2 SIGN GRAMMAR
Grammar is phonology + syntax + semantics
It is the order of sign.

The vocabulary or dictionary of signs is called the LEXICON

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Syntax
In English this is word order, in BSL it is sign order. The smallest syntactical unit is a morpheme, for example ‘ed’ in English shows something happened in the past. You can join it to another word such as join to make joined. In BSL it is a single sign such as ‘think, or true.’ You can join them together to make ‘believe’, a compound morpheme.

MORPHEME

EXAMPLES

Example: Signs with 1 morpheme

AEROPLANE
RED
BEDROOM

Non-manual morphemes

Puff cheeks
Means ‘much’

smile
positive

frown
negative

Compound morphemes

TOOTHACHE
Tooth + hurt + non-manual morphemes

BLOOD
Red + flow + non-manual morphemes
Time frame (when)

A sentence in BSL often shows the time frame first, followed by the topic and then the comment: e.g.
YESTERDAY BEEN SHOP ME (point to self)
A sentence in English often ends with the time frame e.g. I went shopping yesterday

Signs for time frame

Begin by stating when something is happening:

TOMORROW    YESTERDAY    NEXT- YEAR
LONG-AGO     RECENTLY     BEFORE     NOW
LAST- WEEK   NEXT- WEEK   LONG-TIME
Topic

Examples of the main subject you are using.

HE/SHE/IT/YOU
WOMAN
MAN
CAKE

PERSON-COME
LORRY
LIBRARY
KEYS

TEA
COMPUTER
BOOK
COLLEGE

RAINBOW
CAR
HOLIDAY
MEETING
**Comment**

Information about the topic is added at the end of the sign sentence.

**COMPOSING A SENTENCE**
1. Begin with a time frame showing when the event is occurring
2. Sign the topic
3. Sign the comment using appropriate non-manual features

Examples:

Yesterday there were crowds at the Deaf Club

In November I am flying to Spain

Today the weather is awful
Semantics (meaning)
The meaning conveyed in a sentence can be changed by using non-manual features such as facial expression and head movements.

For example expressing an opinion may involve more non-manual features than handshapes. For example head movements:

You? I doubt it      Not happy about it      Not pleasant

Head nod from side to side whilst signing will change meaning from positive to negative:

Nod head GO
Are you going?

Shake head GO?
You’re not going are you?

Yes that one

No not that one

MOOD

MOOD gives meaning to the attitude of the signer: uncertain, possible, definite, and shows statements or commands. Examples of mood are:

SURE
Certain

NOT SURE
uncertain

KNOW
certain

DON'T KNOW
uncertain

Like very much (one hand)
Definite

Like very much (two hand)
Very definite

Don’t like very much

Statement

Verbs (action signs)
There are 3 main types of verbs: plain, agreement/directional and spatial.

1 PLAIN
Plain verbs show little modification and grammatical information. They are modified by speed of repetition and facial expression.

LIKE
LIKE HIM (point)
THINK
THINK-HARD

CYCLE
CYCLE-FAST
RESEARCH
RESEARCH-FOR-AGES

2 AGREEMENT/DIRECTIONAL
Agreement verbs contain information about person, number of subject and object.

HELP-ME
HELP-YOU
HELP-THEM
LOOK-AT-YOU
LOOK-AT-ME
LOOK-AT THEM

RAINBOW LOOK-UP

DOG LOOK-DOWN

BOOK GIVE-HIM/HER

GIVE-ME

PAY-ME

PAY-YOU

TELL-ME

TELL-YOU/HIM/HER

TELL-THEM
3 SPATIAL
Spatial verbs can give information about the path, speed and location of action.

Further examples can be found in:

Additional Illustrations taken from:

TOPIC Clark Denmark picture number 823
COMMENT Wendy Daunt picture number 347
Notes on grammar
Sentences have subjects (S), verbs (V) and objects (O).
Grammar means sign order or word order.
In British sign language sign order is usually **TIME- FRAME, TOPIC, COMMENT** but it may vary. For example:
1 YESTERDAY (time frame) WEATHER (topic) AWFUL (comment)
Or
2 WEATHER (topic) AWFUL (comment) WHEN YESTERDAY (time frame)
Note the addition of the rhetorical question WHEN in this sign order

Sometimes there is no order because one sign shows the noun and verb together: e.g. WASH-HANDS, OPEN-DOOR.

In English this would usually be:
1 The weather (topic) was awful (comment) yesterday (time frame)
Or
2 Yesterday (time frame) the weather (topic) was awful (comment).
Note the addition of ‘was’ to show the past tense

It is important not to use word order in BSL grammar (as in Sign Supporting English, SSE) as it can affect the semantics/meaning of the sentence. Translation between BSL and English should not be word for word, sign for sign but segments of meaning changed using their different grammar

These handouts are designed by Sandra Dowe and Linda Squelch and are used by Linda for teaching British Sign Language at level 3 and can be found on the Deaf Support website [www.deafsupport.org.uk](http://www.deafsupport.org.uk) click on ‘resources’

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