



# Humour in Sign Languages: The Linguistic Underpinnings

Rachel Sutton-Spence and Donna Jo Napoli

CDS/SLSCS Monograph No. 3

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## About the authors



### **Rachel Sutton-Spence (left of photo)**

Rachel Sutton-Spence is a Senior Lecturer at Bristol University (UK). She has been researching and teaching sign language linguistics since 1989. She is co-author (with Professor Bencie Woll) of the award-winning textbook *The Linguistics of British Sign Language* (1998, Cambridge University Press). Her research interests include sociolinguistic variation in signed languages and sign language creativity and folklore. She has written extensively on sign language poetry, with particular focus on the BSL and ASL work of Dorothy Miles (for example, *Analysing Sign Language Poetry*, 2005, Palgrave Press). A lot of creative sign language is funny and Rachel has been collecting examples of humorous BSL for years. This volume is the perfect opportunity to share some cracking good Deaf jokes and examples of things that signers have said that have made her laugh.

### **Donna Jo Napoli (right of photo)**

Donna Jo Napoli is professor of linguistics at Swarthmore College. She started her career in theoretical syntax using Italian data. She also worked in phonology, morphology, and semantics. Within sign language studies, she has worked on morphology (2000 with Ted Fernald and 2003 with Jeff Wu, both articles in *Sign Language and Linguistics*) and on the linguistic rights of d/Deaf children in educational settings (2007, with Shannon Allen and Doreen DeLuca, in *Journal of Research in Education*). She and Doreen DeLuca wrote *Handy Stories to Read and Sign*, a bilingual children's book offering a new approach to teaching reading (2009, Gallaudet University Press). She has co-edited and co-contributed to books on sign matters (2008, *Signs & Voices: Deaf matters in Language, Arts, and Identity*; 2008, *Access: Multiple Avenues for Deaf People*; forthcoming, *Deaf Around the World*).

## **Abstract**

The work here explores the linguistic underpinnings of humour in signed languages. Drawing particularly upon American and British Sign Languages, we consider the similarities and differences in the forms of humour enjoyed by their Deaf communities. We distinguish the general concept of Deaf humour from the more specific phenomenon of humour produced in signed languages that makes use of linguistic characteristics of sign itself. After briefly exploring the functions of humour in Deaf culture and some of the elements of signed languages having specific relevance to signed humour, we turn to the creativity behind funny signing in jokes, stories and simple moments of wit enjoyed by the audience. While we find some generally accepted topics for Deaf humour (concerning both in-group and out-group targets, with many of the barbs aimed at hearing people), examples of playful and entertaining signing are seen in many settings.

Humour often lies outside – or beyond – conventionalised signed language, coming from a complex interaction between playfully modified established lexical items, novel constructions of productive or classifier signs, and non-manual elements, especially facial expression and body movement. Language play occurs at every level – phonetic, phonological, morphological, semantic and syntactic, drawing on existing language conventions and working with more gestural elements to produce highly visual images, in celebration of the absurd. Signers' knowledge of English also allows creative bilingual puns to work their way into the comic mix.

Our review of the humorous signing we have been privileged to see and enjoy shows that no one element is necessary or sufficient for sign language humour. Linguistic play without accompanying gestural activity is clever but rarely amusing. On the other hand, gestural activity without linguistic play also cannot produce sign language humour because it is the fundamentals of the language – its very roots and core – that define the Deaf audience as the right audience for the humour. In combination, we see the riches of sign language humour.

## A note on signed language and sign language

Talking about the signs we see and the languages they occur in creates a problem of terminology with respect to the words "sign" and "signed". It is editorial policy at Trinity College Dublin Press to refer to "signed languages" in distinction to "spoken languages", and "signed language" in distinction to "spoken language". Where this is clearly the context in which we discuss signs we have adopted this convention. However, for many years it has been common practice in the field of sign language research to use the word "sign". Terms such as "sign language poetry" and "sign language humour" and "sign language research" are well-established, familiar collocations, whether or not they are consistent with this distinction. Language names also use the word "sign" so that for example we conventionally use "British Sign Language" not "British Signed Language." Nobody ever said that English was logical. Our use of terms in this work is a compromise that we hope satisfies the sensible objection to anything other than "signed language" when distinguishing the language modality from "spoken language" but also allows the comfort of convention for more familiar terms as we use "sign language poetry", "sign language humour" and "sign language research". We also refer to "sign languages" when we discuss the particular identifiable languages used by different Deaf communities. Sometimes we have just gone with whichever term feels right. We hope it doesn't feel too wrong to you. Sign languages (or signed languages), however, rarely if ever make a distinction between "sign" and "signed" so, in keeping with our topic here, signers may have a good laugh at the expense of English users.

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## Introduction

In this book we consider humour arising from creative use of signed language in Deaf communities. Humour takes many forms and serves multiple functions in signed languages, just as in spoken languages (Sutton-Spence & Woll 1999; Woll & Sutton-Spence 2006). Advances in humour research have seen refinements to general theories of humour, especially in relation to jokes and humorous texts. Of these, the general theory of verbal humour (Attardo and Raskin 1991) is one of the most developed, especially in the area of the semantics of joke texts. We here attempt to widen the data base that humour scholars, particularly those with a linguistic bent, have thus far considered; we examine humour in signed languages for which the exploitation of linguistic mechanisms and the close interaction between text and performance is crucial to the humour.

We hope this book will appeal to many different readers. Raskin (2007) highlights the broad range of disciplines addressing the overall topic of humour in his introduction to the *Primer of Humor Research*. Disciplines include psychology, linguistics, literary studies, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, folklore and communication studies. Anyone already interested in the study of humour in these fields should find something in the discussion of Deaf humour and sign language humour to attract them. For people already aware of the importance of humour and predisposed toward finding linguistic analysis interesting, whether or not they are already familiar with Deaf culture, we hope to establish the concept of sign language humour and offer an organised way of approaching this new field. People who are familiar with sign languages and who have an interest in Deaf culture may enjoy our exploration of the linguistically based humour, which is a proper subset of the larger, more encompassing area of Deaf humour. For people who have little or no experience of Deaf culture, we invite you into a world of treasures you may never have imagined. Exploring new possibilities for using the body in expressive ways might even change the way you view humour. For people who have not previously thought that humour can offer an appropriate or valid corpus of data for close study, we hope to disabuse you, by discussing some of the social functions of humour and demonstrating a range of linguistically interesting ways of fulfilling those functions (and we refer you to the many fine scholarly works on humour, including Raskin 1985 and the journal he edits, *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, as well as the journal *Humor Research* and many other works, such as Davies (1987) and Attardo (1994)).

To anyone who draws back at the terms *linguistics* thinking the study must be dry and of little interest to a general readership, we harbour (perhaps absurdly, but much of this book is about the absurd) the hope of convincing you otherwise, and we even dare to hope to make you laugh. In other words, dear reader, whoever you are, prepare to be dazzled by humour in sign languages.

The word *deaf* is capitalised in the earlier paragraphs. It is a convention in the field of Deaf Studies to use the lowercase “deaf” to indicate audiological status, and the uppercase “Deaf” to indicate membership in Deaf culture. We will observe this usage throughout.

The present study looks at humour in communities using British Sign Language and American Sign Language. A great deal of the language-based humour described for hearing English-users emphasises the importance of the word. The form and meaning of words used in the humour are reanalysed and challenged. We will show how members of the two Deaf communities studied here draw on both linguistic and gestural devices to produce a rich source of humour, as text and performance intertwine to produce strongly visual humour. As in English spoken language humour, sign language humour frequently challenges the form and meaning of signs, that is, it plays linguistically. But it also plays with certain non-manual elements traditionally regarded as gestural, such as facial expression and body movement. Humour used by English speakers does this too, but sign language humour does it to a greater degree, with more systematicity, and to stronger linguistic effect, especially since non-manuals often are distinctive parts of signs. The visual humour created this way supports the signer’s positive Deaf identity as a person with a visual experience of the world.

Although it is fruitless to seek a circumscribing definition of all humorous language and performance since creative language play is exactly that, we will outline here the extent of our enquiry. We will consider instances of clearly signalled humour delivered as jokes, as well as pure spontaneous wit, and humorous examples of creative language including metaphors in everyday conversation, narratives and poetry.

We use examples almost exclusively from American Sign Language (ASL) and British Sign Language (BSL) as we make our points about what humour in sign languages consists of. One might initially wonder why in a comparative study we should choose sign languages from countries whose spoken languages are mutually comprehensible. After all, it would seem somewhat nearsighted to do a study of exploitation of linguistic structures in oral humour comparing only American English and British English. One would expect many more possibilities for encountering new linguistic mechanisms if one compared American/British English oral humour to the oral humour of some quite different language, such as Arabic or Mandarin or Swahili. But, although English is the spoken language of the hearing majority surrounding both the British and American Deaf communities, the two national sign languages are very different. Without exception, the many sign languages around the world are not genetically related to the spoken languages of the countries they arise in, nor could they be, given the different modalities. The two Deaf communities are also culturally very different. Although Deaf people in America and Britain are part of wider Western cultures, their specific social, cultural and educational experiences are very different.

In our comparative studies here, we frequently observe the similarities between the types and form of humour in the two sign languages, leading us to suggest that some of these might be more widespread and could be seen in many other diverse sign languages. We will see that the common experience of many Deaf people as being members of a misunderstood minority social and language group creates much that is similar across national Deaf communities. We will also see that the structural properties common to all sign languages because of their visual, spatial and kinetic natures makes for similar humorous devices in different sign languages. There is little doubt that studies of the humour in, for example, Egyptian, Chinese or Kenyan Sign Language would bring out more of the richness of sign and Deaf humour and add to our understanding of the field, and only increase our delight in the wit and creativity. Quite simply though, ASL and BSL are the sign languages with which we are most familiar, so we explore them here. We hope that others better qualified to describe humour in other sign languages, perhaps building on this work, will be able to make further contributions to the subject.

Comparing the linguistic humour from ASL and BSL, which are two different linguistic and cultural groups, enables us to identify those features that are common to visual-spatial kinetic languages and also those that might differ along individual language and cultural lines just as well as would a study comparing either of them with Egyptian Sign Language or Chinese Sign Language or Kenyan Sign Language. Nevertheless, we certainly hope that this pioneering study will open the gates to future humour studies incorporating data from more sign languages.



## 1. Deaf humour – what for?

For any exploration of Deaf humour and humour in a signed language, it is important to ask what purpose this humour serves. Although there is almost certainly no single unifying theory for the function of humour (Cohen 1999), several clear themes arise. Raskin's tripartite classification of theories – incongruity, hostility and release (Raskin, 1985, explored further in Attardo 2007) – summarises the different functions that have been identified over the centuries, from Classical times onwards. Theories treating incongruity as the source of humour (stemming from Aristotle's thoughts on the matter) attempt to show that humour is created when audiences see and resolve incongruities between their expectations and the linguistic message they are receiving. Hostility theories (which can be traced back to Plato) see humour in the creation of some sort of superiority over someone or some group recognised as being members of some sort of out-group. Release theories (of which Freud was a strong proponent) claim that humour acts to release tensions and constraints within individuals or groups. These theories are not mutually exclusive, and we will see that any one could be used to account for at least some forms of Deaf humour and its expression through signed languages.

Most importantly, humour is pleasurable and fun, providing social and intellectual satisfaction for the signers and audience. Many people, when asked what humour is for, will reply precisely this: It is fun and it makes them feel good. Humour relaxes people and creates a bond between jokester and audience, which is why so many people will begin a formal lecture with a joke to break the ice (Bienvenu 1994). Bienvenu, in fact, says humour is "almost a necessity" (1994: 16) and, given how widespread it is, one might question the use of the qualifying word *almost* here. Perhaps we need to look no further for a general explanation than the fact that humour is fun and we like it. However, we are dealing specifically with humour in signed languages in this work, and there are additional functions of humour that may be important to members of Deaf communities (Rutherford, 1993), which can inform our understanding of the language used in the humour.

Humour is important for social bonding because it is rule-bound (as we will discuss immediately below) and the common acceptance of the rules of Deaf humour creates and maintains a group identity as "Deaf people" (Bienvenu, 1992; Bouchauveau, 1994; and for discussion of Deaf identity particularly with respect to rhetorical traditions, see Bruggemann, 1999). Thus, it celebrates "consociality" of the people participating in the humorous event (Palmer, 1994). For members of a community who are often isolated from each other for many hours of each day, and many days of each week, the opportunity for consociality when they do meet is very important.

Humour provides relief from tension, anxiety, or fear. Members of a minority community that is frequently misunderstood and devalued by the mainstream use humour to make jabs at the established order by being "antistructure" (Douglas 1968), to mitigate embarrassment about common experiences that

stem from being misunderstood or ignored (Holcomb 1977; Holcomb 1985; Holcomb, Holcomb, and Holcomb 1994), to defuse otherwise powerful negative feelings (including negative feelings toward self, see Gibbs, 1996), and to foster counteracting positive feelings and even skills (Lind, 1994; Jacobowitz, 1992, 1996). To this end, Hal, a member of Britain's foremost Deaf comedy troupe The Deaf Comedians, has said, "I think most humour that Deaf people like is based on hearing people making idiots of themselves" (Interview with Hal, March 2005).

The Deaf Comedians have made a video dealing with all these things. As Hal explains:

There is written stuff about oppression and Deaf people in schools etc – there are books written about it but in the video a one minute clip of a sketch summarises the whole thing – oralism, oppression, abuse, trying to make you hearing, making you speak... (Interview with Hal, March 2005.)

In other words, performed humour is a way of encapsulating in visual images something that previously was handled only in books, a medium inaccessible to many Deaf people.

Humour has also been identified as forming part of the politeness strategy of some Deaf people. Hoza (2007) identifies its use when signers reject a request. His example concerns a supervisor turning down the request of an employee to borrow a dollar for a train fare. The supervisor explains why he is unable to lend the dollar and then adds in an amusing way that the employee will have to walk home. Hoza remarks that the supervisor's joke assumes a close connection between the two workers, which is maintained - despite the rejection – because the joking reinforces their closeness by laughing about the predicament. Although this example concerns a supervisor politely rejecting a request from an employee, Hoza also gives examples of an employee joking with a supervisor as part of making a request, demonstrating that humour has a role in politeness between signers of a range of statuses.

Humour allows people to mention topics that might otherwise be considered taboo, and, almost paradoxically, it can also be used for social control (through ridicule). It teaches new members of the community what the rules of their society are. Many people join the Deaf community when they are already young adults and need to adjust to Deaf values and behaviour; humour is one means to helping them achieve this (and see, in particular, the cartoon jokes of Holcomb et al. 1994). Ben Bahan writes that Deaf jokes and stories are all about "face-to-face cultural transmission" (2006a:24). Concluding from the work of Okpewho (1992) and Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan (1996), Bahan says, "In essence these storytellers become the

culture's historians, teachers, and entertainers" (2006a: 26). Hal's explanation of how Deaf audiences responded to The Deaf Comedians' sketches makes clear precisely how the previously isolated audience member is folded into the community via laughter.

The big thing about the all-Deaf audiences was the way they identified with the experiences and so they laughed. They could sit and watch and laugh and think, "Yes, I remember the same thing happening to me before." Also, for some Deaf people who were new to the Deaf community, it brought out lots of things from deep inside about themselves. They watched things being performed that they felt embarrassed about and realised, "I am not the only one who's had this problem – all Deaf people have this problem." So in some ways the show was about humour and laughter but in other ways it was a little bit of therapy for some Deaf people who found their identity. (Interview with Hal, March 2005.)

Humour can also allow us to perceive things differently. Palmer quotes the suggestion of Jonathan Miller (the British polymath - neurologist, theatre and opera director, television presenter, humorist and sculptor) that humour allows us to "reconsider our categories and therefore to be a little bit more flexible and versatile when we come to dealing with the world in future" (1994:57). Not only can this help as an educating and socialising tool for new members of the community, but such an increase in flexibility operates at a linguistic level too. Humour can encourage signers to reconsider the way they use their language, and push the boundaries of the language in new and versatile ways (Klima & Bellugi, 1975, 1979). Word play, in particular, is a kind of aggression against conformity (Feinberg 1978), and, for Deaf people, "who must daily walk the linguistic tightrope between both worlds," hearing and Deaf, language play allows a creative way to channel such rebellion (Rutherford, 1983: 318). That is, linguistic humour can be a response to linguistic (and other) oppression (Bienvenu, 1994).

In that vein, an essentialist view of humour is that much that is humorous rests upon the perception of some sort of incongruity within the text or context. Incongruity is a well-recognised rhetorical device, used to set up an expectation for the audience and then contradict or subvert it. This subversion of expectation in rhetoric may have a humorous outcome among other outcomes, but in identifiably humorous settings it may be the primary one. Such expectation and its subversion can occur at the social or cognitive level, or it can occur at the language level, where it can be seen as existing within the textual element of humour. The pragmatic structure of language means that we have expectations of word forms and sentence structures, and word play can contradict these expectations.

The audience will notice the incongruity in humorous language and look for the minor congruity that can resolve it. The pleasure and intellectual satisfaction causing the laughter comes from solving this "logic of the absurd" (Palmer, 1994). We will see that in humour in signed language signers use their knowledge of language structure, most especially the distinction between the elements creating "frozen" and "productive" signs (the definition and demonstration of which we offer in Chapter Four below), to create and resolve incongruities.

For Deaf signers living in a hearing world, the very fact that they sign means language use is a constant issue. Additionally, for many Deaf people born into hearing families (which may be 96% of Deaf people, see Moores 2001: 24) actually having language itself – that is, having any language – has been an issue in their lives. Accordingly, having the ability to manipulate the structure of their signed language to absurd effect and having the ability to recognise the manipulation by others of the structure of their language to absurd effect can give great joy of the in-your-face type.

In a potentially humorous setting, implausible situations may be deliberately set up so that common sense and rationality are already suspended to permit the joke to proceed. A joke that starts, "Three race horses are in their paddock reminiscing about their most glorious race victories" asks the audience to accept for the development of the joke that this impossible situation actually occurred. This acceptance of absurdity is a crucial element in sign language humour that arises from anthropomorphism (the representation of human behaviour by inanimate or non-human objects). To enjoy the humour that stems from this, the audience needs to accept that certain rules of logic and meaning are suspended. (The joke is ruined, for example, if an audience member interrupts with "Horses have no concept of reminiscence".) We will see later in discussion of Richard Carter's story of the Snow Globe that there is no question that Father Christmas' reindeer can use a sign language – the question is how does a reindeer sign?

Just for completeness, and because it seems very unkind to offer the start of a joke but not tell it, here is the story of the racehorses:

### **Joke 1:**

Three racehorses were in their paddock reminiscing over their greatest racing victories. "Of my last five races, I have won three," boasted the first horse. "That's nothing," said the second horse, "Out of my last ten races I have won seven." "Well," said the third horse, "let me tell you that out of my last twenty races I have won fifteen". Just then, a greyhound who had been dozing in the sunshine nearby raised his head and said, "Out of my last 100 races, I have won them all." The horses looked

at each other in astonishment. "Well, I never!" exclaimed one, finally. "A talking dog!"

Humour stemming from anthropomorphism is deeply embedded in Deaf tradition. One of the most famous sign poems is Clayton Valli's "Deaf World." In this ASL poem the poet notes that the natural world of rocks and water and trees and mountains and clouds is Deaf – just like him. He can now see himself as part of the natural order of things and realise that this is where he belongs. And once he views himself as aligned with the trees, it isn't a very large leap to see the world from a tree's point of view, with all the new and humorous possibilities that follow. A similar device is used in Paul Scott's BSL poem "Too Busy to See". Indeed, this theme is widespread in Deaf communities and there are many examples in both BSL and ASL (and probably in other sign languages) of anthropomorphised trees. Paul Scott's two poems "Spring" and "The Tree" show a tree's experience through powerful anthropomorphic devices, especially through use of facial expression. In "Spring", the tree winces when its buds come out, showing the discomfort of the new growth that we all accept with such pleasure at the end of winter. In "The Tree," the seedling looks around furtively when it emerges from the soil, and the full-grown tree looks annoyed at the approach of a dog (because it knows that the dog will cock its leg), and it looks terrified when it sees a man coming towards it with an axe. These are all humorous devices used to deliver a deeper message about the relationship of Deaf and hearing people that is the poem's overarching theme.

### **1.1 A word about dirty jokes and socially unacceptable humour**

A discussion of humour cannot ignore the existence and importance of dirty jokes and other forms of humour that may be considered in some way "socially unacceptable." This is frequently the source of humour. Sexual jokes, scatological humour and jokes on topics that might be considered socially sensitive including gender differences, disabilities, and race abound. Given the taboo surrounding some topics, it is questionable if a work such as this should give space to racist, sexist or homophobic jokes or those that make fun of physical disabilities, yet it is vital to acknowledge their existence within the Deaf community.

Without going into too many details, once again it is useful to observe that many of these jokes derive their humour in great part from the highly visual creative use of signs. Sexual jokes in sign languages are funny mainly because they are extremely graphic visually (and, of course, in many cultures, including British and American Deaf cultures, sex is considered something intrinsically funny anyway). Further, there is no point in describing these jokes

in English because the humour derives not merely from what is signed (the message) but also from the way it is signed (the performance).

Dirty jokes are not just entertaining but can also be used as a form of social control and to fight battles in the difficult arena of power-games that exist between Deaf and hearing people, especially hearing interpreters and their Deaf clients. One Deaf person told us how a dirty joke was used to bring down an over-confident, self-serving interpreter at a large event. The interpreter had been drawing attention to himself throughout the event, in a way that many of the Deaf participants and other interpreters found unacceptable, so a plan was devised to trick the interpreter into volunteering to interpret as a Deaf man offered to tell a joke to the whole assembly. The interpreter took the bait immediately and sprang onto the stage. As the interpreter rendered the increasingly filthy joke into English he became more and more uncomfortable, being forced to find taboo words in English and accept some kind of public ownership for what he was saying.

