Soundpainting language recognition

EPFL DH Master thesis

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# Introduction

To be written last.

# Table des matières

[I. Introduction 2](#_Toc42842108)

[II. Table des matières 3](#_Toc42842110)

[III. Theoretical part 5](#_Toc42842111)

[A. A brief history of Soundpainting 5](#_Toc42842112)

[1. Back in Woodstock 1974: emergence in emergency 5](#_Toc42842113)

[2. Developments 6](#_Toc42842114)

[B. Historical and theoretical context to SP 9](#_Toc42842122)

[1. Signs and linguistics 9](#_Toc42842123)

[2. Gestural signs for communication: a long history 13](#_Toc42842124)

[3. Artistic context of SP and a computer recognition tool 15](#_Toc42842126)

[4. Classification in ML 16](#_Toc42842127)

[5. The human prototypical and categorical perception and conceptual schemes 16](#_Toc42842128)

[C. A structuralist approach to SP 18](#_Toc42842134)

[1. Preliminary remarks: Context and scope of my personal observations 18](#_Toc42842135)

[2. Mapping of concepts from different spaces onto signs in the physical space of/around the body: the origin of SP signs 18](#_Toc42842146)

[3. Sign overloading: polysemes and technical approaches to concepts in SP 22](#_Toc42842148)

[4. Personal observations during SP practice 26](#_Toc42842149)

[5. The SP grammar 28](#_Toc42842150)

[D. Meta-structures of SP: communication outside sign language, configurations, conventions and diffusion mechanisms 39](#_Toc42842172)

[1. Preliminary remark: what we mean when we say “SP” 39](#_Toc42842173)

[2. SP as a complex communication form 39](#_Toc42842174)

[3. Configurations of SP practices and performances 40](#_Toc42842175)

[4. Concluding remark: the meaning of SP as its use 46](#_Toc42842176)

[IV. Practical part: SP recognition with Max/MSP 47](#_Toc42842178)

[A. A new configuration: motivations, goals, workflow & challenges 47](#_Toc42842179)

[1. Motivations 47](#_Toc42842180)

[2. Goals 49](#_Toc42842181)

[3. Workflow and challenges: a review of literature 49](#_Toc42842182)

[B. The big picture 49](#_Toc42842183)

[1. General overview of the system 49](#_Toc42842184)

[2. The choice of Max/MSP 52](#_Toc42842185)

[Description of each layer 52](#_Toc42842186)

[C. 52](#_Toc42842187)

[1. Part 1: Motion tracking inputs 52](#_Toc42842188)

[2. Part 2: Signs & dictionary management 63](#_Toc42842190)

[3. Part 3: Real-time classifiers, regression or DTW models 67](#_Toc42842192)

[4. Part 4: Grammar parsing 70](#_Toc42842194)

[5. Part 5: Orchestra simulation 76](#_Toc42842196)

[D. Performance aspects 77](#_Toc42842197)

[1. PoseNet and Wekinator settings 77](#_Toc42842198)

[2. Threading 78](#_Toc42842199)

[E. Learning in SP and numerical tool 79](#_Toc42842200)

[F. Potential & future of the tool 79](#_Toc42842201)

[1. Emotion recognition 79](#_Toc42842202)

[2. Classification problem with CRF 80](#_Toc42842204)

[3. The future 80](#_Toc42842205)

[4. "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work." 80](#_Toc42842206)

[V. Conclusion 80](#_Toc42842207)

[VI. Bibliographie 80](#_Toc42842208)

# Theoretical part

## A brief history of Soundpainting

### Back in Woodstock 1974: emergence in emergency

The emergence of SP is well documented by its creator Walter Thompson in the first SP workbook “Soundpainting, The Art of Live Composition” (Walter Thompson, 2006):

Woodstock during the 1970s was an important place for the growth of creative music. This was largely due to The Creative Music School (CMS), founded by Karl Berger whose vision was to invite composers and performers such as John Cage, Ed Blackwell, Carlos Santana, Don Cherry, Anthony Braxton, and Carla Bley among others, to give 2-week master classes with the students and often each session would culminate with a performance.

The CMS was, in the earlier years, closed during summer and many of the students would stay and live in Woodstock until the school re-opened. During Thompson’s first summer he organized jam sessions with these students and formed his first orchestra. His group included 22 musicians and 7 dancers – the dancers would improvise to material performed by the musicians. Thompson produced a series of 3 concerts at Woodstock’s Kleinert/James Gallery. The focus of his work with the orchestra was on compositions incorporating sections of open form improvisation. It was during these early days that Thompson created his first signs that would later grow to become the Soundpainting language.

The first gestures of Soundpainting were created in the moment during the opening concert. Thompson had notated a composition where the basic rule for each player, when performing a solo improvisation, was to make a relationship to the notated material. The first person to take a solo did not follow the rule and Thompson felt that in order to maintain the integrity of the piece he needed to come up with a way to guide the composition behind the soloist. He decided to create a sign asking the other performers to play a specific content behind the soloist. In the moment, he created the gesture Long Tone and pointed at several players and gestured to them to begin. The Long Tone gesture was easily understood and executed by the performers and a few minutes later Thompson created the gesture Pointillism which was also readily understood and performed. After the concert Thompson continued to develop his signs and over the next few years in Woodstock Thompson would develop 40 new gestures.

In 1980 he moved to New York City and formed The Walter Thompson Orchestra (then known as The Walter Thompson Big Band). During the first year with his orchestra, while conducting one of his notated works in concert in Brooklyn, New York, Thompson wanted to communicate with his orchestra and decided to use some of his signs. Trumpet 2 was soloing and during his solo Thompson asked one of the other trumpet players to create a repetitive background behind the soloist and he signed the phrase: Trumpet 1, Background, With, 2-Measure, Feel; Watch Me, and then beat a 4 pattern to bring Trumpet 1 in but, Trumpet 1 did not respond, he stared at Thompson with a blank look. Thompson had never used his signs with his new orchestra and they had no idea what was meant by the gestures. A week later at rehearsal several members of the orchestra asked what the signing was about. Thompson taught the orchestra a few signs and they responded favorably to it and encouraged Thompson to continue developing the language. During the next 10 years, Thompson developed Soundpainting into a comprehensive sign language comprising more than 200 gestures for composing in real time with musicians.

One important remark is that SP has emerged in emergency. At the opposite of oral and written languages that we know have emerged and developed in thousands of years, Thompson had to construct signs and a syntax that he thought the orchestra would understand on the fly without being able to discuss prior conventions.

Even though later, signs were discussed and learned with conventions, the fact that signs must be learned and understood quickly had important consequences that will discuss later.

What Thompson describes is what turned out to be the most common configuration of SP: a single composer (sometimes a few) that faces an orchestra of performers. The soundpainter creates requests to the performers using the sign language in real-time, during the performance. At the exception of two signs, the performers do not sign to the composer but rather propose material that he will shape and compose with.

### Developments

#### A multidisciplinary language

One of the most important development of SP in the 90’s and later is its use with several disciplines: music, dance, acting, all visual arts, sculpture… Recently, SP was even used to control a swarm of drones (Couture, Bottecchia, Chaumette, Cecconello, & Rekalde, 2017), showing the diversity of instruments and disciplines it can be meaningful to.

Walter explains that “Performers first learning Soundpainting won’t relate it to any specific discipline because of its multidisciplinary applications. [He] created many of the gestures from concepts found in theatre, music, dancing, visual arts, and happenings in everyday life. Since Soundpainting is a not a discipline-based language dancers, musicians, actors, and visual artists never have difficulty understanding the meaning of the gestures.”

To the question “Are all your gestures intended to be interpretable by both musicians and dancers?”, he answers: “Yes. That is to say, all the Sculpting gestures – the gestures indicating what content to be performed. Of course, there are gestures such as C Major 7 Chord and Jump that are obviously discipline-specific but most of the gestures traverse the disciplines” (Minors & Thompson, s.d.).

The multi-disciplinary component of SP is now at the core of its definition, although at first it was designed for musicians. We will see in a next part of this report what mechanisms allowed to extend the language to several disciplines.

#### Fertility in Europe, worldwide spread in Western societies, the construction of a community and the beginning of the normalization of SP

##### An important spread and growth in Western societies

Walter gave his first SP workshop in Europe in the late 90’s and found a very fertile ground for the growth of Soundpainting in France, which is now probably its largest community over the world.

Soundpainting is now used for on every populated continent, especially in the Western world.[[1]](#footnote-1)  
A community is born around Walter Thompson as well as several SP orchestras on top of the Walter Thompson Orchestra which he started soundpainting with.

##### A living and expanding language

Several artists created new signs for their own needs with their particular groups and performance configurations: the language has evolved with the contribution of new soundpainters, creating now more than 1500 signs.  
Thompson is still the main figure of SP and gave himself a special role in keeping the language normalized and universal. He leads think tanks, community groups and discussions, the construction of glossaries and dictionaries where the signs, their meanings and uses are discussed.

Two conflictual views of on SP are observed:   
On one hand the idea of SP as a language in constant evolution, whose rules and definitions are changing over time as people transform it for their own use; an element of culture that can fundamentally not be owned and controlled. This representation is close to the one of other languages whose diversities and divergent evolutions are well-known throughout history.  
On the other hand, SP is considered as a creation (moreover, with a living creator) that cannot legitimately be transformed by anyone under the same name and whose transformations must be discussed and eventually approved by its creator and the members of the community.

This conflict is also found in several societies between institutions that claim to have an authority on both the syntactic rules of a language and its dictionary and speakers who are constantly transforming the language irrespectively of the approval or control of these institutions.

In his WB2, Thompson writes: “In order to address the needs of growth and to keep the language from spreading into hundreds of separate dialects or patois, each year experienced Soundpainters come together to further develop the language in what are known as Soundpainting Think Thanks”.

The need for normalization and the concern that a language might drift and be so split apart that two speakers would have trouble understanding each other are also found with other sign languages. For instance in France, where SP has grown rapidly, we can find a lot of divergent views on the French Sign Language which although being much older, has a number of speakers relatively low who only recently in history started forming a visible community and has very little literature that describes its grammatical rules and structure.[[2]](#footnote-2)  
It is often said that “there are no mistakes in SP” and Thompson’s view is that “It is much more interesting and challenging to Soundpaint with the so-called mistake than to acknowledge one has been made. [His] experience has been that composing with the mistake is quite often a more interesting direction to take the composition than any I could think of.” (Minors & Thompson, s.d.)  
But if mistakes are interesting of the side of the performer, is it any different on the side of the soundpainter? We will see that the definition of a “mistake” is conventional, and we will discuss the role of conventions as meta-structures of SP in a next section. At this point, it is important to point out that languages evolve from mistakes and that a different judgement is applied in SP depending on whether the mistake is on the side of the soundpainter or the performer (as interpreter).

Soundpainting is presented by Thompson as “the universal multidisciplinary live composing sign language for musicians, actors, dancers, and visual Artists” language (Thompson, s.d.). One may question whether SP is indeed universal and unique. We will see in a next section that they are other sign languages in history that have multiple similarities with SP.

At first, Thompson had protected the name “SP” as his own intellectual property but has then changed his mind and removed its record. This may be a sign of the evolution of his view on these perspectives as well.

#### The revisited orchestras

While SP has developed around a prototypical configuration involving a composer and an orchestra of performers, research[[3]](#footnote-3) in soundpainting and performance has shown the potential of using the language not only for a frontal performance linking a composer and performers but as a communication and synthesis language between the performers themselves and as a interacting language with the public.  
Thompson himself speaks about the creation of “one handed signs” in SP as the transformation of the language in response to his need soundpaint while performing, so that he could continue to play while communicate with other performers using SP signs.  
In each case, the traditional frontiers between the soundpainter as a composer and the performers as the orchestra are blurry and sometimes irrelevant to describe I what I will conceptualize in further sections as different configurations of SP.

## Historical and theoretical context to SP

To better understand the adoption of SP in the Western culture and the conceptual systems that it is based on, we will discuss some historical and theoretical elements of context that relates to the notion of sign language, real time composition and the use of signs for conducting in music and arts.

These notions will also bring important theoretical concepts that I will use to analyze some mechanisms of SP in linguistic terms.

### Signs and linguistics

First, I would like to review the notion of sign language in linguistics that will allow us to better understand SP as a language.

#### Theories of signs

The most basic definition of a sign is that it is something that stands for something else. The discipline that deal with this notion is called semiotics, and linguistics is basically a sub-discipline of semiotics as our language itself is a system of signs (Brock, Semantics #1 - Signs and Meaning in Language). I would like to introduce a few theories on signs that will help us understanding the processes of SP.

##### De Saussure signified and signifier

Due to his theories on the structure of language, the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure  (1857-1913)  is often known as the founder of modern linguistics (DecodingScience, s.d.).

The main idea brought by De Saussure is that a sign is made of two components (the so-called “egg model”):

* A signified, which is the concept or meaning part of the sign (the sign’s “content”)
* A signifier that represents the signified (the sign’s “body”)

Moreover, he claims that the relation between the signifier and signified is conventional and arbitrary (it could be something else).

##### Charles Sanders Peirce

Charles Sanders Peirce proposed a more complex classification of theory of signs in triadic elements (Peirce, 1903). For instance, he claims that signs can be categorized in three classes:

* Symbols: arbitrary signs that must be learned
* Icons: signs for content and bodies that are similar in look, sound, smell or taste
* Indices (or index): signs that are caused by the thing they stand for or bear close connection between body and content

For Peirce, the most versatile signs are symbols because they can express more abstract and complex concepts.

#### Communication

##### Elements of communication

Even though more complex models have been proposed since, we find the basic elements of communication in the theory of Shannon (Shannon, 1948), that will help us naming the different processes and operators in SP:

* Source: Shannon calls this element the "information source", which "produces a message or sequence of messages to be communicated to the receiving terminal."
* Sender: Shannon calls this element the "transmitter", which "operates on the message in some way to produce a signal suitable for transmission over the channel." In Aristotle, this element is the "speaker" (orator).
* Channel: For Shannon, the channel is "merely the medium used to transmit the signal from transmitter to receiver."
* Receiver: For Shannon, the receiver "performs the inverse operation of that done by the transmitter, reconstructing the message from the signal."
* Destination: For Shannon, the destination is "the person (or thing) for whom the message is intended".
* Message: from Latin mittere, "to send". The message is a concept, information, communication, or statement that is sent in a verbal, written, recorded, or visual form to the recipient.

##### Communication models

Three types of models for communication are generally presented: the linear mode, the interactive model and the transactional model.

###### The linear model

The linear model represents one-way communication, as a transfer of a message from the source to the destination. The sender encodes the message, for instance with sign language, that is decoded by the receiver. There is no feedback in this model.

###### The interactive model

The interactive model represents 2-way but asynchronous communication, like message exchanges over the internet. It considers the feedback, the context and notions of behavior for both intentional and unintentional communication.

###### The transactional model

The transactional model views communication as occurring simultaneously, each person being both a sender and receiver at the same time, even though the language of the communication is not always the same (while someone is speaking, others can react with gestures or unintentional communication forms).

#### Some elements of syntax

In the next parts of this report, we are going to use some elements of syntax that I would like to introduce prior to the discussion on SP grammar.

##### Hierarchical structures

It is common in Western languages[[4]](#footnote-4) to find hierarchical elements and structures of syntax. For instance, most basic elements of syntax are called “words”; in our case, they correspond to single signs. These elements can be assembled to form phrases. Each phrase performs a single function in a clause, which is the most basic unit of meaning in the larger sentence.

For instance, let’s consider the following sentences in English and SP:

“My brother, drives; but he doesn’t drive, very well.”  
“Percussions Actor 1, long tone, slowly enter;.”

I have separated each word/sign by a space, a few phrases by a comma[[5]](#footnote-5), each clause by a semicolon, and noted the end of the sentence by a final point.

##### Functions

Each element of the syntax performs several functions at different levels, for instance at the clause level or at the phrase level. Examples of these functions in English are “verb”, “noun phrase”, “noun”, “object predicative” …

#### Context-free, context-sensitive and regular languages

In order to introduce the parsing mechanisms of my recognition tool, I would like to explain some of the basic concepts of context free/sensitive grammars and how their can be parsed by automata.

##### Context sensitive grammars

Context sensitive grammars describe the grammars of oral and written languages we are familiar with, such as English. As its name suggest, it means that to find the function of an element in the sentence, it may be necessary to know about the context, i.e. the other elements that surrounds it.

One important theorem is that all context-sensitive grammars are described by a linear bounded automaton (LBA) that could for instance be implemented on a computer. (Hopcroft)

##### Context-free grammars

At the opposite of context-sensitive grammars, context-free grammars describe languages in which it is not necessary to know about the context to find the function of an element. Context-free grammars are therefore a subset of context-sensitive grammars.

For instance, consider the grammar made of the following production rules:

S -> WHO WHAT HOW WHEN  
WHO -> identifier  
WHAT -> content  
HOW -> modifier | ε  
WHEN-> go gesture

where “WHO”, “WHAT”, “HOW”, “WHEN” are non-terminal symbols (representing abstract structures in the grammar), “identifier”, “content”, “modifier”, “go gesture” are terminal symbols representing words or signs in the sentence, S is the start symbol (sentence symbol), ε the empty string symbol and | the “or” logical operator.   
This grammar would only produce two different sentences:

* “identifier content modifier go gesture”
* “identifier content go gesture”

Because the production rules on the left side only contain one element, it is possible to find the function of each element in the sentence without the context. This grammar is therefore a context-free grammar.[[6]](#footnote-6)

One important theorem is that all context-free grammars can be described by a pushdown automaton, which is a finite state automaton with an infinite “stack” attached.

##### Regular grammars

A regular grammar is a specific sub-set of context-free grammars that form the so-called “regular expressions”.

A grammar such as the one presented in the previous part is a regular grammar.

One important theorem is all regular grammars can be described by a (deterministic) finite state automaton, also called a finite state machine (FSM).

#### Parsing

Parsing, also called syntactic analysis, is the process of analyzing string of symbols (or sentences) that are described by a grammar. It can be performed by different types of automata, depending on the type of grammar that is considered.

#### Linguistics in generative music

The contemporary field of generative music found interest for many models from linguistic to describe and generate music.

Often implemented in computers and used for experimental music, real-time jazz accompaniment and improvisation to Beatles-like song production, probabilistic models such as Hidden Markov Models are increasingly being used these last decades in research and recent production and composition software, such as Max/MSP.

