Arabic Sign Language: A Perspective

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Sign language in the Arab World has been recently recognized and documented. Many efforts have been made to establish the sign language used in individual countries, including Jordan, Egypt, Libya, and the Gulf States, by trying to standardize the language and spread it among members of the Deaf community and those concerned. Such efforts produced many sign languages, almost as many as Arabic-speaking countries, yet with the same sign alphabets. This article gives a tentative account of some sign languages in Arabic through reference to their possible evolution, which is believed to be affected by the diglossic situation in Arabic, and by comparing some aspects of certain sign languages (Jordanian, Palestinian, Egyptian, Kuwaiti, and Libyan) for which issues such as primes, configuration, and movement in addition to other linguistic features are discussed. A contrastive account that depicts the principal differences among Arabic sign languages in general and the spoken language is given.

Arabic sign languages (ARSLs) are still in their developmental stages. Only in recent years has there been an awareness of the existence of communities consisting of individuals with disabilities; the Deaf are not an exception. Arab Deaf communities are almost closed ones. Interaction between a Deaf community and a hearing one is minimal and is basically concentrated around families with deaf members, relatives of the deaf, and sometimes play friends and professionals.

As in other communities, communication with a deaf person is polarized within such circles. This situation has led to the emergence of many local means of sign communication. Until recently, such signs have not been gathered or codified. Signs are starting to spread, forming acknowledged sign languages. By and large, the view held vis-à-vis disability, including hearing, in the Arab society is still one of accommodation rather than assimilation.

Arabic Sign Languages: Evolution and Relationship With Diglossia

Arabic Diglossia: A Brief Account

The term *diglossia* was first introduced by Charles Ferguson (1959, p. 336) in his article "Diglossia." There, he defined the concept as

> A relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety. The vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature, either of an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes, but is not used by any *sector* of the community for ordinary conversation.

Ferguson referred to the first variety as L(ow) and to the second as H(igh).

In Arabic, it is recognized that there exist more than two varieties. Yet, all will tend to belong to either L or H on a continuum. It is beyond the scope of this study to indulge in the issue of Arabic diglossia. However, for the sake of discussion, note that there are two basic varieties of Arabic: standard and colloquial.

Sign Language and Diglossia

It has been suggested that American Sign Language (ASL), British Sign Language (BSL), and Danish Sign

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Language (DSL) have diglossic features (Deuchar, 1977; Lawson, 1981; Stokoe, 1969).

The situation in Arabic is different. Although Arabic is diglossic, ARSLs are not. It was expected that there would be one sign language in Arabic instead of many. People and scholars outside the Deaf communities cannot appreciate the idea of having other sign language vernaculars in such a way similar to the status quo—having so many vernaculars in spoken Arabic instead of one standard form. Therefore, attempts, which have not been successful, are now being made to develop one standard variety of ARSL.

Interestingly, the situation is rather different in undiglossic speech communities such as British and American ones, in which features of diglossia are emerging among BSL or ASL interlocutors (Deuchar, 1977; Stokoe, 1969). This might be attributed to the complexity and stability of BSL and ASL on the one hand and to the "primitive" nature of ARSLs on the other. Also, the organized formal education of the deaf in Britain and America, for example, has contributed to sign language varieties that most Arab countries lack. Moreover, the superior versus inferior vision regarding sign languages and their spoken counterparts (e.g., that sign languages do not have grammar, are improper, are nonexistent, etc.) has increased the need to have a certain (H) variety alongside the other (L).

In Arabic, hearing learners of sign language vernaculars have considerable difficulty in grasping the idea of not signing for *every word* in an utterance as one would say it in the spoken variety. Yet, no difficulty is encountered in identifying an "utterance" with either the colloquial or the standard, although a big difference exists between H and L in Arabic, and they are treated as one when it comes to communicate in or translate to sign language. As a matter of fact, the Deaf community to an extent might be unaware of the existence of L varieties because they do not have a written form.

