The Chinese University of Hong Kong
Department of Linguistics and Modern Languages
First Term, 2026–27

Sign Linguistics I: Phonetics and Phonology

手語語言學（一）：語音學與音系學

BMBL 2001

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course presents an overview of important concepts and issues in sign language phonetics and phonology. Foundational topics include sign phonetics (location, handshape, orientation, movement, and non-manual expressions), sign phonemics, markedness, phonological processes, sign syllables, and visual prosody. Students will learn to transcribe signs using the modified Stokoe notation system. Examples will be drawn from American Sign Language, Hong Kong Sign Language, and a variety of other sign languages. The course also introduces related research areas, including language acquisition, cognitive processing, and literacy development.

COURSE CONTENTS

Topic	Contents / Fundamental Concepts
Introduction and sign linguistics history	Introduces core course concepts and terminology. Reviews key milestones in sign linguistics research, with emphasis on sign phonology.
Sign phonetics and phonological parameters	Examines the five parameters (location, handshape, orientation, movement, non-manual expressions) and their role in contrast. Provides transcription practice using modified Stokoe notation.
Sign phonemics	Applies phonemic methodology to sign parameters. Uses minimal (and near-minimal) pairs to argue for distinctiveness vs. predictable variation.

Markedness in sign language phonology	Explores markedness, especially in handshape inventories and constraints. Relates cross-linguistic distribution to frequency and typological patterns.
Phonological processes in sign languages	Surveys common phonological processes across sign languages. Develops skills in identifying processes in data and presenting analyses.
Sign language acquisition	Describes early sign production and developmental trajectories. Focuses on acquisition of location, handshape, and movement parameters.
Sign phonology and cognition	Discusses phonological processing in sign production and perception. Introduces sign-language disorders and implications for phonological representation.
Sign phonology in education and reading development	Connects sign phonology to reading/literacy development. Considers implications for deaf education and bilingual/bimodal learning contexts in Hong Kong.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

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

1. Define key concepts taught in the course, such as distinctiveness and markedness.
2. Describe how different disorders can affect phonological acquisition and production.
3. Describe key findings from psycholinguistic research regarding the roles of location, handshape, and movement in lexical access.
4. Describe the patterns of phonology acquisition in signing children.
5. Describe linguistic commonalities shared by both signed and spoken languages.
6. Explain how sign language phonology is involved in reading and literacy development in deaf people.

7. Give examples of variation and historical change in sign languages.
8. Identify and transcribe the location, handshape, orientation, and movement of a sign.
9. Name and explain common phonological processes that lead to variation in signs.
10. Transcribe signs using the modified Stokoe notation system.

COURSE COMPONENTS

Teaching Modes and Learning Activities	Percentage of time
On-site face-to-face	
Lecture (not hybrid)	30%
Interactive tutorial (not hybrid)	15%
Out-of-classroom	
Readings, review, and analysis	55%

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

	Lectures		Tutorial Activities		Readings, review, and analysis	
	In	**Out**	**In**	**Out**	**In**	**Out**
Hours	2	×	1	×	×	4
M/O	M	×	M	×	×	M

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

ASSESSMENT SCHEME

Task	Description	Weight
In-class worksheets	Exercises completed during class.	20%
Phonological analysis	Students will analyse two sets of HKSL signs to demonstrate their understanding of HKSL phonology and phonological processes.	20%
Mid-term concept quiz	Assesses concepts covered over the first half of the course.	30%
Final exam	Assesses concepts covered throughout the course.	30%
Attendance	Regular and punctual attendance is expected (see worksheet policy, below). Attendance is verified through the in-class sign-in process and determines eligibility for in-class worksheet credit.	—
Worksheet policy	Worksheets are graded for good-faith engagement rather than correctness: 2 = substantially complete and demonstrates a reasonable attempt; 1 = partially complete or demonstrates limited engagement; 0 = no meaningful attempt, no submission, or attendance requirement not met. The two lowest worksheet scores, including any zeros, will be dropped. To be eligible for credit, students must sign the attendance sheet by 10:45 a.m. and submit their own worksheet during class. Students arriving after 10:45 a.m. may participate but will receive no credit for that day's worksheet. Missed worksheets cannot be made up.	—
Makeup policy	Makeup assessments are not automatically granted. A student who misses a quiz or examination because of a documented illness, emergency, or other compelling circumstance must notify the instructor and teaching assistant at least two hours before the assessment. Required documentation must be submitted within one working day of the missed assessment. If a makeup is approved, the	—

