

ALPHA



White Paper

The Diversity of Language

The many varied types of language around the world

When we think about the concept of 'language', we generally think about the language(s) we speak, and those we don't; how we write words and what we read, the alphabet we learned at school. Spoken and written languages are by no means universal, but the concept of 'language' is usually assumed to be something spoken and written. Written languages are vastly different between cultures too, from the uncial Cyrillic alphabet to the Arabic abjad script, the logographic Chinese Hanzi to the pictorial hieroglyphics of Ancient Egypt.

But what about the languages that aren't 'words' at all?

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How we move is a language, pictures have their own language in many different ways, various secret and ancient languages are indecipherable unless thoroughly researched and learned. Tribal and isolated groups' communication can be entirely unique and self-contained. What is universal is the human need for socialisation, as well as needing to deliver messages such as threats, and this article will be exploring the many varied ways people make contact with each other all over the world. In a world of mostly 'vocalised' language, we explore the world of non-vocalised/oralised communication.

Many of these languages, especially surrogate languages, may be considered defunct, no longer widely used, and/or only used in very specific circumstances. With communication technology increasing in advancement and geographical coverage, certain types of language have been phased out, particularly those born from a need to communicate over large distances.

Here are just some of the unusual (at least to some) ways of communication found around the world:

Give a Little Whistle

The whistling language of [Silbo Gomero](#), used on La Gomera, one of the smallest Canary Islands, off the coast of Eastern Africa, is a reductive version of Castilian Spanish and has been used by islanders for centuries. The language replaces vowels and consonants with different whistled tones (two and four respectively) and can be used, with practice, to convey any message.

The sounds are made by different positions of the fingers to and around the mouth, making it as beautiful to listen to as it is fascinating to learn about. Though the origin is unclear, either brought by the African travellers who first settled on the island or developed on the island through a need to communicate over distance and mountainous terrain, the Gomeran Whistle was previously used to announce catastrophic events, like the murder of an official, and now is used as a public announcement system for life events like weddings, and to communicate mundane things like asking for the newspaper.

It is a cherished part of the island culture and, as the other whistled languages of the Canary Islands have all but disappeared from modern society, there was a movement to preserve this key part of island life when it was showing signs of dying out during the 1970s and 80s. Taught in schools since 1999, the passing down of this unusual way of communication is vital to its survival and today it is used by the majority of La Gomera's population.

Just a Click Away

Click languages are recognised as African in origin, with the possible exception of one found in Queensland, Australia, called Damin, used in aboriginal ceremonies and rituals. [Khoisan](#) or Khoesaaan languages, meaning “bushperson” and classified together by American linguist Joseph Greenberg, are spoken mainly in southern African countries. There are thought to be 27 Khoesaaan languages currently used, even by a very small population, and these are dying out – it was thought there were over 100 just one century ago.

These languages, often unique to each community, ‘replace’ some consonants with the characteristic clicks, as well as having vowel and consonant utterances, and there are an incredibly wide variety of all. The origin of this complex way of speaking is thought to be a link to the earliest human speech, and could have been a way to imitate nature through onomatopoeic indicators as a form of sound symbolism, though there is no scientific backing to this hypothesis. There is also some tone variation in some of these languages, like in Cantonese, and genders, like Romantic and other languages. The clicking aspect of the languages take up an average of 70% of the overall words, and has been described as sounding ‘dramatic’, even in everyday life.

Within many of these languages, there are several methods of clicking and each sound means a different thing. Some other language groups in surrounding areas, such as Bantu (Central, Southern and Great Lake areas) and Cushitic (primarily found in the Horn of Africa regions with some northern and southern minorities) peoples, also use clicks in their languages, with a one-to-four click system. Some aspects of the click sounds in Khoesaaan have been replaced with non-click consonants that sound similar, reducing the amount of actual clicks used.

Actions Speak a Thousand Words

Sign language is very prevalent in all cultures, usually used when spoken communication is difficult or impossible due to a number of factors. Sign language is often dependant on the cultural illustrators for relevant objects and how people speak, which can make it unique to each culture. Where some sign language is manually coded language, the physical surrogate of oral language in as much as following the same syntax and grammar of verbal or written words, others have evolved into working specifically for deaf people to communicate in the most useful and intuitive way.

British Sign Language (BSL) evolved in the deaf schools that were first founded by Thomas Braidwood in 1783, where he combined a form of sign language, articulation study and lipreading to teach his students. This way of communication spread to New Zealand and Australia, making these languages so similar in style and dialect that they were categorised together as British, Auslan and New Zealand Sign Language (BANZSL). Since then, as usually happens, the languages have evolved with time and development, such as the inclusion and adaptation for Aboriginal and Maori languages, creating each country's respective sign language.

