

Signing the Body Poetic

Essays on American Sign Language Literature

Edited by H-Dirksen L. Bauman, Jennifer L. Nelson,
and Heidi M. Rose

Includes DVD 

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University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Signing the body poetic : essays on American Sign Language literature / H-Dirksen L. Bauman, Jennifer L. Nelson, Heidi M. Rose, editors ; with a foreword by William C. Stokoe and a preface by W. J. T. Mitchell.

p. cm.
"Includes DVD."

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-520-22975-4 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-520-22975-4 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-0-520-22976-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-520-22976-2 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. American Sign Language literature. 2. Deaf authors.
3. Deaf, Theater for the. 4. Visual literature—History and criticism. I. Bauman, H-Dirksen L., 1964– II. Nelson, Jennifer L., 1965– III. Rose, Heidi M., 1963–

HV2353.S53 2007

890—dc22

2006016236

Manufactured in the United States of America

15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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TWO

Face-to-Face Tradition in the American Deaf Community

*Dynamics of the Teller, the Tale,
and the Audience*

BEN BAHAN

INTRODUCTION

The brief DVD clip with which this chapter begins (clip 2.1), showing a duo performance of a “song” whose signs are arranged to a rhythmical cadence, is only one short moment in a long history of storytelling and performance in the American Deaf community. As long as Deaf people have congregated in schools, clubs, and homes, they have passed down cultural patterns, values, and beliefs in the DEAF WORLD¹ from one generation to the next in something very much like an oral tradition. According to Goody (1992), “[T]he oral tradition consists of everything handed down (and ipso facto created) through the oral channel—in other words, virtually the whole culture itself” (13). As James Paul Gee (1983) recognizes, “[I]t sounds paradoxical to say so, but ASL [American Sign Language] exists in an ‘oral’ culture, a culture based on face-to-face signed interaction, with writing and middle-class literacy playing little or no role in much of the heart of the community. Like many other such cultures, it has an active tradition of folklore and performance-centered ‘oral’ (signed) narrative, encapsulating traditional values, and passed down from generation to generation” (232).

While similarities abound between signed and oral traditions, the Deaf community is not a purely oral community; rather, it exists along an oral-literate continuum. In many parts of the world, oral subcultures exist within a literate majority culture (Ong 1982; Edwards and Sienkewicz 1990; Goody 1992). In these communities, it is not surprising to find an oral-literate continuum (Edwards and Sienkewicz 1990). There are people who thrive on oral traditions when among members of their subculture but who can also behave as members of the literate majority culture. Those people are likely to be bilinguals. In such cross-cultural contact situations, the notion of “pure” orality is probably nonexistent. “Moreover, elements of the oral tradition, like folktales, inevitably get written down, whereas elements of the written tradition are often communicated orally” (Goody 1992, 13). The DEAF WORLD is obviously a minority culture situated within a majority culture, so the notion that it is primarily an oral culture—without any influence from literate culture—is misleading; however, the situation is more complicated than it seems.

There is no widespread use of a written form in the primary face-to-face language of the community—ASL.² In addition, most, if not all, members of the DEAF WORLD are ASL-English bilinguals to varying degrees (see Grosjean 1996), so there is some access to literate cultural knowledge. Moreover, because Deaf people are also members of the majority culture (i.e., American culture), they interact on a daily basis with English-speaking people by communicating with them in a variety of ways: speaking or writing. Although literate knowledge is accessed in a language (English) that is not primarily used in face-to-face situations among members of the DEAF WORLD,³ we cannot ignore the relationship between the two cultures and their influences on each other. It is safe to say, then, that many of the patterns of oral and signed face-to-face traditions are similar and that only the medium is different. To be more precise in reflecting this difference of medium, this chapter will use the term *face-to-face tradition*.

The synthesis of thoughts and observations reported in this chapter sprang from my role as a storyteller and lifelong participatory member of the DEAF WORLD. I have had the opportunity of exchanging insights with other storytellers, poets, and performers over more than twenty years. From these exchanges, I have come to recognize distinct patterns in our literary practices, themes, and genres. Here I offer an overview of these literary patterns in the DEAF WORLD.

The Face-to-Face Tradition in Deaf Culture

To gain some insight into the sociohistorical environment of the face-to-face tradition of Deaf culture, let us turn to the experience of Gilbert Eastman (professor emeritus at Gallaudet University and one of the founding members of National Theatre of the Deaf) (pers. comm., June 1999). He remembers being exposed to the types of stories discussed in this chapter while growing up at American School for the Deaf (ASD) in Hartford, Connecticut, in the 1940s. He vividly remembers watching with awe as older kids performed various stories, especially when he was a Boy Scout. His troop would go camping every year, and at night the boys would gather around the campfire and share stories. The older Scouts would tell and retell mystery stories, ghost stories, scenes from movies, Deaf-related experiences, jokes, sign play, and ABC stories. Bear in mind that the “older tellers” in Eastman’s childhood memories were boys who were enrolled in school in the early to mid-1930s. They must have learned the craft of storytelling and tales from someone before them. One might wonder: Just how far back did those ASL story performances at ASD go? Interestingly, we are fortunate to have one of the earliest records of a signed performance captured in a film project by the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) that was produced between 1910 and 1920.⁴ The film series contains various lectures, performances, poems, stories, songs, and narratives of personal experience. One storyteller in this series, John B. Hotchkiss, a professor of English and history at Gallaudet, was an ASD graduate. In one of his performances, a narrative of personal experience entitled “Memories of Old Hartford,” he reminisced about his days at ASD as a child (in the early 1860s) and his encounter with the famed French Deaf educator Laurent Clerc.⁵ He recounted various stories about Clerc, who was already retired but living nearby at the time Hotchkiss was at ASD. In one instance, he portrayed Laurent Clerc lecturing about how the subtle difference in English word order makes a big difference in meaning, focusing on the meaning difference between the two phrases “eat to live” and “live to eat.”⁶ In any case, we know that since Hotchkiss’s time Deaf storytellers have been passing on their stories, culture, and identity through a tradition that has been kept alive through face-to-face events. We don’t know exactly which ASL literature genres existed in the early days, but we know from the NAD films that at least the following genres go back to the turn of the twentieth

century: narratives of personal experience, lectures, and translated songs, poems, and stories.

According to Gilbert Eastman, the environment of sharing stories was not limited to those inside a school for the deaf. There were opportunities for contact among regional schools for the deaf through interscholastic meets (e.g., in football, basketball, and track).⁷ He recalls many evenings, before or after the games, when students from different schools would share stories in a snack bar or dance hall. Thus it is apparent that stories were disseminated across a region of several states. It was not uncommon for people to learn new stories from such gatherings and bring them back to their local school. These gatherings also gave budding storytellers the opportunity to try out their craft with a new audience and to establish a reputation as storytellers. Eventually these signers would graduate and enter local Deaf clubs and different associations in the region, such as the American Athletic Association of the Deaf, currently known as USA Deaf Sports Federation, NAD, and the National Fraternal Society of the Deaf. At these regional affairs, they would encounter Deaf people they had met at interscholastic meets and be prompted into performing.

