

# DIALECTS & SIGN LANGUAGE

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COMD570: Language Development

# ASL sign(s) of the day

- Happy
- Sad
- Angry
- Tired

# DIALECTS

# What is a dialect?

- A **dialect** is a variation of a language specific to a geographical location or social group
  - Dialects of the same language are typically mutually intelligible to each other
  - Remember: “a language is a dialect with an army and navy”

# New Dialect formation

- **New Dialect Formation:** the formation of new languages, both in grammatical structure and vocabulary
  - A continually evolving process with more or less dramatically observable changes
  - Isolation of human communities accelerates the emergence of new dialects
- Both physical and social isolation are relevant
  - Physical isolation: e.g. Icelandic vs. Danish
  - Social isolation: African American Vernacular English vs. Standard American English

# Pidgins & Creoles

- **Pidgin:** grammatically simplified communication system used by interacting speakers of different languages
  - Not really a full language; a makeshift system that borrows features from all of the source languages, typically a highly reduced but functional vocabulary
- **Creole:** a full language (with native speakers) that is derived from multiple source languages, often a fully-fledged form of a pidgin
  - Well-known creoles: Gullah, Haitian creole, Jamaican creole, Tok Pisin (Papua New Guinea)

# Dialectal variation and language-based prejudice

# Perceptions of Language

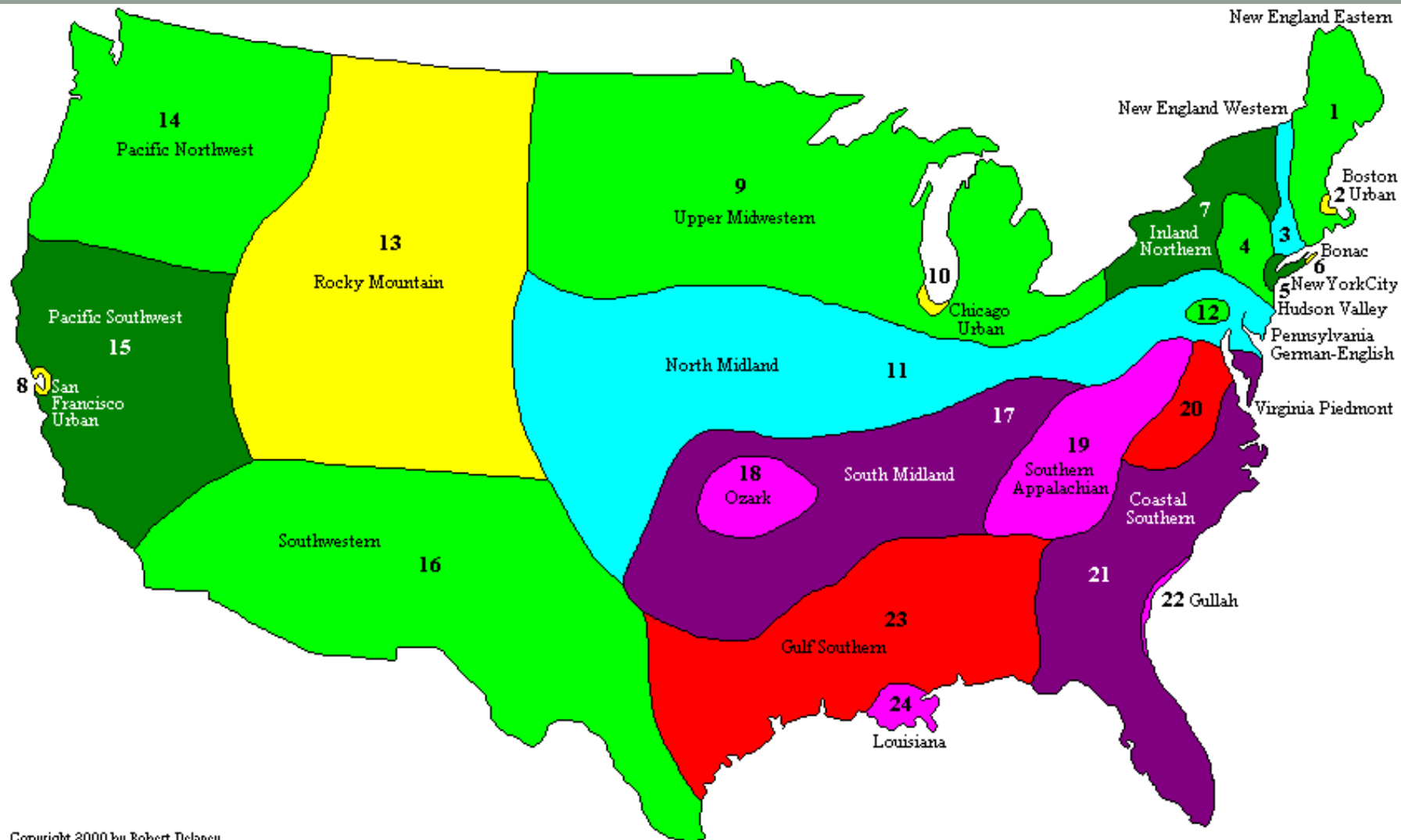
- Language is an important social factor
- How one speaks influences others' perceptions of the speaker:
  - Foreign accents
  - Speech impediments
  - Stuttering
  - Jargon
  - Dialect

# Language amid culture

- Language is tightly wrapped up in identity
- Sometimes the same language is considered distinct when spoken by two different ethnic groups! (typically with a difference in writing system)
  - E.g. Serbo-Croatian (Cyrillic vs. Latin alphabet), Hindi-Urdu (Devanagari vs. Arabic script)

# Language-based prejudice

- People are pretentious about how to use language
  - These biases are hard to overcome, *even* when made aware of them (like all prejudice)
- One prejudice is that people how speak a particular dialect are ‘saying it wrong’, or ‘don’t know how to say it right’, or are ‘less intelligent’
  - This implies that these individuals have somehow made errors in language acquisition
  - However, we know that speakers of a language apply linguistic rules *systematically* in a *highly organized* fashion, regardless of whether these dialects are prestigious or valued within the culture