Another kind of joke in sign that we've been told is by Deaf people who are members of Deaf culture about deaf people who are not. The split between those who sign and those who don't has been a source of much controversy, often at the political level with effects on larger societal institutions (such as schools), but also at the personal level resulting in severe emotional turmoil and even pain. We mention these types of insider jokes only for the sake of completeness – but we will not discuss them further.

The two authors of this book are hearing people who are not members of the Deaf community, and it is probably inappropriate for a range of reasons for us to discuss taboo or dirty or insider jokes of the type mentioned earlier in any more depth for a readership that may not be part of the Deaf community. That is, we are not saying they are too hot to handle, but only that our hands are not the right ones for the task. However, we cannot fail to acknowledge their existence and importance for Deaf humour and humour expressed through signed language.

## 2. Deaf humour and Sign Language Humour

All humour is culturally determined to some extent and it is clear that there is no such thing as a pure joke that is accessible to all audiences and without conditions as to its funny nature (that is, humour is not intrinsic). The Deaf humour considered here is conditional upon the affective response of Deaf audiences, appealing to their likes and dislikes and to their beliefs and values, as determined by their membership of the Deaf community. Cultural knowledge of what has been dubbed the Deaf experience (Lane, 1984; Parasniss, 1996) is a part of Deaf humour. People who are not members of the Deaf community may still appreciate Deaf humour at some intellectual, cognitive level, especially if the humour is explained to them, but their appreciation differs in degree because the humour also appeals to a collective sense of cultural identity for community members. Members of a Deaf community will know the information required to make something funny even before they see it. Explaining the humour after the event can lead to an understanding of the reasons for the laughter but the full effect is lost. For humour to be completely successful it needs to draw upon - and simultaneously create – an intimacy factor that comes from a shared sense of community through beliefs and feelings. Thus, non-members of Deaf communities may find a joke amusing, while members find it irresistibly funny.

Before outlining particular types of Deaf humour, we should point out that humour's dependence on the culture of the audience for its effect is not unique among linguistic folk events. In the work of Vladimir Propp (1927), Lévi-Strauss (especially 1963), and many others, we have seen modern scholars argue for a typology of narrative structures – particularly folklore – where details of a basic story idea vary from culture to culture, and the aesthetic appreciation of the audience lies largely in these details. That is, appreciation depends on sociological coherency. Since jokes are an integral part of folklore, it should come as no surprise that the same should hold of jokes. We are, then, working within a long tradition.

The study of Deaf folklore, in particular, however, is a much newer tradition. It was founded by Simon Carmel circa 1960, when he was a student at Gallaudet University. In 1981, he proposed that the Gallaudet Archives establish a section of videotapes, films, and similar visual materials to house this folklore (Shapska 1981). As we write this, Carmel is working on a book about Deaf folklore, all-encompassing with respect to ASL but with remarks on folklore in other signed languages, which gives relevant information on the origins of particular stories, poems, cartoons, and jokes, including city/state, date (month and year), and hearing status of the author, as well as on variations of these materials, in order to help researchers and readers become aware of their distribution throughout different Deaf communities.

While other studies of folklore (such as Propp's and Lévi-Strauss') start from a linguistic interest as a jumping-off point, and quickly move more toward sociological or anthropological questions, Carmel's work strongly incorporates the linguistic and the sociological/anthropological, with a particular interest in cross-cultural matters. Our focus in this book is primarily on the linguistic, giving sociological information only in this chapter and only to the extent that it helps in appreciating the linguistic side.

## 2.1 Types of Deaf Humour

One of the most immediate and effective ways to create the intimacy necessary for the sense of group cohesion that allows appreciation of humour is through drawing attention to the ordinary. Hal has explained that The Deaf Comedians created their materials using Deaf people's everyday experiences (which he described clearly with the phrase "our experiences") in life and problems they have with communication, education, interpreters and oppression. The sketches were funny because the Deaf audiences could identify with the experiences.

Nevertheless, even when outsiders cannot directly identify with the experiences, if they are able to appreciate the humour of another culture it increases the rapport between the groups and perhaps this is reason enough for research such as this. (Readers unfamiliar with the reality of Deaf cultures should see Padden & Humphries, 1988; Moore, 1993 and Ladd, 2002, among many others). Although The Deaf Comedians originally performed only to Deaf audiences, they later included a wider hearing audience because they thought it would be good for hearing people to see what Deaf people's lives were really about, including the suffering and oppression, communication problems and education issues, as well as inviting them to see what makes Deaf people laugh.

A great deal of Deaf humour can be appreciated internationally, particularly as different Deaf communities share the same life experiences of being visual Deaf people living surrounded by hearing people. Hal explains this clearly when talking about the work of The Deaf Comedians troupe:

... we decided to select ideas from Deaf people's experiences in life and problems they have with communication, education, interpreters, oppression and things like that. So we created a one-hour show based on "our experiences", aimed at a Deaf audience. It became popular and got a worldwide reputation. We were invited to perform in America, all over Europe, Finland, Norway, Italy and Germany. The sessions were based on every Deaf person's life so they were things

everyone had in common .... The sessions were funny because the Deaf audiences would watch it and could identify with the experiences. Gradually sessions developed linked to political events such as cochlear implants, government oppression, closing Deaf schools... (Interview with Hal, March 2005.)

For example, constantly being put down by hearing society is a common experience for Deaf people. Deaf people in English-speaking countries are so used to the put-down phrase *deaf and dumb*, that when Maggie Casteel, a hard-of-hearing rehabilitation counsellor in Pittsburgh, calls herself "deaf and blonde", she always draws a laugh from the audience.

One of the common experiences that many jokes revolve around is that of problems with speechreading. Most of these jokes are circulated among Deaf people in writing, rather than in sign. We found this joke written in English on an ASL website:

### **Joke 2:**

A Deaf man visited his doctor for a check-up. A week later the doctor saw the Deaf man walking down the street with a beautiful woman on his arm and a huge grin on his face. The doctor said to the Deaf man, "I see you're feeling well." The Deaf man replied, "Yes. I followed your advice. I got a hot mamma and I am cheerful." The doctor shook his head. "No, no. I said, 'You have a heart murmur. Be careful.'"

Holcomb et al. (1994) report a joke – perhaps better seen as a funny story - based on similar misunderstandings of lipreading, but this time rather more linked to the common experience of communication breakdown between hearing and Deaf people.

### **Joke 3:**

A Deaf man is looking for his friends in a convention. The hotel clerk tells him they're in room 486. The Deaf man can't find 486. In fact, there are only 3 floors – so there are no 400 numbers at all. So the Deaf man goes back to the clerk and asks him to write it. The clerk writes "4 and 6" -- which looks, on the lips, like 486. (1994, 80)

Another type of joke reflects the general distrust of hearing people. Many are about problems with interpreters.<sup>15</sup> One quite bitter one in ASL involves a Deaf

bank robber:

**Joke 4:**

The police come to the Deaf robber's house and ask where the stolen money is. He gestures that he's Deaf. So they call in an interpreter. The police then tell the interpreter to ask where the money is. The interpreter does, the robber won't tell, and the interpreter reports that the robber won't tell. The police then instruct the interpreter to tell the robber that if he doesn't reveal where the money is, they'll shoot him. The interpreter does. The robber gapes and immediately explains that the money is hidden under his bed. The interpreter says to the police, "He won't tell." (A version of this joke can be seen at [johnlestina.blogspot.com/2007/03/asl-laughs-watch-out-for-interpreter.html](http://johnlestina.blogspot.com/2007/03/asl-laughs-watch-out-for-interpreter.html))

Recognition of the Deaf community's level of distrust of hearing people, even those who sign as well as interpreters do, might bring a gasp from a Deaf person, but it also usually brings a laugh.

Examples of jokes about a variety of problems in the classroom and the hazards of deafness in a hearing world abound (for BSL see Hanifin, Benson, Draper, & Reed 1993; for ASL see Gannon 1981, and many jokes on the Internet performed by Lou Fant, Sharon Neumann Solow, Dan Pineda and Bill Vicars, among others). We should note here that these hazards are often described humorously, even when they are not part of an identifiable joke, but rather part of a story or conversation. A Deaf person reminiscing to friends about a bad experience with hearing people (for example a disastrous job interview or problems with government bureaucracy caused by miscommunications) can make the story quite hilarious, even though the story may describe ignorance, injustice or cruelty that should engender anger. In the past there were many jokes about hearing aids malfunctioning. There are now increasing numbers of jokes about cochlear implants. The following is an example, told to us in BSL by Adrian Bailey (personal communication, September 2007).

**Joke 5:**

A man gets home late from work and quickly grabs a cup of tea, walks the dog, throws a load of washing into the washing machine before rushing out to the pub to meet his friends. On his way there he realises he has lost his cochlear implant hearing aid but decides not to look for it because he will be with his signing friends. He is signing happily with his friends when suddenly his head spins round and round. Then it stops as suddenly as it began and he carries on chatting. Twice more that evening, his head spins uncontrollably and he goes home worried that

he may be unwell. He takes his washing out of the machine and in one of the shirts finds the magnet of his cochlear implant.

Once again, it is important to observe that this joke is not only content-based, but the way it is signed to show the man's head-movements and his concern about them is essential to the humour. It is also necessary to know that the external part of the cochlear implant uses a magnet to keep it in place against the wearer's head. This may not be widely known within mainstream society but this fact is now part of the Deaf community's cultural knowledge, and the cochlear implants' magnets have become the source of many Deaf jokes.

The widespread existence of jokes within Deaf communities concerning cochlear implants shows the dynamic and lively nature of humour in sign languages and its relevance to Deaf folklore. Twenty years ago there were no jokes on the topic because cochlear implants did not hold the same place in the Deaf community. Although the folkloric form of the humour is well established as a tradition, the topics change to reflect the current needs of the Deaf community.

Jokes about cochlear implants often reflect the ambivalence of the Deaf community to the technology. Many people in Deaf communities object to cochlear implantation and its implications for the continued existence of their communities, language and culture. However, it is a reality that many Deaf people who are or who wish to be part of the Deaf community have cochlear implants. Humour is a way of taking some of the heat out of the debate – or at least opening it up.

In relation to this, there are jokes that directly attack behaviour of the in-group. These jokes derive much of their impact from acknowledging more unacceptable behaviour within the Deaf community and the defiant recognition that it may be bad behaviour but it is *our* bad behaviour. Not surprisingly, those enjoying the humour tend not to count themselves among the people whose behaviour they are attacking. Laughing about the behaviour strengthens community bonds and possibly legitimises the behaviour while simultaneously implying that it is wrong.

Many of these jokes follow the formula of "There was a Deaf man, a blind man and a man in a wheelchair..." and are told in sign language. We are told that jokes with this formula are widespread beyond Britain and the USA. Joke 6 is of a well-known joke, told by Clark Denmark in BSL.

### **Joke 6:**

A Deaf man, a blind man and a man in a wheelchair are all in the pub one evening complaining that the beer is

weak and the pub is too crowded. Just then God walks in and sees them looking miserable and dissatisfied. He comes over to their table and says to the man in the wheelchair, "Be healed!" The man in the wheelchair stands up and runs from the pub shouting, "Praise the Lord!" God says to the blind man, "Be healed!" and the man looks around him at everything he can now see. He runs from the pub shouting, "Praise the Lord!" God turns to the Deaf man but before He can say anything, the Deaf man says in panic, "No, please don't heal me! I don't want to lose my disability benefits!"

Again although this joke has a punch line that derives from content, much of the amusement comes from the way it is told, including descriptions of the appearance and behaviour of God and the other characters in the joke. Joke 7 is a similar joke told in ASL (and BSL), with a similar punch line, and, as you might expect, with much laughter coming from the manner of storytelling and not just that punch line.

### **Joke 7:**

A blind man goes to a barber for a haircut. The barber cuts his hair and then refuses payment, saying he's doing community service for the handicapped this week. The next morning the barber finds a thank you card and a dozen roses at his shop.

Later a man in wheelchair comes in for a haircut. The barber cuts his hair and then refuses payment, saying he's doing community service for the handicapped this week. The next morning the barber finds a thank you card and a box of a dozen muffins waiting at his shop.

Later a Deaf man comes for a haircut. The barber cuts his hair and then refuses payment, saying he's doing community service for the handicapped this week. The next morning he finds a dozen Deaf people waiting at his door.

Another kind of Deaf joke involves a situation in which being Deaf rather than hearing turns out to be to a great advantage – a truly lovely situation in a world in which hearing usually has the upper hand (that was a bad attempt at a joke). Joke 8 is a very widely known and often-cited joke.

### **Joke 8:**

A couple on their honeymoon go to a motel. The wife gets hungry, so she sends the husband out for a pizza. He drives around a long time and finally finds a pizza parlour. But by the time he gets back to the motel, all the lights are out and he can't remember which room is his. He thinks a minute. Then, aha! He honks the car horn. All the rooms light up, except one. Yup, that's where his Deaf bride is sleeping.

There are many examples of this joke. One version can be found in Holcomb et al. (1994) but it is very widespread among both the British and American Deaf communities. A variant on this joke made it to the USA Superbowl in 2008 as a television advertisement for Pepsi during a commercial break. As of the writing of this book, this signed variant of the joke may be viewed at <http://www.pepsi.com/bobshouse/>.

Although we claim that humour is often specific to Deaf culture and the Deaf experience, we should add some caveats. First, we need to make it clear that Deaf and hearing people can find many of the same things funny. There is humour that is shared between the cultures and – provided it is accessible to Deaf people – everyone will find it funny. The fact that the joke told during the Superbowl (mentioned earlier) was broadcast to the whole American nation shows that hearing people can be expected to appreciate Deaf humour at some level, even if not in the same way as Deaf people. Many of the Deaf Comedians' early jokes were simply translations of jokes widespread in the English-speaking hearing world. The troupe went on to create more Deaf-related jokes but their initial success with hearing jokes presented in signed language is evidence that a great deal of the amusement and entertainment is shared.

Secondly, we must acknowledge that not all Deaf people will find the same things funny – there is no cultural prescription for tastes in humour for Deaf people any more than there is one for hearing people.

Thirdly, Bouchauveau (1994) points out that much Deaf humour is untranslatable into spoken (or written) language because of the modality difference. One might conclude then that outsiders who do not sign could never truly appreciate Deaf jokes. However, complications in translation do not entail that non-signers can't/won't understand. Indeed, Bouchauveau shows that, regardless of whether or not it is possible to capture the precise import of a sign in speech or writing, the gesture is still visible and readily understandable. Non-signing hearing people who use speech are accustomed to combining language and gesture in humour, just as signing Deaf people are. So the true translation issues that arise depend on real linguistic

differences, and are fundamentally no different from those between any two languages (such as Italian and English). We are optimistic, then, in our goal of helping the reader understand the exploitation of linguistic mechanisms in jokes in signed language.

The creation of intimacy through humour is not so different from the intimacy generated through the creative use of metaphor. Both metaphor and humour rely upon mutual comprehension that the speaker/signer is providing both real and apparent information and that the apparent identity is not the real one. In both cases, shared presuppositions are needed to understand the real identity. One of our points demonstrated here will be unsurprising, then: Many metaphors in signed languages are perceived as being humorous and work because they are, indeed, humorous.

### **3. Deaf humour, visual humour and signed humour**

It is important to distinguish clearly between Deaf humour, visual humour and humour in signed language. The three are inter-related but not identical. Deaf humour includes a broad range of forms of social amusement, including slapstick, practical jokes, and party games, as well as conceptual jokes carried through the medium of a signed language. Conceptual humour covers Deaf riddles and specific Deaf jokes with their own formulae, such as those that begin, "There was a Deaf man, a blind man, and a man in a wheelchair...". These frequently require language as their medium and that language itself may be humorous, but nevertheless these examples of language-borne humour do not focus upon, or foreground, the language. The "Deaf man, blind man, man in a wheelchair" jokes can be phrased in many ways (even in English) but the punch line remains the same, with the humour residing in the content rather than the form of the language.

We note that gesture and behaviour can convey humour quite independently from language. In the era of silent films, comedy was common, often in the form of slapstick, burlesque, or farce. And, importantly, the focus was more on the skills of individual performers than on the genre of comedic films (Bohn & Stromgren 1975). Anybody can laugh at the antics of Charlie Chaplin, for example. And Deaf people certainly do as much as hearing people. Indeed, Chaplin was friends with the Deaf artist Granville Redmond, who taught him some sign and some Deaf storytelling techniques and held minor roles in several of Chaplin's films (Hughes 2002). Body movements and facial expressions carried the day in these silent films (Koszarski 1990), where torso, head, and eye gaze were involved to various degrees in role-shifts. This was so much the case that Schuchman (2004) argues that this period in the history of film afforded comparatively equal access to Deaf and hearing.

Deaf theatre, drama, film and skits are still ways of expressing Deaf humour. Development of Internet sites such as YouTube has led to an explosion of films of these forms. The American National Theater of the Deaf performed *My Third Eye* in 1971 in which Deaf actors mocked hearing people by describing them in terms used by hearing people talking about Deaf people. This tradition has continued, as may be seen in many drama skits and sketches. They are not jokes in the traditional sense of the term, but are good examples of humour conveyed through signed acting. In one example, a white-coated doctor explains the behaviour of hearing people who may be kept as exotic pets. This humorous sketch in BSL may be seen at <http://isathought.blogspot.com/2008/01/keeping-hearing-companion.html>.

Deaf cartoons are another form of highly visual Deaf humour that may bypass language altogether. These cartoons are a major format for Deaf humour, appearing in Deaf publications around the world (Jacobowitz 1992). Some

typical examples are found in Gannon (1981). One is the Deaf man at the movies, where his hearing friends are laughing at what is being said and he is baffled (p. 206). Then he laughs at an exaggerated facial expression of a man suffering in an unfortunate situation, and, of course, the hearing people do not. Another is of a Deaf man so bored by watching the TV, that he opens the newspaper. The next moment a tornado warning comes on, and he misses it, even though it is broadcast visually (p. 207). The humour of these scenarios draws the widespread recognition within the Deaf community of a lack of access to the spoken content of films and television. Where subtitling or in-screen signed interpretation are available there is no fodder for the joke.

Deaf cartoons can spread into the signed joke world, so that something on the page becomes something performed. One of Gannon's paper-based cartoons resurfaces when signed on the body of Hal in our interview.

### **Joke 9:**

I think most humour that Deaf people like is based on hearing people making idiots of themselves rather than Deaf people. There's a joke I know about a Deaf man standing waiting for a bus. A hearing man comes up to him and speaks to him and he signs DEAF, so the hearing man goes around to the ear that he didn't sign DEAF at and tries to speak into that other ear.

The joke travelled between the USA and Britain, has been around since at least 1981 (when Gannon's book was published) and was current in 2005 (when we interviewed Hal), and appears on paper and in BSL and ASL – a remarkable example of the spread of international Deaf folklore.

Another kind of Deaf humour is English-based, so it is conveyed primarily through print. Ken Glickman has a website with such jokes that he frequently updates. His 1999 book has many proverbs that draw on cultural knowledge, such as:

"Show me your hand and I will tell you your school" (p. 73)

"Hearie candor, discreetly put, Deafie candor, bluntly put" (p. 113)

"Teach your child how to sign – for there is no finer gift than a hand-me-down" (p. 3)

The last of these includes a pun. Puns with English abound in this sort of Deaf humour, in fact. In the next example (Joke 10), the pun on "Deaf" and

"Death" is brought out through the expectation of the phrase "near death experience".

**Joke 10:**

A hard-of-hearing audiologist got an ear infection and couldn't wear his hearing aids for three weeks. He wrote an article called "My near Deaf experience" (Ross, n.d.).

Other jokes are based on a homonym in English, as in the following examples:

**Joke 11:**

Q: What language do billboards use? A: Sign language.

**Joke 12:**

Q: What do you call it when people put names on the back of sports shirts?

A: Clothes captioning. [A pun on the term "Closed captioning" used for subtitling film and television]

These have all been examples of Deaf humour, some of which are examples of visual humour. However, there are also linguistic jokes, in which the impact comes primarily from the linguistic form, and this may be properly termed as sign language humour. If the jokes are phrased in any other way, the humour is lost. Clearly, there is frequently an interrelationship between conceptual and linguistic humour, but in the rest of this book we will focus primarily upon linguistic humour.

The extent to which a joke relies upon language varies. Clearly all humour that is conveyed through language is linguistic to some extent. Jokes such as those with the formula of "Deaf man, blind man and man in a wheelchair" need to be told in sign language for maximum effect because simply telling the story in a signed language signals the ownership by the Deaf community. The use of a signed language in telling the joke is central to the joke for any Deaf person.

Some jokes, told in a signed language, rely on a gesture as their punch line. They could not be told entirely in English because of the need for a visual gesture to give the effect of the joke, as in Joke 13, from BSL.

### **Joke 13:**

A man is driving down the road really fast, it's gradually getting darker, he goes over a hill and sees a cat running in front of his car, he slams the brakes on, but he's too late. So he gets out to have a look and oh it's awful! Anyway, he decides that he wants to know whose cat this was and decides to knock on the door of the nearest house. He goes to the door and a sweet old lady answers. "Do you have a pet cat?" he asks. "Oh yes, I have a cat," she says. "I'm really sorry," he says. "I've run over it." "Hang on a minute," she says. "What did the cat look like?". "Like this," he says [and does an impersonation of the dead cat].

Some have extended this joke in the following way:

"No, no," she says. "I mean before you ran him over?"  
"Like this," he says [and does an impersonation of a frightened cat].

Another joke, appearing on the Internet in longer form, has been circulating in ASL groups in shorter form, ending in a facial gesture.

### **Joke 14:**

A young female student moves into a dorm and finds that the other girls are blotting their lipstick on the mirrors in the hall bathrooms. She is annoyed by that and asks them not to, but they persist. She winds up having to clean the mirrors all the time. Eventually, she gets fed up and tells the dorm supervisor, who comes up with a great solution.