Arabic Sign Language's Evolution

Sign languages all over the world are not a new invention. They existed on par with the spoken languages. Their invention cannot be attributed to any person. Rather, they

developed naturally just as other verbal languages (Bellis, 2004). Similarly, ARSLs have been developing naturally. In their "natural context," ARSLs developed as independent systems of communication. They are not interpretations of standard Arabic or spoken vernaculars. ARSLs share many similarities and manifest certain features of difference. After all, this is true for all languages; indeed, trace features of *universality* can be traced among the sign languages of the world.

Basically, ARSLs developed independently, although some have benefited from the pioneer experience of the others. The possible sources of ARSLs could be traced to the following:

Borrowings, especially European and American.

Creations, which are initialization of conceptual signs usually by gestural repertoire of spoken varieties.

Miming actions, shapes, and things in nature.

Expanding means, such as compounding and blending.

"Dumb" regional signs, which are basically signs inherited over centuries, used by "mute" people, and of a local nature.

Finger spelling is fairly new and is mostly a combination of creation and miming sources (see the appendix). It is used to spell out proper nouns and words that do not have sign correspondence. Finger spelling, however, is not used to read out or communicate the standard form of Arabic. Therefore, there is no "manual Arabic" yet; perhaps such form of signed standard Arabic might develop if the deaf are to be educated through sign language and if need arises to have a signed Arabic that corresponds to the standard. Further, to my knowledge, there has been no attempt so far to write down ARSLs (sign writing). ASL, for example, has established writing systems, but these have not been widely used to record ASL literature; however, there is a large body of ASL literature available in movies, videotapes, and compact disks (Wilcox & Kreeft, 1999). Arabic, on the other hand, has a considerable body of signed literature mainly in movies, TV series, and news bulletins; this body has been neither recorded nor utilized for the development of Arabic sign vernaculars.
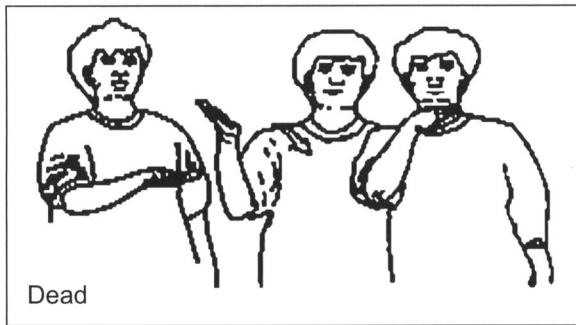
Figures 1 and 2   Using nonmanual features. (Dead: lips spread together with hand movement; fog: eyes slightly closed.)

Arabic Sign Languages: Structure and Comparison

How Arabic Signs Are Made

Arabic sign languages are not particularly different from other known sign languages, such as ASL and BSL. In fact, the Arabic varieties in use have undergone some lexical influence from other sign languages (Miller, 1996). ARSLs are basically manual languages made from cheremes that involve the three recognized elements: configuration of hands (hand shape), placement/space (position of hand in relation to body), and movement (directions and contacts within space).[1] In addition to these manual shapes,

ARSLs make use of other nonmanual features, like those of the face, mouth, and tongue (Figs. 1 and 2).

Arabic sign languages also exhibit similar forms to other established sign languages, such as links between form and meaning that may be iconic, pictorial (Fig. 3), conventional, or arbitrary (Brennan, 1987).