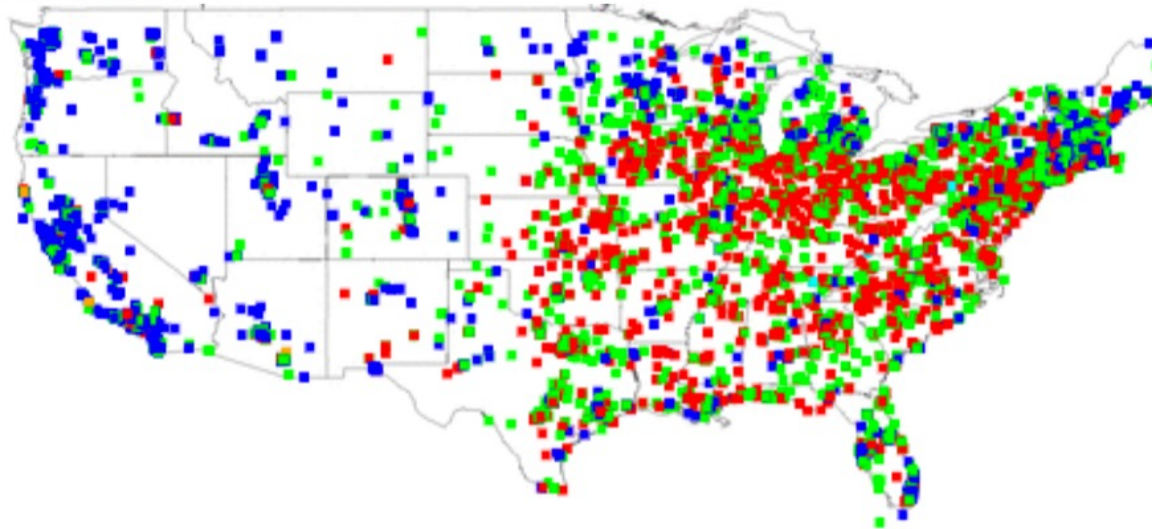
# What dialect do you represent?

- Take the quiz!
- <https://nyti.ms/2l3vAAP>

65. What do you call the insect that flies around in the summer and has a rear section that glows in the dark?

- a. lightning bug (29.07%)
  - b. firefly (30.43%)
  - c. I use lightning bug and firefly interchangeably (39.81%)
  - d. peenie wallie (0.02%)
  - e. I have no word for this (0.35%)
  - f. other (0.32%)
- (10733 respondents)

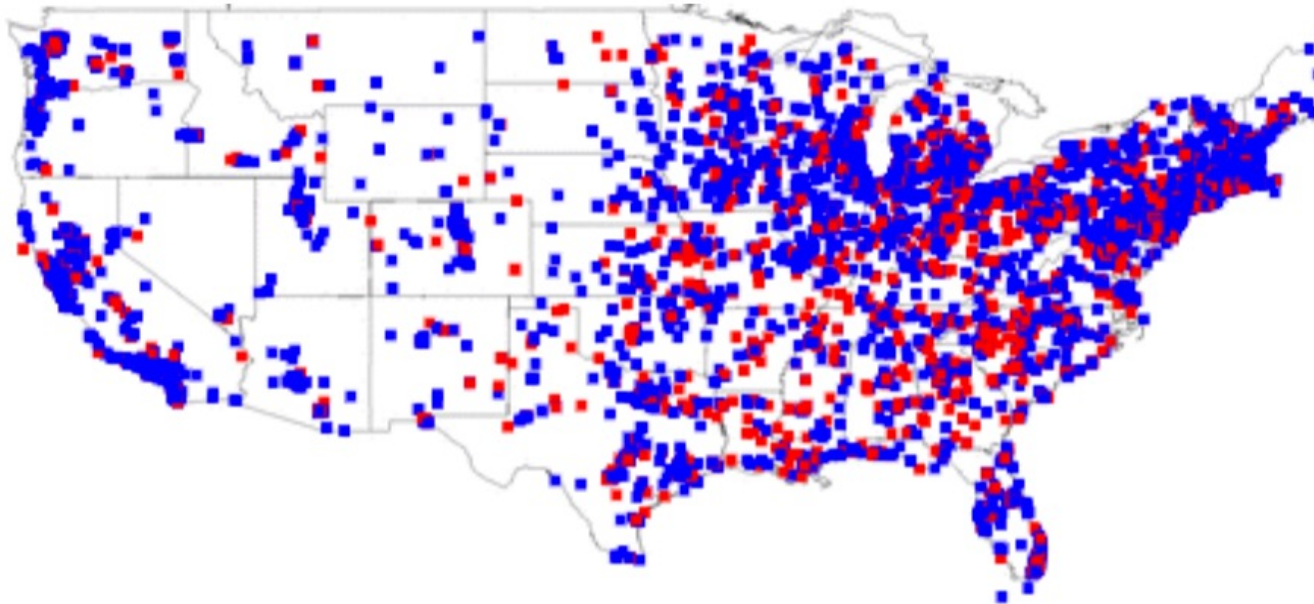
### All Results



## 48. umbrella

- a. **UMbrella** (21.43%)
  - b. **umBRELLa** (78.57%)
- (10796 respondents)

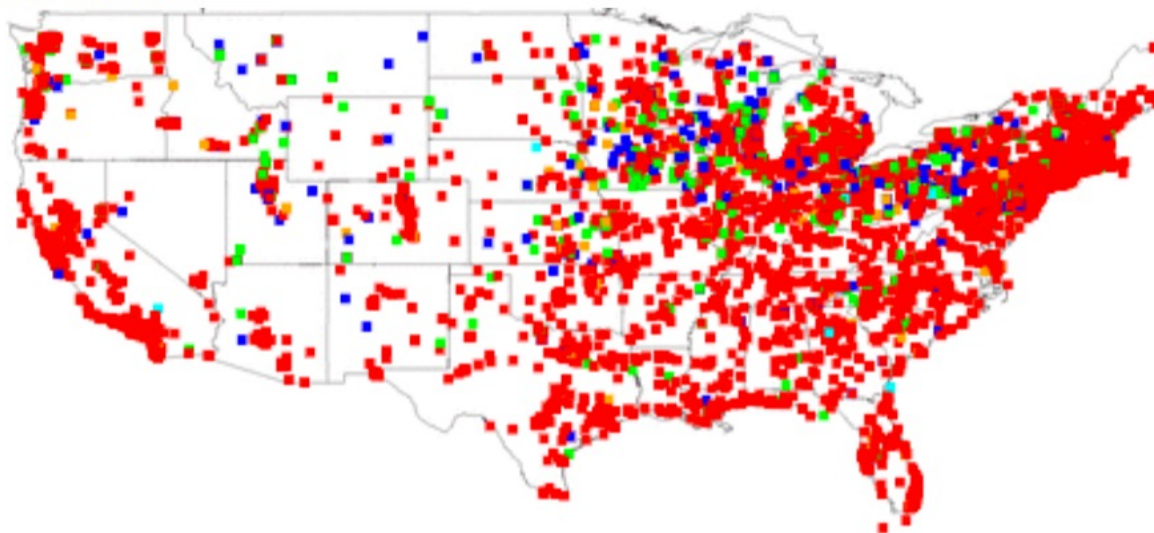
### All Results



10. **creek** (a small body of running water)