The dorm supervisor calls together all the girls and says, "I am aware there's been a problem with getting lipstick off the bathroom mirrors. But I'm happy to announce that the janitor has come up with a solution." She then shows a video of the janitor dipping a mop into a toilet and then using it to clean lipstick off the mirrors. The dorm supervisor turns to the girls with a big smile. "See how well that works?" [The joke ends with the faces of the dorm girls.]

Other jokes have signed language at their heart as a concept, and using signed language to tell them also builds on that effect. The story of the

gamekeeper with his Deaf gundog is one such joke. This joke was created by Clark Denmark and is told in BSL. It is a rich joke at many levels, and is much funnier (of course) when told in BSL by a master joke-teller, but the essence can be recounted in English. The existence of signed languages is central to the joke.

### **Joke 15:**

A gamekeeper's gundog fails to fetch a bird at a shoot. The gamekeeper, worried that the dog is ill, takes it to the vet. When the vet discovers that the dog has become deaf, the gamekeeper thinks it will need to be destroyed. But the vet gives him a fingerspelling chart and tells him to teach the dog to sign. After three weeks of careful training, the dog has learned some signs and is able to understand the fingerspelling b-i-r-d and the gamekeeper takes it out on a shoot. When a bird falls from the sky the gamekeeper fingerspells b-i-r-d and the dog rushes off. The gamekeeper's delight turns to concern when it doesn't return with the bird. He follows the dog's footprints into town, to the local Deaf club, where he finds the dog signing merrily with its new Deaf friends.

The importance of signed language has even greater importance to the humour in the next joke. The form of the language itself is not critical to the humour, but the signed utterance by characters is essential. This joke was told by Richard Carter, a well-known BSL performer and poet. (For clarity here, signed conversation is shown in upper case and speech is shown in lower case.)

### **Joke 16:**

A Deaf man is shipwrecked and washed up alone on a desert island. He finds an old teapot on the shore and gives it a rub. A genie appears and signs to the Deaf man, "FREE ME! THANK-YOU. I GIVE-YOU THREE WISHES." The Deaf man thinks for a while and decides that even though there are no other people on the island there may be dangers from other things and it would be useful to be able to hear so he asks for a cochlear implant. The genie asks him "YOU SURE? COCHLEAR-IMPLANT? HEARING? OK." And the Deaf man gets a cochlear implant and can hear. The genie offers him the second wish and the Deaf man thinks that signing is all very well but now that he can hear, maybe it would be useful if he could speak instead. That way if a ship sailed past he could shout to it. The genie asks him YOU SURE? SPEAK NOT SIGN? The man says he's sure, so the genie

makes him able to speak, "Thank you!" says the Deaf man. "That's wonderful! I can speak!" Then the genie says, OK ONE-MORE WISH. THINK-HARD. MUST GOOD WISH. DON'T WASTE. LAST WISH. IMPORTANT. And the man says, "What? What are you saying? I don't understand you."

In all these jokes the use of signed language is essential, but the form of the language that is used is not essential. We want to contrast such humour to the humour in the rest of this book, in which the form is crucial to making the joke – what we call sign language humour. One could argue that sign language humour is the most important type of Deaf humour for creating a community, since signing is perhaps the most prominent visible identifier of a Deaf person. Carmel (1996, 2006) explains how Deaf jokes that make use of linguistic notions (precisely what we call sign language humour) go a long way toward making the Deaf community "close-knit" through shared identity (2006: 279).

While some language play occurs within specific social settings generally recognised as intrinsically or primarily humorous, most language wit occurs in everyday exchanges. In many instances the creative language occurs spontaneously and is a source of pleasure for both signer and audience, not least because of an understanding that the signer is cleverly using the complexities of the language to create novel meanings.

At its most basic linguistic level, humorous language is no different from non-humorous language in the techniques that it uses, but the signer uses the techniques for deliberately humorous effect (or, occasionally, inadvertently creates a humorous utterance) and the audience knows to interpret these techniques as part of humour, and appreciates them as such.

We have divided our examples, discussion, and analysis of sign humour below into three groups. In section 4, the humour comes primarily from the use of suprasegmentals (a term we will explain there) and other elements of the signing, some of which are traditionally considered to be beyond language and yet are such a crucial part of the humour. While some of these elements might initially be considered merely gesture, they are, in fact, very much more than gesture, and frequently work in harness with the forms of language humour described in section 5.

In section 5, the humour discussed comes primarily from play with the internal structure of ASL or BSL. These jokes do not depend on knowing any other language for their punch. In section 6, the jokes are cross-linguistic, in that they play on the internal structures of a signed language and of the spoken language, English. Accordingly, they depend on one's knowing both ASL/ BSL and English.

It is important to emphasise our main point, however: that these three categories overlap and interact in many cases, so that humour comes from more than one source. Linguistic play with the form of signs alone rarely creates Deaf humour, and playful use of non-manual features can only create humour up to a point. Play with the internal structure of signs needs to be combined with play with the more gestural, non-manual features. In the words of Hal: "I think it's about combining signing with facial expression, body movement and with how Deaf people can become the thing" (Interview March 2005).

Klima, & Bellugi (1979), in their seminal exploration of wit and sign play, observe that a lot of ASL humour arises from a "compression of unexpected meanings into minimal sign forms" (1979: 320). They note that this is done in at least three ways: (i) by substituting elements within a sign; (ii) by using two hands to create two different signs simultaneously; and (iii) by two signs blending and merging. All these devices and others that we will demonstrate in sections 5 and 6 are recognised productive elements of signed languages, but for the purposes of wit, they are used with some sense of novel combination of absurd form and meaning. Again, it is essential to bear in mind that the linguistic play with the manual components is almost invariably accompanied with playful non-manual features.

### **3.1 Sign phonology and morphology, and frozen and productive signs**

It is important to understand some basics of the internal structure of signs that set them apart from the internal structure of words in spoken languages in order to appreciate sign jokes that play with these internal structures. For spoken language we can think about the physical features of the sound wave in speech or the way that speech sounds are physically made. We can also look at how individual sounds change when we put them in the environment of other sounds. For signed language we will be looking at the physical form of individual signs and how we can manipulate or modify their articulation. That is, we'll be looking at what makes one sign distinctively different from another.

The distinctive articulatory parts of signs are called parameters. There are at least five parameters that distinguish between signs: handshape, place of articulation (PoA), orientation, movement, and facial expression. Evidence that these parameters are distinctive, that is, that they are crucial to distinguishing between signs, comes from the existence of minimal pairs. Minimal pairs consist of two signs which differ in form by only one of these parameters and which mean different things. For example, to show that handshape is a distinctive parameter, we need a pair of signs which have different meanings and for which all the parameters are the same except handshape. There are many such signs. Figure 1 shows a pair from BSL:



Figure 1: BSL signs DOCTOR and MORNING differing only in the parameter of handshape

And we can find minimal pairs that differ only by each of the other parameters, too. Figure 2 shows a pair from ASL showing that orientation is distinctive:

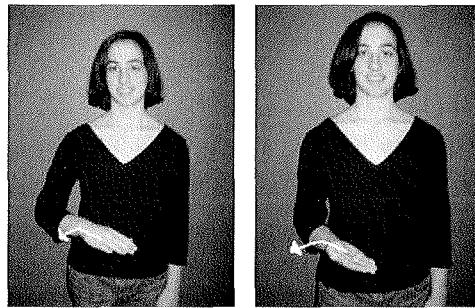


Figure 2: ASL signs CHILDREN and SOMETHING differing only in the parameter of orientation

All five of these parameters are mined in sign language humour, as we will show later.

We do need to qualify this claim, however, with respect to the parameter of facial expression. Every sign listed in a sign language dictionary will have a PoA, handshape, movement, and orientation but facial expression is often not specified. Of course, the face is involved in all signing. Indeed, a deadpan face may be quite ridiculous in certain signed language contexts (and this fact, too, can be used to humorous effect, as we discuss below). But in many cases, facial expressions add information to a sign that is not strictly linguistic, and instead provide the hugely important element of role-shift and characterisation. Other times they add information that is morphological in nature, rather than phonological. We will see examples of both uses of facial expressions in later chapters. Indeed, there are few signs for which facial expression is truly a part of the internal articulatory structure, that is, the

phonological make-up, of the sign. For this reason, we often omit it from discussion of phonological structure.

When we talk about the internal structure of spoken words, however, we don't mean exclusively the articulatory components. Often, we are interested in the meaningful units internal to the word, what are generally called morphemes (and the study of them is morphology). For example, we could be talking about the meaningful parts of words, which might be a series of sounds, such as [k<sup>h</sup> æt] in the English word *cat*, or a single sound, as in the final [s] of the English word *cats*. That is, the word *cats* is made of two morphemes: *cat* plus *s*. Or we could be talking about various processes we can do to words to change a word's meaning, which range widely depending on the language. Some languages can change the point of stress on a verb to indicate a particular tense; some languages can reduplicate a part or all of a noun to show plurality; and so forth. The important point that contrasts morphology from discussions of the internal articulatory structure of words (called phonology) is that, typically, morphology involves meaning whereas phonology involves pure sound, without meaning. The sound [k<sup>h</sup>] by itself in the English word *cat*, for example, means nothing.

The situation is different in signed language. It is quite common for phonological parameters in a signed language to hold meaning to varying degrees. This fact means that teasing apart phonology from morphology in a signed language can be a very tricky matter (see, for example, Liddell 2003), and a matter that offers fodder for humorists.

Many linguists working with signed languages currently accept that it is useful to distinguish between two types of signs that may be termed "frozen" and "productive" (McDonald, 1985; Brennan, 1990; Taub, 2001; Russo, 2004; and others, building on the distinction in Klima, & Bellugi, 1979, between linguistically conventionalised and visually transparent parameters for humorous signs). The phonological and morphological status of the parameters in these two different types of signs are frequently different.

Frozen signs are part of the established vocabulary of any signed language. They convey senses, often in general, abstracted terms. Frozen signs like DOG, RUN and HOT simply identify senses in general categories such as objects, actions, and states of being. However, they give no further indication of the specific type of dog, the way in which the running was done, nor what or who is hot. Frozen signs can also convey referents (that is, which dog we are talking about, or which particular event of running we want to indicate), and, again, alone they identify a referent that has no more information than the bare sense of the sign. Often frozen signs are combined with something else to add more information about the referent. For example, we might add a pointing sign to a frozen nominal to indicate the particular referent that has the sense contained in that lexical item.

Productive signs, however, do not convey a general sense, and instead rely upon strong visual motivation behind the sign formation to present visual images of the specific referent under discussion. Signers might show what the dog looked like and how he behaved. They may show how he moved and where he moved to. In order to express an idea of running on this occasion, we may see the path taken by the dog as he ran, or the manner of running and the duration of the event. To understand the way that the specific referent might be considered to be in the state of being hot we could see a visual representation reflecting the dog's experience of heat or its appearance when hot.

Frozen signs, accordingly, are appropriately used in a wide range of contexts, because the information they carry is so general. But any individual productive sign is appropriate in many fewer contexts, because productive signs carry so much information specific to the event. In some ways the difference between frozen signs and productive signs within a sentence is similar to the difference between phrases that consist only of a lexical item with minimal additional paraphernalia (such as the possible addition of determiners, giving only the most broad information about discourse), and phrases with more hearty paraphernalia. *The girl*, for example, carries only a general sense (that of *girl*) plus the notion of definiteness, yielding rather impoverished information about the referent, and, thus can be used in many contexts appropriately. On the other hand, *the girl who lost all her teeth in the boxing match* carries all the general senses of each component lexical item at a single time plus the notion of definiteness, yielding quite a lot of information about the referent, and, thus can be appropriately used in many fewer contexts.

Most frozen signs are monomorphemic, and many of these show an arbitrary relationship between form and meaning, so that the parameters within the sign have phonological status and may be considered meaningless. In the signs such as WHO, NUMBER, and SIMPLE, for example, the handshape, PoA, orientation, and movement carry no independent meaning (this is true for both ASL and BSL). However, for most productive signs the same parameters now work to provide some direct meaning that is salient enough to be considered fully morphemic, so that the overall sign is now polymorphemic (just as a spoken phrase with multiple words in it contains many morphemes). When signing about a dog, the handshapes may be selected to represent the whole dog or some part of the dog (his paws or tail or ears), so the handshape parameter becomes a morpheme; and the hands will move to represent the manner and direction of his running, so movement becomes a morpheme; and the sign may perhaps be combined with facial expression to show how hot he was at the end of the run, so facial expression becomes a morpheme or, indeed, several morphemes expressed through the eyes, mouth and head movement.

With this explanation of the structure of signed languages in mind, we can now explore how these factors interact with the suprasegmentals and with

other elements of signing traditionally considered to be outside the language, and yet so important for sign language humour.



## 4. Role-shift, suprasegmentals and perspective

A great deal of humour in signed languages comes from a visual delivery of the utterance and not simply from the sense of it. Many of the visual characteristics of sign are linguistic in ways that speakers of spoken language are familiar with, and in the next chapter we deal with those. But other visual characteristics of sign tend to fall outside of the linguistic components generally recognised for spoken languages. Nevertheless, they are integral parts of the structure of the language and thus are important in any discussion of sign language humour.

In the title of this chapter we use the term *suprasegmentals*, which is a linguistic term for those features of spoken languages that can be added to an individual sound without changing the quality (or identity) of the sound. Intensity is a suprasegmental because no matter how softly or loudly we say the sound [o], for example, it is still recognisable as [o]. Pitch is a second suprasegmental; no matter whether we say [o] in a high tone or a low tone, it is still [o]. And duration is a third suprasegmental; whether we hold [o] for a long time or simply say it staccato, it is still [o]. The suprasegmentals in spoken language can play a role in distinguishing one word from another, or not, depending on the particular language. For example, there are languages which have minimal pairs (as we discussed in Chapter Three) differing only by which vowel within the words has greater intensity, or by what tone the words have, or by the fact that a given sound within one word is longer than it is within the other word. Discussion of any use of a suprasegmental that distinguishes one sign from another belongs in section 5.

Suprasegmentals need not distinguish between words, however. In English for example, intensity can signal something such as urgency. Whether we say *sharks* in an ordinary conversational loudness or we shout it, the meaning of the word itself doesn't change but the message of the overall utterance can change – the latter might well be telling us to get out of the water fast! In this chapter we will look at a variety of things, including the uses of suprasegmentals in sign language humour of this latter type.

While we have organised this chapter into subparts, the characteristics we discuss interact to greater and lesser extents. Therefore, we return to consideration of given characteristics repeatedly, each time, we hope, enriching the discussion with the material that interceded since the previous consideration.

## **4.1 Role-shift**

Sometimes a joke can be purely in the choice of the point of view that's delivering the line. If the point of view is unexpected, or takes an exaggerated approach to the line, signers may find it amusing.

Point of view in signed languages is indicated by role-shift (also termed "constructed action" or "reference shift" – see Janzen 2005). For example, if there are two characters in a story, the signer can shift back and forth between the two characters, playing the role of each. Shifting can have various forms of movement. In the full torso form, the signer can actually turn his/her body 45° or so and play the role of one character, then go back to the centre and shift from it 45° or so the opposite way to play the role of the other character. Alternatively, the signer can simply shift his/her head, perhaps tilting the head down when playing one character and up when playing the other. Indeed, the signer can shift eye gaze without moving the head at all, for example, looking down when playing one character and up when playing the other. Finally and importantly for sign language humour, in addition to movement shifts, role-shift can also be manifested through changes in facial expression.

Role-shift, or the taking on of characteristics of another subject, is a prized skill in humour. Hal sums it up:

Role-shifting. For example I remember a friend coming to the Deaf club one evening when it had been snowing outside. He said he'd been walking to the Deaf club and a hearing person was behind him, and he had slipped and fallen over. If I was speaking and telling you that you'd think, "OK, so what?" But the way he explained it with the classifiers and the body movement and facial expression of walking happily and carelessly chatting and joking about going to the deaf club and having a pint and saw the man walking and slip and fall heavily, that was very impressive to me because I could really empathise with the man [literally signed to mean 'change places with him']. It is so fluid and expressive. (Interview with Hal, March 2005.)

Within role-shift, body movement and facial expression - including eye gaze and eye aperture (that is, if the eyes are wide open, squinting or closed) - are a key part of becoming the character or thing under discussion. Facial expression can be an essential part of the sign (that is, a distinctive phonological parameter. See below), but more commonly it can be a way of conveying the attitudes of the character. This is similar to how, in some spoken languages, changes in pitch can be distinctive or merely attitudinal or how, in English, intonation contours can convey grammatical information

(example: *They're coming?* with a rise at the end) or merely attitude (example: *They're coming.* with an oh-no intonation).

Facial expression also, crucially, can portray the appearance of the character. Body movement functions in a similar way. The size of the sign (that is, how much space the articulators travel through) to show the size of movements made by the character can be important in role-shift, as can be the dynamics of the movement parameter of the sign.

In the quotation from Hal's interview above, he mentions the term *classifier*. The way that this term is usually used in relation to signed languages is perhaps most quickly understood through demonstration. Let's assume that we are talking about a cat. Once we've introduced the cat into the conversation, we do not alter the sign CAT or move it around in space to show what it did. Instead, we have a range of particular handshapes to use in productive signs that can represent the cat as it moves through space. All these different handshapes to represent the object and its movement are frequently termed classifiers in discussion of sign language. Some handshapes will be used as "whole entity classifiers" to represent the whole body of the cat moving by itself. Other handshapes employ the mechanism of metonymy (Wilcox 2000) through the use of "body-part classifiers", perhaps indicating only the paws, the ears or the hackles, or, indeed, any part of the cat, to represent the whole. In these "entity classifiers", whether whole entity or showing body parts, the hand is understood by signers to have become the cat or the part of the cat. Other handshapes will be used in "handling classifiers" if we want to indicate how someone else moved the cat, perhaps cradling it, holding it under the middle, or by the scruff of the neck, and so on. In these handling classifiers, the hand is understood to represent the hands of the character holding the cat. Finally we may wish to indicate the extent of the size or shape of the cat. The movement of the hands, then, is understood to be acting as a type of pencil drawing the boundaries of the object in question and the hands here are understood to represent some sort of sketching tool to create the outline. (See Emmorey 2003 for a detailed discussion of issues related to classifiers in signed languages.) This understanding of the meaning of the hands is important for humour in signed languages, which can often turn on incongruous interpretations of the use of the hands in signing.

The creative use of classifiers to present new visual perspectives on a scene is generally highly valued as a form of humour in signed languages. Much of the humour comes from the conceptual creativity in deciding what aspect of a visual image to present and selecting unexpected (but nevertheless logical) classifier constructions to represent them. Guy Bouchauveau's (1994) comparison of the death of a person with the death of a bird focussing entirely on the form and movement of their feet is a perfect example of this. Although he is French, the strongly iconic nature of classifier handshapes means that they work equally as well in a range of signed languages and his performance of this humorous piece in International Sign appeals to signers

of many nationalities. To an observer who is not accustomed to the humour lying within the choice of classifier it may not even appear to be a funny story (certainly the topic is not necessarily intrinsically funny) but its appeal to Deaf people is strong.

Joke 17 is a BSL story concerning a visit from the tooth fairy, which also exemplifies the use of classifier selection to create humour.

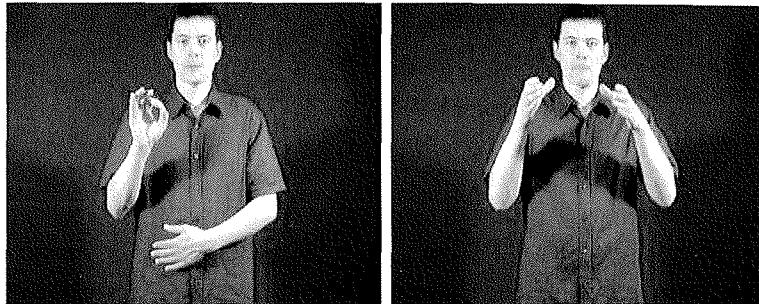
### **Joke 17:**

A little girl loses a tooth and puts it under her pillow at night, leaving a note for the tooth fairy asking for £1 in exchange for the tooth. She turns out the light and goes to sleep. When the tooth fairy arrives, she turns on the light and takes the tooth but is unimpressed by a cavity in it and leaves the girl a note explaining why she has only paid 10p. The fairy then turns off the light and flies away.

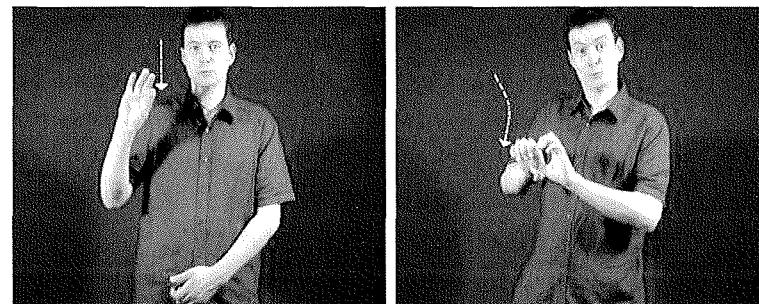
Up to this point where the little girl goes to sleep, all the signs using handling classifiers reflect the conventional way in which objects such as a tooth, pencil and paper, pound coin, and light switch are handled. But once the tiny tooth fairy comes, conventions fly out the window, as the objects are now handled on a very different scale so that they appear very much bigger. The humour in this story not only comes from the fairy's facial expressions and body movement, but from the change in handling classifiers for the same objects. The tooth is much larger relative to the fairy than it was to the girl, so a novel classifier sign must be used. Additional humour comes from the changing handling classifier handshapes dealing with the different size of the fairy in relation to the tooth, pencil, the coins and the light switch. We can see examples of this in Figure 3.



