

Literary and Cultural Disability Studies: An Exploration
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Lecture – 30
ISL Workshop Day 2 – Part 2
Demonstration of the Working of ISL – Its Beauty and Diversity

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Myths about sign language

- Deafness is due to 'paap' or 'karma'! – NO!
- Sign language is universal – NO! there are dialects and variations.
- All deaf can lip read – NO! though they can attempt, it is highly mistake prone.
- Speak loudly so that they can listen! – NO!
- Speak slowly & they can understand! – NO!
- Using sign language will curb use of speech! - NO!
- Signs for new words are created by the hearing people! – NO!
- For words that don't have signs, we can use signs of other countries!
– NO! Signs may be borrowed, but attempt to create own local signs

Nita Gopalakrishnan: We have another presenter today actually just wanted to introduce him formally. He is Mr. Muhammad Shafique. He is also a very experienced teacher of sign language and he is here with us today to take us through some of beauty of sign language.

Muhammad Shafique: So we start, the speech of the hearing people they have different kinds of tones and frequencies, the volume is all different, some of the speeches kind of melodious, there are different ways they speak. Similarly, since deaf people are here, they use sign language which we already know. So, sign language also has certain parameters. The first thing is a handshape. For example, when you are going to sign for ball, there are different ways you can show the sign football. So, depending on the size of the ball you have this particular handshape. So, similar to how hearing people can modulate the voice. So, similarly even deaf people using the handshapes can modulate the signs also to show the object, the particular object how big or small it is.

And then sign language also has movements. So, each and every sign has a particular movement. So, even for each particular word you have a certain movement to show the direction of the speaker and all that. Third thing is the orientation of the signs, so which side your palm is facing. So, for example when you sign for the word car and for the word two-wheeler, so there are different types of handshapes first thing and orientation of the hand, palm, excited faces even that is different. So come and stop. So, this is a word sign for stop. So, you can see which side my palm is facing. So, when I say come, so it faces inside. So, these are certain parameters that sign language has.

The other parameter is body language or body movements. So according to the character we are representing for example, we are talking about a person who is conversing with the other person. And if they are two people if you are narrating a story, a conversation of two people, so you will have to change the side you are of facing with your body. You move your body to show the person who is speaking and responding. And then we have our facial expressions. For example, the word no, if you just keep smiling and saying no, it really does not make any sense. So, if it is something negative, then show a negative expression. So for 'no', you have to show a negative expression; for positive expressions happy, you have a smiling face and these are some expressions, if a person is embarrassed, so how to show the person is embarrassed and if a person is lazy how to show the person is lazy. So, the facial expression is very important while using sign language. If we do not use facial expression that clearly does not have the meaning and something missing in the sign.

So, everything put together, all these parameters put together is very important for a complete sign. For example, if a person is being honest or if a person is lying, so for example, can I help. So if I really want to help them is a different expression. If I am being sarcastic or something, then the facial expression will be different. So, these five parameters, even if one of the parameters is missing, then the sign cannot be understood and it really is not a sign language at all.

So just like how hearing people if they do not modulate the voice, it is not very nice to hear. And there are so many things in speech like consonants and vowels and everything, so we have to enunciate each and every word clearly. So similarly, sign language also has these parameters. So, these are some of the expressions that I am showing. So for example, a person who just vanished away from a place, the way we show the signs are completely different. So, all these facial expressions, there are certain signs, for which

we did not have corresponding English word for it. So, similarly it is the same for all languages. So, any kind of expression if you want to be sweet or angry or kind of expression you want to show, these five parameters are very important. Thank you.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Absolutely brilliant. Thank you so much Shafique for that lovely, very expressive explanation of Indian sign language. The beauty did come out in the way that you were expressing through your movement and expressions on your face.

And now can I request you to teach our audience today some signs which they can use if they come across a deaf person if they meet them for the first time?

Muhammad Shafique: Yes, sure Nita. So, let me start. I hope all of you can see me. This is the sign for hello or hi. Hello. So, I need all of you to sign, I can only show, I am not able to see all of you, but I need all of you to copy what I am doing. Are you fine?

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Can I request the participants to please keep your video off. I know it will be great to see all of you signing. But unfortunately, we need big screen size for the presenter to be able to see the interpreter and likewise for the interpreter to look at the presenter signing. I really hope this was a face-to-face session where we could see all your hands moving. I know all of them talking together but without any sound and being silent, yet communicating that will be great, but I am very sorry to have to ask you to put your video off again.

