

Translucent Meanings: The Poetics of ASL Poetry

Statement of Purpose

In this paper, I will attempt to explore scholarship done on the poetics of ASL poetry, and the questions that it leaves unanswered. For example, how should ASL poetry be analyzed? What are some of the linguistic factors that characterize poetic language in ASL? I hypothesize, finally, that the use of iconicity, (both the exploitation of “transparently” iconic signs and the iconicity of pantomime), is one of the trademarks of ASL poetic language that hasn’t been fully explored. It should be further examined, for it may illuminate unanswered questions about the way that this kind of communication functions in visual languages.

Defining ASL Poetry

One of the first tasks one has to undertake, in a study of ASL poetry, is the problem of defining exactly what constitutes a poem. It isn’t difficult, in general, to get a sense for when someone is using an artistic form of language, as much work has been done on the problems of defining literary style by critics working within written literature. Jan Mukarovsky, in “Standard Language and Poetic Language,” characterizes “poetic (that is, literary) language as esthetically purposeful distortion of standard language: to varying degrees, different kinds of literature make a business of violating the rules of grammar. Poetic language deliberately breaks the rules in order that a given

passage be noticed as language: the hallmark of literary language is foregrounding.”¹

This gives us a general rule to follow to distinguish between literary and non-literary ASL, but doesn't help us differentiate between different kinds of literary language. So the question remains: When is a work of ASL literature a story, a poem, or something else?

The first place to go, it seems, is to ask members of the ASL artistic community. Even they are sometimes confused, however. Ben Bahan, head of Deaf Studies at Gallaudet and an ASL storyteller, explains “Sometimes I see something that is being called a poem and I say, ‘Wow, that really looks like storytelling.’ And sometimes I see storytelling and say, ‘Well, that really looks more like poetry.’”² Additionally, Bahan points out, no one is really sure how to classify literature like ASL ABC-stories, where a signer presents a cohesive story using the handshapes from A to Z. Bahan claims that the community doesn't view these stories as poetry, even though, according to Mukarovsky's definition, these certainly might be considered foregrounding of language.

To deal with the problem of how to classify artforms like ABC-stories, Heidi Rose proposes a division between pre- and post-videotape ASL literature. ABC-stories, Rose points out, along with Number Stories, One-Handshape Stories, and Fingerspelled Word stories, “oral tradition forms unique to Deaf culture.”³ They existed before videotape, and were passed down through generations. Thus, they form Deaf culture's “oral” tradition, since “they continue to flourish without technology the way most spoken-written languages' oral traditions do.”⁴ In contrast, post-videotape art depends on

¹ Mukarovsky, Jan. “Standard Language and Poetic Language,” paraphrased in the introduction to *Linguistics and Literary Style*, Freeman, Donald, ed. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc. 1970. p. 7

² Ben Bahan, personal interview, April 2, 2001.

³ Rose, p. 53

⁴ Rose, p. 50

technology for its continuation, and Rose puts the work of modern ASL poets into this category.

The final word on what is and is not a poem rests with ASL poets themselves. The group of ASL poets today is small and forms a supportive community. Because of this the poets themselves are determining the development of the art form. The way that Peter Cook, a well-known ASL poet, describes the creation of the sign for ASL poetry illustrates the ground-up approach of the ASL poetic community:

The sign for Hearing poetry is a generally traditional sign. The handshape is “P” (at dominant hand) and flat “B” (non-dominant hand). The P moves while the B stays. It is almost the same sign as for music. This sign is strongly associated with rhythms/rhyme.

The other sign was created at the Deaf Way Festival at Gallaudet University in 1989 (I think). Every Deaf poet from around the world came and performed together. I remember a meeting where we were discussing that we needed a sign that shows our poetry. Finally, we decided to use this sign: Handshape “S,” start at the chest then move forward into handshape “5.” This sign is similar to “Expression.” It looks like this: HEART+EXPRESS. So since that festival, we have been spreading that sign. So yes, we have a sign for Deaf poetry!⁵

Just as poets have created their own sign for poetry, they are creating their own ways to decide what constitutes poetry in ASL.

What approaches have been proposed for the analysis of ASL poetry?

One of the most well-known ASL poets today is Clayton Valli. In addition to being a poet, he is a scholar of ASL poetry. For his doctorate in “Philosophy in Linguistics and ASL Poetics,” he wrote a dissertation on the “Poetics of ASL Poetry.”

This was one of the first works to concentrate on the poetics of ASL. Valli proposes two basic features of ASL poetry, which are also found in English poetry: meter and rhyme.

