Iconicity and metaphor in sign language poetry

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Abstract

This paper explores a unique relationship between iconicity and metaphor: that seen in creative sign language, where iconic properties abound at all levels of linguistic representation. We use the idea of ‘iconic superstructure’ to consider the way that metaphoric meaning is generated through the iconic properties of creative sign language. We focus on the interaction between the overall contextual force and individual elements that build up symbolism in sign language poetry. Evidence presented from the anthology of British Sign Language poetry demonstrates that metaphoric meaning is not inherent in signs. What is inherent is iconic value - and purely iconic signs *become* metaphorical when situated in a certain poetic context.

The interaction between iconicity and metaphor is foregrounded in artistic, creative signing, particularly in poems and stories composed and performed by Deaf signers. Strongly visual images are highly valued in creative sign language, and Deaf poets draw on iconicity in a range of ways to produce intensely visual depictions of their subject matter. At the same time, most poems present symbolic meaning, resulting in the high frequency of metaphoric expressions. Understanding how these metaphoric expressions are interrelated with iconicity is important for appreciating creative sign language and for understanding the potential of metaphor creation in general.

Iconicity is a non-arbitrary relationship between a *linguistic* form and its meaning, which is based on physical similarity (Lakoff and Turner 1989, Taub 2001). For example, the English word 'hiss' resembles the actual sound a snake makes. Metaphor, on the other hand, is based on *conceptual* similarity between two concepts (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). For example, we can talk about the abstract target domain of ideas in terms of a concrete source domain of food ("They won't swallow such an outrageous lie"; "Those views are hard to stomach").

Traditionally, iconicity and metaphor in spoken languages have been treated separately because iconic expressions at the vocabulary level were seen to be very limited. However, Hiraga (2005) explores in depth the interconnectedness between the two operations. She illustrates links between iconicity and metaphor using various literary texts. Her inclusion of Japanese haiku has been highly influential as referring to such non-European written texts 'not only epitomises the commonality of iconic manifestations in diverse texts but also clarifies the difference in iconic manifestations in relation to the modes of representation' (ibid: 19). This may lead us to expect that sign languages, which use an entirely different mode of representation,

will also show some similarities but show unique types of iconicity-metaphor links too.

In sign languages, iconic (i.e. visual-visual) correspondences between the form and the referent are the most natural and convenient way of representing the world. The ubiquity of iconicity in the linguistic structure of sign languages forces us to consider the role of iconicity in producing and interpreting metaphoric expressions. Thus the present paper draws on Hiraga's ideas to explore the relationship between iconicity and metaphor in a visual-kinetic-spatial modality. We accept that certain manifestations may be similar to those in other languages, but specifically attempt to identify any unique iconicity-metaphor links.

In this paper we analyse empirical data to examine the following hypotheses:

- Metaphor in creative sign language chiefly takes place at the sublexical level, not at the lexical level, in conjunction with global metaphorical reading.
- In creative sign language, carefully-selected parameters of the sign (handshape, location, movement, and palm orientation) generate an iconic superstructure, which serves as the basis for metaphorical interpretations.
- Metaphorical value of a sign is either absent or not foregrounded out of context. The poetic context evokes or reactivates symbolic interpretation.

We explore how poets use iconic superstructure as a basis (concrete domain) for metaphorical extension. Creative metaphor drives the meaning of the poem using the entire frame of the iconic superstructure, not through a single-shot metaphoric expression (such as "Life is but a walking shadow"). Iconic superstructure operates at the smallest units of sign languages (metaphor at micro level) and how they are used

is determined by the overall structure of the poem (metaphor at macro level). The nature of the interplay of iconicity and metaphor is how these two levels co-work with the “metaphoric intent” of the poets.

Methods

In order to illustrate our arguments, we draw on examples taken from an anthology of British Sign Language (BSL) poetry. The anthology has been created as part of research on metaphor in creative sign language at the University of Bristol, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), and can be found at www.bristol.ac.uk/bslpoetryanthology.

We take a close reading approach which involves a detailed examination of poetic features of, and across, individual poems. We analyse the form and structure of the poems and their possible symbolic associations. Analysis of creative sign language requires the creativity of the poets and the creative input of the interpretations by the viewers (Negus & Pickering 2004). We acknowledge the creative acts of both the poets and ourselves as interpreters, and consider the metaphors that we can identity by reading ‘into’, as well as ‘out of’, the text (Dundes 1965; 108). Reading ‘into’ the poem gives us leeway to look for meanings which are not entirely retrievable from the text. However, to avoid danger of arbitrary ‘free interpretation’ we support our interpretations by the ‘internal evidence’ (in Wimsatt and Beardsley (1946 [1954])’s terms) of the text.

Iconic properties of the sign are determined by a physical resemblance between the form and the referent (and here we provide pictures and translations of sign to illustrate the iconic properties, allowing readers to see how the iconicities are realised in BSL). We identify relevant superstructures as the meaningful recurrence of the same or similar parameters throughout a poem or a particular section of the poem. Identifications of metaphors are more subjective, but they are justified by what is visible in the poem and also by our knowledge of the poet and of the Deaf community. For the latter, we provide explanations if necessary.

Previous studies on iconicity and metaphor in sign languages

The unique features of iconicity and metaphor in sign languages, and their inter-relationship, have been a focus of interest in sign linguistics. Readers wishing to consult some more recent research are directed to work by Wilcox (2000) on American Sign Language, Jarque (2005) on Catalan Sign Language, Cuxac (1999) and Sallandre and Cuxac (2002) on French Sign Language, and Russo, Giuranna and Pizzuto (2001) on Italian Sign Language.

Taub (2001) uses a cognitive linguistic approach to explore the relationship between iconicity and metaphor in American Sign Language (ASL). She defines iconicity as a structure-preserving mapping between the mental models of images and linguistic forms, and she proposes the *analogue building model* which consists of three stages:

- *Image selection* of a mental image that is associated with the original concept
- *Schematisation* of essential features of the image

- *Encoding* of the resulting schema using the appropriate parts of the sign language

Using an example from our anthology we can see that the BSL sign REINDEER[1] selects a prototypical visual image of a reindeer. Then some essential features are extracted to form a simplified framework to create the scheme (several lines of antlers and the head/face of the reindeer). Finally, appropriate parts of the sign language are chosen to encode the schematised elements: the hands with open fingers representing the antlers and the head/face of the poet representing the head/face of the reindeer (Figure 1).

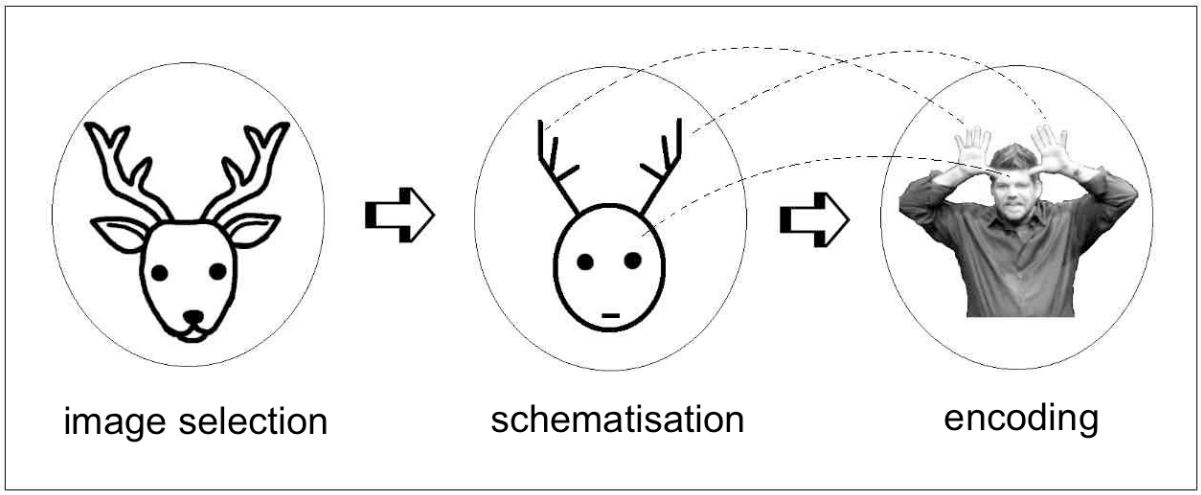


Figure 1: The analogue building model for the BSL sign REINDEER

A metaphor does not have a concrete sensory image directly associated with the target concept. This is linked to the point Hiraga (2005) makes regarding the difference between iconicity and metaphor in spoken languages: while there is a natural link between the form and referent in iconic expressions, perceived similarities between the two concepts involved in metaphor are not taken to be pre-

[1] Signs may be described using an English word that best represents the meaning of the sign, and are written in small capital letters (e.g. TREE).

existent (Hiraga 2005). Thus, in order to be encoded in sign language, a metaphor first needs to be mapped onto a concrete source concept. This source concept can then undergo the same analogous building process described above. For example, a BSL sign occurring in our anthology IGNORE-WHAT-SOMEONE-SAYS[2] (Figure 2) draws on a common metaphor "COMMUNICATION IS SENDING". In the process of forming this sign, the abstract concept of unsuccessful communication (an utterance ignored by the addressee) is first mapped onto a concrete concept of unsuccessful sending of an object (the object bounces off a barrier). Then it goes through the stages of image selection, schematisation and encoding (see Figure 3). The index finger is understood as the object, the ear as the barrier, and the movement away from the ear as the bouncing movement against the barrier. This is in contrast with other BSL signs such as I-HEAR-YOU (Figure 4), in which the end point of the index finger is on the ear, implying the utterance is successfully heard.

