

Boston University
College of Arts and Sciences



Carol Neidle
Professor of French and Linguistics
Department of Modern Foreign Languages
and Literatures
718 Commonwealth Avenue
Boston, MA 02215 USA
Phone 617/353-6218
Fax 617/353-6218
E-mail carol@bu.edu
URL <http://www.bu.edu/asllrp/carol.html>

Prof. John Caradonna
Chairman, CAS Academic Policy Committee
c/o Susan Giovino, Assistant to the Dean
College of Arts and Sciences
725 Commonwealth Avenue

April 13, 2004

Dear Prof. Caradonna:

Proposal

I am writing to request that the Academic Policy Committee recommend that American Sign Language (ASL) proficiency be accepted in fulfillment of the CAS Foreign Language Requirement, which states:

"Degree candidates are required to demonstrate proficiency at the advanced level in one language other than their own."

The supporting materials include a complete copy of the statement of the current requirement, the rationale for it, and the ways of fulfilling it [1].

If it is determined that ASL is a language acceptable for satisfaction of this requirement, the next issue that arises is how proficiency would be demonstrated. I would further propose that a passing grade in SED DE 591 (American Sign Language IV), which CAS students are currently allowed to take for credit, be recognized as evidence of this proficiency. Alternatively (for students who may have learned ASL elsewhere), proficiency could be attested by Prof. Robert Hoffmeister and his staff.

Rationale

Addressed on the pages that follow is the rationale for the two parts of this proposal.

I. Inclusion of ASL among those languages accepted for purposes of the CAS Foreign Language Requirement

American Sign Language (ASL) is currently the only natural language¹ actually taught at Boston University that is not classified as a foreign language for purposes of satisfying this requirement. I will argue here that there is no legitimate basis for this exclusion. In what follows, I will, as you suggested, try to explicitly address concerns that have been raised by the administration with regard to the status of ASL. The main points are the following:

- ASL is a full-fledged, complete, fully expressive, natural language.
- ASL is a very different language from English. For an English speaker, this language in the visual modality could not be more *foreign*.²
- ASL has a rich literary tradition. Values, customs, and traditions are passed down from generation to generation embedded in the language and in the Deaf community's prized linguistic art forms (including epoch tales, stories, poetry, etc.).
- There is a significant corpus of ASL literature available on videotape to students at Boston University, and students can meet and communicate with native users of the language (without needing to travel abroad!).
- There are courses available at BU, which CAS students are already allowed to take for credit; this offers a straightforward way for students to attain proficiency in ASL.
- ASL provides important foundation for continued academic study and future professional activities in several fields.

1.1 Linguistic characterization of American Sign Language

There is clear scientific evidence that American Sign Language is a natural language completely comparable with all other natural languages, with respect to linguistic structure, neurolinguistic processing, acquisition, variation, change, and expressive capabilities. ASL is a full-fledged language in all senses of the word.

There is no comparison to be made between American Sign Language and computer 'languages' -- which are *not* natural languages. I do not know why administrators at Boston University have frequently brought computer languages into the discussion of ASL, but it suggests the possibility that some members of the administration may view ASL as a kind of formal system different from 'real' natural human languages, and that is just not the case.

¹ Linguists understand a "natural language" to be a human language (spoken or signed) that has evolved naturally, is acquired natively, and is used by communities of human beings as primary means of communication. Natural languages also share certain fundamental structural properties (which are studied by linguists). See the excerpt from Frank R. Wilson's, *The Hand: How Its Use Shapes the Brain, Language, and Human Culture* (Vintage, 1999) for a summary of why linguists classify signed languages as well as spoken languages as "natural languages" [2]. A more complete discussion of the relevant issues is found in Karen Emmorey's excellent book, *Language, Cognition, and the Brain: Insights from Sign Language Research* (Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002).

² Sense of 'foreign' intended here: unknown to, and outside of the experience of [the English speaker].