Arabic Sign Languages' Vocabulary: Types and Comparison

Arabic sign languages' word correspondence (i.e., signs) is limited to two basic classes, nouns/adjectives and verbs, and lacks, unlike standard Arabic, many of the particles (e.g., prepositions and some adverbs or intensifiers). However, the relationships and concepts represented by prepositions and intensifiers, for example, can be expressed by other means. This could be done by the position and direction of one sign in relation to another in the case of prepositions (Fig. 4)
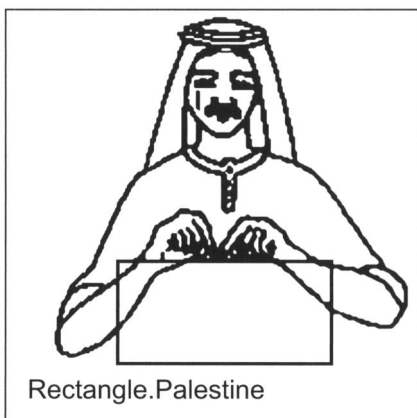
Figure 3   Using iconic/pictorial features. (Rectangle: demonstrating how rectangle is drawn.) (Signs in Palestine, 1994.)
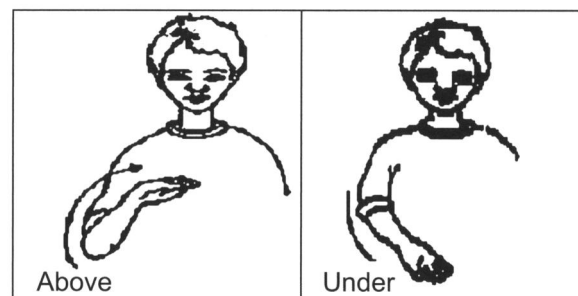

Figure 4   Prepositions. (Above and under: miming in relation to place.)
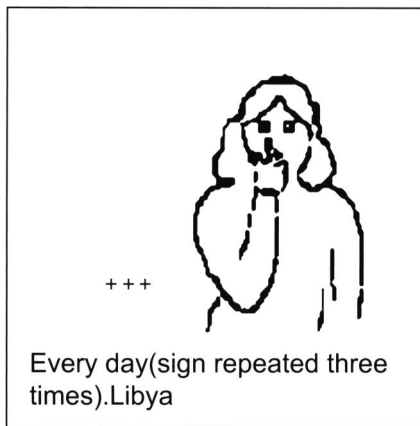
Figure 5   Intensifiers. (Every day: repeating the sign to show frequency.)

and by repetition of sign regarding intensifiers (Suwed, 1984) (Fig. 5). Other vocabulary items can be explained under the following categories: synosigns, antosigns, homosigns, and compounds.[2]

Synosigns   Synosigns, usually two different signs with one meaning, are not common in ARSLs. However, they do exist and mostly evolve as a result of shifting from one sign to another, and when the first sign is not totally abandoned, the two signs continue to coexist for some time until one, usually the second, dominates. Examples from Jordanian Sign Language are *girl* and *rich* (The National Center for Hearing Studies, Amman) (Figs. 6–9).

Antosigns   The type of antosigns present in ARSLs is mostly complementary pairs, which is different only in one element: movement. This makes antosigns in sign language different from antonyms in spoken languages, in which the sounds and meaning are different (Figs. 10 and 11).

Homosigns   Arabic sign languages use some homosigns. There is no difficulty in understanding the
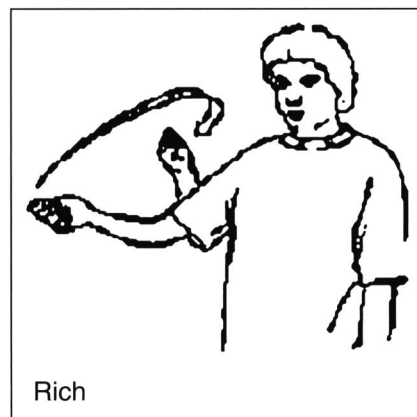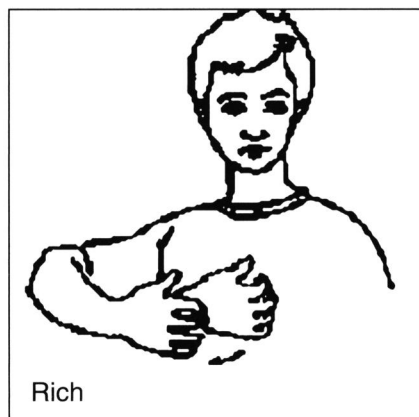
Figures 6–9   Synosigns. (Girl, Rich: different signs that express the same meaning.)
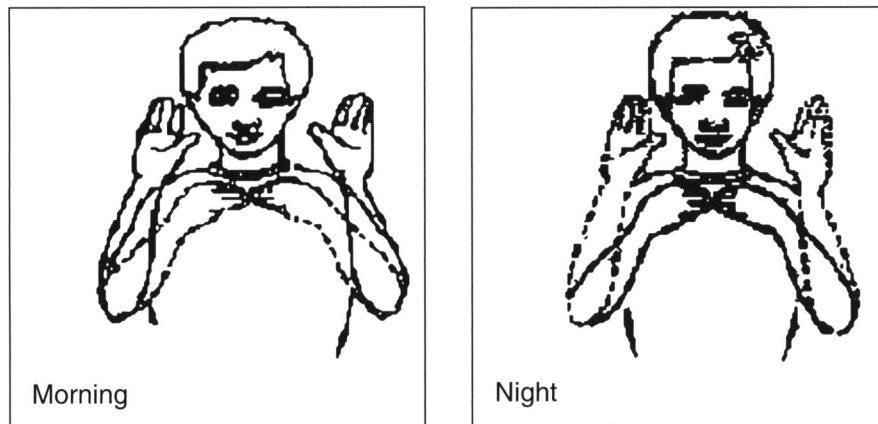
Figures 10 and 11   Antosigns. (Morning, Night: opposite meaning is expressed by change of direction of movement.)

