

# Structure of Sign Languages

## Studies in Linguistics

ENGL 5337 (Fall 2018)  
Texas Tech University

**Instructor:** Dr. Aaron Braver  
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**Class Meetings:** M/W 3:00pm–4:20pm, English & Philosophy Building, Room 308

**Office Hours:** M/W 2:00pm–2:50pm  
Please reserve a slot via <http://www.aaronbraver.com/officehours>

**Course Website:** On Blackboard (<http://ttu.blackboard.com>)

## About this course

Starting in the late 1960s and early 1970s, linguists began to study signed languages in much the same way that they studied spoken languages. This course serves as a broad overview of that research, focusing on phonology, syntax, and semantics, with discussion as well of Deaf arts and culture.

We will examine data from a number of signed languages, especially American Sign Language (ASL) and Australian Sign Language (Auslan). We will also learn about current debates in sign language linguistics.

A major goal of this course is to investigate (and disprove) a number of false assumptions and myths about signed languages. We will explore specific linguistic phenomena in signed languages and compare them with phenomena found in spoken languages.

### By the end of this course, you should be able to...

- Identify and argue against false assumptions about signed languages
- Identify, explain, and analyze common features of signed language phonology, syntax, and semantics
- Relate phenomena in signed languages to phenomena in spoken languages
- Appreciate the diversity found in the signed languages of the world.

No knowledge of ASL or any other signed language is required or assumed.

# Materials

## Readings

Readings will be available on the course Blackboard site. You might also wish to purchase a copy of:

*Sign Language and Linguistic Universals*. Wendy Sandler and Diane Lillo-Martin. Cambridge. ISBN 978-0521483957.

**Abbreviations** The following abbreviations are used in the schedule of readings:

- LF Language Files (Ohio State University)
- SLLU Sign Language and Linguistic Universals (Sandler and Lillo-Martin)
- LSL Linguistics of Sign Languages (Baker et al.)
- SLAIH Sign Language: An International Handbook (Pfau, Steinbach, and Woll)
- Auslan Australian Sign Language (Johnston and Schembri)

## Sign Language Dictionaries

The following dictionaries may prove useful to look up examples referenced in readings and throughout the course. Do keep in mind that there is regional and dialectal variation, so you might benefit from checking more than one source.

- ASL
  - Signing Savvy: <http://www.signingsavvy.com>
  - SignASL: <http://www.signasl.org>
  - Handspeak: <http://www.handspeak.com>
- Auslan
  - Auslan Signbank: <http://www.auslan.org.au/dictionary/>
- BSL
  - SignBSL: <http://www.signbsl.com>
  - BSL Signbank: <http://bslsignbank.ucl.ac.uk/dictionary/>
- Multilingual
  - Spread the Sign: <http://www.spreadthesign.com> (click the appropriate flag after searching)

## Requirements, assignments and grading

### Participation, which is required for successful learning

You are accountable for everything we discuss in class. Participation counts for 10% of your grade in this course; a student who attends class regularly and does not disrupt other students, but does not otherwise contribute, will earn at best a C for this category.

## **Readings** to provide you with background for class

You are encouraged to take notes on the readings and bring questions to class or office hours. Not every part of every reading will be discussed, so please speak up if we don't cover an area of interest.

## **Homework** to provide hands-on practice with classroom concepts

There will be one homework assignment per unit, due by the start of class on the due date.

Work must be typed and submitted as a PDF via the course Blackboard site (too many linguistic fonts go wrong in Word documents). Work submitted in another format will receive a zero.

Collaboration with other students in the course is permitted on (only) homework assignments under the following conditions:

Each person must write up and hand in their own assignment.

Any answers, explanations, or reasoning in the assignment must be written in *your own words*.

If you and another person hand in nearly identical assignments (as judged by me), I reserve the right to require you to work alone from then on.

You must clearly indicate at the top of the assignment who you collaborated with.

A guiding principle: You must always do your own work—this means that you must state things in your own words and show that you understand any ideas that you got from another source.