Expressive capabilities

In 1992, Dennis Berkey stated in a letter to the *Daily Free Press*:³

I have never said or asserted that ASL is limited to "converting the spoken word into hand signs and facial expressions." I do worry, though, that ASL does not even offer unique means of expressing common notions and that signing among non-American (not even non-English) can be quite different (foreign?) than signing ASL.

I am baffled by this statement. ASL offers means as unique as those of any other language for expression of common (and less common) notions. It is true that relative to ASL, other signed languages would be considered "foreign languages." There are well over a hundred distinct signed languages (perhaps 150 or more),⁴ just as there is diversity among spoken languages. I do not see how this bears on the issues at hand.

ASL is not English

Languages in the signed modality have very similar organization to spoken languages, although with some modality-specific properties. The basic discriminatory articulatory units are sounds in spoken languages, perceived auditorily; in signed languages, they are particular hand shapes, orientations, movements, and places of articulation, perceived visually. Linguists refer to these units as *phonemes* in both modalities, because they have such similar properties and linguistic behaviors. There are morphological processes in both types of languages, as well as hierarchically organized syntactic structure. Signed languages are especially interesting from a syntactic point of view, because there are linguistically significant uses of facial expressions and head movements (see Neidle *et al.* 2000 for details [3]).

Contrary to popular misconceptions,⁵ or the impression that one might have from seeing fingerspelling (handshapes used to represent English letters, with a restricted usage for proper names or English borrowings), ASL and English are completely different languages. It would be hard to imagine a language more 'foreign' for an English speaker than ASL (see footnote 2). In that sense, ASL is most definitely a foreign language, in the usual sense of this term.⁶

One of the major advantages of learning a 'foreign language' is that it causes students to have a greater awareness of the nature of language itself and of properties of their own native language that they had taken for granted. This goal is particularly well served by study of American Sign Language. Despite the difference in modality, there are fundamental properties of human language that are striking to the English-speaking student of ASL. For example, like spoken languages, ASL (also like other signed languages) has analogues of all basic linguistic processes and phenomena (e.g.,

³ *Daily Free Press*, Thursday, November 12, 1992, letter to the editor: "CLA dean sets the record straight about school's position on ASL." This and other letters from Boston University administrators and articles from the *Daily Free Press* and *Boston University Today* cited in this proposal are accessible from <http://www.bu.edu/asllrp/fl/>.

⁴ See http://www.ethnologue.com/show_family.asp?subid=1

⁵ Cf. Dean Burton Cooper's statement as quoted in *Boston University Today*, September 23-29, 1991: "Using sign language is not the same as speaking another language... American Sign Language students learn the English language in a different fashion. American Sign Language is another way of speaking English."

⁶ Linguists commonly use the term 'foreign language' as synonymous with 'non-native language.'

shouting *vs.* whispering; differences in register; dialect differences based on region, generation, etc. and even some gender-based differences in the production of specific signs; regular linguistic change; vowels, consonants, and syllables; phonetic processes such as assimilation; morphological processes such as inflection, contraction, and compounding; subject and object verb agreement; syntactic processes for forming questions, for focusing information, etc.; slips of the tongue/hand; to name just a few). ASL is particularly rich (more so than English) in certain respects. For example, there are aspectual distinctions common in ASL -- similar to those found in languages like Navajo -- for which English has only impoverished means of expression; see, e.g., Klima, E. and U. Bellugi, *The Signs of Language* (Harvard University Press, 1979).

1.2 Literature: Linguistic Art Forms

There is a substantial body of interesting literature in ASL. Literary art forms are very highly valued within the culture. There are storytellers within the Deaf community and a tradition of apprenticeship involved in passing on the storytelling art from one generation to the next. There are different genres of poetry, innovative theater, and a rich folklore. As the letter from Prof. Wagenknecht highlights, ASL literature is a fascinating area of study, and Boston University even offers courses in the literature of ASL and the culture of the community defined by its use of ASL [6] (which is not true for many other languages that are accepted for the CAS Foreign Language Requirement).