Muhammad Shafique: I hope all of you are ready, okay shall I start? Okay alright. So, for example in English or in Hindi, sentences we have a certain word order that we are not going to use that word order. For sign language, it has a different structure itself. So, I will translate this. What I sign I will translate this later. But let me just tell you like how you can communicate. So, this is are you fine? So, this is the word for are you fine? I am fine. I am good.

This is the word, this is the sign for sorry, so that is the handshape you need to have. So, you remember the five parameters that I told you about? So do not smile and say sorry, do not have a smiling expression on your face. So, you have to show remorse on your face. Okay, this is the sign for yes or you can also say yes with your face like just nodding your face. This is the sign for no. That is a sign for please. Okay. Where are you? Where are you or where are you from? What is your name?

Amaresh Gopalakrishnan: So, some of them have asked in the chat that I also sign along with Shafique. So. Nita is that okay?

Nita Gopalakrishnan: For Amaresh for you to sign along with Shafique?

Amaresh Gopalakrishnan: Yes, I can see in the chat that some of them are not able to see the signs clearly. Okay. So, they are requesting me also to sign along with Shafique, is that okay?

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Yes, that should be fine.

Muhammad Shafique: Let me repeat. This is the sign for hi or hello. But do not say this, this is not the sign, this is not correct. So, this is correct, hi or hello. So, you have a handshape also here. You fine. So, it all depends on where the person is. If he is right in front, so you show it, you point right in front. you say are you fine? You need to have the expression also, so you have to show how are you? So, the answer would be I am fine. This is the sign for sorry.

So, it is very important you have correct facial expression. If you smile and say sorry means you are sarcastic, so you have to show a sad face sorry. See, I told you about the parameters just now about the sign language parameters. So, you have to remember that. So, you have to say sorry with a proper facial expression. Then where are you from? Place where, so you place where? Where are you from? So, what is your name? So, you can see my eyebrows are raised to ask a question. So, when you say there are certain areas in India where you ask what in a different way. In South India, they say what like this. This is a sign for what in south. In the North they usually use what like that. So, there are certain signs which are a bit different. It is not completely different, just a little bit is different. So, this is the sign for what in South.

This is the sign for yes or you can just nod your head to say yes. The sign for no, so do not keep smiling and say no, this is wrong sign way. So, you can also shake your head and say no. This is the sign for thank you. So, you need to be very careful where you place your hand against the curve of your chin. Thank you, do not kiss, this is completely different. So, this is the sign for thank you. This is the sign for welcome.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Okay. Great okay. Mr. Gopalakrishnan is adding.

Amaresh Gopalakrishnan: Yes, Gopalakrishnan sir has said have you eat? Have you had food? So that is how we ask question if you already had food.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Right, thank you so much. Yes, please if you can share the alphabet, alphabet in sign.

Muhammad Shafique: So, I will teach you the English alphabet, how to fingerspell the English alphabet. So, please understand that just because you learn the alphabet, it does not mean that you know Indian sign language completely that is not the case. Well, we use fingerspelling to spell out certain words only when we do not have a sign for that or if it is a proper noun or something like that. If you keep on fingerspelling the whole conversation, the person will get bored and go off to sleep. So do not use fingerspelling. Finger spelling is only used to introduce people or like the names of places if you do not know names of certain signs or certain words then you could use fingerspelling for that.

Okay, so let us start with the letter A. So, this is the fingerspelling for the letter A. This is B. This is C. So, you use your right hand to show the letter C. And this is the sign for D. This is E. You have two different ways to show E, you can either show E like this or show E like this. The sign for F and then G. The sign for H. This is the sign for I, J, K, L, M. Do not turn your palm inside, please have your palm outside so people can see the letter which you are signing. This is M and for N. This is the sign for N, O, P, Q, R, S. So, fold all your fingers on both hands except for your little finger and cross them that is S. This is T. This is the sign for U, V, W, X, Y, Z. So that was the manual alphabet. So, once you learn A, B, C, D then you can fingerspell your names. For example, Shafique. So, you can ask them what is your name, Amaresh, Shafique, so you can introduce yourself to deaf people. Great, thank you.

Hemachandran Karah: Thank you.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Thank you very much. So that was a beautiful journey. Yes, that was our very short journey in less than an hour or so into the world of sign language and how beautiful and expressive it is. You can just understand what the person is trying to tell you and I am proud that we use Indian sign language which is even more expressive than any other sign languages in the world. So great, thank you for taking us through that journey to all the presenters. So over to you Dr. Hemachandran.