## **Presentations** to provide familiarity with research and broaden horizons

Each student will present a summary of an article listed with an asterisk\* in the syllabus, or a related work approved by the instructor. Details of the presentations will be discussed in class.

## **Final paper** to provide you an opportunity to apply and demonstrate the concepts and skills you've learned in this class

A final paper will be due on Wednesday, 12/12 at 11:59pm. Details of the paper will be discussed in class. A proposal for the paper will be due by the start of class on 12/3.

## **Grade breakdown**

Category	Percent	Numerical score	Letter grade
Homework	60%	95–100%	A+
Final paper (due 12/12)	30%	90–94.99%	A
Participation	10%	85–89.99%	B+
		80–84.99%	B
		75–79.99%	C+
		70–74.99%	C
		65–69.99%	D+
		60–64.99%	D
		>60%	F

## Policies and expectations

### Attendance and punctuality

You are expected to come to (every) class and to participate fully in class discussions and exercises. Please make an effort to arrive on time. (Repeat tardiness may be counted as an absence.)

If you know you will be absent, *email me ahead of time*. If the absence is documented and justifiable, it *may* be excused (at the discretion of the instructor).

After 5 unexcused absences, you will automatically receive an F for the course.

### Religious holy days

Texas law requires institutions of higher education to excuse a student from attending classes or other required activities, including examinations, for the observance of a religious holy day. The student shall also be excused for time necessary to travel.

An institution may not penalize the student for the absence and allows for the student to take an exam or complete an assignment from which the student is excused. The student should make up any missed work.

TTU policy indicates that a student who intends to observe a religious holy day should make that intention known to the instructor prior to the absence.

See OP 34.19 at <https://www.depts.ttu.edu/opmanual/OP34.19.pdf> for more information.

### Late work

Assignments must be submitted on time—this is at the start of class, unless otherwise specified. *Assignments turned in after the deadline will receive zero points*. There is no partial credit for late work.

## **Extraordinary circumstances**

Life is complicated—illnesses and injuries happen. If these or other life events are interfering with your ability to meet course requirements, please *let me know as soon as possible*.

## **Email**

Some course-related announcements will be made over email. These messages will be sent to your TTU address, which you should check at least daily. Failure to check your TTU email will not excuse you from any requirements assigned via email.

Please include the course number in the subject line of any emails you send me (as well as an actual subject). If you are sending from an account other than your TTU address, please include your full name in the message body.

## **Civility in the classroom and electronic devices**

Students are expected to maintain a polite, civil environment that is conducive to learning for everyone. This includes refraining from non-approved uses of electronic devices, or use of such devices that becomes distracting for other students. Breaches of decorum may result in expulsion from the classroom or consequences for your final grade.

## **Accommodations for students with disabilities**

Any student who, because of a disability, may require special arrangements in order to meet the course requirements, should contact the instructor as soon possible to make the necessary arrangements. Students must present appropriate verification from Student Disability Services during the instructor's office hours. Please note that instructors are not allowed to provide classroom accommodation to a student until appropriate verification from Student Disability Services has been provided. For additional information, please contact the Student Disability Services office in 335 West Hall or call (806) 742-2405.

Note that it is your responsibility to provide your instructor with a Letter of Accomodation (LOA) within the first week of class, or within one week of receiving the LOA, so please bring me your LOA as soon as possible. Further, the LOA becomes effective only after it is signed by the instructor, and is *not* retroactive.

## **Academic integrity**

Cheating and plagiarism will be treated very seriously. As a general policy, all such cases will be referred to the Office of Student Conduct with a recommendation for the fullest sanctions, as well as automatic failure for the course. It is your responsibility to familiarize yourself with TTU's statement on academic integrity, which is available at <http://www.depts.ttu.edu/studentconduct/academicinteg.php>, and related policies in the Student Handbook Part I, Section B, Subsection 1 (<http://www.depts.ttu.edu/dos/handbook/conduct.php>) and Part II, Section B (<http://www.depts.ttu.edu/dos/handbook/community.php>).

You are encouraged to form study groups outside of class to help you understand the course material and discuss readings. You may collaborate on homework assignments only as described above.