referential meaning of such signs, which is usually clear from the context (Figs. 12 and 13).

Compounds   A very important method to expand vocabulary is through compounding. This is also true for sign languages, including Arabic. Whenever two signs can give the meaning of another concept when combined, they are employed to do so, especially in developing sign languages such as those of Arabic. Indeed, it is much easier to understand a concept in relation to another rather than to invent one; consider these examples: dentist, internist, vet, dream (Figs. 14–20).

The Grammar of Arabic Sign Languages

Arabic sign languages are similar to other sign languages of the world in that they are basically spatial–gestural languages. This makes it difficult to compare sign languages with their spoken counter-parts; Arabic in this regard is not an exception. As a matter of fact, many concepts used to describe spoken languages are inadequate for the description of sign languages. Nevertheless, inevitably, one system should be mapped practically into the other.

Generally, ARSLs do not follow the same order of their spoken or written counterparts. Usually, a reversed order is used. This is because sign languages are highly thematized and indeed more pragmatic[3] than the spoken ones. In Arabic, emphasis is given to content signs, those representing nouns and verbs. The nominal "sentence" is usually made up from a subject and a predicate, such as "she/he deaf " (Suwed, 1984) (Fig. 21). And, unlike spoken and written varieties,
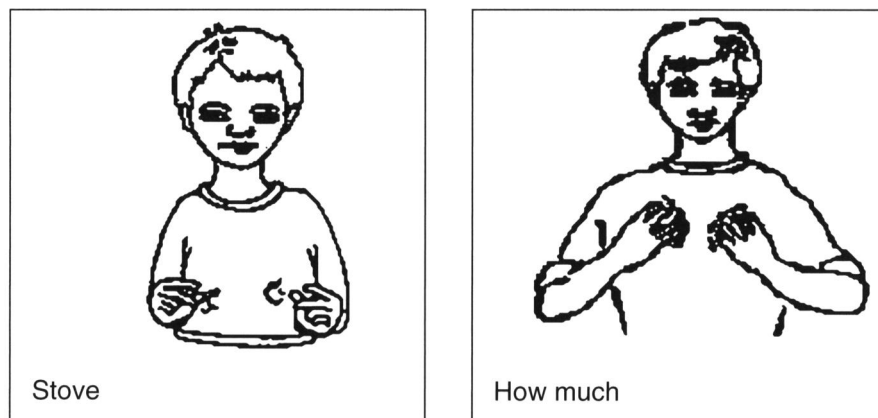
Figures 12 and 13   Homosigns. (Stove, How much: the same sign is used to express different meanings.)

