EMILY SHAW AND YVES DELAPORTE

New Perspectives on the History of American Sign Language

Asserting that French, Spanish, or Romanian derive from Latin is easy; to establish proof of such a connection, as philologists of Roman languages have done in historical phonetics, one must retrace the evolution of forms and meanings to uncover the Latin etymologies of thousands of contemporary words. The same can be said about the relationship between American Sign Language (ASL) and French Sign Language (LSF). It is well known that Laurent Clerc introduced LSF to the United States beginning in 1817. Linguists and anthropologists have long argued that LSF influenced the majority of the ASL lexicon (e.g., Woodward and DeSantis 1977; Woodward 1978, 1979; Lane 1992). In more recent years, American linguists have begun exploring this historical relationship as it concerns the gesture-sign connection (e.g., Shaffer 2002; Wilcox 2004). A comprehensive exploration of the effects of this affiliation on contemporary American signs, though, has yet to be conducted by researchers familiar with the history of both LSF and ASL. After years of research on historical documents and dialects in deaf communities in France and the United States, we present here preliminary data that help to fill this gap. Ultimately, these data will culminate in an etymological dictionary of ASL.[1]

While much is known about the *events* surrounding the spawning of the Deaf community in the United States, very little is known

Emily Shaw is a doctoral candidate in Georgetown University's Department of Linguistics. Yves Delaporte is a research director at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (Paris).

about just what type of language Gallaudet and Clerc used to communicate with their first generations of students. Since this was the moment when ASL began to crystallize, it is surely the place where a historical linguist would find the origins of most of the lexicon. This task is not so simple, though, as the backgrounds of the deaf people who originally attended the first American school were diverse: Some students were older, some had never used a sign language before, some came from deaf families (where they were already signing), and many were children from Martha's Vineyard, where a long-established sign language was already in use (Lane 1984). Thus, to record the history of ASL, we must consider historical documents of LSF, Martha's Vineyard Sign Language (MVSL), and the signs used by the first students and teachers at the Hartford school in addition to emblematic gestures that hearing people used in the United States and in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of research on MVSL and no written records of signs used by students and teachers at the school, as far as we can tell. So we are left to consider historical records of LSF and ASL, in addition to the gestures used by earlier populations of hearing people, to paint as coherent a picture as possible of the history of the lexicon. While we cannot account for the entire lexicon in this work, we are able to tackle a great deal of it with what we have.

A vast variety of forces triggers word creation in any language. These influences can be categorized in ways that help us understand how words and signs come to be. Of course, over time, words can experience influences from multiple sources, oftentimes resulting in a reinterpretation of the origins as representing something wholly different from their earliest etymons, or roots (we will see this in the case of the American sign TIME). The history of signs in ASL is unique in that it necessarily includes the history of LSF—one that developed in a geographically and culturally distant place. For the purposes of this article, we focus on the impact of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French culture, in addition to that of the educators of deaf children in French deaf schools, in hopes of underscoring their relevance to the history of ASL.

We gathered our data on the LSF etymons in this article from descriptions and/or illustrations of historical texts by Abbé de l'Épée

(1784), Abbé Ferrand (ca. 1785), Abbé Sicard (1808), Baron Degérando (1827), Abbé Jamet (ca. 1830), Alexandre Blanchet (1850), Joséphine Brouland (1855), Pierre Pélissier (1856)—the only deaf author—Abbé Lambert (1865), and Abbé Laveau (1868). The historical sources of ASL are unfortunately scarcer than those in LSF. Three collections of signs were published in the early twentieth century, almost at the same time: John Schuyler Long's (1910) *Sign Language,* Daniel D. Higgins's (1923) *How to Talk to the Deaf,* and John Walter Michaels's (1923) *Handbook of the Sign Language of the Deaf.* In addition, we include references to films from *The Preservation of American Sign Language* (2003), which includes monologues recorded in 1913 of prominent figures in the deaf community such as John B. Hotchkiss, George Veditz, and Edward Miner Gallaudet. We also know of a nineteenth-century list of English descriptions of signs printed by Jerome S. Brown (1856). Brown's text was written not to document signs as they were used but to standardize the varieties of signs Brown so disliked. This text has proved the least helpful in providing etymologies as it consists almost entirely of English synonyms or definitions of English words that do not correspond with descriptions of signs in other early dictionaries. Though incomplete, historical texts do provide a rich collection of etymons when viewed in relation to contemporary and historical sources of ASL.[2]

As we have said, historical documentations of signs are limited in their scope (i.e., number of signs documented), original purpose (e.g., religious proselytizing), and biases (e.g., tendency to record signs used by a particular group of people). We have collected signs from dialects not documented in texts and/or no longer used in mainstream LSF and ASL through long-term fieldwork in French and American deaf communities. Outlying areas of France, like Chambéry and Auvergne, for example, preserved many signs that dropped out of use in Paris; we have discovered several sources of ASL signs in these and other regions of France. Likewise, areas in the United States, especially those clustered around older schools for deaf students like those in Indiana, Ohio, and Alabama, have conserved many older signs that have gone undocumented in texts of ASL. Fieldwork consisted of naturalistic interactions with deaf people, participant observations, and ethnographic interviews throughout the course of years of research in deaf communities in both countries.

For the purposes of this article, we have grouped these etymons into six broad categories, including some we also see at work in spoken languages. First, expanding upon connections between gestures and signs illustrated by Shaffer (2002) and Wilcox (2004), we examine several gestures meaningful to French hearing people from which deaf people created a number of signs (section 1). We consider the material culture, or the implements used in daily life, of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France as a category of etymons. These include tools, technical gestures, and clothing (section 2). Third, we consider educational, social, and religious customs that figure greatly in the creation of signs (section 3). Another category consists of etymons derived from values, representations, and symbols of ancient society (section 4), followed by a category influenced by values specific to French deaf people of ancient times (section 5). Finally, in a class unique to LSF, we consider both initialized and methodical signs implemented and used by the Abbé de l'Épée in his early teachings of deaf children, as well as the influence of French calques, or loan translations, on some signs (section 6).

Several examples that we discuss concern the history of isolated signs, while others, in contrast, show proof of the existence of lexical families, or groups of signs that derive from the same etymon. In many cases, signs from these lexical families are now distinct from the forms and/or meanings of their ancestral roots. These signs' relationships become obvious only when considered together over a stretch of time. While researchers have proposed etymologies in past works, we show that these have largely been founded on intuitions gleaned from observing contemporary signs. By examining evolutionary trajectories of signs over time, we are better able to capture the rich sources from which deaf people gleaned, created, and manipulated meaningful units in their language.

1. Gestures Meaningful to Hearing People in France

Gestures commonly used by hearing people have served as artifacts of sign creation in both LSF and ASL. These gestures range from spontaneous, less-entrenched forms, such as deictics, to more-established, emblematic forms like the evil eye gesture. We examine several signs as they evolved from these origins in the following.

Deictics

The deictic gesture consists of pointing one's finger at an object, real or imagined. When directed toward the sky, this gesture was the etymon of the ASL sign STAR (figure 1) according to the historical descriptions of the French sign ÉTOILE "star": "show different points in the firmament" (Ferrand, ca. 1785), "indicate the place of the stars in space" (Lambert 1865) (figure 2). Pointing to the sky with alternating index fingers also produced the contemporary French sign ASTROLOGIE "astrology" (figure 3). Over time, the two index fingers drew close together so that their sides now make brushing contact in ASL. The evolution obscured its origin, as evidenced by Higgins (1923): "the elevated indices striking each other like flints to show the light and the twinkling." Higgins's colloquial etymology has been passed down without modification in contemporary sources (Costello 1999; Riekehof 1987).