- a. [i:] as in "see" (88.57%)
- b. [ɪ] as in "sit" (3.85%)
- c. I use both interchangeably (5.13%)
- d. I don't know how to pronounce this word (0.04%)
- e. I use both, but they mean two different things (please state how they differ in the comments box) (2.05%)
- f. other (0.36%)  
(11517 respondents)

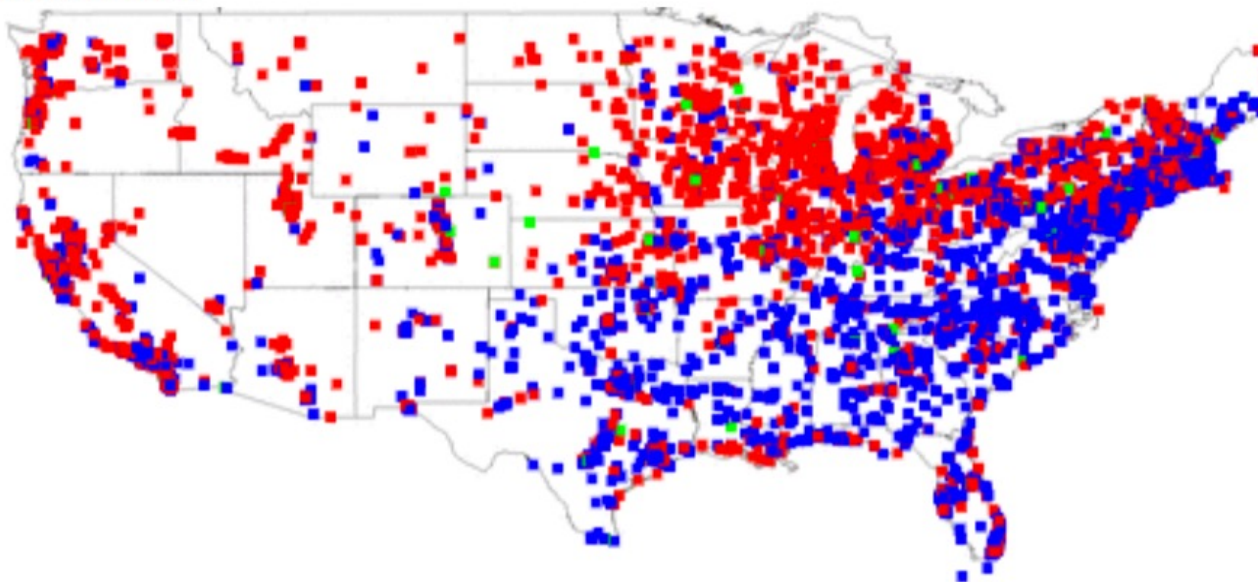
**All Results**



## 20. the second vowel in "pajamas"

- a. [æ] as in "jam" (45.92%)
  - b. [ɑ] as in "father" (51.86%)
  - c. other (2.23%)
- (11277 respondents)

### All Results



# Some Grammatical Properties of African American English

# African American (Vernacular) English

- One dialect of English you are probably familiar with is Standard American English (SAE)
- African American (Vernacular) English (AAE or AAVE) is a dialect spoken by many Americans, also colloquially referred to sometimes as 'Ebonics' or Black English

# African American (Vernacular) English

- AAE is structurally similar to SAE, although it incorporates similarities to some African languages and older dialects of English
- The differences between AAE and SAE are **systematic**, i.e., AAE has different rules than SAE
  - Speakers of AAE are not making haphazard or random errors
  - The differences are not due to them learning language ‘incorrectly’
- [https://youtu.be/rNjhB1DW\\_s](https://youtu.be/rNjhB1DW_s)

# Expletive subject & negation agreement

- Consider some of the differences between AAE as used here vs. SAE:
  - SAE uses *there* as the expletive subject in ‘there’s really a god’
  - AAE uses *it* as the expletive subject: ‘it’s really a god’
    - SAE uses *it* in different contexts: ‘it’s raining outside’
  - AAE has agreement for negation (similar to French):
    - ‘you ain’t goin’ to **no** heaven’

# Copula Deletion

- AAE allows deletion of the copula ‘be’
  - ‘If you bad’ vs. ‘if you *are* bad’
- Copula deletion is allowed in only the contexts that the copula can be contracted in SAE (‘if you’re bad’):
  - In SAE, these are bad: \*‘yes he’s!’, \*‘I don’t care what you’re’ , \*‘Who’s it?’
    - When meaning to say these: ‘Yes he is!’, ‘I don’t care what you are’, ‘Who is it?’
  - In AAE, these are bad: \*‘yes he!’, \*‘I don’t care what you’, \*‘Who it?’
    - When meaning to say these: ‘Yes he is!’, ‘I don’t care what you are’, ‘Who is it?’

# Phonology: cluster reduction in AAE

- Consonant cluster reduction rules in many languages
  - Part of the more general problem of dealing with consonant clusters
  - Variety of options: leave the cluster alone, insert vowels, delete consonants
  - AAE chooses deletion
- In many varieties of AAE, relative to SAE, word-final consonant clusters are reduced
  - Stop consonants tend to be dropped from the cluster
  - /dɛsk/ → [dɛs], /post/ → [pos], /wakt/ → [wak]

## Stop formation and labialization of dental fricatives

- When /θ/ and /ð/ show up in word initial position in AAE, they appear as stop consonants (stopping):
  - ‘thin’ /θɪn/ → [tɪn], ‘this’ /ðɪs/ → [dɪs]
- When /θ/ and /ð/ show up in other positions, they are realized as [f] and [v] (labialization)
  - ‘bath’ /bæθ/ → [bæf], ‘brother’ /brʌðr/ → [brʌvr]

# Vowel Lowering

- Like many dialects of Southern English, most varieties of AAE lower /ɪ/ to [ɛ] or [æ] when [ŋ] follows
  - ‘sing’ /sɪŋ/ → [sɛŋ], ‘thing’ /θɪŋ/ → [tɛŋ], ‘drink’ /dɪŋk/ → [dɛŋ]