Valli describes rhyme in ASL as “the repetition of the same or similar features, whether handshapes, handedness, movements, non-manual signals, locations of a combination of these in one or more syllables, usually stresses an occurring at determined and recognizable intervals.”⁶ He describes a poem that he composed and notes that this poem, COW & ROOSTER, only uses three different handshapes (5, Y and 3) to produce many different signs. This kind of rhyme, he notes, is analogous to alliteration in English poetry. He also uses what he calls “open handshape rhyme” in COW & ROOSTER, since all of the handshapes that he uses are “open.” He explains that all handshapes can be classified as either “open” or “closed” with varying degrees of open within the categories. [See Figure 1.]

Valli’s work on rhyme has been affirmed by many other people. The concept of handshape alliteration, in particular, has been pointed out as an ASL poetic device by others. (Dirksen Bauman 1999, Peters 2000). His work on meter, though, seems to be the only work of its kind. However, this is not because other authors have ignored the concept of meter. On the contrary, many scholars of ASL poetry find Valli’s conclusions in this area problematic.

Valli claims that ASL poetry can be broken down into lines, which can be further analyzed by their syllables and by the stress on their syllables. The notion of ASL containing syllables is non-controversial, and comes from the work of Liddell and

⁵ Interview with Peter Cook recorded at About.com.
<http://poetry.about.com/arts/poetry/library/weekly/aa060397.htm> Accessed 4/20/01.

Johnson (1989). Keeping with their framework, Valli breaks signs down into holds (H) and movements (M), which are analogous to vowels and consonants in English.

However, he claims that this combination of “vowels” and “consonants” is not the only way to create syllables in ASL. He also posits the following:

ASL, not like English, is a modulatory language in which lexical signs consist of hold and movement segments in sequence that can produce syllabic metrics by using stress. Stress can be of four different kinds as shown below:

1. hold emphasis (long pause, subtle pause, strong stop)
2. movement emphasis (long movement, short movement, alternating movement, repeated movement)
3. movement size (enlarged movement path, shortened movement, reduced movement path, accelerating movement)
4. movement duration (regular, slow, fast)⁷

Valli seems to be attempting to directly compare stress in ASL to stress in English. One of the obvious objections to this notion that stress creates syllables in ASL is the fact that stress in ASL has a different linguistic meaning than stress in English. In English, two different kinds of “stress” exist. One kind of stress is the stress that naturally occurs in multi-syllabic words. This kind of stress doesn’t have semantic weight. The other English stress focuses stress on a particular word in the sentence. (Consider “I found the BOOK in the library” versus “I found the book in the LIBRARY.”) This stress does carry semantic meaning, as it denotes focus, but this meaning remains different than the meaning that ASL stress carries. The stress that Valli is describing, which determines the emphasis of holds, the duration of movement, size of movement, etc., can carry many

⁶ Valli, Clayton. “The Poetics of ASL Poetry.” PhD Dissertation, The Union Institute Graduate School, 1993.

different semantic meanings. Also, he is referring to many different kinds of “stress.” For example, an enlarged movement, shortened movement, reduced movement, and accelerating movement all have very different semantic meanings. How is one to know which of these indicates “stress”?

In general, Valli’s definitions seem to be more problematic than productive, particularly when he tries to fit ASL poetry into the framework of English poetry. For example, Valli tries to claim that there is a “line” in ASL poetry. He writes that “there [are] a variety of features that can be used in order to determine line breaks: long line-end pause, eyebrow shift, eye gaze shift, head shift, body shift, location change, movement path change, handshape change, handedness change, and/or end-rhyme.”⁸ Other scholars, however, have objected to Valli’s insistence on using the concept of the “line.” Lippmann Bauman, for example, agrees with the motivation behind Valli’s work, but simultaneously problematizes it. He writes that, although Valli’s complicated definitions of line may be “more confusing than helpful,” the fact that “Sign can partake in the literary traditions of the West is an indispensable argument in convincing universities to recognize Sign literature.”⁹ Even so, Bauman continues:

[What is] troubling is the way in which Valli uncritically adopts the signifier of “literature,” overlooking the fact that “literature” has been formed within hegemonic practices of spoken and written languages. As the linear model is the structural embodiment of hearing forms of literature, Valli’s concept of the “line” places Sign literature directly within a phonocentric/audist tradition... Rather than adopting the linear model based on rhymes, meter,

⁷ Valli, p. 68.

⁸ Valli, p. 66.

⁹ Bauman, Humphrey-Dirksen Lippmann, “American Sign Language as a Medium for Poetry: A Comparative Poetics of Sign, Speech, and Writing in Twentieth-Century American Poetics.” Dissertation, Binghamton University, 1998. p. 39.