Rubbing the Hands

The sign WHATEVER (figure 4) derives from a gesture that consists of rubbing one's hands as if to wash them clean and has the same meaning as the English (and French) expression "I wash my hands of this" (i.e., "this does not concern me") The gesture was attributed to Pontius Pilate, who is thought to have disclaimed responsibility for the death of Christ (figure 5) by using this gesture. Proof of the etymology of this sign is driven by the contemporary LSF sign BONHEUR "happiness" (figure 6), nearly identical to WHATEVER, which comes

Figure 1. STAR[3] (CM).[4]

Figure 2. Reconstructed etymon of STAR (PM).[5]

Figure 3. ASTROLOGIE "astrology" (IVT[6] 1997).

FIGURE 4. WHATEVER (CM).

FIGURE 5. Etymon of WHATEVER (PM).

FIGURE 6. BONHEUR "happiness" (IVT).

from a gestured homonym consisting of rubbing the hands as a sign of satisfaction. BONHEUR underwent the same formal evolution as the American sign (save for the closing of the hands when they approach the body—a recent evolution in the history of the LSF sign). In both cases, an adaptation to the phonology of the signs in the borrowing language occurred: Rotating the hands over each other changed into brushing against each other so that the palms remained facing the body.

Indicating Size

When uttering French expressions such as "just a little bit" or "not even this much," French hearing people gesture by touching the index finger on the thumb of the same hand. The index finger is used metaphorically to represent a measurement of smallness. The gesture became the linguistic unit PEU "few" in LSF with the addition of a flicking movement of the thumb. PEU preceded by FUTUR "future" composed the nineteenth-century sign BIENTÔT "soon" (figure 7), which literally meant "future few." Over time, the process of economy of movement quickly caused this compound sign to be reduced to its second component, PEU, meaning "bientôt." This gesture was transmitted to ASL, where it became QUICK/IMMEDIATELY (figure 8). The etymology is no longer perceived by contemporary American authors: "a quick movement" (Sternberg 1994); "as fast as shooting a marble" (Riekehof 1987).

Figure 7. BIENTÔT "soon" (Lambert 1865).

Figure 8. QUICK/ IMMEDIATELY (CM).

Gesture of Defiance

In French culture, a gesture produced by flicking a fingernail under the teeth used to signify defiance, meaning "I will not yield to anything," and eventually took on the more general meaning of "nothing" among French people (Carénini 1991). Young hearing children passed the gesture along to their peers and continued to use it with the accompanying expression "bisque, bisque, rage!" or "goody, goody for you!" (Wylie 1977). Deaf people in France borrowed this gesture, as attested by the Abbé de l'Épée (1784): "The sign RIEN ["nothing"] is known by everyone. One takes the extremity of the two front teeth between the fingers and quickly retracts the hand: the deaf and mute

Figure 9. RIEN "nothing" (Lambert 1865).

Figure 10. NOT (CM).

all know this sign, even before coming to our instruction" (figure 9). Descending to the chin by economy, the sign was transmitted to ASL, meaning "not" (figure 10). The origin is no longer noted in contemporary texts: "flicking away something distasteful" (Costello 1999).

Horned Handshape

Another pejorative gesture from Europe consists of directing at an adversary one or both hands with the index and little fingers extended (we refer to this handshape as the *horned* handshape). Documented for the first time on a painted mural from Pompeii (100 A.D.), the gesture was widely used throughout the Mediterranean basin, extending throughout France, as an act of protection against the evil eye: The two extended fingers threaten to poke the eyes of someone casting a spell (Carénini 1991). The gesture eventually lost its superstitious connotations in France[7] but was still used derisively during the twentieth century by French hearing children (figure 11). The gesture was later borrowed by deaf people, resulting in the sign SE MOQUER "to mock," identical to ASL MOCK (figure 12). The absence of this gesture in the United States precluded American authors from identifying the sign as originating in hearing European milieus. Higgins (1923) suggests the sign's form represents "speech is against or poked at them."

In France, the evil eye gesture is the etymon of an important family of signs whose units all consist of the horned handshape and carry negative connotations (e.g., SE TROMPER "to be wrong," FAUX "false," ARTIFICIEL "artificial," EXPLOITER "to exploit," DÉGUEULASSE

FIGURE 11. Etymon of MOCK (hearing children) (PM).

FIGURE 12. MOCK (CM).

"revolting," MALADROIT "clumsy"). In each of these signs, an extended thumb is used in lieu of the extended index finger.[8] The first of these derived forms, SE TROMPER "to be wrong," was originally a directional sign meaning VOUS VOUS TROMPEZ "you are wrong" when the palm was directed away from the signer and JE ME TROMPE "I am wrong" when directed toward the signer (figure 13). This second derivation remains intact in the ASL WRONG (figure 14). The origin proved elusive to historic authors like Higgins (1923), who saw "children and persons [who] grasp the mouth or chin when they speak out of turn or erroneously" and to contemporary authors like Sternberg (1994, p. 608) who reports a curious etymology, "The thumb and little finger are said to represent, respectively, right and wrong, with the head poised between the two."

DECEIVE (figure 15) differs slightly from WRONG in the form of the right hand: The little finger is contracted. DECEIVE also comes from the evil eye gesture more likely through the ancient French sign VOUS VOUS TROMPEZ "you are wrong" (figure 13B) as an intermediary. The contraction of the little finger is not unusual since the same evolution is known to have occurred in the contemporary French sign SE TROMPER "to be wrong" (like the ASL WRONG but exhibiting a contracted little finger). In DECEIVE, the left index finger serves as the place of contact for the right hand and is likely the classifier predicate of a third person. Thus, the original feature of directionality in the sign SE TROMPER is in effect applied to this third person to mean "I make him/her wrong" or "I deceive him/her." The shift in meaning from

FIGURE 13. SE TROMPER "be wrong" (Lambert 1865).

FIGURE 14. WRONG (CM).

FIGURE 15. DECEIVE (CM).

FIGURE 16. IRONY (CM).

"one is wrong" to "one is deceived" is likewise attested in LSF as a result of the polysemy of the French word *tromper* "to deceive" when the verb is transitive and *se tromper* "to be wrong" when the form is reflexive.

IRONY (figure 16) exhibits the extended index and little fingers and is endowed with a movement that most likely symbolizes "opposite"—implicating the underlying significance of the word *irony*. IRONY is the only form in the horned handshape family where the historical relationship to European gesture was perceived by an American author: "Possibly an ancient sign as dez[9] is the 'evil eye' configuration, index and pinkie fingers extended parallel" (Stokoe, Casterline, and Croneberg 1976, 170).

Finally, in Ohio (Shroyer and Shroyer 1984), FAKE (figure 17) is a derivative of the ancient LSF sign VOUS VOUS TROMPEZ, where the horns are struck against the dominant hand; this sign is very close in form to the contemporary LSF sign FAUX "fake" (figure 18), which followed the same evolution as its American counterpart. A more complete account of regional variation in ASL will permit an enrichment of this family of lexical units.

