

American Sign Language Fluency Interview

Grammar Guide

Grammar is the combination of morphology and syntax. Morphology is the study of the smallest pieces of meaning in a language. Syntax is the study of word order in a language. Grammar, therefore, is the proper combinations and orders of the pieces of meaning in a language.

This Grammar Guide is organized based on ASL Phonology. Phonology is the study of the smallest pieces of a language (regardless of meaning). The phonology of ASL is based on the four primary manual parameters of signed languages: Handshape, Palm Orientation, Location, and Movement (HSP, POR, LOC, MVT). All signs (and all gestures, too) are composed of these four elements. The *morphology* of ASL can be divided along these parameters to better understand how these parameters can influence meanings.

ASL Morphology

- HSP**
- Nominative / Possessive / Reflexive - Handshapes distinguish pronoun types.
 - Numeral Incorporation - Handshapes identify the numeral information, usually between numbers 1 and 9 (sometimes 10). Incorporation is usually with a commonly countable concept such as minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, or years. Numeral information can also combine with morphemes for height, dollars and cents.
- POR**
- 1st Person versus 2nd Person (palm toward self versus away from self)
 - Relative Orientation of Objects / Directions (furniture in a room, which way to turn)
- LOC**
- Subject-Object Agreement (1st person GIVE 2nd person)
 - Locative Verbs (FOOD on the mind)
 - Time Lines (distant past, recent past, present, near future, future, distant future)
 - Use of space to show comparisons and contrasts (timeline comparisons, column A vs B)
- MVT**
- Plurality / Distribution (MY vs OUR, YOU vs YOUR, GIVE generally vs GIVE individually)
 - Noun/verb pair examples / (SIT vs CHAIR, FLY vs AIRPLANE... single versus double MVT)
 - Temporal Aspect (LOOK-AT vs LOOK-AT-long time vs LOOK-AT-repeatedly)

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- HSP + MVT**
- Classifier Predicates (3 Movement Roots and 7 Handshape Morphemes)
 - Numeral Incorporation with temporal aspect (every five weeks, quarterly, biannually)

- POR + LOC**
- S-O Agreement with internal agent identification (say-no-to, #BACK)

- HSP + LOC**
- Numeral Incorporation with tense (years ago, years future)
 - Numeral Information with comparisons and contrasts (team scores)
 - Numeral Information as a locative verb (identification by numbers on jerseys)

Adverbial Markings include the following non-manual signals

CS (cheek to shoulder, shoulder raised, head tilted to shoulder) indicating recent past.

TH (Interdental tongue protrusion) indicating carelessness.

MM (bilabial pursed lips, head tilt) indicating regularity, repetition, or redundancy.

Intensity Markers have the following progression:

1) puffed cheeks, 2) puffed cheeks with head movement, 3) tensed and open lips, 4) tensed and open lips with tongue movement.

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ASL Syntax

The *basic word order* of ASL sentences with plain (intransitive) verbs is S-V:

SUBJECT VERB (ex: 1st-person-pro HUNGRY)

This word order can be modified with *Subject Reduplication*, which requires an affirming head nod:

SUBJECT VERB SUBJECT-PRONOUN (ex: 1PP HUNGRY, 1PP (headnod))

This word order can be further modified with *Subject Deletion*:

- - - - VERB SUBJ-PRO (ex: HUNGRY, 1PP (headnod))

These rules also apply to transitive verbs using the deep structure order of S-V-O:

SUBJECT VERB OBJECT (ex: 1PP HIT 2PP)

with *Subject Reduplication* it becomes 1PP HIT 2PP, 1PP (headnod)

with *Subject Deletion* it becomes HIT 2PP, 1PP (headnod)

Therefore, **any time the word order is anything other than S-V-O, it must be marked non-manually.**

These non-manual grammatical markers include headnods, raised eyebrows, lowered eyebrows, and head tilts. Manual elements may also appear. Look at the following chart for the rules for each syntax label:

Syntax Label	Eyebrows	Head Posture	Other
Yes / no question	Raised during entire question	Tilted/forward during question	Last sign held
Wh question	Furrowed during entire question	Tilted during entire question	Last sign held
Question Mark Wiggle	Raised during question word	Forward	Q sign held
Topicalization	Raised during topic	Tilted during topic	
Relative Clauses	Raised during relative clause	Tilted back	Raised lip/cheek
Rhetorical question	Raised during WH-word	Tilted during WH-word	
Conditionals	Raised during If-Clause	Tilted during If-Clause	Use of Space
Commands	Direct and steady eye gaze	May be forward	Stressed Verb
Affirmation	(na / various)	Up-and-down Nodding	
Negation	May be lowered (squinted)	Side-to-side Shaking	

Because these common syntactic structures have non-manual grammatical markings, they may also have word orders different than S-V-O:

WH questions typically place the Subject (the WH word) at the end of the sentence.

Topicalizations typically front the Object information before the Subject (O, SV). They may also emphasize the Subject (S, VO). One form of subject reduplication combined with subject deletion has previously been described as topicalization of both the Verb and Object (VO, S (headnod)). Since it requires the same headnod of subject deletion, however, it appears no to be due to topicalization.

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