student will be offered a limited selection of sessions, normally within one week of the original assessment. The student must attend one of the offered sessions; no additional session will be arranged to accommodate the student's personal schedule. Failure to attend an offered session will result in a grade of zero. For any makeup quiz or examination, the score earned will be reduced by 25%. That is, the recorded score will be 75% of the score earned.

Rubrics

Score	Standard
2 – Satisfactory engagement	The worksheet is substantially complete, addresses the assigned tasks, and shows a reasonable attempt to apply the concepts or procedures introduced in class.
1 – Limited engagement	The worksheet contains some relevant work, but substantial portions are incomplete, responses are consistently underdeveloped, or the work shows only minimal engagement with the task.
0 – No credit	The student did not meet the attendance requirement, did not submit the worksheet, submitted a largely blank or irrelevant worksheet, or provided responses that do not represent a meaningful attempt.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Class	Date	Topic	Readings
1	08-Sep-26	Introduction to sign linguistics; Sign phonetics	Valli and Lucas (2000), Part I (Basic Concepts); Baker et al. (2016), Chapter 10
2	15-Sep-26	Sign parameters: Location, handshape and orientation	Johnston and Schembri (2007), Chapter 4
3	22-Sep-26	Sign parameters: Movement; Sign language phonemics; Prosody	Sandler (2012); Sandler and Lillo-Martin (2006), Chapter 15
4	29-Sep-26	Markedness	Baker et al. (2016), Chapter 11
5	06-Oct-26	Phonological processes (I)	Valli and Lucas (2000), Unit 5; Frishberg (1975)
6	13-Oct-26	Phonological processes (II)	Brentari (2019), Chapter 8
7	20-Oct-26	Mid-term quiz	
8	27-Oct-26	Iconicity and morphophonology	Brentari (2019), Chapter 3
9	03-Nov-26	Sign phonology and cognition	Baker et al. (2016), Chapter 2; Emmorey (2001), Chapter 4
10	10-Nov-26	Sign phonology and the brain	Corina (2015)
11	17-Nov-26	Sign language phonological acquisition	Chamberlain et al. (1999), Chapters 4 & 5
12	24-Nov-26	Sign phonology and literacy development	Petitto et al. (2016)
13	01-Dec-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 Publishing Company.

Chamberlain, C., Morford, J. P., & Mayberry, R. I. (1999). *Language acquisition by eye*. Psychology Press.

Corina, D. P. (2015). Sign Language, Disorders of. In J. D. Wright (Ed.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*. Elsevier.

Emmorey, K. (2001). *Language, cognition, and the brain: Insights from sign language research*. Psychology Press.

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

Johnston, T., & Schembri, A. (2007). *Australian Sign Language (Auslan): An introduction to sign language linguistics*. Cambridge University Press.

Sandler, W. (2012). The Phonological Organization of Sign Languages. *Language and Linguistics Compass*, 6(3), 162–182.

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

Valli, C., & Lucas, C. (2000). *Linguistics of American sign language: An introduction*. Gallaudet University Press.

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, hypothesization, 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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Teaching Venue	Wu Ho Man Yuen Building (WMY 506)
Class Time	Tuesdays 10:30AM – 12:15PM
Office Hours	Available by appointment

TEACHING ASSISTANT

Name	Mr. Andre Fei
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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

All use of AI tools is prohibited in assignments and assessment tasks.