The existence of this lexical family of signs with the horned handshape is no longer perceived by ASL users due to distinct gestural traditions in France and the United States. Additionally, the connections between the signs are masked by the variability in the forms of the hands, which are sometimes configured with the thumb raised (as with WRONG and the regional sign FAKE) and at other times with the index

Figure 17. FAKE (Shroyer and Shroyer 1984).

Figure 18. FAUX "fake" (IVT 1986).

finger raised (as in MOCK, DECEIVE, and IRONY). Incidentally, both Michaels (1923) and Higgins (1923) characterized the horned handshape of MOCK and DECEIVE as the "French form" (i.e., thumb and little finger extended), thus providing supplementary proof of the existence of the signs' historical ties to LSF.

Forked Handshape

Another handshape linked to the supernatural world is the forked handshape (or the V handshape) directed away from the signer toward one on whom the signer is "placing a spell." In Greece, this gesture means "go to hell!" (Morris 1997, 47) because it points a presumed damned soul in the direction of hell. The portal of the cathedral of Bamberg (Germany) displays this gesture from the thirteenth century (figure 19). It was borrowed by deaf people in France to create DIABLE "devil" (figure 20), where the forked hand evokes the devil's horns, tail, claws, and split hooves, as well as the pitchfork with which he is said to torment the damned. DIABLE produced the derivative MAUVAIS "bad," in which the two forked hands cross each other as they move toward the ground (figure 21). This derivation conforms to the etymology of the French word *malin,* another name for *devil,* which, like *mauvais* "bad," comes from the Latin *malus* "bad, evil." MAUVAIS was transmitted to ASL through two signs, CARELESS (figure 22) and WORSE (figure 23). The homonymy between WORSE and MULTIPLY resulted in the dissemination of a false etymology for WORSE "to indicate a bad condition multiplied" (Costello 1999, 503).

FIGURE 19. Damned by a forked hand (YD).[10]

FIGURE 20. DIABLE "devil" (Lambert 1865).

The forked handshapes in CAREFUL/KEEP (figure 24) have been interpreted to represent watchful eyes or the manual letter K: CAREFUL "a combination of watching and warning" (Riekehof 1987); "K for keep in the sense of keeping carefully" (Sternberg 1994); "eyes looking attentively" (Costello 1999). In entries glossed KEEP, we perceive "hands in the position of 'seeing,' represented by four eyes watching" (Riekehof 1987); "the K-hands are crossed" (Sternberg 1994); and "eyes looking in different directions" (Costello 1999). The nearly identical forms of CAREFUL and the LSF FAIRE ATTENTION "be careful" leave no doubt as to the sign's actual origins. FAIRE ATTENTION (figure 25) is composed of two signs: VOIR "to see," followed by DANGER "danger" (figure 26). The second part of the compound, DANGER, is a derivative of the sign MAUVAIS "bad" (Delaporte 2007).

FIGURE 21. MAUVAIS (Pélissier 1856).

FIGURE 22. CARELESS (CM).

FIGURE 23. WORSE (CM).

Figure 24. careful/keep (CM).

Figure 25. faire attention "be careful" (IVT 1986).

Figure 26. danger "danger," (IVT 1986).

Counting Gestures

The French gestural system for counting has greatly influenced numbers in ASL in addition to other signs. In France, the extended thumb represents the number "one," followed by the extended thumb and index finger for the number "two," and so on. French deaf people have constructed their numeral signs according to this gesture system; that is, they produce UN "one" with the thumb extended, DEUX "two" with the thumb and index finger extended, and so on. The evolutionary trajectory of these signs diverged when passed on to ASL, where ONE is realized by extending the index finger in accordance with the gesture used to count "one" in the American culture.[11] Several ASL signs derive from LSF UN, however, and because the thumb is not interpreted as representing the number one in the United States, the origin of these signs is not always obvious. In the following paragraphs are some examples of signs in which the French UN has been passed down to American signs.

The ASL sign TOMORROW comes from the French sign DEMAIN "tomorrow": The thumb projects forward from the side of the signer's cheek, meaning "one day into the future." Likewise, YESTERDAY comes from the French sign HIER "yesterday," where the thumb projects backward from the side of the cheek, meaning "one day in the past." An older American sign, IN A FEW DAYS, also derives from LSF and is produced by successively extending all of the fingers from

the side of the cheek, beginning with the thumb, meaning "in one, two, three, [etc.] days." This sign is still used by some in the United States (Texas and Alabama, field observation, E. Shaw) and was produced by Edward Allen Fay in his 1913 monologue (*Preservation of American Sign Language,* 2003). Much later, the thumb of IN A FEW DAYS became affixed to the jaw, creating the illusion that the sign conforms to the American system of numeration: "One by one, the remaining fingers appear, starting with the *index* finger" (emphasis added) (Sternberg 1994, 272).

ANY derives from the French CHAQUE/CHACUN "every, everyone": "trace circularly in front of oneself and by little jumps of the wrist where only the thumb is lifted" (Lambert 1865). This sign amounts to producing UN several times in sequence (figure 27). At the beginning of the twentieth century (Long 1910; Higgins 1923), this exact form in the United States meant "any." In more recent years, the movement of the sign has evolved from "little jumps" in a half circle to a single rotation of the wrist (figure 28).

BETTER/BEST (figure 29) is identical to the French MIEUX "better" (figure 30), which the Abbé Lambert (1865) glossed as BON EN PREMIER "good first." In ASL and LSF, the compound consists of BON "good" and PREMIER "first," which eventually assimilated into a single sign.

In ASL, WHICH/OR (figure 31) comes from the old French sign OU "or" (figure 32), meaning "this first or that first." Another ASL sign, OR/THEN, is identical to a different French sign, OU (figure 33), where

FIGURE 27. CHAQUE "every," CHACUN "everyone" (Lambert (1865).

FIGURE 28. ANY (CM).

Figure 29. BETTER/BEST (CM).

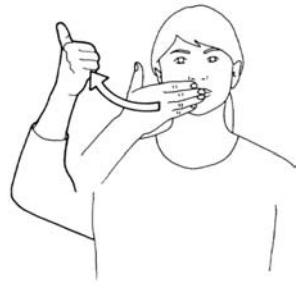

Figure 30. MIEUX "better" (IVT 1986).

the right index finger touches first the thumb and then the index finger of the left hand in accordance with the French system of numeration. The adaptation to the American system produced another sign, EITHER/OR, in which the right index finger first touches the tip of the left index finger and then the middle finger.

Staying with the motif of the number "one," the extended thumb in LSF has for some time been used to mean "one person" and more particularly "one person in movement."[12] SEUL "alone" (figure 34), where the raised thumb moves across the signing space, was constructed through the semantic transfer of "one" to "one person." For Ferrand (ca. 1785), this sign represented UN, whereas for Sicard (1808) it represented UN INDIVIDU "one individual." The two inter-

FIGURE 31. WHICH/OR (CM).

FIGURE 32. OU "or" (Pélissier 1856).

FIGURE 33. OU "or" (Lambert 1865).

FIGURE 34. SEUL "alone" (IVT 1986).

FIGURE 35. MOI-MÊME "myself" (IVT 1986).