# /z/ stop formation

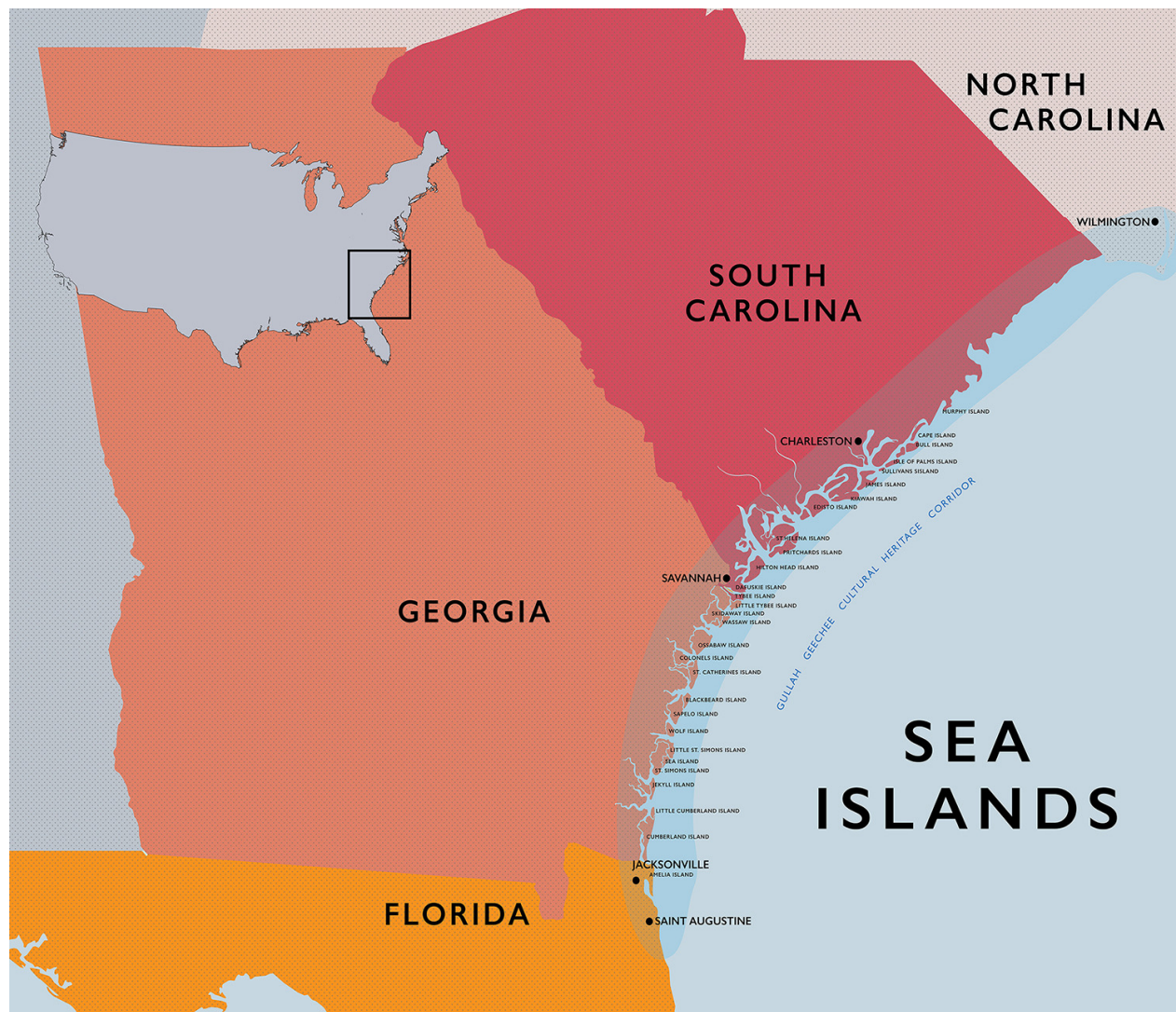
- /z/ is frequently changed to [d] when a nasal consonant follows:
  - ‘isn’t’ /ɪznt/ → [ɪdnt], ‘wasn’t’ /wʌznt/ → [wʌdnt], ‘business’ /bɪznəs/ → [bɪdnəs]
- Apparently this phonological rule may be historically from England, as some dialects in southwestern England produced ‘wasn’t’ like [wʌdnt]
  - Similar to ‘hadn’t’, ‘didn’t’, ‘couldn’t’, ‘wouldn’t’, etc.

# Phonology of AAE

- We have observed several grammatical properties of AAE
- A critical detail to notice is that the differences between AAE and SAE are **systematic**, i.e., AAE has different rules than SAE
  - Speakers of AAE are not making haphazard or random errors
  - The differences are not due to them learning language ‘incorrectly’

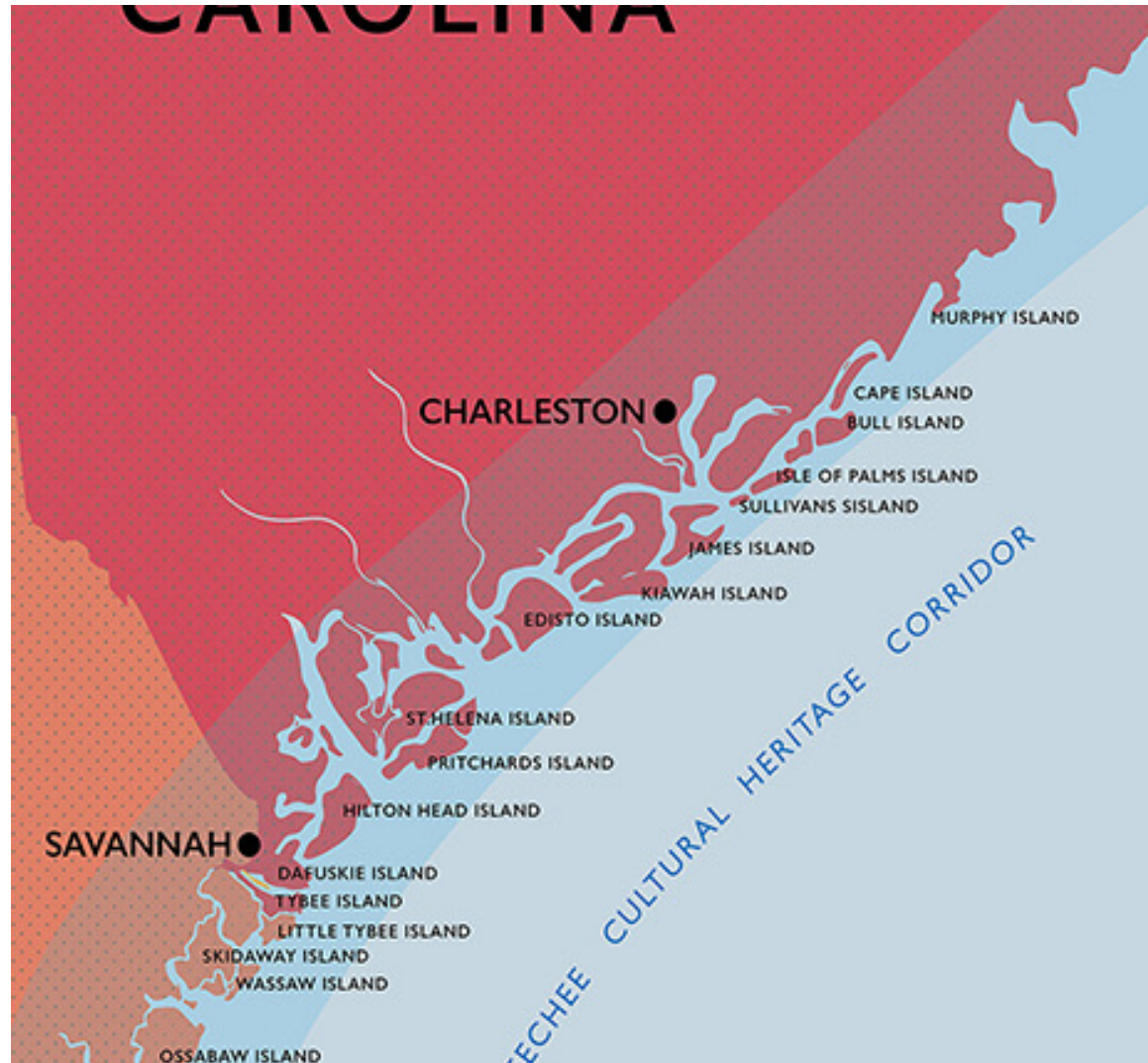
# Gullah (Geechee)