In essence, then, as Taub makes clear, metaphors in sign languages undergo a *double mapping* process: metaphorical mapping (from abstract concept to concrete concept) and iconic mapping (from concrete concept to linguistic form). In spoken languages, metaphorical mapping takes place primarily at the conceptual level, not at the linguistic level, as metaphorical expressions are built on a single mapping between abstract and concrete concepts.

[2] When there is no single English word that can express the meaning of a single sign, we use several words joined by a hyphen.

Figure 2: The BSL sign IGNORE-WHAT-SOMEONE-SAYS

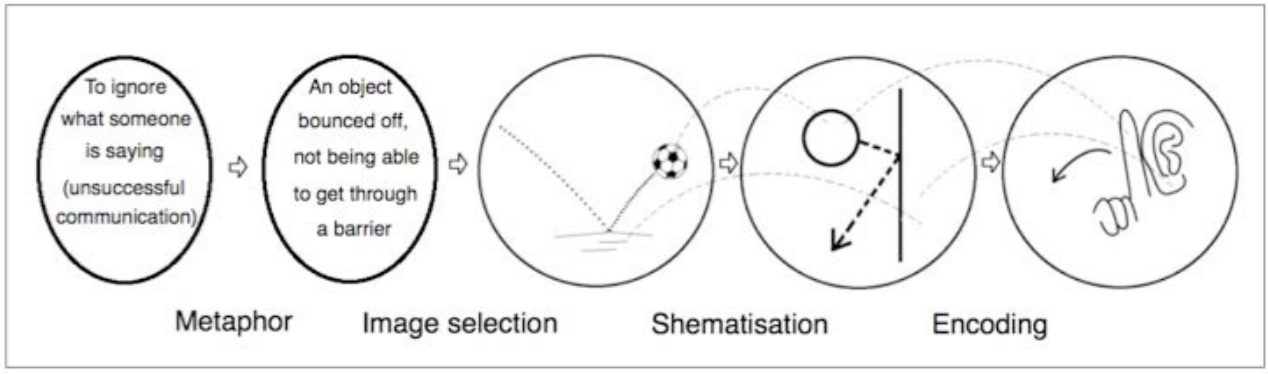


Figure 3: The Double Mapping Model for the BSL sign IGNORE-WHAT-SOMEONE-SAYS

Figure 4: The BSL sign I-HEAR-YOU

Meir (2010) takes one step further into the double-mapping process of sign language metaphors, and proposes “Double Mapping Constraints” to explore why some

established signs in Israeli Sign Language (and in ASL) cannot be used metaphorically. For example, the sign EAT (identical in Israeli, American, and British Sign Languages, and shown in this sign from our anthology in Figure 5) cannot express an abstract notion of consumption as in the English sentence “The acid ate the iron key” (Meir 2010: 7). Meir explains that once a sign has gone through the iconic mapping process any further mapping needs to retain the basic structural correspondences. In EAT, the dominant hand represents holding food; its movement represents the act of putting the food to the mouth; the mouth represents the mouth of the person who is eating. A general non-iconic concept of ‘consumption’, which is the basis of metaphorical extension in English, has no structural elements that correspond to these details in the original iconic mapping. Such absence of corresponding elements blocks the metaphorical extension. In other words, the specificity of iconic mapping of a sign refuses to serve as the ground of its metaphorical extension.

Figure 5: The BSL sign EAT

Insights gained from the existing frameworks

Meir's work highlights what is essentially a translation issue between spoken and signed languages, asking: 'Why are some metaphors which are so common in English not expressed in sign languages?' Our research builds on these ideas, and acknowledging the ubiquity of iconicity in sign languages using Taub's approach, reverses the perspective to ask from the starting point of the sign language, 'How can these iconic aspects be extended to mean something abstract? What is necessary for them to be interpreted as metaphors?'

Most previous research (including Taub and Meir's work) has tended to focus on discrete lexical signs, each having a clear, non-context-dependent form and meaning (such as EAT, TREE or LEARN-FROM-OTHERS). However, sign languages also use many productive signs where form is generated *ad hoc* and meaning is heavily context dependent, offering multiple layers of information simultaneously, and having no ready English equivalents (Sutton-Spence and Woll 1999, Johnston and Schembri 2007). Signers assemble relevant sub-lexical sign elements (such as the shape, location, movement and orientation of each hand, and facial expressions, eyegaze and head- and body-movement) to produce a single complex expression such as COMMANDER-RECEIVES-AGREEMENT-FROM-FIVE-GROUP-MEMBERS or ROAD-RUNNER-RUNS-AROUND-THE-WORLD (examples drawn from David Ellington's *The Story of the Flag* and Vitalis Katakinas' *Haiku* in the BSL poetry anthology[3]). Sublexical features, which are mostly iconic, are used as building blocks for a holistic description of a visual scene. Sublexical elements have been described within sign linguistic literature as being phonological parameters, and in established lexical signs they may be, but in these productive signs they are not meaningless (leading to the claim that they may be better seen as morphophonemes – e.g. Johnston and Schembri 1999). The

[3] All of the poems mentioned in this paper, unless otherwise stated, are available at the above-mentioned BSL poetry anthology website (www.bristol.ac.uk/bslpoetryanthology)

existing models, which only analyse signs at lexical level, have not been used to provide adequate analyses of the role of sublexical elements in iconicity and metaphor.

Additionally, previous research does not take into account how each sign relates to surrounding signs and to the overall meaning of an utterance. This contextual information is crucial for understanding how iconic signs can be interpreted as metaphors in some contexts but not in others. Most iconic sublexical features are not metaphorical *per se*, but when placed in a certain context they start to bear symbolic meaning. Metaphoric interpretation is imposed by the context.

The significance of sublexical features and context is foregrounded in creative sign language. A piece of creative signing is usually carefully pre-structured and thus it is important to see the overall poetic effect of the whole, built up by careful selection of smaller units. Therefore, creative metaphors require a two-way analysis: from micro level (sublexical features) and macro level (poetic context). At a macro level, many poems can be read as allegories or extended metaphors so the whole poem is a metaphor to symbolise a concept which may or may not be explicitly stated. In our collections of creative sign language to date, the most common extended metaphor alludes to situations concerning Deaf people's interaction with the wider "Hearing world". This may be with respect to their oppression by hearing people or their resistance to it. For example, Dorothy Miles' *Elephant Dancing* is a poem that ostensibly describes training elephants to dance by chaining their legs, but thus refers to deaf children being forced unnaturally to speak by being deprived of sign language. Richard Carter's *Deaf Trees* uses a forester's desire to destroy brown trees and keep only green trees (and the Deaf protagonists' attempts to save the

brown trees) to explore attempts by hearing people to eradicate deaf people, and the Deaf community's resistance to this.

At a micro level, the sublexical units combine to contribute to the overall meaning of the poem. The selection of particular parameters of the sign (its handshape, location, movement, and palm orientation) is often governed by metaphorical principles and the parameters symbolically represent the ideas that underlie the entire poem. We will illustrate some examples later in this paper.

Iconic superstructure

When conducting such two-way analyses as we propose, the notion of *superstructure* becomes useful in understanding the relationship between individual components and overall structure in sign language poetry. 'Superstructure' refers to any features that are found across different signs which appear to be imposed by the contextual force. This term was first used by Klima and Bellugi (1979) as one of the features which are unique to sign language poetry. There are two types of motivation behind the superimposition of the forms in 'superstructure': aesthetic and thematic. Klima and Bellugi were mainly concerned with how signs are modified or distorted to produce aesthetic effect. But thematic motivation is more relevant for our discussion of metaphor and iconicity. Moreover, superstructure does not necessarily mean distortion of the original form of the signs. Rather, it is in the way that similar features are put together to create meaning as a whole. In fact, what is striking in signed poetry is its power to add symbolic meaning to a sign without changing its distinctive features.