FIGURE 36. MYSELF (CM).

pretations are equally exact since the number "one" also occurs in "one person." In both senses, the thumb is essentially put out of the way as it passes to the periphery of the signing space, thus conforming to one of the meanings of SEUL, "lonely," which produced the derivative MOI-MÊME "myself" (figure 35), from which the ASL MYSELF (figure 36) derives.

The form that features the extended thumb also became a classifier predicate for "one person in movement." Several French signs have this meaning and were subsequently borrowed into ASL. Examples include FOLLOW (one person follows another), CHASE (one person pursues another), FAR (one person is at a great distance from another), and RACE (two people compete to see who can do something faster). Today, the original meaning of the raised thumb in ASL has diminished, as evidenced by the variety of explanations of this class of signs by American authors. For instance, FOLLOW continues to be interpreted as meaning "one *hand* follows the other" (emphasis added) (Higgins 1923; also see Stokoe, Casterline, 'and Croneberg 1965; Riekehof 1987; Sternberg 1994; Costello 1999): We see the meaning of the movement of the hands but no longer interpret the handshape as representing a person. The same phenomenon is observed for all of the other signs we have cited in this group. For example, TOMORROW is interpreted as meaning "the *sign* moved forward into the future" (emphasis added); WHICH as "the movement indicates indecision"; MYSELF as "the *sign* moves toward oneself" (emphasis added) (Costello

1999). The raised thumb in ANY is interpreted as representing the manual letter A for the English word *any* (Higgins 1923; Costello 1999). An example that diverges from these reinterpretations of the raised thumb comes from Higgins (1923), who saw the following meaning in BACKBITE (figure 37) (the contemporary sign MEAN): The "right hand is trying to beat the left thumb (a person) down and out of place."

Figure 37. BACKBITE
(YD from Higgins 1923).

2. Material Culture: Implements of Daily Life

We turn now to some tools, technical gestures, and items of clothing from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France that figure in the creation of a number of ASL signs. In some instances, as in the case of FINE, American authors are familiar with the roots of the signs in French material culture. The origins of most of these signs, however, evade contemporary authors since they were originally highly contextualized to quotidian life in France. With these signs, we often see a reinterpretation of meaning by users, which can lead to changes in the forms of the signs. These cases demonstrate the complexity of uncovering etymological origins in this language and reinforce the need to compile and compare multiple sources in order to determine every influence operating in the history of a particular sign.

Sickle

The sign COUNTRY (figure 38) is identical to the LSF CAMPAGNE "rural, country" (figure 39) and has been interpreted as representing "a tree" and "the land where it grows" (Higgins 1923) or more recently as "the elbow reinforcement on the jacket of a 'country squire' type" (Stern-

FIGURE 38. COUNTRY (CM).

FIGURE 39. CAMPAGNE "country" (IVT 1986).

FIGURE 40. Harvesting wheat (YD from a medieval drawing).

berg 1994). The gesture etymon (figure 40) is unambiguously identified in historic texts: The sign "simulates the action of cutting wheat with a sickle" (Blanchet 1850), "harvest" (Lambert 1865): The right hand simulates the movement of a sickle while the left arm symbolizes the act of grasping a sheaf of wheat with one's fist. Over time, the sign's movement reduced to a rotation of the open right hand on the left elbow. The precision of this etymology is confirmed by the fact that the same form with the meaning "August" (one of the months of harvest time) continues to be used in the Drôme region of France.

Grater

The sign CHOCOLATE (figure 41) comes from the French sign CHOCOLAT "chocolate" (figure 42), which represents the act of grating choco-

FIGURE 41. CHOCOLATE (CM).

FIGURE 42. CHOCOLAT "chocolate" (IVT 1986).

late: The left hand symbolizes a grater, while the right symbolizes a piece of chocolate. Initialization of the ASL sign with the letter C broke the etymological link with its French counterpart, but a sign in Louisiana (Shroyer and Shroyer 1984) remains identical to its root.

Handkerchief

The ASL sign SELL (figure 43) is indistinguishable from the French sign VENDRE "sell" (figure 44), whose etymology refers to an ancient custom wherein "the two hands, elevated to the height of the head, agitate as the merchants do when they take a handkerchief by the two corners and shake it to attract customers" (Degérando 1827). This etymology is confirmed by a variation used in rural France, where the two hands are configured in the shape of a ring—a handshape (also called the F handshape) that depicts the grasping of thin objects. This variation of VENDRE is still used in some parts of the United States (Maryland, field observation, E. Shaw). In both LSF and ASL, the signs have dropped from the height of the head to the front of the chest by virtue of economy of articulation.

Figure 43. SELL (CM).

Figure 44. VENDRE "sell" (IVT 1986).

Spurs

URGE (figure 45) is inherited from one of two French signs that are both glossed FORCER "to urge" (figure 46). Synonyms in LSF, these signs are distinguished by different configurations of the hands: the extended index finger (not pictured below) or the key handshape (also called the X handshape). The extended index fingers represent the

FIGURE 45. URGE (CM).

FIGURE 46. FORCER "urge" (IVT 1990).

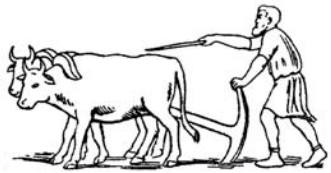

FIGURE 47. Plow.

long sticks that people used to herd cattle (figure 47), while the key handshape represents grasping the stick. The symbolism additionally plays on a metaphor based on the French word *aiguillonner* "to spur on" when it is used in the sense of "to urge."

Hammer and Bell

Contrary to common belief, the origin of TIME (figure 48) was identified long before the advent of the wristwatch in 1904. Older texts show the index finger tapping the back of the left hand (Pélissier 1856) to mean HEURE "time" (figure 49). The etymology of this sign is rooted in ancient clocks (figure 50), not wristwatches, where the sign is intended "to show the hammer which taps the bell" (Ferrand, ca.

FIGURE 48. TIME (CM).

FIGURE 49. HEURE "time" (Pélissier 1856).

FIGURE 50. Old clock with hammer and bell.

1785) and "with the right index finger ring the hour on the back of the hand which is in the guise of a bell" (Lambert 1865). When the wristwatch became an object used in every day life after World War I, the index finger moved a few centimeters from the back of the hand to the back of the wrist, leading users to assume its original symbolism was the wristwatch.

Feathers and Lace

The garments of the French upper class of past centuries are represented in an important lexical family that comprises MAN, FATHER, FINE, LADY, WOMAN, and MOTHER, all of which we discuss. MAN (figure 51) derives from a very old sign absent from ancient French texts because it hails from a region far from Paris. The open hand, whose thumb is first posed on the forehead and then the chest, represents two flamboyant elements of the clothes worn by French nobles at the end of the seventeenth century: ornate hats adorned by ostrich feathers that men frequently wore and the lace that decorated their shirts (figure 52). Until the 1950s, MONSIEUR "mister" continued to be used in Chambéry (figure 53, field observation, Y. Delaporte). Interestingly, in the same area, the open hand placed with the thumb on the forehead used to mean "rooster." We might conclude, then, that the first part of MAN was actually a metaphor used to mock the handsome gentlemen from the city who adorned themselves as proud roosters.

The etymology of MAN explains that of FATHER (figure 54). We already know that the two parts of the compound represent the feathered hats and the lacy ornamentation of men's fashion—FATHER retains only

Figure 51. MAN (CM).