Sign criticism may now see that the line, like all other literary concepts, is not a neutral standard by which “literariness” should be judged.¹⁰

After all, a line exists in 2-dimensional space, while ASL poetry, as Bauman points out, exploits 3-dimensional space. In this sense, then, trying to fit ASL poetry to a notion of a “line” is like reducing it by a dimension. Also, unlike written English poetry, ASL poetry remains an art form that is conveyed sequentially, over time. So, unlike a written poem, where the reader can look at the same words again and again, or could even choose to read the poem in any order, the performance of ASL poetry imposes a strict hold on the order in which the viewer experiences the text. There is no going back or changing the order of things. In this way, at least, ASL poetry is more like oral poetry, which also contains no visual lines. So, instead of trying to align ASL poetry with written poetic literature, a more productive strategy may be to use frameworks developed to analyze oral literature.

This is the approach advocated by Ben Bahan. He believes that, although respect must be paid to Valli as a pioneer of ASL scholarship, Valli took some of his notions too far and made his rules of analysis “too black and white.” Bahan thinks that a more productive way to study the poetics of ASL poetry would be to compare it to work done on oral literature.¹¹ For example, Wallace L. Chafe has proposed the notion of idea units, instead of “lines,” as a more useful way to approach the study of oral literature.¹² This kind of framework has proved useful in other studies, like that of Egbert J. Bakker, who

¹⁰ Bauman, p. 41

¹¹ Ben Bahan, personal interview. April 2, 2001.

¹² Chafe, Wallace L. The Pear Stories: Cognitive, Cultural, and Linguistic Aspects of Narrative Production. Ablex Publishing, New Jersey, 1980.

analyzed Homeric poetry according to Chafe's formulation of "idea units" to produce a more meaningful reading of the text.¹³

Valli's own poem, COW & ROOSTER, could be analyzed in terms of idea units rather than the traditional "lines" that he posits. In the analysis that Valli provides, lines are determined by handshape change, head shift, body shift, and other linguistic cues. This presents the following "lines." (In the following explanation, I have used Valli's translations, and added my notes as to when the signs pertain to the cow or to the rooster in parenthesis.)

- 1 FARM VAST-LAND
 - 2 COW FAT LAY-DOWN
 - 3 ROOSTER IN-HIGH-FEATHER STAND-FIRM
 - 4 (the cow) CHEWING-GRASS
 - 5 (the rooster) SCRATCHING-DIRT
 - 6 (the cow) BRAGGING FOOL-AROUND
 - 7 (the rooster) SLUGGISH AWFULLY-LOUSY
 - 8 (the cow) CHARGE-ROOSTER (the rooster) CHARGE-COW
 - 9 (the cow) TURN-AROUND WOBBLING HORNS-&-TAIL SWAYING
 - 10 (the rooster) TURN-AROUND STROLLING CROWN-&-
FEATHERTAILS-SWAYING
 - 11 FARM VAST-LAND
- [Figure 2]

Valli offers explanations of handshape change, head shift, location, and other linguistic cues to explain how he chose to break up the lines. However, although he emphasizes the role of handshape change and head shift, his divisions are inconsistent. For example, lines 4 and 5 represent only one sign, and involve both a change in handshape and in head shift. Valli marks these as separate lines. But line 8 seems to

¹³ Bakker, Egbert J. Poetry in Speech: Orality and Homeric Discourse. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1997.

contain the same elements: prolonged action, involving only one sign, taken by each animal and marked by change in handshape and headshift. Yet line 8 is not broken into two lines. Valli's explanation for this is ambiguous. For lines 4 and 5 he writes "the lines 4 and 5 have only one sign each and one could mistakenly think that these signs form one line. Handshapes and use of syllables help divide these lines." For line 8, he says "The head shift, body shift, and handshape change in signs 15 and 16 occur but don't cause the line to break since the roles of cow and rooster are emphasized as they challenge each other and their syllables are balanced in one line."¹⁴ [Figure 3]

It seems, then, that the only distinguishing feature between lines 4 and 5 and line 8 is that, in line 8, "the roles of cow and rooster are emphasized" and that, in lines 4 and 5, "use of syllables help divide." These distinctions, though, seem very ambiguous. How is one to measure emphasis? And doesn't line 8 use syllables, as well? One conclusion to be drawn from these problems is that Bauman may be right—Valli may be on the wrong track, here, in trying to define a notion of "line" analogous to that in English literature.

If we use Chafe's "idea units" to make sense of the poem, however, we get smaller units that almost identically correspond to Valli's "lines." Reading the content of Valli's lines, it becomes clear that the most consistent feature for declaring a unit break is the change in topic. With one exception, every time Valli changes topic—be it the farm, the cow, or the rooster—he changes lines. This breakdown of the poem into smaller units organized around the sub-topic is exactly the kind of approach that Chafe and Bauman advocate. So, Valli's analysis isn't far off of the mark, as far as the analysis of oral poetry is concerned. Indeed, he uses "head shift" as a marker of line change, which,

¹⁴ Valli, p. 67

semantically, indicates a change of topic. Perhaps what Valli was really responding to, in deciding where to mark his lines, was the underlying changes in sub-topic.

