



**Publication:** Cape Times - Opinion

**Title:** Opinion: A long journey, but signs pointing in the right direction

**Publish date:** 27 Sep 2023

**Page:** 6

**Reach:** 10921

**AVE:**R 27521.34

**Author:** KATE HUDDLESTONE



## A long journey, but signs pointing in the right direction

KATE HUDDLESTONE

SOUTH African Sign Language (SASL) is now the 12th official language of the country.

While it has taken quite some time to get to this point, SASL has finally received the recognition it deserves. This was indeed something to celebrate on the International Day of Sign Languages (23 September) and the International Week of the Deaf being observed during the last week of September, which is also Deaf Awareness Month. Now that SASL is an official language, the hope is that more resources will be directed towards promoting its development in all spheres of society.

Very often, when people hear "sign language", they think there must be one "universal" sign language. This belief is wrong, however. SASL is a fully-fledged language unique to our country. Just as particular spoken languages are shared by members of a certain community and can be unintelligible to people from other communities, so, too, individual sign languages are shared by members of different Deaf communities across the world.

Because different communities use different sign languages, signers from one community will need interpreters to understand signers from other sign language communities. In South Africa, we have SASL.

SASL has evolved naturally, just like English, isiXhosa and Nama, to name a few, although it has been influenced by sign languages from elsewhere in the world. SASL, therefore, has its own vocabulary and grammar – it is not a manual code for English, Afrikaans or any other spoken South African language. For example, like many spoken languages, SASL can express verb agreement – where the form of the verb tells you who is doing the action to whom. However, what is different about SASL verb agreement is that the language uses space – the direction of the movement of a sign – to do this.

What is also interesting is that sign languages, including SASL, are processed in the same areas in the left hemisphere of the brain as spoken languages – meaning that language, whether it is produced in the auditory-oral modality of speech or the visual-gestural modality of sign, is language!

The vocabulary of SASL allows signers to express the same subtle, technical, and complex meanings that speakers of spoken languages do – the vocabulary is also able to expand to include new concepts – a process that is supported by Stellenbosch University's HandLab, which is an SASL curriculum development project aimed at empowering Deaf learners in South Africa through literacy and language development.

And just like spoken languages often have many words for the same concept – the use of different words often depending on where you grew up, how old you are, or your social class – so too does SASL have a great deal of lexical variation, although in this case, it is often a result of what school you went to. Of course, the finger-spelling alphabet means that signers can introduce a word from English – or any written language – into SASL.

One feature of SASL vocabulary, and certain aspects of the grammar, is iconicity. Although spoken languages do display iconicity – where the form reflects the meaning – such as with onomatopoeia (a word that sounds like the noise it describes) and ideophones (words that vividly depict sensory experience, found in many African and Asian languages), iconicity in sign languages is much more prevalent.

Making SASL the country's 12th official language is an important step in the path to an inclusive nation, but there is a lot of work still to be done to enable Deaf South Africans to access education and services in an equitable manner. Understanding what SASL is, as a language of the South African Deaf community, will hopefully contribute towards this goal.

*Dr Huddlestone is a senior lecturer in sign language linguistics in the Department of General Linguistics at Stellenbosch University.*