Figure 52. Garments of a French nobleman (Agron n.d.).

Figure 53. MONSIEUR "mister" around 1700 (Chambéry) (YD).

FIGURE 54. FATHER (CM).

FIGURE 55. PÈRE "father" (Auvergne) (YD).

the first part of this compound. The derivation of FATHER from MAN occurred before Laurent Clerc's departure to America since the sign is identical to a contemporary sign in two French regions: in Anjou, where it means "mister," and in Auvergne, where it means "father" (figure 55, field observation, Y. Delaporte).

The second part of the compound MAN is identical to FINE (figure 56). While the etymological link between FATHER and the old feathered hats has long been obscured, the link between FINE and lace ruffles has been passed down in American texts: "indicating the fancy ruffles and laces formerly affected by so-called gentlemen and ladies" (Higgins 1923), "the ruffles on the front of a fine old-fashioned shirt" (Costello 1994). In addition to what has been shown elsewhere (Delaporte 2006), the popularity of the *jabot* "ruffles" (figure 57) on garments

FIGURE 56. FINE (CM).

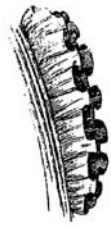

FIGURE 57. Jabot "ruffles" (Piroux 1830).

of bourgeois men during the eighteenth century reinforced the imagery inspired by garments of the seventeenth century.

In the nineteenth century, the French sign MADAME "lady" was a compound consisting of FEMME "woman" followed by JABOT. FEMME (and the contemporary ASL sign GIRL) was produced by tracing the thumb down the side of the cheek, suggesting the ribbons of that era's hairstyles. The LSF sign MADAME is identical to ASL WOMAN 1 (figure 58) and is the source of WOMAN 2 (figure 59) due to assimilation (Frishberg 1975) of the first sign's handshape with that of the second. MOTHER (figure 60) is identical to the first part of WOMAN—this is likely the sign GIRL, where the hand has opened, again as a result of the influence of the compound WOMAN. The pairs MAN/FATHER and WOMAN/MOTHER formed a structural system of four analogous terms (MOTHER is to WOMAN as FATHER is to MAN) even though the forms evolved somewhat independently.

Tricolor Badge

An entirely different element of clothing, inherited from the French Revolution, prompted the creation of the sign GOVERNMENT (figure 61). In older forms, the index finger traced a circle close to the temple (figure 62) or was posed on the temple and then removed to trace a circle in space before touching the temple again (Long 1910; Higgins 1923). This form symbolizes the tricolor badge worn on republicans' hats in France (figure 63). The same image is the source of the French sign RÉPUBLIQUE "republic" (figure 64). The proposed etymol-

Figure 58. WOMAN 1 (CM).

Figure 59. WOMAN 2 (CM).

Figure 60. MOTHER (CM).

FIGURE 61. GOVERNMENT (CM).

FIGURE 62. GOVERNOR (Michaels 1923).

ogy of American authors (Sternberg 1994; Costello 1999) ties the location of the sign to a metaphoric use of the word *head* as in "head of state," but this explanation fails to account for the circular movement of the sign, which today has been reduced to a simple rotation of the wrist.

FIGURE 63. The tricolor cockade of the republican cap.

FIGURE 64. RÉPUBLIQUE "republic" (IVT 1986).

3. Rituals

American Sign Language inherited from LSF certain customs and traditions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France. These signs carry significant meaning in French culture but have generally lost all relevance in American culture, thus perplexing American authors as to their origins. We explicate several of these signs rooted in French rituals in the following paragraphs.

Crown of Laurels

SUMMER (figure 65) is commonly reported as representing the act of wiping perspiration from one's brow during extreme heat; in some regions of France, signs for ÉTÉ "summer" are rooted in this very gesture. In Paris, however, a different etymology was at work. Pélissier (1856) reveals in his entry for AOÛT "August" that ÉTÉ (where the middle finger of the open hand wipes the forehead) represents a crown of laurels. In August, the distribution of books and crowns of laurels at school was a long-standing tradition to reward the best students for their hard work (figure 66). By semantic derivation, what was once AOÛT later became ÉTÉ. In LSF, until the 1960s ÉTÉ was produced with the bent index finger posed on the forehead (Oléron 1974), while the Quebec Sign Language (LSQ) sign ÉTÉ, also inherited from LSF, taps either side of the forehead (figure 67). It is likely that the popular "wiping the forehead" etymology instigated the change in movement of the ASL sign such that the index finger now glides across the forehead as it bends. As with TIME, it is impossible to determine which of these etymons influenced the contemporary ASL sign SUMMER. We conclude, then, that both of these two etymons likely influenced the sign as it exists today.

Swordfights

The importance of swordfights and duels in French society from centuries past is well known. Causing thousands of deaths, duels were outlawed by the Cardinal Richelieu in 1626 under punishment of

FIGURE 65. SUMMER (CM).

FIGURE 66. A crown of laurels, etymon of SUMMER.

FIGURE 67. LSQ ÉTÉ "summer" (YD).[13]

death, but they continued to occur up to the end of the nineteenth century. This ritual of civil life is the etymon of a number of ASL signs belonging to the conceptual field of confrontation. ARGUE (figure 68) is identical to the French ENNEMI "enemy" (figure 69), whose etymology is provided by Ferrand's description (ca. 1785): "men against, swords drawn." The sign CANNOT (figure 70) comes from the French sign INTERDIT "forbidden" (figure 71), where the index fingers represent the swords of adversaries, one of which prevents the passage of the other. In ASL, there has been a slight change in meaning from "not able to do something forbidden" to simply "not able to."

FIGURE 68. ARGUE (CM).

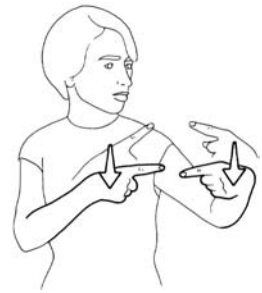

FIGURE 69. ENNEMI "enemy" (IVT 1986).

FIGURE 70. CANNOT (CM).

FIGURE 71. INTERDIT "forbidden" (IVT 1986).

Fasting for Lent

Another ritual, this one religious, produced a vast family of lexical items in LSF and ASL. In an older ASL sign, FAST, the thumb traces a cross over the lips, showing that "the lips are sealed with a cross because of the Catholic law of fasting" (Higgins 1923). This sign is identical to the contemporary French sign SACRIFICE "sacrifice" (figure 72), which used to mean "fast, Lent" (Lambert 1865). Both FAST and SACRIFICE initially referred to Lent, the forty-day period between Mardi Gras and Easter, during which Catholics were expected to fast throughout the day. The traced cross is the etymon of a number of French signs (Delaporte 2005) and American signs that have become divorced from religious roots but remain linked to notions of privacy, effort, and suffering. Some derived forms have maintained only the vertical beam of the cross: For instance, ABSTAIN/PATIENCE (figure 73) is identical to the French sign PATIENCE, which, with a single downward pull, means SE FORCER "to force oneself." LONELY (figure 74) differs from ABSTAIN/PATIENCE only in its handshape, which likely represents the manual number ONE. When the index finger is drawn down both sides of the mouth, this is the sign SINGLE, and when initialized with the manual letter B, the sign BACHELOR. One might suppose these signs originally referred to a celibate person, in particular, Catholic priests, who take vows of celibacy.

