

The Chinese University of Hong Kong
Department of Linguistics and Modern Languages
First Term, 2025-26

LING5104 Foundations in Sign Language Research

This course offers a detailed overview of essential topics in deaf studies, sign linguistics, sign language acquisition, and deaf education. We start with an introduction to hearing loss and deafness, discussing types of hearing loss, assistive devices, and debunking common misconceptions about deafness and sign languages. The course then delves into the linguistic properties of natural sign languages, covering aspects such as phonetics, morphology, and spatial syntax. Students will learn how natural sign languages differ from spoken languages and other types of manual communication. The course also explores cognition in deaf signers, sign language acquisition, and deaf education. By the end of this course, students will have a solid grasp of all these key areas and be prepared for further study in sign linguistics.

Course Contents

Topic	Contents/Fundamental Concepts
Hearing Loss and Deafness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Types of hearing loss • Assistive hearing devices • Deafness and sign language misconceptions
Different Modes of Manual Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural sign languages • Spoken-language based sign systems • Cued speech
The Linguistic Properties of Sign Languages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phonetics, phonology, and morphology • Spatialized syntax and classifier constructions • Non-manual features
Sign Language and Cognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sign language perception and production • Impact of sign language on spatial cognition and visual processing • Gesture and sign language
Gesture and Sign Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The gesture to sign language continuum • Iconicity in spoken and signed languages • Role of gesture in spoken and signed languages
Sign Language Acquisition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stages of sign language acquisition • Impact of late sign language acquisition • Comparison of sign language and spoken language acquisition
Deaf Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational approaches: oralism, total communication, bilingual bicultural, and bimodal bilingual approaches • The role of natural sign language in education • Challenges in deaf education

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

1. Understand various types of hearing loss and the use of assistive hearing devices.
2. Be aware of common misconceptions about deafness and sign language.
3. Differentiate various modes of manual communication, including natural sign languages and cued speech.
4. Grasp the linguistic properties of sign languages, such as phonetics, morphology, and spatial syntax.
5. Understand the cognitive processes involved in sign language perception and production.
6. Differentiate between gesture and sign language and understand the concept of iconicity.
7. Know the stages of sign language acquisition and understand the negative impact of delayed language access.
8. Understand different educational approaches for deaf learners, including oralism and bilingual approaches.
9. Gain rudimentary knowledge of Hong Kong Sign Language and use this knowledge to illustrate linguistic principles and phenomena.

Learning Activities

Lecture		Exercises		Workshops		Readings		Presentations	
(hours)		(hours)		(hours)		(hours)		(hours)	
in /out class		in /out class		in /out class		in /out class		in /out class	
22	-	11	-	3	-	-	31	3	10
M	-	M	-	M	-	-	M	M	M

M: Mandatory activity in the course; O: Optional activity

Assessment Scheme

Task	Description	Weight
In-Class Exercises	Participate in discussions and complete worksheets during class sessions and/or at home. All submissions are to be made online. Each exercise is worth up to three points and graded by the TA (1 point = minimal effort, 2 points = good effort, 3 points = strong effort).	20%
Group Presentation	Deliver a 10 – 15 (TBD) minute presentation analyzing the status and challenges of sign language implementation, deaf education, and social support systems for the deaf community in a selected country.	20%
Midterm and Final Quiz	Take two quizzes, each consisting of multiple-choice, true/false, fill-in-the-blank, and short answer items. Each is worth 30% of the final grade.	60%
Attendance	Regular attendance is expected. A deduction of 2% from your final score will be made for each unexcused absence.	-

Learning Resources for Students

- Baker, A., van den Bogaerde, B., Pfau, R., & Schermer, T. (2016). *The linguistics of sign languages: An introduction*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Brentari, D. (2010). *Sign languages*. University Press.
- Brentari, D. (2019). *Sign language phonology*. Cambridge University Press.
- Crowe, T. (2017). You're Deaf? Breaking through myths for effective therapeutic practice. *Journal of Social Work in Disability & Rehabilitation*, 16(3–4), 230–246.
- Emmorey, K. (2001). *Language, cognition, and the brain: Insights from sign language research*. Psychology Press.
- Emmorey, K., Reilly, J. S., & International Conferences on Theoretical Issues in Sign Language Research. (1995). *Language, gesture, and space*.
- Johnston, T., & Schembri, A. (2007). *Australian Sign Language (Auslan): An introduction to sign language linguistics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Marschark, M. (2007). *Raising and educating a deaf child: A comprehensive guide to the choices, controversies, and decisions faced by parents and educators*. Oxford University Press.
- Messing, L. S., & Campbell, R. (1999). *Gesture, speech, and sign*. Oxford University Press.
- Padden, C. A. (1998). The ASL lexicon. *Sign Language & Linguistics*, 1(1), 39–60.
- Supalla, T., & Craig, C. (1986). *Noun classes and categorization: Typological studies in language*.
- Sutton-Spence, R., & Woll, B. (1999, March 18). *The Linguistics of British Sign Language: An Introduction*. Higher Education from Cambridge University Press; Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139167048>

Feedback for Evaluation

Students are encouraged to give feedback or comments on course contents and teaching materials throughout the course, in addition to the midterm and final course evaluation. Students can contact either the lecturer or tutor directly. See contact details below.