### Gestural signs for communication: a long history

In this part, we will have a short overview of the use of gestural signs for communication in history and highlight the different motivations for using gestures in all cases.

#### Cheironomy

Cheironomy is defined by Hickmann as “textually the direction of a musical ensemble by the movements of the hand” (Huglo, 1963). It is employed to refer to the use of controlled, regular and organized movements that is mostly encountered in texts about the arts of movement: music, dance and pantomime.   
For instance, in the modern artform, conductors tend to hoist batons for indicating melodic curves and ornaments.

##### First traces in antiquity

We know from sculptures and paintings from antique Egypt (at least 4 000 years from now) that Epgyptians used a form of cheironomy to indicate several pitches and rythms, sometimes as they were singing, athough singer and cheironome were in principle two different roles.

In Greece, ascendant and descendant movements of the hand were also used during antiquity to indicate whether the next note was higher or lower in pitch. Cheironomy was then considered a from of art (Pâris).

##### Cheironomy in middle ages

Cheironomy had an important place for the direction of Gregorian chant from the middle ages to the 16th century.   
Gregorian chant has extensively used the notation system of neumes. In fact, the most ancient neumatic notations of music were also called cheironomic notations and the grec “neuma” refers to the latin “nutus” according to the grammarian Comminianus and was used prior to the notations of music on parchment to signify a vocal exercise. Michel Huglo makes the conjecture that cheironomy was in fact the ancestor of the neumatic notation (Huglo, 1963).

In the 11th century, the famous “hand” of Guido d’Arezzo is another example of the musical cheironomy during the middle ages.

Of these systems were used as learning methods and as memorization helpers. Later, they will be abandoned for written notations but they are still part of the musical learning in some regions of the world such as India and may be considered the ancestors of today’s conduction techniques.

#### Sign languages in the deaf communities

Sign languages are most known for their extensive use in deaf communities. Their emergence among deaf is reported several times both late and recent history.[[7]](#footnote-7)

One of the first sign language that was reported in the deaf communities and that is a partial ancestor to many other sign languages including the American Sign Language is the French Sign Language. FSL has however been forbidden since 1880 and only officially re-approved in schools in 1991.

##### As an artistic element

As an artistic element, the sign languages that come from deaf communities are also used outside of this community as a way of exploring new expression means with the body; indeed, they make extensive use of facial expressions and iconic gestures, similarly to theater, dance and other artistic disciplines.

###### In theater and dance

Inside the deaf communities themselves, several artists use their sign language as an expressive and artistic element. In 1977, the deaf American artist Alfredo Corrado creates the International Visual Theater in Paris to lead research in non-verbal theater and sign language as artistic tools.[[8]](#footnote-8)

###### “Sign singing”

Recently, several artists started creating and adapting songs in sign language, called sign singing in English or “chansigne” in French. Lyrics may be translated in sign language but already composed in sign language directly. It is now taught in a few places, such as the “Opéra comique” in Paris as a discipline in its own right.

#### Monastic sign languages

Monastic sign languages have been used in Europe from at least the 10th century by Christian monks and are still in use today, not only in Europe but also in Japan, China and the USA. Unlike deaf sign languages, they are better understood as simple signs lexicons and forms of communication that could be used when silence was required or as memory aids rather than languages.

#### Butch Morris’ Conduction

Aside SP, there are a few other sign systems that are also used for conducting of composing in real time with musicians or other disciplines as well. The main one, that is also a reference in the SP community is “Conduction”.

##### Conduction

“The New York cornetist, Butch Morris, has also developed a system of signals for musical purposes. Morris's system, known as conduction, has been exhaustively documented (notably in Mandel 1999), and depends on a much smaller number of gestures (around 30) than Thompson's (around

[1500 in 2020]). In an interview (Mandel 1999:65), Morris describes conduction, not so much as a language in Thompson's terms, but as a ‘gestural vocabulary’:

*‘Through my gestural vocabulary the improvisers and audience start to hear the music happen. You don't just hear the music happen, you start to hear it happen, and then all of a sudden, it happens.’”* (Duby, 2006)

Butch Morris describes conduction in the following terms:

“Conduction (conducted interpretation/ improvisation) is a vocabulary of ideographic signs and gestures activated to modify or construct a real time musical arrangement or composition. Each sign and gesture transmits generative information for interpretation and provides instantaneous possibilities for altering or initiating harmony, melody, rhythm, articulation, phrasing or form.” (All About Jazz)

##### Ritmo y Percusión con Señas

More recently, we have seen the emerging of other signs systems; I would like to mention “Ritmo y Percusión con Señas”:

“Rhythm and Percussion with Signs is an innovative way to play percussion created by the Argentinian musician Santiago Vázquez, who was Inspired by Conduction [by Morris]. Santiago was looking for a way to communicate certain information to musicians improvising percussion, in order to generate coordination and harmonization of a spontaneous creativity.

Through these attempts, little by little he codified a language consisting in approximately 150 signs executed with hands and body by the conductor in order to coordinate the flux of group improvisation.” (La Percumotora)

### SP in the artistic landscape and computer music

SP and Thompson’s practice enters in the wider movements of music and arts of their generations. In this section, I would like to superficially explore the artistical landscape in which SP lies (focusing on music only) and identify in computer music the potential of linking SP to machines.

#### Artistic context to SP

In general, the 20th century can be thought in music as the century of ruptures, divergences and exploration of new forms of performances and productions.

We can identify at the time of the development of SP a great number of esthetics in the production of music but also a specific interest for new production processes, such as algorithmic, aleatory, serialism and stochastic music and many other compositional techniques that would also involve machines such as computers (electronic, concrete music, etc), for instance in France with Pierre Henry, Pierre Boulez and Iannis Xenakis.

Thompson also was influenced by Anthony Braxon and the genre of free jazz; his encounter with François Jeanneau, a pioneer of French free jazz was the start of a long collaboration and Jeanneau is now a leading figure in SP.

#### Computer music

Computer music is the use of computing technology in music composition, from sound synthesis to algorithmic composition programs.

Today, the widespread availability of relatively affordable digital audio workstations (DAWs) and the growth of home recording studios has brought computer music everywhere in the landscape of music production and diffusion. Aside the notion of computer music for composition only, the use of digital tools for recording, processing and diffusing sound make computers the most widely used interface for music creation.

The potential of computers and digital tools is to my opinion still not expressed in SP and the construction of a recognition tool could be an important step in that way.

### Classification in ML

In machine learning and statistics, classification is the problem of identifying to which of a set of categories a new observation belongs, based on a training set of data containing observations whose category membership is known. It is typically achieved with a supervised learning procedure.

A supervised learning procedure comprises 3 phases:

* First, a ground truth dataset is constructed from our prior knowledge of what output values for our samples should be. The dataset comprises one or several training examples.
* Then, an algorithm is used to “learn” iteratively a function that, given a sample of data and desired outputs, best approximates the relationship between input and output observable in the data. Several algorithms can be used for this process.
* Finally, the “learned” function that we call “model” can be used to classify new data.

### The human prototypical and categorical perception and conceptual schemes

The human categorical perception scheme plays a very important role in the construction of basic artistic concepts such as note, pitch, scale, line, hit… by constructing discrete categories out of a continuous set of elements (frequency, time, space, color, etc). One can think of these schemes, that contain innate and learn (cultural) parts, as processes of identification and classification.

We know from research in psychology (Rosch, 1973) that a single concept can be modeled as a category of elements around a prototype, considered as the central point of the category. Moreover, people tend to define the concept itself by the characteristic traits of the prototype, whereas in general, it extends beyond such a definition: the prototypical scheme rejects the discrete notion of ‘limit’ or ‘border’, replaced by the continuous notions of graded membership (similarity to the prototype) and the fuzzy edges of concepts (Brock, Semantics #4 - Prototype Theory). But on top of the prototypical scheme, the categorical scheme introduces a rupture by either accepting or rejection an element inside the category based on its similarity with the prototype.

#### Remarks on analogy

In his conference “Analogy as the core of cognition” (Hofstadter, 2009), Hofstadter says the following: “Categorization is the name of the cognition game and analogy is the mechanism that drives it all”.

As we talk about the categorical scheme of perception of humans, it is important to mention analogy as responsible for the extension of a concept from its prototype and as the main process behind the evaluation of similarity. In fact, Hofstadter defines making an analogy as raising the similar features of two mental things.

#### A side-note on conceptual space

In all previous discussion, I have considered the idea of boundaries between concepts, just like if we could model the space of concepts as a 2D or 3D space where all concepts would be clusters of points around a center. In fact, this model is only valid as long as we consider each concept individually.

When describing the combination of concepts, we can no longer think of them as such. For instance, the German way of constructing words is a very explicit example of the hierarchical construction of some concepts.  
Whereas it is also clear that concepts are not either hierarchical structures, they do embed some form of hierarchy, such as studied in research in ontologies in the field of Digital Humanities.

As a final word, I would like to mention the quantum-like formalism as one of the most promising models for describing concepts and the way they interfere with each other, although they have no explanatory power[[9]](#footnote-9) (Aerts, Broekaert, Gabora, & Sozzo, 2016).

## A structuralist approach to SP

Now that we have seen a bit of the development of SP and the theoretical background it lies in, I would like to propose a model of Soundpainting that would explicit its construction mechanisms as a sign language, as well as the implicit operations that makes it an efficient language for art performance.

My approach is a structuralist approach: I will focus on the structures of SP at several levels, in a bottom-top approach rather than the description of the constitutive elements themselves.

### Preliminary remarks: Context and scope of my personal observations

The reader must be aware that this section is mostly based on my personal observations of and participation in SP performances, mostly as a performer with only a limited number of groups (7) during the past 7 years (most of my experience however comes from the last 3 years).

Moreover, I only have one experience of SP outside Europe (Brasil), while my experiences in Europe are in France and Switzerland only.

While I will try in the following sections to speak about SP as objectively as possible, I will use the first-person pronoun to indicate my own analyses and points of view.

The reader is invited to compare my observation with his and criticize the models and interpretation I give in this section.

### Mapping of concepts from different spaces onto signs in the physical space of/around the body: the origin of SP signs

When we speak of sign language, we usually speak of gestural sign languages, in which the signs are expressed with gestures. In linguistic terms, all languages are sign languages. In this section, I would like to discuss the formation of signs using gestures in SP as a mapping of concepts from different conceptual spaces onto the physical space of the body.

In mathematics, a mapping[[10]](#footnote-12) is often described by a function from a domain (the input space) to a codomain (the output space). In the case of SP, I would like to identify several conceptual spaces from which it constructed its own concepts (several input spaces) and identify several output spaces that may be signs with the body but also imaginary spaces around it that are significant in SP.

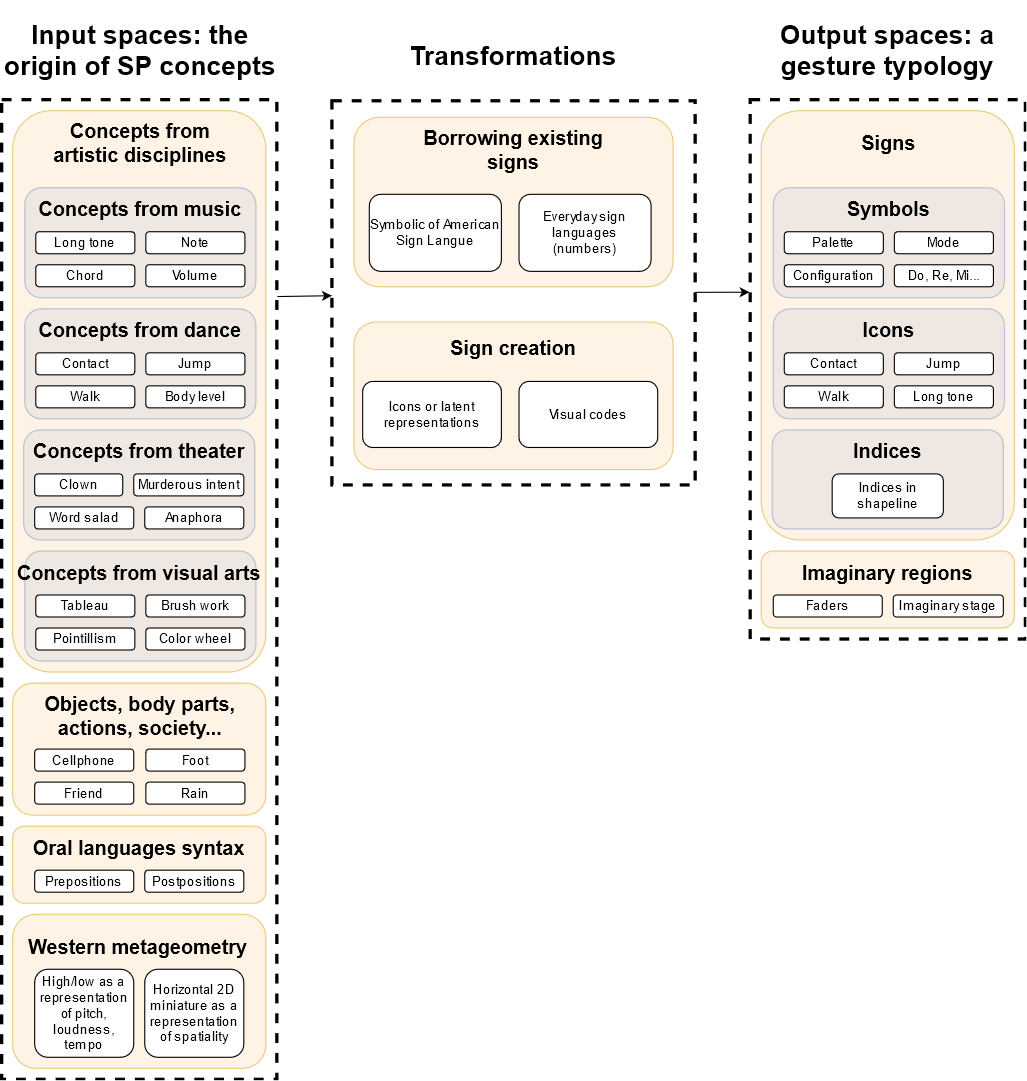


Figure 1 SP as a transformation scheme (a mapping) from several conceptual spaces to different gestures types

#### Input spaces

We can identify several repertoires (sources) of concepts as different input spaces of the mapping scheme of SP.

##### Concepts from artistic disciplines

The first input space that I would like to consider is the space of concepts from existing artistic disciplines. As Thompson says, “I created many of the gestures from concepts found in theatre, music, dancing, visual arts […].”

We usually identify the origins of the concepts from their names: “Long Tone” (from music, although “tone” itself could also refer to visual arts), “Brush Work” (visual arts – painting), “Tempo” (music), “Volume” (music), “Snapshot” (visual arts – photography), “Hit” (dance, music), etc.

##### Cultural representations of pitch

However, SP also has several gestures that are born from cultural representations proper to Western context, such as the concept of height for describing a sound (e.g. high and low).

Even though the concepts of volume, tempo or pitch may be universal, their mapping onto a low/high axis is part of the *metageometry,* (i.e. the rationalization of the spatial condition of knowledge) of modern societies, that use space and time (we already saw the example of cheironomy) to represent relations in music. In fact, the music intelligibility of qualities such as the frequency of sound through representations in space is common to many musical civilizations but the choice of particular orientations in space is arbitrary and varies with cultures and history:

“ Ni arbitraire, ni naturellement perçue, la *hauteur* du son est – l’histoire du concept le montre - le résultat d'une construction rationnelle, à parti d’une perception primitive préférentielle sans spatialité, la qualité grave-aigu, sur laquelle elle est superposée, et que, grâce à l'éducation, elle transforme en *perception conceptuelle.* Cette construction rationnelle, bien que très répandue, n’est ni générale, ni, sans doute, définitive.” (Duchez, 1979).

She argues that already in ancient Greece, one would speak about voice with movements, about the location of a sound or intervals as a distance between sounds: there was already a clear notion of spatiality in the descriptions of sounds. However, it is in the 9th century that the rationalization of pitch in terms of height appeared with the prominence of Gregorian chant and later became systematic with the development of the notation systems (neumes) and in the pedagogy after the 10th century.

Similarly, the concept of height for representing tempo, volume and sound in general are historical constructions that do find universal basis (sound as a spatiality) but whose precise orientations and projections on the vertical axis are culturally defined conventions.

##### Objects, body parts, actions, society…

To the question “In what way would you say your gestures are culturally determined (specific to Western contexts)?”, Thompson respond: “The gestures are culturally determined in a sense that their physicality is created from what we see in everyday life such as events occurring on television, computers, people in crowds, sports, etc.”.

While from the previous, point, it may be clear that forgets some cultural representations in the construction of signs, SP does indeed borrows concepts from the Western culture that refer to objects, body parts or actions: “Cellphone”, “Drone”, “Tear up”, “Chair”, “Cops”, “Change This”, “Blinders”, “Prepare”, “Sprinkle”, “Mouth”, “Open”, “Close”, “Woman”, etc.

##### Elements of syntax from the grammars of Western oral and written languages

Additionally, SP borrows some elements of grammar from other languages, in particular adpositional elements (prepositions and postpositions): “with”, “within”, “without”, “through”, “go back to”, “go onto”, “enter next cycle”, etc.

We will see in future section that the instruction of these element fundamentally changes the SP from a context-free to context-sensitive grammar.

#### Mappings and output spaces: gesture typology

Now that we have described the main input spaces from which SP borrows or construct concepts, I would like to identify 4 typologies of transformations of the concepts to the body space: three types of signs (according to Peirce’s classifications of signs) and one *metageometry* that does not exactly act as a sign but rather as a underlying scheme for signs that represent space or frequency.

It is implicit that all SP gestures do not enter exactly in one category only; there is at least a symbolic component to each sign, while they may also carry several elements of iconicity.

##### Creation of a symbol

Symbols in SP may appear as the less convenient type of sign (despite Peirce’s argument of versatility): because they do not convey an image of what they represent and are mere conventions, they may be difficult to memorize and transform.   
There are a few symbols created in SP, for instance “Palette”, “Mode”, “Configuration”, notes, chords, “Melody”, etc, in which I could hardly see any iconicity.