SUFFER (figure 75) is simply a derivative of ABSTAIN/PATIENCE. Another sign, also translated as "suffer," is executed by rotating the fists around each other above the stomach (figure 76). This sign is part of

FIGURE 72. SACRIFICE (IVT 1990).

FIGURE 73. ABSTAIN, PATIENCE (CM).

FIGURE 74. LONELY (CM).

FIGURE 75. SUFFER 1 (CM).

FIGURE 76. SUFFER 2 (CM).

FIGURE 77. A: PATIENCE. B: SOUFFRIR "suffer" (Lambert 1865).

a compound shown in a picture from Abbé Lambert (1865), who groups the LSF signs PATIENCE "patience" and SOUFFRIR "suffer" (figure 77). The origin of the fist rotation is an eighteenth-century French sign that represented stomach pains: "Pass the closed fists several times in front of the stomach" (Ferrand, ca. 1785). Long (1910) describes the sign as meaning "difficult." Inherited from LSF, this sign could be translated as either *souffrir* "suffer" or *difficile* "difficult" in the nineteenth century, depending on context (Delaporte 2007).

Other derivations in this lexical family retain only the horizontal beam of the original cross: An older sign, ABSTINENCE, where the thumb traces across the lips (Long 1910) is identical to an ancient French sign, FÉVRIER "February" (figure 78); Lent, whose dates fluctuate yearly, generally begins in the month of February. Initialized in the manual letters F and L, ABSTINENCE takes the respective meanings FAST (figure 79) and LENT. In other signs, the horizontal or vertical movements evolved into more economical ones, as in PRIVATE, where the back of the thumb simply taps the lips (figure 80). The symbolism of placing the finger over the mouth has long been evident to American authors: "Lips are sealed and the thing hidden" (Higgins 1923), "the movement seems to silence the lips to keep a secret" (Costello 1999). The configuration of the hand is explained only by the etymology of ABSTAIN; by semantic association, keeping a secret aligns closely with abstaining from speaking. Furthermore, the Catholic religion and the monastic tradition have always linked the concepts of asceticism, silence, chastity, and fasts: "The silence is the

Figure 78. février "February" (YD).

Figure 79. fast (CM).

Figure 80. secret, private (CM).

chastity of the lips" (Saint Benoît); "The one who masters his stomach can master his fornication and his language" (a priest, cited by Guy 1993, 227).

4. Representations, Values, and Symbols of Ancient Society

In this category of signs, we look closely at several cultural elements of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France that deal with representations of a group of people, spiritual values, and parts of the body. These signs are perhaps the most elusive to American readers since they refer entirely to French culture as it existed centuries ago.

Rural Dwellers

It is understandable that both Riekehof (1987) and Costello (1999) see the representation of a crude gait in the sign AWKWARD (figure 81), but it is less clear whose gait is so characterized. The solution to this puzzle is found in the French sign VILLAGE (figure 82), which, depending on the locale and era, has meant "peasant," "impolite," and "uncivilized." VILLAGE differs from AWKWARD only by a retracted thumb and depicts the gait of peasants: "sign of heavy walking, a silly air, and a gaping mouth" (Ferrand, ca. 1785). We see in AWKWARD, then, the perpetuation of negative stereotypes of rural life by urban dwellers of eighteenth-century France. The forked configuration of the hands in the French sign used to represent the manual letter P from the word

FIGURE 81. AWKWARD (CM).

FIGURE 82. VILLAGE (IVT 1986).

paysan "peasant" or the letter V of *village* "village." The extended thumb in the American sign likely resulted from a relaxation of the contracted thumb of the manual letter P; since the initialization of the French word *paysan* carries no meaning for American signers, it is not surprising that the shift occurred.

The Soul

American authors' descriptions of SPIRIT (figure 83) implicitly refer to "spirit" as a "ghost" in the mystic sense: "something you can't see or hold" (Higgins 1923); "shows a wispy form representing a spirit" (Costello 1994). Analyzed in its historical context, this sign symbolically manifests traditional religious conceptions of the soul. The right, pinched hand rises and moves away from the left, representing the soul as it rises from the heart toward God. The symbolism of the left hand is seen in the old sign glossed SOUL by Riekehof (figure 84). Elsewhere, the left hand took on the form and opposing movement of the right hand, thereby losing association with the heart. Brown (1856) describes an entirely distinct sign: "hands put at sides of mouth brought down with the breath." We see this sign in LSF, first described by Jamet (ca. 1830), meaning "soul," and then by Lambert (1865), meaning "spirit": "Take the two hands over the mouth like a breath that evaporates" (figure 85). This sign passes down an even older strain of medieval beliefs that the soul exited from the mouth of the dead.

Figure 83. SPIRIT (CM).

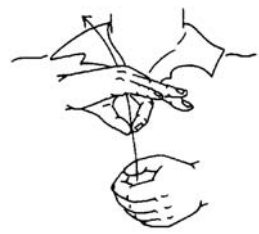

Figure 84. SOUL (Riekehof 1987).

Figure 85. ESPRIT "spirit" (Lambert 1865).

The Heart

The association between the heart and the emotions traces back to high antiquity. In LSF, this link produced dozens of signs, but as it lost relevance in the consciousness of ASL users, the forms evolved in interesting ways that have obscured the original root. For example, the initial part of CONFIDENT (figure 86) is identical to the old French sign CONFIANCE "confidence," glossed as "heart drawn towards" by Lambert (1865). The same sign is observed even today in Belgium, where many signs share an etymological history with LSF. The cupped hands symbolize the heart, which is brought toward the person in whom one confides (figure 87). The closing of the hands at the end of the

Figure 86. CONFIDENT (CM).

Figure 87. CONFIANCE "confidence" (Centre francophone de la langue des signes de Belgique 2002).

ASL sign, as well as its slight shift to the center of the torso, caused its origin to be obscured: "holding on to something with trust" (Costello 1995); "suggests preparing to plant a flagpole into the ground" (Flodin 2004).

In ANGRY (figure 88), Higgins (1923) saw "the old sign of anger, rending of one's garments." According to French documents, though, this sign in fact derives from COLÈRE "anger," which, originally produced by placing one hand on the left side of the chest, symbolized the boiling of the blood in the heart: "The right open hand, with the fingers bent like claws and turned against the heart, execute rapidly, and several times, a movement from low to high, near the heart, as marking the blood, which agitates" (Degérando 1827). The symmetry of the two-handed sign conceals its original relation to the heart.

FIGURE 88. ANGRY (CM).

The Nose

The nose is an area of the body that continues to have multiple metaphoric associations in French culture but has lost symbolic value in the United States, so much so that the ASL signs historically related to LSF that incorporate the nose as the location of contact are no longer seen as relics of LSF. In French culture, the nose is considered to be a substitute for the penis (Delaporte 2007). These conceptions were inherited from literature from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, as well as from European folklore (Bakhtin 2008, 314–17). The metaphor is responsible for the LSF signs FAIRE L'AMOUR "make love" and JOUIR "have an orgasm" (figure 89) and is likely the same metaphor that motivates the signs PENIS (figure 90) and ORGASM (figure 91).[14]

Figure 89. JOUIR "have an orgasm" (IVT 1990).

Figure 90. PENIS (CM).