- Refers to both the cultural group and the language
- Gullah language spoken by several thousand people living in costal SC and GA
- Descendants of enslaved people from from West Africa
- Gullah creole incorporates features of English and African languages



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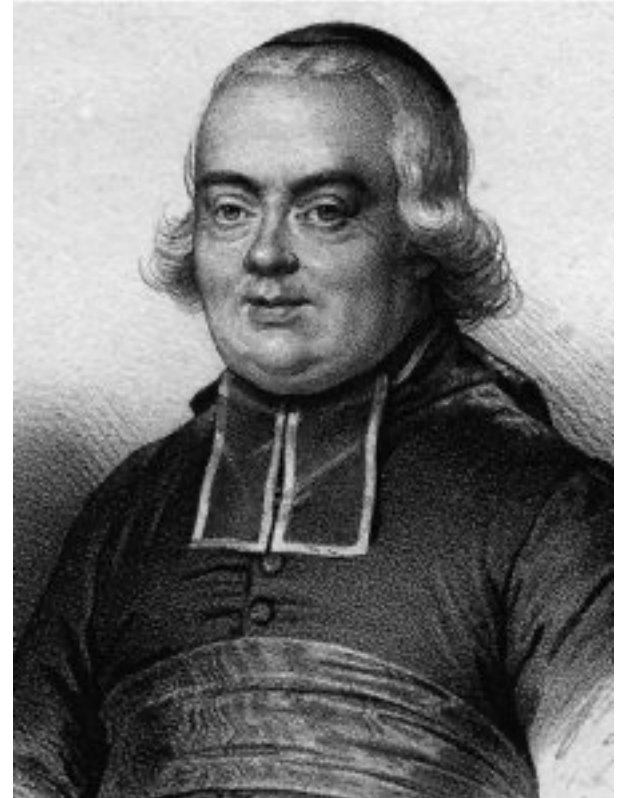
- <https://youtu.be/INLoxvNjFiA>



# Sign Language & Deaf Culture

# History of American Sign Language

- Charles-Michel, abbé de l' Epée (1712-1789)
  - Founded a school for the deaf in 1760 after being inspired by an encounter with two deaf sisters
  - Supported the use of gesture in deaf education



de l'Épée

# History of American Sign Language

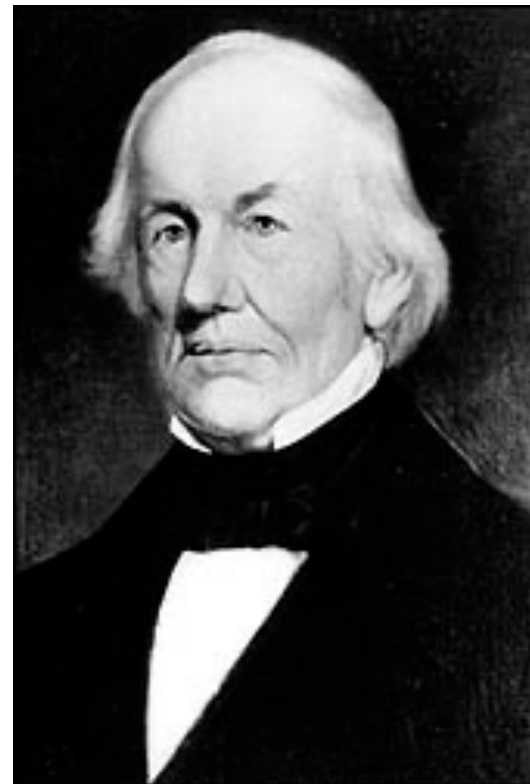
- Charles-Michel, abbé de l' Epée (1712-1789)
  - Tried to create an artificial signed system that was rejected by the deaf pupils
    - Instead, they communicated primarily through the naturally-occurring French Sign Language
  - Established teacher training programs so that new schools for the Deaf could be established



de l'Épée

# History of American Sign Language

- Laurent Clerc (1785-1869)
  - Deaf student in one of the schools founded by l'Epee
  - Later became a teacher in the school, dedicated to his craft



Laurent Clerc

Gallaudet University Archives

# History of American Sign Language

- Thomas Gallaudet (1787-1851)
  - American minister-in-training, concerned about the lack of educational opportunities for the deaf
  - Went to London to seek out ideas, met a French teacher of the deaf who invited him to Paris
  - Clerc was Gallaudet's sign language instructor
  - Gallaudet invited Clerc to travel to the U.S. to help him establish schools for the deaf
  - First American school for the deaf established in Hartford Conn. in 1817



Thomas Gallaudet

# Deaf education

- Most European countries have focused on **oralism**
  - **Oralism:** the education of deaf students through oral language by using lip reading, speech, and mimicking the mouth shapes and breathing patterns of speech
    - The philosophy that deaf education should focus on speech, not sign
- By contrast, in the early-mid 1800s the US had a much greater acceptance of sign language for deaf education