Closer to our approach, Demey, Van Herreweghe and Vermeerbergen (2008) propose the idea of an ‘iconic superstructure’ to an utterance, which can be defined as the sublexical iconic elements activated at the level of syntax or discourse. They try to capture the notion of iconicity at the sublexical (micro) level and also at the larger syntactic or discourse (macro) levels. Because they are working at the smaller unit level, they can provide more detailed and flexible explanations for iconicity beyond single signs.

Demey et al usefully show that the iconic superstructure is not inherent in the form of the language but is activated by the ‘iconic intent’ of the language users. In other words, iconic and non-iconic signs may have identical forms but are ‘seen’ differently depending on how they are used by the signer or interpreted by the interlocutor. For example, BSL signs WHAT and WAGGING-TAIL have exactly the same form (Figure 6). But WAGGING-TAIL is clearly iconically motivated, whereas there is no obvious motivation behind the formation of WHAT (Figure 7). All forms have potential iconic value, but only the ones with iconic intent can foreground their iconic form-meaning relationship. In other words, iconic value is not objectively observable. We can extend this notion of “iconic intent” to the idea of “metaphoric intent”, which can be defined as the intention of the poet that determines if certain features bear symbolic meaning.

Figure 6: BSL signs WHAT and WAGGING-TAIL

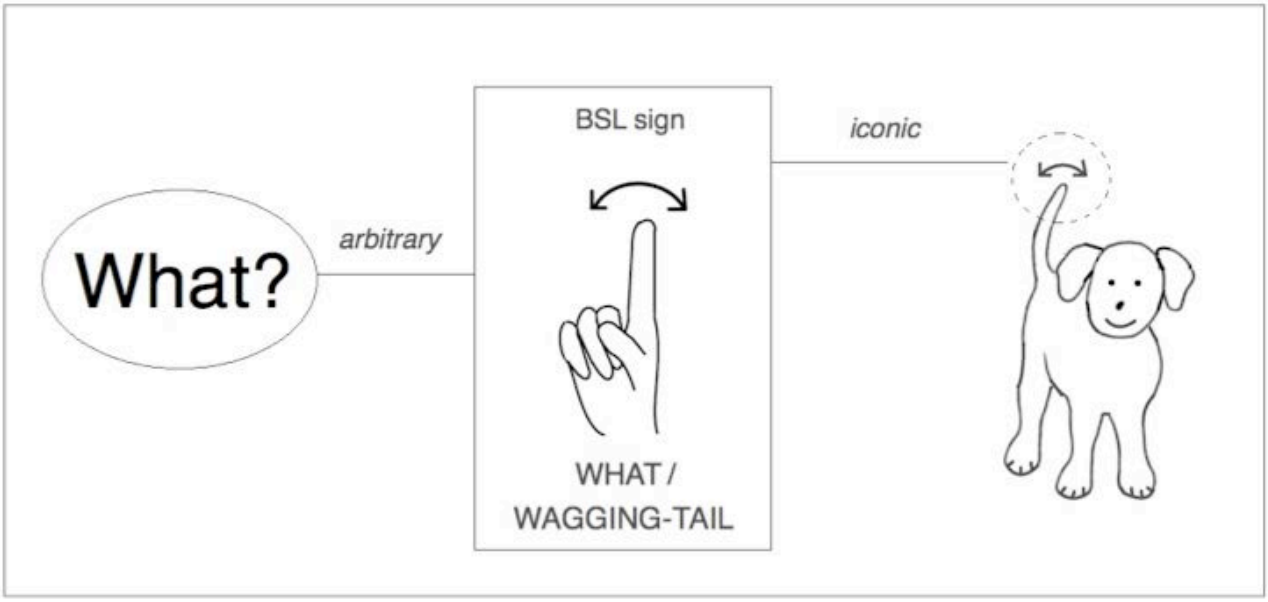


Figure 7: Form/meaning relationship for WHAT and WAGGING-TAIL

Demey et al also claim that their iconicity model can be applied to both spoken and signed languages. These two modalities, they claim, “do not produce differences in kind, but only in degree” (Demey, Van Herreweghe and Vermeerbergen 2008: 212). The iconic superstructure manifests itself in spoken language as onomatopoeic

iconicity, especially in creative context. They give an example from Tennyson's *Come Down. O Maid*:

*"*The moan of the doves in immemorial elms
And murmur of innumerable bees"

In this poem, the sounds of doves and bees are expressed iconically by the repetition of [m] sounds and the buzzing sound of the final word [bi:z]. They are iconically mapped onto the actual sounds of the referents. There is nothing iconic or inherently metaphorical about the [z] in "doves", nor the [m] in "elms", but when in the context of the iconic sounds in the other poems, these sounds increase the poetic effect.

Although Demey et al do not refer to metaphors, such onomatopoeic iconicity can be used metaphorically where it does not represent physical sounds but images of abstract notion. This "sound symbolism" can be found, for example, in Edgar Allan Poe's *Anabel Lee*:

*"*It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea,
That a maiden there lived whom you may know
By the name of Annabel Lee;
And this maiden she lived with no other thought
Than to love and be loved by me."

Here, the [m] and [l] sounds are scattered across the poem contributing to soft and mild impression of the heroine and the entire poem. In both examples, the words

themselves are conventional. It is the combination of particular consonants and the contextual effect that lead them to certain poetic effect. The selection of these particular consonants by the poets shows their ‘iconic or metaphoric intent’ in spoken languages.

Thus, iconic superstructure can provide ways in which we can discuss iconicity and metaphor in the same light. It does not require complex models and constraints as proposed by Taub and Meir. Working at the sublexical level, in association with the context in which signs are used, we propose a flexible and comprehensive concept that can explain a wide range of examples in a bottom-up manner.

Iconic superstructure in creative sign language

We will now consider examples of iconic superstructure in creative sign language. Although for convenience’s sake, we have divided the discussion according to each parameter of the sign (handshape, location, movement, and palm orientation), they are frequently interrelated.

Handshape

Interplay of iconic superstructure and metaphors manifests itself most noticeably in handshapes. Deaf poets can use unconventional handshapes to create new signs, but in most cases, the creativity lies in the arrangement of existing handshapes. In

this aspect, the selection of handshapes is similar to the repetition of particular consonants in above poems by Tennyson and Poe.

Some handshapes have inherent semantic values. For example, “open” handshapes are more likely to arouse positive feelings in the viewer than “closed” handshapes would. Handshapes with more extended fingers (B, 5)[4] metonymically express greater aboundedness than those with only one finger extended (A, G, I) (Sutton-Spence 2005). Kaneko (2008, 2011) also found what she calls “handshape symbolism” within the BSL lexicon: for example, handshapes with bent fingers (X, 5”, V”) are more likely to be associated with signs for negative concepts (such as ANGRY, MISERABLE and HAVE-TO-PUT-UP-WITH-SOMETHING) than handshapes with straightened fingers. Such association has also been noted by other linguists, including Brennan (1990), Bouvet (1997) and Zeshan (2000).

However, not all signs with these handshapes bear this kind of symbolism (for example, the same handshape used for ANGRY can occur in signs expressing neutral or even positive concepts such as ANIMAL, GOVERNMENT and INTERESTING), and their symbolic aspects are not usually foregrounded in everyday signing. When placed into their poetic context, however, they ‘become’ metaphorical. This is in line with the view presented in Hiraga (2005) that metaphorical interpretation is not pre-existent in the form of the language but is something to be established by our cognitive operations. It is important to remember that the form does not change; the signs and the handshapes do not lose or gain iconicity. Rather, the context of a poem, the intention of the poet and the interpretation of the audience highlight the form-meaning relationship and turn the sign with this handshape into something symbolic. In other

[4] Handshapes are conventionally represented by single letter or number labels (e.g. A or 5). The list of handshapes used in this paper and their symbols can be found in the appendix

words, the poetic context has the power to (re-) activate the metaphorical elements in handshapes.

Thus, superimposed 'bent' handshapes create a negative impression in a poem. They establish a gloomy atmosphere without using any lexical signs that actually have negative meaning (such as SAD or SCARY or BAD). For instance, in Wim Emerik's NGT (Sign Language of the Netherlands) poem *Garden of Eden*,[5] the theme of lost paradise is largely realised by the frequent use of crooked fingers. Signs such as WORM-CRAWLING, BECKONING, and APPLE are expressed with bent fingers. Such a succession of signs with 'claws at joints' contributes to the overall 'negative' impression in the poem (Figure 8). Note that the handshape of each sign per se (WORM-CRAWLING, BECKONING and APPLE) is not negative. It is only when they are arranged together in this particular poetic context that they produce uncanny feeling.

