An Overview of Tactile American Sign Language
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**Introduction**

American Tactile Sign Language (TSL) is very similar to American Sign Language (ASL) but is linguistically complete on its own. Although many aspects of ASL stay the same when presented tactually, some parts of the language’s grammar need to be changed when signs are received manually. Examples include:

- Information about the environment that a deaf-blind individual should be aware of, such as who is present, need to be added.
- Information about how a message is perceived, called backchanneling, is signed differently. An example of backchanneling in spoken English would be, “I see.” or, “No WAY!”
- Some signs have to be altered slightly so that the receiver can keep his or her hands on the communicator’s hands without struggling or reaching; for example, signs that are made on the body where the receiver would otherwise have to bend forward to “follow” them.
- Adverbs which are typically conveyed through facial expressions in ASL must be encoded manually in TSL.
The continuum

Although there are distinctions between ASL and TSL, there is also a continuum between ASL and TSL, just as there is a continuum between Signed Exact English and American Sign Language. A student who is losing his vision might progress through all of the steps. Others might stay at an intermittent step in the continuum if he retains some functional vision. The following list describes modes of communication from ASL to TSL for an individual with Ushers Syndrome.

- ASL is signed in its typical form, but the signer wears a contrasting colored shirt and good lighting ensures the message is intelligible to the Deaf-blind receiver.
- ASL is signed, but in a smaller area than is typical. The distance from the communicator to the receiver is modified to account for both the field loss ("tunnel vision") and the acuity loss (similar to an out-of-focus projector). Some grammar aspects of TSL might be in place, such as letting the receiver know who is present.
- ASL is signed with some of the grammar aspects of TSL. The receiver puts his hands on the wrists or hands of the communicator to aid the Deaf-blind person in tracking the signs across space, and in keeping the hands in his visual field.
- TSL is signed into the receiver's hands.
Grammar differences between ASL and TSL

- In ASL, facial expressions typically mark the difference between questions and statements\(^1\). In TSL, this difference must be signed explicitly so that questions and statements are not confused. At the end of a sentence, deaf-blind individuals use the sign for “question” to mark an utterance as a question\(^2\). For example, you might sign “SICK YOU QUESTION?” to say “Are you sick?”

- Negative operators must also be encoded negatively; words like “not”. In ASL, the phrase “…don’t understand” is said with the word “understand” along with a negative facial expression. In TSL, the word “no”, is substituted for the facial expression\(^3\). For example, the sentence “I didn’t find it”, which in ASL would look like “Find-it I” with a negative facial expression, would look like “Find-it I no no no” in TSL.

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\(^1\) Grossman, 23
\(^2\) Petronio 61
\(^3\) Petronio, 83
How do I use my hands while communicating in TSL?
There are two basic positions when using TSL; the monologue position, and the dialogue position.

The monologue position

- This position is used when one person talks to another for an extended time. This is also used when the deaf-blind individual is with an interpreter.
- Two people sit opposite each other, one with his hands resting on the other's. If the two are seated or standing opposite each other, such as when the deaf-blind individual is chatting in the hallway, both hands are used.
- If the two are seated beside each other, the receiver only uses the one hand that is closer to the communicator. This is the most common position among skilled TSL users.
- It is important to use both hands or to check for comprehension with deaf-blind individuals who are developing communication skills.

The dialogue position

- Two people sit across from each other. Each has his right hand under the other's left.

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4 Mesch, 42
5 Petrono, 60
This position is used when two people are having a conversation. It also supports a give and take type of conversation, rather than simply a receptive one.

In this position, the dominant hand of each person (typically the right hand) is under the passive hand of the other person (typically the left). This allows both people to sign and to also take turns rapidly.

“Levels” in TSL

When using TSL, the differences in the vertical and horizontal planes between the two people are used to help determine whose turn it is to speak.

- The expresser may signal that he is ready for his turn to be over by lowering his hand slightly, or that he is not ready to finish his turn, but needs time to think, by hesitating with his hands at the same level as when he was signing.

There are also other positions used to indicate whose turn it is to speak. In these illustrations, the communicator is on the left.
At Rest: When two people are both paused in a conversation, such as when both are thinking, both hands are lowered.

Hesitation level: When a communicator is thinking about what to say, he holds his hands higher, near to his body and keeps them still, signaling that he is thinking, but that he is not finished with his utterance.

Turn level: The communicator beings the receiver's hands towards his body, indicating a desire to have a turn.

