

ETHNOLOGY

# "Handies" Turn Limelight On Man's Oldest Language

## Teacher of the Deaf Says Sign Language Stimulates Imagination; He Deplores Puns in Any Language

"IT IS the oldest language in the world."

In this brief verdict, science sums up the current vogue for making "handies," which has the younger generation tying its fingers into knots this summer, in the effort to express itself in gestures.

At the Columbia Institution for the Deaf, where sign language is no novelty in school time, Dr. Percival Hall, the president, looked out over the deserted green lawn of the campus, and expressed the opinion that handies have educational value.

"Thinking up signs, and interpreting the signs made by others, may stimulate imagination," Dr. Hall believes.

"But," he added, "puns are terrible—just as bad in signs as in speech."

### Thumbs Down

With that verdict, which he might have given by signing thumbs-down in the good old Roman fashion, Dr. Hall expressed a language specialist's objection to those handies made by piecing together syllables in tricky ways to build up a word.

As an example of sign-punning, there is the word "hardship." Some handy-manufacturer has concocted this word by a pounding gesture for hard and a waving motion of the hand to suggest a ship at sea.

"That sort of thing may be humorous," declared Dr. Hall, "but such signs are useless because they are not natural signs. Natural sign language can be understood the world over. It does not depend on double meanings of words, or on any language.

"We have had experience with deaf persons who visited a foreign country and, with no knowledge of the language, managed to get along by conversing in signs with people of the country."

### The Natural Way

Just to show a natural way of signaling hardship, Dr. Hall then demonstrated by working one hand with difficulty inside the other. The motion suggested a struggle, and the idea could be made still more graphic, he pointed out, by facial expression and motion of the body. Aside from Indians, most persons who become skilled at this art of pantomime employ gestures of face, hands, and body to make themselves clear. Indians are noted for keeping straight faces when they talk with their hands, but then, Indians used this device often when dealing with unknown or enemy tribes.

Dr. Hall agrees with Sir Richard Paget, British investigator of origins of speech, in believing that sign language

was man's first venture in communicating with his fellows.

Thousands of years ago, in the Stone Age, it is supposed that cave dwellers communicated by signs. Tongue-gesturing often accompanied the effort of arm waving, and grunts were made in the struggle. In time, certain grunts came to be recognized without seeing the gestures, and speech slowly evolved.

At the Columbia Institution for the Deaf, a government-aided school at Washington, Dr. Hall has sign language taught to one class—the sophomores.

"Our students pick up sign language in their games and social activities, whether we teach it or not," he explained. "So, we instruct one class, just in order that they may understand the basic principles and learn to make the signs properly."

### Not Sign Alphabet

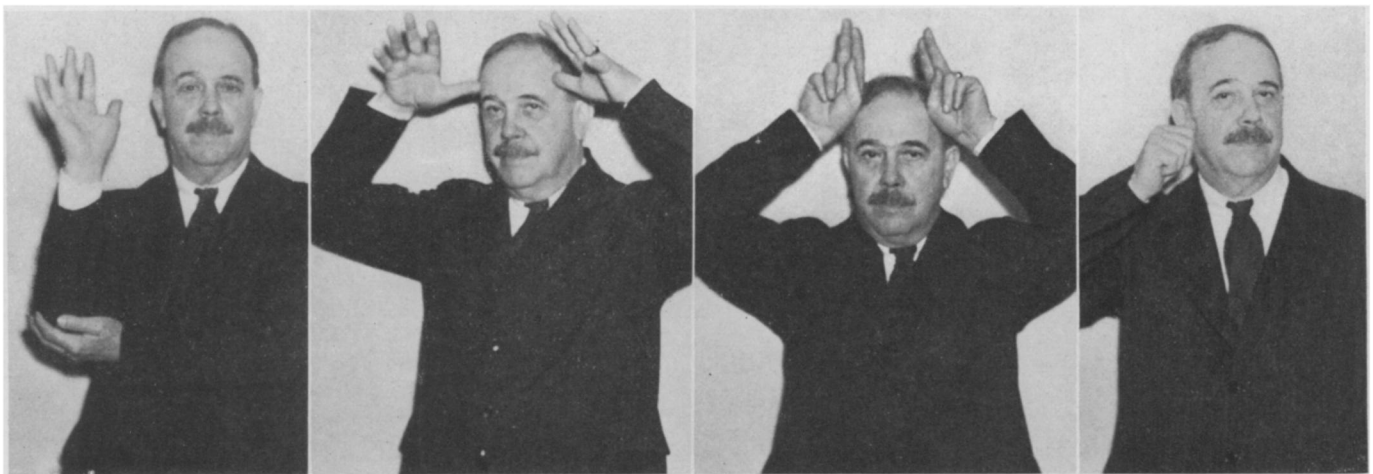
But don't confuse the sign language with the sign alphabet that deaf persons sometimes use in talking together, Dr. Hall warns.

The sign alphabet is a set code by which words can be rapidly spelled out in finger positions. Only those who have mastered the alphabet can understand it.