So in essence all these places—schools, interscholastic meets, Deaf clubs, Deaf associations, and regional or national tournaments or conferences—have served as settings that perpetuate face-to-face cultural transmission. Often performances have sprung up at these locations as a by-product of the gatherings. Sometimes the performances themselves have been the goal of the gatherings (as in literary societies and theater groups).

THE TELLER, THE TALE, AND THE AUDIENCE

Everyone in the DEAF WORLD can tell stories and share ideas and personal experiences. However, only a few can do so with such skill that they are often called upon to perform. Those with this special talent are often called “smooth signers.” A smooth signer is someone who as a language artist can weave a story so smoothly that even complex utterances appear simple, yet beautiful.

Often these smooth signers end up becoming the community’s storytellers and/or poets and are encouraged by the culture to show their craft in a more formalized manner. The culture often dictates, through its encouragement and requests for repeated performances, the kinds of stories/poems

that the smooth signers will end up spinning. The three components of the face-to-face tradition—the teller, the tale, and the audience—are so intertwined that it is almost impossible to describe one without the others. The following sections will address each component and show how all the components complement each other.

THE TELLER

The Making of a Storyteller/Poet

One might wonder how “smooth signers” or storytellers and poets develop in oral cultures. According to Edwards and Sienkewicz (1990), some people are apparently born with the gift of being a good talker: “Good talkers have particular expertise; they have a knowledge of a specialized language and body of information and have often undergone a lengthy process of learning and preparation. Yet this training can be of little value if the apprentice has no basic aptitude” (17). Okpewho (1992) similarly states that “[o]ne’s mind or nature has to be predisposed toward art before the skill can successfully take root” (21). With this predisposition in place, storytellers still have to be “made”; they must go through an apprenticeship to learn the craft. There are two general ways in which one can be apprenticed: formal training or informal training. Formal training involves a more structured approach toward apprenticeship: one is selected to attend a “school” that has master storytellers as teachers who provide specific training and guidance for future storytellers. In other communities where storytellers are developed informally, apprentices learn and work alongside master storytellers (Okpewho 1992), and apprentices undergo a longer period of training or long-term exposure to experienced storytellers/performers than they would in formal training. In the course of learning through either approach, apprentices “inherit” and learn various specialized techniques: controlling the pauses and tempos in stories, using parallelisms, repetitions, and digressions effectively, and so on. They also learn from master storytellers a core of narratives that employ basic themes or combinations of themes that are meaningful and central to the culture and audience. Master storytellers pass down technical and artistic uses of language that were learned from storytellers before them. In sum, smooth signers undergo a period of preparation.

The Making of ASL Storytellers

ASL storytellers appear to show patterns of the kind described above. From a very young age, they tend to be exposed to various adult signers in their community (including their parents) and to have the opportunity to observe various smooth signers performing stories, monologues, and, in some cases, poems. Once they go to school, most of them have the opportunity to interact with smooth signers employed at their school. More importantly, they have the opportunity, from a very young age, to play out the role of a storyteller and retell the stories they have heard to their peers. Their peers probably beg them to tell more stories. To do that, they have to become more active in remembering stories and/or inventing stories on the spot. In their telling, they experiment with various techniques that they have absorbed from watching adult smooth signers in action. This cycle goes on until they reach adulthood. Then they begin testing their work with a larger audience outside the school, at clubrooms, associations, and various Deaf social events.

In essence these storytellers become the culture's historians, teachers, and entertainers (Okpewho 1992; Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan 1996). They pick up various styles and nuances that go into telling a story from Deaf adults who have picked it up from Deaf adults before them. Their work combines elements of various other signers, picked up along the way, and, more importantly, their own "signature." All artists borrow ideas, some of which can be traced, yet each artist adds his or her own personal flair. They are also passing down the culture's heritage by sharing the stories they have heard from the adults in their communities, even if they modify the story by adding their own personal touch. In this sense, they are recording life histories of Deaf people and themselves in particular.

Storytellers also teach Deaf people by giving them a sense of identity and a sense of belonging, as well as providing ways of interpreting and comprehending the world collectively, thereby perpetuating the survival of their culture. Each tale has embedded within it messages for ways of behaving and strategies for surviving as a member of a minority culture in a world surrounded by others with different cultural values and world knowledge (see, e.g., Padden and Humphries 1988; Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan 1996).

Finally, storytellers' primary goal appears to be to use their gift as language artists to entertain members of the audience. Their role as performers is tied to how they bring the story to the audience. This puts the tellers in the position of controlling how they want the stories to unfold.

Learning Controls in Storytelling

A good storyteller needs to be adept at synthesizing different kinds of controls, such as the control of language, of paralinguistic cues, of selection of tales, and, finally, of the audience (Bahan 1994; Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan 1996). Control of the first two—language and paralinguistic cues—falls in the domain of language use. In the control of language, a teller must attend to a wide spectrum of linguistic elements, from the smallest units, such as handshape or eye gaze location, to those on the grammar and the discourse level. The teller deploys linguistic units by controlling various paralinguistic elements, including the rhythm, tempo, and pause mechanisms of the story. The teller also exploits facial expressions and nonverbal expressions (which may be used for imitation, among other things) to convey additional messages in an attempt to control the mood and trigger emotions from the audience for various episodes in the story. In essence, these two types of control enable the teller to pay attention to the aesthetic use of language.

However, the task does not end there. The teller has to select an appropriate story. Each teller has a repertoire of stories (and, for some, poems). Some of these stories are suitable only for particular members of the audience and particular locations. Some of the stories are still in various stages of development and have not yet been fully disclosed. There are risks of releasing these stories to an unreceptive audience. The teller has to evaluate the situation he or she is facing (e.g., the audience and location) and proceed to select the stories and tell them. For example, a storyteller would risk inappropriate story selection if he told a detailed story of hunting down and skinning a bear to an audience filled with animal rights advocates.

Tellers also need to monitor the members of the audience from time to time to see if they are engaged in the performance before venturing into disclosing work under construction. If their story selection is irrelevant for the audience/location or simply not good, then they are bound to fail.

There have been instances where a teller reportedly misjudged an audience by assuming that most of the people in the audience were fluent signers, able to follow a high-speed montage composed of rapidly produced signs. Especially in a mixed audience of Deaf and hearing people, and of signers and nonsigners using interpreters, gauging the audience's ability to follow the work may be difficult. The teller may realize upon gauging the audience in the middle of a story that they are not following him or her and then digress in order to work the audience back into the performance.