I have heard the suggestion that ASL literature is somehow less worthy of study within the context of the CAS Foreign Language Requirement because not much of it has been translated and therefore it has not attained a "circulation beyond its own users" (to quote Dean Henderson's article of April 8, 2004 in the *Daily Free Press*). If ASL literature is not better known among literary scholars and the general American public, it is surely because of the language barrier and the difficulty of translating linguistic art forms across modalities. However, this is all the more reason for studying ASL as a foreign/second language: the study of ASL provides students with access to this body of literature in the original. Moreover, there is a wonderful collection of ASL literature captured on video available at Boston University.

1.3 On ASL as a "foreign" language, and its relation to the history and culture of a coherent, well-defined (ethnic?) group

ASL is different from more familiar languages in that the isolation that has given rise to the formation and evolution of a language, community, and culture, is not due to geographic obstacles (such as oceans and mountains and distance) but rather to obstacles of communication. However, the nature of the linguistic community that has been created as a result of this deep isolation is not different; and as in all linguistic communities, there is a distinctive culture that has evolved within that community. I fear that this point may not have been well understood by those at Boston University who have made prior decisions about the status of ASL.

I would like to address the following statement contained in the letter from Prof. Gary Jacobson, Chairman of the Academic Policy Committee, from April 25, 1994:

the use of ASL is primarily confined to deaf people, and those who communicate with them in this manner, in North America. Moreover, these people come from a variety of ethnic and sub-cultural backgrounds, because the basis for ASL is an unfortunate disability that has no geographic or demographic basis.

Although it is unclear to me that this should be a requirement for accepting ASL as a foreign language in the sense implicit in the CAS Foreign Language Requirement, there is a case to be made that the Deaf community does, in fact, constitute a distinct ethnic group; see the enclosed manuscript by Harlan Lane, University Distinguished Professor at Northeastern University (especially pages 1-6) [4]. What is incontrovertible, however, is that the Deaf community is associated with its own rich language, literature, history, values, worldview, and traditions, and this would seem to be the important point with respect to the concern raised by Prof. Jacobson. See the letter from Prof. Wagenknecht about ASL literature [5] and the letter from Prof. Hoffmeister further addressing the issues of literature and culture [6].

For the reasons just stated, learning American Sign Language provides students with direct access to a non-native (and truly quite "foreign") literature and culture. Having myself sat in on ASL classes (4 semesters of language instruction plus 1 course on Deaf literature and culture), I can attest to the fact that these courses are completely comparable to foreign language courses offered in my own department. Through my own study of ASL, I have been astonished by the rich world that I have discovered in ASL literature and culture. I agree completely with the article by Lennard Davis that I have included with this letter [7].

In fact, one advantage of studying ASL is that American students have access to the local Deaf community. They can take advantage of opportunities to meet and converse with Deaf people in their native language. Thus, this kind of contact does not require 'study abroad,' as it frequently does with other languages.

Any natural language used as the primary form of communication by a given linguistic community across generations is inextricably intertwined with the culture, values, history, and tradition of that community. ASL expands the horizons of English-speaking students in the same way as languages used outside of the borders of the United States.

On the issue of the "foreignness" of ASL, several points are worth considering, some of which were pointed out in Lennard Davis's letter to the *Daily Free Press* (copy also included with supporting materials [8]):

- ASL is used in parts of Canada and Mexico. Thus, its use is not restricted to the US. It is also in the same historical sign language family as LSF (*la langue des signes française*, the signed language used in France), as well as several other signed languages used in other countries. Thus knowledge of ASL would be useful to students who travel to certain foreign countries.
- According to the Ethnologue Web site (see footnote 4), ASL is also used, to varying degrees, in the Philippines, Ghana, Nigeria, Chad, Burkina Faso, Gabon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, Côte d'Ivoire, Mauritania, Kenya,

Madagascar, Benin, Togo, Zimbabwe, Singapore, China (Hong Kong), and Guatemala. (This is similar to the use of English in other parts of the world.)