##### Borrowing of a symbol from another sign language

It is interesting to note that some symbols in SP come from other sign languages, especially the American Sign Language: “Bullshit”, “Man” and “Women” are some examples of these.

##### Creation of an icon

In his interview with Helen Minors, Thompson says:  
“Some of the gestures I created are quite iconic such as Long Tone and Pointillism and others have little or no visual relation to the material to be performed. I created the Play gesture from the movement used when Bowling – the release of the ball. I modified the movement to incorporate two hands. Many other gestures share a similar history. I may also add the gestures of the Soundpainting language are not [usually] based on the language for the deaf or hard of hearing.” (Minors & Thompson, s.d.)

Duby also remarks that “the iconic element of the gestures of Soundpainting is often conveyed in a humorous manner. For example, the “Rock” gesture, in which the soundpainter clenches the fist (to mimic throwing a rock), can be interpreted quite literally "to mean what it says," but at the same time the punning visual element in this gesture lends it an ironic, tongue-in-cheek quality. In this sense, many of the gestures have a double meaning, functioning both as icons and as ironic reflections of an unproblematic iconicity. (Duby, 2006)

As additional examples, one can think of “Break”, “Change” and “Volume” (as the icons for the letter C V of “change” and “volume”), “Match”, etc, as iconic signs.

Whatever the intent from the creator of the signs is, it is also remarkable that icons are very performative: slight changes in the icon could be also interpreted as such conceptually and their memorization is made easier by the clear reference they provide to the concept they signify.

##### Use of indices

Indices are rather difficult to observe in SP (I think they are the less usual type of sign among those that are commonly use to describe SP) and I can here only point to their use in “Shapeline”, a SP mode in which all signs – not only SP signs – must be interpreted by the performers, in which the soundpainter use indices (just like an actor). To my knowledge, there are no indices in SP signs outside those used in shapeline.

##### The imaginary regions

###### The imaginary staff

In his website, Thomson introduces the “imaginary staff”:

“The Imaginary Staff: An imaginary vertical field 1 and ½ meters (3 ½ feet) just in front of the Soundpainter that indicates low to high pitch range with sound and slow to fast movement with certain gestures such as a Long Tone. Note: The name Imaginary Staff is derived from music language. It is related to the music staff, which is a set of five parallel lines with spaces between them, on which notes are written to indicate their pitch.” (Thompson, s.d.)

This region is an explicit reference to the representation of pitch in terms of height in the Western culture, which Duchez refers to as an element of the *metageometry* of Western culture.

###### The imaginary stage

He also describes an “imaginary stage” as the following:

“The Imaginary Stage: A horizontal field (like a small square table top) approximately ¾ of a meter for each side (3/4 of a yard squared) at waist height positioned just in front of the Soundpainter. The Imaginary Stage is the region in which the Soundpainter indicates movement directions on the stage – where the movement will travel to and from. Such gestures as Directions and Space Fader are both signed on the Imaginary Stage.” (Thompson, s.d.)

This time, it is not a representation in terms of height that is implied but rather a 2D miniaturization of space and the cultural concept of stages that are invoked in his description.

###### The creation of an “imaginary region”

These representations share common traits:

* They are the result of at least three operations:
  + spatialization (or re-spatialization in the case of the stage), that one could also call a projection
  + orientation
  + evaluation
* Their relative character (there is no absolute value or measure in each representation), therefore they function as a relational space
* Their function as underlying scheme for several signs in soundpainting

Similarly, to the frequency of the sound, tempo or volume, height as a spatial evaluation is the basis of many “faders” that can represent complexity, “asshole”-ness (the asshole fader); exaggeration, age, amplitude, body level, gravity, etc.

Other “faders” – faders are the main type of imaginary regions in SP – use the horizontal axis rather than the vertical one, such as the density fader or the “more space” fader. It is interesting to note that the choice of the horizontal dimension is directly linked to the representation of space.

##### A deeper look in the mapping process: the visual codes

From the typology that I have introduced, one may wonder at a more fundamental level what the mapping process relies on and how exactly the sign is constructed visually by its creator and understood by other people.  
As a first answer to this complex question, I would like to point out the analysis of SP visual codes by Yerlikaya and Coskuner (Yerlikaya & Coskumer, 2016), that brings finer element of interpretation to the signs that explicate how they may have been formed intentionally or not by their creator.

For instance, they analyze the “knowledge of visual contract” in the sign “Whole group” as “Circle [that] evokes the concepts like a round table or a ring. It incorporates the constructs as whole, being together etc.” among several visual codes that are sometimes relevant to explain the signifier-signified relation.

### Sign overloading: polysemes and technical approaches to concepts in SP

In Thompson’s interview with Helen Minors, she asks: “Pitch is reliant on a Western concept of height in relation to sound (e.g. high and low), replying on our metaphorical understanding of music. How would you expect a dancer/actor to respond to this musically determined gesture?”.   
Thompson responds that “Pitch is a frequency and its tempo governs whether the sound is low, middle, or high. Movement takes place in space and is also governed by tempo. When a musician is signed a Long Tone (middle range) they choose a pitch from this region, a dancer signed the same Long Tone will perform sustained movement at a medium tempo. The Long Tone gesture spans all the disciplines. I created the physicality of the Long Tone gesture and just like any spoken language each performer must learn what the gesture means. Being a musician, dancer, actor, visual artist, etc. does not present any discipline-specific problems when learning the signs.” (Minors & Thompson, s.d.)

Despite his questionable definition of pitch and movement as governed by tempo, we can read in his words the analogy underlying the significance of the notion of pitch in both music and dance.

We have seen that SP is a multi-disciplinary sign language, i.e. that a single sign can be used to signify a content[[11]](#footnote-13) not only for different instruments of the same discipline (1) but also across discipline (2). This what I call the “overloading” of a sign.[[12]](#footnote-14) Moreover, it is the result of a historical construction of SP: it is only several years after its creation for composing music by Thompson that existing and new signs started being overloaded.

In this section, I will try to show that

* each sign refers to a different concept in each discipline (at the contrary of Thompson’s statements[[13]](#footnote-15))
* multi-disciplinary signs are polysemic signs constructed from analogies between different concepts in each discipline
* disciplines are conceptually different from instruments
* the operability of a sign inside a discipline – with different instruments – is a technical operation of translation of the concept of their discipline to the set of producible material realized by the performers

and therefore, that the overloading of signs in (1) and (2) involves mechanisms of different nature.

#### Polysemy of signs across disciplines

We commonly observe signs made of one signifier and several signified in oral languages and our everyday life. When one signifier can stand for several signified, the meaning of the sign is found by an operation of “disambiguation” that depends on its context.   
We call the fact that a sign can have several meanings “polysemy” and such words “polysemes”.

In this part, we will see that multi-disciplinary signs are the main polysemes in SP, having a different meaning to each discipline[[14]](#footnote-16) before discussing the construction process of these multi-disciplinary sign to show that their signified are linked by analogies.

##### Multi-disciplinary signs

To demonstrate the existence of several concepts[[15]](#footnote-17) under a multi-disciplinary sign in SP, let’s take the common example of the LT, that we will use all over this section to demonstrate some of the mechanisms of SP.

For a musician, the LT is a concept preexisting to SP with a specific prototype, whose characteristic traits are “constant volume”, “constant pitch” (among others). But is the concept of the LT for a musician the same as the one for a dancer or a visual artist? To answer this question, let’s first remark that soundpainters often explain how to perform a LT differently for each discipline:

* “A fluid movement, without accent” for dancers
* “A freeze on the first syllable of a word” for actors
* “A note with constant volume and constant pitch over time” for most musicians…

They also often illustrate those descriptions with a prototypical example.

By looking at the description themselves, we can see that they involve different concepts: a “movement”, “roll” or a “syllable”, which cannot be considered equal. Moreover, we know from the history of SP that the concept of a LT was first borrowed from music and “extended” to other disciplines, i.e. that the multiplicity of signified of the sign “LT” is a voluntary construction[[16]](#footnote-18).

Although we illustrated the overloading mechanism with the sign “LT”, we can observe the same mechanism for all multi-disciplinary signs.

##### Analogies as the core of polysemy

We have seen previously that the concepts we are dealing with when referring to a LT or other artistic concepts are the result of a mental classification process. Moreover, we also know from Hofstadter (Hofstadter, 2009) that the similarities between concept are expressed with analogies.

In Thompson’s description of the LT (see previous quote), we can read his interpretation of “tempo” as a common feature between pitch and movement[[17]](#footnote-19). In other descriptions of the LT, one would also find the “esthetic constancy in time” as another possible common feature between them, among others. Some of these features may in particular come from the innate human perception scheme but analogies in general cultural, learned mechanisms.

In his words, it is because of these common features that a movement in dance and a pitch in music can be associated: he forms here an analogy.

The same principles are found with other multi-disciplinary signs, such as “volume” (analogy between the loudness in music, extension of the body in dance, sizes or dimensions in visual arts), “minimalism” (analogy between the repetition of forms, colors and traits in visual arts, of notes and rhythms in music, of movements in dance), “complexity”, etc.

###### Long tone viewed from psychology

Now that we have identified analogies as the core of the polysemy of signs across disciplines, I would like to shortly comment the way a concept (in SP or elsewhere) is usually presented from a definition from the point of view of psychology.

I note that one definition of the LT is usually given for each discipline of the group: because the analogies are in general not obvious (they are conventional at some point), they may require an explication.

About the definitions themselves, wefrom psychology (Rosch, 1973)that they are not representative of the entire concept (and usually, one can find counter-examples to the definition); a ot and cannot: one has to learn what is a LT through practice and exploration of the concept. The role of the soundpainter here is to introduce a prototype of the concept (the LT) for each discipline by giving one or several examples of what it can sound or look like, while the concept will expand in the performer’s mind by constructing materials analogical to the prototype.

One interesting conclusion is that there is not “wrong” long tone; i

Essentially, we can also explain the fact that there are different concepts and prototypes in each discipline by the difference in phenomenon: a sound, a movement, a visual, etc. as each independent concept that cannot be explained by the others.

#### The operability of signs inside a discipline, across instruments

In this part, I would like to discuss the operability of signs across instruments of the same discipline. Although it is the polysemy of multi-disciplinary signs that allow it to be significant in several signs, I will argue that across instruments of the same discipline, a unique concept, represented by its prototype[[18]](#footnote-21), is approached by different technical interpretations, possibly involving the human perception scheme. The term “instrument” is used here as an equivalent of “technical apparatus”.

##### Preliminary remarks about the instrument as technical apparatus

First, I would like to remark that a technical apparatus can be characterized by the set/range of artistic material it can provide. It is not obvious that every instrument (as technical apparatus) can achieve similar concepts: monophonic instruments are not able to perform a chord, resonating instruments can hardly perform staccatos…

In SP however, similar concepts can be requested to very different instruments and I believe that one of its interests is also to push the technical achievement of the performers to the limits of what they can produce with their instruments.

My motivation for this discussion comes from my experience of SP as a percussionist and the questions that I often see arising about how to perform a sign for a specific instrument, even though a definition of its prototype for the discipline as already been shown. From the previous point, one could think that a different concept is required per instrument, in order to perform a SP sign, just like there are different concepts per discipline. In following part, I will reflect on the mechanisms that I use for achieving a LT on percussions and will argue that in each discipline, there is only one concept per SP sign, that does however require non-trivial technical approaches.

##### A LT on percussions

While the experienced performer will probably use different possible techniques intuitively (a fast roll, using brushes, playing on cymbals that have a long acoustic response), there are indices that the achievement of a LT is not as obvious on percussion that on a violin for instance:

* In the vocabulary of percussions, the term “long tone” is not used a lot or at all to describe the performing of a sound. Instead, one would speak of a “roll” for fast, repetitive hits on the percussion, or brushing techniques.
* In SP context, I observed specific discussion between performers and soundpainters on the subject and soundpainters giving examples on how to achieve a LT with percussions, making a translation to “roll”.

In general, every concept do not necessarily have a trivial interpretation for all instrument. I interpret the fact that a “long tone” is not relevant to speak of a sound in percussions as the fact that there is not “easy way” or basic technique that could refer to such a sound.

We have seen that in music, a LT is described by a prototype, whose characteristic traits include a constant volume and pitch over time. On a violin, we do not perceive micro excitations on a string but rather a constant acoustic response to the performer’s long tone. By “percussion” however, it is meant that the acoustic response of the instrument is very sharp, such that listeners are usually able to discern the individual hits on the surface: our perception scheme will identify a note produced by drawing a bow with constant velocity on a violin as a long tone, whereas in general, it will not recognize the percussions sounds with naïve techniques as such.

Conceptually, the percussionist cannot perform the prototype of the LT but only “approach” it with several techniques: in the space of musical concepts as perceived by the human perception scheme, the prototype of the LT is the asymptotical, limit point of the concept of roll when its frequency goes to infinity.

This approach to a concept is to my opinion one interesting feature of SP: it pushes the performers out of what is usually called their “comfort zone” by requesting materials and interactions that are not trivial and favorizes imitation as a collective learning process.

### Cognitive load

My theory is that our categorical and prototypical perception scheme plays an important role on both how performers and soundpainters can interpret the artistic material that is being produced by the group, and how they will respond to the requests, i.e. what content the performer will produce.

I will try to support this theory by analyzing examples from my own experience as a performer, a soundpainter and discussions I had with other performers on the topic of the LT which appears as an easy example to observe some of the underlying schemes of perception and associations of musical concepts.

All 5 experienced soundpainters I have worked with teach the concept of a long tone by giving both characteristic traits and prototypical examples of a LT, showing “how it’s done” in each discipline. Their approach is usually to start defining orally the most characteristically trait of the concept, for instance “a fluid movement without accent” for dancers and then give illustrations using their body, with different speeds for each example. For musician, they would for instance mention that a LT is a sound with constant frequency as first definition of the concept and give examples by singing the prototype of a LT at different frequencies.

* From the examples given by the soundpainter, unexperienced performers are usually able to internalize the prototype of the concept of a LT for their discipline and produce examples of their own at different frequencies/speeds. I observed that the examples produced by unexperienced performers at first are very often close to the prototype.  
  But as performers become more experienced, I observed that they tend to increase the span of produced examples not only by broadening the distribution to the parameters that have been introduced to (volume, frequency, timbre…) but also by exploring different “dimensions” of the sound, such as vibrato, micro-distortions, extended techniques etc. In other words, they progressively “detach” from the prototypes of the LT concepts and their characteristic features by exploring more features of the content and reaching more extremal points. In other words, if we take the N-dimension space (one dimension per parameter of the LT) of all LTs accessible to a performer, whose boundaries are determined by the technical and imaginative limitations of the performer himself, the distribution of the production of a learning performer should first span a limited volume around the centroid of the space that can be considered the prototype of the concept of a LT. Then, the volume covered by the distribution and its variance would increase with experience and artistic research.  
  This expansion process was discussed especially in my experience with a year-lasting Soundpainting group, in which we had sessions dedicated to explore new generative processes and dimensions for LT and other very prototyped concepts. From the discussion, it was clear that our production of LT was largely prototypical and that extending the range of production required dedicated work and one explanation that I remember was that it takes a lot more cognitive load to produce a LT far from the prototype than a LT close to it. Therefore, under the constraints of immediate play, it was hard to propose something original. I conceived this training as a way to reduce the cognitive cost of the production of less-prototypical LT, therefore bringing more diversity to the responses of the performers.  
  During one week or shorter workshops that mixed both beginners and experienced performers in Soundpainting, I observed that experienced performers were responding to requests with a wider variety than beginners in Soundpainting as one could expect from previous observations, but also that performers with a greater technical level would also respond with a greater variety. My interpretation of this observation is that
  1. the cognitive load of the production of a content depends not only on the experience of the performer with SP, but also with his discipline
  2. the cognitive load is a key metric for understanding how far from a prototype a given performer can respond to a SP request

From my experience in Brazil, I can add to the latter the following remark:

* 1. the desire or willingness of a performer to respond to the request in a certain way is very cultural. In the previous discussion, I have interpreted the expansion of the variety of responses as a consequence of the decrease of its cognitive load for the performer, but it is important to remark that this expansion may not be observed at all if the performer himself is satisfied by a certain type of response, should it by prototypical or not. In fact, this expansion relies on the motivation of/relevancy for the performer to vary its responses for artistic reasons that depend on the context of the performance and the background of the performer, including his cultural background.[[19]](#footnote-27)
* Another consequence of the categorical nature of the concepts beneath SP signs is the inexistence of a clear frontier between the concepts themselves. For instance, one could argue that silence can be considered as an extremely low volume long tone, and purposefully respond to a request of LT with silence. My observation is that during learning phases, Soundpainters prefer that beginners show that they have understood the concepts by responding with prototypical examples instead of “extreme” examples.

### The SP grammar

Like other languages, SP has evolved with complex structures and rules that allow to form sentences, i.e. to form meaning at a higher level that the signs themselves. Those structures are what define the grammar of SP, which allow soundpainters to communicate by creating temporal sequences of signs or combining several signs together.

At the linguistic level, grammar can be split in two parts: morphology and syntax.

#### Morphology in SP

As defined in written and oral languages, morphology has to do with the **internal** economy of words. In English, a word like bookkeepers has four morphemes (book, keep, -er, -s) and is put together with morphology.

In sign languages in general, there are a variety of morphological systems and rules[[20]](#footnote-28) that assemble basic signs (the equivalent or morphemes) in more complex ones (the equivalent of the words). Consider for instance the sign for “falling” in French sign language[[21]](#footnote-29): starting from the icon of a person with one hand and the icon of the ground with the other hand, the movement of both hands represents the movement that a person would have when falling on the ground. We can interpret this sign as a morphological construction from the morphemes “agent” (person) and “ground”. Because of the relatively young age of several sign language, there morphology is not always clear and shared among all speakers of the language.[[22]](#footnote-30)

In SP, we can also observe several morphological constructions that historically explain particular formations of new signs. A controverted example in the SP community is the “change now” sign that is a morphological construction from the morpheme “change” and the morpheme “hit”, borrowing the hand pose from the first and the movement of the hand from the latter one, creating a new sign that could be named “change now” (or “change hit”). It is also possible to think of the sign “glissando” as an extension of the morpheme “long tone” to the “imaginary ladder” that represents the mapping of pitches in the Y axis of the body (height).

These examples are raised in this report to point out the role of morphology in the grammar of SP. A deep study from linguists should be made to explore further its mechanisms.