As we have seen, there are a variety of reasons to remain wary of analysis that remain rooted in the framework of written literature, and to apply the criticism of oral literature to ASL poetry. However, some scholars note, there are some ways in which ASL poetry resists direct comparison to oral poetry. One difference lies in the ways that they are consumed. Although most ASL poetry is still viewed in live performances, more and more videotapes are being created. As noted above, this is the distinction that Heidi Rose draws between ASL poetry and forms of ASL literature that are more similar to an “oral tradition.” Cynthia Peters points out that the increasing use of videotapes may, in fact, be creating a kind of “text” for both viewers and critics.

Writing about the textualization of ASL storytelling, Peters claims that “just as an oral spoken story becomes text when it is put on paper, taking on some of the characteristics of the medium of the written page, so an ASL story becomes “text” on videotape, acquiring characteristics of (written) “textual” works and losing some of its oral or vernacular characteristics.”¹⁵ Most of her concerns are about the content of the stories, and don’t seem to have anything to do with the linguistic expression of the work. For instance, she writes that textualization of ASL will decrease the emphasis on interaction between the artist and audience, increase the number of works that deal with personal experience, rather than communal experience, and will lead to the “sanitization” of narratives, which, in the vernacular oral tradition, often have vulgar content.

¹⁵ Peters, Cynthia L. Deaf American Literature: From Carnival to the Canon. Gallaudet University Press, Washington, D.C., 2000. p. 180

She also writes, though, that the textualization of ASL literature may lead to an “increase in aesthetic play.”¹⁶ The increase in aesthetic play results from the new situation that video creates where artists can have several “drafts” of their work, and viewers can view the same piece multiple times. Because of this, artists are more likely to use layered meaning and play with language. In this sense, then, the textualization of ASL may result in even more “poetic” language, since it makes possible an increased “foregrounding” of language, in Makovsky’s words. In this sense, then, it makes sense to approach ASL poetry as written poetry, with many layered meanings that only emerge with careful analysis, and language that is emphasized for its own beauty and not for its communicative power. Like a written English poem that can be read and reread, to grasp multiple meanings, an ASL poem on videotape can be rewound and reviewed, which is very different from the situation of viewing a live poetry performance. In this sense, then, video may be encouraging ASL poetry to become more like English written poetry.

There are reasons, then, for using both the analysis of oral literature and of written literature in an approach to ASL poetry. But, some aspects of ASL suggest that a third method of analysis should be considered as well. Scholars such as Ben Bahan and Dirksen Lippmann Bauman have pointed out that ASL is, in some ways, closely related to film. ASL speakers use cinematography techniques in everyday conversation, and these techniques are particularly exploited by storytellers, poets, and other producers of ASL art. For instance, a poet might present a “wide-angle” shot of a car moving along a street, using one hand shaped as a classifier for car moving along the other hand, palm up, representing the street. Then, a “zoom-in” might occur, as the poet now becomes the

¹⁶ Peters, p. 189

driver of the car, using both hands to make the sign for drive and pantomiming checking the mirrors of the car. As the story progresses, the speaker may make many jumps, from zooming out to zooming in, and presenting the picture from all angles. (So, the teller could become someone in the back seat, looking at the back of the head of the person driving, or could become someone on the street looking in the windows of the car as it goes by.)¹⁷ Neither written literature or oral literature captures these kinds of cinemagraphic effects so effortlessly.

Inherent Iconicity—Translucent Representational Values

The comparison of ASL to film highlights a distinctive quality of ASL: the capacity of many of its signs to have what some call “inherent iconicity.” Part of what makes ASL so exploitable as a poetic language, some argue, is the fact that many of its signs have transparent representational value. That is, many signs derived from gestures that were highly mimetic, and the signs that have evolved still contain some of this representation. So, for example, the sign for DRIVE is both hands, in S-handshape (closed fists), alternating pulling back towards the speaker. If the hands move to the width of a steering wheel and move slowly, the sign clearly looks like a pantomime for driving.

