

Sign Linguistics

LING 5404

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course introduces linguistic approaches to analyzing sign languages across all major levels of structure—phonetics, phonology, morphology, and syntax—showing how sign languages pattern as natural human languages while exploiting the possibilities of the visual-manual modality. We focus on how paired manual articulators, non-manual marking, and the use of signing space shape linguistic organization and analysis. Units cover (i) sign language phonetics and phonology, including minimal pairs, phonemic inventories, core parameters (handshape, movement, location, orientation, non-manuals), major phonology models, and basic transcription; (ii) common phonological processes, examining cross-linguistic patterns of change and their roles in lexical, historical, and sociolinguistic variation; (iii) morphology, emphasizing compounding and classifier/depicting constructions and their form-meaning mappings; and (iv) syntax, addressing word order and sentence types, including topic-comment structures, wh-questions, negation, and information-structural effects. No prior sign language knowledge is required as students will learn basic Hong Kong Sign Language through Deaf-led mini lessons.

COURSE CONTENTS

Topic	Contents / Fundamental Concepts
Sign Language Phonetics and Phonology	This unit introduces how the visual-manual modality shapes sign articulation and perception. Topics include minimal pairs, phonemic inventories, and contrastive parameters (handshape, movement, location, orientation, and non-manuals). Students survey major models of sign phonology and practice basic transcription/representation.
Phonological Processes in Sign Languages	This unit examines phonological processes and change across sign languages. Students learn to identify processes in data and consider links to historical change, lexical variation, and sociolinguistic variation.
Morphological Processes in Sign Languages	This unit overviews sign language word-formation, focusing on compounding and classifier/depicting constructions. Students analyze form-meaning mappings and how modality influences morphological expression.
Word Order and Sentence Types	This unit addresses basic word order in sign languages and variation across sentence types. Topics may include topic-comment structure, wh-questions, negation, and information-structure effects on constituent order.
Other Issues: Gesture, Grammaticalization, Metaphor and Meaning	This unit covers how gesture relates to sign language structure, including how manual and non-manual actions become conventionalized and grammatical. Students examine grammaticalization and how metaphor and modality shape meaning in sign languages.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

After completion of this course, students will be able to:

1. **Explain** how the visual-manual modality of sign languages shapes sign language phonetics.
2. **Identify and analyze** phonological processes in phonologically related signs and **explain** how these processes contribute to lexical variation and historical change.
3. **Evaluate and apply** evidence related to the core phonological parameters (handshape, movement, location, orientation, and non-manuals) to **motivate sign phonology models** and **conduct phonological analyses** of additional sign languages.
4. **Identify and classify** major types of compounding and classifier/depicting constructions in sign languages, and **explain** the mechanisms underlying their form-meaning mappings.
5. **Describe, identify, and analyze** major sentence structures in sign languages using sign language data.
6. **Explain and illustrate** how gestures may become conventionalized as manual signs and non-manual markers in sign languages.

COURSE COMPONENTS

Teaching modes and learning activities	Percentage of time
On-site face-to-face	
Lecture (not hybrid)	25%
Application activities	15%
Out-of-classroom	
Readings and review	25%
Assignments	35%

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

	Lectures		In-class activities		Paper and presentations		Readings	
	In	Out	In	Out	In	Out	In	Out
Hours	2	×	1	×	×	2	×	2
M/O	M	×	M	×	×	M	×	M

M: Mandatory activity in the course; O: Optional activity; ×: Not applicable

ASSESSMENT SCHEME

Task	Description	Weight
In-class worksheets	Short exercises completed during class (individual or small groups). These are primarily for application practice.	15%
Group presentation	Group presentation on linguistic universals in sign languages.	15%
Sign language analysis paper	Mini research paper (or ~750 words, excluding references and appendix) using lexical database and/or corpus data. Must include a quantitative component and a cross-linguistic comparison (two sign languages, or a signed vs. spoken language).	30%
Final exam	Exam assessing concepts covered throughout the course; mainly short answer questions and sign language transcription problems.	40%
Attendance	Attendance is expected. Two percent of the final grade will be deducted for each unexcused absence after the add/drop period.	—