Figure 91. ORGASM (CM).

In European culture, the nose is also the body part known to induce laughter as is reflected in the gesture "thumbing one's nose" at someone, the character of Cyrano (Delaporte 2007), and the red noses of clowns. Just like the association between the nose and the penis, these conceptions were at work in medieval representations of the nose (Bakhtin 2008). These cultural relics explain the location of FUNNY (figure 92), which derives from the LSF HUMOUR "humor" (figure 93). The cultural link between the nose and laughter was forged in antiquity in the Latin word *nasus,* meaning "mocking spirit," from which the word *nose* derives.

In LSF, the nose also carries a nuance of negativity. In ASL SILLY (figure 94), a derivative of LSF IDIOT "silly" (figure 95), there is an ensemble of both humorous and negative connotations with the nose.

Figure 92. FUNNY (CM).

Figure 93. HUMOUR "humor" (IVT 1986).

FIGURE 94. SILLY (CM).

FIGURE 95. IDIOT "silly" (IVT 1986).

The configuration that looks like the manual letter Y in ASL is in fact the LSF manual letter I, initialized for the French word *idiot*.

Folding

NUMBER (figure 96) comes from the French sign PROBLÈME "problem" (figure 97) through the intermediary "math problem." It belongs to a family of French and American signs that have a pivoting movement of each hand in opposite directions: in LSF COMPLIQUÉ "complicated," STRUCTURE "structure," and PROBLÈME; in ASL NUMBER, PROBLEM (figure 98), and a regional sign, PUZZLE (figure 99). The twisting movement is a metaphor for complexity, as Abbé Ferrand (1785) indicated in his dictionary under the entry COMPLICATION: "fold and refold together." Jamet (ca. 1830) further describes the movement: "The two hands being open, palms up, turn the right over

FIGURE 96. NUMBER (CM).

FIGURE 97. PROBLÈME "problem" (IVT 1986).

FIGURE 98. PROBLEM (CM).

Figure 99. Regional variation of PUZZLE (CM).

Figure 100. PLIER "fold" (YD).

the left and vice versa" (figure 100). The bundled handshape symbolizes the union of different things (as with ASL MORE, for example). NUMBER and PUZZLE, then, show an ensemble of things folding over themselves. This metaphor is transmitted in the French word *compliqué* and the English word *complicated,* both derived from the Latin *complicare* "to fold together."

5. Symbolisms of Ancient LSF: Crossed Index Fingers and RED

In old LSF, certain forms, like the crossed index fingers and the sign for the color red, carried enough symbolic meaning to be applied to multiple signs. Having already addressed this vast topic as concerns the crossed index fingers (Delaporte and Shaw 2009), we limit our discussion here to LIE and COMPLICATED and to the relationship between RED and COLOR.

LIE

According to Ferrand, crossing the index fingers in front of the mouth, where spoken words are expressed, produced MENTIR "lie." This sign was in use in France until the second half of the nineteenth century (figure 101). In the beginning of the nineteenth century in Paris, it was made with a single index finger; this form was transmitted to ASL and continues to be used in some circles (figure 102).

Complicated

Crossing the index fingers in front of the forehead—the location of thoughts, as noted by Ferrand, produced DIFFICILE "difficult." This sign was transmitted to ASL as COMPLICATED (figure 103), which has since descended from the forehead to the base of the face and as low as the front of the torso as a result of economy of production. For a detailed demonstration of this historical progression, see Delaporte and Shaw (2009).

FIGURE 101. MENTIR "lie" (Laveau 1868).

FIGURE 102. Variation of LIE (CM).

FIGURE 103. COMPLICATED (CM).

Color

In COLOR (figure 104), the oscillating fingers in front of the mouth have been considered to represent the colors of the rainbow (Costello 1999), which prompts us to wonder why the sign is produced there. COLOR was borrowed from the French COULEUR "color," whose history may shed some light on this. The mouth is the same location where ROUGE "red"—a deictic reference to the color of the lips—is produced. Deaf people in France used ROUGE as a prototype for all colors: Ferrand (ca. 1785) translates the French word *coloris* "color, shade" with the signs TEINT ROUGE "red shade," and Lambert (1865) translates *couleur* "color" with ROUGE PEINDRE "red paint." Likewise, Lambert explains that the republicans' tricolored, blue, white, and red sash, borrowed from the flag of France, was signed ROUGE CEINTURE "red belt." In COULEURS, the oscillation of the fingers indicates a plu-

Figure 104. COLOR (CM).

rality of colors: Etymologically, then, COLORS can be said to mean "different red things."

6. Signs Derived from French Words

Beginning with Abbé de l'Épée, hearing educators of deaf people, for better or worse, have influenced sign languages. Additionally, as adults, deaf people live among a hearing majority and, to varying degrees, are bilingual. As a result, it is not surprising that French and English have influenced LSF and ASL, respectively. This influence is made manifest in the history of ASL in four ways: initialization of French words, fingerspelled French words, borrowing of "methodical" signs, and calques, or loan translations. We have shown thus far the ways in which a lack of understanding of gestures, material elements, rituals, and traditional European culture has obscured the relationships between several ASL signs and their LSF roots. This rupture in the history is even more powerfully evident when we find origins of ASL signs in words of the French language.

Initialization

In ASL, PLAY (figure 105) comes from the French sign JOUER "play" (figure 106): "Make two *J*s . . . [and] impress on the hands a small rotation over themselves" (Blanchet 1850). The configuration of the hands in PLAY and JOUER represents the manual letter J, initialized for the French word *jouer.* The handshape in the American sign defini-

FIGURE 105. PLAY (CM).

FIGURE 106. JOUER "play" (IVT 1986).

FIGURE 107. FÊTE "celebration" (YD).

tively proves that it is borrowed from LSF. Incidentally, the LSF sign originated as an initialized form of the old LSF sign FÊTE "party, celebration" (figure 107), from which the contemporary sign BRAVO "applause" derives—a sign that was only recently transmitted to the United States.

Fingerspelling

In several variations of BECAUSE, we see the contemporary French sign POUR ÇA "for that" (figure 108), originally composed of POUR "for" (figure 109) (a trace of which is seen in the initial location of the hand at the temple), followed by the fingerspelled Ç-A "that" (a hint of which is seen in the initial and final handshapes). In variations of the sign (figure 110), used by older signers from Indiana and Alabama (field observation, E. Shaw), we see the closest link with the original LSF, providing evidence of the etymology of the contemporary forms (figures 111–13). Each variation of BECAUSE contains at least one of three components of the original French sign. In one contemporary variation (figure 111), first described by Long (1910) are traces of POUR, followed by the manual letter A. In another (figure 112), described by Michaels (1923) is evidence of the manual letter C, followed by the A. In the last example (figure 113), the index finger is the sole remnant of POUR. The variety of forms intimates that ASL only tentatively integrated this foreign sign—one that is grounded in

Figure 108. POUR ÇA "for that" (IVT 1997).

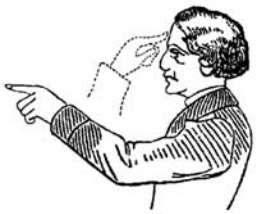

Figure 109. POUR "for" (Pélissier 1856).

Figure 110. BECAUSE 1 (Indiana and Alabama, field observation, E. Shaw) (CM).[15]

spoken and written French—into its lexicon. [For a complete demonstration, see Shaw and Delaporte (2007).]