[5] O. Crasborn, E. van der Kooij, A. Nonhebel & W. Emmerik (2004) *ECHO data set for Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT)*. Department of Linguistics, Radboud University Nijmegen. http://www.let.ru.nl/sign-lang/echo

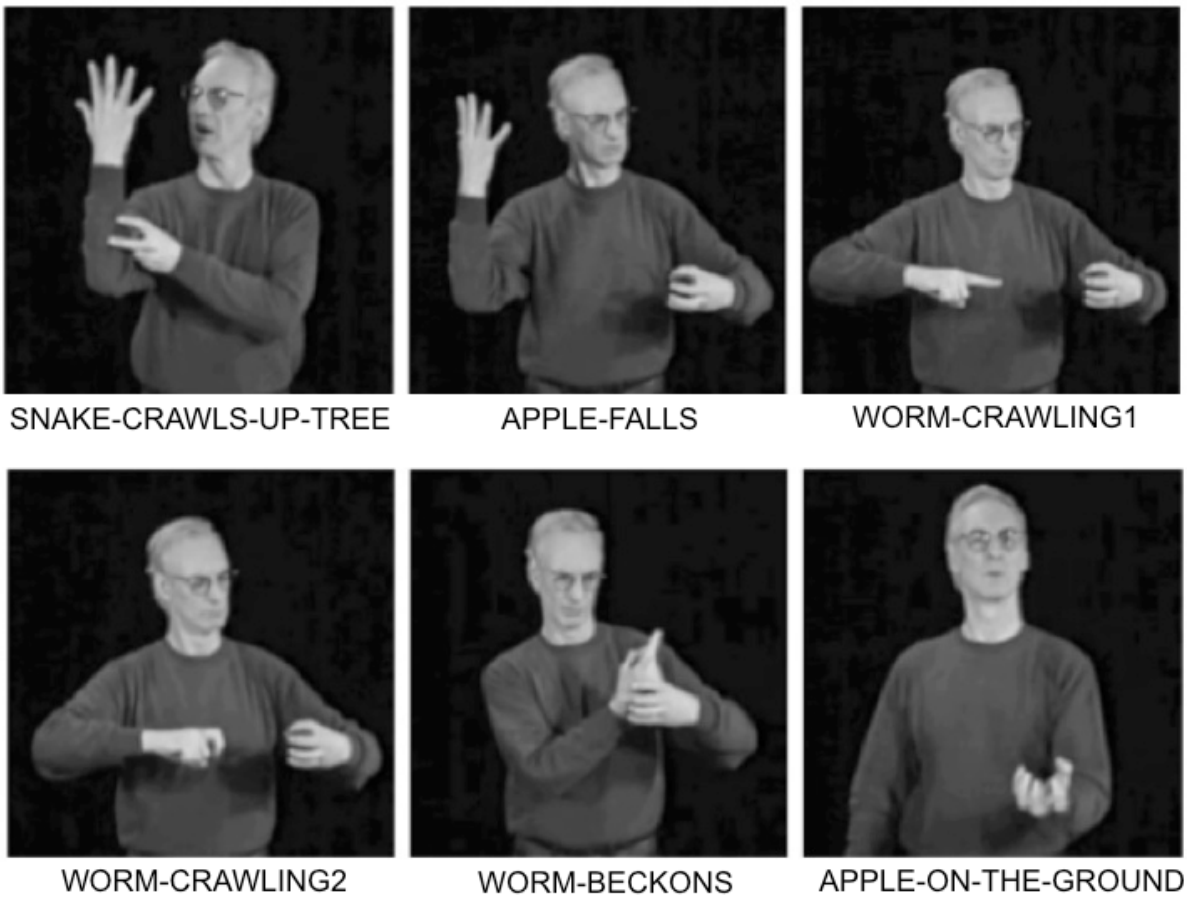


Figure 8: Signs from Wim Emerik's *Garden of Eden*

A similar imposed superstructure of the bent fingers can be observed in Richard Carter's poem *Cochlear Implant*, in which the poet personifies and attributes a cunning and demonic character to a cochlear implant[6]. The personified cochlear implant feigns innocence at first and 'beckons' the protagonist to try it on (Figure 9 d, e). Once it is turned on, however, it violently attacks him by 'screaming' at his ear (i). This sequence is presented through the repetitive use of bent handshapes. Not only signs related to COCHLEAR-IMPLANT but also other signs with bent handshapes such as GET-OUT-OF-BED (Figure 9 a, b), HOLD-BOX (c) and PICK-UP (f, g), are deliberately used together to produce an unsettling impression. The implant's attack comes at the

[6] Readers unfamiliar with Deaf communities should note that many Deaf people have strong negative feelings towards cochlear implants, seeing them as dangerously invasive and unnecessarily so, given that they do not consider deafness to need medical treatment.

end of the poem, but an uncomfortable atmosphere has been built up through the repeated use of bent fingers, preparing the audience for a negative outcome.

Figure 9: Signs from Richard Carter's *Cochlear Implant*

Other handshapes can be superimposed over a poem and be the basis of metaphorical interpretation. David Ellington's *The Story of the Flag*, is the story of an

attack by a group of soldiers or bandits, culminating in the capture of a flag. The description of the soldiers is characterised by the recurring appearance of signs with closed fists (A handshape). This handshape, in general, iconically represents a firm grip (as in GRAB), and this firmness can be extended so it occurs in signs like STRONG, DETERMINED, and POWERFUL. In a poetic context, such symbolic value is emphasised. In this poem, each sign is an iconic representation of, for example, the act of drawing a bow, the hooves of a rearing horse, and human heads (Figure 10 a, b, c). When arranged together, they are used to symbolise the determination, solidarity and power of the soldiers. In contrast, the fluttering flag is iconically configured using the open, flat B handshape, which, in this particular poem, may symbolise its helplessness and frailness (Figure 10 d). The guard who is trying to stop the soldiers (but is easily trampled down) is also represented using the B handshape (Figure 10 e). The sign at the end of the poem is highly symbolic as it visually depicts the fall of the flag (B handshape) onto the arm of the victorious soldier with the closed fist (Figure 10 f).