Hemachandran Karah: Thank you so much all of you. That was an expressive first view into Indian sign language. Now we can open the floor for QA. All the presenters they are here to clarify a few questions. Maybe we can have 20 minutes for Q and A, Nita what do you think?

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Yes. Amaresh, can you check with all the presenters quickly if 20 minutes is okay for them?

Hemachandran Karah: What is the time now actually?

Nita Gopalakrishnan: It is 5:22.

Hemachandran Karah: Okay until maybe 5:45 or 5:50. Yes. Is it okay for all?

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Yes, I think it is fine. Great.

Hemachandran Karah: Maybe I just want to; given its expressive freedom, I am saying freedom because capacity to achieve synchrony and facial expression and using whole body is a great freedom, given the fact that it is inherent to sign language maybe it has great contribution to art, poetry and theatre. Maybe it is a very large question, but would you consider giving us some insight into that? Is my question clear Nita?

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Yes, I think Mr. Shafique is going to take that question.

Muhammad Shafique: That is true that facial expression and the sign it is very important and it could be connected with arts, not for certain arts which are fixed and does not have movements not for that but for art which has kind of moments like theatre or something it could influence.

So, when you talk about sketching or drawing so that kind of art might not be influenced by sign language because the images are kind of frozen. So, when I draw something, I can show expression so you can show emotions, but for abstract emotions we want to show that the theatre is best if you have videos then it is nice. If you have the GIF images, the GIF images can show some kind of emotions but for drawing and sketching not too much, but for theatre and movies not like you can understand much so probably sign language influenced those fields.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Okay, great. Thank you. We have got some questions here. It says, is it the same for left handers and right handers. In fact, that is a wonderful question. We have got a left-hand user which is Rahul, he uses left hand, so he will be best person to tell us about it.

Rahul Jain: Okay. There is not much difference for right-handed or left-handed movements. The movements, the expression, the sign all remain the same. The only thing is for me I am a left-handed person right from childhood. I will eat and write or I

use my left hand for that, I use more and also my left hand as the dominant hand when I use sign language. But for other people whose dominant hand is the right hand, they can use the right hand as a dominant hand. So not much of difference. So, if I use my left hand as the dominant hand by my side, people can understand. So even Shafique is a right-handed person. If he uses his right hand as a dominant hand, even that people can understand, so there is no much difference. Thank you.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: There is a question from yesterday that I would like to pose here for now. The question was from Lakshmi and she says that she has noticed a new sign that has come up for the term Covid which is there fairly recent. And the question is how do these kinds of words which are new enter the dictionary and how does it happen in the deaf community?

Rahul Jain: You see like all when the Covid pandemic started, we did not have a particular sign, so a sign was invented. So that would be included later on in the dictionary. So, in order to include that in the dictionary, we will have to do a lot of analysis and see if the sign has been used in the majority and that is our institute called Institute of Indian Sign Language Training and Research Centre. So, they are actually responsible for including these kinds of signs into the lexical. So, they would be conducting this kind of analysis and they would add the entirely new signs into the dictionary.

Amaresh Gopalakrishnan: Nita, I am not able to see Rahul or Shafique.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Okay. I am able to see Rahul, so I can continue to verse for him, check you are able to see, just let me know.

Amaresh Gopalakrishnan: Yeah, I can see him now. So, he is gone again.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Yeah, so it is very difficult actually, this is one of the challenges having to work with technology where you need to have constant video of the presenter who is signing as well as the interpreters. So, we are having the videos going on and off, so it is very difficult to actually capture what is being said. So, hope it is better now.

Rahul Jain: Okay, great. For example, the sign for the word laptop, this is the sign for laptop. So that has already been included in the dictionary because it has been used by

majority of the deaf population. So similarly, office stuff analysis needs to be done before particular sign is added into the lexicon.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Okay, thank you. The other question we have is from Karthika J. She asked what is the need to have different sign languages for different countries? Why cannot we have a common sign language? And she has another question attached to it. Even within Tamil Nadu I came to know that learners from one deaf school cannot communicate with another deaf learner from other schools, is it true?

Rahul Jain: So, globally different countries they have their own sign languages so that has evolved locally. For example, you know that India was ruled by the British prior to 1947. So, the manual alphabet and some of the signs that we use, some of them are influenced by the British Sign Language and most of the signs that in sign language are naturally locally or so. So, they have not been influenced by any of the sign language. So, when we compare British Sign Language and Indian Sign Language there are similarities in them. For example, house, food; so, there are similarities. But majority of the signs are different, maybe 20 to 25% might be similar, but around 70-75% are completely different signs. This British Sign Language has evolved in the United Kingdom, but Indian sign language evolved here locally and we also invented a lot of new signs over here in India. So, it is similar to the British scenario. So, it all depends on the people from the whole country how they invent the signs.