# Deaf education

- Milan conference in 1880
  - Meeting of educators of the deaf throughout Europe & the U.S.
  - Almost all 164 attendees were hearing; only one was deaf
  - Declared that oralism was superior to sign language instruction, banned the use of sign language in schools
    - Marked the consolidation of oralism as the primary means of deaf education for the past 140 years
- Oralism was already gaining steam in the U.S.,
  - By the end of the 19<sup>h</sup> century almost all schools for the deaf became oralist
  - Gallaudet university maintained the use of ASL, which helped to preserve the language

# Residential Schools

- Boarding schools for deaf children
  - Established in the 1800/1900s
  - Separated deaf children from hearing world
  - Often a place of great struggle/difficulty (including oralist education, abuse)
  - Allowed many deaf children to find a community of individuals with whom they share a common background, language, and culture
  - Very often their first exposure to sign language, despite the official oralist focus of the schools
  - Now, most children are “mainstreamed” into normal schools with mostly hearing children



Spartanburg, SC

# Deaf with a capital D



- The concept that there is a distinct culture/set of cultures within the deaf community, with sign language as a core aspect (Padden & Humphries, 1988)
  - Deaf with a capital 'D' = deaf culture
  - deaf with a lower-case 'd' = condition of deafness/hearing impairment
  - E.g., a deaf person may not identify as part of the Deaf community, and somebody who is in some important sense part of the Deaf community may not be deaf (e.g., a coda or Child of Deaf Adults)
  - Hard of Hearing = somebody with substantial hearing impairment but retains ability to access sound & speech, often considered Deaf in the cultural sense, especially when born into a Deaf family

# Some aspects of Deaf culture

- Separate language
- Shared history
  - Including narratives of origin, oppression, struggle
  - E.g. “[Deaf President Now](#)” movement at Gallaudet in 1988
- Unique Cultural practices:
  - Poetry, story-telling
  - Priority placed on clarity of communication
    - Often Deaf people are more direct, less use of the “sandwich” technique typical of hearing people in the United States wherein **negative feedback** is sandwiched in-between **positive comments**
    - E.g., “**I really liked your presentation, very persuasive 😊** **It could have used a bit more emphasis on XYZ, but it was very well done!**”

# Sign Language Linguistics

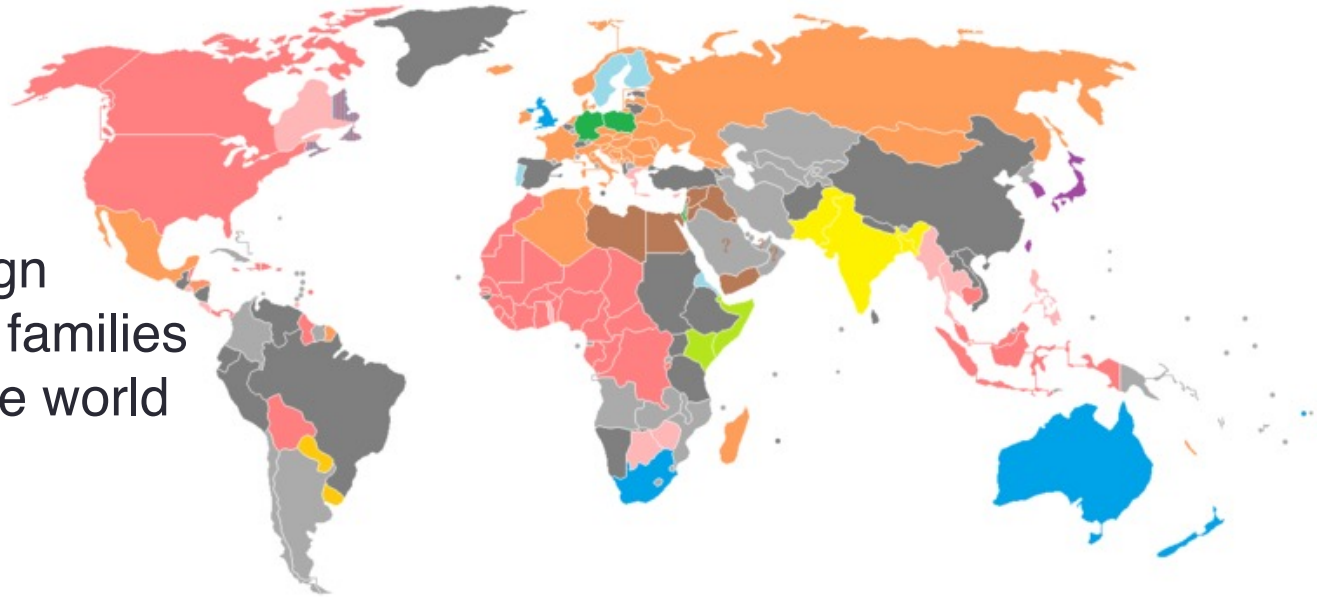
# Sign languages are languages

- Sign languages share many core linguistic properties that spoken languages have, at all levels of organization
  - Distinct features as well – some due to modality differences
- Suggest a common underlying component to language that is not tied to modality



# Sign languages are different

- Map of sign language families around the world



# Sign language is not based on spoken language

LIGHT, from lamps



LIGHT, e.g. lightbulb or lamp



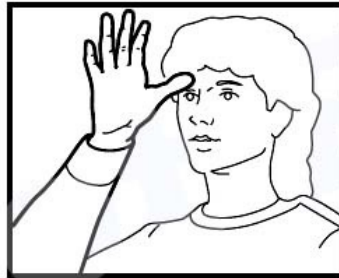
LIGHT, opposite of heavy or dark



# Arbitrariness

- Also sign languages:

American Sign  
Language  
(ASL)



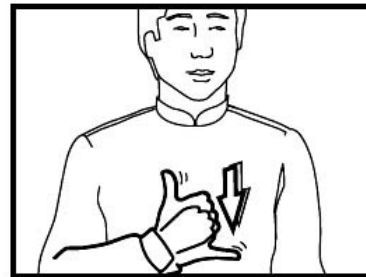
FATHER (ASL)



SUSPECT (ASL)



FATHER (CSL)



SUSPECT (CSL)

Chinese Sign  
Language  
(CSL)

# Iconicity in sign languages

- Sign languages have a larger degree of iconicity than spoken languages, likely due to their modality (gestures are more naturally iconic than speech) & youth (iconicity fades as languages get older)

