

**Structural Differences Between American Sign Language, Signed Exact English, and
Pidgin Signed English**

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ASL, or American Sign Language, is a distinct visual language that is often considered the “natural language” of deaf and hard of hearing individuals (The Stews, 2014). However, while many individuals who sign utilize ASL, there are also other forms of sign language that are used throughout the United States, including Signed Exact English (SEE) and Pidgin Signed English (PSE). While all three communication systems use many of the same signs, the main distinctions between ASL, SEE, and PSE are the extent to which the grammatical structure of signed sentences mimics that of the English language.

ASL is its own distinct language. It utilizes hand shapes, direction and movement, and facial expression to communicate thoughts, feelings, and intent (Centers For Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2019a). ASL follows unique grammar conventions and does not mimic the structure of spoken or written English (RD, 2018). Most often, ASL sentences follow the structure of Topic-Comment, rather than the basic Subject-Verb-Object structure of English (Barlow, 2017). Thus, ASL is a complete language that is entirely separate from English, much like Spanish or French.

In contrast, SEE is not a true language. Rather, SEE, also known as Manually Coded English, simply translates English sentences into manual cues while maintaining the grammar, word order, and sentence structure of spoken English (CDC, 2019c). SEE is most often used in educational settings, as its proponents believe it helps students learn English and supports the development of written communication (Hearing Loss Association of America: North Carolina State Association [HLAA-NC], n.d.b). However, it SEE is a much slower means of communication than ASL, so it is rarely used for natural conversation (Strickland, 2007).

Finally, PSE is a mix between elements of ASL and SEE. PSE is an unofficial language that uses ASL signs and eliminates words that carry little meaning, such as articles, but mimics the structure of spoken English (Barlow, 2017). PSE is also called Conceptually Accurate Signed English, as it blends the communication styles of ASL and SEE (CDC, 2019b). PSE is often used to communicate among non-native signers, or those who learn to sign later in life, and is considered a bridge between ASL and English ([HLAA-NC], n.d.a).

While ASL, SEE, and PSE are all considered forms of manual communication, they each have different structural characteristics. SEE mimics the structure of English, while ASL serves as a totally separate language, and PSE integrates aspects of each to facilitate communication between native and non-native signers.

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