COURSE SCHEDULE

Class	Date	Topic	Readings
1	06-Jan-26	Introduction Phonetics and phonology (I)	Battison (1978) Baker et al. (2016), Ch. 10
2	13-Jan-26	Phonetics and phonology (II)	Woodward (1976) Baker et al. (2016), Ch. 11 Pfau et al. (2012), Ch. 2
3	20-Jan-26	Sign-phonological processes	Frishberg (1975)
4	27-Jan-26	Sequentiality and simultaneity	Sandler & Lillo-Martin (2006), Ch. 8-9
5	03-Feb-26	Models of sign phonology (I)	Sandler & Lillo-Martin (2006), Ch. 10-11
6	10-Feb-26	Models of sign phonology (II)	Sandler & Lillo-Martin (2006), Ch. 13
—	17-Feb-26	<i>Holiday (no class)</i>	
7	24-Feb-26	Morphology (I)	Baker et al. (2016), Ch. 9 Sandler & Lillo-Martin (2006), Ch. 5
8	03-Mar-26	Morphology (II)	Pfau et al. (2012), Ch. 8
9	10-Mar-26	Syntax (I)	Pfau et al. (2012), Ch. 12, 14
10	17-Mar-26	Syntax (II)	Sze (2021)
11	24-Mar-26	Sign language and metaphor	Meir, I. (2010). Meir, I., & Cohen, A. (2018).
12	31-Mar-26	Presentations	
—	07-Apr-26	<i>Holiday (no class)</i>	
13	14-Apr-26	Final exam	

REQUIRED READINGS

Baker, A., van den Bogaerde, B., Pfau, R., & Schermer, T. (2016). *The linguistics of sign languages: An introduction*. John Benjamins.

Battison, R. (1978). *Lexical borrowing in American Sign Language*. Linstok Press.

Frishberg, N. (1975). Arbitrariness and iconicity: Historical change in American Sign Language. *Language*, 51, 696-719.

Meir, I. (2010). Iconicity and metaphor: Constraints on metaphorical extension of iconic forms. *Language*, 86(4), 865-896.

Meir, I., & Cohen, A. (2018). Metaphor in sign languages. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 1025.

Pfau, R., Steinbach, M., & Woll, B. (Eds.). (2012). *Sign language: An international handbook*. De Gruyter Mouton.

Sandler, W., & Lillo-Martin, D. (2006). *Sign language and linguistic universals*. Cambridge University Press.

Sze, F. (2021). Effects of the semantic and morphological factors on word order in simple transitive clauses in three Asian sign languages. *Senri Ethnological Studies*, 107, 5-41.

Sze, F. (2022). From gestures to grammatical non-manuals in sign language: A case study of polar questions and negation in Hong Kong Sign Language. *Lingua*, 267, 103188.

Sze, F., Wei, M. X., & Wong, A. (2017). Taboos and euphemisms in sex-related signs in Asian sign languages. *Linguistics*, 55(1), 153-205.

Woodward, J. C., Jr. (1976). Signs of change: Historical variation in American Sign Language. *Sign Language Studies*, 10, 81-94.

RESOURCES

Lexical databases / dictionaries

- **ASL-LEX: A Lexical Database of American Sign Language**
Link: <https://asl-lex.org/>
- **Asian SignBank (CSLDS, CUHK)**
Link: <http://cslds.org/asiansignbank/>
- **Global Signbank**
Link: <https://signbank.cls.ru.nl/>
- **HKSL Browser - 香港手語瀏覽器 (CSLDS, CUHK)**
Link: <http://www.cslds.org/hkslbrowser/>
- **SpreadTheSign (category search example link)**
Link: <https://www.spreadthesign.com/en.us/search/by-category/17/grades-certificates/>

Corpora (sentences / narratives / conversations)

- **ASL Sign Language Corpus (DePaul University)**
Link: <https://asl.cs.depaul.edu/corpus/index.html>
- **BSL Corpus Project — CAVA Open Access Data**
Link: <https://bslcorpusproject.org/cava/open-access-data/>
- **DGS / MEiN DGS Linguistics Portal (University of Hamburg)**
Link: https://www.sign-lang.uni-hamburg.de/meinedgs/ling/start_en.html
- **Hong Kong Sign Language Corpus (CSLDS, CUHK)**
Link: <http://www.cslds.org/hkslcorpus/>

FEEDBACK FOR EVALUATION

1. There will be a midterm evaluation for the instructor to obtain students' feedback.
2. There will be an end-of-term course evaluation.