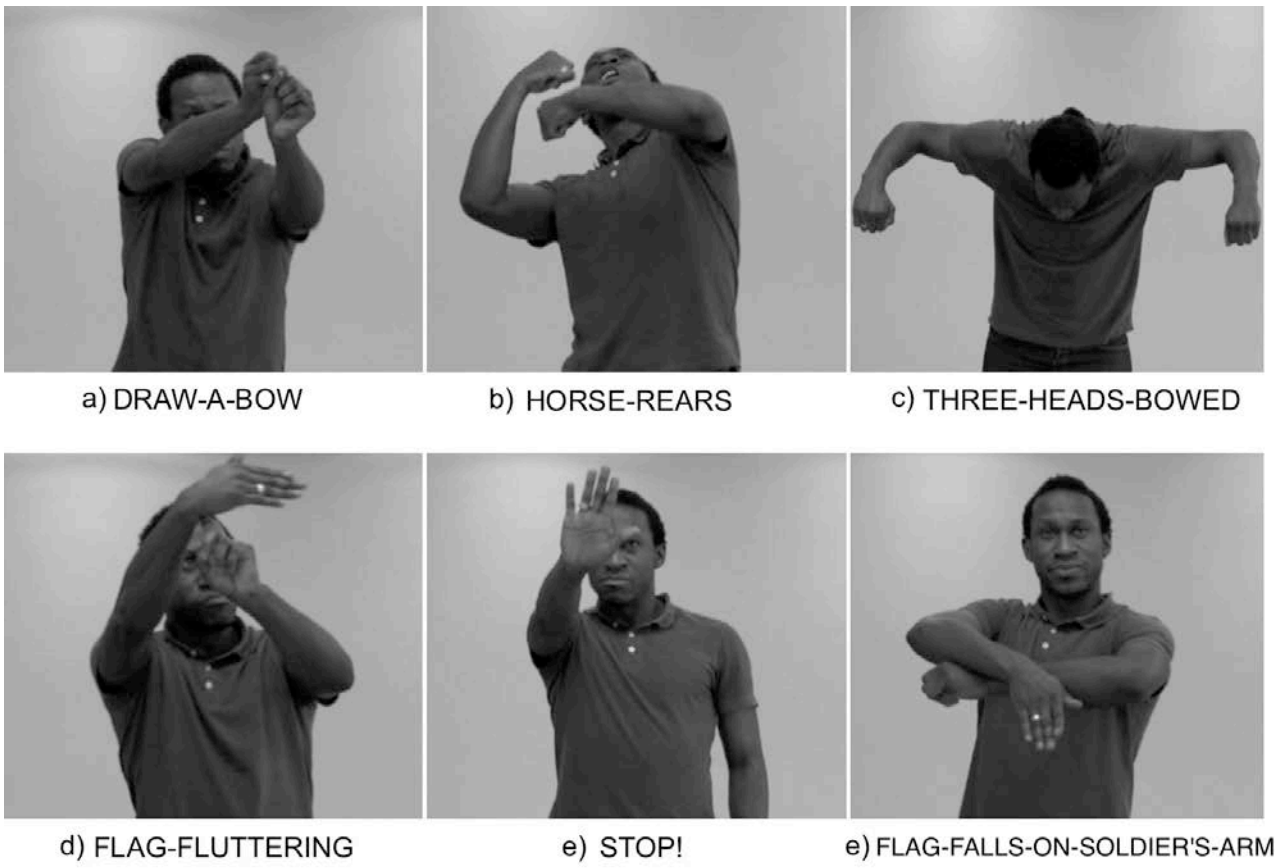


Figure 10: Signs from David Ellington's *The Story of the Flag*

Richard Carter's *Mirror* tells the story of a personified mirror which is hung on the wall and becomes bored and lonely as people walk by without paying attention to it. The mirror is represented as a two-handed sign with the plain, unmarked B handshapes on both hands (Figure 11 a). This iconic form emphasises the two-dimensionality of the mirror. Carter carefully selects other signs with the same handshape to construct the story (Figure 11 b-f). As a result the B handshape is spread over the poem, and is used to symbolise the monotony of the life of an inanimate object. The B handshape is one of the most frequently used handshapes in BSL, and it is used neutrally in everyday signing. It is only in the context of this poem that the flatness and ordinariness of the B handshape is foregrounded and becomes symbolic.

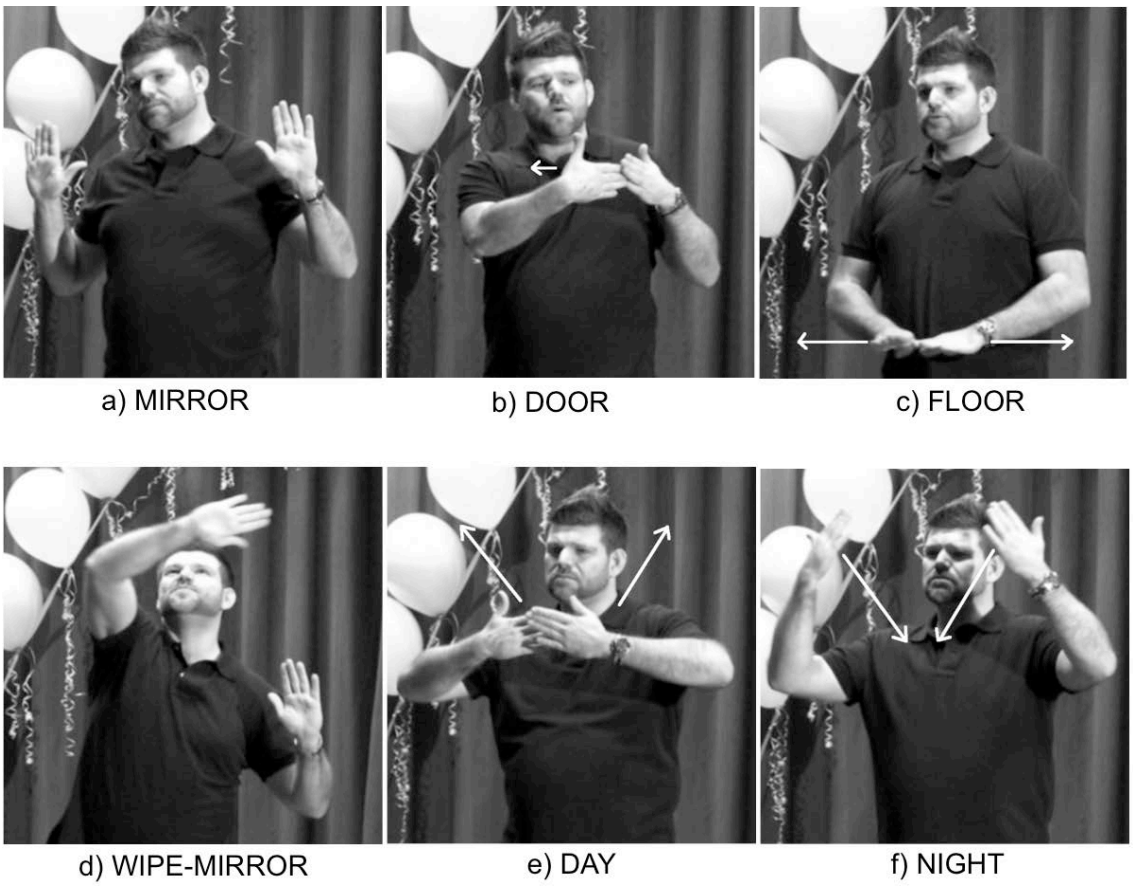


Figure 11 Signs from Richard Carter's *Mirror*

In all examples, the superstructure of particular iconic hand configuration is effectively placed within the context of the poem, and leads to metaphorical interpretation. Once again, such metaphorical meaning is not inherent in the form of these signs. Signs such as APPLE, GET-OUT-OF-BED, HEAD, FLAG, DOOR and FLOOR are common signs, and the handshape is simply used to iconically represent the shape of the referent. In non-poetic contexts, they are iconic but not metaphorical "yet". Their symbolic value only exists within the context of the poem in which they are situated.

Locations

Consistent use of locations is another important feature of creative signing. Although most lexical signs have specified locations, they can be changed relatively easily, compared to handshape or movement, depending on the surrounding signs or overall use of space in particular discourse. A coherent spatial structure in individual poems can be imposed over the signs, sometimes overriding their default locations.

For example, Donna Williams' *Dissertation and Duck* uses diagonal space to represent a symbolic association between the mental struggle of finishing a dissertation and the physical struggle of a baby duck swimming upstream (Figure 12, 13). In this poem, the upper-right location is associated with negative concepts, while lower-left is symbolically more positive. When the poet expresses the stress of writing up her dissertation, the productive sign showing its imminent deadline is located at the upper-right area and approaches the poet downward (emotional pressure is expressed metaphorically as physical downward force). In a neutral context, when something is approaching the signer, the sign's default location is the centre of the signing space, changing location when the referent physically comes from a particular direction. But in this poem, the poet intentionally locates the sign showing this non-concrete pressure on the upper right to be consistent with the following sequence of a river. The poet takes a break and goes to a park, where she finds a baby duck trying to swim upstream in the river. The established sign RIVER is located in a neutral space, moving outward in front of the signer, but in this poem the river runs from the upper-right direction to the lower-left end, crossing the signing space diagonally, and the baby duck is located at the bottom of this line. This diagonal line is physical as well as symbolic as both the poet and the baby duck struggle against

the pressure (approaching deadline for the poet and the river flow for the baby duck) that “runs” from upper-right to lower-left. This consistent use of space emphasises the emotional bond that grows between the poet and the baby duck.