If you have any questions, please consult the instructor, a dean, or the University's academic integrity policy.

## **TTU resources for a safe, inclusive campus**

Texas Tech University is committed to providing and strengthening an educational, working, and living environment where students, faculty, staff, and visitors are free from gender and/or sex discrimination of any kind. Sexual assault, discrimination, harassment, and other Title IX violations are not tolerated by the University. Report any incidents to the Office for Student Rights & Resolution, (806)-742-SAFE (7233) or file a report online at <http://titleix.ttu.edu/students>.

I identify as an ally to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\*, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) community, and I am available to listen and support you in an affirming manner. I can assist in connecting you with resources on campus to address problems you may face pertaining to sexual orientation and/or gender identity that could interfere with your success at Texas Tech. Please note that additional resources are available through the Office of LGBTQIA within the Center for Campus Life, Student Union Building Room 201, <http://www.lgbtqia.ttu.edu>, (806) 742-5433.

Faculty and staff members at TTU are committed to connecting you to resources on campus. Some of these available resources are:

- TTU Student Counseling Center, (806) 742-3674, <https://www.depts.ttu.edu/scc/> (provides confidential support on campus)
- TTU 24-hour Crisis Helpline, (806) 742-5555 (assists students who are experiencing a mental health or interpersonal violence crisis. If you call the helpline, you will speak with a mental health counselor)
- Voice of Hope Lubbock Rape Crisis Center, (806) 763-7273, <http://voiceofhopelubbock.org> (24-hour hotline that provides support for survivors of sexual violence)
- The Risk, Intervention, Safety and Education (RISE) Office, (806) 742-2110, <https://www.depts.ttu.edu/rise/> (provides a range of resources and support options focused on prevention education and student wellness)
- Texas Tech Police Department, (806) 742-3931, <http://www.depts.ttu.edu/tttd/> (to report criminal activity that occurs on or near Texas Tech campus)

## **Schedule**

This schedule is subject to change. Please pay attention for announcements in class and via email.

Readings marked with an asterisk\* are for student presentations.

## Introduction

M	8/27	Syllabus What are signed languages?	·What is Sign Language (Perlmutter)
W	8/29	Signed languages of the world History of SL research Modality Age of SLs	· <b>Make an office hours appointment</b> ·LF 1.5 ·Auslan 1.4, 3.1 ·Syntax of ASL appendices A.1, A.2, A.4 ·SLAIH pp. 4–7 ·Study of Signed Languages ch. 1*
M	9/3	No class — Labor Day	

## Are signed languages ‘real’ languages?

W	9/5	Communication vs. language The hallmarks of language Animal communication	· <b>HW 1 (introduction) due</b> ·Language Matters ch. 5 ·Auslan 1.1–1.1.7
M	9/10	Origins of SLs SL myths Gesture vs. language	·Where did NSL come from? (Senghas) ·A new language arises (Wade) ·Myths about ASL (Markowicz) pp. 1–3 ·Auslan 1.3–1.3.9 ·Auslan 1.5 ·Senghas and Coppola (2001)* ·Goldin-Meadow (2006)*

## Phonetics and phonology

W	9/12	Phonetics and phonology in spoken languages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>·<b>HW 2 (Are signed languages real languages) due</b></li> <li>·LF 2.0–2.6</li> <li>·LF 3.0–3.4</li> </ul>
M	9/17	How can SLs have phonetics/phonology? Basic handshapes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>·LSL 10.2–10.3</li> <li>·LF 2.7</li> <li>·SLLU ch. 8</li> <li>·Basic handshapes</li> </ul>
W	9/19	Signed syllables	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>·Linguistics of ASL pp. 18–21, 24–40</li> <li>·Perlmutter (1992)</li> <li>·SLLU pp. 216–220</li> <li>·Sign Languages ch. 14*</li> </ul>
M	9/24	Natural classes Features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>·Language Matters pp. 56–58</li> <li>·Auslan ch. 4</li> <li>·SLAIH pp. 21–27</li> <li>·Auslan 10.3.1</li> </ul>
W	9/26	Non-manual marking Phonological processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>·SLLU pp. 60–63</li> <li>·Linguistics of ASL pp. 41–45, 57–61, 70–72</li> <li>·Modality and Structure ch. 4 or 5*</li> </ul>
<b>Morphology</b>			
M	10/1	Morphology in spoken languages Basics of morphology in SLs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>·<b>HW 3 (Phonetics and phonology) due</b></li> <li>·LF 4.0–4.4</li> <li>·SLAIH ch. 5</li> <li>·Auslan ch. 5</li> <li>·Sign Languages ch. 9*</li> </ul>