Grade Descriptors

A A-	Outstanding performance on all learning outcomes. A thorough grasp of the subject as demonstrated by consistently high marks of the assignments. Ample evidence of familiarity with the literature of the relevant research topics. Students can generate good and worthwhile research ideas by themselves and produce a substantial research project.
B+ B B-	High performance on some learning outcomes which compensates for less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall good performance. A generally good grasp of the subject as demonstrated by good marks of the assignments. Some evidence of familiarity with the literature of the relevant research topics. Students can generate doable research ideas by themselves.
C+ C C-	Satisfactory performance on some learning outcomes, possibly with a few weaknesses. A general grasp of the subject as demonstrated by average marks of the assignments. Students need help in generating doable research ideas.
D	Barely satisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes. Insufficient grasp of the subject as demonstrated by poor marks of the assignments. Students need substantial help in generating research ideas.
F	Unsatisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes, or failure to meet specified assessment requirements.

Course Schedule

Class	Date	Topic	Readings
CL-1	05/09	Introduction to Deafness and Sign Languages	Crowe (2017) Marschark (2007), Chapter 2
CL-2	12/09	Natural Sign Languages and Other Manual Communication Systems	Baker et al. (2016), Chapter 1 ("Sign languages as natural languages" by Anne Baker) Marschark (2007), Chapter 3
CL-3	19/09	Linguistic Properties of Sign Linguistics: Phonetics and Phonology	Baker et al. (2016), Chapter 10 & 11 ("Phonetics" by Onno Crasborn and Els van der Kooij) Baker et al. (2016), Chapter 11 ("Phonology" by Els van der Kooij and Onno Crasborn)
CL-4	26/09	Linguistic Properties of Sign Language: Morphology	Johnston and Schembri (2007), Chapter 5 Padden (1998)
CL-5	03/10	Linguistic Properties of Sign Language: Spatialized Syntax	Emmorey et al. (1995), Chapter 2 ("Real, Surrogate, and Token Space: Grammatical Consequences in ASL" by Scott K. Liddell) Sutton-Spence and Woll (1999), Chapter 8
CL-6	10/10	Linguistic Properties of Sign Language: Non- Manual Features	Brentari (2010), Chapter 17 ("Nonmanuals: their grammatical and prosodic roles" by Roland Pfau and Josep Quer) Sutton-Spence and Woll (1999), Chapter 5
CL-7	17/10	Workshop: Introduction to ELAN for Sign Language Analysis Midterm Quiz	

CL-8	24/10	Linguistic Properties of Sign Language: Classifier Constructions	Johnston and Schembri (2007), Chapter 6 Supalla and Craig (1986), (“The Classifier System in American Sign Language” by Ted Supalla)
CL-9	31/10	Gesture and Natural Sign Language	Brentari (2019), Chapter 3 Messing and Campbell (1999), Chapter 8 (“Do signers gesture?” by Karen Emmorey)
CL-10	07/11	Sign Language and Cognition	Baker et al. (2016), Chapter 2 (“Psycholinguistics” by Trude Schermer & Roland Pfau) Emmorey (2001), Chapter 4
CL-11	14/11	Deaf Education and Sign Language Acquisition	Marschark (2007), Chapter 6 & 7 Baker et al. (2016), Chapter 3 (“Acquisition” by Anne Baker, Beppie van den Bogaerde and Sonja Jansma)
CL-12	21/11	Student Presentations (I)	
CL-13	28/11	Student Presentations (II)	
	TBD	Final Exam	

Teacher and TA Contact Details

Professor/Lecturer/Instructor:

Name:	Prof. Philip Thierfelder
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Teaching Venue:	YIA LT4

Teaching Assistant/Tutor:

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Use of AI Tools

This course adopts Approach 1 on the use of AI: All use of AI tools is prohibited in assignments and assessment tasks. For assignments and assessment tasks that count towards the final course grades, students are not allowed to submit work which is produced with the collaboration of or supported by the use of any generative AI tools (e.g. ChatGPT)*.

Any breach of the regulations will be considered an act of academic dishonesty and will be handled according to the University's Procedures for Handling Cases of Academic Dishonesty. In case of queries, students should seek advice from the course teacher.

Academic Honesty and Plagiarism

Attention is drawn to University policy and regulations on honesty in academic work, and to the disciplinary guidelines and procedures applicable to breaches of such policy and regulations. Details may be found at <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/>. With each assignment, students will be required to submit a statement that they are aware of these policies, regulations, guidelines and procedures.