- ASL is used as a *lingua franca* at many international Deaf events, since Deaf people in other countries have often learned ASL as a second language. For the same reason, knowledge of ASL would enable American students to communicate with Deaf people in many countries.
- Other languages used by significant numbers of people in the US, such as Spanish, are accepted in fulfillment of the CAS Foreign Language Requirement. Their use by Americans does not disqualify them from fulfillment of this requirement.

The Modern Language Association does consider ASL to be a “foreign language,” as do a great many other universities for purposes of foreign language requirements; see attached materials [10 and 11].

1.4 Benefits of the study of ASL for further graduate or professional education

Another question that has been raised is the following, as posed by Dennis Berkey in his letter to the *Daily Free Press* of November 14, 1991:

"In what way does ASL proficiency enable students for further academic study, meaning graduate or professional education?"

ASL is potentially extremely useful for further study in linguistics, cognitive science, neuroscience, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and education, among other areas. It is of professional utility in all fields that involve dealing with people (including medicine, law, social work, etc.), since ASL is the third most used non-English language in the United States, surpassed in number of speakers only by Spanish and French. Estimates of the number of current users in the US range from 500,000 to 2,000,000.⁷

It is also true that there are other languages currently accepted for the CAS Foreign Language Requirement that do not provide any more access than ASL to written literature and printed research materials in traditional fields of graduate study. Therefore, this does not provide a basis for excluding ASL from the list of languages that a student might choose for satisfaction of the requirement. Students are responsible for determining which language would be most useful for them from among the choices allowed; there is no justification for the university to deny recognition of ASL on this basis while allowing study of African languages such as Zarma or Mandinka to fulfill the foreign language requirement.

1.5 Academic merits vs. social considerations

I firmly believe that the study of ASL fulfills all of the stated goals of the CAS Foreign Language Requirement (see [1]). The arguments that I urge you to consider are based strictly on the academic merits. The fact that there would be other benefits (such as ending a policy that has had serious negative impact on Deaf students, etc.) takes nothing away from the academic merits of the case.

⁷ These statistics are taken from <http://library.gallaudet.edu/dr/faq-asl-rank.html>.

II. Means for demonstrating proficiency in ASL

Since the ASL courses taught in the School of Education are already available to CAS students, there is no change required in university course offerings or policy. The ability of the School of Education to meet demand is addressed in the letter from Prof. Hoffmeister.

It has been suggested that there is a problem in allowing SED courses to count for CAS core requirement credit. I would like to point out that the current foreign language requirement does *not* restrict the way in which students attain advanced proficiency in the language in question. Students who have taken foreign language courses in high school (or who have learned a foreign language in any other way) are allowed to demonstrate proficiency through standardized exams. With respect to American Sign Language, there is an obvious way for students to demonstrate proficiency: earning a passing grade in American Sign Language IV, which CAS students are currently allowed to take for credit. Again, no change in CAS policy is required to allow those students who take ASL classes to be recognized for the proficiency that they achieve by doing so. For those who have achieved mastery of the language in a different way, we have experts at the university who can test them for proficiency.

Thank you very much for your consideration of this request. Further information about this issue is available from <http://www.bu.edu/asllrp/fl/>. I would be very happy to attend the meeting of the Academic Policy Committee to address any questions that the committee may have. I have also asked Dr. Harlan Lane whether he would also be willing to do the same, and he has indicated that he would (unless the date should conflict with his complex travel commitments).