Human holds a tooth and tooth fairy holds a tooth



Human holds a pencil and tooth fairy holds a pencil



Human switches on a light and tooth fairy switches on a light

Figure 3: Different handling classifiers for a human and a tooth fairy

The following humorous exchange was not a joke but simply a light-hearted conversation. It shows how the changing interpretation of classifier handshapes can be used wittily for entertainment. A British Deaf friend of one of the authors described how he has moved progressively southwards through his life. Starting in the far north (metaphorically, at the top of the country), he moves southward (metaphorically, downward, through use of an imagined map) until he finally reaches the south coast of England. If he moves any further south, he will end up in the sea, clearly. Up to this point he has used a "surface classifier" (another type of entity classifier) in a metaphorical way, as he uses a B-handshape moving down through the wall-plane he has established in front of himself to mark the lines of latitude of his steady descent from north to south. (The B-handshape, and all other handshapes that we refer to in this book, are found in Appendix A.) But now he changes the meaning of the surface classifier to mark literally the water level rising up his chest if he continues to move south. Note that moving south by this stage no longer means metaphorically moving down the map but literally wading deeper and deeper into the sea. Once the surface classifier has passed over head-height (and the friend keeps on moving determinedly southward and so deeper into the water), it is replaced by a mask and snorkel. At last, he signs a few bubbles rising and disappearing as he vanishes from sight. Again, the humour was inextricably linked with the facial expression of determination tempered with increasing concern at the rising water levels, but the humour is driven by the changes in perspective of approaches to the move southwards.

These are only a few examples of a very widespread - frequently core - element of signed humour.

#### 4.2 Facial Expression

Copying the facial expression of the subject of humour is an essential part of humour in signed languages and could even be argued to be the most frequently employed and, therefore, most important humorous mechanism. We will see in our discussion that it may be humorous because of its perceived accuracy through precise mimicry, or because of the perceived accuracy of a feature selected for caricature and then caricatured to perfection. Facial expression is also an essential element in anthropomorphisation, showing the emotions and feelings of the non-human object being described. In these situations the facial expression cannot be a precise mimicry as we have no evidence that the objects feel these emotions, and if they did they would not show it on their face. In Judith Jackson's haiku poem concerning the snail that sets off to climb Mt Fuji (performed at Bristol University, February 2006), much of the humour is derived from the dejection on the snail's face as it realises it has embarked on too great an undertaking. Snails' faces do not show dejection, but that fact doesn't stop anthropomorphising signers from using their own faces to show the snail's face. Many anthropomorphised objects do not have faces at all. A tree cannot feel exasperation and has no face on which it could show it, but Paul Scott's poem "The Tree" humorously shows an exasperated tree through facial expression. A lift does not have a face, yet John Wilson's haiku poem about a lift uses the face almost exclusively to convey emotions imputed to the lift – to great humorous effect.

Several writers (including Bienvenu 1992 and Rutherford 1993) have observed that humour through mimicking use of facial expression develops young, as Deaf children learn to become expert observers of their visual world. Rutherford explains that imitations "are a traditional pastime of children at the residential school and can also be seen at Deaf adult gatherings where skits or other entertainment are being performed" (1993: 108). Imitation is often directed at hearing people but that's just because they are easy prey as members of a relatively powerful outgroup. In fact, character flaws in general, such as pomposness, are targeted so Deaf people may also be targets in this humour. Some imitations can even be fairly loving and point out positive qualities. Imitation results from careful studying of the people (in Rutherford's example, the children are bored in class so have nothing better to do) and it is useful to the child to be good at it and have that skill be acknowledged and appreciated by the others.

The addition of a well-chosen facial expression can make an ordinarily non-humorous sign terribly funny. Examples abound. Here we draw an example from French Sign Language, as discussed in Bouchauveau (1994), but which is just as funny in ASL or BSL. In the piece, a man pursues a woman. The signer uses the B-handshape on both hands as classifiers for the walking feet.

There is nothing inherently funny in this action predicate that uses a standard body-part classifier to represent feet. However, the facial expression of the signer shows that the man is sexually enticed and is delightedly hopeful (see the photograph in Bouchauveau, 1994: 27), equivalent to someone rubbing their hands together in telling a spoken story. In this particular joke the facial expression has the effect of making a sympathetic buffoon out of the man in a way that could not be achieved by the manual signs alone.

Changing the size of facial movement is also a major element of humorous facial expression. Exaggerated facial expressions are considered humorous in many cultures (consider the international appeal of the British actor Rowan Atkinson's character Mr. Bean, as only one example; indeed, in a recent radio interview Rowan Atkinson claimed that humour is "exaggerated truth"), and as such may be seen as extra-linguistic or gestural in some way, but sign language humour certainly uses this as a major source. Increased size of facial expression through exaggeration may be kindly, but it may also be mocking, and caricaturing the facial expression of out-group members (especially hearing people) is a well-recognised humorous practice (e.g. Bienvenu 1992).

Another humorous use of facial expression is to poke fun at hearing people who sign with blank faces. Keith Wann (n.d.#1), an American CODA (where this acronym means Child Of Deaf Adults, a term that has an equivalent in Britain of Hearing, Mother Father Deaf), does the comedy routine "Watching Two Worlds Collide - Wrong Sign Language Song" in which he describes a back-to-school night when he was in elementary school. His teacher was so excited to learn that his parents were Deaf that she had him teach the students a song in ASL, so that they could sign to his parents and welcome them to the classroom. When Wann plays the role of the boys, in particular, his face is utterly dead, which is hilarious because of the audience recognition of the incongruity of a signed song with no facial expression, and the resolution of this apparent incongruity through the shared cultural observation that hearing people's faces lack expression.

Lack of facial expression is deliberately used in Deaf signing games in which whole utterances are signed without any facial expression at all and other players need to determine the meaning of the utterance. There is skill in producing the unnatural utterance and skill in divining the meaning, but the humour comes from more than this display of wit because the very attempt to sign without any facial expression is so deviant that it is funny.

#### 4.3 Size of the sign

Just as exaggerated (or minimal) facial expression can be altered for comic effect, so enlarging or reducing the space for a sign can be used in humour. The signing space is usually understood as a square in a vertical plane facing the signer. The top edge is at the level of the eyes; the bottom edge is at the

level of the waist or slightly below. Most signs are made within this space. When signs normally made within the signing space are articulated so large as to go outside it, this can be tantamount to yelling. An ASL joke uses this fact:

**Joke 18:**

A Deaf couple have an argument. The woman gets heated up and her hands move beyond the signing space. The husband signs, "NOT NEED YELL. I DEAF NOT BLIND."

Other examples of changing the size have to do with exaggeration. Such examples are numerous, so we'll give only a characterisation of the whole type. Ben Bahan, a Deaf American storyteller, linguist, professor, and publisher, gave a presentation at Swarthmore College in 2000 in which he described some ASL storytelling techniques. He talked about modifying the size of a sign and he used the ASL sign LONG as an example. Signers will frequently extend the size of a sign referring to the length of something in order to show that it was not just long, but very long. This might have a parallel in drawing out the vowel sound in the English word "long" to represent a very long time or a very long list. However, Bahan showed how this normal linguistic process can be used in humorous ASL through exaggeration. In the normal sign a 1-handshape of the dominant hand traces a line up the back of the non-dominant hand, oriented down. The dominant hand moves from close to the tip of the middle finger of the non-dominant hand to past the wrist. To exaggerate this sign, one could continue the movement all the way up the forearm to the elbow. To really, really exaggerate it, one could continue the movement all the way up the arm to the shoulder, across the collarbone and out past the shoulder of the dominant arm into space behind the signer. When Bahan made that final sign, the entire audience laughed. The joke here is not just that the exaggeration is itself so exaggerated, but that actually making this sign is a bit of an athletic event. As such, it goes far beyond language *per se*, and this fact contributes strongly to the humour.

Indeed, changing the size of a sign for humorous effect is such a common technique in ASL comedy skits and storytelling events that workshops teach people how to do it<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Deaf storyteller, Joe4Ward, has given such workshops in the USA.

#### 4.4 Dynamics (speed, energy)

Changing speed and energy of signs is widespread in many genres of creative signed language, including humour and poetry (and, consequently, in humorous sign language poetry). Common devices include the use of slow motion signing, especially as homage to cinematographic techniques where actions can be portrayed in slow motion to increase dramatic tension (Bauman 2006). Manny Hernandez's piece "Times Squared" (2006), while exploring a range of changing scales of size in signed language, also demonstrates the effectiveness of slow-motion and extreme-fast-forward signing. Although the performance is not explicitly humorous, the wit behind it shows the potential for humour, in the right context. One humorous example may be seen in the ASL video clip on the Internet "An idiot boy and a motorbike." Here Jon Thompson (n.d.) speeds up and slows down movements to great comic effect.

Where movement of articulators represents movement of objects via classifier constructions or role-shift, the speed of movement of articulators directly represents speed of movement of the referent. In contrast, where the movement parameter is phonological, speed of movement of the articulator does not indicate anything about the speed of any part of the sense of the sign itself, but, instead, is either just part of quick signing or indicates intensity. So, for example, when describing someone getting into a bath that is too hot, the speed of movement of a hand representing a foot dipped into water (that is, where the hand is a body part entity classifier) directly shows the speed of dipping and removing the foot from the water. But speed of movement of the hand that articulates the frozen lexical or vocabulary items such as HOT does not indicate anything about speed but only about intensity (the water is very hot). And speed of movement in articulating WATER would again not indicate anything about speed (the water in the tub isn't moving), but it would also not indicate anything about intensity – instead being only a result of the fact that the overall signing is fast. In both of these other cases, the speed, then, is phonological, so these would not be examples of the use of speed we're discussing here.

There is always humour in encouraging people to produce language at a different speed. The fun of encouraging people to speak as quickly as possible lies in the language output, often in hearing them stumble on a tongue-twister (and frequently obliging them to accidentally say something taboo) rather than in watching the speech articulators moving. Party games that encourage signers to sign a message as rapidly as possible provide their entertainment by showing language skill and physical dexterity as the audience can see the moving articulators clearly. Manipulating the large articulators of hands and arms at high speed is a very different challenge from making the smaller motor movements of the speech apparatus at high speed. Radner and Carmel (1981) refer to finger fumbling as an analogue of tongue twisters. An example with ASL fingerspelling is the English sentence *If it is up to be, it is up to me* (The Eskimo n.d.).

Fumbling can also be with full signs (not just letters). An extended ASL example which repeatedly uses the Y-handshape is on the Internet (Schmidt 2007). A short example with ASL signs offered by Susan Fischer (1991) is GOOD BLOOD BAD BLOOD. GOOD is a one-handed sign made with the B-handshape moving out and down from the mouth, palm oriented toward the signer. BAD is also a one-handed sign made with the same handshape and the same movement, but the orientation changes from toward the signer to toward the ground as the hand moves out and down. BLOOD consists of the dominant hand touching the lip with tip of the finger of a 1-handshape (which is the sign RED) followed by a 5-handshape which moves downward from in front of the face to in front of the belly, palm always oriented toward the signer and fingertips pointing across the body. Meanwhile, the non-dominant hand stays steady in front of the torso in a B-handshape oriented toward the signer with the fingers pointing across the body. The dominant hand passes by the backside of the non-dominant hand. Sandwiching BLOOD between GOOD and BAD means alternating orientations and spreading of the fingers – and even relatively slowly this particular phrase is hard to articulate quickly. Finger fumbles occur as errors in BSL, creating “slips of the hand” (which can of themselves be matters for laughter) but we have not found any examples yet of specific games in which BSL phrases or fingerspelled words are issued as a finger-fumbling challenge.

Trying to create slow motion signing can also be entertaining, especially as this means not only the slow movement of the hands, but also slow movement of the eyes and body. This is surprisingly hard for signers to do under normal circumstances, and there is considerable fun to be had trying to achieve it. Slow movement of signs can show intensification in signed verb morphology as well as affect such as being depressed, tired, peaceful or contented. It is well recognised in sign language poetry that slow motion signs can make a message more powerful and have a greater impact, and sometimes this impact can be humorous. Judith Jackson's haiku poem about a snail climbing Mt Fuji mentioned earlier uses slow motion to capture the size of the mountain in relation to the snail's size, speed and task. There is already a certain humour that comes from the exaggeration in the idea of using slow motion to depict the already slow movement of a snail.

However, paradoxically, slow motion signing can also be used to show very rapid events, as is common in film and cinema. This means there is already an absurdity inherent in any slow-motion signing used in humour to describe an event at speed. Part of the humour comes from this absurdity and part comes from an appreciation of the skill of the signer to mimic the output of this unusual form of film. It requires signers to highlight the events that we might not otherwise notice, giving us a new perspective (a function of humour, as we have already seen). Slowing the production of non-manual features draws attention to them, and intensifies every part of the message, leading easily to exaggeration and almost as easily to caricature. And this is funny.

#### 4.5 Facing the audience

It has frequently been observed that the default direction of eye gaze for signers involved in a conversation is to look at each other's faces. However, in role-shift, where a signer plays a character's role, the signer can look wherever the character should be looking (see, for a commentary on the use of gaze in signed languages, Engberg-Pedersen, 1990).

In the ASL video clip "An idiot boy and a motorbike," Jon Thompson (n.d.) at one point actually turns in a circle, violating a linguistic rule that is so fundamental, he brings us outside of language with this simple act, moving us into some other realm. The effect of this outrageous violation of the norm of language rules is enormously funny. Keith Wann (n.d.#2) does the same in an eponymous video clip from a performance at Gallaudet University. He signs a song and turns around repeatedly. Every time he turns, the audience can be heard laughing. At one point he turns several times in a row and the audience laughs and claps.

#### 4.6 Personification and anthropomorphism

We have mentioned these tropes<sup>2</sup> many times in passing so far. Here we will address them in detail because they have a central part in sign language humour. Personification is an important part of humour in both spoken and signed languages (and see for examples, among many others, Bouvet 1997 on French Sign Language, Ogawa 1999 on Japanese Sign Language, Russo 2000 and Pietrandrea 2002 on Italian Sign Language, and Emmorey 2002 on general issues in sign metaphor using ASL) but here we will focus upon signers. Within these tropes, the audience is asked to suspend the understanding that non-human objects are not human. Following this acceptance of the absurd, signers can use their wit and imagination to show how these objects might think, behave, feel and communicate like humans.

The process of accepting that non-human objects can be understood in human terms starts at an early age, and is often seen in children's stories and cartoon films where it is readily accepted that animals and inanimate objects such as cars can feel, think and talk. It is also very common in folklore, myths and legends such as *Aesop's Fables*, the Coyote and Brer Rabbit stories from North America, and Spider stories from Africa. The belief is also prevalent in everyday language so that animals, cars or computers are understood using human attributes in such a natural way that we barely notice it. Advertising makes extensive use of it, as do literature and poetry where novel, original and highly creative metaphors are seen.

The natural human tendency to impute our own emotions and motives to non-humans as a way of attempting to understand them leads to very widespread anthropomorphism. Personification of objects induces us to

<sup>2</sup> A trope is a rhetorical figure of speech that consists of a play on words, using a word in a way other than what is considered its literal or normal form.

empathise with them. It allows us to explore new ways of expressing and understanding our behaviour and emotions and also to explore new ways of expressing and understanding the behaviour and emotions of other objects. It further removes responsibility for the utterance from the speaker. If the speaker puts words into the mouth or hands of another creature, the ownership of the utterance is at some level in doubt. Additionally, imputing human behaviour and emotions in non-humans allows us to ask, "What if...?" We saw earlier that humour is frequently used for all these purposes, so we should expect anthropomorphism to be a significant feature of humour. Another very important function of personification and anthropomorphism, however, is to entertain. In the hands of a smooth signer and entertainer, it can be very funny.

In personification, like in the creation of any successful metaphor, the signer needs to extract features or characteristics of the object and then extrapolate away from the obvious but remain logical. In Richard Carter's humorous BSL story of the "Snow Globe" (described in more detail below), Father Christmas's reindeer can sign using his antlers. Carter selects the antlers from the characteristics of the reindeer and highlights the common understanding that antlers have a similar outline to hands. Extrapolating from this, he asks us to accept the less obvious but logical possibility that the reindeer can use them to sign – and does. We see an even more outlandish case (also described in more detail below) in Guy Bouchauveau's story concerning the talking wings of a biplane. Again, the logic is strong. The wings can talk because the sign used to show the wings uses the hands and forearms already in the location that could be used to sign. Given that, they talk about precisely what wings should talk about: the direction they're going to fly.

In the personification used in sign language humour exemplified below, crucially, the signer gives a non-human thing a Deaf human form, Deaf human characteristics, or Deaf human behaviour. Sometimes the deafness of the non-humans is explicitly remarked upon; other times it's clear from their actions, including things like putting on hearing aids, checking text phones, or simply signing. Clearly, this will serve to increase the feeling of intimacy within the members of the in-group as they recognise elements of their own culture and behaviour in the personification. The specifically Deaf attributes include how the non-humans behave, what their emotions are, how they perceive the world and how they communicate. In all cases, the idea is that they may well do it as a Deaf human does it.

Objects for personification include animals (such as cats, birds, reindeer), inanimate objects (such as flowers, cars and computers, and the trees, biplane and lift already mentioned) and abstract concepts (such as time, senses or opinions). The personification process starts with the wit needed to select and extrapolate from the feature or characteristic of the object. Linguistically, this conceptual approach to personification is realised using frozen signs, productive signs (e.g. body-part classifiers), and constructed action (or role-shift). As part of this constructed action, the signer in some

way becomes the object, by adopting the facial expression, eye aperture and gaze, body posture and signing style of the object. This is made possible because of the signer's ability to make a metaphorical mapping between the body-parts of the non-human object and the signer's own body parts. This can happen in two directions: the physical parts of the non-human object can be mapped onto the human body, or human body parts can be mapped onto depictions of non-humans.

In descriptions of animals, the head and body can be used to refer to the animal's head, face and body through a direct one-to-one mapping. Arms and legs of the animal are mapped onto the signer's arms. Other body parts not shared by humans and animals (such as a beak, horns or a tail) can be shown through the handshapes of body-part classifiers placed on the signer's body in the equivalent location on the animal's body (the beak at the mouth, the horns on the head and so on). The mapping is more complex with objects that have fewer physical features directly comparable to those in humans. For trees, there is a simple mapping via shape from the tree trunk to the human trunk and from branches and twigs to human arms and fingers. For cars, headlights can be mapped onto the eyes and the wheels to the hands.

A similar mental mapping is found in spoken languages too. For example, Palmer (1996) describes how the language of the Western Apache of east-central Arizona extended the names of body parts of humans and animals to refer to the parts of cars. In their structural metaphor, the words for the car's bonnet/hood, headlights, front wheels and battery were those used for the nose, eyes, hands and arms and liver. Clearly in spoken languages only the words can be mapped through these structural metaphors. In signed language metaphors where anthropomorphism or personification are creatively employed, the body parts can be mapped directly.

Skilled sign wits know how to use this mapping of inanimate objects onto body parts. Beyond this, however, is a more conceptual mapping that goes the opposite direction: human body parts (such as faces and hands) can be allocated to objects such as computers and apples that have neither but are treated as having them to enable them to act in a specific way. In Ben Baham's "Ball Story", for example a wide smile is attributed to a ball by tracing a large smile across the signer's face, which is understood to be the ball's face.

Paul Scott's haiku poem "Spring" shows humorously the way that a tree sprouting new growth might experience feelings that in humans would be of pain and surprise. He does this entirely by using non-manual features, especially the movement of his body (understood to be the body of the tree) as he twitches and winces with each bursting bud, as we can see in Figure 4.



Figure 4: Facial expressions of Paul Scott's tree as it comes into bud

As with all humour in signed languages, personification through constructed action uses devices already present in the language. Constructed action may be used to show human characteristics of humans, animal characteristics of animals, and non-human characteristics of non-humans, as well as human characteristics of animals or non-humans. The anthropomorphisation in Ben Bahan's story "Bird of a Different Feather" is visually creative. In the opening section it combines human attributes (Father eagle sits reading the sports pages) with animal attributes (running birds' feet when Mother eagle comes running to tell him that the eaglets are hatching). Frequently, and importantly for the skilled use of the trope in sign languages, the human and non-human attributes may be shown simultaneously through both manual signs and non-manual features. For example, facial expressions may be human while manual signs indicate the non-human element. (It is usually this way around because the hands can be manipulated to represent non-human elements, but there is little a signer can do to alter the form of articulators on the face.)

In Paul Scott's (2005b) BSL version of the Aesop's Fable "The Hare and the Tortoise" the hands show the actions of the hare's paws or the tortoise's stubby legs, and the body moves to reflect the body movements of the two animals, but the facial expressions are anthropomorphised. Hares do not show confident or condescending facial expressions. Tortoises do not show determined or patient facial expressions. Yet these are the facial expressions used in conjunction with the signs, and it is these that add so substantially to the amusement in the story, as we can see in Figure 5.



Figure 5: Facial expressions of the arrogant hare and the determined tortoise

This next example of personification involves creativity at both the phonological and morphological level. It is described in Bouchauveau (1994:28) and it works equally well in ASL and BSL because in some way it moves beyond any particular sign language, carried as it is through the non-manual elements. He tells a funny story about a bulldog and a tall elegant dog, and his face and torso carry enormous humour through imitating the animals. To show the bulldog's jaw, he has the non-dominant hand form the I-1 with the palm facing up, while the dominant hand is an A above it. The hands are close together, so the two extended fingers of the non-dominant hand look like the dog's protruding bottom teeth. At the same time, Bouchauveau's mouth chews like a bulldog would (so again here we see the direct mapping of the bulldog's mouth onto the human mouth). The humour uses modification of the handshape parameter, since the created sign for the bulldog eating is very much like the established sign for CHEW-CUD (two A-handshapes, palm facing palm, with the top one rubbing in a circle on the bottom one). That his mouth chews at the same time means that his facial expression is offering a redundant morpheme to back up the one his hands are involved in. But the redundancy is only at the level of truth-functional semantics. The combination of facial expression and handshapes, in fact, makes us laugh because it's as though we can really see the bulldog – our eyes tend to impose the protruding bottom teeth from the hands onto his face, so that he becomes that bulldog. When he then presents the bulldog walking, his handshapes become body-part classifiers for the feet of the bulldog, but his shoulders curl forward in a tough-guy way, so that those feet are his and, once again, he is the bulldog manually, but through the non-manual elements he is both the bull-dog and the human tough-guy walking down the street.