#### Syntax in SP

##### The way SP syntax is usually (historically?) presented

In addition to morphology, syntax is the second important part of the grammar that defines how the different signs can be temporally laid out to form sentences.

Historically, syntax in SP started to be discussed in the 90’s, long after its basic rules were already internalized and used by Walter himself and the other few soundpainters that had learned the language: “It wasn’t until 1997 during a Soundpainting residence in Woodstock, NY that I and Soundpainter Sarah Weaver formalized the syntax.” (Minors & Thompson, s.d.)

In his SP workbook 2 as well as on his website, Thompson presents the “structure of SP” in the following terms:

“The Soundpainting gestures are grouped in two basic categories: Sculpting gestures and Function signals.

Sculpting gestures indicate What type of material and How it is to be performed and Function signals indicate Who performs and When to begin performing. Who, What, How, and When comprise the Soundpainting syntax. Note: The How gestures are not always employed. The Soundpainter often signs a phrase leaving out a How gesture. For example: Whole Group, Long Tone, Play. If you sign your phrase without a How gesture, then it is the performers choice in deciding the dynamics and quality of the material.

The Soundpainting syntax Who, What, How, When and the two basic categories Sculpting Gestures and Function Signals are further broken down into six subcategories: Identifiers, Content, Modifiers, Go gestures, Modes, and Palettes.

1 – Identifiers are in the Function category and are Who gestures such as Whole Group, Woodwinds, Brass, Group 1, Rest of the Group, etc.

2 – Content gestures are in the Sculpting category and identify What type of material is to be performed such as Pointillism, Minimalism, Long Tone, Play Can’t Play etc.

3 – Modifiers are in the Sculpting category and are How gestures such as Volume Fader and Tempo Fader.

4 – Go gestures are in the Function category and indicate When to enter or exit the composition and in some cases when to exit Content such as Snapshot or Launch Mode.

5 – Modes are in the Sculpting category and are Content gestures embodying specific performance parameters. Scanning, Point to Point, and Launch Mode are several examples of Modes.

6 – Palettes are in the Sculpting category and are primarily Content gestures identifying composed and/or rehearsed material” (Thompson, s.d.)

##### Initial remarks on the “structure of SP” presented by Thompson

We can see that by the term “structure”, Thompson refers to two elements: the syntactic structures and functions of SP (and perhaps the term “structure” could be refined in that sense; we have seen previously that there are other important structures in SP such as morphological structures). It is also in those terms that SP is presented during the workshops that I have experienced. Before going further, let’s make some initial remarks on this introduction to the SP syntax:

* Walter describes a hierarchy of categories: the two initial categories “sculpting gestures” and “function signals” are “broken down” into the Who, What, How, When, Modes and Palettes sub-categories.
* The ordering at which the signs are sequenced in time is at the level of the sub-categories (Who, What, How, When – the ordering when using Modes or Palettes is not mentioned) but is independent of the meta-categories “Sculpting gestures” and “function signals”. Consequently, the “Who, What, How, When” corresponds to the syntactic structure while these meta-categories are not syntax categorizes but my interpretation is that they rather represent Walter’s interpretation of their role in the sentence, from the point of view of the composer rather than the linguist.
* There are some ambiguities with the “Palettes” and “Modes” categories, that are said to also contain signs of the category “Content”, although this division is at the same level.
* On one hand, the “Who, What, How, When” categories can be seen as the analogies of subject, verb, direct object and other syntactic functions in written or oral languages we are familiar with. Moreover, these functions have a specific order that cannot be changed.
* On the other hand, the “Identifiers, Content, Modifier, Go gestures”, etc. seem to correspond to syntactic labels (also called syntactic tags) of the signs in SP.
* It is in these functional categories that signs are also described in Walter’s SP workbooks 1 and 2.

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Description générée automatiquement

Une image contenant couteau

Description générée automatiquementUne image contenant couteau

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Description générée automatiquement

Although in the WB1, the signs are only classified by “syntax” (Who, What, How, When) and “category” (function signals or sculpting gestures), in WB2 the “subcategories” (Identifier, Content, Modifier, Go gesture) are introduced.   
From the reading of the “structure of Soundpainting” and our initial remarks, we could conclude that there is an exact mapping between the syntactic functions Who, What, How, When and the syntactic labels “Identifier, Content, Modifier, Go gesture”. However, we observer examples in the WB2 that contradicts this hypothesis.

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Description générée automatiquementUne image contenant couteau, table

Description générée automatiquement

In those examples, additional “syntax” categories are mentioned in parenthesis and we observe signs of the label “Content” that are classified as part of the “How” syntactic function, or “Modifiers” that classified as “What” or “Who”. Similarly, other signs are indicated as sharing the functions What and How, What and Who… and some Modifiers are classified as “When”. A priori, these could be interpreted as inconsistencies in Thompson’s analysis of the SP grammar.

My interpretation of his analysis of the SP grammar is the following:

* First, I think that there is a confusion between the notions of lexical categories, syntactic structures and functions in his analysis. It is suggested in his definition of the SP structure that to each lexical category (Identifier, Content, Modifier, Go gesture…) corresponds a single grammatical function (Who, What, How, When), while in his WB 2, he shows it can correspond to several functions. He does however not detail how a lexical category performs a specific function, or in which structures it can change from its “main function” to its “alternative” ones.
* Then, I think that additional confusion is brought by the naming of his categories for the signs: “category”, “subcategory”, “syntax”. I think he misses two important things:
  1. What is named “syntax” correspond to the typical syntactic functions that the sign can perform in the clause. However, it is different from the syntactic categories themselves (I suggest to name them “Identifier phrase”, “Content phrase”…), among which the lexical category is relevant for a single sign (Identifier, Content…).
  2. That the “categories” (at the opposite of the “subcategories” and “syntax”) may be relevant in artistic terms, in order to think the roles of the signs in the artistic creation (sculpting, function…) but may not be relevant at the syntax level.

If instead, he would rename those categories as “artistic category”, “lexical category” and “syntactic function”, parts of the ambiguity would be removed.

* Moreover, I think that this hierarchy of categories has been designed to explain further complexity in the syntax itself, without studying its deeper mechanisms to derive the relevant syntactic categories in SP. In other words, by suggesting the existence of “alternative syntax” categories, Thompson is leaving implicit that:
  1. The syntax of SP has several hierarchical structures (phrases) that can be constructed out of several sign to perform a single function
  2. There are additional lexical categories such as adpositions that allow to construct phrases from single signs, while changing their function

As a simple example, let’s simply mention at this point that the common clause “minimalism group, off” is not explained in Thompson’s description, nor “Whole group, long tone with movement, play” or “Whole group, movement with long tone, play” (and it is unclear at this stage too which one of the latter is correct).

There are several gestures in Soundpainting which defy reasoning—

irregular verbs so-to-speak. In other words, they break the rules of

Soundpainting. A good example of this is the 'Watch Me' gesture,

which gets used as an 'off' gesture when removing yourself from

'Shapeline' mode. Another example is the 'Synchronize' gesture—in

this case, the gesture isn't initiated by a 'Go' gesture—the content is

performed once the 'Synchronization' gesture is signed.

In most spoken languages there are irregular verbs—the reasoning

for their existence is confusing. I can't say how this came about in

other languages, but I would venture to say it's probably for the same

reason—in the Soundpainting language, in each case, I had to break

the rules to achieve my goals.

A deeper linguistic analysis would probably lead to more relevant categories to think signs with, in terms of their position in the clause, their function, but also their use in more complex syntactic structures.

* Finally, I think that his description suffers from the velocity at which the language has evolved from its most basic elements to complex uses and rules, leading to describe its structure both in artistic and linguistic terms and principles. This description might have been proposed at a time at which it made sense to think in those simple terms, while it was sufficient to introduce only superficial elements of syntax as the performers would internalize in practice many of the implicit complexity of the language.

The description of the whole syntax of SP would be the subject of a whole book and out of my field of expertise.   
However, I will underline some of its basic elements that will be relevant to my technical proposition of a recognition tool and propose a view on its mechanisms at several levels.

##### A closer look at SP syntax

In this part, I will step back from the historical description of the SP syntax to cover its structure in its contemporary forms and try to provide a wider view of its components including my own observations and interpretations.

###### The big picture



Figure 2 Representations of the modes, their "enter"-"escape" dynamic with respect to the "Default mode" and the correlation of the ambiguity between two modes and their respective sign/gestures corpus: the “enter” and “escape” signs are used to disambiguate the interpretation of gestures or sign common to two or more modes for the performer. In the non-ambiguous cases, we see that the “escape” signs disappear (or is simply a “step outside the box”).  
  
 1Launch mode is ambiguous because some signs must be interpreted as in shapeline (Identifiers for instance). However, it is not ambiguous for contents and modifiers, which can simply be performed immediately when the soundpainter “steps into the box”. For that reason, their enter and exit signs are not always performed when there is no ambiguity. It is also possible that one particular mode is used by convention (by default) instead of the “default mode” (for instance, it is often the case that dancer interprets signs and gestures in launch mode during performance by default), in which case the enter and escape sign may not be used either.

Let’s start with the big picture.  
Imagine a language that has an alphabet (a set of signs) and several syntaxes that all speakers know and can use whenever they think that one is more appropriate than the others. Let’s call these syntaxes “modes”. SP is such a language. We have seen that SP has an alphabet and how it is created. We have also seen that modes are said by Walter Thompson to “embody specific performance parameters”, even though they are at this point probably not usual Content gestures.   
My proposition is to understand modes as several syntactic and semantic[[23]](#footnote-31) modules that the soundpainter can use during the performance, i.e. the specific performance parameters that Walter Thompson speaks about are their syntactic (and semantic) components.  
One may say that such two different modules, because they have different syntaxes, are therefore two different languages and wonder how they could form a single language that we call SP. To understand how they relate to each other and labeled under “SP”, let’s take a look at the alphabetical level (their set of possible signs) to understand their common features.

###### A shared alphabet for several syntaxes

Imagine the dictionary of SP and visualize the abstract space of all signs in SP (bottom of Figure 1).   
Among those signs, some are used in specific modes only. For instance, the sign “scan” is significant only for the mode that has its name, as it allows the soundpainter to enter the scan mode from the “Who, What, How, When”-like syntactic structure, that we will call the “default mode” of SP (the main reason for choosing this name (default) is that it is the syntactic module that soundpainters use by convention and which allows to connect all modes together). Outside the scan mode and its variations, the sign “scan” is practically not meaningful nor used. Therefore, when the soundpainter uses that sign, it is clear for the performer which mode the soundpainter uses.  
However, some signs are significant and can be interpreted differently in several modes, which is represented in Figure 1 by the overlapping of two sets (ellipses) at the gestures level. When using those signs, it is no longer obvious what mode the soundpainter uses and how they should be interpreted: the mode is ambiguous, so there must be a way for the soundpainter to let the performers know what mode he is using. This is the role of what I call the “enter” and “escape”[[24]](#footnote-32) signs for each mode.

###### The ambiguities between modes resolved by the “enter” and “escape” signs

The enter and escape signs allow the soundpainter to “navigate” between the different modes, by signing the enter sign of one mode to “enter it” (i.e. use its syntactic and semantic structure) and signing its escape sign when escaping from that mode. However, not all modes are in the graph are connected; in fact, there is a mode from which we can enter all other modes and that we return to by default when escaping a mode. I call it the “default mode” (or the “core”, “central” mode of SP), from which the other modes connect, just like modules in the system. We can see that the “escape”  
It would be interesting to discuss further the motivations and consequences of this centrality of the default mode, and why it is not possible to directly move on from one mode to the others by simply signing the dedicated “enter” signs for each mode. If it was the case, I speculate that the common “tear up” sign would take the place of the enter sign for the default mode. I leave that discussion to further research and debates in the SP community.

###### About syntactic differences and semantic similarities between modes

Syntactic differences are the most obvious ones to observe between modes. Whereas some modes have a structured syntax that allow to form complex requests (such as the Who, What, How, When syntax), some modes such as “shapeline” have no syntax: the performer must interpret freely, or in “abstract ways” the gestures and signs of the soundpainter. Everything can be signed in that mode, even signs that do not exist in the SP language (or dictionary). We also have modes with other syntactic structures that the default mode, for instance “Play can’t play”. In general, we can classify the modes in two types that are relevant to the composer:

* Those that allow to create structured and delayed requests, in which the signs are not interpreted immediately but only at the end of a sequence
* Those that request the performers to respond to the signs in real time

To mark this polarity between “structured request and delayed response” and “immediate response to single signs or gestures”, the “imaginary box” is used. The imaginary box is usually introduced as an imaginary space in front of the soundpainter that the soundpainter enters when he wants his request to be executed by the performers, opposed to the neutral position where the soundpainter prepares the request. However, this description is only merely valid for the syntax of the default mode (Who, What, How, When -like): the imaginary box is also used in other modes, including those in which there are no structured requests. In fact, the box is a sign universal to all SP modes, with a slightly different meaning than what Thompson presents: entering or not the box is the sign of whether the request is to be answered immediately by the performer or not; it is the indication to the performers of whether to expect a structure in the request or not. Therefore, in all modes that do not allow for building structured requests, the soundpainter uses his signs inside the box.  
Stepping in or out this imaginary box can also act as an enter/escape sign from the default mode to all that only propose non-structured requests and are unambiguous with respect to the default mode. For instance, to exit the scan mode, it is enough to step out of the box and use the default mode syntax again, without using an additional escape sign to signify the change in mode.

On the semantic side, many signs are shared by several modes and have similar, if not equivalent meanings in all these modes. In fact, the common semantic features of the different SP modes are what make them efficient and what allow their quick learning and memorization by the performers. Indeed, if instead there were only signs proper to each mode and new signs had to be learned for each one, SP would probably loose much of its performativity, which for me lies in its ability to mix several syntaxes with similar semantics.

###### Remarks on the syntax of the “default” mode

Structures that performs functions. The structures are the assemblage of one or several signs (phrases in linguistics), and the functions of SP are called Who, What, How, When. The assemblage of the Who, What, How, When phrases is called a clause.

The “default mode” appears as a very unique element of the SP syntax because of its centrality in the network of modes (Figure 1) and its use as the conventional syntax of SP, to the point that it is in those syntactic terms that SP is presented, despite the number of syntaxes it covers.

In my observations, I found that the syntactic and grammatical rules are made explicit by the soundpainter (or teacher) for each mode but the default mode. I suggest two explanations for this phenomenon:

* The default mode syntax is the most complex one of all modes
* Part of its syntax is borrowed from languages that the performers are already familiar with

Indeed, a unique feature of the default mode is that is incorporates syntactic elements and rules from Western oral and written languages. Those elements, such as recursion, omission, prepositions (both simple and complex adpositions), postpositions or logic operators allow for greater complexity in the request structure and are usually implicitly learned (i.e. they are not explicated by the teacher or soundpainter). Examples of such elements are with, within (and without), through, add, remove, go back to, move on to….  
Still in 2020, most introductions to the default mode of SP follow the “Who, What, How, When” classification and explanation of its syntax. In practice, it is often the only explicated part of grammar, while the interpretation of signs like such as prepositions, postpositions or logic operators are often left implicit to the performers already familiar with Western languages.

In linguistic literature, we have observed several languages that do not possess these concepts.[[25]](#footnote-33) One could wonder how much presenting the syntax of the default SP mode to communities that are not familiar to Western languages would challenge the usual conceptions of the SP syntax. The story of the emergence of the Launch Mode is an answer to that question:

“Launch Mode means to respond to the What gesture immediately – a Go gesture is not needed. In other words, when the Soundpainter signs a Long Tone, at the moment of signing the gesture, the group responds and performs a Long Tone.

The idea for this gesture came from my work with the learning impaired. It isn’t always possible for people with learning disabilities to comprehend a Soundpainting phrase incorporating the syntax in its entirety – Whole Group, Long Tone, Volume Fader (ppp), Play. This type of phrase wasn’t possible to follow the first time I Soundpainted with a group of learning impaired people. So I ask the group to respond to the Long Tone gesture at the moment I signed them. I gave an oral example of what was expected and the group found it very easy to comprehend. I took the same approach with all the other gestures I taught the group.

Afterwards, I decided to use the immediate response to a What gesture and created Launch Mode. Nowadays, Launch Mode is a widely used gesture amongst many Soundpainters and its origin came from necessity. “ (Minors & Thompson, s.d.)

In this example, we can see that the default mode does have a degree of complexity that involve prior knowledge in grammatical rules and logic. Of course, all mechanisms of language are not cultural and learned, but these rules were not internalized by the learning impaired and it might as well be an issue for working with people whose language or culture does not yield them either.

I suggest for future research to push the analysis of the SP syntax and its formalization in linguistic terms. At the moment I am writing this report, a dictionary is being built that already contains some descriptions of signs in terms of syntax, such as the ones that have historically been formalized by Thompson. I believe that a linguistic approach to SP would be very relevant and add a lot of value to this collaborative work.

## Meta-structures of SP: communication outside sign language, configurations, conventions and diffusion mechanisms, learning

In the previous sections of this report, I have discussed several mechanisms of SP such as its linguistic and intrinsic structural features.   
In this section, I would like to first point out that it cannot only be described in those terms and limited to those mechanisms, give an overview of some extrinsic aspect of SP that play important roles in the way that it is used and understood by those who practice it and finally discuss the implications of the linguistic modeling of SP in a critique of some of the traditional definitions and presentations of SP.

### Preliminary remark: what we mean when we say “SP”

I observe that what is usually called “SP” is not only the communication between the soundpainters and the performers with signs but also the whole context and performance configuration that surrounds it and establish a broader communication between the soundpainters, performers but also external agents such as the public. I think that it is important to clarify that the name SP is commonly used to signify not only a sign language but an artistic practice as a whole: a context, configuration, esthetic, conventions and several types of communication… While I won’t enter the process of re-defining SP, I would like to discuss in the following parts what I call the “meta-structures” of SP, which are all the structures and mechanisms above the description of SP as mere sign language that compose its usual definition.

### SP as a complex communication form

We have seen that SP allow for a communication from one or several senders (the soundpainters) to receivers (the performers): so far, we have only discussed SP as a linear communication form using sign language.