Figure 12: Signs from Donna Williams’ *Duck and Dissertation*

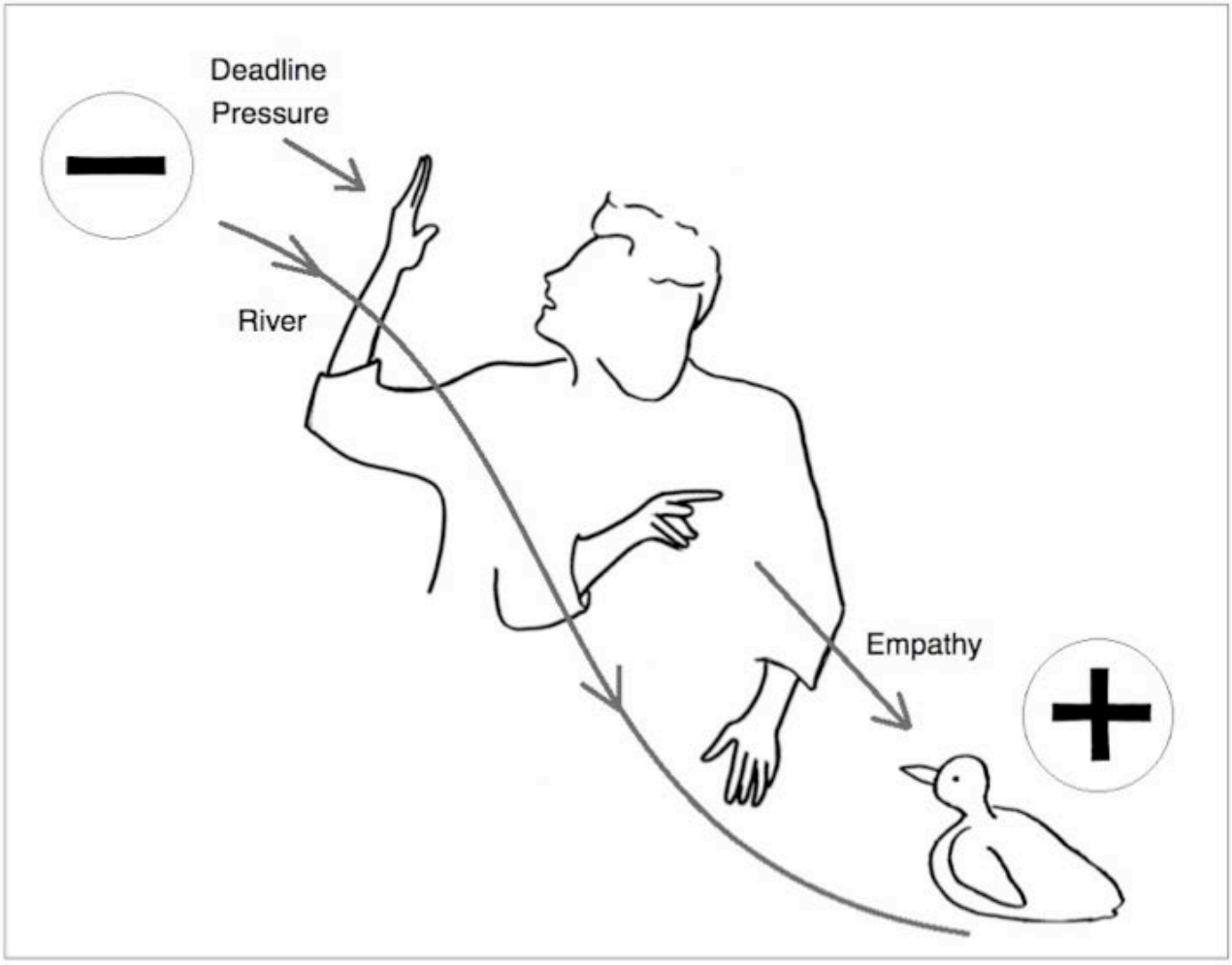


Figure 13: Symbolic use of space in *Duck and Dissertation*

Imposed location is used effectively in another poem by Williams, *That Day*. This poem describes the qualities of an ideal Deaf world, comparing them with the current hearing-dominant world. Contrast between the real world (hearing-centred) and the ideal world (Deaf-centred) is highlighted by assigning different locations to each world. Concepts or objects which belong to hearing people are represented by signs located on the far right of the poet, and incidents that happen in the hearing world are shown to come from this direction: such as a hearing person bumping into the Deaf poet from the right (Figure 14 a); the signs showing tannoy announcements coming from far right (b); a hearing person who patronises the poet is situated on the right (c, d). In contrast, signs related to the Deaf world are more centralised, such as SIGN-

LANGUAGE (e), INSTANT-MESSAGING-SCREEN (f) and DEAF-AWARE (g). Central space is their default location, and out of a poetically deliberate contrastive situation, it would carry no extra communicative power. However, when set against the deliberate placement of the hearing world, these unmarked locations for the Deaf world take on extra meaning. Interpreters are originally located on the right using a sign that is normally centrally located, symbolising the fact that they are hearing (h). They are brought to the centre (Deaf space) on demand of the poet (i), thus highlighting a different aspect of interpreters – that they are to serve the deaf community. The poem establishes the centrality of the Deaf world by literally and symbolically peripheralising hearing-related referents to the far right (Figure 15).

Figure 14: Signs from Donna Williams' *That Day*

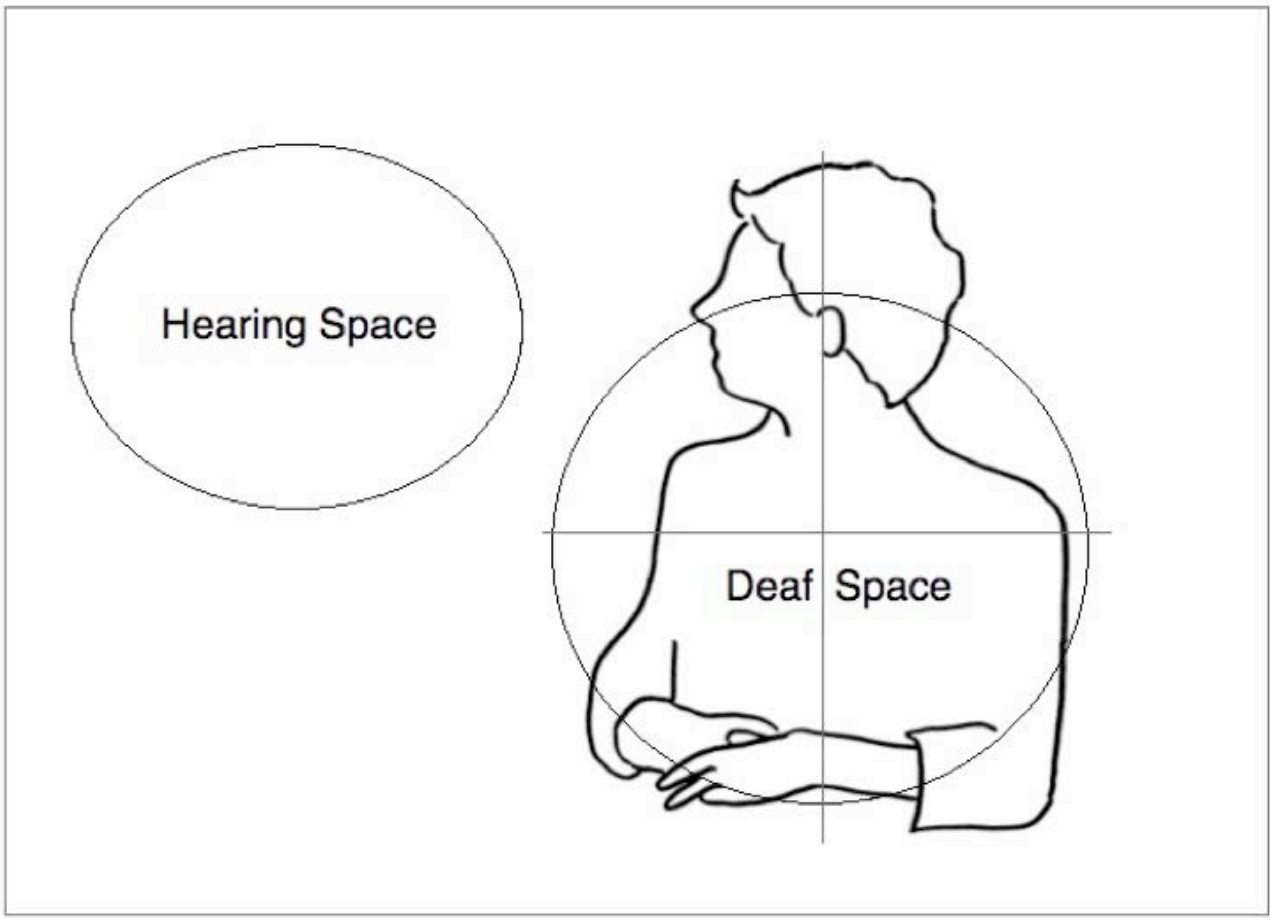
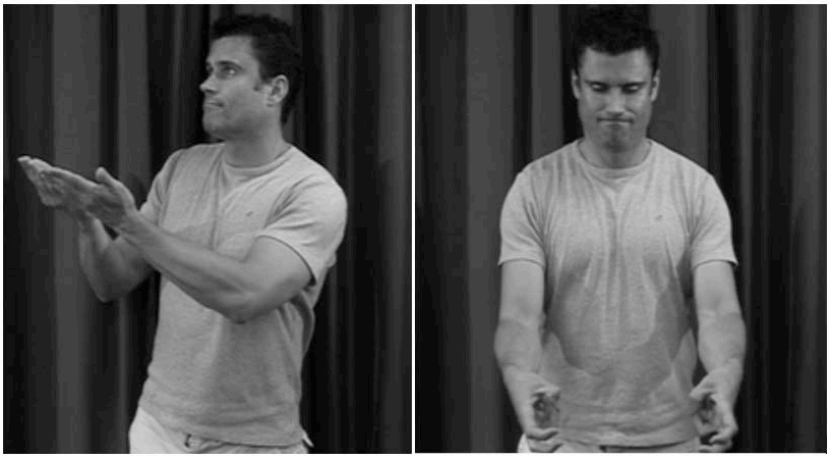