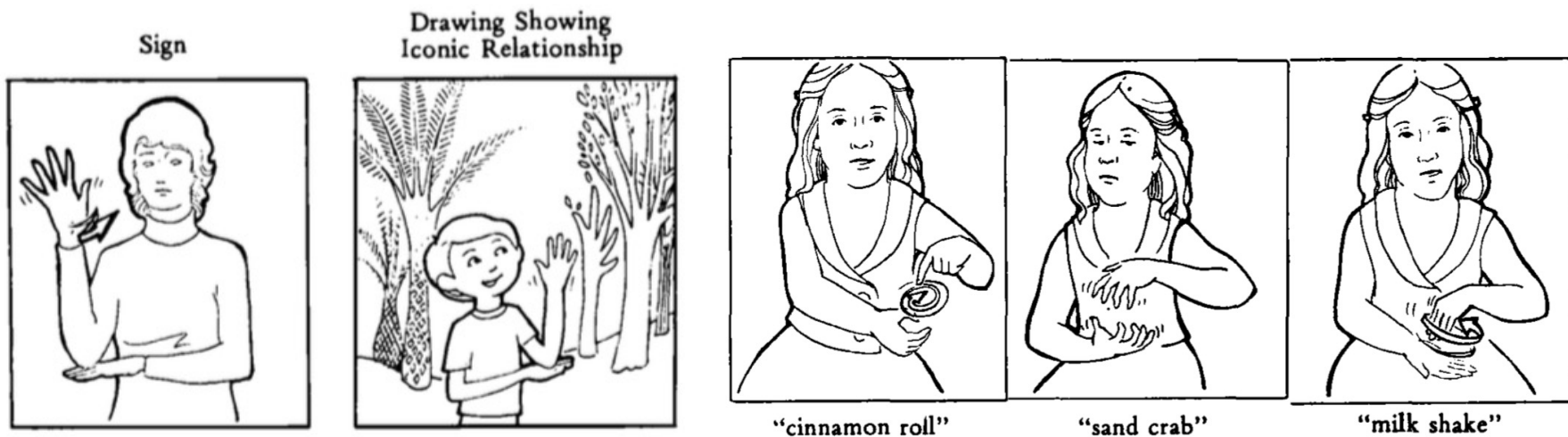


FIGURE 1. Nonce signs invented by young deaf children.

# Iconicity in sign languages

- Variability across sign languages with respect to iconic representation
  - Still arbitrariness even for relatively iconic signs



FIGURE 6. Sign for TREE in three different sign languages.

# Iconicity: signs vs. pantomimes

- Clear differences between the forms of sign and pantomime
- Iconicity reflects historical development of signs, not their current usage

The ASL Sign STEAL



Bellugi & Klima, 1976

Bernard Bragg's Pantomime of "steal"

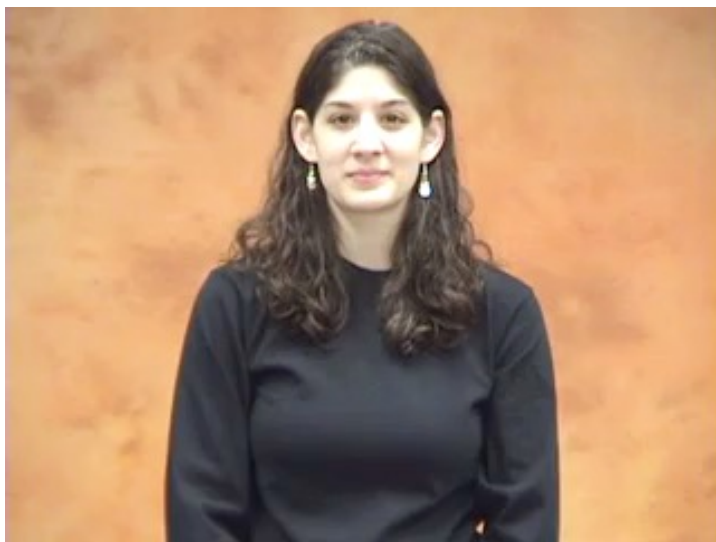


# Phonology in sign languages

- Signs can be characterized by a finite number of discrete, meaningless, contrastive phonetic parameters (Stokoe 1960)
  - Movement
  - Location
  - Handshape
  - Orientation (some theories (Sandler, 2012) consider it to be part of handshape or location (Van der Hulst, 1996 )
  - Non-manual markers (facial expression)

\* - Stokoe (1960) used the term “cheremes” (from greek χείρ – hand)