In general, we can identify multiple interactions within a SP group, including feedbacks to the soundpainter’s request. The soundpainters may receive several forms of feedback:

* The artistic productions of the performers
* The unintentional communications of both the performer and the public
* The few signs that can be used by performers as such (not as soundpainters)

Although there are some configurations in which some of these elements of communication occur, soundpainters are usually able to perceive a feedback to their resquests. One may object that they can be prepared in advance and written down on some kind of score, such that the feedback from the performers would have no influence on the linear communication from the soundpainter to the performers. It is however not the case in general and is often reported and discussed how the requests are made in reaction to the proposals of the performers: this part of what is called “real time composition” and the role of the soundpainter as a composer who listens to and shapes the artistic propositions of the group.

### Configurations of SP practices and performances

#### Introduction to the notion of configurations and contexts of SP performances

In this part, I would like to show some contextual features that play an important role in SP and point out the historical emergence of new configurations in which conventions that are usually presented (by Thompson for instance) as representative of SP such as the traditional dichotomy between the composer and the performers (or the orchestra) disappear.

We have seen that SP is introduced as a sign language between a soundpainter which is the composer and an orchestra that is the set of performers. We also have seen that these roles are questioned and that SP is used in different ways by dance duets, jazz bands and other groups in which performers may also sounpaint, or soundpainters are also seen as performers themselves, while the composition process may not be directed by a composer anymore, but may be a collective process in which the notion of composer makes no or little sense.

I would like to call these different “ways” using of Soundpainting and their contexts: configurations. A configuration may embody many parameters such as the distribution of the roles in the group, what are the possible interactions with the public, spatial arrangement, cultural conventions but also particular compositional rules and other elements of context that are not defined using the sign language itself. I use it to mean in general “the context of the performance and how people decide to use SP within the performance”.

##### A remark on the sign “configuration” of the SP sign language

There is a sign in SP called “configuration”, whose description in the WB2 is the following:

“Players maintain the parameters of an assigned role, individually, or in a specified group or groups. A Configuration may comprise style and/or specific role function for the performer. Configurations are usually assigned in rehearsal. A Configuration may have a style assignment such as a performers role commonly found in most traditional jazz ensembles.”

Such a definition does relate to notions of roles and compositional conventions. However, my own use of the word “configuration” is perhaps broader than its meaning in the SP language and does not directly refer to its use within the sign language.

#### A linguistic re-definition of SP taken away from its traditional configurations and contexts

At this point, it is important to motivate the concept of configuration by stepping back from the historical introduction of SP by Walter Thompson and reflect on what SP represents today and might represent it in the future.

##### Performativity of a language

Let’s forget for a moment the history of SP and assume that it is a mere sign language, that is only defined by its grammatical and semantic features. One may use this language for cooking, buying clothes on the market or playing games. In all of these uses cases, SP may seem very inefficient for communicating relevant messages and meanings. However, it might be performant in a band, in a group of dancers or between a composer or a conductor and an orchestra.

##### Configurations as external elements to languages

SP may then simply be understood as a language among others, that is used in specific configurations for which it is more convenient than others, but that is not defined by its use in cooking, playing games nor between a composer and an orchestra. The observation that it is mostly used between composers and orchestras may simply be understood as a result of its history, diffusion, adoption processes and what it has been designed for and performative at, but is not a constitutive element of its definition.  
Of course, what we usually mean by “SP” does not refer to it as a mere language and also relates to elements of context such as the configurations it is used in; but my point here is to argue that configurations are not constitutive elements of languages, while it is true that languages are used in specific configurations.

We can make an analogy here with oral or written languages, that are convenient cooking or playing games but perhaps not as good as SP for real-time composition with a multi-disciplinary orchestra. Yet these languages, such as English, are used in a variety of configurations: from a collective communication between several family members in their house in England where it is born to a monologue of a foreign indigenous tribe representative at ONU. English can no longer be defined as the language of families in England, nor as the international language for ONU speeches in 2020; it is also used in many other contexts and configurations.  
In fact, we know from psychology and the studies of concepts that there may not be a definition of English at all but only several perspectives that combine into a single complex concept.

##### A critique of compositional choices and configurational choices as definitions and rules of SP

Similarly to my previous example with the English language, I would like to push for a similar understanding of SP as complex concept involving a sign language and set of practices that are not defined by any configuration or context. For instance, let’s consider the following statements, that are found in Thompson’s and other presentations and definitions of SP:

* The soundpainter is a/the composer
* The gestures are signed by the soundpainter (here, I would like to point out the unicity implied by “the”)
* “The Soundpainter, standing in front of the group (usually), signs a phrase to the group then composes with the responses.”
* “One of the most important aspects of Soundpainting is to compose with what happens in the moment whether it is intended or not”
* “A very important part of Soundpainting language is the basic rule that there is no such thing as a mistake”
* “It is the Soundpainter’s responsibility to realize the piece”
* “[The soundpainter is] the creator of the work, the director of the performance, the instigation for communication among an ensemble, the owner of the work”
* “All performers must keep the Soundpainter in their vision whether directly or in their periphery. This must be so in order for the Soundpainter to communicate the next phrase and be able to continue with the development of the piece.”
* “There is a general rule in SP which states: Whenever any Content is being performed it is an error if the Soundpainter uses Scanning, Point to Point, or any of the others Modes or Content gestures without first indicating what to for with the materiel being performed.”

I would like to propose that these statements are not considered as properties of SP nor elements of its definition but as either configuration or compositional choices - that of course are important parts of SP but not constitutive of its definition.

To demonstrate this proposition, I would simply draw the attention on examples in which the SP sign language is used that contradict those statements, such as those that were presented in section III.B.3. In such “revisited” orchestras, we observe that:

* Performers can soundpaint while performing, hence creating a shared composition and voiding the notion of composer (and unique composer) in the definition or as a property of SP
* Several compositional rules that Thompson defines as SP rules are changed or not considered at all:
  1. Some soundpainters do not require all performers to always keep them in vision.
  2. Some soundpainters may as well consider that it is not an error to ask for new content or mode without first indicating what to for with the materiel being performed, and may as well consider by default that the performers must stop their previous artistic production when it happens
  3. Some groups do not consider any responsibility of one or several soundpainter to realize the piece, promoting more democratic structures where each has an equal authority and responsibility in making compositional choices, performing and realizing the piece.   
       
     All these points are also relations of power and hierarchy between the soundpainter and the performers. It is important to note that configurations also embody power and hierarchical relations, that may appear also in the form of spatial configurations (the soundpainter sountpainting in front of the orchestra).
* SP can be used in configurations where it is not the only nor most important language, hence not having a great influence or an influence at all on the philosophy of the composition or artistic production.
* SP is used outside the artistic field, hence making notions of composition, orchestra, composer, discipline, etc. void.

At the opposite of these new configurations, we can read the vision of Thompson on SP in the compositional rules, configurations and contexts that he defines SP with and in which it has grown. However, they may now not be used anymore to describe and define all the varieties of contexts, configurations, compositional choices and “philosophies” that surrounds its use as a mere sign language that can be described in linguistic terms, hence the common core to all these different uses of the language.

#### Default parameters as conventions and configurational elements of SP

##### A confusion between default parameters, conventions about the interpretation of sentences and grammatical rules in Thompson’s descriptions of SP

In the WB2 of SP, Thompson introduces the complex concept of layer in SP with the following sentence:

“There is a general rule in SP which states: Whenever any Content is being performed it is an error if the Soundpainter uses Scanning, Point to Point, or any of the others Modes or Content gestures without first indicating what to for with the materiel being performed.”

He then explains how the concept of layer solves this problem by requesting the performers to play those modes or gestures “above” the layer of original material and to return to it when the Scanning, Point to Point or other Content gestures do not require them to perform.

I would like to discuss Thompson’s statement:

* First, I would like to remark that in his description, the error is a grammatical error (the sentence is wrong), hence the “general rule” is in his words a grammatical rule of SP.
* Then, I would like to point out that part of Thompson’s statement is inconsistent with very common similar situations in SP that are not considered as errors.  
  In his statement, Thompson describes the ambiguity on the side of the performer of being requested a new content, for instance with Content gestures without first indicating what to do with the material being performed.   
  However, in practice, this situation is observed very commonly and even in the compositions and teachings of Thompson himself. Take the following basic example: “whole group, long tone, play. Whole group, minimalism, play”. According to his statement, the second phrase is an error because the performers have not been indicated what to do with the ongoing long tone.   
  In fact, we learn by convention in SP that the long tone must be stopped by the performers at the moment that the minimalism is requested by the soundpainter; I have never seen a soundpainter signing “[step out the box] whole group, off, minimalism, play [step in the box]” to tell the performers to stop prior content before performing the minimalism.   
  The fact that a prior content must be stopped when a new one is requested is a convention that has been formalized in SP as “default parameters”. If one decides to ask the performers to behave differently, the new parameters can be conventionally defined prior to the performance and assigned to specific signs and indexes[[26]](#footnote-34). In his statement, Thompson seems to forget that the situation he describes is very common but is in practice never judged as an error, because of the conventions that are learned on how to interpret such ambiguous requests.
* At this point, one could still argue that even though the error is conventional and not grammatical, it is still a rule of SP.  
  We have seen previously that in the conventions of SP, the mistake has no place on the side of the performer. At the exception of grammatical errors (which in this case it is not), I then wonder why would mistakes exist on the side of the soundpainter. Indeed, Thompson justifies the inexistence of mistakes on the performer side by the interesting propositions and situations it creates for the composition.   
  I believe that in general, mistakes on the side of the soundpainter could also result in interesting compositional propositions, ambiguities and unexpected behaviors. It is well known that languages develop some mistakes and that they are most of the time the result of unconscious analogies (Hofstadter, 2009) (and possibly other mechanisms) that reveal the role of hidden structures in the understanding and production of language. In fact, most of the language we use for our everyday life comes from such mistakes and uncontrolled evolutions of the grammar.
* Finally, I would like to propose an interpretation of his statement as a mark of his own conventions as a composer. This will allow us to discuss the role of the traditional composer in the structural rules of SP that are particular to configurations rather than the syntax of the sign language.  
  It is obvious that most of structures and conventions in SP follow closely the visions of Thompson on composition and what he does expect from the performers himself. What he calls a “general rule” in his statement is to my point of view his own convention.   
  Indeed, a different composer could as well propose by convention that scan, point to point and all content gestures are meant as additional layers on the ongoing material. Such conventions are what allow performers to interpret ambiguous requests in other situations (cf. the example in the first point); but it may be the case that Thompson or other soundpainters disagree on the conventions to use when the soundpainter indicates new modes.  
  As a composer Thompson developed and formalized an important set of conventions from his own experience (we can think of the conventions about the development rates, neutral positions, or simple conventions such as what defines a minimalism or a pointillism) that he diffuses as a main figure and teacher of SP.

This example also points out the important role of conventions and other sets of rules that are not explained from within the grammar of SP but are determined by the configuration of the group, for instance by a composer.

##### A remark on the diffusion of conventions in SP

The previous example underlines the conjunction of two roles of Thompson, first as a composer and second as the main diffusor and authority of SP, who defined SP rules not only in terms of grammar and semantics but also in terms of conventions such as default parameters and configuration choices.

In the previous parts, I have tried to push for a conceptual separation between SP as a sign language and the elements of context such as conventions and configurations that come with SP performances. This separation is analogical to language and culture: the culture defines the use, conventions and configurations of a language; the language itself can be described in mere linguistic terms but cannot be understood without elements of culture, that are however not necessarily elements of language. I believe that there is an implicit confusion in Thompson’s descriptions between the compositional conventions in SP and its definition of SP as a sign language. I explain this confusion by the following:

* The most obvious point is that Thompson is not a linguist himself and started to think about SP in linguistic terms dozens of years after internalizing his own representations of SP in artistic and compositional terms.
* He is historically the creator and main diffuser of SP and teach his compositional conventions and propositions as part of the language itself; he presents SP as a composition tool and what he designed and developed it for, not only as a mere language.
* SP may be most appreciated and adopted for the set of compositional propositions and concepts from several disciplines that it encapsulates rather than its internal mechanisms as a langue such as the creation of new signs, modes and syntactic structures. In other words, the adopting of SP may rely more on the exploration of its different modes, contents and “built-in” categories than the creation of new modes, contents, signs and structures.  
  We have seen that it indeed borrows ideas and artistic concepts from elsewhere and provide a convenient context to explore them, which assembled, makes it a very powerful tool to move on from other configurations of improvisation, real-time composition or experimental music.
* Finally, the “traditional” visions on and conventions in SP might be related to a Western vision on arts, performance and their cultural conventions. The fact that SP developed a lot in Europe may have had an important influence on the culturally determined configurations it was used in and the people who diffused it.

I interpreted those specificities in the mechanisms and contexts of diffusion of SP as explanations of what I would call rather mainstream or traditional configurations of SP in contrast to marginal, recent configurations.

#### A remark on the performativity of SP, style and esthetics

Walter Thompson writes in his WB2: “At this point in your studies you understand Soundpainting is not a style of music such as Classical, Jazz, Rock, Rap, Folk, etc. It is a sign language for composing in real time”. What is raised here is the fact that one can use Soundpainting for very different esthetic and stylistic results. However, I will try to discuss the practical extent of the esthetics and style productions with SP, that are in practice very oriented towards certain types of music only.

On one side, SP is not equally used to produce all styles and esthetics. SP is more efficient and performative at composing in certain styles that others, which may explain why some artists are more interested in SP and some are less. This also explains why some people say that something “sounds” or “looks” like SP, as they do construct of prototypical view of the style of SP from their experience.

On the other side, the production of a certain style or esthetic, the choices of conventions and configurations in SP are conditioned by both particular (individual) and cultural contexts, which may also have influenced its development towards a greater performativity for certain styles and esthetics, for instance linked to the Western contemporary artistic practices.

Because SP is now developing in many countries, cultures and is being used by an increasing number of artists, I am sure that the diversity of its use will keep increasing, from experimental contemporary performances to baila baila parties.[[27]](#footnote-35)

### The meaning of SP: structural model versus practical uses

In the previous parts, I have been critical about the deploying of many elements of contexts inside the common definitions and descriptions of SP. However, in this part, I would like to step back from this critique and reflect on SP from the point of Wittgenstein for whom the meaning can only be a function and definition of how the language is used in very practical situations, as opposed to a theoretical model such a my structuralist approach.

In accordance with what we have seen of the theories of concepts, Wittgenstein reminds us that definitions are constructed from the common use of words and language rather than from definitions. Whereas the linguistic approach formalizes SP in terms of structural definitions and characteristics, the common meaning of SP also refers to what I have previously named elements of context.

and although my attempts at identifying the divergent origins of the elements constitutive of its definition (linguistic elements, configurational elements, convention…), it is nevertheless true that SP cannot be understood without them, and that they constitute the meaning of SP.

# Practical part: SP recognition with Max/MSP

In this section, I will introduce my Max/MSP Soundpainting recognition tool.

First, we will motivate the creation of such a tool, capable of recognizing several SP signs but also of creating new ones, as a composer would do and provide a short overview on the previous literature on the subject.

Then, we will explore the structure of this tool in a top-bottom approach, in contrast with constructivist model of SP that I presented in previous sections, by discussing the global structure of the program and then taking a deeper look into the features and key objects of each layer.

Moreover, we will investigate basic performance mechanisms to optimize the speed and accuracy of the system.

Finally, we will discuss the use of this tool for learning SP in connection with the theoretical aspects discussed in the previous parts. We will look at some implications of the tool for the formalization of SP and hopefully, the future of the language.

## A new configuration: motivations, goals, workflow & challenges

### Motivations

#### Computer music with SP

Thompson reports the specificities of using and controlling electronic instruments with SP:

“Electronic” are incorporated into your work and gestural language. What software have your laptop performers worked with in the past?

Each laptop performer usually designs or modifies their own software in order to be able to respond to the gestures quickly.

Have you found any limitation in the real-time nature of the response from these electronic ensemble members?

There are times during a Soundpainting where I have signed a laptop player to perform a phrase and they are not ready to do so. This is common and each Soundpainter must set specific Defaults during rehearsal in order to deal with this problem. For example: If a laptop player is signed a gesture such as Pointillism, but they are not ready to perform it because of their software or any other reason, they must sign to the Soundpainter the gesture called “I Can’t Do This”. The Soundpainter will either wait and sign the same phrase a little later in the piece, when the laptop player is ready, or will discard the idea and go on to another. This is a commonly used Default when working with any discipline that may need a little extra time to prepare a response. This is the same when working with visual artists – they often need a little more time to prepare a response to certain gestures.

#### A new configuration

We have seen previously that SP is used in different configurations and their role as a super-structure, defining its set of internal grammars (for instance, the modes), the roles of emitter/receiver (soundpainter/performer) and the “default parameters” as context-depend rules for the performance.

By creating a SP recognition tool, I am proposing new configurations for SP, in which a computer can process SP signs and take the role of one or several performers at the same time, aside other human performers or not. At the difference of what is possible with human performers, the program itself can only recognize signs from one sender at the time (the soundpainter) and cannot send SP signs itself (but it can of course provide other types of feedback). Among the set of possible configurations, I would like to mention two of them that I had in mind when starting this project:

* In the first configuration, the orchestra is simulated by the computer running the SP recognition tool (and possibly other digital gear), without other human performers.
* In the second configuration, the computer takes the role of single performer inside an orchestra with other human performers.

In general, the choice and use of a specific configuration is motivated by the qualities (in terms of creative processes, special layout, communication rules…) it has for achieving a certain result in the performance. Let’s discuss the qualities of these two configurations:

* In the configuration one, such a tool can be used as a learning tool for individuals aside the collective approaches to learning SP. As for now, the tool only covers the basic structures of SP and would only be interesting for beginners in SP or soundpainters who cannot rehearse with a group.
* In both configurations, such a tool is also interesting even for more advanced soundpainters for exploring new areas of composition with artificial intelligence, machine learning and their complex generative processes.
* In the second configuration, the tool can be used as a controller with other digital elements that are already part of the performance and sometimes used by the human performers themselves: effect processors, amplification mechanisms, mixing devices, recording devices and much more. It is sometimes the case that such elements cannot be controlled real-time performance because of the complexity of their interface or controls, or that it requires performers to manipulate them. The interfacing possibilities offered by Max/MSP makes it an ideal choice for controlling these devices within the SP language directly.

