Linguistic Differences Between English and ASL that Challenge Interpreters

ASL is a visual/spatial language and requires that relationships be clearly established. **Space** *and* **order** *are used to identify the relationship of objects and events.*

ASL utilizes a **topic-comment structure** *(what is talked about comes first, then comments or reasons are indicated at the end of the sentence). Signers indicate the topic first and then make statements or questions about it. This also results in varying levels of detail conveyed related to the topic (or contextualization)*

Imperative *forms are usually placed at the end of a sentence (sometimes take the form of a modal verb)*

Interrogative *forms (who, what, where, when, why, how, what for) are placed at the end of a sentence.*

Tense *is established by time indicator signs, which are typically placed at the beginning of a sentence. Time indicator signs are those which specifically establish a present, past, or future tense form. Absence of a marker indicates present tense.*

In addition to the use of time indicator signs to convey tense form, ASL also conveys information about time by modulating/inflecting verbs called **temporal aspect.** *These modulations convey information about the duration of an event and/or frequency of an event.*

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1) Modality/How language is conveyed
English is auditory/vocal; an auditory modality requires use of content and functional elements to create proper rhythm

ASL is visual/spatial; a visual modality uses spatial referencing and restricts use of functional elements—utterances made up primarily of content elements

2) Determining Meaning
English is considered *indirect* because it requires listeners to figure out meaning by identifying implied words:
- multiple meaning words
- new words made by combining verbs with prepositions
- use of generic terms which represent a wide range of meanings
- pronouns are used with implied referent
- use of small or "slang" phrases and words which carry descriptive meaning

ASL is considered *direct* because it uses very straightforward, clear words, minimizing the need for signers or addressees to identify implied units of meaning:
- few, if any, multiple-meaning words
- maintains strong association to immediate event
- specific- and sensory-oriented
- signs are based on effectiveness in communicating semantic meaning through perceptual imagery

3) Word Order/Grammatical Structure
English follows a fairly strict subject-verb-object (S-V-O) word order; some flexibility in certain areas

ASL uses a topic-comment word order; embedded information allows signer to give more simultaneous information

4) Time/Tense Marking
English verbs are conjugated to mark present, past, or future tense (walk, walkING, walkS, walkED)

ASL places the time marker early in the sentence and it conjugates all following verbs until a new time marker is noted

5) Affect Markers
English generally conveys affect through words and appropriate vocal inflection

ASL generally conveys affect through non-manual behaviors like facial expressions although sentences may be signed with accompanying facial marker

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Challenges for interpreters:
- deriving meaning
- dropping source language form, i.e. not "speaking ASL," or glossing
- managing the number of words and the speed the source language is delivered
- not confusing ASL with English even though ASL borrows the alphabet of English for writing

Challenges for interpreters:
- managing the degree of detail—learning how to add and subtract information appropriate for the direct and indirect nature of English or ASL
- using the first or third person address as appropriate for each language, including appropriate use of role-shifting in ASL
- identifying implied units of meaning in the source language and converting information into appropriate implied units of meaning in the target language

Challenges for interpreters:
- producing a 'target language' (TL)—the language being interpreted *to*—that is grammatically correct and that avoids 'source language' (SL)—the language being interpreted *from*—intrusions
- conditional sentences in ASL must precede consequence

Challenges for interpreters:
- producing an TL that appropriately conveys time
- accurately recognizing time markers (a particular challenge when reading ASL)

Challenges for interpreters:
- learning to work publicly with a language whose visual qualities (particularly role-shifting and visual affect) may have negative response
- incorporating visual affect/informational units from visual into spoken language forms

References and Bibliography   Humphrey, Janice and Alcorn, Bob. 1995. *So You Want to Be An Interpreter?* Salem, OR: Sign Enhancers.
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*Depending on the degree, **negative forms** may be placed at the end, beginning, or both beginning and end of a utterance.*

ASL pluralization 1) adds a plural modulation to a classifier or use a plural classifier, 2) adds a plural modulation to a pronoun or noun, or 3) uses a definte number sign (THREE or FIVE) or an abstract number sign (SEVERAL, FEW, MANY)

Verbs can also be modulated/inflected to convey the distributional aspect of an action to each person in a group or to only one or two persons.

