

SLPI INFORMATION #3: WHAT DOES THE SLPI ASSESS?

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 April 1998 (1st edition); December 2007 (9th edition)

The Sign Language Proficiency Interview (SLPI), as described in PAPER #4 in this document (*SLPI-SCPI-SLPI History*), has been adapted from the Language/Oral Proficiency Interview (L/OPI). Just as the L/OPI may be used to assess a variety of spoken languages (for example, French, German, and Japanese), the SLPI may be used to assess a variety of sign languages; for example, French, German and American Sign Language (ASL). Given that the SLPI Rating Scale is anchored at the highest level (Superior Plus) by native/native-like sign language users, the SLPI may only be used to assess skills in using natural sign languages for communication.

Our application of the SLPI has allowed for assessment of ASL from a broad perspective as it is used among skilled sign language communicators in the United States and Canada. This use includes the full range of ASL from pure, linguistic descriptions of ASL to English-like contact signing. Expanding upon this, *SLPI Notebook (NB)* Sections 1, 5, and 8 discuss and support the importance of both communicative **functioning** and linguistic **form** to the SLPI, considering in this discussion the concepts of rhetorical and communicative language norms. As stressed in *SLPI NB* Section 5 (page 1), “The rhetorical norm represents an idealized form of a language...The rhetorical norm is generally not the ‘standard’ for everyday communication of skilled language users. The communicative norm is found in the every day communication of skilled language users. Among users of a language there is generally greater variation in their use when communication (not linguistic form) is their goal.”

Also, as discussed in *SLPI NB* Section 5, natural sign language in the United States has acceptable variations, and these variations include English influenced contact signing:

ASL and English have been in contact in the United States for more than 150 years. Due to this contact, as has been documented in the sign language literature, ASL has been influenced by English and English-like signing has developed to include many features of ASL. Haugen (1977) noted that, when there is an intermingling of two languages in contact, the concept of “language norm” is “highly ambiguous and slippery.” He further stated, “We have to recognize that the communicative norm which grows up in a bilingual community is more elastic and less predictable than that of a monolingual community” (p. 98). Given the above, it can be expected that the communicative norm for ASL use in the United States will reflect mixtures and borrowings between the two languages in contact (that is, between ASL and English).

The above is one of the major reasons that we train local people to conduct SLPI assessments. Local skilled ASL users are able to use their knowledge and intuitions about both national and local standards of what is acceptable for ASL communication as they conduct SLPI interviews and ratings. Further support for local SLPI training and implementation is provided in SLPI PAPER #12, *Support for Local SLPI Teams and SLPI Team Training*.