As the above story illustrates, tellers need to exert some type of audience control. This involves captivating and holding onto the audience's interest. Various linguistic and paralinguistic cues work to hold onto the audience, such as effective use of pause mechanisms (the teller must pause for the right amount of time, not too long or he or she may risk losing the audience), quickly scanning the room to evaluate the audience's involvement while using such devices, and effectively using digression at particular points of the story to hold onto the audience and then woo them back into watching the completion of the performance.

In fact, if any of the four types of control mentioned above (i.e., the control of language, paralinguistic cues, selection of tales, and audience) is missing or unsuccessful, then the teller's work is judged to be ineffective. Good storytellers can adeptly juggle all of these controls to create a fine-tuned, deftly synchronized performance.

THE TALE (AND SOME SELECTED GENRES)

A wide variety of performances/stories are passed along in the Deaf community. Some of these stories have been around for a long time and are comparable to the type of stories that appear in every culture, such as the narrative of personal experience. Some are original tales created by the tellers for members of their cultural audience. Some tales originated in other cultures (i.e., stories in print that appeared in literate cultures) and have been translated or adapted for the Deaf audience.

For the purpose of this chapter, I will cover only three genres: narratives, songs, and stories with constraints.⁸ Narratives are further subcategorized into narratives of personal experience, cinematographic stories, folktales, translated works, and original fiction. Songs are also further subdivided to include translated songs and percussion signing. Stories with constraints include ABC stories, number stories, set handshape stories, and worded handshape stories.⁹

Narratives

Narratives are stories that relate various events in chronological sequence. Each type of narrative described here—the narrative of personal experi-

ence, the cinematographic story, the folktale, the translated work, the work of original fiction—unfolds events in a sequence in its own way.

Narratives of Personal Experience

Narratives of personal experience are probably the most common type of storytelling in the Deaf community. These are real-life accounts of various events, including those that are humorous or tragic and those of struggles to overcome various odds. In some of them, “the speaker becomes deeply involved in rehearsing or even reliving events of his past” (Labov, 1972, 354). One commonly retold humorous story in the DEAF WORLD involves a Deaf person being asked by a hearing person, maybe a stewardess, if he can read Braille. A tragic story might involve a story of Deaf person being struck by a train while walking on the track; this is usually followed by comments or instructions on how one should avoid walking on train tracks. In recounting a struggle to overcome odds, a Deaf person might talk about her persistence in finding a job despite mounting discrimination from various potential employers.

Many real-life accounts are vignettes that focus on a single event. For example, the teller might describe how he needed to get a Deaf friend’s attention while that friend’s doorbell was not functioning and how he tried different strategies until he finally got the friend’s attention. Life histories, on the other hand, may be composed of multiple narratives of personal experience. They are works that cover the span of a life or some major aspect of life (e.g., relations with parents, marriage, child rearing, career) or milestone (e.g., meeting a spouse or getting a first job). (See Linde 1993 for more information on life stories in general.)

Each personal experience or life history is unique in its own right, but many personal experiences and personal histories overlap in the Deaf community. Consequently, stories of shared experiences promote bonding among members of the DEAF WORLD and extend beyond the personal to become stories of the life of an entire culture.

Cinematographic Stories

Another popular form of narrative involves using cinematographic technique in the creation of stories. Although cinematographic technique can appear in any genre of narrative performance, a cinematographic story

foregrounds this technique and uses it extensively throughout the work. Cinematographic stories may be attempts to retell or re-create scenes from (or sometimes entire) movies to an audience. But even stories that have no connection with any motion picture may extensively use various filmlike techniques, such as close-ups, panning, zoom in, zoom out, medium shots, far shots, and even the morphing of objects while telling stories (for more information, see chapter 5 of this book).

The way the language is structured makes it possible to engage in this form of storytelling. Tellers do that by taking particular advantage of one aspect of the linguistic system: classifiers, a set of predicate signs that are used to describe the state, shape, and action of the noun signs.¹⁰ With classifiers, tellers are able to utilize the three-dimensional space and use their body and hands in various ways to depict the motion and location of various objects, as well as their salient physical properties. They can also coordinate different classifiers to change the scale of objects, describing activities or states from the microscopic to the cosmic.

Some stories, called classifier stories, consist entirely, or almost entirely, of classifiers. By the use of this linguistic system they would automatically shift across various kinds of classifiers.¹¹ Each kind of classifier involves a different use of scale and reference frame, so different classifiers can employ the various shots seen in film (e.g., close-up, medium, and long shots) (T. Supalla 1982).

Clip 2.2 shows a simple classifier story I created for children that also involves the manipulation of rhythm. In this story, a scientist inadvertently creates a ball after an explosion in his laboratory. The ball expands and contracts and then bounces out of the room, followed by a boy on a bicycle and eventually by a dog, a girl, an old man, his parrot, and a heavy-set woman. Each of these figures is represented by a distinct classifier. They all join the chase around corners, up a hill, and down a hill and eventually tumble into the lab, where they see the ball smile at them.

Another example of a classifier story is “Durrassic Park,” told by Manny Hernandez (**clip 2.3**). Adapting scenes from the movie *Jurassic Park*, it clearly depicts the use of cinematographic techniques as it recounts the story of a group of boys who ask their father to take them camping. After packing and loading the car, the coffee-drinking father takes them up a mountain road. When he gets out of the car to relieve himself, the boys find themselves accosted by a Tyrannosaurus Rex, whose giant head and

three-clawed feet are vividly embodied through a cinematic use of classifiers. The viewers' experience of this film-inspired story is very much like watching the film itself as Hernandez splices together a sequence of scenes—the boys' reaction, the stalking dinosaur, and the father comforting his son, who has been dreaming the whole scene.

Cinematographic stories ranging from G to X rated can be told in “live action” or “animation” style. Some tellers are better at one style and some at the other. The “Jurassic Park” story is a good example of “live action” style. An example of animation style can be seen in a signer's exaggeration of a shocking reaction by signing “eyeballs popping out of their sockets, while the mouth gapes open, allowing the tongue to roll down to the floor,” as illustrated in **clip 2.4**. The influence of animation can also be seen in the popular technique of personification, or transforming part of one's body into an object. The most common transformation is turning one's head into various balls, such as a golfball, baseball, or pinball. A teller would, for example, personify a golfball by making his entire head the ball and then going through various stages of action while empathizing with the golfball, such as grimacing when golf club swings down to the side of its “head.”

Given that almost all storytellers incorporate cinematographic technique into their repertoire in some way, we might ask whether this genre originated from or predated movies. It is hard to determine the extent to which movies or filming technique have influenced the way ASL stories are told. Nonetheless, some specialized techniques have obviously been influenced by film—such as panning and slow zooming into a scene, as in Supalla's opening segment in *For a Decent Living*, which vividly sets the scene of a vast bleak snow-covered country landscape and depicts the blowing snow that comes to a halt in a drift at the side of a farmhouse (**clip 2.5**).