Anthropomorphisation in Deaf humour is often closely linked to Deaf Identity. The signer asks how nonhumans, in a world where everything and everyone might be Deaf, would perceive the world. The answer is clearly: By sight and touch. How do these nonhumans communicate? By signing. How do these nonhumans behave? According to Deaf rules of behaviour. Much of the entertainment in Deaf humour comes from seeing how these are achieved. A well-known, widespread Deaf joke that takes many forms essentially describes a lumberjack felling several trees (see discussion in Carmel 2006).

### **Joke 19:**

Each time a tree is ready to fall, the lumberjack calls "Timber!" and the tree falls. One tree, however, does not fall, despite his calling "Timber!" several times. In the end he calls for a tree surgeon, who examines the tree and concludes that it is deaf. The forester contacts an interpreter who comes out to the forest. He shouts, "Timber!" and the interpreter fingerspells T-I-M-B-E-R, after which the tree obligingly falls to join the others.

How do nonhumans sign? Sometimes they sign just like humans in a straightforward personification (as in Paul Scott's "Hare and Tortoise" described earlier). However, their signs may be modified to accommodate the reality of their different articulating forms. The handshape may be different, as we will see later with the bird's wings in Richard Carter's "Bird on the Wire" and with Jerry Hanafin's rabbit character in his BSL version of "Little Red Riding Hood," in which the curled hands show a rabbit's paws signing. Proximity also may be different, as we will see in "Bird on the Wire" and also in June Smith's BSL piece "The Tree," where the tree is able to sign with accurate handshapes (the fingers usefully correlating with twigs through the mapping process of the physically similar forms) but the whole arm is outstretched to accommodate the reality of the tree's branches. The signing space, too, may be relocated (as we saw in the signing reindeer's antlers). Boucheaveau's signing biplane uses its wings (and perhaps its propellers) to sign, so that signs are constrained to the location of the chest.

#### **4.7 Back to role-shift**

The extensive use of comic role-shift in humour means that amusement can be had throughout the joke or story. In fact, in many examples of Deaf humour, the punchline is barely relevant and it is quite acceptable for a story to just peter out without reaching any sort of clear climax or obvious termination. However in jokes that do have a punchline, the final line often involves a clear use of role-shift characterisation. Smith and Sutton-Spence (2007) found several examples of these in BSL jokes (both translated from English and original BSL jokes). At the end of the joke mentioned earlier about a man who ran over a cat and killed it (and it is a funny joke, despite the topic) there is a final sign that requires the teller to role-shift and take on the character and appearance of a dead cat, as we see in Figure 6 (a). The final line of the joke about the Deaf gundog described above relies upon the signer role-shifting into a signing dog, as we see in Figure 6 (b). In both cases there is considerable humour in the absurdity of a human portraying these animal characteristics but the role-shift is crucial, because it:

... serves to deepen the impact of a joke through its speed and complexity, it is an economic and effective way of communicating emotion, relationship and action at

the same time, and conveying an immediacy and presence in the performance that draws an audience in (Smith and Sutton-Spence, 2007:63).



(a) The dead cat (b) The signing dog

Figure 6: role shift at the punch-line of a joke

The tale of the giant who accidentally kills the human girl he loves also has its final line delivered through role-shift. The translated English text of the joke presented here barely makes any sense at all and is not remotely funny because the joke turns on the reanalysis of the BSL or ASL signs MARRY (as we will discuss shortly) but we give it now.

### **Joke 20:**

A giant was taking a walk and he saw a town. He liked people, so he headed for it. The people in the town saw him coming, so they ran away. But one woman fell. The giant caught her and put her in his palm. He told her she was beautiful. And he loved her. And he wanted to marry her. So he dropped her.

Although the joke works through the analysis of the last manual sign in the joke MARRY, that sign is the penultimate element of the joke. The change in non-manuals through role-shift showing the surprise and sadness of the giant after he has dropped the woman is perhaps the cherry on the icing of the cake. It makes the joke. (See Figure 24 for illustration of this joke and the giant's expression of regret.)



## 5. Playing with the internal structure of sign

There is no doubt that a great deal of signed humour comes from using non-manual elements and other suprasegmentals such as speed and size of movement together with carefully chosen highly visual original classifier signs. However, in addition to these, reanalysis and modification of the internal structure of signs can be valued sources of signed humour.

### 5.1. Phonology

In section 3 we briefly considered the way that the internal structure of signs could contribute to signed humour. Here we will consider this in greater depth. We organise the humorous mechanisms in this chapter subsection as falling into three major types. One involves modification of the distinctive parameters somehow, one plays with the suprasegmentals, and one plays with some larger canon (in a way we will demonstrate).

A crucial fact for understanding many jokes is that one can modify a parameter of a sign to indicate a change in meaning in a variety of ways. The very fact that signed languages can do this may surprise some readers. In spoken languages, the internal structural features of a word do not commonly have any semantic content (although morphology does make use of distinctive features in special instances, according to Spencer, 1991). That is, when we hear *shoe*, nothing about its internal phonological structure signals the word's meaning. The arbitrary nature of the phonology-semantics (sound-meaning) line within the lexicon is, in fact, the foundation stone for historical linguistics (Saussure 1916); if two languages have many similar phonology-semantics lexical pairings (that is, cognates) scattered across the lexicon, we take that as strong evidence that they are genetically related. In the past two decades, however, much attention has been given to those instances in which the relationship between phonology and semantics within the lexicon seems less than arbitrary in spoken languages, cases of iconicity, known in the parlance of literary critics as onomatopoeia. Indeed, there was an international conference in Rome in 1991 on "Iconicity in Language," with an eponymous volume of the proceedings following (Simone 1995). Since then a number of conferences on the topic have taken place and there is even a journal by that name. Nevertheless, that there should even exist non-arbitrary phonology-semantic mappings within the lexicon in spoken language is still considered controversial by some and remarkable by many.

This is not necessarily so in signed languages. Understanding the internal structure of signs is essential for our appreciation of sign language humour. Clearly, some signs in sign languages exhibit arbitrary relationships between their shape and meaning, while other signs show non-arbitrary relationships between shape and meaning. There is a continuum of transparency in signs, with some signs being strongly visually motivated and highly transparent and

others being arbitrary and highly opaque, while most signs are somewhere between the two ends of the continuum. Additionally, signs can form families around a particular PoA or handshape or other parameter (Frishberg & Gough 1973, 2000). For example, there is a general tendency in ASL for signs made on or below the nose to have a nasty connotation (for example the signs UGLY and PISS-OFF), just as in BSL there is a strong correlation between the I-handshape and a negative meaning, so signs with this handshape may be expected to mean something bad (for example ILL, WRONG and FAIL all use this handshape). In neither language, however, is this effect neatly predictable. A much stronger effect is realised in ASL by nuclear families, which are a cluster of parameters known as an ion-morph (Fernald and Napoli 2000). Thus, from knowing the signs for MOTHER and FATHER in ASL and realising they are identical except for the parameter of PoA, seeing the sign for DAUGHTER or SISTER allows a correct guess at the signs for SON or BROTHER.

With the potential semantic significance of sign parameters in mind, then, we can begin our discussion of jokes that play with the internal structure of signs, of which the first set, in the first part of section 5, involve modification of one or more parameters. Importantly, the humorous signs in this section are possible, but not actual, signs. The substitutions made might use elements from other signs related in form and meaning, but they are also often highly visual, so that a parameter that has appeared to be strictly arbitrary and fundamentally meaningless is suddenly reanalysed as iconic and visually meaningful.

Not all parameters within a sign are equal: there are certain characteristics that some have and others lack, or that all have but to varying degrees. Here, we discuss four such characteristics that have relevance to the creative play that takes place in jokes with respect to the parameters of PoA, handshape, movement, and orientation.

First, we note that the parameters of movement and PoA exert a stronger influence on the retrieval of signs during language perception or production than do the parameters of handshape or orientation (Corina and Hildebrandt 2002; Dye and Shih forthcoming). In this sense, then, we might think of these two parameters as being extra important for memory; that is, they are memorable in the sense defined here.

Second, we note that signs can be one-handed or two-handed. And two-handed signs gather into two major groups: ones that use the non-dominant hand as an immobile base and ones in which the hands both move and are symmetrical to one another (in a variety of ways), with or without inversion of the movement (Napoli and Wu 2003). Often, however, two-handed signs must be made with a single hand (the other hand being occupied, for example, with groceries or driving or holding the baby). In these instances for the signs in which the non-dominant hand serves as an immobile base, some other object can substitute as the base, instead (perhaps the side of the

grocery bag or the steering wheel or the baby's shoulder), or perhaps the sign is made in the air with just an imaginary base. The same kind of substitution can happen for one-handed signs that use some part of the body as an immobile base. For example, to make the sign for MOTHER in ASL, we tap the thumb of a 5-handshape against the side of the chin. But if we have a wound on the chin, we might tap the air beside the chin. What all this means is that signers are used to both producing and perceiving quite a variety of PoAs for a given sign. In fact, one way of whispering in ASL is to make the signs in a small space off to the side so that only the intended audience can see them – and this would be patently impossible without giving up the ordinary PoA's for the signs. When a deaf child sits on someone's lap to read a book, the adult will most likely sign the story in the signing space in front of the child and then use the child's body for the PoA whenever needed.

Schembri, Johnston and Goswell (2006) found evidence of phonological variation in PoA for a range of signs in Auslan (Australian Sign Language), determined by social factors. The citation PoA in Auslan for a sign such as NAME is the forehead but the same sign could be articulated at the eye, cheek, jaw or even lower down in neutral space. While all the parameters can vary somewhat in Auslan (depending on non-linguistic factors such as level of tiredness or arthritis, and sociolinguistic factors such as level of formality) and these parameters can often be changed in spreading or assimilation rules, only PoA is a flexible parameter in the particular sense described here.

Third, we note that the parameters are not all entirely independent of one another. Orientation, in particular, is dependent on physiology and on the correlation between movement and PoA (Torres and Zipser 2004). If we change PoA and/or movement, the chances are high that orientation will accordingly change (Brentari 1998). But PoA and movement are also limited somewhat by the other phonological parameters of a sign. For example, the movement path that traces the angled path of a figure "7" (as in PHILADELPHIA, ROCHESTER, CHICAGO, and many other city names in ASL) requires a relatively extensive PoA; it couldn't be done on the chin or the forehead or any other small area. Indeed, one variant of the ASL sign RUSSIAN moves a 1-handshape across the chin from one side to the other and then the hand is thrown downwards, so that overall it has travelled a "7 path", but it must leave the chin to do that. Likewise, the ASL sign that indicates a sigh of relief moves the 5-handshape across the forehead and then throws it down, again leaving the forehead.

Handshape, however, appears to be independent of the other parameters; there is no handshape that is incompatible with any PoA or movement (Liddell and Johnson 1989).

In fact, the independence of handshape may be responsible for the fact that handshape is the one parameter that can be detached from the others and imbued with extra meaning. The very existence of classifier signs depends on handshape having such a morphological capability, for classifiers carry

meaning solely on the basis of the handshape. For example, if we take the 3-handshape, which is the classifier for vehicles in ASL, we can move it forward or backward to indicate a car going forward or backward; we can make the 3-handshape in the horizontal plane parallel to the floor to show that a bike has fallen over; we can move the 3-handshape up and forward and then down, to show a motorcycle going off a ramp (see Ben Bahan's 2006b "Ball Story" for a beautiful and very entertaining exploration of ways in which classifier signs can move). The movement, PoA, and orientation can all vary widely – but so long as the handshape remains, the sense is stable.

Notice that the substitution of one handshape for another among signers whose motor abilities are either not fully developed or somehow constrained is in no way problematic for the independence of handshape, since such substitution is not meaning-based. In the signing of young children, the handshape parameter of lexical items is the one most frequently substituted for. Complex handshapes are beyond the motor control of small children, who are more likely to use unmarked, more simply articulated handshapes, while frequently retaining the adult PoA, movement, and orientation for the sign. Thus, for example, a child might sign RABBIT in BSL in a simpler way, substituting a 5-handshape for the more complex H-handshape used by adults, but all other phonological parameters are retained (Cheek, Cormier, Repp, and Meier 2001).

Finally, we find that orientation is the only phonological parameter that is not typically used in rhyming (Valli 1995a), nor is it used as a manipulable unit in language games, in contrast to the other three parameters (Bienvenu and Colonemos 1987). Handshape, on the other hand, is consistently important in rhyme and language games (Blondel and Miller 1998; Valli 1995b; Smith and Sutton-Spence 2007). In this sense, we can think of orientation as being infertile, while the other parameters are fertile. Considering the four characteristics of memorability, flexibility, independence and fertility, we have the following table:

	Memorable	Flexible	Independent	Fertile
PoA	+	+	-	+
Movement	+	-	-	-
Handshape	-	-	+	+
Orientation	-	-	-	-

Table 1: Phonological Characteristics of Sign parameters for Humour

So PoA is a special parameter: it is memorable, flexible, and fertile. We might predict, then, that it would be the most susceptible to being modified in a joke, in that we will certainly notice the change of PoA (because it is 54

memorable) and we'll feel free to produce such modification and be alert to perceive such modifications (because of its flexibility), plus we'll be attuned to the idea that PoA can be used playfully (because of its fertility).

Handshape is both independent and fertile. Again, we might predict that jokes would play with handshape quite freely, and not just by modifying the handshape. The fact that handshape is independent allows for the potential to do many things, such as liberate, so to speak, a handshape from the other parameters of a given sign and move it through space (as though it were a classifier).

Movement, being memorable, also offers potential for creative play in jokes, although, if we are to judge by just the four characteristics we've discussed here, it offers less potential than handshape or PoA. However, movement also is the most sonorant (that is, it is in some way the most noticeable or "loudest") of the parameters (Perlmutter 1992; Brentari 1998; building on Liddell and Johnson 1989), which correlates to the fact that it is a prosodic (that is, having to do with rhythm) parameter, whereas the others are inherent to the sign's essential form (Brentari 1998). Since prosody is so often used in language play in spoken language, we might expect it also to be exploited in sign language play.

Orientation, instead, is not memorable, not flexible, not independent, and not fertile. We might predict then that jokes would rarely exploit orientation. Indeed, exploitation of orientation in a joke might result in such subtlety that many would miss the joke entirely.

Now we turn to our examples.

## 5.2 Modifying the parameters

We give here examples of humour created through modifying the parameters that make up the internal structure of signs. We'll start with the two parameters we expect, given Table 1, to offer the most purchase – handshape and PoA. Then we turn to the others, ending with examples of humour which depend on modifying more than one parameter at once.

### 5.2.1 Handshape

Modification of a parameter can result in the creation of a new sign whose meaning is that of the original changed in a way appropriate (in a sense to be demonstrated below) to the particular parameter modification. One such example is given in Klima and Bellugi (1979). In ASL the sign UNDERSTAND locates the closed fist handshape by the ipsilateral cheek (or temple), palm facing rear. The closed fist then changes to a 1-handshape with a flick of the index finger. To indicate UNDERSTAND-A-LITTLE, the signer can do the same, but flick the pinkie instead<sup>55</sup> so that the handshape change is to an I.

Here we have the idea that a pinkie is smaller than an index finger – so we are using physical size to indicate degree of understanding as we can see in Figure 7.

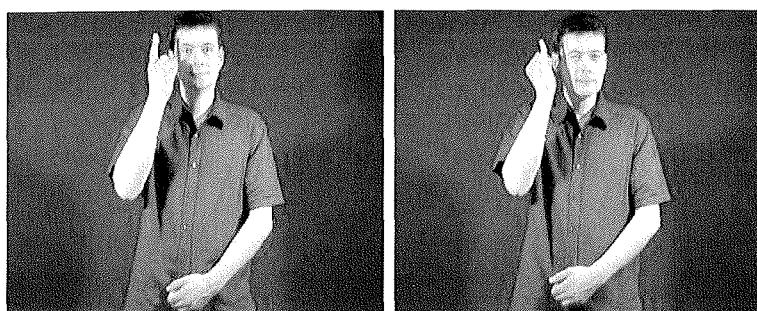
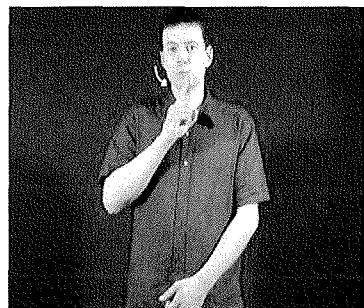


Figure 7: UNDERSTAND and UNDERSTAND-A-LITTLE

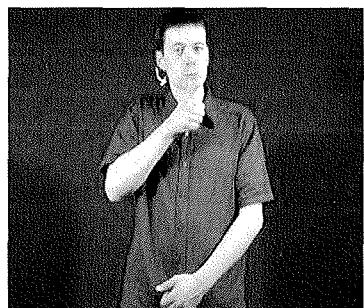
The substitution of handshape in humorous BSL is also widespread. We remarked earlier that in some cases the handshape carries semantic meaning. For example, in BSL, the Å-handshape (A-handshape with an extended thumb) is strongly related to things that are good. Lexical signs such as GOOD, HEALTHY, PROUD, RIGHT, BEST and KIND use this handshape. Conversely, the I-handshape is strongly related to things that are bad. Lexical signs such as BAD, ILL, BITTER, SWEAR (meaning to curse or use foul language), FAIL, WRONG and WEAK are all made with the I-handshape. This gives signers the opportunity to comment humorously on the perceived qualities of a referent.

There is a range of signs in BSL used to indicate a hearing person, and in most of them the dominant hand moves from the ear to the mouth. The sign most commonly used today has the 1-handshape but 20 years ago the handshape was commonly Å. (Note that we distinguish between the 1-handshape and the G-handshape, where we use the latter term only if the thumb must be parallel to the index finger.) This older sign might be interpreted as carrying some positive meaning, and yet it is used for a group of people who could be seen as out-group and potentially opposed to the group identity of community members. During the tutor course for a Certificate in British Sign Language at Durham University, Deaf students, increasingly aware of the structure of their language, jokingly suggested alternative signs. As a way to generate intimacy with other in-group members, the students suggested a sign made with the I-handshape. The cultural knowledge and affective impact of using the pejorative handshape to refer to out-group members towards whom some in-group members may feel ambivalent at best makes this an importantly humorous sign. (The British comedian, John Smith, makes much of this play on handshapes in his comedy show, so that many people refer to him and his show using the sign HEARING-PERSON made with the I-handshape.) The Durham University students also proposed that the sign DEAF, rather than the sign HEARING, should be made with the Å-handshape, in order to support the in-group

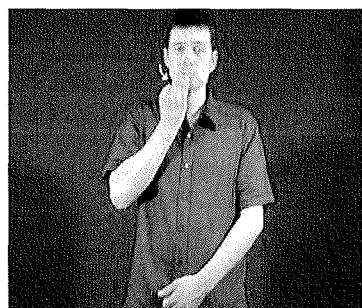
members, but this never caught on as a sign, even humorously. Nevertheless, out of this humour came the drive to use a more neutral 1-handshape for the sign HEARING-PERSON. This sign spread so rapidly and extensively that few people who have learned BSL in the last fifteen years are even aware of the older sign. (We note, by the way, that this sign, with the 1-handshape, is DEAF in ASL. This particular pairing of meanings is not accidental. The sign deictically indicates a relationship of ear to mouth, but BSL uses that relationship to indicate use of the mouth and ear and ASL uses it to indicate lack of such use.). These signs are illustrated in Figure 8:



Standard BSL sign HEARING-PERSON



“GOOD”-HEARING-PERSON



“BAD”-HEARING-PERSON

Figure 8: BSL signs HEARING-PERSON with different handshapes showing signer's attitude to hearing people

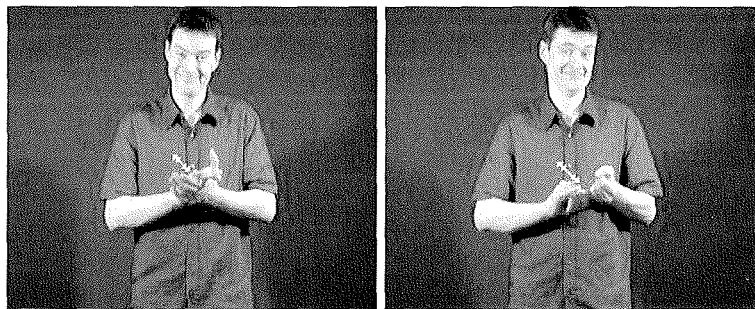
A similar handshape-substitution game is played with the sign INTERPRETER, which in BSL is made with a V-handshape. Substituting this handshape for an I-handshape, while maintaining the other parameters creates the sign that means a bad interpreter, and shows a value and affective judgement towards a group of people who have a complex relationship of power with the Deaf community (See Figure 9). This joke does not translate well into ASL where the I-handshape could be taken as an initialised sign meaning INTERPRETER. In fact, in Irish Sign Language this *is* the initialised sign meaning INTERPRETER even though ISL also attaches negative connotations to the I-handshape. Thus we can see that these language games are genuinely language specific.



Standard sign INTERPRETER “BAD”-INTERPRETER

Figure 9: BSL signs INTERPRETER with different handshapes showing the signer’s attitude to interpreters

In a third example, the two B-handshapes in the sign APPLAUD-BY-CLAPPING are altered to two I-handshapes to give the meaning of applauding something that is bad (and, so, the applause is not genuine). It also has an overlapping meaning, shared with ASL, signers, of “small applause” using the same metaphor seen in UNDERSTAND-A-LITTLE in which a handshape using the little finger means something less than something referred to by the larger B-handshape (Figure 10).