Of course, there are other possible configurations in which people would want to use the tool, such as remote performances over internet, where the tool could act as an interpreter from video to words and simple parameters for reducing the bandwidth of the information to pass over internet.

### Goals

In the frame of my master thesis, I have chosen to focus on the use case of my tool as a learning tool in the first configuration (simulation of the whole SP orchestra).

In analogy with the constructivist model we discussed previously, we know that the learning tool must have at least the following features:

* A mechanism of sign & dictionary creation
* A mechanism of classification between different signs and parametrization of different positions in the body space
* One or several grammatical systems for parsing the sequence of signs and gestures (one grammar for each mode)
* Audio/visual feedback in response to the soundpainter’s requests

The goal of my project is to implement these features, focusing on only one mode (the default SP mode) and implementing an audio feedback by simulating a small orchestra.

### Workflow and challenges: a review of literature

Nadine couture

## The big picture

### General overview of the system

These goals and the constructivist approach to SP that was presented in the previous parts are direct inspirations for building the recognition with several independent layers, that are represented in Figure 1.

Each layer has a particular function that the user should easily be able to interpret. Inside each layer are different processes and objects that the user interacts superficially with from the interface of the program. For transparency, I have put in white the parts that I built myself and in blue the parts that are either taken from other works[[28]](#footnote-36) or only slightly modified for my project.

At the interface level, all layers are implemented inside Max/MSP, a graphical programming environment designed by IRCAM and optimized for real-time applications. The user interface has a very basic look and design. The user can see the whole patcher in the main window and is also able to access specific functionalities of each layer by using tabs.

At the processing level, Max/MSP itself has three different threads that it uses for processing the data passing through its compiled objects. For these threads, Max guarantees the synchronicity/ordering of events. However, Max also interprets node.js code that is processed in external threads asynchronously to Max internal threads. We will discuss the consequences and implementation choices of this remark in future sections of the report.



Figure 3 Summary of the recognition program structure

### The choice of Max/MSP

Before starting a finer description of the mechanisms of the program, I would like to motivate the choice of Max/MSP as the main programming environment hosting the different layers and functionalities.

There are several options for building such a tool, each with their own pros and cons. In my case, I have considered Unity3D and PureData as the main alternatives to Max/MSP.

The advantage of Unity3D over Max/MSP(/Jitter) is that it is endorsed by a much larger community, it is free and has a better potential in terms of graphics.

The advantage of PureData over Max/MSP is essentially that is it free and open source.

However, I think that Max/MSP is a better choice than those software for the following reasons:

* Max/MSP is a high-level object-based programming language with already optimized pieces for music and real-time applications that are easy to use and assemble. It allows for scripting in JS and Node.js, which makes it a powerful host for a huge number of scripts and tools developed by the web community and its graphical interface allow newbies in coding to catch up easily with what is going on.
* Max/MSP comes from IRCAM and is used by a community of artists and musicians with interests very similar to my projects.
* Max/MSP has a nicer visual interface than PD, is maintained by a commercial company whereas PD has not been updated for years.
* PD connects badly to external pieces (node.js scripts, java…) that are critical for my project.
* The graphical programming interface of Max/MSP can be transformed into a user interface easily (for simple demos such as mine) … or very extensively, with complex GUI objects.
* Given my programming skills and the time constraints of the project, Max/MSP was a much faster approach than Unity3D.

Although being a commercial software, Max/MSP patchers can be compiled to a standalone program for Windows and Mac OS, allowing to share the program for free.

## Description of each layer

### Part 1: Motion tracking inputs

As humans, we are equipped with cognition and recognition systems that allow us to discern a wide variety of objects such as bodies in space and to build features to identify (classify) movements and gestural signs from those bodies.  
Computers, however, are not natively equipped with such systems, so that it is necessary to build them in this project, according to the goals and objectives we defined previously.

The role of the motion tracking layer is to compute a set of motion features from the movement of the user. There exist several motion tracking systems with different technologies that allow computers to recognize bodies and compute several features that can be used to identify gestural signs.  
In SP, there are some body parts such as the hands that are much more frequently to sign than others, therefore they require more precise tracking than the latter to classify amongst the signs. However, all motion tracking systems available have a finite range of operation, i.e. they can only track motion at a certain scale. (just like the human cognition system).  
We can observe two main scales at which signs are performed: full body and hands. Although there are certain costly technologies that would allow us to deal with both scale in one model, I propose and discuss two different technologies that are each adapted and efficient for each one.

#### Full body scale: “skeleton” tracking

To construct our features for the identification of the signs, we must drop a lot of information from the input of the system, such as the webcam or motion tracking system we are using. For instance, information such as colors, certain body parts such as the belly or torso, sound, etc, are not crucial for the identification of SP signs. There may be cases in which there are, but they will not be covered by this project.   
Typically, the “skeleton” representation of the position of each broad body part of the soundpainter (hands, shoulders, head, hips, knees, feet…) would allow the computer to recognized most basic signs at the full body scale. Because of the structure of the body (articulations, rigid body parts…), only several key points are needed to model its skeleton. Then, the features that would allow us to classify different signs must typically reach a precision of the order of magnitude below the distance between two keypoints. Assuming that most body parts are separated by a distance of the order of 10cm, we know *a priori* that our motion tracking model at this scale must reach a precision of the order of the centimeter.

In the following part, I will introduce and motivate the choice of PoseNet as the main motion tracking model at the full body scale.

##### Introduction to PoseNet

PoseNet[[29]](#footnote-37) is a computer-vision model that can be used to estimate the pose of a person in an image or video by estimating where key body joints are in 2D space. Its performances on modern CPUs and GPUs allow it to run in real-time using a webcam or alternative low-latency video input devices.

In Max/MSP, I could adapt and upgrade two demonstration projects showing how to port PoseNet into Max with Node.js[[30]](#footnote-38) to build a simple user interface (1.2.) allowing the user to start PoseNet either in a separate window, within an Electron process or directly inside a Jweb object on the patcher. A demo of the process can be found in my [second](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jW6bo6XkhFo) and [third](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OmPFMT9mgOs) demo video of the tool. I have observed a slightly lower performance with the Jweb object than the Electron process on my computer and the Electron process has the advantage of having its dedicated window, allowing the user to move it, resize it and most important, to keep it visible while the model is running, otherwise PoseNet performance drops critically. Both hosts (Jweb and Electron) are perfectly inter-changeable in less than a minute (for loading the model).



Figure 4 View of PoseNet inside Max/MSP



Figure 5 Posenet skeleton tracking for "rest of the group", from the Electron external window

PoseNet allows the user to choose different models and internal parameters that will affect its performance:

* The architecture of the model (MobileNet or ResNet)
* The input resolution of the video input
* The output stride of the model
* The depths of the convolution operations (for MobileNet only)
* The size of the model (ResNet only, only affects loading time)

With these settings, the user can adapt the model to its hardware to get the best performance.

We will discuss the optimal performance settings in a next section.

##### PoseNet advantages

PoseNet has several advantages to its concurrent technologies:

* It takes it input from a webcam or any video input that can be recognized by the computer, so that
  + For many laptops with integrated webcam, there is no need of external hardware
  + It can be used with very common and cheap hardware in case the computer does not have its own webcam, making the costs typically very low
* It provides a direct feedback of its accuracy to the user by overlapping the skeleton joints with the video, allowing users to change settings according to how good they see the model performing
* It is an open-source project, led by giants (Google…) and supported by a vast community
* It is still under development and will probably continue to be improved over the years, so it has a much greater potential than hardware-dependent solutions that are getting obsolete very fast
* It integrates with Max (and other systems) very easily as it can be run in a little node.js server

##### The main shortcoming of PoseNet: depth

The only major shortcoming of PoseNet with respect to other motion tracking systems is that it only operates in 2D and does not model the depth of each body joint.

As a workaround, I first built a simple calibration process that allowed to compute the depth of the torso of the user as well as its angle to the camera. After some testing, I realized that it was useless in my use case, did not allow any better classification and would only bring noise in the data.

###### Depth in SP

In fact, there are also some specificities that allow us to recognize SP signs without any depth information in PoseNet.

My observation is that depth (z axis) is often not the most informative axis for recognizing SP gestures and even signs like “play” which uses the z dimension extensively can be recognized only by the movement of the body in 2D, from the point of view of the camera in front of the soundpainter, because there is little ambiguity with other signs. Depth would only be important in cases where two signs would be similar in 2D space and depth would be the only information allowing to classify them; which is rare in my experience of SP.

However, capturing depth is important for one special sign in SP, which is often called “entering the box” and almost only takes place in the depth dimension. Its specialty is that this sign, consisting in putting one foot in an abstract “box” in front of the soundpainter, is used in many SP modes to significate “execute the request now”; whether the request has been defined previously (default mode) or is being signed while the soundpainter has “entered the box”. It is only meaningful when executed simultaneously to other signs, for instance “go gestures” in default mode or contents in launch mode. The opposite sign “exiting the box” also has the very specific meaning of “getting back to default mode”.

How can we manage to get past that specific issue?

###### Recognition without depth: compromises and simplifications of SP grammar

Ideally, one would want to capture depth and abandon PoseNet for a better tracking method:

* Kinect systems can capture depth but have many other shortcomings in terms of performance, user experience and portability
* Motion capture suits (for instance, IR marker-based suits) are usually the most accurate and performant devices but their costs and and specificities make them unattractive for sharing the tool to the SP community
* OpenPose[[31]](#footnote-39) is the main realistic alternative to PoseNet at this moment; it supports 3D triangulation from multiple view (like two cameras orthogonal to the soundpainter) but could not be ported to Max without much hassle[[32]](#footnote-40)
* Some learnable triangulation methods are being developed recently[[33]](#footnote-41) yet far from portable to my project

PoseNet appears like the best compromise for this particular use case, its goals and under the constraints of this project.  
In theory, it would be sufficient to add a simple external hardware of software mechanism to know whether the soundpainter has “entered the box” or not to remove the greatest part of the problem. One could for instance think of using a numeric carpet of a simple tracker of relative feet distance on the z axis to achieve this.  
In fact, I chose to work primarily on the default mode as my use case. In this mode, the practical use of the “go gesture” “play” is always associated with “entering the box” while even if the use of other “go gestures” such as “Slowly enter” is not always with “entering the box”, a simplified version of the grammar can easily assume that “entering the box” is always performed with “go gestures”, without removing much of the SP performativity in this mode.

With this simplification in mind, a 2D tracking of the full body is enough to cover the default mode. But what about over modes, that also make use of the “box” in a different way?  
Interestingly, most other SP modes that I am aware of are using immediate requests rather than structured requests, and the soundpainter is always standing in the “box” when using these modes. In other words, signing “outside the box”, not in real-time, to make structured requests is particular to the default mode.[[34]](#footnote-42) By entering or exiting other modes (marked with their “enter” and “exit” signs), the program should be able to know whether requests must be considered immediate requests or structured, delayed ones[[35]](#footnote-43).

In conclusion, although more expensive or complex systems would allow for full 3D tracking of the body, PoseNet is suitable for building most features at the full body scale relevant to SP and is the most adapted technology in the frame of this project.  
From the observation of correlations between missing depth features and known signs/features, we are able to make a small simplification of the SP grammar by assuming that the requests must be executed immediately when “go gestures” are used, and that in every mode but the default one, the requests are immediate. Under these assumptions, PoseNet is sufficient to build all necessary features to recognize SP signs at the body scale.

##### Building features

Meaningful features to feed the classifier with need to satisfy the following properties:

* The set of features should reduce to the lowest number of dimensions, while still being meaningful, in order to avoid the so-called “curse of dimensionality” problem. It can for instance be solved with a principal component analysis which in general provides the best set of features to a given classification problem; however, in our case, we want the features to always remain interpretable to the user, so that we cannot afford such a transformation. Instead, we should only keep the most significant joints in PoseNet output such as the wrists or elbows positions, discarding less significant ones (for SP) such as the nose or hips. However, if the user wants to build its own set of signs that rely heavily on these body parts, he would have to use such features.
* The features must be invariant to transformations that are not meaningful and do not correspond to any sign. In particular, the features must be translation- & rotation-invariants and independent of the dimensions of the body of the soundpainter.  
  In practice, this is achieved with PoseNet by taking the X & Y distance between each joint and the nose, which is considered a fixed point and then normalizing the X dimension with respect to the inter-shoulders distance and the Y dimension with respect to the distance between the middle of the hips and the nose.  
  The feature invariance will allow a sign to be recognized independently of the soundpainter’s
  + location and orientation (as long as the soundpainter faces the camera with a relatively small angle and does not get outside its field of view)
  + body dimensions (assuming that the general proportions of the human body remain constant)

With these constraints in mind and from my previous knowledge of SP signs, I could first order the body joints in PoseNet by their importance for SP signs recognition for basic signs in default mode:

* wrists
* elbows
* shoulders
* all other joints

In fact, I decided to only use wrists and elbows positions, which gave the best performance in my initial tests, reducing the feature space dimension to 8 instead of 34 (all 17 body joints X and Y values).[[36]](#footnote-44)

#### Hands tracking

Similarly to the full body model, hands can be represented as a skeleton in which our features are built from the position of the hands in space. This time, a 3D model is necessary as several signs are ambiguous in 2D space and can only be classified by looking at whether the palm is facing the soundpainter or the opposite direction. It is for instance the case with the signs “two” and “volume”.

##### Hi5 Gloves

Just like for the full body model, I initially looked at several existing technologies to model 3D positions of the hands. At the time of my research (before early March 2020), there was no equivalent computer-vision model similar to PoseNet for the hands that I could integrate into Max.[[37]](#footnote-45)

Instead, a variety of dedicated hardware was already available on the market with three major technologies:

* Marker based gloves
* Flex sensors
* Inertial measurement units, typically using small magnetometers

The prices of this equipment is quite expensive on the market, from 1000 chf to 5000+ chf for most expensive models. The cheapest models suffer from important shortcomings:

* IMUs are reported to drift when magnetic fields are present around the gloves, preventing a close use of computers, cellphones and other electronic devices nearby.
* Flex sensors are only one dimensional. In the cheapest gloves, many important dimensions of the fingers’ movements such as the phalangeal joint angles or angles between two fingers are therefore not captured, whereas they are often used in SP and other sign languages.
* Some gloves are designed for specific software such as Unity and may not integrate with Max easily.

While most expensive gloves often provide solutions to these problems, I decided to start with the IMU based Hi5 gloves from Noitom, which is one of the cheapest one available on the market (1000 chf approx.) which provides a Unity and C++ SDK.

However, at the time of this report (early June), I have still been unable to test the gloves with Max. I have made two mistakes during the conducting of the project:

* Before buying the gloves, I had not realized that the gloves connection with the Vive trackers was not only a feature as they are marketed on their website and documentation but that the Vive trackers were also necessary for using the gloves directly with the provided Unity plugin. In fact, the connection with positional tracking devices was not explicitly documented as a requirement for the Unity Plugin in their documentation. We could therefore not use the gloves on the fly with the provided scene and needed additional scripting using the SDK.
* I had been late on testing the gloves and identifying that issue. Although it made sense to me to start by building all the core mechanisms of the tool and pipeline before integrating the gloves, it was a mistake not to test them earlier, so that I could have figured out this issue at early stages.

The EM+ lab offered me support to build a dedicated object in Max for receiving the gloves data. The first experiments with the C++ SDK were good but unfortunately, the difficult schedule of that semester did not yet allow us to go further.

##### HandPose

Around mid-March, Tensorflow released the new HandPose model[[38]](#footnote-46). I first heard about it from within the Max community, when a first wrap of HandPose into an Electron server (just like PoseNet) was shared on github late May[[39]](#footnote-47). In the following days, I contributed to designing an interface within Max that made the output of the model accessible to the user (Figure 4).

While I was stuck with the Hi5 gloves, HandPose provided me an easy and light way to test the multi-input pipeline and the combination of the two scales or recognition inside Max. An introduction to HandPose inside my recognition tool is shown in my [fourth demo video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKD5BMaHmI8).

HandPose properties are very similar to PoseNet, hence it runs in a similar Electron node.js server, also has several performance settings and joints that can be selected by the user as features for the classification model.

Contrary to PoseNet, HandPose models the hand in 3D. However, it cannot yet recognize two hands at the same time, although there are good reasons to believe that this will be implemented soon.[[40]](#footnote-48)



Figure 6 My re-worked HandPose port to max

In SP, signs that are made of hand poses in can have two versions: two-handed and one-handed versions. While HandPose only allows for using one hand at the same time, the soundpainter can therefore use only one-handed signs with the recognition tool. Another possibility would be to the split the video input from the camera for the left and right side of the body (only one hand in each side) and running the model on both sides. This has not been tested by myself by would theoretically work without problem if the user is able to do so.

Another important constraint when using HandPose is that the model only works as long as the hand is sufficiently close to the camera, typically within 2 meters from the camera. This greatly limits the ability of the soundpainter to use PoseNet and HandPose models on the same video source. While PoseNet has a greater accuracy when the full body is visible (not only arms), HandPose requires the user to typically get closer to the camera than the distance at which the whole body fits inside the camera’s view. I suggest using separate camera for each model, one that would be close to the soundpainter for HandPose and one further for PoseNet. I have not been however to test this configuration yet. If it is not possible, then I suggest making sure that the arms, torso and head are well visible for PoseNet, while leaving hips, knees and feet under the field of view of the camera and making sure that hands are put as close as possible to the camera when signing with hand poses.

#### Input manager

I initially created the ‘input manager’ to allow the user to select in the list of all possible inputs (PoseNet, Kinect, gloves…) those that he wanted to use and that the program should listen to. This way, each part of the system would know how many features to expect and how to route the data flow correctly.

Until late stages of the project, when I started working with both PoseNet and HandPose, it was unclear for me whether a single DTW model would be able to classify all signs from a sign input combining all the selected features from both HandPose and Posenet, or if I should instead use several models depending of the type of signs that the program should recognize (movement with the full body, hand poses, faders…). There was also no built-in way to make a generic input to model routing in Max, so that I was hesitating between building a fixed routing that would work for my use case but would not allow any flexibility to change the inputs to each model, or building the desired input manager routing matrix myself. I chose the second option which allowed me to build a very modular tool, in which I could add or remove models and inputs in the future following my needs and the constraints of the several SP modes.