Folktales

Some scholars might categorize the entire body of work discussed here (narratives, poetry, etc.) as Deaf folktales. In this chapter, however, I distinguish folktales as a body of work whose origin is lost but that have been shared in the community for a long time. We should bear in mind that many stories whose origins have been lost may have begun as narratives of personal experience and subsequently been passed around. There have been few studies in the area of Deaf folktales, with the exception of those by Susan Ruther-

ford (1993) and Simon Carmel (1979). Rutherford (1993) has catalogued various types of tales, among them legends, tall tales, and traditions.

Legends, tall tales, fables, and traditions are deeply ingrained in the consciousness of the culture. For example, there is a legend of an encounter between two Deaf rival soldiers during the Civil War who became friends in the middle of a battle and were suspected by their superiors of being spies (**clip 2.6**). It is not known whether this story is true, yet its message is powerful because it tells of Deaf people bonding in the midst of war. One particularly popular tall tale is about a Deaf scientist's escapade to a distant planet called "Eyeth," where everyone uses sign language as the primary language. A particular community tradition that we often hear about involves an annual rite of passage at Gallaudet University, where freshmen (especially those in the former preparatory program) conduct a rat funeral in the spring to ceremoniously mark the end of their first year (Rutherford 1993). Such folktales carry subconscious cultural messages and reinforce the need for maintenance of tradition to connect the present and the past. It is comparable to professional ball players of today realizing they are part of a rich American tradition that connects them to the Ted Williamsees of yesterday. For more information, see the excellent work in the area of American Deaf folktales by Rutherford (1993).

Translated Works

Since many members of the DEAF WORLD are also bilingual speakers of ASL and English, they have access to stories that appear in print. There have even been literary organizations/societies in the DEAF WORLD that have encouraged discussions and translations of these printed works. Translations of printed works into face-to-face interactions have been well documented and preserved in various archived films and videotapes over the years. One of the earliest efforts was a series of films produced by the NAD that featured a variety of performances ranging from Edward Miner Gallaudet telling the story of "The Lorna Doone Country of Devonshire, England" (c. 1913) to Joe Velez performing Eric Malzkuhn's translation of Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" in 1968.

Often in the process of translation, Deaf cultural behavior, values, or norms find their way into the work, whether the translator is aware of this or not. For example, in telling "Little Red Riding Hood," a translator may unconsciously make the characters "Deaf" by assigning them behavior and

discourse that are visually based, akin to those in the DEAF WORLD (such as waving one's hands to get attention of another character). An example of conscious translation (i.e., adaptation) of this story might involve making the mother, girl, and grandmother Deaf and the Wolf hearing, to set up a dichotomy that reflects conflicts in the culture.

Original Fiction

In the past twenty years we have seen a burgeoning of original ASL fiction being created in the DEAF WORLD: short stories, novellas, even novels. We can speculatively tie this to the growing communal awareness of ASL as a language and the growing sense of identity among members of the DEAF WORLD (Padden and Humphries 1988). Two original works, for example, appear in the ASL Literature Series by Bahan and Supalla (1992). Although they were videotaped and created in 1992, they developed in the 1980s and have undergone development over the years as they received exposure and were "tested" by interactions with countless audiences in the United States. My own "Bird of a Different Feather" is an allegorical fable of an eagle family into which a straight-beaked bird is born. The narrative of the family's various attempts to turn that bird into a crooked-beak eagle like the rest of the family suggests parallels to issues and events related to the lives of Deaf people (S. Supalla and Bahan 1994; Kettlehut and Bahan 1991a). Supalla's ASL "novella" *For a Decent Living* focuses on various obstacles that a Deaf protagonist overcomes in his journey to earn a decent living (Kettlehut and Bahan 1991b). In the end, his triumph becomes Deaf people's triumph. These two stories are examples of fictional works created in ASL for an ASL-signing audience.

Songs

Because the DEAF WORLD functions as a linguistic minority community within a majority English-speaking culture, members of the DEAF WORLD are predominantly ASL-English bilinguals, to varying degrees. This means many Deaf people are also members of the majority culture (i.e., American culture) and may have acquired, through their interaction with English on a daily basis, some appreciation of various genres that appear to have originated in the oral medium, such as songs.

What is most interesting, however, and what I focus on here, is how signers modify this genre to fit or blend in with the visual discourse that is essential to the face-to-face nature of the DEAF WORLD. Some elements of vocal songs are transposed into the signed modality, such as fluidity of words/signs and the rhythm. The cadence of songs usually springs from the structural way signs are formed (e.g., phonology/morphology) and is visually pleasing.

Two common types of songs used in the DEAF WORLD are translated songs and percussion signing.¹² Although it is difficult to prove, percussion signing may have originated in the DEAF WORLD rather than being modified from the oral medium. However, given the contact of the two worlds, it is difficult to rule out the possibility of influence.

Translated Songs

Translated songs have been around in the DEAF WORLD for a long time. In this genre, the lyrics of various songs are translated into ASL and performed for an audience.¹³ They may involve some ritual like singing the “Star Spangled Banner” before various sports events. Note that the pacing of these songs is at the artist’s predisposition; he or she is likely to modify the pace so that it fits the visual modality of ASL, as seen in clips 2.7 and 2.8 of two artists performing the “Star Spangled Banner.” Mrs. Washington Barrow’s performance was captured in Charles Krauel’s film in 1940 (T. Supalla 1994); the other clip features Ella Mae Lentz about fifty-five years later (Lentz, Mikos, and Smith 1996).

Also popular in the DEAF WORLD during the early to mid-twentieth century was the performance of “Yankee Doodle” (see Padden and Humphries 1988 for some discussion on the disappearance of this song). Winfield E. Marshall performs the song in *The Preservation of American Sign Language: The Complete Historical Collection* (1997), and examples of other renditions appear in the film *Charles Krauel: A Profile of a Deaf Filmmaker* (T. Supalla 1994).

Percussion Signing

Percussion signing involves arranging signs to certain beats.¹⁴ There appear to be three types of cadences: “one, two, one, two,” “one, two, one-two-

three,” and a mixture of the first two. It is not unusual to see this type of performance accompanied with a drummer who keeps up with the cadence, hence the use of the term *percussion signing*.