This is not to say that much of ASL is simply miming, or that the meaning of even highly transparent signs is deduceable by non-speakers of ASL. Klima and Bellugi, pioneering ASL researchers, proved this in 1970 with an interesting scientific

¹⁷ Ben Bahan, lecture given at Swarthmore College, April 2, 2001. The relationship of ASL poetry to film

experiment. They presented non-speakers of ASL with 90 different signs that could be directly translatable into English nouns---words like APPLE, BIRD, BOY, CANDY, and EARTH. Presented with only the signs, no translations, the subjects were asked to write down what they thought the meaning was of the sign. They found that “not a single subject was able to guess the meaning of 81 of the 90 signs presented.”¹⁸ Even when given a multiple choice task, where the correct meaning of the sign was one of a few plausible meanings, the subjects performed slightly worse than random guessing. Klima and Bellugi note that “to the extent that a sign’s meaning can be understood from its form alone, a sign is considered transparent...According to this criterion of iconicity, most of the ASL signs in the list were not transparent but opaque.”¹⁹

However, Klima and Bellugi also conducted another experiment where they presented non-signers with the same 90 signs and with the English translation of the sign. For this experiment, they asked the subjects to say what they thought the basis was for the relation between the sign and its meaning. For more than half of the 90 signs, the responses of the subjects showed agreement as to the connection between the sign and its meaning. Because of this striking finding, Klima and Bellugi posited that ASL signs have a representational aspect. Even if they are not entirely transparent, they are “translucent”—a feature that is much more pronounced among visual languages than oral languages.

Unfortunately, though, for most people the connotation of the word “iconic” is something that is purely transparent. Thus, calling ASL signs “iconic” in any sense is

is also pointed out by Bauman (1999).

¹⁸ Klima, Edward S. and Bellugi, Ursula. The Signs of Language. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA. 1979. p. 22

highly problematic, given the difficult task that linguists have had proving that ASL is a natural language. To say that ASL poets exploit the inherently “iconic” nature of their language, then, is not to say that ASL is iconic in the vernacular sense of the word. A better way to explain this point may just be to say that some signs in ASL have latent representational values, which can add a dimension of meaning for speakers who already understand the meaning of the sign. However, since most of my sources use the word “iconic,” it is present in this paper through their work. It is meant, in that context, not to be taken in its vernacular sense.

Donna Jo Napoli illuminated the problems associated with the word “iconic,” and also suggested a possible explanation for why visual languages, like ASL, might have a higher degree of representational value than oral languages like English. As humans, we live in a highly visual world. There simply aren’t many sounds that could be represented by icons, while visual examples abound.²⁰ One example of oral iconicity, though, could be an English poem about the wind “whooshing”—the sound of the word sounds like the wind. Another seemingly obvious example is onomatopoeia—the occurrence of words that sound like the sounds they represent. So, in English, dogs “bark,” roosters “cock-a-doodle-doo” and kittens “meow.”

This example, though, brings up problems of inherent representational value for both oral and visual languages. The fact is that when non-English speakers are asked “What animal makes the sound ‘cock-a-doodle-doo?’” very few will answer “rooster.” When told the answer, though, most speakers will understand the reason for the

¹⁹ Klima and Bellugi, p. 23

²⁰ Donna Jo Napoli, conversation, April 2001.

connection between “cock-a-doodle-doo” and the sound that roosters actually make.²¹

Thus, what seems to be an example of transparent iconicity in English may actually be something more like Klima and Bellugi’s translucent iconicity.

The argument against the idea of “translucent iconicity” is that arbitrariness is an essential component of language. Thus, making a claim about the representational possibilities of ASL could be viewed as an attack on the legitimacy of ASL as a natural language. However, some scholars question the assumption that arbitrariness is essential for language. In his article on “The Implosion of Iconicity,” Joseph Grigely takes as a given the fact that ASL is a natural language. He then uses that fact to question the assumption that morphemes are essentially arbitrary, writing:

Suppose we tried to orient the principle of arbitrariness around the minimal unit of meaning in language—the morpheme—and pose the question cited earlier: would such minimal signifying units be arbitrary too? Probably not, if only because there is a large subset of morphemes called classifiers which, in languages like American Sign Language, could be described as indexical—a sign value that often gets overlooked in the tug-of-war between iconicity and arbitrariness.²²

Grigely is doing something important here. Instead of using traditional definitions about iconicity to question ASL’s status, he is using the fact that ASL is a language to question the assumptions behind iconicity. Grigely questions the established categories of icon, index, and symbol, approaching the issue from the standpoint of semiotics and pointing out that “when we speak of ‘the principle of arbitrariness of the linguistic sign’ we accept as a given the closure that underlies

²¹ This was also pointed out to me by Prof. Napoli.

