



Sign languages are ways of expression that do not make use of verbal or written modalities, but instead use audio-visual and motor modalities to convey meaning. You might think that this would restrict expression but that is not the case. These are languages just as much as English, Hindi, French, Spanish or any other language you can think of. Sign languages have their grammar, syntax, vocabulary and lexicon just as much as these languages. These languages have special uses for auditorily or visually impaired persons. Let us look at the history of sign language.

## **History Of Sign Language:**

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### **Early Pioneers**

If you think about it, sign languages must have existed since the dawn of time. They are the primary mode of expression for infants who cannot speak. So, in a way, we have all learnt sign language before verbal or written language. Scientists have found evidence to prove that man as a hunter gatherer might have used sign language to communicate with fellow hunters over large distances where sound couldn't reach. Sign language existed even as early as in the primitive Greek societies. In fact, Plato in his dialogue Cratylus recorded Socrates alluding to the need for sign language. Native Americans also possibly developed a sign language to communicate with tribes who did not share the same auditory language.

### **Spanish and Italian Scholars**

However the Greek philosopher Aristotle suggested that people born with auditory deficits shouldn't receive education and should be kept out of society. Italian and Spanish scholars,



especially Geronimo Cardano of the sixteenth century were the first to refute this exclusionary and cruel claim. Cardano's son was deaf, and he started using a method of hand gestures corresponding to verbal letters to communicate with his son. Even though his sign language remained quite obscure, he was the first to start talking about it. Spanish monk Pedro Ponce de Leon also began the tradition of educating the deaf, and many monks followed this pioneer.



*History Of Sign Language (A.S.L)*

## **French Sign Language Revolution**

The next major development in the history of sign language took place in 18<sup>th</sup> century France. Jesuit Catholic priest Abbe Charles Michel de L'Eppe was a magnanimous man devoted to charity and service. In his widespread encounters, he met two deaf twin sisters, and was moved to educate them, which prompted his lifelong service to the deaf. He made a breakthrough by realizing this deaf people have the same comprehension abilities as those that learn auditorily - but visually. This started a movement in France - which revolutionized sign language for the deaf. Thomas Braidwood, Samuel Heinicke and otherds



were pioneers of this movement, and L'Eppe is the Father of Sign Language today.

## **Deaf Islanders of Martha's Vineyard**

Evolution had designed that Martha's Vineyard residents had a specific genetic makeup. As a result the concentration of the world's largest deaf population was here. Thus, this island became the prominent scene of sign language development. Necessity prompted the island residents to come up with one of the most advanced signing languages in the world. Yet, sign language here was not standardized to the world.

## **Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet**

The advent of the Great Gallaudet in the world of sign language through his neighbour's deaf daughter Alice Cogswell was a significant event in sign language history. He began teaching her via pictures, and was astounded by her intellect and comprehensive abilities. Alice's father then sent Gallaudet to Europe to study, in hopes that he would make a mark upon the world and deaf children. He then (with Cogswell's help) founded the first American school for the deaf in 1815. By the end of Gallaudet's life, about twenty two schools for deaf had opened in America, and his youngest son carried on his legacy.



### *History Of Sign Language*

## **The Tradition of the Oralists**

The Oralists of Europe and America believed that the best interests of the deaf lay in doing away with sign language and teaching them orally. The inventor of the telephone, Alexander Graham Bell, was one significant Oralist. Their tradition hampered the proliferation of sign language throughout the world, and the Milan Conference put a ban on it.

## **William Stokoe**

Despite the ban on sign language, it found a way to survive, and even thrive. A significant entity in this restoration was William Stokoe. His linguistic knowledge showed that sign language was in no way inferior to verbal language. His widespread research and evidence backed philosophy urged the Congress to revoke the Milan Conference in the Babbidge Report. Since then, sign language has been flourishing.

## **Contemporary Sign Language**

Today, almost every country has its own sign language, and these languages are very important in the education of deaf and dumb people. And almost all countries are taking



strong and weighty measures to ensure its spread, in big ways and small. For example, a chain of restaurants in Mumbai employs only deaf and dumb people. Customers place their orders and say thank you in sign language only.

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