Doctor

Dentist

Internist

Veterinarian

Sleep
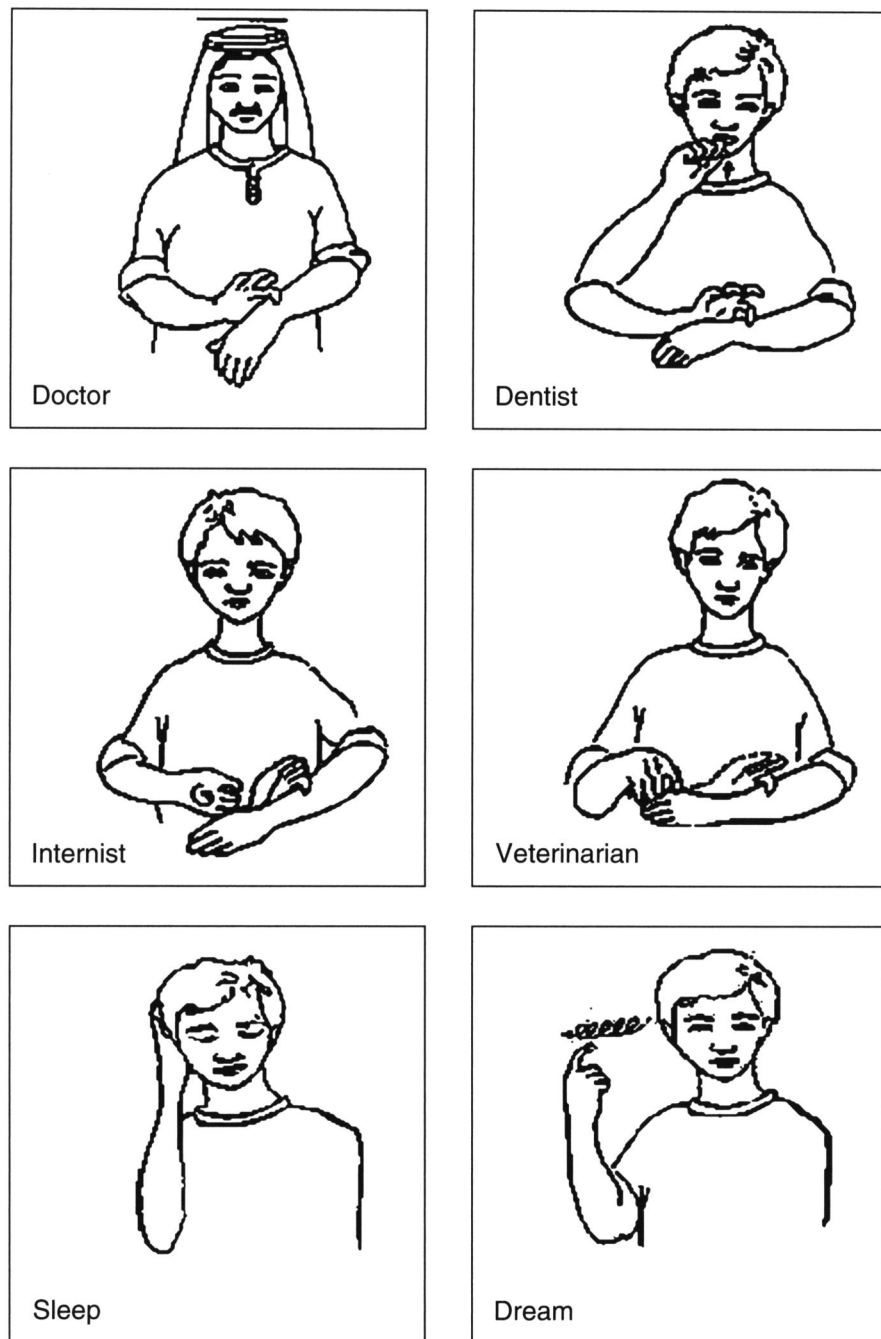
Dream

Figures 14–19   Compounds. (Doctor, Dentist, Internist, Veterinarian, Dream: a combination of one or more signs are used to express the meaning.)

there is no singular, dual, or plural agreement in ARSLs.

Signed sentences, on the other hand, do not make use of tense/aspect as in spoken and written varieties. Tense is simply and practically used. Past, present, and

future times are indicated at beginnings of conversation chunks and only shifted when there is need to indicate a different tense (e.g., worked; Fig. 22).