Perhaps the earliest recorded performance of this type is found in Charles Krauel’s film (T. Supalla 1994). It is a duo between an unknown signer and George Kannapell, who are entertaining and leading a group with a percussion performance to the cadence of “one, two, one-two-three” (see clip 2.1).¹⁵

BOAT	BOAT	
1		2
BOAT-BOAT-BOAT		
1	2	3
DRINK		DRINK
1		2
DRINK-DRINK-DRINK		
1	2	3
FUN		FUN
1		2
FUN-	FUN-	FUN
1	2	3
ENJOY		ENJOY
1		2
ENJOY-ENJOY-ENJOY		
1	2	3

Songs like Kannapell’s are sometimes performed spontaneously and are often done in social gatherings to “incite a crowd to good cheer and a sense of unity” (Padden and Humphries 1988, 78).

Another group song that is widely known is the Gallaudet University fight song called the “Bison Song” (see T. Supalla in press for further insight into the history of this song).¹⁶ Several schools for the deaf have adopted their own fight songs, perhaps modeling after Gallaudet’s fight songs, but it is not known which schools still use them today. In **clip 2.9**, Freda Norman gives an example of a fight song using the cadence of “one, two, one-two-three.”

Some people have observed that the tradition of percussion signing appears to have altogether vanished, except for the “Bison Song” (Padden

and Humphries 1988). But I have seen several people, perhaps out of nostalgia or a desire to revive this genre, perform original percussion songs—for example, at the Deaf Way conference of 1989. Several years ago I had the opportunity to view a home video of an Easter service performance at a Deaf church in the Midwest in which two members did a brief percussion signing. The performance, translated below, involved a mixed cadence of “one, two, one-two-three” and “one, two.” Some description of the signs may be needed in order to follow the translation. The pronoun *he* was presented using an honorific third-person handshape in which the whole hand with an open palm (as in the “B” handshape) points upward to the heavens. The sign for *Lord* involves two contact locations—for a right-hand signer, the first contact begins the left shoulder area and the sign ends at lower right side of the torso. The signer in this performance broke up the sign LORD, assigning “beat 1” to the first contact location and “beat 2” to the second contact location (transcribed as LORD-1 and LORD-2).

CLAP		CLAP
1		2
CLAP-	CLAP-	CLAP
1	2	3
HE		MY
1		2
LORD-1		LORD-2
1		2
HE		MY
1		2
LORD-1		LORD-2
1		2
CLAP		CLAP
1		2
CLAP-	CLAP-	CLAP
1	2	3

Percussion signing may not be as widespread as it used to be in the early part of the twentieth century, but it is far from gone, and it may be reviving in situations that involve the need for sense of unity among a group. A service of worship, such as the one described above, is one particular event where we would expect this type of song to surface.

Stories with Constraints

Two types of stories are distinguished by observance of particular constraints.¹⁷ One type involves constraints on the handshapes that must be used in particular sequences (e.g., ABC stories, number stories, and plays on fingerspelled words). In other cases, the story is constrained by use of only one handshape or a limited set of handshapes (e.g., two handshapes: 1 and 5).

Stories with Handshape Sequencing Constraints

Stories that adhere to a particular sequencing of handshapes follow four general rules:

1. The handshapes must be used in correct sequence. For example, in ABC stories, each handshape in the alphabet, from A to Z, needs to be used in succession.¹⁸ The same applies for number stories where the handshapes must be used in numerical sequence (e.g., 1 to 10).
2. If there are handshape deviations, they must be kept within the boundaries of allowable deviations.
3. There must be clear use of paralinguistic and discourse mechanisms (such as shifting between characters, pausing, and use of space).
4. The story needs to make sense.¹⁹

ABC STORIES

ABC stories follow a format employing the handshapes of the manual alphabet in alphabetic order,²⁰ as illustrated in figure 2.1. The use of this genre involves many possible themes; one common theme is the haunted house story, like the one I created that is described below and can be seen in **clip 2.10**.

Synopsis of the Story: A person goes into a haunted house and encounters a devil wearing a bow tie. Fearing being killed, he offers the devil a cigar, but it turns out that the cigar explodes in the devil's face. Then this person high-tails his way out.

[A man walks up to a haunted house]

A: BEATING-HEART	(his heart beats loudly)
B: WALK	(as he walks up toward the door)
C: TURNS-DOORKNOB	(opens the door)
D: HEARS	(hears something)
E: "EEEE"	(a screeching sound)
F: TURNS-EYES-RIGHT	(glances quickly to the right)
<i>[As the devil]</i>	
G: POINTY-SHAPED-EYES	(sporting pointy eyes)
H: BOW-TIE	(and a bow tie)
I/J: HORNS	(with long pointy horns [note: it becomes clear at this point that this is the devil])
<i>[Back to the man, who is very worried]</i>	
K: KILL-ME	(thinks to himself, "He'll kill me . . .")
L: LATER	(. . . later.)
M: SWEAT-TRICKLES	(sweat trickles down his face)
N/O: "FUNNY^ZERO	(thinks to himself, "This is serious . . .")
P: SEE-SEE"	(. . . let's see what I can do.)
<i>[Worriedly, he looks down and spots something in his pocket]</i>	
Q: PULLS-OUT	(pulls out a thin object)
R: CIGAR	(a cigar)
S: HANDS-OVER	(hands over the cigar to the devil)
T: "TRY	(and says, "Want to try . . .")
U: SMOKE"	(. . . smoking this?")
<i>[As the devil]</i>	
V: PUTS-CIGAR-IN-MOUTH	(puts the cigar in its mouth)
W: CIGAR-EXPLODES	(the cigar explodes in the devil's face)
<i>[Back to the man, who says . . .]</i>	
X: "SHOULD	(the man says, "I should . . .")
Y: NOW	. . . at this very moment . . .
Z: RUN-OFF"	(. . . flee.)

Rutherford (1993, 28) describes the ABC story as a phenomenon that employs "an interplay between the community's two languages, ASL and English" and says that the tellers "consciously manipulate the phonetic system of one language with the phonological system of the other" (28). They are telling the story in ASL but using an "external structure of the English alphabet determining the handshapes used for the story" (28).