Yours sincerely,

Carol Neidle

Professor of French and Linguistics

Department of Modern Foreign Languages and Literatures

Director, American Sign Language Linguistic Research Project

Supporting materials

1. Copy of the current statement of the CAS Foreign Language Requirement
2. Excerpt from Frank R. Wilson's, *The Hand: How Its Use Shapes the Brain, Language, and Human Culture* (Vintage, 1999), pp. 199-200.
3. Neidle *et al.*, *The Syntax of American Sign Language* (MIT Press, 2000), as well as Dr. Neidle's cv.
4. A copy of Dr. Harlan Lane's keynote address delivered at the Deaf Studies Today conference on 4/13/04 (<http://www.uvsc.edu/asl/deafstudies/>): "Ethnicity, Ethics and the Deaf-World," as well as Dr. Lane's cv.
5. Letter from Prof. David Wagenknecht
6. Letter from Prof. Robert Hoffmeister (with details of the ASL courses currently offered and a discussion of the financial impact of making the proposed change in the CAS Foreign Language Requirement, and a statement of his ability and willingness to certify proficiency in ASL)
7. Article by Lennard J. Davis: "The Linguistic Turf Battles Over American Sign Language," *Chronicle of Higher Education* from the issue dated June 5, 1998.
8. Letter from Lennard Davis
9. Two other articles from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*:
 Ellen K. Coughlin, "A Professor Champions Distinct Culture of Deaf People," *Chronicle of Higher Education* from the issue dated October 2, 1991.
 Eric Hoover, "American Students Flocking to Foreign-Language Courses," *Chronicle of Higher Education* from the issue dated November 21, 2003.
10. "Foreign Language Enrollments in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2002," by Elizabeth B. Welles, Director of Foreign Language Programs and the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages (ADFL) at the Modern Language Association. Published in *ADFL Bulletin*, Vol. 35, No. 2, Winter 2004.
11. A list of universities accepting ASL for foreign language requirements
12. Letter of endorsement of this proposal from the Chairman and Executive Committee of the Department of Modern Foreign Languages and Literatures
13. Supporting letter from the Program in Applied Linguistics

Foreign Language The study of a foreign language is a significant element in liberal education, providing access to the literature and culture of another society. In planning language work, students should consider the particular needs of their proposed concentration and should remember that graduate degrees frequently require one or two languages, often French and German. Degree candidates are required to demonstrate proficiency at the advanced level in one language other than their own.

The foreign language requirement may be met by any of the following:

1. A score of 560 or higher on the SAT-II: Foreign Language Subject Test in Chinese, French, German, Modern Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Latin, or Spanish. Students are encouraged to take these exams before applying for admission, but may take them after matriculation and may repeat them several times during the year. SAT-II reading exams are offered on campus in French, German, Italian, Latin, and Spanish. Information is available from CAS Room 105.
2. A score of 3 or better on an Advanced Placement foreign language test.
3. Satisfactory completion of one of the following courses:
 - Arabic CAS LY 212
 - Chinese CAS LC 212, 216
 - French CAS LF 212, 222, 223, Grenoble I Program
 - German CAS LG 212, 232
 - Greek (Classical) CAS CL 262
 - Greek (Modern) CAS CG 212
 - Hebrew CAS LH 212
 - Italian CAS LI 212, Padova I Program
 - Japanese CAS LJ 212
 - Korean CAS LK 212
 - Latin CAS CL 212, 215
 - Russian CAS LR 212
 - Spanish CAS LS 212, 222, Madrid I Program

Students with prior instruction in these languages, at the high school or college level, must take a placement test

before enrolling in any course. *Note:* Language requirement courses are sequential. Students are not permitted to move backwards in the sequence, take two or more levels of the same language simultaneously, or repeat courses for credit.

Placement into upper-level courses in ancient Greek, modern Greek, and Latin may be achieved by satisfactorily completing a written proficiency examination administered by the Department of Classical Studies.

4. Any course numbered 212 or above in one of the regularly offered African languages: Bambara/Mandinka, Hausa, Swahili, or Yoruba. Consult the African Language Coordinator (617-353-3673) regarding other African languages.
5. Bilingualism. No student is automatically exempted from the language requirement. The requirement may, however, be waived for students who are currently bilingual and are able to demonstrate satisfactory proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking English and another language. Such students should contact Academic Advising in CAS Room 105.