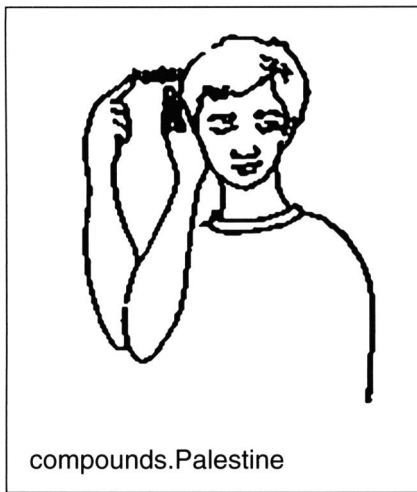Negatives and interrogatives have more than one way of expression. While in some cases nonmanual

Figure 20   Dream. (Signs in Palestine, 1994.)

Figure 22   Verbal sentence.

Figure 23   Negatives.

gestures are important (e.g., raised eyebrows, head and shoulders leaning forward, signed question mark), in other cases signs are used, for instance, "red not" (Fig. 23).

As for other grammatical features like emphasis and adverb position, emphasis is done by repetition, longer signing time, and facial expressions and dramatization; adverbs are explained manually, by one hand's position in relation to the other (Fig. 24). Other features, such as passivization, declension, and indeclension, are nonexistent. Conditional expressions, sentence boundaries, and turn taking are usually achieved by nonmanual features of facial expressions and context.
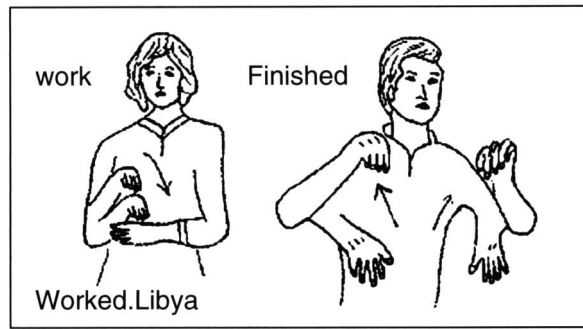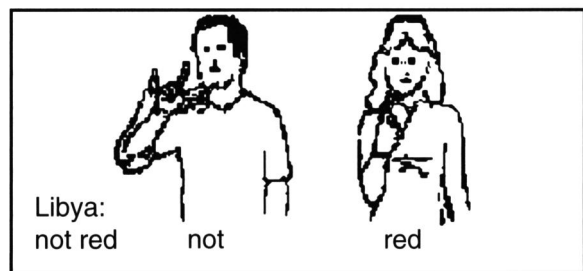
Form and Meaning

Sign languages show greater link between form and meaning than spoken languages (Brennan, 1987). Arabic word order is so flexible that it allows for one meaning to be expressed in different formal structures, such as V-S-O (verb-subject-object), S-V-O, O-V-S, V-O-S. This makes the structure of ARSLs familiar, especially to hearing learners, and easily comprehensible to the uneducated (most deaf people in the Arab
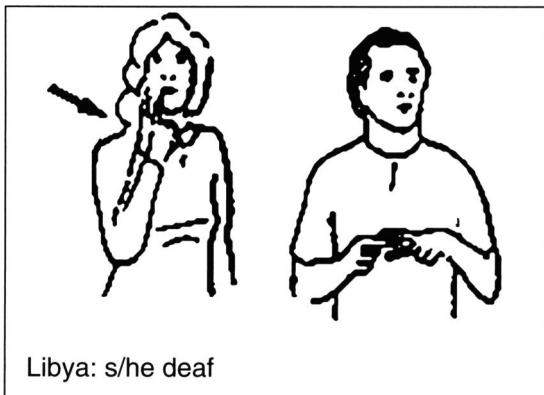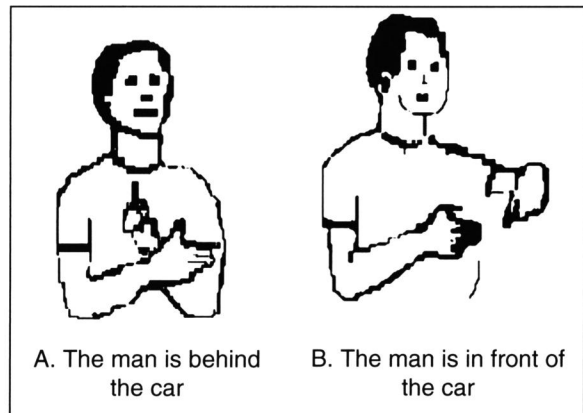

Figure 21   Nominal sentence.