Sign language has adopted some conventionalized gestures, and what might be called local dialect signs, that would be as hard for the beginner to grasp as

### TRY THESE

*Can you guess these "handies"? They are natural sign language words, as demonstrated by Dr. Percival Hall. Left, Dr. Hall gives the sign for tree. Next, this is an easy one—yes, "deer." Next, another animal, "horse." Right, you may never guess it, it means "girl," a gesture indicating a bonnet string.*



the finger alphabet. The sign language gesture for "girl," for instance, is widely made by indicating a bonnet string—a relic of days when girls wore sun-bonnets.

But, in general, Dr. Hall declares,

good sign language is natural and universal, and the pantomime artist who masters use of his hands and body can make himself understood wherever he goes.

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PUBLIC HEALTH

## Highest Heat Death Rates In Arizona and Nevada

Because of Sparse Population, Total Numbers Do Not Bulk so Large; South Atlantic Relatively Fortunate

THE death tolls that the heat has taken in recent days in Michigan and elsewhere in the high temperature area are unusual when the records of past years are viewed.

At the request of Science Service, statisticians of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company reviewed the latest available complete U. S. statistics and found that much the highest death rates from excessive heat are recorded in Arizona and Nevada.

Because of relatively sparse populations, the total number of deaths do not bulk as impressively from these states as they did during the Michigan heat wave. Aside from these two mountain division states, highest death rates occur in three states in the north central region, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Iowa. South Atlantic and east south central states, as a whole, record death rates from excessive heat only two-thirds of the average for the whole country, and about one-third as high as the states in the east north central and west north central divisions.

Relatively low death rates from heat which prevail in the south Atlantic, east south central, and west south central divisions are the more remarkable because of concentration in these areas of four-fifths of the Negro population of the United States, and because of the fact that Negroes show death rates from excessive heat from two to over six times as high as corresponding rates for whites in same areas.

Except Pennsylvania and California, where the death rate from heat and sunstroke closely approximates the average for the United States, every state in New England, Middle Atlantic and Pacific Coast regions falls far below the average for the United States.

The ages most seriously struck are babies under one and persons past fifty.

Infants should be carefully protected from exposure during hot weather. Their diet and clothing should be carefully regulated. Older persons should avoid unnecessary exposure to high temperatures, overcrowding and over-activity.

Cities, as a general rule, have higher mortality rates from heat and sunstroke than rural districts, particularly in years when above-average number of deaths occur from heat throughout the United States.

There are wide fluctuations in number of deaths due to excessive heat from year to year. In some years, as this year, when the summer season has frequent and successive days of high temperature, number of deaths is strikingly large.

States abutting on one another frequently show wide differences in death rates from heat and sunstroke. For example, although Arizona and Nevada have highest mortality rates in the United States from excessive heat, some of the states adjoining them register the very lowest rates in the entire country.

Striking examples are Arizona, where average death rate for three year period, 1931 to 1933, was 9.7 per 100,000 population, whereas three adjoining states, New Mexico, Utah and Colorado recorded rates of only 0.1, 0.6, and 0.1 respectively. Similarly, Nevada recorded 8.6, whereas the figure for California was 1.3, for Oregon 0.1, and for Idaho, 0.3.

*Science News Letter, July 25, 1936*

It is believed that the early Chinese, like the Greeks, painted their statues.

Cutworms eat at night, and therefore farmers who lure them with poison bait make it fresher and more attractive by applying it in the evening.

METEOROLOGY

## Ball Lightning Observed By Nebraska Family

A DOUBLE display of ball lightning, a very rare phenomenon, was witnessed recently by Mrs. P. H. Moore of Lincoln, Nebraska. She was watching a rainstorm through a window of her home, when she saw three red globes of fire rolling and bouncing along the street. They struck an iron post and disappeared.

Mrs. Moore called her husband to the window, but he did not arrive in time to see the first display. The Moores, however, together witnessed a second discharge of three or four balls about a quarter of a minute later. This second set was also seen by two boys, Don and Dale Darnell.

Prof. J. C. Jensen of Nebraska Wesleyan University has interviewed both the Moores and the Darnell boys, and is convinced of the essential accuracy of their observations.

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BOTANY

## Flower Photo a "Fooler" To Trap Unwary Botanists

See Front Cover

WHAT is wrong with the flower picture on the cover of this issue of the SCIENCE NEWS LETTER?

Take another look before you give an answer. (Only ambitious young botanists will be held responsible.)

Correct: the lotus flower and the arrowleaf foliage do not belong to each other. It is an Esau-and-Jacob picture—the flower is the flower of *Nelumbo*, but the leaves are the leaves of *Sagittaria*.

Another point on which local worthies sometimes fool the innocent—and in all innocence on their own part, too—is the claim you will often hear, in many places where the American lotus grows, that "This plant is found only here and in Egypt."

Actually, this declaration gives America too little credit, and Egypt too much. The American lotus has a wide distribution in the central part of this country; and the famed lotus of the Nile was not a lotus at all but a white water-lily. The Old-World lotus, a close cousin of the American species, is native to southern Asia. Buddha is quite properly associated with the lotus blossom, but not Osiris.

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