W	10/3	Classifiers Non-concatenative morphology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>·SLAIH pp. 158–164</li> <li>·Auslan 6.2.2.2</li> <li>·Linguistics of ASL pp. 76-82</li> <li>·Auslan p. 165–172</li> <li>·Aranoff et al. (2005)*</li> <li>·Auslan ch. 6*</li> <li>·Auslan 10.3.2</li> </ul>
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## Syntax

M	10/8	Syntax in spoken languages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>·<b>HW 4 (Morphology) due</b></li> <li>·Contemporary linguistics pp. 183–221</li> </ul>
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W	10/10	How can SLs have syntax?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>·Linguistics of ASL pp. 137–144</li> <li>·SLLU pp. 304–308</li> <li>·Auslan ch. 7*</li> <li>·LSL ch. 5*</li> </ul>
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M	10/15	NMM and syntactic structure Wh-questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>·SLLU pp. 60–63, 432–445, 310–315</li> <li>·Auslan pp. 96–99, 154–156</li> <li>·SLAIH ch. 14</li> <li>·Nonmanuals in Sign Language pp. 7–45*</li> </ul>
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W	10/17	Other syntactic phenomena Parallels with spoken language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>·Myths about ASL pp. 5–6</li> <li>·SLLU pp. 472–474</li> <li>·Auslan 10.3.4</li> <li>·Modality and Structure ch. 10</li> </ul>
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## Semantics

M	10/22	Semantics in spoken languages Semantics vs. semiotics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>·<b>HW 5 (Syntax) due</b></li> <li>·General Course in Linguistics (Sausure) ch. 1 §1–2</li> <li>·Auslan ch. 8–8.2, 8.5</li> </ul>
W	10/24	Iconicity Aspect and time reference Pronouns, deixis, and agreement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>·Myths about ASL pp. 4–5</li> <li>·Linguistics of ASL pp. 6–8</li> <li>·Auslan pp. 232–242</li> <li>·SLLU pp. 23–29, 39–42</li> <li>·SLAIH pp. 441–452</li> <li>·Linguistics of ASL pp. 91–97</li> <li>·Linguistics of BSL ch. 7</li> </ul>
M	10/29	No class	
W	10/31	Cochlear implants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>·<b>HW 6 (Semantics) due</b></li> <li>·My bionic quest for Bólero (Wired)</li> </ul>
M	11/5	No class	
W	11/7	No class	
<b>Acquisition</b>			
M	11/12	Manual babbling Phonological acquisition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>·LSL ch. 3</li> <li>·Becker Karnopp (2002)*</li> </ul>
W	11/14	Syntactic acquisition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>·Morgan and Woll (2002)*</li> <li>·Schick (2002)*</li> <li>·Reilly and Anderson (2002)*</li> <li>·Meier (2002)*</li> </ul>

M 11/19 L2 acquisition  
·van den Bogaerde and Baker (2002)\*  
·Williams et al. (2016)\*  
·Mayberry 1993\* Georgianna

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W 11/21 No class — Thanksgiving

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M 11/26 Acquisition topic TBD

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### Sociolinguistics

W 11/28 Sociolinguistics of signed languages  
·**HW 7 (Acquisition due)**  
·SLAIH ch. 33

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M 12/3 Sociolinguistics of signed languages  
·**Final paper proposal due**  
·Linguistics of BSL ch. 2  
·Sign Languages ch. 19 or ch. 22\*  
Adam and Shelby

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W 12/5 In-class paper workshop

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W 12/12  
·**Final paper due**

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