*ASL indicates pronouns (**pronominalization**) by using handshapes, eye gaze, body movement, or role-taking to indicate a person or thing is present or by referencing a location in the signing space which represents a person or thing that is not present. ASL pronouns in and of themselves do not indicate gender, subject vs. object, people, things, or places but may be encoded by context and or word order.*

6) Voice
English uses the passive voice frequently, particularly in upper-consultative and formal registers

ASL primarily uses active voice; passive voice used in limited constructions

Challenges for interpreters:
- when working from English into ASL, identifying passive voice constructions in English and making proper transition to active voice in ASL

7) Negation/Affirmation
English adds a word to indicate affirmation or negation. "I will *not* go"; affirmation is usually embedded in the verb, although an extra word may be added for emphasis and/or clarity

ASL uses a non-manual behavior (head movement indicating 'yes' or 'no') as the sentence is signed. If using formal register, the non-manual behavior must also be signed with an appropriate affirmation or negation sign.

Challenges for interpreters:
- using correct affirmation and negation signs in informal/consultative vs. high consultative/formal registers
- avoiding shaking head from side-to-side when making an emphatic statement—looks like negation in ASL

8) Noun/Verb Modifiers
a. Describing noun relationships:
   English uses prepositions.
   ASL uses classifiers but prepositions can be signed for emphasis; directional verbs incorporate the signer and the addressee because of how the verb uses space.

b. Noun description:
   English adds adjectives, generally preceding the noun.
   ASL uses classifiers (SASS—size and shape specifiers); sometimes adjective are signed alone or in conjunction with SASSes.

c. Describing movement:
   English uses adverbs (i.e. slowLY, temporariLY, enthusiasticalLY, etc.).
   ASL augments verb production with specific non-manual behaviors; adverbs may be signed.

d. Making nouns plural:
   English generally adds an affix (-s) to the noun. Some rules exist for irregular nouns (goose-geese, deer-deer)
   ASL typically uses repetition, sometimes uses pronominal pronouns, verb modulation, or specific plural signs

Challenges for interpreters:
- when working from English to ASL: using classifiers and other language appropriate strategies to convey information, thus avoiding SL intrusions
- when working from ASL to English: developing a working English vocabulary adequate to translate SASSes and other classifier-rooted utterances with equivalent meaning and clarity
- when working from English to ASL: using pluralization rules to show when more than one referent or categories are indicated

9) Pronouns
English utilizes gender-specific, number-neutral referents; "him" or "her" may refer to a person, but "they" is not specific to the number of referents.

ASL conversely uses gender-neutral, number-specific referents; signs often incorporate a number (TWO-OF-US) when referring to numerous referents.

Challenges for interpreters:
- providing number specificity when working from English into ASL where possible
- providing gender specificity when working from ASL into English where referents are set up with no indication of gender (friend, neighbor)

References and Bibliography   Humphrey, Janice and Alcorn, Bob. 1995. *So You Want to Be An Interpreter?* Salem, OR: Sign Enhancers.
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Syntax Practice Sentences

1. The car hit the truck on the driver's side.

2. The wooden plank is behind the press machine, against the wall.

3. The burn mark on the woman's arm was noticeable.

4. The shirt had narrow stripes and small gold buttons on it.

5. The land on the property is flat, except for a narrow gully on one side. Water collects and then drains in that area.

6. The boxes must be folded and stacked in the corner by the door.

7. The doctor's office is the third door down from the pharmacy.

8. Where did the box on the top of the car come fr om?

9. You will see the signs for the personnel of fice as you walk down the hall.

10. Put the medicine on the thir d shelf of the cabinet.

11. Where were you positioned when you saw your husband strike your son?

12. The shoes were lined up on the floor of the closet.

13. Have you noticed any changes in the color of textur e of her skin?

14. Several members of the gr oup plan to go to dinner after the game.

15. The child was last seen on the playgr ound, near the swings.