Standard sign APPLAUSE “SMALL”-APPLAUSE

Figure 10: Signs APPLAUSE showing signer’s attitude behind the applause

Sometimes just a part of a parameter can be significant semantically – and that significance can lead to language play. For example, in both ASL and BSL (and many other sign languages) the bent version of a V-handshape carries a negative connotation. Thus the V-handshape is used in the signs SEE and WATCH, but the bent-V is used in signs that have negative connotations including BLIND, NAG (in BSL) and SLUT (in ASL). The V handshape in ASL is also used in the signs for SPEECH-READING and COCHLEAR-IMPLANT. To show a negative attitude toward either of these, one need only use a bent-V. We note that for some signers, this particular play on these particular signs is not warmly humorous, but may be bitterly humorous or even offensive. In BSL these two signs are signed regularly with the bent-V handshape, and using the V handshape would be unusual. How overtly negatively British signers view these signs is a moot point, but the fact remains that the bent-V

handshape is used to refer to two ideas to which many signers feel considerable antagonism.

A different sort of handshape substitution is also seen in a BSL joke "Deaf bird on the wire" told by Richard Carter. There is a traditional Deaf riddle, widespread in many countries, that runs as follows:

**Joke 21:**

Q: "Ten birds are sitting on a wire. The farmer fires his gun to scare them off but only nine fly away. One remains. Why?"

A: "The tenth bird is Deaf".

Usually the riddle ends here, but Richard Carter's joke delights by continuing with a story.

**Joke 22:**

The farmer takes aim at the bird that would not fly away and the bird flaps his wings desperately, signing "NO, NO! I DEAF!"

The farmer lowers his gun in astonishment because he is Deaf, too, and he signs, "YOU DEAF?"

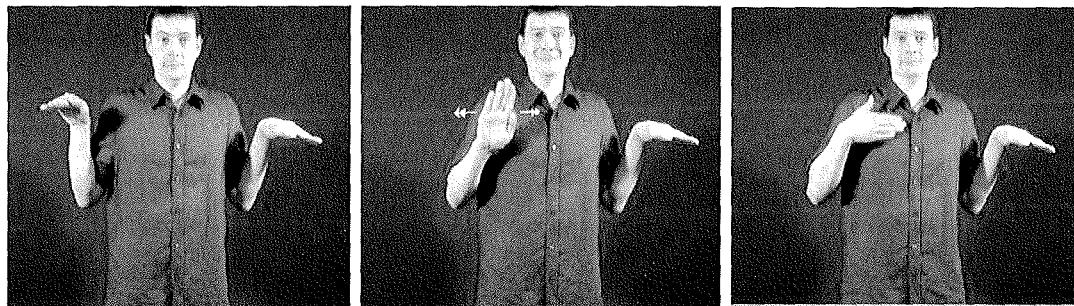
"YES," signs the bird "ALL OTHER BIRDS HEARING. BORING. FAMILY HEARING. ONLY DEAF ME. LONELY."

The Deaf farmer invites the bird into his home and they all live happily ever after in a Deaf signing environment.

As a conceptual joke, this has its charm and it appeals once more to the sense of intimacy of the Deaf audiences. Some of the humour lies in the unexpected realisation that not only is the bird Deaf but so is the farmer. (Lorraine Leeson has also pointed out the cultural significance of the development of the story. The little bird equates to a Deaf child, especially with its childlike signing; the farmer provides the Deaf adult role model for the child/bird; and the farmer's home is equivalent to the Deaf community where the child/bird has access to signs.) It also completely by-passes the sense of the absurd that a bird might be able to use language to communicate with the human. The crucial point for the amusement is the delight they both take in finding that they are both Deaf. However, none of this is especially linguistic. The BSL humour occurs in the way that the bird

signs. Clearly, conceptually, the bird will sign with its wings as analogues to hands, but the comedian alters both the movement and handshape of the signs. He constrains his joints so that most of the movement is proximalised to the shoulder joints. This has the additional effect of making the signs bigger (and recall that such exaggeration is a well-used humorous device, discussed earlier in section 4) and of making the bird seem younger (childlike regression is often seen as humorous) because larger signs are associated with small children, who proximalise their signs (Cheek, Cormier, Repp, and Meier 2001).

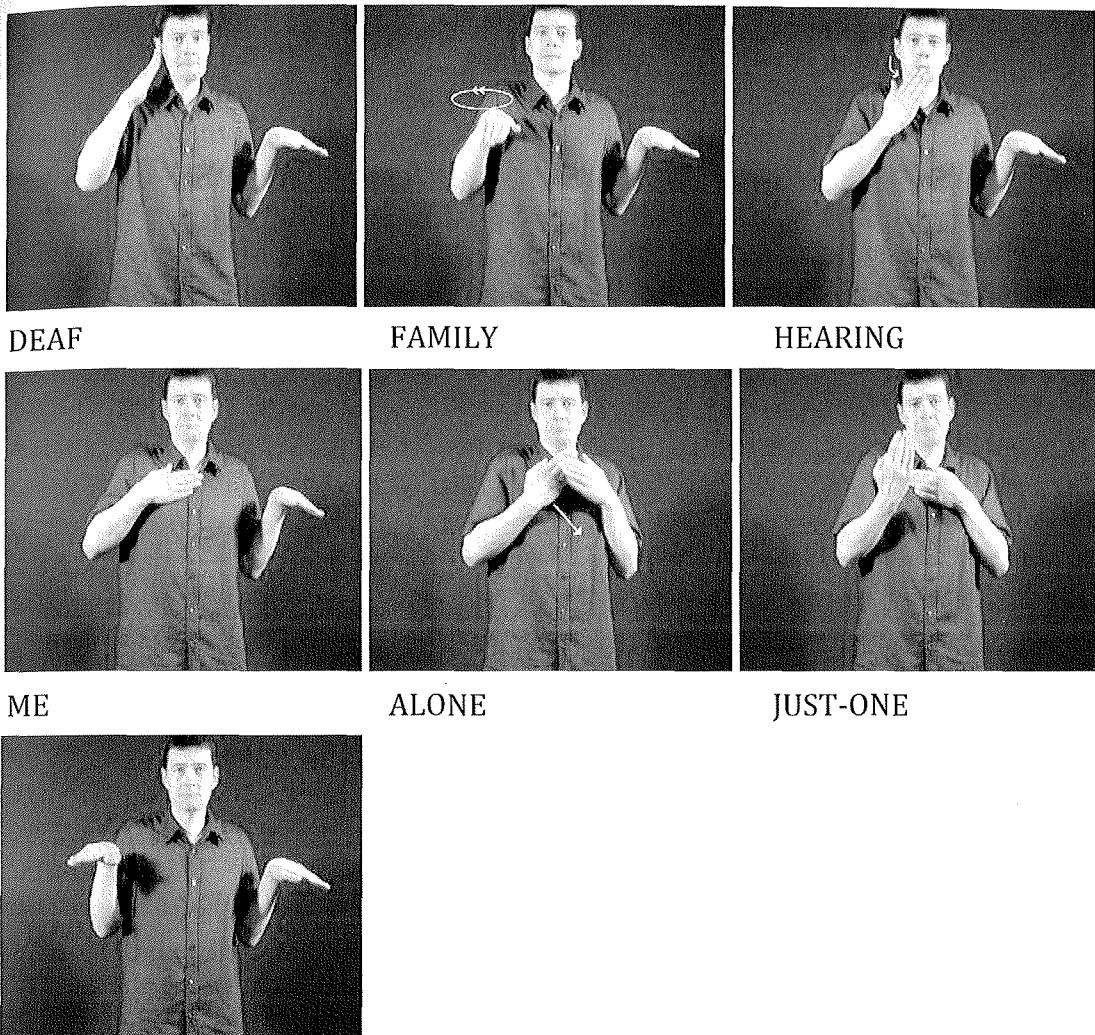
The most noticeable element of the humour, however, arises out of the handshape constraints; the signs are all made with the B-handshape, as would befit a bird's wings. The audience needs to appreciate that the handshape has changed and be able to resolve the meaning of the signs, despite the handshape change, as well as be entertained by the reason for the change. Additionally, recall our earlier point, that young children often substitute an unmarked handshape for a marked one. As the B-handshape is less marked than many other handshapes, its use here presents an endearingly young aspect of the little bird. In fact, the way the joke is built up allows the audience to realise only slowly how far the signer will push the conceit. That's because the comedian has carefully sequenced his signs; initially the humour appears to rely on merely constrained joints, since the first few signs do not call for a handshape change. "NO! I DEAF!" could be signed correctly in BSL using the B-handshape entirely because, the sign NO! uses the B-handshape and, although the sign DEAF is made in BSL with the H-handshape, it is common for British Deaf people to gesture to hearing people that they are deaf by tapping their ears with a B-handshape. At this stage, the change in articulating joint and the turn of events in the story make the signs humorous (as does the facial expression and body movement of the bird throughout the story). Only as the bird continues to sign does the full extent of the joke become clear, with the B-handshape imposed upon all subsequent signs, which would normally use a range of different handshapes. The story can be seen in Figure 11. Again, we can see the importance of facial expression in conjunction with the altered signs to create the humour.



[Bird stands]

NO!

ME



[Bird stands sadly]

Figure 11: Bird's signs with the B handshape

Single handshape games (producing sequences of signs with the same handshapes) are good party games and are also used to teach signers to become more aware of their signing production (Deaf and hearing, of any level of skill). In a game at the most basic level, a signer will sign a sentence using fists only, no matter what the handshape of the sign ought to be. The task for the other players is to guess the meaning of the sentence despite the imposition of the new handshape.

In other slightly more sophisticated sign games, often played as a language-learning exercise, signers are encouraged to think of signs that use the same handshape. Each person successively offers a sign of an agreed handshape until someone can't think of one or repeats one already used, and is out of the game. This encourages learners to become aware of the formation parameters of the language, while also having some fun. More fluent signers may be asked to create a story using only one handshape as part of a game or in workshops for Deaf people focusing on linguistics or poetry. In these

games, the selection of the specific handshape must be complemented with use of non-manual features for the humour to occur.

Hal has talked about the games with one handshape that he played with other children at school. In one game there was an imaginary box, from which one child took something of a certain shape, shown by the hands. The child whose turn it was manipulated it, changed the shape and then passed it on to the next person. For example, a child could make something long and thin and pass it on with the other parameters that made it a pencil. In the hands of the next child the other parameters were changed, while keeping the same handshape, so that the sign became a fairy wand. This was passed on to become a conductor's baton, and so on. Although Hal does not mention it explicitly in the interview, his explanation and examples makes it very clear that with every new sign the accompanying facial expression and body movement went a long way to creating the fun behind it. Writing with a pencil, or being a fairy or a conductor is only marginally entertaining but when an exaggerated or caricatured facial expression and body movement is added, the game takes on a new dimension of humour. Facial expression and body movement alone would, likewise, not suffice because they would not carry enough meaning. The two types of creativity need to work together as shown in Figure 12.

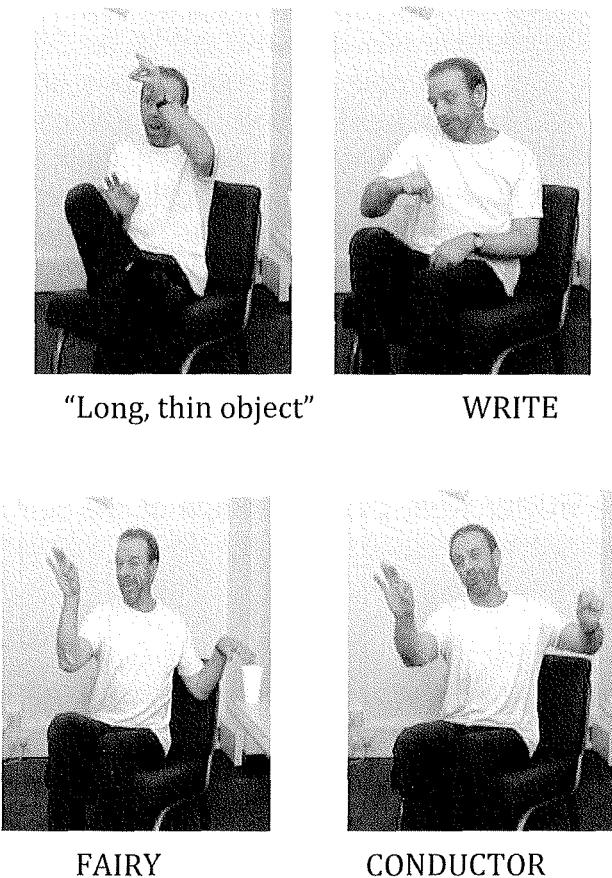


Figure 12: Hal's creative use of handshapes with facial expression

The BSL performer Judith Jackson has shown how single-handshape games played with fluent signers (for example, as part of poetry workshops) require significant non-manuals. If a sign that expresses the desired meaning has the "wrong" handshape for the game, that sign will not be used; instead, its meaning will be conveyed through use of eyes, facial expression, body-movement, and creative use of space. A sentence meaning *Tomorrow I will meet a girl I really like* can be signed entirely with the 1-handshape in BSL: TOMORROW I MEET GIRL (in BSL all these signs use this handshape). The idea that the person really likes this girl cannot be expressed manually because the BSL sign LIKE uses a B-handshape. Instead, the non-manuals of eyes, body and facial expression tell us all we need to know about the signer's intentions. This use of wit is amusing, and the increased used of non-manual elements also adds to the enjoyment.

The longer and more meaningful the story is, the greater the entertainment. Judith Jackson (at Bristol University, February 2006) performed a story 22 signs long using only the 1-handshape about the trip to the London landmark, the London Eye. Judith also gave another example (learned from another signer) of a story using the marked Irish T-handshape (a variant on the X-handshape, with the thumb tucked under the curved index finger). The whole story uses only three identifiable manual signs – READ-A-NEWSPAPER, HANG-ONTO-STRAP-ABOVE and ZIP-UP-FLIES. However, when eye aperture and gaze, facial expression and body movement are combined with strategic use of space, the story is fleshed out so that it tells of a person reading a paper on the train who notices that the person strap-hanging beside him (or her) has his fly open. At first, the straphanger is indignant at being looked at but then realises the problem and rapidly zips up in embarrassment (Figure 13).

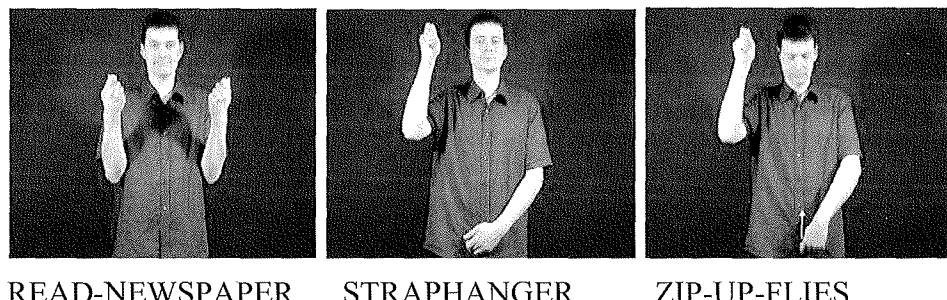


Figure 13: Signs from a story using the same handshape

This story was much funnier than the one about the trip to London (to judge easily by the reactions of her audience that day). This can probably be put down to three things. First, the more unusual the handshape is, the greater the challenge and the more intense the satisfaction and humour at achieving the task. The Irish T-handshape is much less common in BSL signs than the 1-handshape. Second, the non-manual elements are used far more, plus they are used with wit and creativity. These first two elements work together to produce the language performance elements of the humour. Third, challenges

to taboo mean there is something intrinsically funny about embarrassingly open flies.

### 5.2.2 PoA (Place of Articulation)

Just as we saw with handshapes above, modification of the PoA parameter can result in the creation of a new sign. General body locations in BSL and ASL are associated with different semantic groupings. For example, the head (especially the temple area) is associated with mental processes and states, the eyes with visual processes, and the chest area with emotional processes and states. Signers who are fully aware of these metaphorical iconic PoAs are able to modify these creatively to extend other metaphors, frequently humorously. The shared presuppositions of the signers allow all signers to enjoy the humour in the creativity in these signs.

Signs normally articulated at a particular location can be moved meaningfully to new places of articulation. The BSL sign SWITCH-OFF, as switching off a small knob may be signed at the throat to mean SWITCH-OFF-VOICE (something hearing learners of a signed language are encouraged to do to prevent interference from the spoken language). This sign is fairly widespread and no longer recognised as particularly witty. However, it can be applied in novel ways, at the temples to mean SWITCH-OFF-MIND (to stop worrying), at the ears to mean SWITCH-OFF-EARS (to stop listening) and even at the heart for SWITCH-OFF-HEART (to stop the pain of unrequited love). The BSL sign REST (to mean a pause or break) is signed with two 5 hands resting on the chest. If the two 5 hands are placed under the eyes, it means to REST-THE-EYES (because signers know that watching signs intently for a long time tires the eye-muscles) and if they are placed at the temples, the sign can mean to REST-THE-MIND/BRAIN (Figure 14). It is important to note that the facial expression here anthropomorphises the eyes and mind, metaphorically showing how the eyes feel when they are in need of the break, or how the brain enjoys the relief of a rest.



REST

REST-THE-EYES

REST-THE-MIND/BRAIN

Figure 14: Playful change in location of an established BSL sign to add new meaning

The BSL poet Paul Scott, describing poetry (at a performance of BSL poetry for the Essex Book Festival in March 2007), explained that poetry is like

chocolate. At first he signed CHOCOLATE, tapping the curved index finger X-handshape gently at the standard PoA, just below the chin. He went on to use productive signs to explain the pleasure of the sensation of chocolate melting in the mouth and trickling down the throat. In this case, a 5-handshape slowly and sensually brushed from the lips down the throat. Then, however, he suggested that spoken poetry might be chocolate to the ears of hearing people. In order to show this, he signed CHOCOLATE with all the standard parameters, except PoA, as it was located at the ear itself. The same sensual 5-handshape then spread out from the ear down the cheek. For Deaf people, signed poetry is chocolate for the eye. By this stage, the audience could expect – but still be delighted by – the final shift of PoA, so that CHOCOLATE was signed at the eye and the delicious “eye-taste” of the chocolate poetry spread with the 5-handshape down the face. In concept of metaphor alone, the episode was creative. However, the signs themselves were also creative, beautiful to watch, clever and funny.

In ASL the sign for HEARING-PERSON locates the 1-handshape in front of the mouth, pointing to the contralateral side, palm facing mid way between down and rear (toward the signer). One then draws little clockwise circles in the air with the entire hand, as though that 1 is rolling forward (although it doesn't move forward – it stays in one spot right in front of the lips). The ASL joke sign for DEAF-PERSON-WHO-THINKS-LIKE-A-HEARING-PERSON is the same sign located now in front of the forehead. The PoA change here can be seen as physiologically appropriate in that it indicates that thought takes place behind that forehead (and see Brennan 1990, and Wilcox 2000: 94-95). This particular change of PoA also capitalises on the forehead (although generally the side of it, not the centre of it) as the location for many predicates or nominals of cognition in both BSL and ASL (including THINK, WONDER, KNOW, DREAM, MAKE-UP and IDEA).

Another example of the same type involves the ASL sign WEAK. It is made with the dominant hand in a claw, sitting on the palm of the non-dominant hand in a B handshape. The claw then bends deeper at the knuckles, as though it is too weak to hold itself up. The same sign made with a change in PoA to the side of the forehead is a joke sign for WEAK-MINDED or HARE-BRAINED (Figure 15).

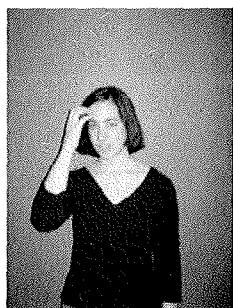
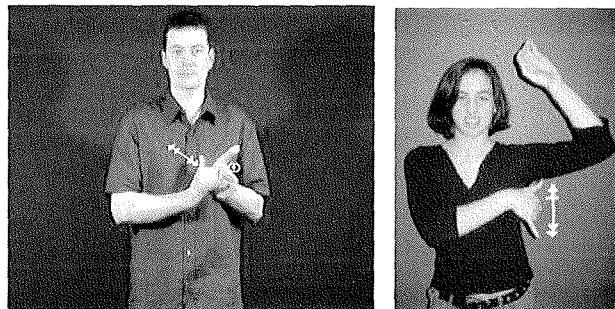


Figure 15: The ASL sign WEAK made at the temple to mean WEAK-MINDED

A third example that capitalises on meaningful PoA's involves the ASL sign LATER. LATER has a dominant hand in the L-handshape located in the centre of neutral space with the palm outward (so that the index finger points upward) and the thumb hitting the centre of the palm of the non-dominant hand in the B-handshape. The L then rotates 90 degrees clockwise, keeping the thumb touching the non-dominant palm, so that the index finger of the dominant hand points outward at the end of the sign. A joke sign for SEE-YOU-LATER moves the PoA of LATER to the corner of the eye, instead of the palm of the non-dominant hand. The PoA here plays off the fact that the eyes are the site of vision, as well as that many signs having to do with sight (SEE, LOOK, WATCH, BLIND) are located near the eyes (although typically in front of or below the eyes rather than to one side).

One can also change the PoA of a sign with no accompanying change of the meaning of the sign but the addition of a connotation. For example, in ASL and BSL the sign for New York City (NYC) is made with a Y-handshape rubbing from side to side on a B-handshape, palms facing each other. But if a person doesn't like NYC, the Y-handshape can move back and forth in the air in the same sort of rubbing motion in front of the armpit of the raised non-dominant arm (Figure 16). Here the appropriateness of the location change is again physiological; it plays off the idea that the armpit is a nasty, smelly place (as in the English expression *That's the pits*).



