

Lexicalized Signs

Fingerspelled loan signs and the eight ways they change

Borrowing from English

On occasion American Sign Language borrows a word from English and takes it into its own sign vocabulary. This happens often when two languages come into contact with one another. In ASL the borrowing happens through lexicalized fingerspelling, also called fingerspelled loan signs.

The word starts out spelled letter by letter. Over time it stops behaving like spelling and starts behaving like a sign.

The eight changes

1

Letters are deleted

Not every letter survives. Some drop out entirely, so the sign is shorter than the spelled word.

2

The location changes

The sign leaves the neutral fingerspelling space and moves somewhere new, sometimes onto the body.

3

The handshape changes

One or more letters take a shape that is not the standard fingerspelled letter anymore.

4

Movement is added

A path movement joins the letters into one motion, instead of separate letters in a row.

5

Palm orientation changes

The palm turns to face a new direction, away from how the letters would normally be spelled.

6

Repetition is added

Part of the sign repeats. This reduplication is often what makes it read as a sign rather than spelling.

7

A second hand is added

What began as one-handed fingerspelling becomes a two-handed sign.

8

Grammar is included

The sign carries information the spelled word did not: number, direction, or intensity.

Writing loan signs in gloss

A lexicalized sign is written with a number sign in front of it: **#BANK**, **#JOB**, **#BACK**. The marker tells the reader this is a loan sign, not a word being spelled out letter by letter.

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Common loan signs to watch and practice

Spot the change

Your teacher signs each one. Watch what happens to the letters, then write the number of every change you see from the list on page 1.

Most loan signs use more than one change at a time, so expect two or three numbers on a line rather than one.

Loan signs

SIGN	CHANGES YOU SEE	SIGN	CHANGES YOU SEE
#BANK	_____	#PIZZA	_____
#JOB	_____	#OWN	_____
#EARLY	_____	#BUS	_____
#STYLE	_____	#ALL	_____
#SALE	_____	#IF	_____
#WHAT	_____	#OFF	_____
#BACK	_____	#OK	_____
#YES	_____	#EX	_____
#FIX	_____		

Not every fingerspelled word is a loan sign

Spelling a name or a brand letter by letter is just fingerspelling. It only becomes a loan sign once the letters start changing — dropping out, moving, gaining a movement of their own.