55 AMERICAN MANUAL ALPHABET

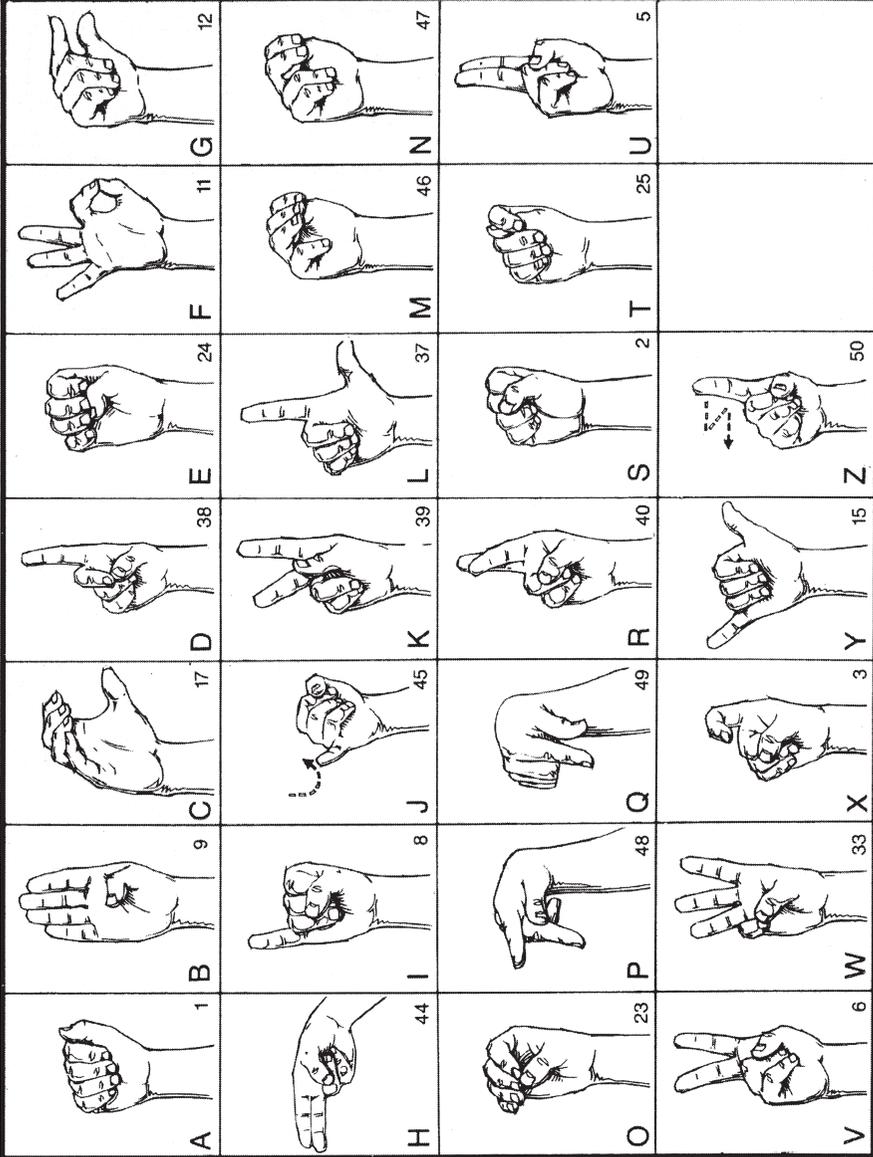


FIGURE 2.1. Alphabet handshapes, reprinted by permission of the publisher from *ASL Handshape Game Cards*, by Frank Allen Paul and Ben Bahan, San Diego, CA: DawnSignPress.

This interplay needs to be taken into serious consideration in examining ABC stories. Some letters in the manual alphabet have basically the same handshape but different movement or orientation. For example, the two sets “K”/“P” and “U”/“H”/“N” have similar handshapes but differ in the orientation of their hands. The letters “I” and “J” differ in their movement (Rutherford 1993). Signers of ABC stories are “allowed,” through creative license, to just focus on the handshape and create signs despite their actual orientation and movement in the manual alphabet (Rutherford 1993). There is also a certain amount of flexibility in how the handshapes can be modified, but the handshape used must be close to the form of the original handshape (Rutherford 1993). One may notice that some ABC storytellers have used the gesture for TIME-OUT (as seen in various sporting events) for the letter “T.” This violates rules number two (stated above) because the use of this gesture deviates too much from the T handshape. Rutherford noticed in her collection that there was a frequent interchange among the two-fingered handshapes “N,” “H,” “U,” and “V,” as well as interchange between the three-fingered handshapes in “M” and “W” (see Rutherford 1993, 38, for a table showing acceptable interchanges).²¹ It has been observed that a good ABC storyteller would be able to stay within the acceptable limits of deviation.

Another item in ABC stories that appears problematic is the limited number of signs that come with certain handshapes, such as “E” and “M.” Unless signers borrow from manually coded English systems such as Signing Exact English, there are not enough ASL signs with these handshapes. It is predictable that, in the next ABC story we encounter, for “E” the signer may well sign “EEE” (comparable to a screech or a whistling sound) and, for “M,” “MMM” (used to convey a humming noise).²²

On the issue of paralinguistic cues and discourse mechanisms, Lon Kuntze (Gallaudet University Distance Education Program 1997) points out that ABC stories are limited not only in terms of how to come up with signs for each letter in sequence but also in terms of how to deal with what is between the letters. That is, the artful use of these mechanisms enhances the story and story line and is essential to a successful ABC story. According to Kuntze, a skillful ABC storyteller would be able to handle these cues effortlessly, to the point that one might not even realize he or she was telling an ABC story.

ABC stories have several classical opening motifs. Although various storytellers may have modified the story line, the opening line with the letters

“A,” “B,” and “C” is usually maintained, as in these segments from “haunted house” and “race” stories (clips 2.11 and 2.12):

A: KNOCK-ON-DOOR

B: DOOR-SWINGS-OPEN

C: SEARCH

A: RACE

B: Classifier B (signing includes a “B” handshape—“wide-bodied object [car] rolling to stop line”)

C: Classifier C (signing includes a “C” handshape—“wide tires vibrating with the engine”)

This genre has been around in the Deaf community for a long time. Gilbert Eastman remembers seeing ABC stories in the 1940s²³ and is sure that they were around in the 1930s. There is a remote possibility that this genre may have existed around the 1900s at the Ohio School for the Deaf, as reported by one of Rutherford’s informants (see Rutherford 1993, 55). Its existence as far back as the turn of the century shows that there is a long history of the interplay between the two languages of ASL and English.

NUMBER STORIES AND PLAYS ON FINGERSPELLED WORDS

Two more story types that build on handshape sequencing constraints are number stories and plays on fingerspelled words. Basically, they follow the same principles described in the ABC story above. The story unfolds based on handshapes that follow the sequence of either the numbers (e.g., 1–15) or any fingerspelled word, including, for example, names of people, activities, and states.

Number stories are self-explanatory: they are like ABC stories, but the story utilizes the number handshapes in order. The play on fingerspelled words may be rather intriguing. Rutherford (1993, 56), using a different label, “fingerspelled/ASL word characterizations,” explains that the story content of this type of play usually revolves around “illustrating some aspect of the word.” If the word in play were *golf*, then the handshapes for each letter in the word would be used in succession to create a brief story about golfing (see Barwiolek 1984), as in the following example taken from Rutherford (1993, 57):

(right hand)	G: a tee is placed on ground
(left hand)	O: a ball is placed on the tee
(right hand)	L: a club swings at the ball
(left hand)	F: the ball becomes airborne

In such a short sequence (four signs), we have an overall impression of what golfing is about.

