

'disability' rights, has led to a shift in consciousness within both deaf and hearing society which has had two important results. Firstly, in the UK, British Sign Language (BSL) was finally recognised as an official national language in March 2003. Secondly, there has been an explosive evolution in Sign arts since the 1960s – notably in areas that have traditionally been considered 'text based', such as theatre and poetry.

In order to understand the impact of Sign on such media, it is necessary to examine the characteristics of the language more closely.

Sign languages are unique, in that they are visuo-spatial rather than verbal/auditory. In the UK, Sign is often thought of as simple, pictorial language that is a transliteration of spoken English. In fact Sign is an evolved language not a devised one, with its own very different syntax and grammar. It shows regional variation in the same way that spoken languages do and is rich in visual metaphor, (e.g. 'ravenously hungry' is signed as little fish swimming in the belly).

BSL has a much smaller lexicon than spoken English but achieves greater expressivity by modifying individual signs. Though the basis of a given sign is the handshape, the meaning can be altered by the speed, style, location, direction and repetition of the movement as well as by non-manual aspects such as eye gaze, facial expression, mouth shape etc. This mimetic quality of Sign is easily demonstrated. For example, the same verb can be performed lazily, angrily, jauntily, so that a person can amble, stalk or strut where the basic sign is 'walk'. Nouns can be similarly modified – 'tree' is formed by one forearm standing upright, resting on top of and perpendicular to the other forearm, where the fingers are the tree branches. When the upright forearm sways or the fingers wriggle, the tree is depicted in stormy weather.

This sort of mutation happens spontaneously between signers and allows for great degrees of subtlety and economy so that a single sign may need many words to cover its entire