²² Grigely, Joseph, “The Implosion of Iconicity.” In *Word & Image Interactions: A Selection of Papers Given at the Second International Conference on Word and Image*. Wiese Publishing Ltd, Basel. 1993. p. 244.

the semiotic nature of the sign—the relationship between the signifier and signified.”²³ That is, in the traditional conception, arbitrary symbols (signifiers) stand for something in the world, the signifier decodes the meaning, and meaning is understood. But, as Grigely explains, the process of creating meaning is actually much more complicated, and “the assumption that all literary texts are alike—even when spelled exactly identically—fails to recognize changing textual contexts, and the human element played in the act of reading signs.”²⁴ Grigely posits that perhaps signs are not inherently either arbitrary or iconic—instead, multiple values of arbitrariness may co-exist within a sign and “a sign can be described as iconic without abandoning its symbolic value; a painting could be described as symbolic without abandoning its iconic value.”²⁵ This sounds very much like the kind of “translucent iconicity” that Klima and Bellugi describe.

The notion of translucent iconicity, or inherent representational value, is important to a study of ASL poetry, because many ASL poets exploit this aspect of their language in their art. Klima and Bellugi point to this in their article “Poetry and Song in a Language without Sound.” In their analysis of one ASL poem, they note that “a phenomenon that is particularly prominent in art sign...is the intensification of iconic aspects of signs...There are signs whose representational aspects are exaggerated.”²⁶ The poem they are discussing is an original work of ASL art, Dorothy Miles’ haiku “The Seasons.”

²³ Grigely, p. 233

²⁴ Grigely, p. 244

²⁵ Grigely, p.247

²⁶ Klima and Bellugi, p. 369.

In writing of how Lou Fant, another ASL poet, interprets Miles' poetry, Klima and Bellugi point out the ways that Fant exploits the iconic nature of the signs.

Let us consider first the title "SUMMER," the first sign in Fant's rendition...In the citation form of SUMMER the bent index finger brushes across the central part of the forehead. But, in the words of Mr. Shanny Mow, a deaf signer reviewing the videotapes, Fant elaborates the sign by "increasing its length...thus producing a more pantomime-like action"; with an outstretched index finger that gradually bends as it moves, "Fant 'wipes' the entire length of his forehead." The wiping is presumably the wiping from the forehead of the sweat from summer's heat.²⁷ [Figure 4]

They also note that Fant's sign for CLOUDS drifts and rotates, HEAVY is so heavy that the bottom drops, and SLOW is literally slowed down. In all of these cases, Fant is exploiting the transparently iconic nature of the signs to convey more poetic meaning in the text.

The Exploitation of Pantomime-Linguistic Concerns

The above discussion has focused on the question of iconicity of signs, but this is not the only example of communication between ASL signers that is more than just symbolic. In this section, I will explore another non-symbolic form of communication, that of pantomime. I will consider how linguistic definitions of pantomime can illuminate the works of two major ASL poets: Debbie Rennie and Patrick Graybill. I am using the videotapes "Works in Motion," published by DawnSignPress, which are useful because they have both original ASL poetry by the authors and clips of the authors explaining

²⁷ Klima and Bellugi, p. 369.

their works to the audience in between poems. Thus, the videos provide a way to see both the conversational and poetic style of these poets.

Mimetic communication, communication that mimes or “acts out” something, is used both in poetic and non-poetic language. As Klima and Bellugi note, “In communicating among themselves, deaf ASL signers use a wide range of gestural devices, from conventionalized signs to mimetic elaboration on those signs, to mimetic depiction, to free pantomime.”²⁸ One question, then, is to what extent mimetic communication between ASL signers is considered “linguistic” communication. This question is crucial, because, as we will see, for some poets the degree of mimetic communication is one of the distinguishing features of their poetic use of language. Is this difference a linguistic one?

One poet who uses a high degree of pantomime is Debbie Rennie. As an example, we can consider her poem, “Black Hole: ASL Poetry,” one of the poems on her “Works in Motion” tape. First, Rennie signs the title of the poem, using ASL fingerspelling. Then, she pantomimes walking down the street, looking around, and then pantomimes seeing a ladder. She presents the ladder through miming the rungs of a ladder, then presents the classifier she will be using for the ladder. A more typical way of presenting the information would be to make the sign for LADDER and then present the classifier. In this case, though, her pantomime functions in the same grammatical way that a sign would. This implies that the pantomime is functioning, in this respect, in a linguistic way.

After presenting the ladder, Rennie then mimes someone climbing the ladder. She does so in a pantomime that involves her whole body—her eyes look up, her hands and

arms motion climbing rungs, and she bounces on her feet to imply upward movement. After a while, her pantomime makes it clear that she has come to the top of the ladder, and she signs “paint” and then uses classifiers to present five cans of paint, waiting at the top. She makes the sign for each color of paint (RED, GREEN, BLACK, etc.) with one hand, moving down to make the sign for PAINT with one hand while the other hand holds the classifier position of the can. In this short sequence, then, Rennie seamlessly uses pantomime, classifiers, and arbitrary signs, exploiting the full range of latent representational values available to her in ASL. [Figure 5]

As the poem goes on, Rennie continues to use a high degree of pantomime gestures, as she becomes, in turn, someone shaking the ladder at the bottom, someone falling off of the ladder, and, finally, someone flying. All of these gestures must be said to be pantomime, and not invented signs, because they violate the linguistic boundaries of ASL. For one, most clearly, all of the pantomimes violate the constraints of the signing space—they all involve movements that occur outside of the box from hips to head in which ASL signs must occur.