Stories with Handshape Type Constraints

Some stories, rather than following a specific sequence of handshapes, use a limited set of handshape(s)—ranging from one (e.g., a handshape used to signal the number 5) to a set of handshapes (e.g., using the three handshapes “1,” “A,” and “5”). In using this kind of constraint, a teller will still need to comply with two of the three rules stated in the section on handshape/sequencing constraints: the handshape(s) used need(s) to comply with the original intent (if there is deviation, it needs to be within acceptable limits), and the story needs to make sense.

An example of this kind of story is Freda Norman’s work “A Full Hand” (clip 2.13) in the videotape *Signing Treasures* (Lentz, Mikos, and Smith 1996). In the story, Norman chooses to use two particular handshapes (“B” and “5”), and we can see as the story unfolds that there is some deviation from the handshape. Yet the deviation remains within acceptable boundaries. It involves bending the spreading fingers in “5” and the bending fingers in “B.” The story’s theme is about a man and a woman who meet and get married. They give birth to a child who grows up and is eventually called off to war. Upon returning home from a long war, he becomes depressed when he learns of his mother’s death. His father, who tells him his mother has gone to heaven, comforts him. The way the story unfolds help create a sense-making mechanism that viewers identify.

Ownership of Stories

Tellers may invent their own stories (e.g., telling a narrative of their own personal experience), but in many cases stories are passed down (or passed along) within the community. Even if a story is original, the question of ownership is unclear because unlike stories that are written down, which the writer can write for himself and never share with others, stories in the

face-to-face tradition are told to an audience and shared with members of the community.²⁴

In my discussions with storytellers, I found that most of them are facing this interesting paradox. As in much of the oral tradition, the notion that the “community” owns the story remains, in some sense. The teller may own only his or her style and perhaps the process of rebuilding the story after acquiring a “story-skeleton” from the culture. But since the 1990s, with the advent of video technology, the ownership question has been undergoing further re-evaluation. When one’s performance is “printed” on videotape, it is like having one’s work written down. Even the purposes of writing down and videotaping one’s work can be similar: going back and correcting the work, fine-tuning some parts of the story until a point of satisfaction is reached, and then creating a permanent document. (For further discussion of this point, see chapter 3 in this volume, by Christopher Krentz.)

THE AUDIENCE

The audience, and the culture they represent, play a crucial role in shaping the work of the tellers and in developing the various tales. They often dictate, through their encouragement and, in some cases, indirectly through requests for repeated performances, the kind of stories and/or poems that the tellers will end up performing. If that is true, then who is governing the story? Okpewho (1992, 45) reports that “in most narrative traditions across the African continent, the storyteller simply has the bare outlines of the story and is expected to make the appropriate adjustment to the details in accordance with the interest of the audience.” That is, there has to be a shared mind-set between the audience/culture and the teller to make the tale work. This reiterates the interwoven nature of the triad. The way tellers conduct their work reflects their perception of the culture, and the desired outcome of their work depends on the culture’s perception of the way they conduct it.

Tales in a Clubroom: Audience Participation at a Deaf Club

Some Deaf clubs have “open mike nights” where, as part of the program, everyone is free to jump on stage to tell stories, ABC stories, jokes, and

poems.²⁵ At first a line of people wait for their turn, but after a while the audience “weeds out” weak tellers by asking specific persons to come back and tell another story/joke. In this process they are also telling this person what particular genre to cover (e.g., another dirty ABC story). Near the end of the program, the selection process has reduced the line to two to three people, who may just specialize in, for example, dirty stories or cinematographic stories. The point here is that the audience has determined the course of events for that night at the club. They have determined (or in some cases predetermined) who is the best storyteller of the club. And if that storyteller decides not to stand on line but to sit by the bar and watch, he or she will eventually get encouraged by the audience to “get up on stage.” Marie Philip (pers. comm., June 20, 1994) recalls the following event at a Deaf club where she grew up. At one open-mike night, a couple of members, not satisfied with the way the event was unfolding, scanned the room and, spotting a fabled local storyteller over by the poker table, publicly urged her to go on stage. In this, we see the role an audience assumes in selecting their teller. It is also not unusual for an audience in a Deaf club to play a role in selecting what tales will be told: to dictate, for example, that the teller tell a funny story instead of the sad one that he or she is telling at the moment. But in a less intimate setting, such as a staged performance, we would not expect to see this type of rapport.

The Changing Audience

One elder storyteller with over seventy years of storytelling experience mentioned to me in passing that he had seen the composition of his audience change rapidly over the past ten to fifteen years. For many years he had been invited to perform at various Deaf-related events and had known what to expect from the audience because he had grown up in the culture and had Deaf parents and grandparents. It was as if the audience was in him and he was in the audience. Lately, however, he was finding it not unusual to encounter a mixed audience containing people who were not part of his culture—that is, hearing people.²⁶ He reported that this change had had some effect on the way he would present his work. For a while, he was unsure if he should sign the way he normally did, and he would ask

himself, “Should I slow down my signs so that these people can understand me?” He even modified his stories so that they would not offend hearing people. But then he found himself going back to the way he normally performed because he had grown accustomed to this mix.

Problems of Mixed Audience

According to Okpewho (1992, 58), “[A] good storyteller is also expected to exercise discretion in the structuring of his stories before a variety of audiences.” But what if the audience contains both “insiders” and “outsiders” to the teller’s culture?²⁷ To whom should the storyteller pay attention?

There have been reports of tellers who pay so much attention to the hearing audience that it affects their performance. It is not unusual to find Deaf members of the audience saying that a performer was “too English.” Those tellers who decide to be more concerned about the hearing members of the audience may do so for two reasons. First, they may be considering economics: many, if not most, of the paying members of the audience will be hearing people. Second, they may mistrust interpreters and choose to sign in English so that the interpreters will have an easier time following the performance.

In this situation, if a teller focuses on the Deaf audience and tells tales that favor Deaf people and portray hearing people in a somewhat negative light, he will draw protest from hearing members in the audience. As one teller recalled, “I remember after one performance where I was telling various stories about Deaf people overcoming odds and portraying hearing people as ignorant and sometimes as losers, several hearing people would come up to me and remark that I hated hearing people.” He maintained that this was not true and that he was only sharing stories he normally shared among Deaf people and Deaf audiences. “So, these stories do upset some hearing people,” he told me. “I can easily decide to drop telling these stories and modify my stories to make them happy, but I will not do that, because my stories are from my culture. I will tell it as it is whether they like it or not.”

Since everything in a face-to-face tradition is dynamic, we should expect some influence from this mixed audience on the selection of tellers and tales in the future.