Figure 24   Adverbs.

countries are) because of their grammatical simplicity, which does not exist in standard Arabic. All this in my opinion makes sign language in general and Arabic in particular more "pragmatic" than the spoken varieties of language, which adds to the advantages of sign language.

Conclusion

It is obvious that ARSLs have developed on a pidgin-style basis, but separately from each other. For most of the existent sign languages, and because they are immature, it is possible to benefit from the phenomenon of pidginization and to develop yet another pan-Arab sign pidgin that might cater to more interlocutors and their communicative needs. Also, teaching the written form of standard Arabic to the deaf would aggravate the pursuit for more signs that might lead to the development of a signed Arabic. Such issues, in addition to that of diglossia, will remain hot topics of discussion among the involved and interested.
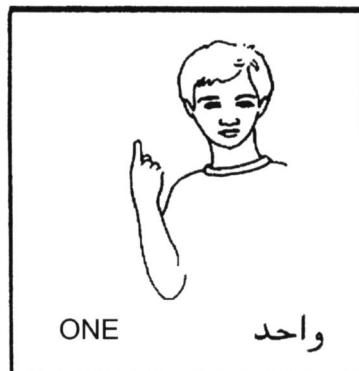
Appendix 1: Arabic Sign Alphabets

Appendix 2: Signs Compared

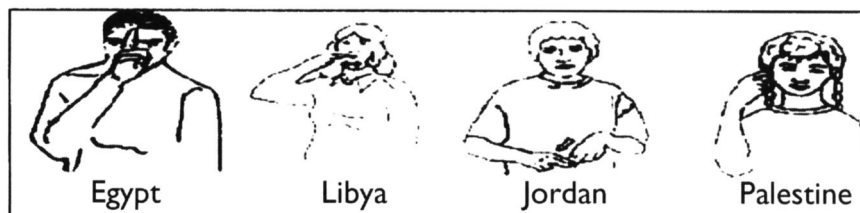**Similar signs, different countries:**
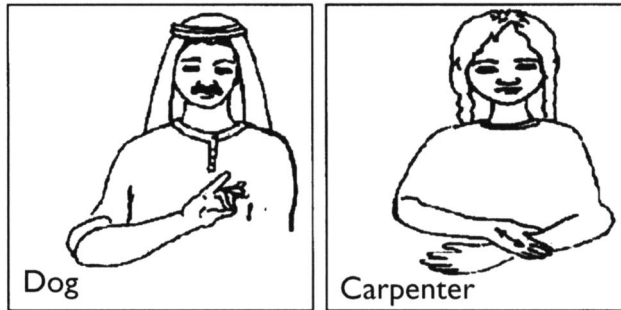
Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Libya

Numbers: Palestine, Kuwait (KSL, 2004)

Different signs, different countries:

Woman

Deaf

Notes

1. Sign duration is a very important element in sign language and can be considered a basic element in forming a *chereme*. In many signs the cheremic contrast is achieved by duration; consider the example of tahineh (crushed sesame) and honey. Both signs are similar, but the duration of movement upward is the factor that makes the difference.

Palestine:
Crushed sesame/honey

Note 1 Figure   Duration.

2. The terms *synosigns*, *antosigns*, and *homosigns*, in my opinion, better express what they refer to because after all the unit described is a sign rather than a word or a sound. It is unfair, for example, to use the term *homophones* to describe homosigns. The list can also be extended to include other terms that describe sounds and/or words. These should use sign(s) as a root.

3. I believe that sign languages exhibit more speech act features than spoken languages. Of course, such a claim should be thoroughly investigated and deeply scrutinized through analysis of a sign language. I have not come across any reference that discusses sign language from a pragmatic point of view.

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