So, even French people have French Sign language, so it is all different languages. The second thing you have asked about in Tamil Nadu there is a deaf school. When the person from that particular deaf school goes to another school for the deaf, he is not able to communicate that is not right. Sometimes, it might happen that in the particular school they do not use sign language. They probably use sign supported languages like the signs that they use is complete proper translation of the spoken language and probably some of the signs are being invented by the teachers themselves. So maybe because of that there might be some kind of communication gap, but if they learn Indian Sign language, then it is very easy for them to communicate.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Yes, Mr. Shafique, looks like he wants to add something, but his video is freezing.

Amaresh Gopalakrishnan: Shafique's video is frozen.

Rahul Jain: When a deaf person meets another person, he would probably ask for the name like first time they might fingerspell our names. So, after introducing and after meeting for the first time for the next meetings, it is not necessary to fingerspell the names each and every time. But you can see how the person is physically, his physical appearance or to say a particular habit that the person has so you can identify some particular trait of that person and you can assign a name sign for that person. For example, this is my sign name and that is the sign name for Shafique and this is the sign name for Gopalakrishnan sir and this is the sign name for Amaresh. So, Nita has this particular sign name. So, that is the name for Shafique. So visually certain physical traits that a person has or something which the person uses or I got my sign name because I use the hearing aids like throughout the day and people gave me that particular sign name. So, maybe when you introduce for the first time, meet a person for the first time you do fingerspelling to know the name, but after that you can assign a name sign for that person.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: So, we have another interesting question. So, we have Sonia, sorry Sonal asking, no it is Sonia. Sorry, I am mixing up names. So, she is asking if deaf people cannot hear at all, how do they learn the language which is sign language? I mean how do they know what is the correct sign for what they want to say?

Muhammad Shafique: Sign language evolves from the deaf schools. When you have so many different children gather so that is where it will go on. For example, ruler, pencil, rubber, sweet. So, they evolve their own sign language or signs at those places, at the local places, so that is how it evolves. So, when you meet other deaf people throughout the day when you are with them, probably over the weekend when you meet other deaf people to chat with them slowly the signs evolve. And so that is how and signs are also invention, natural so it has passed on from one generation to the other. So even if when you complete schooling and get out of school, the deaf school, even after that meet every weekend, deaf people get together at clubs and associations. And when people move away from that particular locality, move away to other places, they feel their sign is still not in that locality and that is how the chain reaction happens. So slowly, it spreads out.

So that is how deaf people learn sign language. I have another question to Sonia. So how do you acquire language? So how did you start to speak? Do you think the God has

actually given that inherent skill to speak? So, it is not like that. So, you acquire language when you meet other people, hear them speak and that is how language evolves and develops.

Similarly, in sign language also these signs evolve from the schools for the deaf, not from the parents, parents, they do not know sign language. If the parents are deaf, then it is certain advantage for the deaf child. So, it is easy to have a sign language environment. But if the parents are hearing, then the only place this deaf child can learn sign language spoken from the schools. And when he grows up and moves out to different places, he spreads the signs to other places.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Yes, absolutely. So, they start with home signs. But they have smaller gestures. So like I was saying yesterday, we saw the statistics that most of the deaf children or deaf people are born into hearing families. So, like Shafique pointed out when they start learning a language it is more home science or it is more gestures rather than a full-fledged sign language. But it only starts to develop when they are communicating or in touch with other deaf children or deaf people just like how we would learn as hearing people a language because of the scenario, the situation at home. So whatever language thrives at home is what we learn, so very similar to that.

Hemachandran Karah: Even verbal languages, they have their home versions endearing names for food, actions, yeah family names and so on. Toy names.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Correct, right. Okay, so we have another question here says how does sign language help blind person?

Amaresh Gopalakrishnan: Nita can you please repeat? I could not hear that clearly.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Okay. So, the question goes how sign language is helpful for blind people?

Muhammad Shafique: The sign language can be used by blind people, but it has to be used in a different way. So, for deaf person you can actually see the signs. You have to be facing the deaf person who is signing it you can actually see the signs. But for a blind person he obviously cannot see. So, that means that we have to be very close to the blind

person and he needs to have his hand over the hand of the person signing, and then he will be able to understand the signs.