Pantomime is, however, used in all forms of ASL communication, not just poetry. Klima and Bellugi recognized that “a central question for the analysis of ASL is how to distinguish in the signing stream those gestures that constitute the lexical signs of ASL” and, as a result, conducted experiments to try and “establish specific criteria for distinguishing ASL signs from pantomime.”²⁹ They asked native ASL signers to both do a pantomime and perform the sign for several signs which are highly iconic in ASL, like

²⁸ Klima, Edward S. and Bellugi, Ursula. *The Signs of Language*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1979. p.13.

²⁹ Klima and Bellugi, p. 17.

ZIPPER, APPLAUD, and BOOK. From this, they drew a few conclusions about the distinctions between pantomime and ASL.

For one, they point out that one distinction between sign and pantomime is that different renditions of a sign are “recognizably the same across speakers,” while pantomimes of the same action or object vary greatly from speaker to speaker. (This seems obvious. Consider the analogous case in English of a situation where people have to describe something for which they don’t have a name, like a new invention. If they have to invent a name, chances are that every person’s name will be different. But, once told the name of the object, every speaker will then produce the same name when presented with the object.) Klima and Bellugi also note that pantomimes tend to be longer than ASL signs, with more thematic images. They claim that, in pantomime, hands are less constrained than in ASL—hands don’t have to create handshapes, and both hands can move independently and differently. This contrasts the situation in ASL signs, where only three possibilities exist: hands can move together, one hand can move alone, or one hand can move on another, unmoving hand acting as a base.

This work, which establishes a basis for distinguishing between sign and pantomime, could be very useful for a study of ASL poetics, as some poets, like Rennie, use a higher degree of pantomime in their poetic language. Klima and Bellugi’s study is also helpful, however, in analyzing poems that contain more subtle forms of pantomime. For example, Klima and Bellugi note that “pantomime includes head and body movement; in the sign, only the hand moves...In the pantomime the eyes participate in the action, sometimes anticipating, sometimes following the hands; in signing [the

model] makes direct eye contact with the camera (or addressee) throughout the sign.”³⁰

This is significant for our purposes, because we can use this linguistic differentiation between mime and sign to analyze the presence of pantomime in the works of another poet, Patrick Graybill.

At first, Patrick Graybill’s poetry looks very different from Debbie Rennie’s. While Rennie’s is characterized by large, full-body pantomime, Graybill’s motions tend to conform more to the sign space, and at first glance one would think that he employs ASL signs alone in his poetry. However, there is an important distinction between Graybill’s conversational and poetic communication style. During the parts of the video where Graybill is speaking to the audience, he maintains eye contact with the camera. However, during all of his poems, Graybill’s eyes follow the action of his hands. This is a minor difference, and not as striking as the contrast between Debbie Rennie’s poetic and non-poetic style, but it is just as significant. In averting his eyes from the camera and, instead, following the motion of his hands, Graybill makes himself a character in his poems. As his eyes follow the action of the poem, his facial gestures add layers of meaning to his signs. Through his facial gestures and the movement of his eyes, he is employing the devices of pantomime. For Graybill, this is one of the most obvious distinctions between his poetic and non-poetic communication, and Klima and Bellugi’s work implies that eye gaze is one of the distinguishing features between pantomime and ASL sign. Thus, one of the major distinctions between Graybill’s poetic and non-poetic language is the extent to which he employs pantomime. [Figure 6]

³⁰ Klima and Bellugi, p. 19.

If pantomime can be used in both poetic and conversational ASL, though, why bother to make the distinction between mimetic and non-mimetic gestures, as Klima and Bellugi have done? One answer is that it may be useful in analyzing the nature of poetic language in ASL. As we have seen with the poetry of Debbie Rennie and Patrick Graybill, pantomime is a central part of their poetry. I would like to hypothesize that one distinguishing feature between poetic and non-poetic ASL is the degree to which the signer uses iconic forms of communication. By this I mean both the use of pantomime and the exploitation of the transparently iconic nature of signs, as discussed earlier.