Langue des Signes Française (LSF), or French Sign Language, is thought to have been used in the Parisian deaf community long before it was credited to Charles Michel de l'Épée in the mid-1700s. The creation of the official language and subsequent free schools for the deaf meant a more structured, rule-based system, making it significantly more complicated than it was before. LSF became one of the more influential European sign languages, and went on to influence other manually-coded language, such as American, Irish, and Russian Sign Languages (ASL, ISL, RSL). After it was banned in schools during the 1880s, LSF was reintroduced officially in the 1970s after protestations from the deaf community, authorised for use in schools in 1991, and wasn't recognised as a language in its own right until 2005. Brazilian Sign Language, or Libras, follows a similar structure but is unique in its language.

Chinese Sign Language or Zhōngguó Shǒuyǔ (CSL or ZGS) tends to be more pictorial compared to the finger-spelled alphabet structure of ASL, such as miming chopsticks for "eat". Deafness is stigmatised in China, among many other countries and cultures, and there is more of an emphasis on institutionalised rehabilitation rather than adapting to communicating without oralism (speech and lipreading). However, with a deaf population of anywhere between 1 to 20 million, ZSL is slowly becoming a more accepted form of communication.

Another area with poor education and recognition of sign language is South Asia, where Indo-Pakistani Sign Language is used but not taught in schools, despite it being relatively common in low and medium income population that cannot afford private care and education. With dire interpreter shortages and up to 7 million people who have hearing difficulties in India alone, some non-government organisations now support and provide both academic and vocational teaching using this form of sign language.

According to [WHO](#), around 1.5 billion people live with some level of hearing loss and/or disability, 430 million of which require services to support and live with these conditions. That doesn't even include the many more people who learn sign language in order to communicate with loved ones, colleagues and clients. Non-verbal body language is also an interesting factor, some aspects differing between cultures while the seven universal facial expressions – disgust, contempt, joy, sadness, fear, surprise and anger – are shared and shown by human beings everywhere, with the possible exception of neurodivergent and physically differenced people. The physical language, from subconscious to clearly structured, is often overlooked but is still a huge part of people's lives.

Steady as the Beating Drum

Another means of communication developed specifically for long distances, similar to the whistling of Silbo Gomero, is the drummed language of [Amazonian Bora](#), as well as those used across Asia and West Africa. The drummed rhythms emulate the words that are usually spoken, recreating sentences that can be heard 10 times further away than the human voice can reach. It was once very widely used within these tribes, every man in the village would have known how to use the drums, but now few people have that knowledge and only about 20 of the objects still exist.

Where most of the world's drummed languages use one tone, spoken Bora uses two. Using hollowed-out logs, called manguaré, that create different tones depending on the thickness – a higher “male” sound using the thin logs and a deeper “female” tone using thick logs – the sound can carry the same message, as someone speaking right beside you, from miles away. The effect could be compared to the violin, which evokes an empathetic feeling because it is so close to the sound of the human voice, though it is the message and not the emotion that is important here.

Unlike other signal systems, like Morse code where words are rendered into a standardised code, this drummed language relies on a knowledge of the specific language enough to understand a reduced version of it, not dissimilar to hearing and understanding words spoken underwater or over very loud music. Rhythm is often overlooked in linguistics, though it is common in forensic studies, such as political speeches and even lullabies, and this type of language makes it imperative to get right.

Other communications over long distances, though not rhythm related, are the smoke signals used by the Native Americans, and the semaphore flag language used before the invention of the telegraph to spell out messages through a series of arm positions. Native Americans also used drums, but it was more commonly used to announce war and during battle. These types of language surrogates have been far reduced due to advancements in technology, and the reduced space – in Native Americans' case – they are now able to occupy. Who knows how long these drums will continue to echo across the Amazon landscape.

Conclusion

With the rise of communication technology, many of the more 'unusual' language and language surrogates are becoming less and less prevalent. However, many of the cultures where these languages are used feel a responsibility and drive to keep their sometimes ancient customs alive, even if there are modern alternatives available. La Gomera is an excellent example of a community and their government taking steps to revive and preserve previously fizzling customs, and ensure future generations know, understand and continue to use them.

Language is, in itself, diverse and learning about the many varied facets of human communication is imperative to understanding how wonderful it is. At Alpha CRC, we see the beauty in localization as well as the practicalities, and we hope languages continue to evolve and adapt to the world, technology or not, without losing its wonders.

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