GRADE DESCRIPTORS

Table: Grade Descriptors

Grade	Description
A	Outstanding performance on all learning outcomes; competent in theorization, generalization, hypothesizing, and reflection; skilled in creating hypotheses and generating proposals to tackle issues with unanticipated extension.
A-	Generally outstanding performance on all (or almost all) learning outcomes; skilled in comparing and contrasting arguments, explaining causes, analyzing and relating concepts to general theories; good at applying issues to relevant social contexts and predicting logically related outcomes.
B	Substantial performance on all learning outcomes, or high performance on some which compensates for less satisfactory performance on others; able to enumerate, describe, list, and clarify concepts; capable of examining a topic from multiple perspectives.
C	Satisfactory performance on a majority of learning outcomes, possibly with a few weaknesses; able to state, recognize, recall, and tell single points of topics of discussion.
D	Barely satisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes; barely able to state, recognize, recall, and tell single points of topics of discussion.
F	Unsatisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes, or failure to meet the specified assessment requirements; missing the points.

TEACHER AND TA CONTACT

INSTRUCTOR

Name	Prof. Philip Thierfelder
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Email	dpthierfelder [at] cuhk [.] edu [.] hk
Teaching Venue	Sino Building (SB) LT2 (UG/F)
Class Time	Tuesdays 6:30PM - 9:15PM
Office Hours	Available by appointment

TEACHING ASSISTANT

Name	Ms. Qingyi Chen
Office Location	G21, Leung Kau Kui Building, The Chinese University of Hong Kong
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DETAILS OF COURSE WEBSITE

A Blackboard account has been set up for students to access information of the course.

ACADEMIC HONESTY

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:

<https://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/>

The Chinese University of Hong Kong places very high importance on honesty in academic work submitted by students and adopts a policy of **zero tolerance** on academic dishonesty. Academic dishonesty includes: (i) plagiarism; (ii) undeclared multiple submissions; (iii) employing or using services provided by a third party to undertake one's submitted work, or providing services as a third party; (iv) distribution/sharing/copying of teaching materials without the consent of the course teachers to gain unfair academic advantage in the courses; (v) violating rules 15 or 16 of the University's Examination Rules or rule 9 or 10 of the University's Online Examination Rules; (vi) cheating in tests and examinations; (vii) impersonation fraud in tests and examinations; and (viii) all other acts of academic dishonesty. Any related offence will lead to disciplinary action including termination of studies at the University.

USE OF GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) TOOLS

Permitted without acknowledgement

- **Grammar / writing-mechanics correction** (spelling, punctuation, phrasing, clarity), as long as the original sentences and ideas are **your own** and the AI is not used to generate new content.

Permitted with acknowledgement

- **AI as an information-search tool** (e.g., to locate leads, keywords, papers, names, and possible sources).
 - You must **independently verify 100%** of any factual claims and **consult the original sources directly**.
 - Any sources “found via AI” should be cited **as the original source**, not as the AI tool.

Penalty for unreliable references

- **Hallucinated or unverifiable citations** (nonexistent papers, incorrect authors/titles/years/DOIs, fabricated quotes or information) in any paper or presentation will result in a **50% grade reduction**.

Caution

- AI output about **sign languages and sign language research is often unreliable**; treat it as a starting point only, not an authority.

Prompt to OpenAI ChatGPT (01/2026): Is LLM output about sign languages and sign linguistics reliable?

Response: LLM output about sign languages and sign linguistics is sometimes useful but not reliably accurate by default. It's best treated as a starting point (for ideas, terminology, and search directions) rather than an authority—especially for claims about specific signs, grammars, or communities.
