

# Deaf sign language users pick up faster on body language

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Deaf people who use sign language are quicker at recognizing and interpreting body language than hearing non-signers, according to new research from investigators at UC Davis and UC Irvine.

The work suggests that deaf people may be especially adept at picking up on subtle visual traits in the actions of others, an ability that could be useful for some sensitive jobs, such as airport screening.

"There are a lot of anecdotes about deaf people being better able to pick up on body language, but this is the first evidence of that," said David Corina, professor in the UC Davis Department of Linguistics and Center for Mind and [Brain](#).

Corina and graduate student Michael Grosvald, now a postdoctoral researcher at UC Irvine, measured the response times of both deaf and hearing people to a series of [video clips](#) showing people making American Sign Language signs or "non-language" gestures, such as stroking the chin. Their work was published online Dec. 6 in the journal *Cognition*.

"We expected that deaf people would recognize sign language faster than hearing people, as the deaf people know and use sign language daily, but the real surprise was that deaf people also were about 100 milliseconds faster at recognizing non-language gestures than were hearing people," Corina said.

This work is important because it suggests that the human ability for communication is modifiable and is not limited to speech, Corina said. [Deaf people](#) show us that language can be expressed by the hands and be perceived through the visual system. When this happens, deaf signers get the added benefit of being able to recognize non-language actions better than hearing people who do not know a sign language, Corina said.

The study supports the idea that [sign language](#) is based on a modification of the system that all humans use to recognize [gestures](#) and body language, rather than working through a completely different system, Corina said.

Provided by University of California - Davis

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