# Minimal pairs: Location



MOTHER



FATHER

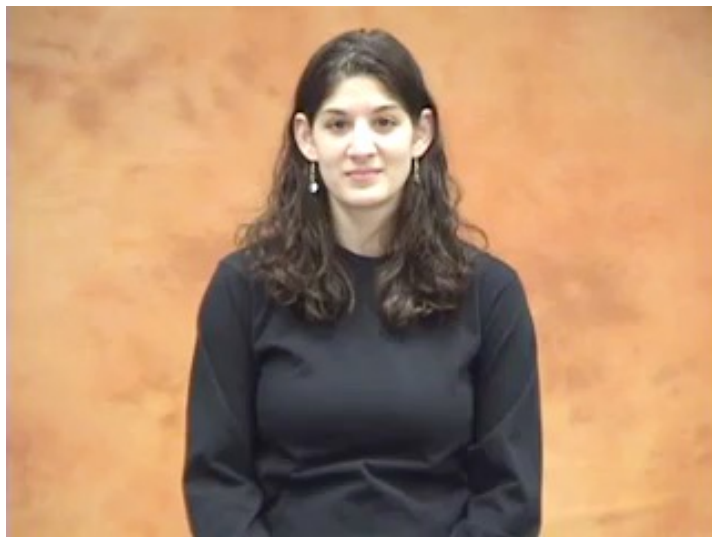
# Minimal pairs: Handshape



THINK

KNOW

# Minimal pairs: Movement

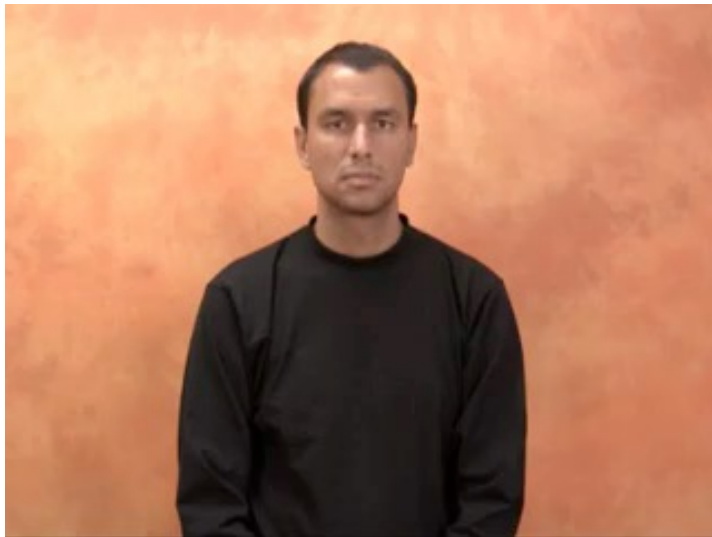


PAPER



SCHOOL

# Minimal pairs: Orientation



























































































STARS



SOCKS

ASL Handshapes

<b>A</b>				<b>G</b>			
 Extended A	 A-Index	 Closed A-Index	 Open A	 Modified G	 Double Modified G	 Closed Modified G	 Closed Double Modified G
<b>B</b>				<b>I</b>			
 Extended B	 Bent B	 Bent Extended B	 Contracted B	 Bent Combined I + One	 Combined I + One		
<b>C</b>				<b>K</b>			
 Crooked Extended B				 Extended K			
<b>D</b>				<b>L</b>			
 Extended C	 Clawed Spread C	 Contracted C	 Crooked C	 Bent L	 Bent Thumb L	 Clawed L	 Contracted L
 Flat C	 C-Index	 Double C-Index	 Spread C	 Double Contracted L	 Crooked L	 Combined LY	
 Spread Extended C				<b>M</b>			
				 Flat M			
<b>E</b>				<b>O</b>			
 Bent D	 Closed Bent D			 Covered O	 Flat O	 O-Index	 Modified O
<b>F</b>				<b>R</b>			
 Covered F	 Flat F	 Flat Open F	 Offset F	 Offset O	 Open Spread O	 Open O-Index	
 Open F				 Extended R	 Bent R		

<b>T</b>				<b>1</b>			
 Covered T				 Bent one	 Crooked one		
<b>U</b>				<b>3</b>			
 Extended U	 Bent U	 Bent Extended U	 Clawed U	 Clawed 3	 Contracted 3		
<b>V</b>				<b>4</b>			
 Combined U & Y	 Contracted U	 Crooked U		 Bent 4	 Clawed 4	 Slanted 4	 Crooked 4
<b>W</b>				<b>5</b>			
 Bent V	 Bent Extended V	 Clawed V	 Clawed Extended V	 Bent 5	 Bent Midfinger 5	 Clawed 5	 Contracted 5
 Slanted V	 Crooked V	 Crooked Extended V	 Closed V	 Slanted 5	 Crooked 5	 Crooked Slanted 5	 Modified 5
<b>X</b>				<b>8</b>			
 Covered X	 Closed W			 Covered 8	 Open 8		
<b>Y</b>				<b>Agent Ending</b>			
 Modified Y				 Standard Base Hand	 Agent Ending		

# Morphology

- Spoken languages: morphemes concatenated to form complex words
  - Cat-s, walk-ed, vacat-ion, tomb-stone
- Sign language has both **sequential** and **simultaneous** morphology
  - Sequential: phonemes/morphemes follow each other
  - Simultaneous: phonemes/morphemes are superimposed on each other and produced simultaneously.
- Sequential morphology differs across sign languages, while simultaneous is more similar (Aronoff et al., 2005)

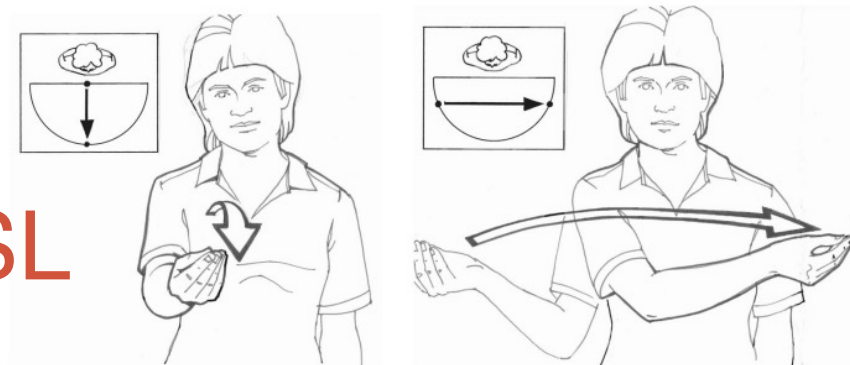
# Sequential Derivational Morphology

- I.e. suffixation
- Teacher = teach+PERSON



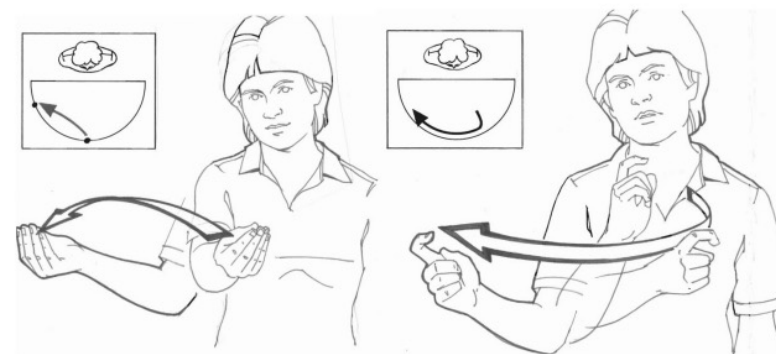
# Simultaneous morphology: Agreeing verbs in ASL

- Unlike (most) spoken languages, agreement in sign languages occurs only for a subset of verbs
- Object agreement most common



a. I-GIVE-YOU

b. S/HE-GIVE-HIM/HER



c. YOU-GIVE-HIM/HER

d. I-GIVE-YOU-ALL

Sandler, 2012 (from Carol Padden)

# Classifiers

- Words that represent a large category of possible words
- At the border of abstract grammatical expressions and gestures
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GF0iqbD64TA&feature=youtu.be>

# Tackling Myths & Misconceptions

1. Sign language is not universal
2. Signed languages are not based on spoken languages
3. Signed languages are not simply pantomime and gesture
4. Signed languages have arbitrariness; they are not always iconic
5. Signed languages have the same expressive capacity as spoken languages

# Tackling Myths & Misconceptions

6. Signed and spoken languages are processed by the brain in similar ways
7. Children learn spoken and signed languages in similar ways
8. Signed languages were not invented by hearing people

# Conclusions

- Dialects
  - Language differences are often used to establish social-political superiority
  - All languages and dialects are highly structured and rule-governed, use the same linguistic toolkit as others
- African American (Variety) English – AA(V)E
  - Nonstandard dialect of English
  - Not "broken" or "bad" English, but rather a distinct (set of) dialect(s) related to Standard American English (SAE)
- Sign language
  - All components of language found in speech (e.g., phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics) are similarly found in sign
  - Deaf with a capital 'D' Culture: distinct language, history, cultural practices from the hearing world