Turn change level: The speaker signals that his utterance is done, and either can speak by putting both hands in a neutral position.
The environment in TSL

The sighted person should give relevant information to the deaf-blind communicator about his or her environment. Although this information may not be part of the linguistic message conveyed, it is important for the deaf-blind individual to be aware of.

- For example, sign “hahaha” if the deaf-blind communicator’s words were considered funny by either the receiver, those around him or her, or the audience in the case of a presentation. It is important for the speaker to know how his words are perceived.
- The receiver can disagree with the speaker by making the sign for “no”. The sign in this case is made by the receiver gently on the back of the communicator’s hand with two fingers.
- Notice the difference between “hahaha” and “no”. They look similar but mean almost the opposite. In the sign for “hahah”, the thumb is tucked down. In the sign for “no”, it is out.
- To indicate that you didn’t understand, or you want something repeated, the receiver should gently pull the communicator’s hands toward their own. Signing can continue just as it would if people were speaking over each other, or facial expressions were being made while someone was talking.
- You don’t have to continue signing the same environmental information if it continues. But if it changes, for example, a
person goes from smiling to frowning, that information should be conveyed.\textsuperscript{8}

- It’s also important to give other information about the environment, such as who is present, just as you would as a sighted guide. One researcher suggests developing a code with the person to signal these things with a series of taps\textsuperscript{9}. The hearing receiver might give one tap for a person entering the environment and two for a person leaving. Of course, this information would only be given if that person is relevant to the deaf-blind individual.

- In ASL, pronouns are typically made with a point of the index finger. Since directionality isn’t as concrete in TSL as in ASL, it is important to give the speaker’s name, and avoid the pronoun.\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{8} Morgan
\textsuperscript{9} Frankel, 171
\textsuperscript{10} Morgan
Backchanneling

Backchanneling refers to a giving of information about the listener’s response to the speaker so that he is aware of the listener's response. In spoken English, this could refer to facial expressions, such as a look of surprise, or phrases such as “Oh no!” In ASL, this is also the case.

- In TSL, facial expressions are not accessible. Even though the phrase “Oh, I see” can be used, it requires the speaker to stop communicating, possibly change positions, and to wait for the other communicator to sign, causing stress on the smooth nature of the utterance\(^{11}\).

- TSL has a few ways of effectively backchanneling. One is for the listener to gently tap the communicator's hand to signal understanding, a movement similar to “Yes, I agree” that doesn’t require a break in the conversation.\(^{12}\)

- Another is for the communicator to slow the rate of his or her signs or to hold his or her hands still for a moment. This indicates that they want feedback. It basically means “Do you agree?”\(^{13}\) If two people are in dialogue position, this facilitates quick remarks like “yes” to show agreement.

\(^{11}\) Frankel, 171
\(^{12}\) Mesch, 56
\(^{13}\) Mesch, 56
Changes to signs in TSL

Changing signs for logistical purposes

- Although most ASL signs stay the same when presented tactually, some have to be altered.
- There are some signs, such as “work,” that are made on the back of the hand. If the receiver’s hands are on the back of the communicator’s, their hand would cover the area where he or she needs to “be” in order to properly make the sign. In this case, simply make the sign on the top of the receiver’s hand, as if their hand was part of yours.\textsuperscript{14}
- There are some signs that are made on the signer's body, such as the sign for “mine”. It would be logistically, and possibly personally awkward, to force the receiver's arms to follow yours into your body space. Also, it would be tiring for the receiver to follow the communicator’s hands around a large area. When signing tactually the sign space is fairly small. If a sign is made close to the body, the signer should lean forward slightly, or bend his head for signs made on your head, so that the receiver has less of a distance to move when “following” your signs.\textsuperscript{15}

Changing signs for clarity

\textsuperscript{14} Mesch, 60; Frankel, 171
\textsuperscript{15} Mesch, 44
Received signs tactually isn’t always an exact science; the receiver’s hands do not need to be aware of the entire sign made by the communicator. For example, the sign “island” is made with the “I” handshape, which might be missed entirely if the receiver does not have his or her hands in the exact right shape. On the other hand, a skilled tactile communicator will read signs mostly through movement and location rather than through handshapes alone.

Some authors have suggested fingerspelling signs that might be confused when received tactually. The word “gun” and “21” are very similar. In this case, you might want to sign “21”, and finger-spell “gun.”

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Conclusion
Deaf-Blind individuals experience the world very differently than hearing, sighted individuals. Is tactile sign language “harder” than spoken English? Although modifications have to be made for TSL, the language itself is not any harder to learn than any other language and can convey the same depth and range of emotions as any other language. It is important to follow these guidelines, however, to keep the meaning from becoming ambiguous.
Works Cited


