

## What Grammar Requires, What It Permits, How You Get Around It When It Doesn't: An Introductory Presentation

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Linguists say that any language can express any concept, but some concepts can be expressed more straightforwardly in one language than in another. One variable along which languages vary is that in some languages a concept must be expressed in the grammar, while in others that concept can optionally be coded in the grammar; in other languages, the same concept must be expressed idiosyncratically, via periphrasis, lexical choice, or modifiers. One example of this is plurality. In English, the singular-plural distinction must be expressed on nouns and verbs; a phrase like “three book” is ungrammatical, as “books” would be required in that context. In Japanese, plurals can be expressed, but only on some nouns and never on the verb, e.g., hitobito ‘people’, karera ‘they’, kodomotachi ‘children’. In many Polynesian languages, nouns are invariant, but plural can be expressed on the article. Some languages, e.g., Hidatsa, have “evidential” particles that show the speaker’s certitude about the truth of what s/he is saying. Japanese has at least one evidential marker -soo meaning hearsay, and ASL has a head nod that marks certainty on the part of the signer. Languages like English need to use verbs like “think” or “know” or “heard” to express the same differences in certainty.

Another thing that can vary cross-linguistically is where in the grammar something is expressed: morphologically or syntactically? Negation is expressed morphologically in Japanese via the adjective-forming suffix -nai while English mainly uses the adverb “not”; both languages also have negating prefixes such as hu- in Japanese or “un-“ in English. Sign languages often express negation prosodically via headshakes, but many also have an adverbial negator, and a few have productive morphological negation. The idea of past is expressed in English via tense, but future must be expressed with a modal “will” or quasi-modal “gonna”. In ASL, time must be expressed periphrastically using adverbials like YESTERDAY or NEXT-WEEK, as there is no grammatical tense; that said, there is a notional timeline that most sign languages use in word formation. Instrument in most sign languages is expressed by a handshape classifier. Some spoken languages have an instrumental case, while others may have individual lexical verbs that incorporate instrument, such as English “knife” or “hoe”. Still others use periphrastic adverbials like “with a hoe”.

These kinds of issues are important for linguistic typology in general, and many have been addressed in spoken languages: see, for example, the series of books edited by Dixon and/or

Aikhenvald. Where do sign languages stand? Some work, notably by Brentari, and by Zeshan and her colleagues, has been done, but much more is needed.

### **References**

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