The present input manager allows the user to add his own input to the system automatically, without manually creating additional routings all over the program, by following only a few conventions

* each input must send its data through a “send <input\_name>” object
* each input must also forward its “size” (number of dimensions of the input) before the recording is launched[[41]](#footnote-49) through a “send <input\_name>\_size” object

Then, on the input manager panel, the user can select what input should be used by each model. Because inputs have different data rates and dimensions, it is in general not possible to route more than one input to a single model. If two inputs are compatible (typically with similar data rates) the user simply can create a new input and merge the two original ones in a single one the way he wants to if he would like to route this new combination to a single model.

Une image contenant capture d’écran

Description générée automatiquement

Figure 7 Input to model routing interface. The routing matrix is automatically updated from the list of inputs and models that the user defines, allowing the user to add his own inputs or models in little time.

### Part 2: Signs & dictionary management

Once the inputs and models are defined in the program, the user can start recording signs and building its sign dictionaries for each model.

#### Sign creation

We have seen that creating new signs is one of the core mechanisms of SP. It is also one important feature of my program in which the user can either create his own signs or use pre-recorded signs, for instance that would have been created or recorded by other users.

In my program, a sign is defined two properties:

* Its name
* Its category, in analogy with the syntactic model of SP : WHO, WHAT, HOW, WHEN, OFF, NEUTRAL & LOGIC [[42]](#footnote-50)

These properties are sufficient to allow the program to parse the sign, i.e. to construct a meaningful request from the temporal flow of signs.

The procedure for defining a new sign is shown in 2.1. (Figure 6).

Figure 8 User interface for defining new signs and recording them to the buffers of a model. First, the user can select which model he wants to use to recognize the signs he wants to add. Then, he must enter the signs and their corresponding category that he would like to record. Finally, he can set a few parameters before launching the automated recording session.

For the sign to effectively by identify, two steps are required after the sign has been defined:

* Record training examples
* Program the virtual instrument itself to interpret the sign

While the recording of training examples is an automated process that simply involves pushing one button, the programming of the virtual instrument or device that the sign should control is outside the scope of the program. For demo purposes, I have implemented myself the interpretation of some signs by Ableton Live and a simulation of an orchestra with the Bach Project, but the connection with other devices must be implemented later by the user himself.

#### Sign recording

The user can choose to either define one sign at the time and record one or several training examples for it, then saving the training data and adding another sign… or directly define a list of signs and recording all of them in the same session.

The recording session has the following form:

* 1. Initial preparation time of *I* seconds
  2. Each sign is recorded *N* times, in the following loop:
     + The recording is launched for *R* seconds
     + Break (preparation time for next recording) of *P* seconds

The user can change the values of *0<I, 0<N, 0<R<5[[43]](#footnote-51)* and 0<*P* according to his needs.

Each recording takes place in a different buffer of the Multiple Buffer (MuBu) objects (one Mubu object per model[[44]](#footnote-52)) and each active input data is saved into a different track. The user can navigate the recorded data in each buffer and track using the Multiple Buffer Interface (Imubu object).

Une image contenant capture d’écran

Description générée automatiquement

Figure 9 Imubu controls and interface.

After the recording session, the data contained in a given track of a given buffer corresponds to a (N+1) x L matrix with N being the number of dimensions of the corresponding input and L being the number of steps in the recording sequence (sampling rate x duration of the sequence). The additional dimension corresponds to the time-tagging of the data. There are two main reasons for time-tagging the data:

* When several inputs are recorded at the same time, each has its own output rate; time-tagging the data in each track guarantees that during playback, the rate of each track is preserved
* Individual inputs can have varying output rates over time, for instance PoseNet and HandPose that run on GPU. Although we will see that the Dynamic Time Warping classification does “warp” the sequence in time and is therefore not sensitive to small variations of data rate, it is safe to assume that keeping the data timing in place always would better represent the original movements of the soundpainter

Wrapping up, inside the MuBu object, a sign is represented by labeled multi-dimensional buffers that contain the motion tracking data corresponding to each recorded example of the sign.

Once the data has been recorded, the user is able to save the recorded buffers to files in the ./data folder, by using the dedicated button “Save buffers to file”.

#### Saving recordings to file: building a dictionary

What would be ideal would be to store the data in the following fashion:

./data  
 /track\_name (corresponds to the input name)  
 /sign\_label + unique\_id (.mubu or .txt)

The motivation for using this file and folder structure is that it best represents the data structure of the MuBu object itself and allows the user to clearly identify what the file corresponds to without looking at its metadata. The user would then be allowed to mix data from recording sessions that are inhomogeneous, i.e. with a different number of recorded inputs, by loading all the files that corresponds to the inputs he uses, even though they might come from very different sessions.

However, the MuBu object write and read mechanisms suffers from bugs[[45]](#footnote-53) that should be fixed by the developers in the near future (as of May 2020) and I had to implement a workaround before it gets fixed, by saving each buffer with all its tracks in a single file:

./data  
 /configuration\_#track\_name\_1\_#track\_name\_2…  
 /buffer\_name + unique\_id (.mubu, .txt)

This way, the buffer names are saved correctly, but the user is no longer able to mix data from different sets of inputs.

#### Loading pre-recorded signs

Loading buffer data from files is much simpler and can be achieved in 2.3. by a simple drag and drop of one or several data files in the dedicated zone (see Figure 6).

#### Summary

Wrapping up, the user flow of the sign & dictionary management layer is the following:

* If the user wants to record new signs, i.e. either record examples of a sign that was not recorded and saved previously or record more examples of a sign that was already saved into files, he must first define which signs he wants to record and then launch the recording session.  
  Once the signs are recorded in the buffer, he can save them to files by hitting the corresponding button if he is satisfied by the recordings.  
  If the user adds new signs again without saving the buffers first, the data that was contained in the MuBu object is lost.
* Once the recordings of new signs are finished, the user should load into the MuBu object the data files of all signs that he wants to recognize and classify, for all inputs that he would be using. This is done in by dragging and dropping the corresponding files from the data folder into the dedicated zone.

### Part 3: Real-time classifiers, regression or DTW models

Now that the user has been able to connect his motion tracking inputs and record a few signs, we will see how the system is able to “recognize” the signs in real time with one or several machine learning model.

#### A short introduction to cognition and machine learning models

The word “cognition” dates back to the 15th century, where it meant "thinking and awareness." (Revlin). The term comes from the Latin noun *cognitio* ('examination,' 'learning,' or 'knowledge'), derived from the verb *cognosco*, a compound of con ('with') and gnōscō ('know'). The latter half, gnōscō, itself is a cognate of a Greek verb, gi(g)nόsko (γι(γ)νώσκω, 'I know,' or 'perceive') (Liddell, Henry, & R.).   
Re-cognition can therefore be understood as the process of “another” cognition, that allows the identification of something already knew or already perceived.

One can wonder what the core processes of recognition are and try to reproduce them on a computer. Very common examples of computer-recognition come from the so-called computer vision field such as object recognition (classification) or detection convolutional neural networks (CNNs) whose performances are now close to that of humans. However, CNNs are trained on huge amount of data and are (in general) not models that can be interpreted by humans.

In the context of this master project and to offer the ability of creating new signs to the user, we must work with lightweight, interpretable models that can be trained fast and identify the signs that are performed in real time. In our case, the identification process is a simple classification process, in which we ask the classifier to predict the “class” of the motion sequence performed by the performer among a set of classes that have been previously learned by the model: SP signs.

We have seen that in SP, there are very different types of signs (movements, poses – at several scales). At the beginning of my project, I thought about recognizing all signs with a single Dynamic Time Warping model.

Indeed, two light-weight models are generally presented in the literature to classify time-sequences: Dynamic Time Warping (DTW) and Hidden Markov Models (HMM). In general, DTW is observed to be faster and more accurate than HMMs (Raheja, 2015) (Carmona J.M., 2012). Some works also propose combinations of HMM and DTW or modified DTW algorithms for gesture recognition (Hiyadi, 2016) (Choi, 2017).

My initial design was to sum up all the features that I would use (full body skeleton, hands skeleton…) into a single feature vector that I could feed to DTW.   
The first obstacle to this initial design was that all inputs would not have similar data rates, so that the combination of inputs would either result in a data rate equal to the slowest input or a very high data rate, equal to the sum of each input data rate, but with common values between two consecutive feature vectors. This situation would not be ideal as it would require more processing and would not represent accurately the movement.  
The second obstacle was that although DTW can recognize poses, it performs much slower than pose classifiers that are not time-dependent, such as SVM or decision trees. Ideally, one would want to construct one model per type of sign to be recognize.

I have chosen to implement two models for my final prototype: one for the full body with DTW and one for the hands with Adaboost decision trees.

#### Full body Wekinator DTW

Unfortunately, at the time of the project, I could not find any real-time implementation of DTW in Max/MSP.[[46]](#footnote-54)

However, the external software Wekinator[[47]](#footnote-55) offers a very efficient DTW implementation based on the FastDTW library (Salvador, 2004) with additional improvements for real-time performance and several internal parameters for its DTW model.

Max and Wekinator communicate in Open Sound Control (OSC). Although the user must launch Wekinator separately and perform basic operations on its GUI, most important parts of Wekinator can be controlled remotely via OSC, allowing Max to automatize certain operations, such its training process.

The “user guide” for using Wekinator with the project is the following:

1) Start Wekinator.

2) Set the listening port to match Max settings and click "start listening"

3) Set the OSC input address to /wek/inputs (default)

4) Change the number of inputs (#inputs) to match the size of your input in this patcher, as defined in the first layer. For instance, with PoseNet, there are two features per joint (X and Y coordinates) so #inputs = #joints\*2

5) Change the Wekinator output type to "All Dynamic Time Warping" with N gestures types, N equal or greater than the size of your dictionary of signs. It probably does not matter if you specify a greater amount of types, so you can also use any sufficiently large N if you do not know how many signs it should recognize; ultimately, Wekinator will simply never match the signs to those classes.

6) Set the ouput port to match Max/MSP settings and click next.

7) If any input is running, make sure that the “OSC In” indicator of Wekinator is green. If it is yellow instead, make sure you have some input running and try to open the view/OSC input status window and restart listening to the OSC. If it is red, check that the size of your input in Max matches the #input parameter of Wekinator.

8) You can now push the train button aside the Mubu object for the full body DTW model. The number of examples for each sign should show up in Wekinator.

9) Once the training is done after a few seconds, you can press the "run" button in Wekinator to start classifying your live input.

These operations may take 3 minutes at the first time use and less than 1 minute once the user would get acquainted to the process. Automatizing these steps would be very difficult from Max directly, as Wekinator builds its own file structures and I could not find a way to load a project in Wekinator from a command line directly. In the future, it is possible that the InteractML or RapidMax project will make the process fully automated.

Once the model is running, Max receives in real time the set of DTW distances from the real time sequence to each recorded sign sequence. By finding the minimal value in that set and comparing this value to a confidence threshold, we can find when a sign is being performed in real time.



Figure 10 DTW output GUI in Max. The middle black box are slides that show the confidence level of each sign in real time. Recognized signs are shown at the bottom.

We will address performance and accuracy aspects in a further section.

#### Hands Adaboost for decision tree

To recognize hand poses that are used in signs like “tempo” or “volume”, I chose to work with an Adaboost for decision tree classifier model in Wekinator. The configuration process in Wekinator is only slightly different and is fully detailed in my [fourth demo video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKD5BMaHmI8).

At the output of the model, Max receives the index of the most likely sign and can eventually threshold on the confidence of the classification to avoid false positives.

### Part 4: Grammar parsing

#### A finite state machine (FSM) automaton

From the models introduced in the previous section, we can recognize individual signs, forming a sequence in time, just like words form a phrase in oral languages.

The next step is therefore to implement the grammar of SP with a parsing mechanism that would then allow us to create requests or commands to each device that acts as an individual performer in the system.

We have seen previously that the default SP mode can be modeled as a regular language. This allow us to build a deterministic finite state machine (FSM) that can create meaningful requests from the time sequence of signs.

There are several ways to implement a FSM inside Max but the most convenient way that I found was using a node.js package called “Javascript state machine”[[48]](#footnote-56). By also using the Viz.js library[[49]](#footnote-57), I was able to display the FSM inside a Jweb object in Max as a connected graph that represents all the states and transitions of the FSM. This is a very nice visualization for learning the grammar of SP and also for programmers to have a direct feedback on their grammatical implementation, for instance when adding new modes to the tool in the future (see Figure 9).



Figure 11 Max SP automaton (FSM) GUI

Yet, the FSM only implements the default SP mode and although they have a dedicated state, all logic elements are not implemented either, as they introduce a great level of complexity both in the automata and the interpretation by the device itself.

#### Forming a request to devices from a sequence of signs

For constructing the request messages, I took inspiration from the OSC protocol: at the output of the automata, requests are sent to the devices with the following recursive forms:

/device\_name/content/parameter value  
/device\_name/content/parameter/parameter\_of\_the\_parameter/…/… value1 value2 …

The way the request is formed inside the automaton is by collecting each sign during the state transitions and assembling them into several hierarchical objects:

* The request object that stores each request in the following format:
  + At the first level, the index of the request
    - At the second level, the name of the devices
      * At the third level, the name of the contents
        + At the fourth level, the contents’ parameters

Une image contenant moniteur, écran, texte, intérieur

Description générée automatiquementAt deeper levels, the parameters of the parameters…

Figure 12 Representation of the request object inside Max

* The “distribution” object that stores what content each device is currently performing.
* The “reverse distribution” object that stores for each content, what device is playing it with what parameters.

For convenience, I also use intermediate objects that store specific types of signs (the “who”, “what” arrays) in the parsing process.

Finally, the “group” object defines and store all the groups of the performance and the “defaults” object stores default values for certain parameters. Both can be used to adapt the parsing to specific performance situation, in analogy with the default parameters and the conventional groups in SP.

Une image contenant capture d’écran, moniteur, écran, portable

Description générée automatiquement

Figure 13 Capture of the automaton debug and convenience panels, where the user can take a look in each object internally use by the automaton and send messages for testing or debug.

The details of the internal mechanisms of the automaton and the operations it makes on those objects are not described in this report because of the complexity of their description in written English; they are available to the programmer by looking at the automaton.js file that implements those mechanisms.

However, there are specific elements of the code that can bring interesting points to a conceptual analysis of SP categories.

#### Discussion of some implementation choices and representation of SP concepts and elements

##### “Play”, “slowly enter”: from the conceptual opposition between immediateness and delay to a continuous parametrization of time

To define “when” the events must happen in SP, it is very frequent to either use Play for immediate requests and Slowly for anything that needs to be delayed (and eventually precise the delay time using “within X seconds”). This way, there is a clear opposition between immediateness and delay, whereas for a computer, there are no such categories but rather a continuous parametrization of time, such that it is possible to synchronize events very precisely and define timing in ways much more complex than the immediate versus delayed dichotomy that is relevant for human performers.

I think that conceptually, using machines in SP brings new ways of thinking and working with time in SP. Because I am not an expert on that side of SP, I am not sure whether there are already signs for working with time at the precision and parametrization of machines (absolute timing, relative timing, continuous parametrization of time at the very low or very large scale…) but I have never experienced such signs. Of course, precision or parametrization is often not wanted in SP where the interest lies in the liberty that a performer has in his propositions. However, with machines, fine descriptions of time are often relevant and allow for a wide variety of results (think about signal processing, effects…). I find the idea of requesting a computer to delay a sequence by a few samples only or reaction synchronously to events a very powerful and interesting aspect of working with computer and hope that the language could evolve with the use of such technologies.

##### Content and modifier sharing the same state in the automaton

Originally, I had separated the state “content” and “content modifier” in my automaton, before observing that after the first request, they shared the same transitions and could be merged into a single state that I called “content modifiers”. This shows that the grammatical construction itself does not reflect the conceptual difference between each sign (even if the concepts of content and content modifier are relevant for human performers, they are not very different in terms of grammar).

In fact, it is possible to remark that the idea of a content always come with default parameters, such that signing a content is always equivalent to signing content + default or open parameters. On the other side, one could push the limits of the “content modifier” very far, such that one would observe that at the end, the content has totally changed. It shows that the frontiers or the concept of content and modifiers are very porous, just like we have seen in the theory of concepts previously. The fact that the content and modifier state coincide is to me a direct consequence from the porosity of these two concepts that can regroup under the single idea of “content modifier”, whether it is at a fine level (subtle changes in volume that are close for the human perception) or broader level (change from a long tone to a pointillism, that are very different conceptually).

##### The challenge of prepositional elements unveiling the contextual components of SP

###### “With” + content -> modifier

Adding to the previous remark, we can see that using prepositional elements can change the syntax of the signs. For instance, in the sentence “whole group, movement with pointillism, slowly enter”, pointillism is a modifier, whereas in the sentence “whole group, pointillism, play” it is a content and is often explained as such.

###### Content + “group” -> identifier

Consider the following example:

* First request: “percussion 1, actor 1, dancer 1, minimalism, play”
* Second request: “numerics, long tone, play”
* Third request: “minimalism…”

At this point, the finite state machine cannot determine whether minimalism is part of the broad identifier “minimalism group” or if it is a content for the identifier “numerics”. To parse the syntactic role of “minimalism”, we therefore must know more about its context, i.e. what precedes it and what follows it.

The action of “group” after a content can be summarize in the following grammar rule:

Content + “group” -> Identifier

###### Prepositions as syntactic operators

There are examples that show the influence of context in SP grammar. Think of recursive requests such as: “Whole group, pointillism with head add hands low volume, play”.  
One could interpret the “low volume” in two ways:

1° referring to the pointillism in general  
2° referring to the movements of the hands only

I would personally interpret the request the first way. However, in the following request: “Whole group, pointillism with head high volume add hands low volume, play”, I would interpret it the second way, i.e. that the low volume refers to the hands only.

In general, my observation is that there is a class of SP signs that I would call “prepositions”: with, without, add, group, remove, go on to, go back to, morph… that act as operators[[50]](#footnote-58) that changes the syntax of elements around them. In the second SP workbook by Walter Thompson, these signs are described as belonging to the syntax categories “what” or “who” and part of the “function signal” class.

Une image contenant couteau, table

Description générée automatiquementUne image contenant couteau

Description générée automatiquementUne image contenant couteau

Description générée automatiquement

DECORRELATION what – content how -modifier…??

From my model of SP as a regular language and the previous observations, it is clear that at the syntax level, these signs are very different from other contents or modifiers signs.