Figure 15: Contrastive use of space in *That Day*

Systematic locations of the characters in a poem or a story often portray the power relationship among them. For example, in Nigel Howard's *Deaf*[7], signs are located to show that the hearing doctor is located higher than the parents of the deaf baby (Figure 16 a), thus s/he physically and conceptually "looks down upon" them. The baby, because it is small, is iconically located at the bottom of the signing space, which in turn symbolises its helplessness when the doctor implants it with two cochlear implants (Figure 16 b). In Johanna Mesch's *Son*, placement and direction of both established and productive signs show that the son is located lower than the poet-performer (the mother) when he is small but at a higher place once he has grown up (Figure 17). While this iconically represents the physical growth of the son,

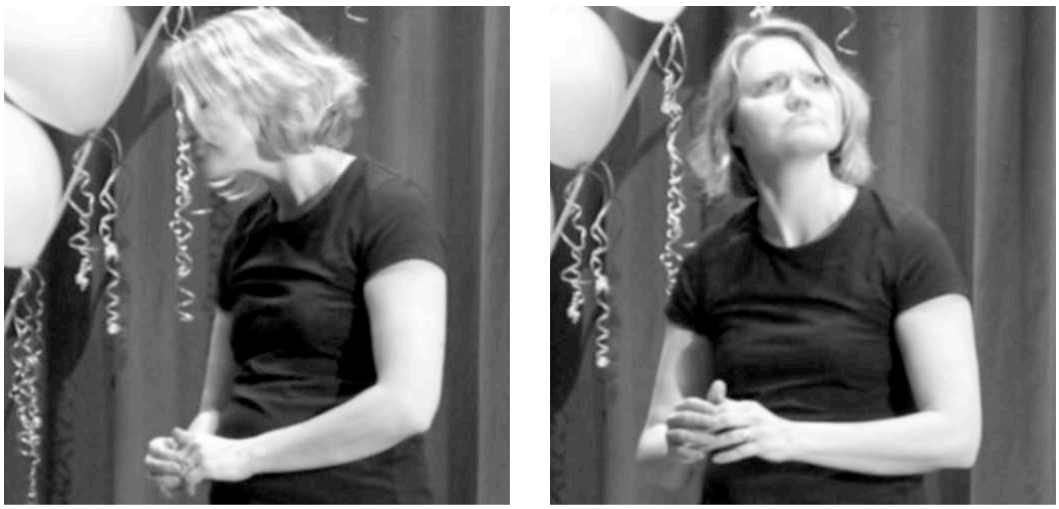
[7] This poem is not included in the BSL poetry anthology but can be found at http://www.bslhaiku.co.uk/

it is also metaphorical, in that the mother has to look “up” to her grownup son as she feels a little overwhelmed by the power and confidence of the adult man. In both cases, the poet’s choice of signs illustrates the iconic (physical) locations of referents but also makes them symbolic by relating them to the overall meaning of the poem.



a) GIVE-BABY-TO-DOCTOR b) DOCTOR-IMPLANTS-BABY

Figure 16 Signs from Nigel Howard’s *Deaf*



Mother looking at the young son Mother looking at the grownup son

Figure 17: Signs from Johanna Mesch’s *Son*

In all these examples, the symbolic meaning of location is lost if we pick one sign and analyse it out of context. Also, a particular association of locations with symbolic

meaning is consistent within a poem, but it is not usually carried over to other poems. In other words, different poetic contexts will establish different sets of metaphorical locations. The upper-right location is seen negatively in *Dissertation and Duck*, but can be used to express something positive in other poems (for instance, the bright sunlight comes from upper right in Dorothy Miles' *Spring*). Some basic symbolism in locations (such as solid basis for orientational metaphor "GOOD IS UP, BAD IS DOWN") may be observed across a wide range of poems (see Sutton-Spence, 2010, for discussion of symbolic use of space in signed poetry), but all locations are fundamentally neutral in meaning and their semantic value is imposed by the context of each poem.

Movement

Selection of movement can also be driven by contextual force. For example, 'circular' movement is likely to be selected in poems that describe the passage of time, as in Paul Scott's *Tree* and Richard Carter's *Surprise Apple* (Figure 18). Both utilise the iconic representation of the circular movement of the sun and the moon, which is also metaphorically linked to the theme of 'circle of life' in these poems, as a seedling grows in place of a felled tree in the former poem, and a new caterpillar emerges before the eyes of a butterfly in the latter. The circularity is imposed on the poems both at the linguistic and thematic levels.

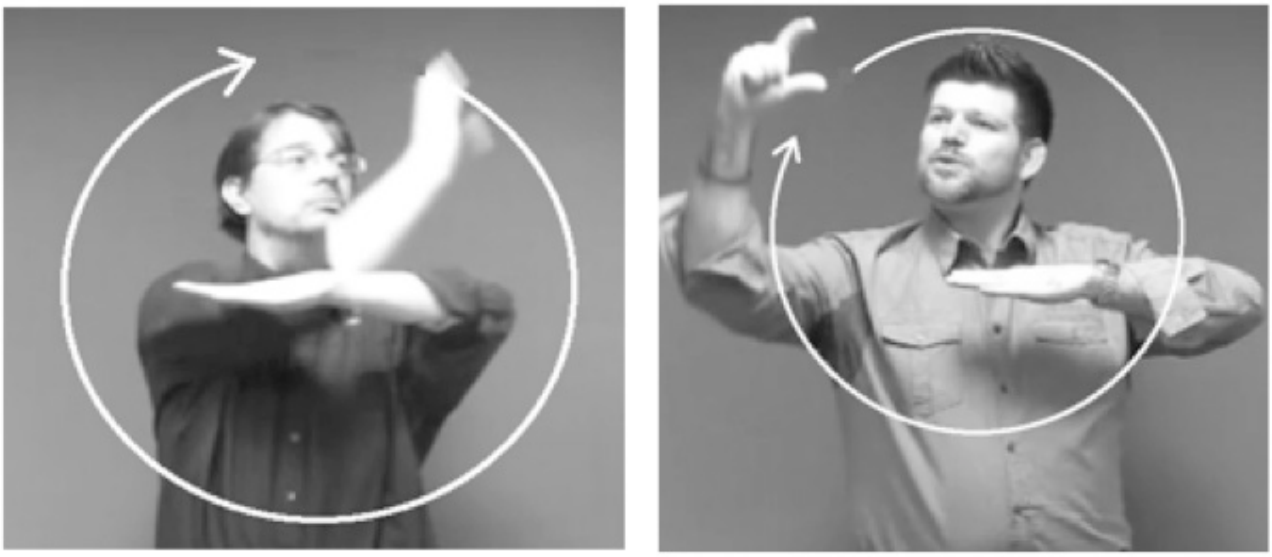


Figure 18: Passing of the time in Paul Scott's *Tree* (left) and Richard Carter's *Surprise Apple* (right)

The passing of the time is expressed differently in Carter's *Mirror*. This poem does not deal with the circularity of life or events, but instead, illustrates the monotony of the life of a personified mirror on the wall. Thus, what is imposed in the poem is not the circularity but flatness of the movement (see the earlier discussion on the flat B handshape in this poem). Passing of the days and nights in this story is expressed by the repeated up-down movement of the lower arms, like the movement of a windscreen wiper (see the pictures in Figure 11 e and f). This revitalises the meaning of the non-iconic movement in the established BSL signs DAY and NIGHT. Additionally, in this particular poem, it emphasises the 'flatness' of the mirror, both iconically (two dimensionality of the mirror) and metaphorically (monotony of its 'flat' life).

Paul Scott's *Too Busy to Hug, No Time to See*, contrasts signs with movement and signs without movement to add symbolic meaning to a poem that personifies a mountain and the sea, and describes their interaction. The form of the sign MOUNTAIN in BSL used in this poem simply shows the static outline of the mountain using both

arms (Figure 19 a). In contrast, the sign SEA used in this poem represents the waves of the ocean, and is constantly moving (b). Such contrast in movement of the forms is skillfully used to reflect the different characters of these two protagonists and their style of communication. The mountain is immobile, unemotional and passive. It reluctantly tolerates the natural forces causing troubles (rain, cold, new vegetation sprouting on its slopes). It is mostly indifferent to the presence of the sea. When they interact, the mountain looks down at the sea and shouts at it ("What?!" "Look!") but it does not (cannot) physically approach the sea (Figure 19 c, d). The determinedly unmoving hands and forearms that refer to the mountain highlight its imperturbable nature. In contrast, the sea is more active, restless, emotional and mischievous. It is verbally quiet, but interacts directly with the mountain (touching, tickling, hugging, Figure 19 e, f). Thus, Scott's poem uses different types of movement in the signs MOUNTAIN and SEA to establish their characters, which, in turn, symbolises the unspecified theme of unsatisfied communication suggested by the title.