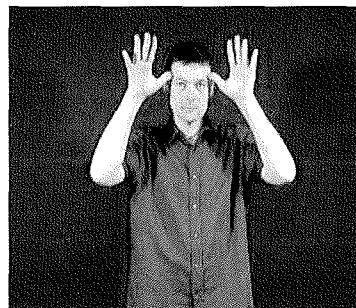
Standard sign NEW-YORK NEW-YORK (THE-PITS)

Figure 16: Location change to add connotational meaning

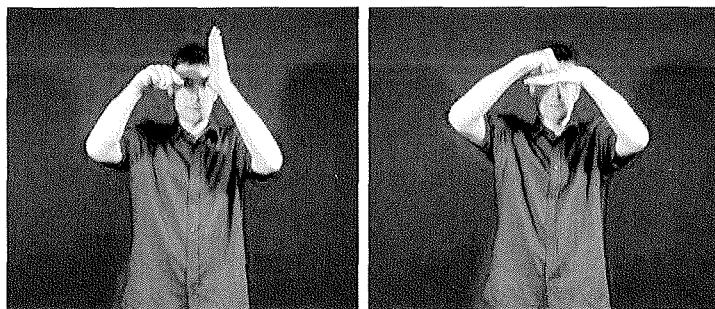
In a language game not dissimilar to the one played out with the bird on the wire, Richard Carter has delighted many audiences with his story in BSL of the little girl who gets sucked into the world of a Snow Globe, where she meets Father Christmas on Christmas Eve. Father Christmas is late leaving home and is upbraided by his long-suffering reindeer. The reindeer signs, "YOU LOOK-AT-THE-TIME! LATE COME-ON! READY WORK GET-UP. READY CHRISTMAS. WILL LATE COME-ON!" However, he signs this with a consistent change in location, as all the signs are made from the top of the head rather than in front of the signer in neutral space. This is because the reindeer signs with his antlers (see Figure 17). While the bird's wings discussed earlier were

allomorphic to human hands (being of a different shape but understood to have the same biological origin as hands and used perhaps in some similar ways), the reindeer's antlers are homomorphic to the hands (being of a very similar shape but intended for a very different function). Antlers are signed in BSL (as in ASL) with both hands in the 5-handshape on either side of the top of the head, giving a close visual representation of form and location of the antlers.

Richard Carter, however, reanalyses the sign so that the handshapes representing the antlers are shown to be the hands themselves, and the fingers, instead of linguistically representing bifurcating antlers, become fingers, which are then recruited to sign just as human fingers would sign. Once again, the audience has been invited to look beyond the apparent interpretations to see the real intended meaning. They can resolve the incongruity of flexible, moving antlers by reinterpreting them as hands. Finally, we should note once more that much of the humour comes not only from the signing antlers but also from the facial expression and body movement that Richard Carter uses as part of his characterisation of the reindeer.



REINDEER



BSL LATE signed at the temples      BSL CHRISTMAS signed at the temples

Figure 17: Location of signs changed to match the reinterpretation of antlers as hands

### 5.2.3 Movement

The movement parameter can be modified in a variety of ways. In the Flying Words Project's poem "e=mc<sup>2</sup>" (Cook and Lerner 2004), the sign SNOW has a gentle, slow primary movement of parallel hands downward in neutral space, with a secondary trill of the fingers. But as the snow gets heavier, the movement changes so that the hands literally push down, showing the weight of the snow on all below.

Another example of a change in primary movement involves reversing the direction of the movement. Richard Carter's haiku "Summer" has the sign SWEAT – with drops falling from the forehead – followed by the motion of a fan turning to cool him. Then he makes the sign SWEAT in reverse, so that the drops come back up to the forehead (Figure 18).



a) SWEAT-DRIPPING      b) FAN-BLOWS      c) SWEAT-DRIPPING-REVERSE

Figure 18: Change in direction of movement to change the meaning of a sign – reversing the movement “reverses” the meaning

Klima and Bellugi (1979:326) offer an example of reverse of secondary movement on UNDERSTAND. In the normal sign, the index finger pops up from a fist. In the reverse sign, the index finger closes into the fist, to show the subject of the sentence understands less now than before.

More examples of modification of the movement parameter are given in the subsection of Section 6, where cross-linguistic puns are discussed.

### 5.2.4 Orientation

We have found no examples of creative language in which the phonological parameter of orientation has been modified in a creative way. This is hardly surprising, given that orientation is the parameter we expected to be the least

susceptible to creative play in that that it has none of the four important characteristics shown in Table 1 above.

### 5.2.5 Combination of parameters

This well-known ASL example (a version of which is described in Klima and Bellugi 1979:323) involves modifying handshapes as well as movement, although once again the facial expressions also play a significant role:

#### Joke 23:

An educational administrator visits a school for the Deaf. All the students at the school act remarkably happy. So he asks (in sign), why everyone is so happy. One student answers, "TOTAL COMMUNICATION." The man is satisfied with that answer and leaves. The student then turns to his friends and signs, "SMOKE, DRINK, SMOKE, DRINK."

This joke isn't the least bit funny in English. All the humour lies in the shape of the ASL signs. In the sign TOTAL COMMUNICATION, the dominant hand makes the T-handshape and the non-dominant makes a C-handshape (see Figure 31 for this handshape in the sign CULTURE). After the administrator leaves, the student turns to his friends and does the sign again, this time changing the T-handshape into an F-handshape and extending the thumb on the C-handshape. He alternates moving them in and out to the mouth, yielding the signs SMOKE, DRINK, SMOKE, DRINK. The two hands move in an alternating pattern in and out on parallel horizontal lines in front of the signer's collarbone. This ASL joke involves handshape change, PoA change, movement change, and orientation change. Even with all those changes, it still works because the transformation from one sign to the next is smooth here and the very conceit of transforming one sign into the next is part of a tradition within ASL storytelling and poetry (as in the poetry of Clayton Valli, Debbie Rennie, The Flying Words Project, Dorothy Miles, Paul Scott, and many others), so the audience readily recognises and appreciates it.

Here's another ASL example. The ASL sign HEAR is made with the 1-handshape of the dominant hand tapping the ear. The ASL sign THING is made with the 5-handshape of the dominant hand oriented upward in neutral space, which bounces outward to the side one or more times. A joke sign sentence is made by putting the Å-handshape (also known in ASL as the 10-handshape, since the sign for the numeral 10 in ASL is an Å-handshape with the tip of the thumb oriented upward) beside the ear with the thumb pointing toward the ear, then opening the rest of the fingers into a 5, so there's a quick change from 10 to 5 beside the ear, with the palm oriented forward.

The signer also tips the torso forward and raises the eyebrows, indicating a yes-no question. This means HEAR ANYTHING? The change from a 1 to a 10 in the handshape is both clever and natural. It's clever because it plays on the idea that the numbers 1 and 10 have something in common. And it's natural in that it sets up the handshape change perfectly both from a physiological and a linguistic point of view. Changing from only the thumb extended to all fingers extended is merely moving the four fingers as a unit (in this case, to match the thumb), and those fingers move as a unit in many ASL signs. This is more natural than changing from only the index finger extended to all fingers extended, which requires that the thumb and last three fingers move as a unit. Indeed, the thumb and last three fingers rarely move as a unit in ASL. The only example that comes to our mind is forming the D-handshape.

### **5.3 Other types of phonological play**

We present here some examples which don't fit into the categories we've already discussed but where the joke hinges on the phonological shape of the signs.

#### **5.3.1 Puns**

Puns abound in ASL. Ken Glickman is a well known ASL comedian who runs a website that is always adding new jokes ([www.deafology.com](http://www.deafology.com)). He does live performances and also appears in several videos. Among his many brilliant works is his video "Pot, an ABC story." Here he uses the F-handshape held to the mouth and then flicked to the side to indicate someone smoking pot and flicking the ash. However, at the same time the sign could be interpreted as PREACH, which in ASL is also made with the F-handshape held to the side of the signer and making short forward movements. Glickman shakes his head throughout. The final message is that, when it comes to pot, he's not practising what he preaches.

Another pun is in the following riddle: Q: Why do Deaf people love flying? The answer is simply to move the I-L-Y-handshape in loops in front of you. This handshape means both I-LOVE-YOU and AEROPLANE in ASL (see the figure in Conventions). (We saw this joke performed by Simon Carmel at Swarthmore College, in Pennsylvania on 25 October 2007.)

Puns or near-puns are also often employed in creating ASL name signs, where the pun is between a sign and an alphabetic letter used as an initial for a name. A common name sign for Alexander Graham Bell among the USA Deaf community is to make the initials at the forehead. The A-handshape is smacked against the forehead, palm oriented to the rear, making the sign DUMB. The G-handshape is likewise smacked against the forehead with the

index finger and thumb pointed to the contralateral side, so that the sign for PEA is made at the forehead, which is itself a joke sign for PEA-BRAINED. The B-handshape gives a third smack, with the palm facing the contralateral side, making the sign BASTARD. So this one name sign is a triple pun, driven by much of the Deaf community's disdain for a man whose work (no matter how misguidedly well-intended) wrecked havoc in the Deaf community by urging the replacement of signing schools with oral schools, trying to get legislation passed to prevent marriage between Deaf partners, and championing eugenics.

Another name sign that employs both punning and associations made with certain PoAs is that for the old television programme "Dynasty" in the Philadelphia Deaf community. It consisted of the three letters D-N-Y, all with the palm facing the rear. The D-handshape was made at the forehead, evoking the sign (though not being equivalent to it) for DUMB. The N-handshape was made below the nose, evoking the sense of nastiness associated with that POA. And the Y-handshape was made at the chin, which is the sign for WRONG.

Additional puns given in Carmel (2006) include the name sign for Richard Nixon, former President of the United States who was impeached, which consists of the ASL sign LIAR with the N-handshape instead of the usual 1-handshape, and the name sign for Ronald Reagan, another former President of the United States who had been an actor, which consists of the ASL sign STAR with R-handshapes instead of the usual 1-handshapes.

### 5.3.2 A canon

Sometimes a joke can come about by playing off the expectations of the audience with respect to form. Let us give an English example we particularly like to make clear what we mean here. Consider this limerick:

An ancient Carthusian monk  
Was sleeping one night in his bunk  
He was dreaming that Venus  
Was kissing his elbow  
And woke up all covered in sweat

The joke works both because we know the rhyme form of a-a-b-b-a and, thus, expect certain rhymes at the end of the last two lines, and because the sense of the first three lines makes us expect particular lexical items to fill those rhymes.

We know of no long-standing canons in signed poems/jokes/stories comparable to the limerick form. However, the performer can set up expectations within the work simply by making very clear the rules of that particular performance piece. Ben Bahan's "Ball Story" (2006b) is a wonderful example of expectation set up by regular repetition of signs. One by one, different characters join in the pursuit of a magic ball in a repetitive pattern reminiscent of "The House that Jack Built." There are seven classifiers introduced successively to represent seven characters: the ball, a boy on his bike, a dog, a girl, an old man, a bird, and a fat lady. Each scene is shown from seven different perspectives: Right to left, rear to front – coming at you!, round the corner, up the hill, over the hill, down the hill fast, and finally hitting a closed door and falling in a heap. The story ends without confounding any expectations built up by the repetition – here the pleasure is in following the pattern as it grows.

However, confounding expectation is exactly what Ken Lerner and Peter Cook, the ASL poetry team known as The Flying Words, do in their poem/story joke "Baseball" (created in 1992). Peter plays baseball, taking on the roles of all the different team members, and he executes all the changes in character while always keeping one foot in a fixed location. In other words, when he shifts from pitcher to catcher, to runner on first, to first baseman, to runner on third, to third baseman, to umpire, to batter, he moves his body up and down and sideways, but always with the same foot in place. To end the poem, however, the batter hits the ball and Peter moves both feet, breaking the canon and making the story funny.

The BSL poet Paul Scott (2005a) sets up similar expectations only to confound them in his amusing poem "Five Senses." Each sense is allocated a finger on the non-dominant hand, and the poet converses with each one in turn. He taps the finger, it straightens to wake, and it describes its experience of the world before folding back into a closed fist. This works fine for the thumb (touch), the index finger (taste) and the middle finger (smell). By this time the audience has a firm expectation that the ring finger will also straighten and engage in discussion. However, it fails to, because this is the finger allocated to the sense of sound. It can only straighten and interact when it joins the ring finger (sight). Not only is there amusement in the breaking of expectation, but there is also extra satisfaction from understanding that the single raised ring finger from a closed fist is an illegal handshape in BSL (as well as ASL, although the handshape is permissible in some sign languages, including Taiwan Sign Language). The one finger that cannot stand alone is linked to the one sense that will not stand alone for a Deaf person.

Once again, however, it is essential to point out that these stories are particularly funny because these patterns are being set up and broken at the same time as a range of amusing non-manual elements are being used. Paul Scott's use of eyes and facial expression adds considerably to the humour of

"Five Senses," just as a range of non-manuals, including outrageous facial expressions, makes The Flying Words' "Baseball" hilarious.

### 5.3.3 Symmetry

One of the morpheme structure constraints of signed languages has to do with symmetry (and has more complexities than we will go into here. See Napoli and Wu 2003 for a discussion of this in relation to ASL). Basically, in two-handed signs in which the hands are not connected, so that each moves independently of the other, the movement of the hands must be symmetric in some way, where the most common symmetry is across a vertical plane that divides the body into left and right halves (Battison 1979). A similar constraint holds in BSL (Sutton-Spence and Kaneko 2007).

We can see exploitation of this requirement for symmetry in a French Sign Language joke discussed in Bouchauveau (1994) and mentioned earlier in our discussion of anthropomorphism. While this joke is performed by a French signer, it appeals to international audiences and works just as well in ASL and BSL. The joke is about a biplane, where the two wings talk to each other. The dominant forearm is held in front of the chest, with the B-handshape oriented downward and the tips of the fingers pointing to the opposite side of the body. The non-dominant forearm is below the dominant one and parallel to it. So the forearms represent the two wings of the biplane. As the two wings move through space, they maintain their parallelism, calling for an unusual and rather strained configuration. That is, the arms are symmetrical to one another across a horizontal plane that moves with the movement of the wings. At one point, the bottom wing prods the top one to go north. The prodding itself is absurd to see, with fingers of the bottom arm coming up to tap the elbow of the top arm. The top wing agrees. When the bottom wing signs GO, they change direction. But the bottom goes out to its side of the body and the top goes out to its side of the body, so the two arms fly apart. It's an aerial disaster of course and hilarious (see photos in Bouchauveau, 1994:29). (Even in its hilarity the story can carry a social message for Deaf people: we must all stick together in the Deaf community, no matter what our apparent differences and aims. If we pull in different directions, we will suffer a similar disaster.) One factor in the humour is that the way the wings move conforms to the requirement for symmetry, especially symmetry across the vertical plane. This is a much more natural symmetry than the horizontal one. So what is natural linguistically turns out to be completely unnatural for the aeroplane.

A more casual example of the use of symmetry is found in the charming witticism of a Deaf friend of one of the authors. He was talking about the zoning of the London Underground system and he signed 1 2 3 4 5 6 quickly on both hands, each moving away from the centre of the signing space to the

outside to show the spreading radius of the zones. It was delightful in its cleverness and efficiency.

#### 5.3.4 Meta jokes

Some sign language jokes play explicitly with the knowledge signers have of the linguistic building blocks of their signs. This next joke does that. The ASL sign INTERESTING is made with both hands doing the same movement with the same handshape and orientation, but at different PoA's. The dominant hand is at the centre of the chest and the non-dominant is below it at the centre of the belly. The 5-handshape starts flat against the body and changes to an 8-handshape as it moves away from the body. A joke sign meaning 'interesting' puts the dominant hand in neutral space, oriented palm out, and signs 2 – 5 – 8. The 2 indicates two hands. The 5 indicates the starting handshape. The 8 indicates the ending handshape. By placing the hand in neutral space oriented out, the signer has effectively stripped away all phonological parameters except handshape. Here the characteristic of independence, which we discussed above, is the key, but in a decidedly analytical way, since there is nothing whatsoever iconic about these two handshapes in this sign, nor is there anything that harks of a classifier in these two handshapes in this sign. So the joke is a bare-bones linguistic analysis of the sign – a meta joke.

A similar meta-joke concerns the ASL sign INVOLVE, which is made with the dominant hand in a 5, palm downward, circling tightly as it closes into an O and the tips of the fingers insert into a waiting O-handshape on the non-dominant hand. That change from 5-handshape to O-handshape is also made in the sign for the number 50, but without the small circle path. A joke sign meaning 'very involving' makes the number sequence 2 – 50 on the dominant hand. Here another bit of linguistic knowledge is consciously exploited; often a one-handed sign can be intensified by doing it with both hands symmetrically. So the 2 in the playful sign 2 – 50 indicates doing the motion of the sign for the number 50 on two hands at once, hence the sense of 'very' is added to the sense 'involving.'

### 5.4. Morphology

In this section we focus on those building blocks of a sign that are generally recognised as meaning-bearing (not just specially imbued with meaning, as in many of the examples discussed in the previous section).

The productive signs that show how something is handled, how the whole or part of an object might move, or that trace the shape of the object all may be used in sign language to create new signs. Johnston and Schembri (2007) show how in Auslan (Australian Sign Language) the frozen lexical item

TICKET has come from tracing the shape of an object, while BAG has come from showing how a bag is handled, and DISABLED is derived from showing how the whole of an object might move. The wit in many humorous signs is to reverse this process of lexicogenesis. Thus, signs that have become frozen and where the relationship between the form of the sign parameters and their meaning has been lost (or at least degraded), are reanalysed and the components become meaningful once more.

Recently, in Bristol, a Deaf colleague of one of the authors of this paper was considering ways in which students could be gently persuaded to choose a course of study most convenient for faculty. To do this he played with the sign PERSUADE in BSL (which is identical to the sign FLATTER in ASL); a sign that has its origins in a whole-entity classifier. The non-dominant hand shows the upright 1-handshape that indicates a person. The dominant hand, in a B-handshape then brushes against it from side to side, as though buttering it up. The origins of this sign are clear but signers do not analyse it this way any more because it has become an established lexical item. The signer in this situation, however, used the dominant hand to move the non-dominant hand steadily and firmly towards the location in space allocated to the preferred faculty course. By re-analysing and modifying the sign he was able to treat the non-dominant hand as a classifier once more, and the dominant hand as a persuading hand. Additional humour for this sign came from the facial expression, which mixed apparent careless unconcern for the direction of persuasion with crafty determination. This is a particularly nice example of reversing the process of lexicogenesis. This subversion of conventionalised language creates demand upon the intellect of signers and audiences, and is a source of considerable entertainment, as everyone is able to delight in the absurd but plausible results.

To understand our next example of morphological creativity we need to explain a bit more about ASL morphology. Recall our earlier discussion of classifiers. When one makes the sign for an object, say a cat for example, that sign has a given PoA, handshape, orientation, and movement. However, if the cat then runs across a garden, one does not move the sign CAT to some other place. In fact, that would be impossible, since the PoA for CAT is the cheek(s). Instead, one uses the handshape that is the appropriate classifier for a cat and then moves that handshape across the signing space.

A second thing we need to explain is that the morphology of many sign languages, including ASL and BSL, can employ incorporation through handshape. Typically incorporation is of numerals (that is, cardinal numbers). Thus the sign for (ONE) WEEK in both ASL and BSL, for example, can be made with a 1-handshape. But it can also be made with a 2-handshape (identical to the V-handshape), to indicate TWO WEEKS. The same can be done for the 3-, 4-, and 5-handshapes. For many signers, even more numerals can be incorporated into the sign WEEK, up through the 9-handshape (identical to the F-handshape). And in the signs for the ordinal numbers, we can incorporate all the numeral handshapes (1 through to 9) for

all speakers we have asked. Incorporation, however, is extremely limited, reserved primarily for time expressions.

Keeping in mind, then, that this mechanism of incorporation exists in ASL, let us consider this next example from ASL. The Flying Words Project duo does a poem called "Ode to Words" in their DVD *The Can't Touch Tours* (1990-2003) in which a character is looking for gold. The ASL sign GOLD has the PoA starting at the side of the head and moving outward from there. The handshape changes from 5 to open 8, with the palm oriented toward the head, of course. In the poem, however, the signer (Peter Cook) signs the predicate LOOK-FOR and substitutes the handshape change of GOLD for the ordinary V-handshape seen in the usual ASL sign. That is, he makes a 5-handshape that pulls back into an open 8-handshape in all the different places that the character is looking. The signer has incorporated part of the phonology of GOLD into LOOK-FOR, treating the handshape as though it were a classifier. The effect here is not so much humour as amazement.

The fact that signed languages allow incorporation via handshape can be exploited in the very common creative technique of sign transformation. In the Flying Words Project's poem "Oil," about the insatiable desire of modern life for oil, the ASL sign for NEED, which uses the X-handshape, winds up being incorporated via that handshape into a created sign for the nodding donkey OIL-PUMP-MACHINE. Peter Cook, the signer, transforms NEED into OIL-PUMP-MACHINE with one swift, sweeping movement repeatedly throughout the poem. The effect is graphic and dramatic.

Other jokes involving incorporation revolve around the sense of "I love you." A common sign for this in ASL is the I-L-Y-handshape (the handshape with thumb, index finger, and pinky all extended) making a small circle in neutral space, with the palm oriented outward. The I is the first letter of the word *I*; the L is the first letter of the word *love*; the Y is the first letter of the word *you*. A joke sign for asking "Do you love me?" is to make the sign I-LOVE-YOU with a wiggling index finger and a raised eyebrow. Note that a fist with a raised and wiggling index finger (that is, the X-handshape with a wiggle added) in neutral space with the palm oriented outward and raised eyebrows means I-ASK-YOU. So in the joke sign it looks like the sign I-ASK-YOU has been incorporated into the sign I-LOVE-YOU. Additionally, the signer can take the sign I-LOVE-YOU and rotate the index finger to mean I-ALWAYS-LOVE-YOU. Here the sign for ALWAYS (a 1-handshape that circles in neutral space) has been incorporated (although in a much diminished form, as the rotation of a single finger is contrasted with a relatively large circle drawn repeatedly in neutral space) into the sign I-LOVE-YOU. Finally, it is possible to take the sign I-LOVE-YOU and substitute crossed index and middle fingers for the raised index finger (that is, the letter R appears in the middle of the sign) to mean I-REALLY-LOVE-YOU. Here the recognition of incorporation depends on cross-linguistic information (and we talk about other cross-linguistic jokes in section 6); the person signed to must know that the English word *real* begins with an R. All three of these variants<sup>6</sup> are reported on in Carmel (2006).