Methodical Signs

It has long been known that ASL FOR, derived from LSF POUR, was invented by Abbé de l'Épée as part of his so-called methodical approach to teaching French grammar to deaf children. A lesser-known product of these invented grammatical signs is found in ASL GENDER (figure 114), also translated as "sex." Interpreted by Sternberg (1994) as the manual letter X, this sign was in fact invented by Abbé de l'Épée to translate French gendered articles. The masculine article *le* "the"

Figure 111. BECAUSE 2 (CM).

Figure 112. BECAUSE 3 (CM).

Figure 113. BECAUSE 4 (CM).

FIGURE 114. GENDER/SEX (CM).

FIGURE 115. HOMME/LE "man/masculine article" and FEMME/LA "woman/feminine article" (Pélissier 1856).

was represented by the crooked index finger brought to the head to symbolize grasping a hat, while the feminine article *la* "the" was represented by the crooked index finger brought to the ear, "where the hairstyles end of the person of the sex [i.e., a woman]" (de l'Épée 1784). LE and LA were equally used to mean *homme* "man" and *femme* "woman", respectively (figure 115). Additionally, the crooked index finger in these signs symbolizes the fact that articles "join the words" just as the articulations of the fingers "join our bones" (de l'Épée 1784). Abbé de l'Épée capitalized on the double meaning of the word *article* during the eighteenth century: In one sense, it meant "word which, placed in front of the noun, indicates gender and number," and in another sense it meant "articulation of an organ," in this case, the fingers. The two placements, initially on the head and the ear, later dropped to the side of the face in ASL. A complete demonstration has also been made elsewhere (Shaw and Delaporte 2006).

Calques

The fourth and final way in which the French language has influenced first French Sign Language and later ASL is through calques, or loan translations. There are different kinds of calques, but for our purposes a calque constitutes the influences of different meanings of a word on the form of a particular sign. A clear example of this is in the French word *bête,* which has two meanings; in its literal sense, the word is a synonym for *animal,* and in the figurative sense, it is a synonym for

stupid. The first meaning motivates the form of LSF BÊTE "stupid" (figure 117), which retains the meaning of the second word only; an altogether different sign means *animal*. BÊTE was later transmitted to ASL, but its association with animal horns disappeared when it was brought to the English-speaking country. Higgins (1923) interpreted STUPID (figure 116) as "hardheaded," while Sternberg (1994) states that the two fingers "represent prison bars across the mind—the mind is imprisoned," and Costello (1994) interprets the forked handshape as "indicat[ing] a void of knowledge."

Figure 116. STUPID (CM).

Figure 117. LSF BÊTE "stupid" (Pélissier 1856).

Conclusion

Whether we recognize these connections or not, people speak languages that carry with them cultural histories inherited from ancient civilizations. From FATHER and CANNOT, signs that symbolize the feathered hat and sword fights (respectively) of French nobility, to URGE and COUNTRY, which symbolize herding cattle and the harvest (respectively), ASL is steeped in history. The links between ASL signs and Latin words (*malus* "bad, evil"; *nasus* "nose"; *complicare* "number") that we have uncovered demonstrate ties to metaphors, images, and gestures from centuries-old Western civilization. What English speaker, when pronouncing the word *candidate* (from the Latin *candidus* "of white color") thinks of the white toga, a symbol of purity, worn by contenders for office in ancient Rome? Or, when using the

word *disaster* (from the Latin *astrum* "star"), considers the beliefs held by the Roman populace of centuries past? The same phenomenon can be applied to signers of ASL, where the only difference is the striking dearth of etymological research on sign languages and a much more limited supply of historical documents.

While it is true that lexical similarities can and do exist across unrelated sign languages, the unique influence of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French culture (of both hearing and deaf people) on ASL—one that we see so clearly in signs like SEX, FINE, and STUPID—is indisputable. Proving such connections, though, requires one to collect data from multiple historical sources from both countries. The sources we have used, as noted in the introduction, provide us with only a glimpse of what these lexicons looked like in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Of course, a historical account of a language is only as strong as its sources, and these sources, particularly for ASL, are incomplete. We have found that collecting lexical variations in both languages has helped to augment our analyses, thus underscoring the need for variation studies—*lexical* variation studies in particular—as a part of historical linguistics of ASL and LSF.

For the purposes of this article, we elected to show several concrete etymologies that we have uncovered. As we have already mentioned, these are only a part of a much larger body of work consisting of data both historical (from texts and older video recordings) and contemporary (from texts, mainstream forms, and dialectal varieties in both languages). In this larger work, one that will culminate in an etymological dictionary of ASL, we have exhaustively compared each documented etymology with other related sign languages (like those in Belgium and Quebec) and with unrelated sign languages (namely British Sign Language) to confirm historical connections and also to reveal historical coincidences. In a departure from other lexical comparisons of sign languages that focus on sign-for-sign similarities gleaned from preestablished word lists (Woodward 1978; Aldersson and McEntee-Atalianis 2008), we contend that a complete account of the history of the ASL lexicon can be constructed largely by examining signs as they existed in their original context and as they subsequently evolved after their transmission to the United States. It is only

through the implementation of these rigorous methods that the etymology of ASL can be reconstituted as part of the scientific domain.

Notes

1. Our demonstrations here are purposely terse due to constraints on length. We suggest that the reader who wishes to learn more about the history of the French signs cited herein turn to the etymological dictionary of LSF published by Delaporte (2007).

2. For the purposes of this article, we introduce etymons we have discovered during our research. For a detailed look at our methodology, we point the reader to Delaporte and Shaw (2009) for an analysis of a particular lexical family using the same methods we employed to analyze the data in this article.

3. All illustrations of signs are used today unless noted otherwise.

4. CM: illustrations by Carole Marion.

5. PM: illustrations by Pat Mallet.

6. IVT: illustrations by the International Visual Theater: *La langue des signes: Dictionnaire bilingue LSF/français*.

7. The horned handshape still carries superstitious connotations in Italy and has a verbal corollary, "facciamo le corna," or "let's make the horned handshape," meaning, "let's ward off evil." It can also be used to insult someone when accompanied by the phrase "Ah cornuto!" (Ceil Lucas, email communication, March 15, 2010).

8. This change in form likely resulted from an adaptation to the phonology of LSF. The extension of the index and little fingers is rarely used in this sign language, whereas the extended thumb and little finger combination exists in hundreds of signs.

9. "Dez" refers to "handshape" in *The Dictionary of American Sign Language* (Stokoe, Casterline, and Croneberg, 1965).

10. YD: illustrations by Yves Delaporte.

11. It is worth noting that several ASL numbers, like THREE, TEN, and TWENTY-ONE, maintain traces of the French counting system.

12. The raised index finger in LSF and ASL is similarly used to represent a person.

13. Illustration from a video at http://www.courslsq.net.

14. It is worth noting that these signs were not documented in the older American texts as they were composed by religious men intent on proselytizing to deaf people. In the case of this class alone we have compared contemporary texts and the semantic associations of French culture.

15. This illustration somewhat resembles WHY. The actual production of the sign, however, features an initial brushing contact on the forehead, fol-

lowed by a rapid closing and then opening of the hand, where the final movement is directed toward the interlocutor.

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