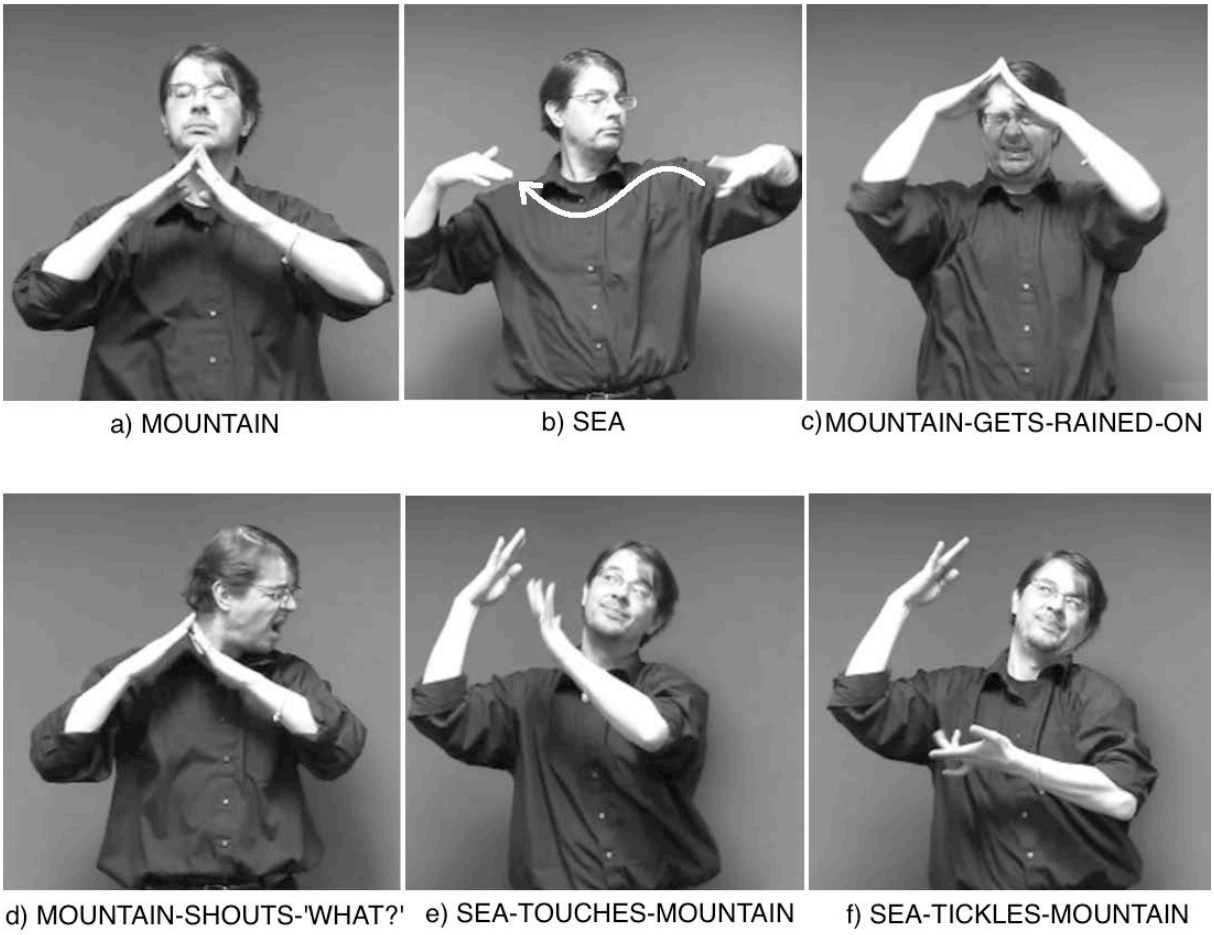


Figure 19: Signs from Paul Scott's *Too Busy to Hug, No Time to See*

Palm Orientation

Palm orientation in signs has both iconic and metaphorical interpretations. The palm is often understood as the salient side of a two-sided flat object (e.g. the front of the mirror in MIRROR or the printed side of BOOK), and the back of the hand is iconically mapped to the back of the object. The palm orientation also shows inherent metaphorical value. Wilbur (1987) observes the metaphorical use of palm orientation. The ASL sign GOOD is made with the palm facing up and BAD is with the palm facing down. Such potential semantic value is reactivated in creative signing.

In *Twin Leaves*, Johanna Mesch describes the destiny of a personified pair of leaves. They promise to stick together, but one of them is blown away by the storm. They are eventually reunited on the ground as a pair of fallen leaves but they wither shortly after. In the first half of the poem before the storm, Mesch illustrates the leaves mostly with her palm facing outward (toward the audience) such as LEAVES-ON-THE-TREE, HAPPY-PAIR-OF-LEAVES (Figure 20 a and b). However, after the leaf loses its partner in the storm, the audience start to see more of the back of her hand (as in SAD-LEAF, Figure 20 c). The last sign represents the reunited, happy pair of leaves, but this time they are facing down. The difference between the previous sign and this sign may symbolise their approaching "death" (Figure 20 d).

Figure 20: Signs from Johanna Mesch's *Twin Leaves*

In *Mirror*, when the personified mirror is happy, the palms of the poet are facing outward; when it is sad, the poet turns his hands inward, so that the back of the hands are directed toward the audience (Figure 21). The BSL sign LONELY is made in the same way, but no particular symbolic meaning is attached to the palm orientation when it is used in its citation form. The context of this poem has imposed the use of outward palm throughout the poem, consequently foregrounding the change in its orientation to illustrate the emotional state of the character.

HAPPY-MIRROR SAD-MIRROR

Figure 21: Two contrastive signs from Richard Carter's *Mirror*

Showing the palm to the interlocutor may also imply feigned innocence. Richard Carter's *Jack-In-The-Box* is a magical Christmas story about a boy and a Jack-in-the-box which signs to the boy and tells him off for opening his present before Christmas day. The Jack-in-the-box reveals its animacy only to the boy, and reverts to a lifeless toy in the presence of his parents. In this poem, association of outward palm and (feigned) inanimacy is effectively imposed over the entire poem. The sign depicting the Jack-in-the-Box has its palms outward to represent the toy iconically – the palm of a real Jack-in-the-box faces outwards, so the palms in a sign referring to it will face outwards too in a direct mapping of the hands. However, this basic iconicity is then recruited metaphorically in the poem as the changes in hand orientation are set in poetic context. While it remains inanimate, the Jack-in-the-box extends its hands in the open 5 handshape with the palm facing outward (Figure 22 a). It reveals the harmless, innocent and vacant nature of a lifeless puppet. Once it starts to sign to the boy, however, signs in palm-down orientation such as NAUGHTY, CHRISTMAS, NOT-YET (Figure 22 b, c, d) are assembled and used to 'accuse' the boy. The palm orientation symbolically highlights the contrast between personified toy and its feigned inanimacy. Similarly, in Richard Carter's *Cochlear Implant* discussed above, the

pretended naiveté of the personified cochlear implant is well represented by the palms facing upward, which almost looks like a posture of surrender (Figure 9 d).

Figure 22: Signs from Richard Carter's *Jack in the Box*

Conclusion

We have shown that sign language poetry draws attention to the abstract message of the poem by highlighting metaphorical elements in imposed iconic superstructure (i.e. systematic arrangement of sublexical features) in both established and productive signs. In other words, iconic superstructure, not individual lexical signs, functions as the basis of symbolic association. Metaphorical interpretation is often not inherent in the forms. *Iconicity* is inherent - and metaphorical meaning is produced when these

iconic signs are placed in a certain poetic context. Therefore it is essential to understand both the general building blocks for potential metaphorical association (metaphor at micro level) and the context in which they are used symbolically (metaphor at macro level), and the interaction between the two.

This approach enables us to analyse form-meaning relationships in creative signing in a new way. It manages to capture unique features of sign language poetry, without relying on existing frameworks based on spoken and written language poetry. It also manages to deal with the general features of sign language poetry which can be found across different poems, as well as features that are unique to individual poems.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the poets who gave us permission to use their work in this paper: Richard Carter, Nigel Howard, Johanna Mesch, Paul Scott, and Donna Williams (in alphabetical order). *Garden of Eden* by Wim Emmerik is from the ECHO Project. http://www.let.ru.nl/sign-lang/echo. Our project ("Metaphor in Creative Sign Language") is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), UK AH/G011672/1. We thank our project team members, Donna West and Chris John, for their support.

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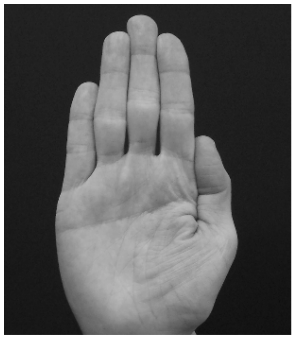
Appendix: Handshapes used in this paper



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