Rahul Jain: The question is about a blind person, not deaf blind person. So, the blind person is able to hear, so it is not a deaf blind person.

Muhammad Shafique: Yes, it might take a lot of time to get the message across to a blind person. So, if the blind person knows how to recognize things and recognize the handshapes, then it might be easier for them to communicate. So, we might be able to express our feelings, but since he is a blind person, if he speaks then we will not be able to understand what he is saying.

Rahul Jain: For blind people, we have Braille text. So, if deaf people also learn the Braille text, so we might be able to communicate or we might be able to help them or teach them the different handshapes and things like that. So, blind person can also learn sign language and maybe he can start using sign language later. Maybe because facial expressions or his body movements might not be so expressive. It might take time for a blind person to learn.

Amaresh Gopalakrishnan: Gopalakrishnan sir says that it might take a longer time. Shafique sir says that I have experienced some people they go to a restaurant where they have to blindfold themselves and eat. So, like that spreads a kind of awareness for people of how blind people feel. So similarly, we also have to do the same thing. So, we will have to explain the signs for a blind person that he/she may be able to learn.

Hemachandran Karah: Can I add a little more? If one has to communicate to another person and both have different disabilities, what works in common for them is what both may identify. It is entirely possible that I communicate with my deaf friend using a chat messenger. So, my screen reader will read out and he or she will see the chat message or I sign with my hands and he or she is able to see and reply to me via chat message. And even the idea of touching hands and doing the sign language communication together is also open. It is about the communicative choice. We can look at it that way and everything else is a matter of training and interest.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Yes. Absolutely, common thread and common interests. So, this is pertaining to music. So, we have a question from Nithisha. She says I am not sure how

valid this question is, but what is the place of music in the lives of deaf people? Do deaf people experience music? Is there an alternative? What is the common piece of entertainment that suits an average deaf person that is not particularly visual?

Muhammad Shafique: So, hearing people can hear music. They do have different drum beats and different kinds of melodies. So deaf people cannot hear all that, definitely they cannot hear. But our music is sign language and we also can see if there are flickering lights which goes according to the music, we might be able to understand the music a little bit. Okay, so with regards to music so when you sing you modulate your voice and make it melodious, so similarly also while signing we can also have a melodious way of signing. We can sign with kind of expressions, body expressions and facial expressions, to make it more musical.

Amaresh Gopalakrishnan: I am sorry, I missed a bit of there because it is.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Yes, sir said that we are short of time, but he says there is lots more that he could have explained otherwise.

Rahul Jain: For hearing people, when they hear music they can actually feel the melody and actually have emotions. So, for deaf people, they can feel through the vibrations and through flashing lights. So, they also have a way of signing poetry with facial expressions when you sign and you smile and you have a soft expression. So, you do not sign very fast, you try and modulate your sign to make it visual, when you see it more visual, musically visual.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: I would like to add here, like we established yesterday that deafness is of different ranges, right? So, you have got different categories of deafness. So, some could be having mild hearing loss or moderate and with the help of technology like hearing aid or cochlear implants, they are able to access music. And there are many people who also play a musical instrument.

But now if we talk about the severe to profound categories of deafness, that is where what Mr. Shafique and Rahul were explaining about relying on the vibrations and the visual effects through lights or any other visual effects that you can use. But again, it is a matter of interest and people who find interest in music will definitely find a way out of how best they can utilize their other senses to access music. And even technology aids

like hearing aid or cochlear implants, they are probably able to get the sound but maybe not the lyrics, and this is purely for severe to profound hearing loss people.

Hemachandran Karah: Most interestingly, Nita, best music runs in the mind, something it is internal. So, it can come in the form of expressions or it can be in the form of visual imagery and notations scores. There are many dimensions of music which may not require explicit hearing, but running through our system holistically. So, it is much richer experience when you run it through your system than you just hear it per se literally.

Nita Gopalakrishnan: Yes. Yes, so I just very quickly brought to mind.

Amaresh Gopalakrishnan: Shafique's laptop battery is getting down, it is very low, might get switched off any time, so he just wants to let you know.

Hemachandran Karah: Alright, I think we are there now, I mean, fag end of the beauty of sign language, it did come across and it is a great starter for all of us. And I am sure we all will cherish this day and take it further in our search in language; the meaning of language for our life, imagination, reality and the lives that we paint. Thank you. Thank you Shafique, Nita, Gopalakrishnan sir, Rahul and all of you there and here in the cloud. Thank you. Thank you all.