It is a very important limitation of the modeling of SP as a regular language, that I have not solved in my tool yet. Several options for solving this problem in a future implementation are discussed in a further section.

In all cases that I have identified, it is the logical element that are able to change the category of a sign and therefore “break” the FSM representation validity. I hope that my work and these observations will serve as a base for deeper studies and linguistic modeling of SP grammar in its “regular” and “contextual” components, a process which to my knowledge has not been done so far.

### Part 5: Orchestra simulation

From the OSC commands created by the automaton, there is an unlimited panel of tools and ways to create an orchestra.

#### First try with Ableton Live

I originally started by building a connection with the performance software Ableton Live because of its wide spread use in the community of live performing artists (DJs, live performers) and its useful features for live music such as the use of scenes and or the launch of clips synchronized with a particular metric and tempo.

Just like many DAWs, Live can be hard to control externally and only offer a limited API to its internal mechanisms. Controlling Live externally typically requires scripting a server in python that must be installed manually. However, LiveOSC[[51]](#footnote-59) has been shared by the community to help in this process by creating server that listens to OSC map it to Live parameters.

In my [third demo video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OmPFMT9mgOs), I showed how I could use custom gestures to launch and stop clips in Live, just like a simple DJ controller would. It required only a little effort to convert the conventions I use in my OSC commands to match the LiveOSC format. By synchronizing all the clips at the same tempo and metric, Live allowed me to create a fun demo with very simple controls that “sounds good” and can easily be modified and customized by the users.

However, the integration of SP commands could not be pushed very far into Live without more complex scripting by extending the LiveOSC API, or perhaps by using additional custom Max for Live scripts. For instance, in Live like in many DAWs, it is not possible to change dynamically the tempo of single elements, as they are built around a single timeline whose tempo is usually shared by all clips.  
This is a very useful and ergonomic design choice for many use case but clearly is a limit to one of the most basic element of composition in SP. Some extended research showed me that there would be some workarounds change the tempo of a single clip of scene from within their naming, which would make it a better tool than other DAWs in which multiple tempos are almost never found. But getting into those modifications in real time would require a very deep “hack” into Live that I could not afford spending time on in the frame of this project; also given that Live is a proprietary software that would maybe not be the most popular choice among the community of performers and Soundpainting that I target with my tool.

#### The advantages of DAWs over Max

While searching for alternatives to Ableton to implement the virtual orchestra, I realized that most DAWs do not have the flexibility that would is required for composing in real-time with SP gestures:

* Working at several tempos
* Looping things on the fly
* Working with continuous frequencies (in contrast with quantized pitches in the frequency domain) for glissandos and pitch manipulation
* Extension to generative methods that rely and real-time analysis of musical elements
* …

For many of these elements, Max/MSP looks like a better choice than DAWs because of its packages and objects dedicated to these features.

However, DAWs offer high-level and ergonomic features that are not found into Max:

* Midi roll editor

## Performance aspects

### PoseNet and Wekinator settings

As mentioned previously, PoseNet as different parameters that influence its performances. It is however not obvious where lies the best compromise between accuracy and the number of poses processed by seconds (FPS). Let’s take a look at how Wekinator processes its input to identify the best settings for PoseNet.

We know that by default, Wekinator’s DTW is downsampling the data rate to improve the DTW speed, such that the best compromise in performance and accuracy is to keep the number of FPS just below what Wekinator can handle without downsampling for a sequence of 2 seconds[[52]](#footnote-60). With Wekinator’s default settings (max sequence size = 10), the ideal number of FPS is 5[[53]](#footnote-61). On a fast computer, it would be worth to change Wekinator’s default max sequence length to 20-40 and run with around 10-20 FPS, which have proven to be more than enough for SP recognition or disable downsampling.

Another question that would yet still need to be addressed is whether using very different rates for PoseNet among the training dataset or between the training dataset and real-time data would badly affect the performances of Wekinator DTW or not. Although DTW warps the sequence and should be able to match two sequences with a different data rate, they are still constraints on how far the algorithm looks forward in time to find a point that may match a sequence in the training set and possibly on how much the sequence can be warped. These remarks are only speculative at the moment and are simply left here to warn the user and programmer about the possible limits of the FastDTW and its implementation in Wekinator that takes compromises in order to be fast enough for real-time applications.

It is also to be tested how does the performance of Wekinator changes with the number of signs to be recognized. In the scope of this project, no more than dozens of signs were tested but it is possible and likely that its performance (accuracy but also speed) drops with the increase of the number of signs. These points should be investigated for future improvements of the tools, especially for working with bigger sets of signs.

The qualitative improvement of the translation- & rotation-invariant transformation was also observed during the initial tests with those 8 features by moving in space and taking slightly different orientations to the camera. However, the improvement given by the normalization of the body joints with respect to body dimensions is still to be tested with more users.

### Threading

## Learning in SP and numerical tool

Imiration, mimétisme

## Potential & future of the tool

### Emotion recognition

#### From PoseNet to building features for recognizing emotions in body gestures

Although we discussed the choice of meaningful features for recognizing SP signs within the default SP mode, I would like to discuss the motion descriptors library for Max/MSP “Modosc”[[54]](#footnote-62) and its potential use in other SP modes.

Let’s look at the SP mode “shapeline”. In this mode, all gestures and signs made by the soundpainter (except the “exit” sign of the mode) are interpreted in a figurative way by the performers, i.e. in an iconic or suggestive way rather than in a symbolic way. For instance, the soundpainter could use his facial expressions to convey emotional content or imitate the throwing of a virtual ball in the space and let the performers interpret (abstractly and freely) the dynamics of the scene.  
Interpretation in such a mode, as we have seen previously, involves particular cultural knowledges as well as knowledges about emotions, facial expressions… whether they are cultural or not.

The EyesWeb project (DIBRIS - University of Genoa, s.d.) proposes several “expressive cues” for analyzing body movement and gestures in relation with their emotional content and creating models of interaction between gestures and musical languages, in analogy to what the mode “shapeline” offers in SP. Some of these cues are features such as the contraction index, fluidity, curvature of a movement, jerk (first derivative of the acceleration), symmetry with respect to different points of the body, directivity etc.  
Although the authors of the this system are not directly demonstrating that these are the features the cognitive system uses for triggering emotions (Piana, Stagliano, Odone, Verri, & Camurri), the experiments and interactive performances they present suggest that these features do capture some sense of the emotions conveyed through gestures.

In Max, the “Modosc” library allows for computing of some of these cues. In future extensions of the project, it would be relevant to explore simple interpretations of emotional contents through gestures with music or visuals contents in the shapeline mode based on such features for PoseNet, even though more performant models would probably come from non-interpretable machine learning models in the near future.

#### FaceMesh and face emotions recognition

Tensorflow has just released in March 2020 the Facemesh package[[55]](#footnote-63) that infers approximate 3D facial surface geometry from an image or video stream and that can be ported to Max just as easily as PoseNet or Handpose models.

One use of this package for SP could be building a lightweight expression and emotion classifier that could also be used in SP modes such as the shapeline.

There are already several convincing attempts at recognizing facial emotions but Facemesh advantage is that it opens the way for fast, real-time emotion recognition from 3D mesh, hence independent of the user’s face color, dimensions, eyebrow shape, etc. Just like a normalized skeleton from PoseNet allows us to build a simple yet efficient model for recognizing SP signs without heavy training sets and models, the Facemesh could allow us to recognize emotions as facial signs… but also creating our own, new signs with the face.

### Classification problem with CRF

* Le CRF tient compte de la proba de chaque signe plus de la position dans la requête pour classifier le signe

### The future

### "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."

# Conclusion

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No synonyms in SP

Are there homonyms? YESS

Meronymes… to check/discuss : sense relations

Sign overloading: what is an analogy?

Quantum-like theory of concepts to model human interaction (interference) in responding to SP signs? <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00418/full>

Modes and defaults: attempt to define particular grammars inside a “universal” one?

Enquete statistique sur poids cognitif/temps de réponse/complexité de la réponse/débutant/experts

Utilization des signes motivée par la representation a priori du concept/résultat du soundpainter

Représentation mentale qui precede la réponse du performer; intéressant pour W (tout le monde?) si la réponse n’est pas telle qu’attendue

On ne peut s’adresser qu’à une discipline qu’on connait un peu

Immobilté du soundpainter dans la config ordi et config traditionnelle walter => aucune “deformation” du contexte de la performance artistique  
Notion d’espace

Distinction SP et performer: discussion de l’évolution, prospections de configuration possible?

Nouvelles configurations: le so

W a deja supprimé signe? Pk? Ex “race” supprimée du dict de l’académie  
Pas de synonyme en SP? Interpretation du synonyme dans les langues avec contexts: ??? nuance contextuelle (cf video )

Language SP manipulé par le sp (context free grammar) VS musical language (context sensitive) by performer

Context: importance au dela de la (context-free grammar): attentes du compositeur, configuration, par défaut…

Mode: préciser le sens en SP

“mode”, “forme”

Glossaire (definition des mots/concepts utilizes)

Biblio, table des illustrations.

4 semaines:

Facilité:

- partie technologique

* Brief history of SP

INTERACTML and why I dropped Unity

Splitcam

1. I have no example of SP used by artists outside modern societies but experiences with people from cultures that do not share the same linguistic structures and views on the artistic practices and roles would be very interesting for further studies. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For reference, see Le Corre, G. (2007). La langue des signes française (LSF). Enfance, vol. 59(3), 228-236 or « J'avancerai vers toi avec les yeux d'un sourd » (Laetitia Carton, 2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For instance, take a look at [Conducting with the body](https://www.facebook.com/ConductingWithTheBody/) (<https://vimeo.com/331394981>) or [similar duets](https://www.facebook.com/groups/4383252451/permalink/10156376454242452/), [Audrey Vallarino and the Tours soundpainting orchestra](https://www.facebook.com/ToursSoundpaintingOrchestra/videos/vb.401085769989676/1217561198395241/?type=2&theater), [Col·lectiu Free't. Soundpainting](https://www.facebook.com/pg/colectiufreet/photos/?tab=album&album_id=467792383556650) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Because I am not an expert in linguistics, I would refrain my self from assuming that the syntactic and grammatical structures that we are familiar with in Western languages are universal. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. If I had to separate each phrase in the English example, there would be a lot of commas, making it impossible to realize what phrase does each comma corresponds to, as phrases are encapsulated in other ones in hierarchical structures. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Although I have taken an example that is a simplification of the SP grammar for commodity and illustration on our topic, it is not the SP grammar, which we will see is not a context-free grammar. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For a striking example of the emergence of sign languages, see *Children Creating Core Properties of Language: Evidence from an Emerging Sign Language in Nicaragua* By Ann Senghas, Sotaro Kita, Asli Özyürek, Science (2004) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See the IVT’s website <http://ivt.fr/> for further documentation about its history and resources on artistic practices with sign language. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Indeed, the mapping from concepts to vectors in the Hilbert space is not derived from first principles, but rather inferred a posteriori by fitting the predictions of the model to the experimental data, thus removing any explanatory power. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Here, I use the term mapping as a general term, without figuring out whether it can more precisely be called a transformation or projection in mathematical terms. However, in the common sense, one can understand it as a transformation or a projection. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
11. Note that the whole discussion of this section is only relevant to the signs used to signify contents. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
12. In reference to the concept of overloading in programming languages. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
13. “When first teaching Soundpainting to a group of musicians and dancers I explain that almost all the gestures, except for a few discipline-specific ones, mean exactly the same concept or something similar (equivalent) for each of the disciplines.” (Minors & Thompson, s.d.). Here, I would agree that they mean something similar (by analogy) but not exactly the same concept. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
14. There may be other cases in which a sign has several signified, even inside one discipline, but we won’t discuss this possibility. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
15. Here, I use “concept” as an equivalent of “signified” or “meaning” [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
16. We will discuss the motivations of this construction later. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
17. By « tempo » he his implicitly referring to the frequency of a pitch and the speed of a movement; one could easily argue that frequency and speed can only be compared in the context of a cyclic movement, still the power of analogy relies in its ability to associate elements that are not directly linked. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
18. In this part, we won’t discuss the possibility that a concept has several prototypes, but the reasoning would be similar in that case. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
19. In my case, from my experience in Europe, producing a large variety of contents was personnally exciting and part of the interest I and others share for the technique ; therefore it was an important consideration that may not be shared at all by other groups with different interests and motivations to use SP. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
20. Some basic examples can be found here : https://www.handspeak.com/learn/index.php?id=41 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
21. See http://www.sematos.eu/lsf-p-tomber-5958.html [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
22. For a discussion on this topic, see Aronoff, Mark et al. “THE PARADOX OF SIGN LANGUAGE MORPHOLOGY.” *Language* vol. 81,2 (2005): 301-344. This argument is sometimes used to motivate the need of normalization of sign language. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
23. They embody several semantic components that can change the meaning of one or several signs and make some signs from the SP alphabet significant and some other insignificant. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
24. Walter uses the term « escape » in his description of the « tear up » sign which is very commonly used as an escape sign. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
25. The most interesting example to my mind is that of the Pirahã people studied by Daniel Everett, which contradicts the universality of recursivity in human cognition. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
26. Without going into many details, the concept here is simple to assign each set of parameters to a number (an index) to be able to change them during the performance. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
27. I am referring here to the concerts/parties that are hold by the Soundpainting group of Rio that I had the honor to meet and play with; to me at the opposite of my SP experience in Europe. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
28. External parts that are “shipped in” with the program are distributed under GPLv3 license (or less restrictive). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
29. With TensorFlow: https://github.com/tensorflow/tfjs-models/tree/master/posenet [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
30. Posenet Node For Max: <https://github.com/tejaswigowda/posenet-node-max>, Posenet for dummies <https://github.com/billythemusical/n4m-posenet-for-dummies> and original N4M posenet <https://github.com/yuichkun/n4m-posenet> [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
31. https://github.com/CMU-Perceptual-Computing-Lab/openpose [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
32. The only realistic approach would have been to use the pytorch implementation of OpenPose (<https://github.com/Hzzone/pytorch-openpose>) and then try to run the python scripts in Max (Max does not interpret Python natively) with <https://github.com/grrrr/py>. It is very unlikely to work and could not be tested in the frame of my master thesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
33. The most convincing project is https://saic-violet.github.io/learnable-triangulation/ [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
34. One could ask : « why then is it the case that the soundpainter always consider the virtual « box », even when the grammar of the mode implies that the request is always immediate ? I believe that it has to do with how SP has developed from the default mode to others and the pratical point of reference that the « box » is a common symbol for immediateness in all modes. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
35. In practice, soundpainters tend to omit the « enter » and « exit » signs of modes that are not ambiguous, making things more difficult without depth tracking in case that « entering the box » is the only mark of the change of mode (for instance by using the launch mode directly with « entering/exiting the box » instead of signing Launch Mode and Tear). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
36. I did not test the performance of this choice quantitatively, but only qualitatively by testing the change in performance that I could perceive with and without shoulders. It is obvious from the SP signs that I consider that aside shoulders, no other body joints could increase the performance of the recognition in real-time (curse of dimentionality problem). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
37. Several hand pose estimations models are presented here : <https://xinghaochen.github.io/awesome-hand-pose-estimation/>. The open pose model also has 2D hand pose recognition but in each case, the models could not easily be ported to Max. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
38. See Tensorflow blog, March 09, 2020 : https://blog.tensorflow.org/2020/03/face-and-hand-tracking-in-browser-with-mediapipe-and-tensorflowjs.html [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
39. https://github.com/lysdexic-audio/n4m-handpose [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
40. See the MediaPipe repository : https://github.com/google/mediapipe/blob/master/mediapipe/docs/multi\_hand\_tracking\_mobile\_gpu.md [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
41. The information flow at the opening of the patcher follows a specific order. If implemented at startup, the triggering of the input size should be launched with a « loadpercent 91 » object to guarantee that it is caught by the input manager. Otherwise, the number can be sent anytime before the recording is launched. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
42. Other categories such as MODE are not implemented yet, given that the program only focuses on the default mode of SP. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
43. 5 seconds is the maximum sequence length that I allowed the recording buffer to store. Internally, it is a constraint from the MuBu object that stores the buffers and require a « maximum capacity » for each track, possibly for memory allocation issues. However, it is unrealistic that a sign does take more than 2 seconds to be executed. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
44. In further releases of the tool, i twill be possible to only use one Mubu object for all models, but I could not reach this level of genericity and complexity inside the frame of my project. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
45. https://discussion.forum.ircam.fr/t/mubu-write-to-file-bugs-suggested-improvement/21714/2 [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
46. The MuBu library has a DTW object that can be directly used on the buffers but I could not find whether it could or how to make it work with real-time data.

    Frédéric Bettens from UMons presented in 2009 the num.dtw object for Max and PD, but it can not longer be found over the web as annonced in its introductory paper *Real-time dtw-based gesture recognition external object for max/msp and puredata* in Proc. SMC ’09, 2009 30-35

    Another DTW object for Max has been built on the online-DTW library: *An Online Tempo Tracker for Automatic Accompaniment based on Audio-to-audio Alignment and Beat Tracking*, G. Burloiu. In Sound and Music Computing (SMC), 2016, but it is not designed to be used as a classifier.

    The RapidMax object (<https://github.com/samparkewolfe/RapidMax>) implements a part of the RapidLib on which is also based Wekinator, but has less functionalities and does not implement DTW yet. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
47. http://www.Wekinator.org/ [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
48. See https://github.com/jakesgordon/javascript-state-machine/ [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
49. https://github.com/mdaines/viz.js [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
50. The notion of operator in linguistic is well defined but I am not sufficiently expert in that field to clearly define and interpret my observations in those terms : https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operator\_(linguistics) [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
51. The version that I am using is the following : https://github.com/ideoforms/LiveOSC [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
52. 2 seconds is the default value of the recording sequence for each sign. The implementation details of Wekinator are discussed in the course *Machine learning for musicians and artists, Working with time* on Kadenze.com and visible on <https://github.com/fiebrink1/wekinator>. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
53. We indeed have FPS\*sequence\_length = sequence size. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
54. Modosc can be found at <https://github.com/motiondescriptors/modosc>, which relevant papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
55. https://blog.tensorflow.org/2020/03/face-and-hand-tracking-in-browser-with-mediapipe-and-tensorflowjs.html [↑](#footnote-ref-63)