

International Day of Sign Languages 23 September 2019

Introduction

In 2017, the United Nations (UN) designated 23 September as the International Day of Sign Languages.¹ This briefing marks the 2019 day by providing a summary of the history of sign languages, their use today and current debates around the teaching of British Sign Language (BSL) in the UK.

History

In a timeline illustrating the history of BSL, University College London (UCL) said that the first use of fingers to create an alphabet was around 700 AD.² However, the British Deaf Association (BDA) argued that the presence of sign language amongst cultures such as Australian aborigines suggests that its use goes back to prehistoric times.³

According to UCL, the first documented use of sign language was at a wedding ceremony in Leicester in 1576.⁴ Elsewhere, *National Geographic* described how a 16th century Spanish monk adapted the signs used during periods of monastic silence to create a method for teaching the deaf to communicate.⁵

The BBC explains how the first modern forms of BSL were developed in the 18th century, as cities, and therefore deaf communities, grew larger.⁶ The first school for the deaf opened in Edinburgh in 1760, introducing sign language into education.⁷

However, the BBC also describes how BSL has a history of oppression by hearing people, who wrongly believed that it was nothing more than a collection of ungrammatical gestures.⁸ An international congress in 1880 concluded that sign languages were inferior to speech and lip reading and “ought to be banned”.⁹

The British Association of Teachers of the Deaf suggests that attitudes began to change in the 1970s.¹⁰ BSL was recognised by the UK Government as a minority language in 2003.¹¹ However, the BDA argues that this change did not result in any legal rights and has called for BSL, along with Irish Sign Language (which is used in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland), to be given full legal status.¹²

Sign Languages Today

The BDA has estimated that 151,000 individuals in the UK can use BSL, of whom 87,000 are deaf.¹³ Globally, the Ethnologue, a guide to the world’s languages, lists 144 sign languages.¹⁴ However, the UN has estimated that there are more than 300.¹⁵ Academics Jordan Fenlon and Erin Wilkinson stated that all such figures are uncertain as data collection techniques are inadequate.¹⁶

Fenlon and Wilkinson have also discussed the nature of sign languages, stressing that they are real, distinct languages rather than visual representations of spoken languages.¹⁷ They have said that “sign languages provide a valuable insight into the way that languages work”. The UN likewise suggests that sign languages are “structurally distinct” from spoken languages but are equal to them in status.¹⁸ As evidence for the independence of sign languages, American academic Jon Sprouse noted that BSL and American Sign Language are “unintelligible” to each other, despite the close similarity of the spoken languages.¹⁹

BSL and Education Policy

In March 2018, the House of Commons debated a petition calling for BSL to be added to the national curriculum.²⁰ The Minister for School Standards, Nick Gibb, stated that the Government had no plans to do so. However, Mr Gibb said that individual schools may choose to offer BSL. He also stated that the Government had provided funding for programmes to support sign language.²¹

In May 2019, the Government confirmed that it was developing content for a GCSE course in BSL but described the process of introducing such a qualification as “complex”.²² Previously it had noted other available qualifications, such as National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs).²³

Further Information

- Robert Long, '[International Sign Languages: Could BSL Become a GCSE?](#)', House of Commons Library Blog, 23 September 2018

¹ United Nations, '[International Day of Sign Languages: 23 September](#)', accessed 27 August 2019.

² University College London, '[British Sign Language Timeline](#)', accessed 27 August 2019.

³ British Deaf Association, '[Help and Resources for Sign Language](#)', accessed 27 August 2019.

⁴ University College London, '[British Sign Language Timeline](#)', accessed 27 August 2019.

⁵ Inés Antón Dayas, '[How Monks Helped Invent Sign Language](#)', *National Geographic*, 28 May 2019.

⁶ BBC Voices, '[The History of British Sign Language](#)', accessed 4 September 2019.

⁷ University College London, '[British Sign Language Timeline](#)', accessed 27 August 2019.

⁸ BBC Voices, '[The History of British Sign Language](#)', accessed 4 September 2019.

⁹ University College London, '[British Sign Language Timeline](#)', accessed 27 August 2019.

¹⁰ British Association of Teachers of the Deaf, '[Sign Language and the Education of Deaf Pupils](#)', 29 November 2017.

¹¹ University College London, '[British Sign Language Timeline](#)', accessed 27 August 2019.

¹² British Deaf Association, '[Legal Status for British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language](#)', March 2014.

¹³ British Deaf Association, '[Help and Resources for Sign Language](#)', accessed 27 August 2019.

¹⁴ Ethnologue, '[Browse by Language Family](#)', accessed 27 August 2019.

¹⁵ United Nations, '[International Day of Sign Languages: 23 September](#)', accessed 27 August 2019.

¹⁶ Jordan Fenlon and Erin Wilkinson, '[Sign Languages in the World](#)', in Adam Schembri and Ceil Lucas (eds), *Sociolinguistics and Deaf Communities*, 2015, pp 5–28.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ United Nations, '[International Day of Sign Languages: 23 September](#)', accessed 27 August 2019.

¹⁹ Jon Sprouse, '[Psychology of Language: Sign Language](#)', University of Connecticut, 12 March 2013, p 3.

²⁰ [HC Hansard, 5 March 2018, cols 1–23WH](#).

²¹ *ibid.*, col 18WH.

²² [HL Hansard, 22 May 2019, col 1973](#).

²³ House of Commons, '[Written Question: Sign Language: GCSE](#)', 14 March 2018, 132714.

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