

The Mechanics of Fingerspelling: Analyzing Ethiopian Sign Language

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As we begin to understand fingerspelling systems as native subsets of a signed language's lexicon with the specific task of encoding a writing system's characters, we can analyze these signs as lexical items to find parallels and variation among signed languages.

Ethiopian Sign Language (ETH) includes a fingerspelling system that represents the Amharic orthography. As each character of the Amharic abugida encodes a consonant-vowel sound pair, each sign in the Ethiopian Sign Language fingerspelling system uses Hand Configuration to encode a base consonant, and a combination of Timing, Placement, and Orientation to encode a paired vowel.

Thus, I argue that Ethiopian Sign Language's fingerspelling system is a productive polymorphemic system for naming the written characters of the Amharic language, extending previous work on signed morpheme combinations by Liddell (2003). Following his analysis, I propose that each of the seven vowel orders of Amharic is represented in Ethiopian Sign Language by a bound morpheme containing specified Timing, Placement, and Orientation information; similarly, each of Amharic's thirty-three consonants is represented in ETH as a unique Hand Configuration.

Finally, I show the combination of phonological information from each of two contributing bound morphemes to make a fully-specified sign that names an Amharic fidel (just as ASL fingerspelling signs name letters of the English alphabet), and I offer a brief discussion of phonological processes at work during quick fingerspelling following Liddell and Johnson's 1989 analysis.