As noted above, though, this is not the only use of iconic forms in poetry, as pantomime also presents a way for poets to play with language. It is worth noting, however, that despite the linguistic quandaries that pantomime may pose and its potential to distinguish between poetic and non-poetic speech, the distinction between sign and pantomime seems unimportant to most scholars. When describing a poem or story, they don't distinguish between signs that were made with ASL and mimetic images that were produced with the body. For example, in his dissertation, Dirksen Bauman, a professor in the Deaf Studies department at Gallaudet University, describes a poem presented by the Flying Words Project which uses a high degree of pantomime. Yet, in his description, he never distinguishes between which movements are "signs" and which are pantomime.³¹

The Flying Words Project is a poetry duo team comprised of Peter Cook and Kenny Lerner. Peter Cook is a deaf poet, while Kenny Lerner is a hearing one. In performances, "Peter is the moving picture; Kenny is his 'hearing voice.'"³² Dirksen

³¹ Bauman, p. 136.

³² Ithaca College Sign Language Club online advertisement for a Flying Words Project performance. <http://147.129.1.10/publications/spots/flying/> Accessed 4/20/01.

Baumann spends quite a few pages in his dissertation describing the poetry of Flying Words Project. In particular, he focuses on a poem entitled “Poetry,” attempting to provide a description, in words, of what is going on in the poem. Tellingly, though, he doesn’t distinguish between ASL signs and more mimetic gestures. Viewing the poem with this distinction in mind, however, it is clear that Peter Cook is using a high degree of para-linguistic gesture.

At one point in the poem, for instance, Lerner says “[Poetry]’s the painter and the portrait,” and Cook acts this out. Lerner’s words are hardly necessary. Cook’s body presents a painter, then a painting of a face, then the painter again, smearing paint on the canvas, then goes back and forth between the painter and the painted. (As Cook’s own face is also the face on the canvas.) Finally, the painter rips the canvas off of the easel and crumples it, as the face on the canvas protests. Cook uses very few clear ASL signs, however, as most of this action is conveyed with mimetic gesture. In fact, in this short section of the poem, Cook exploits both of the highly representational elements of ASL that we’ve discussed. First, he clearly makes the sign for paint, where the pinky finger of one hand sweeps the palm of the other hand, but then continues it beyond the duration of the sign, bringing his pinky up before him and using it to pretend to paint a canvas right in front of him. From there, almost all of the action is acted out, as he uses facial expression and hand motions to mime the actions of the painter and the reactions of the painting. Even a non-speaker of ASL would be able to clearly follow the action.³³ Indeed, on at least one recording of “Poetry,” the audience is clearly following Cook’s gestures and

³³ “Poetry” by The Flying Words Project. Accessed at “The Best Minds of Our Generation,” a section of Jim Cohn’s website “The Museum of American Poetics.” <http://www.poetspath.com/bestmind.html>

laughing at appropriate points, and their laughter sounds like the laughter of a hearing audience.

Conclusion

ASL poets employ a variety of poetic devices in their work. Some, like handshape alliteration, have been well-explored by other scholars. Some devices, though, like the use of pantomime, have been overlooked. Clearly, ASL poets use pantomime in their work, just as speakers of ASL vernacular use it in conversation. The poetic use of language varies from poet to poet, but something all ASL poets may have in common may be their tendency to exploit the representational value of their language—by exploiting what some call the “transparent iconicity” of ASL—and to take that representation one step further and use mimetic gesture. For some poets, particularly The Flying Words Project and Debbie Rennie, pantomime is an integral part of their art, used in different ways and to a much larger degree than it is used in casual conversation. This communication is treated as linguistic both by observers and by scholars. There is no doubt that it conveys information, but is it linguistic—or something else?

Diane Brentari points out that systems which are not natural languages, such as “systems of gesture used by the Cistercian monks...either appropriate the syntax of the spoken language community or else they lack a system or rules for constructing units larger than a single morpheme, such as polymorphemic words and sentences. This is also true for dense systems, such as dance or mime. ASL, on the other hand, has a very strict set of combinatoric rules prohibiting certain types of morphemes combining with certain

lexical stems.”³⁴ Mime, then, and gestures of pantomime, may belong to a dense system of signification, but not to natural language. A question that remains, then, is how non-linguistic gesture functions, particularly in poetic usage, in a natural language like ASL.

This question warrants further investigation by other researchers. It may be that ASL’s use of para-linguistic gesture could lead us to insights about how we define “linguistic,” just as scholars like Joseph Grigely have questioned what we mean by “iconic.” Heidi Rose writes that Western philosophy has created “an unnatural dualism between the body and the mind, between nature and culture, and between emotion and reason.”³⁵ Perhaps the way that we currently conceive linguistic vs. non-linguistic communication is yet another “unnatural dualism,” and the use of mime in ASL can help researchers examine this. Hopefully, further investigation of the use of pantomime in ASL poetry may give us insights into the way that ASL functions as a language, and thus insight into universal aspects of natural language.

³⁴ Brentari, Diane. p.238

³⁵ Rose, p. 2