CONCLUSION

Since the face-to-face tradition is alive and dynamic, we are currently seeing several changes. The increasingly diverse makeup of the audience is already having an impact on the selection of tellers and tales. Also, the rapidly growing use of video technology has already begun to influence the composition as well as the ownership of stories. Because this technology replaces the face-to-face encounter that has been a dynamic force in the community for years, the audience no longer sees tellers demonstrate their ability to construct and perform stories on the spot, showcasing their ability to think quickly on their feet. These changes are an inevitable consequence of a contemporary world where cultures and technologies cross borders. Hence the literary traditions in the Deaf community will continue to change as the nature of performance changes.

NOTES

I am grateful to the following people who have over the years shared their insights, discussion, and input, some of which eventually found its way into this chapter. They are H-Dirksen Bauman, MJ Bienvenu, Bernard Bragg, Simon Carmel, Gilbert Eastman, Leo M. Jacobs, Judy Kegl, Bonnie Kraft, Lon Kuntze, Robert G. Lee, Ella Mae Lentz, Ernest Marshall, Marie Philip, Susan Rutherford, Sam Supalla, Clayton Valli, and Janet Weinstock. I am also grateful to Dirksen Bauman, Carol Neidle, and Robert Lee for their editorial assistance. Any errors are solely my own. Funding for this work was provided in part through a grant from the National Science Foundation (#SBR-9729010).

1. The capitalized DEAF WORLD is used to reflect how it is signed in ASL. As used in Lane et al. (1996), it roughly translates as a way of life for those who are oriented visually.

2. Several written systems have emerged in recent years, among them Sign Font (Newkirk 1987) and Sign-Writing (Sutton 1981).

3. There are, however, some Deaf bilinguals who are more proficient in English than ASL, and this shows up in the way they converse. The fact that the community acknowledges this by labeling this group of people as “English signers” suggests some deviation from the expected face-to-face norm.

4. Charles Krauel has made a collection of films of various Deaf social events, such as weddings, schools, and conventions, from 1925 until the 1970s (see *Charles Krauel: A Profile of a Deaf Filmmaker*, T. Supalla 1994). In fact, the intention of Krauel’s and most likely of NAD’s films was to serve as medium of disseminating information using the face-to-face language of the community.

5. Hotchkiss enrolled at ASD in 1859 at the age of fourteen and graduated in 1865. Laurent Clerc, who co-founded ASD in 1817, died on July 18, 1869.

6. It is highly probable that Clerc was basing his lecture on word order from a famous French saying dating back to Molière in the seventeenth century, *Il faut manger pour vivre et non pas vivre pour manger* (One must eat to live and not live to eat). I am grateful to Carol Neidle for pointing this out.

7. The interscholastic sports conference to which ASD belonged was at that time called Eastern Schools for the Deaf Athletic Association. The conference included the following schools in the mid-Atlantic states and New England: Maryland School for the Deaf, Pennsylvania School for the Deaf, New Jersey School for the Deaf, New York School for the Deaf (Fanwood), and St. Mary's School for the Deaf (Buffalo, NY).

8. Some of the genres in ASL not discussed here are poetry (which is discussed elsewhere in this volume), group narrative, and "sign play" (which might include puns, riddles, jokes and so on; see Rutherford 1993). There are more genres, but few researchers besides Rutherford (1993) have systematically categorized the various genres.

9. Many of these categories are taken, with modifications, from Rutherford (1993).

10. The genre of cinematographic stories could well be called "classifier stories" instead, since the use of cinematographic technique requires sophisticated manipulation of classifiers.

11. There are several types of classifiers, such as semantic, instrument, locative, descriptive, and body and body-part classifiers (see Lentz, Mikos, and Smith 1989 for further description of these types).

12. It should be noted that some members of the DEAF WORLD have created their own lyrics and performed them. Such original songs are performed in the same manner as translated songs, with a sense of fluidity and rhythm. Examples of original songs are David Supalla's "Ballad in Honor of the USA Flag" (C. Supalla and D. Supalla 1992) and Bill Ennis's "Backwards All the Way to Birmingham Alabama" (Ennis 1993).

13. Also, signers (usually those who are hearing or those who have residual hearing) sometimes play a tape or CD of popular songs and sign out the words of the song while keeping in pace with the beat of the music. Such interpreted songs do not seem to be particularly popular with Deaf audiences. I would not categorize them as part of the genre of translated songs because the pace of the discourse is primarily geared to the auditory modality.

14. The label of this category is taken from Ted Supalla (in press).

15. Translated by T. Supalla (appearing in Padden and Humphries 1988 and T. Supalla in press).

16. This song involves a mixed cadence of "one, two" and "one, two, one-two-three."

17. I am grateful to Lon Kuntze for some insights in this section.

18. It is also possible to reverse the sequence, going from Z to A, or to set up a formula of repeating the handshape twice before moving on to the next handshape (i.e., A, A, B, B, C, C, and so on). It is also possible to create a rhythm of 2, 1, 2, 1 with this sequence of handshapes: A, A, B, C, C, D, E, E, F, and so on. However, the sequence must be maintained, one way or the other.

19. These four rules seem to be an unwritten code in the Deaf community; there has been consensus about this among the people I have talked with (e.g., Lon Kuntze, MJ Bienvenu, Ella Lentz, and Clayton Valli) over the years.

20. Peters (2000) points out that in written form ABC stories appear to be analogous to “acrostic” poems. (The plays on fingerspelled words provide an even closer parallel.)

21. It should be noted that the list of allowable deviations proposed by Rutherford is only a beginning effort; further scrutiny is needed. For example, it is questionable whether the “Y” handshape can be interchanged with the “|_|” handshape (opening of index finger and pinkie while the rest of the fingers and thumb remain clenched). Furthermore, the handshapes used in classifiers appear to allow more flexibility with respect to modification.

22. Sometimes, however, tellers will use the “M” handshape to signify signs that ordinarily employ the “flat-O” or “bent-B” handshape: for example, they will use the “M” handshape for MONEY (ordinarily signed with “flat-O”) and CHEWING-TOBACCO (ordinarily signed with “bent-B”).

23. Simon Carmel, a Deaf folklorist and anthropologist, confirms this observation from his field notes (pers. comm., July 1, 1999).

24. Some tellers will say about their original work: “I feel I own the story because I created it, yet there is another part of me telling me that the story is not mine and it belongs to my people.” As storytellers, they seem to feel they owe the culture something for making them who they are and that giving their audiences stories is a way of repaying their debt.

25. I want to particularly acknowledge the late Marie Philip for first bringing this up. Much of what is stated here comes from her observations of one local Deaf club in New England. Similar phenomena have been observed elsewhere.

26. They come from various backgrounds: many of them are sign language students, with skills ranging from beginning to advanced, and interpreters.

27. Deaf performers are not the only ones who are confronted with this issue. For example, a similar situation arises when a black performer who draws on material from black culture (e.g., a comedian like Chris Rock) addresses an audience that contains whites.

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