## **5.5. Syntax**

Much of what one thinks of as the job of the syntax in spoken languages (using word order to tell us, essentially, who did what, with what, and to whom) is handled through the structure and meaning of the signs in signed languages. However, there are some characteristics of the structure of sign languages that can be thought of as syntactic, and we find that those characteristics are fair game for language play.

One such characteristic is the fact that there are multiple articulators in signed languages, in particular in this case, the two hands. If each hand expresses something independently of the other, we can get two simultaneous propositions (Miller 1994 and Vermeerbergen, Crasborn and Leeson 2007). Rutherford (1993) describes precisely such an ASL example. Each of the two hands spells out R-E-F-L-E-C-T-I-O-N. The down-turned dominant hand is located above the up-turned non-dominant, so that the hands are in fact a reflection of one another. They move across neutral space from left to right (the direction of reading and writing), as they spell out the word. Because the horizontal plane is the means of reflection, rather than the more frequently used vertical plane, the action evokes a sense of the top hand being reflected in water.

One of the authors of this paper spent a week in Brazil. She was a BSL user, signing with LSB (Lingua de Sinais Brasileira) users. In recognition of the cooperation on that occasion between BSL and LSB, one of the Brazilian signers made a joke by using the LSB manual alphabet to sign the letters BSL on one hand while simultaneously spelling out LSB on the other hand. The palms faced one another, so that the S in the middle of both provided the axis of symmetry across which the letters were reflected (Figure 19).



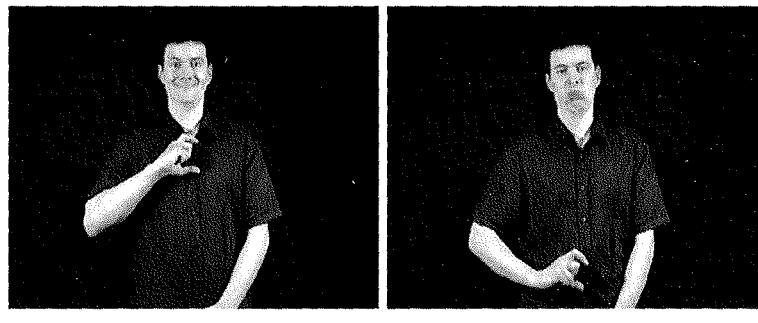
Upper hand B  
Lower hand L

Upper hand S  
Lower hand S

Upper hand L  
Lower hand B

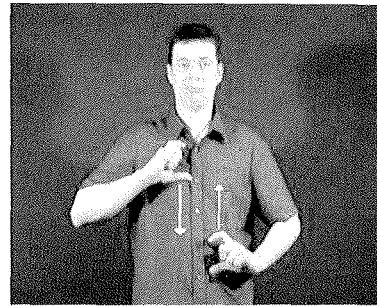
Figure 19: Simultaneous spelling of BSL and LSB across horizontal and vertical axes of symmetry

Not all instances of two independent articulators involve fingerspelling. Klima and Bellugi (1979:328) give an example of someone who took the signs EXCITED (open 8 moving up and out to sides from the chest) and DEPRESSED (open 8 moving down the chest) and alternated the hands, to show he was both excited and depressed at the same time. Two propositions are being articulated simultaneously. An analogous thing occurs in BSL, where one can sign CONFIDENT on one hand and UNCONFIDENT on the other, to show mixed feelings (see Figure 20, and note in addition the non-manual features that blend and combine the two facial expressions corresponding to the two manual components).



CONFIDENT

UNCONFIDENT



CONFIDENT-AND-UNCONFIDENT

Figure 20: Creative BSL signs linked to varying degrees of confidence

Another syntactic characteristic of signed languages is that they make use of “verb sandwiches” (Fischer and Janis 1990); a predicate is introduced and then repeated, but the second (or third or more) time, more information is added to that predicate. Verb sandwiches can be a source of humour if the added information gets absurd, as happens in the video clip “Fastest hands in the west” (Holman and Roby n.d.). Here two cowboys compete to sign their stories. The first actor signs getting on his horse and riding. Then he signs riding again, but with the added information that he tilts off to one side and the other and even winds up riding upside-down for a while before finding his seat in the saddle again. The other signer responds with equally ridiculous additional information about his running alongside his galloping horse. Throughout this challenge, they use different classifiers to represent the same actions.

A third characteristic of signed languages is facetting (Humphrey and Alcorn 1996). In facetting, signers show shifting perspectives of the same event or character. While these different perspectives are conveyed by the morphology in some spoken languages (such as Latin) and by the syntax in other spoken languages (such as English), facetting is handled only by the syntax in signed languages. That is, we don’t find a sign being altered in some way to allow a different perspective on the event or character. Instead, we find additional signs – that is, additional syntactic phrases. Facetting is one of the major sources of humour in Bouchauveau’s (1994) story about the bulldog and the elegant dog described earlier. Bouchauveau looks at the bulldog’s paws, ears, mug, tail, and so on, giving us more and more details to allow us to see how proudly the dog struts his stuff. Each added bit of information brings a laugh, as we see the whole picture emerge.

A fourth syntactic characteristic of signed languages is discussed in Bahan (2006a). He describes succinctly the use of classifier signs in cinematographic techniques in signed stories. Different kinds of classifiers allow the signer to represent close-ups and long-shots, as well as to zoom in on different areas or present things from different angles. So if one is describing a horse race

and represents one of the horses with the classifier for the hoofs, we have a close-up. If one represents the horse with the classifier for the whole horse, we're a bit further away. If one shows the two horses racing side by side from above (as with two index fingers alternating), we have a long aerial shot. Again, although, cinematographic techniques need not necessarily be humorous, where they are used as part of humour, they can play a major part in the amusement. The humour lies in selecting unusual or unexpected shots that present original and highly visual images of the subject in question. These need to be articulated using the correct classifier, and with appropriate facial expression and body movement for good sign language humour. A perfect example is when the signer gets so close as to become a pinball, feeling every smack of the flippers (as discussed in Bahan 2006a).

## 5.6. Semantics

We saw the interaction of semantics and phonology in the first section of this chapter. Here we point out examples where other elements of semantics are involved. In the first part we look at jokes where issues of lexical semantics (that is, the meaning of individual words) and pragmatics (that is, the meaning associated with a word, phrase, or sentence due to the context it is performed in) are at issue. In the next part we look at jokes where role-shift, through use of point of view and indexicals (that is, pointers) are at issue.

### 5.6.1 Meta jokes

Klima and Bellugi (1979:333) acknowledged sign play at what they considered to be "beyond the linguistic system". In this language play, the linguistic handshapes of a sign are also understood to be, literally, the hands, while places of articulation are also understood to be simply body parts. This ambiguity asks the audience to decide if the hand is a formation element or something to manipulate the sign. It allows signers to create humorous language that may be interpreted both with its apparent and real meaning, as audiences are invited to understand that hands and body may be abstract linguistic articulators representing objects and locations and may, at the same time, be hands and body.

One common device in humorously creative signed language use is for one hand to manipulate the other hand or another part of the body that is being used for linguistic reference. Klima and Bellugi (1979:335-336) use the following example: the ASL sign CLEAR is a reflexively symmetrical sign in which both hands change from O to 5 as they move away from each other and away from the centre of the signing space. In a made-up sign CLEAR, instead, the non-dominant hand starts as O and the dominant hand opens it to create the new sign MAKE-(THINGS)-CLEAR.

This is seen in poetry as well as humour. Dorothy Miles' poem "To a Deaf Child" uses the phrase "You hold the word in hand," signing this in BSL by placing the sign WORD into the other hand so that the poet literally holds the sign WORD in the hand. In ASL, since WORD is a two-handed sign in ASL, only the dominant handshape is placed in the palm of the non-dominant hand, freeing part of a sign, so that it becomes a classifier.

A BSL sign NOTHING is articulated with an F-handshape. In order to humorously emphasise that there really is nothing at all, a signer may look through the hole left by the fingers - proving that if we can look right through the sign, there really is nothing there. They may then also blow through the gap, to make the same point in a slightly different way. Here, the signers are reanalysing an established sign with fixed parameters into a handshape that simply has a hole in the middle, but the two are very closely related (see Figure 21).

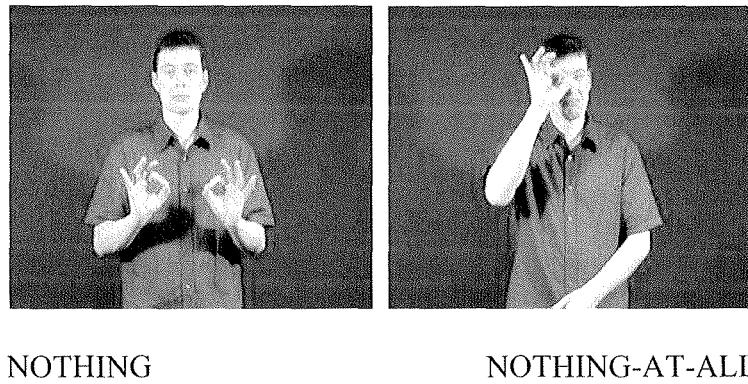


Figure 21: Humorous modification of the BSL sign NOTHING, reinterpreting the space between the forefinger and thumb as meaningful

Something similar happens in ASL, with incorporation in the following ASL joke sign. The sign for NOTHING is an O-handshape shaking in neutral space. The sign for KNOW is a bent B-handshape that taps the side of the forehead twice. The joke sign for KNOW-NOTHING is an O-handshape tapped twice close to the middle of the forehead. Here the handshape of the sign NOTHING has been incorporated into the sign KNOW, with a shift of PoA from the side of the forehead to the middle of the forehead. It's the shifting of the PoA that clues us in to the physical nature of the joke. The O-handshape brings to mind both the number zero and a hole, suggesting that there is zero or a hole in the person's brain. A similar joke occurs in BSL, with the handshape normally used in the sign ZERO or NOTHING moved repeatedly across the middle of the forehead.

A widespread BSL sign glossed as CONFIDENT uses the baby-C-handshape moving up the centre of the body from abdomen to just below the neck. To sign LOSS-OF-CONFIDENCE, the hand starts just below the neck and drops

down to the abdomen. (This sign is also widespread and is not regarded as either creative or especially humorous, although it may have been both in its inception.) These signs are illustrated above in Figure 20. However, if a person needs help to build up their confidence – needing a helping hand so to speak (sorry, we couldn't help it) – the non-dominant hand can reach below the C-handshape and supportively push it up towards the neck. Over-confident characters may be remarked upon with the C-handshape well-above head-height. In this example, the body is no longer solely the place of articulation, but is treated as a real body part. To bring this over-confident person down a peg (or two), the non-dominant hand again takes on the role of a hand, rather than an abstract articulator, and covers the top of the C-handshape and pushes it back down to chest height (Figure 22).

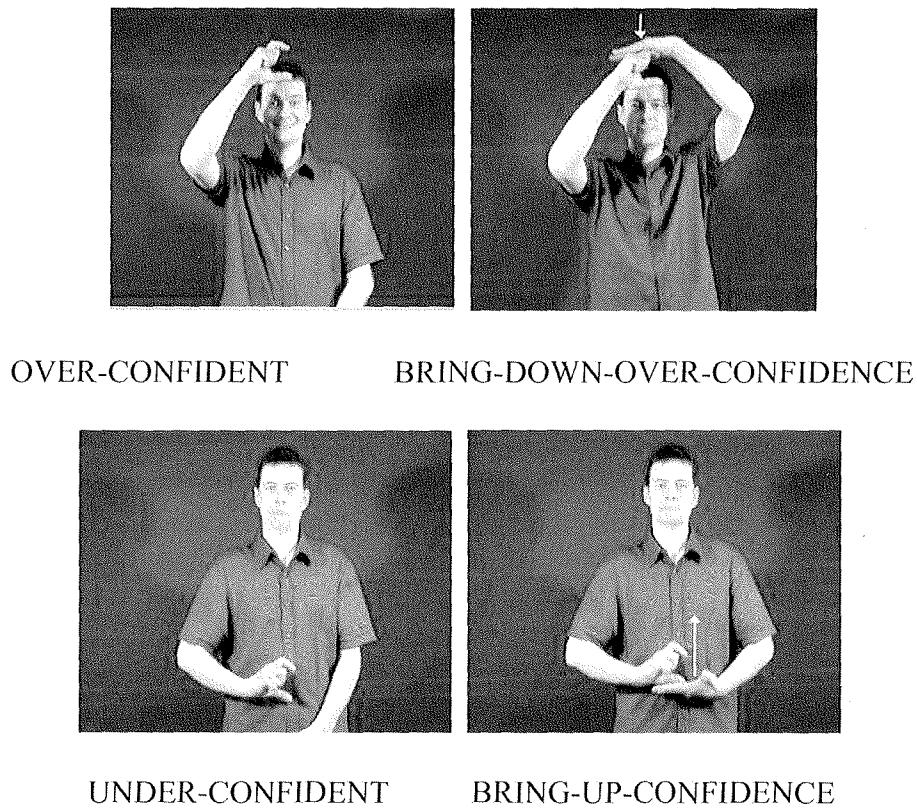
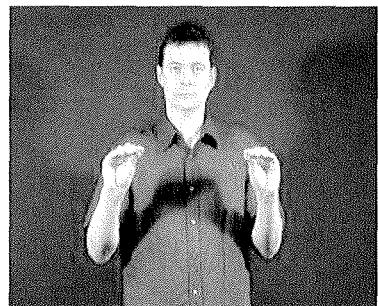


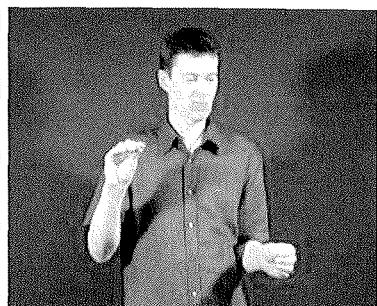
Figure 22: Example of the hands being treated as a manipulable body-part

Another BSL example describes the effect of teaching the same sign language classes too often. Figure 23 shows this. In the BSL sign TEACH, both flat-B hands are held out at chest height, palm down with the fingers facing forwards. As the signer becomes tired of teaching, one of these hands may drop away as though too exhausted to hold itself up and continue to teach. The other hand, taking a break from signing TEACH, can reach down and gently but firmly place the tired hand back in its correct PoA. Shortly afterwards, though, the second hand tires and drops down, so the first hand,

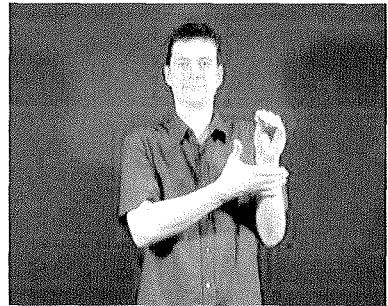
repaying the favour, reaches down and lifts its companion back into place. Teaching then can continue.



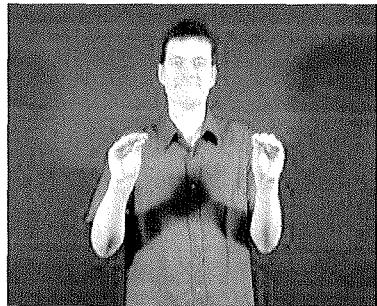
TEACH



HAND-TOO-TIRED-TO-TEACH



ONE-HAND-LIFTS-THE-OTHER



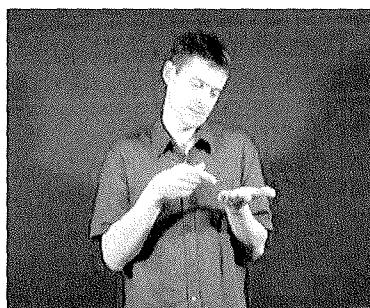
TEACH

Figure 23: Hands appearing to act of their own volition while signing

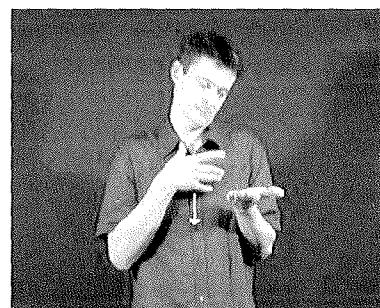
In a common, if informal, BSL sign, ASTONISHED, the hand moves away from the jaw to indicate the jaw dropping, while the jaw itself also drops. In ASL, a similar thing happens; both hands are in the bent V-handshape and the non-dominant hand is located in front of the mouth. Then the dominant hand falls away from the top hand while the jaw also drops open. It is a well-recognised formation process in signed languages for the mouth to be used to represent the mouth (and one we saw in section 4 with the bulldog joke). In this sign in both languages the dominant hand reflects the bottom jaw's movement (van der Kooij, Crasborn, Waters, Woll, and Mesch, in preparation). In BSL for a humorous modification to the sign, the hand ceases to be the articulator that merely matches the mouth movement. Instead it becomes the hand itself that reaches back up and clamps the jaw shut again. (A British Deaf friend of one of the authors, wishing to indicate even greater astonishment, used his other hand to sign a winching movement next to the jaw, winding the jaw back up to its closed position.)

Humorous blending of an abstract, frozen sign with a visually-motivated productive classifier sign is very common. The blending is exemplified clearly in the joke about the giant described as Joke 20, widespread in both British and American Deaf communities.

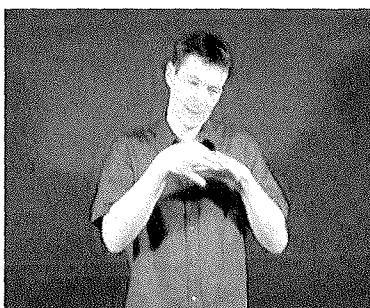
When the giant signs MARRY, he squashes her, much to his dismay, because the ASL sign MARRY involves the firm clasping of the two hands. In BSL (where the joke often features the cinematic images of King Kong striding through New York rather than a giant, although the essential plot is the same) the sign MARRY creates a different punch line. The BSL sign MARRY is visually motivated by the act of placing a wedding ring on the ring finger of the down-turned non-dominant hand. While the giant (or King Kong) holds the beautiful woman in the palm of his hand, the palm is up-turned. In order to articulate the established sign MARRY, he needs to turn the palm over, with the effect that the woman falls to her doom (Figure 24). In both languages, however, the humour arises out of the shift from seeing the hands as representing the hands to seeing them as articulators of an established sign which, when seen literally as hands, creates incongruous meaning. Some people add a moral: it's better to learn to vocalise than to sign – a tongue-in-cheek moral, since the people often signing this story are anti-oralism (Bienvenu 1994:20).



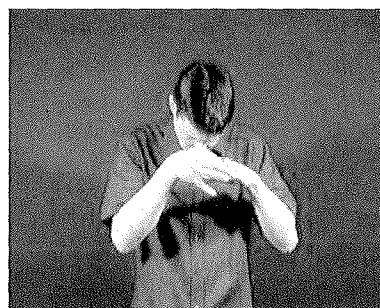
Addressing woman on the palm



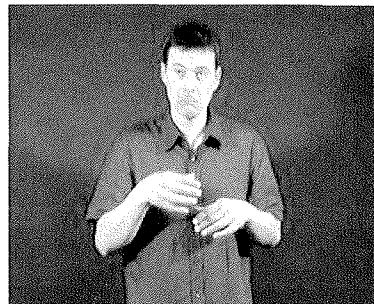
Signing WANT to woman on the palm



BSL sign MARRY



Watching woman fall from palm after MARRY



Oops

Figure 24: The Giant's (or King Kong's) brief love affair destroyed by marriage

In Peter Cook's wildly energetic ASL poem "Ode to Words" (performed at Gallaudet University, March 2006), which considers the definition of poetry, the dominant hand's handshape in the established sign WORD (the handshape being the baby C or BSL C-handshape) is reanalysed as a whole-entity classifier, much like in Dorothy Miles' poem discussed earlier, but this time the classifier is for a container, and the non-dominant hand's 1-handshape becomes the index finger itself. Peter Cook signs WORD but then separates the hands to crack the sign open and uses the index finger of the dominant hand to scoop out the delicious filling from the container-shaped word. Then he eats it.

In BSL, continuing with the example of the sign CONFIDENT, the BSL C-handshape can drop down to waist height before changing orientation and becoming a whole-entity classifier handshape for a hunched person moving. Accompanied by a dejected facial expression, the non-confident handshape now slopes off sadly, away from the body (see Figure 25). The humour lies not only in seeing the blending between the two but enjoying the simultaneous interpretation of the handshape as both an abstract phoneme and as a classifier, while also understanding that confidence has become personified.

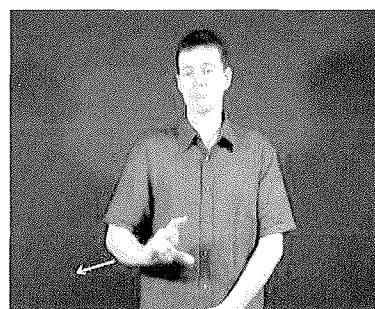


Figure 25: Personification of Confidence through use of classifier and roleshift, blended with the primary parameters of the sign CONFIDENT

A final example for ASL comes from Klima and Bellugi (1979:332-333). To show that a person has a temptation for sweets, the signer first signs TEMPT (the index finger taps the elbow), then the tapping moves up the arm while the handshape changes to a claw, so that it ends with the sign COOKIE (a claw tapping side to side on the palm of the non-dominant hand). At that point the signer eats the imaginary cookie. Here the handshape of TEMPT becomes a classifier as it moves along the arm and transforms into COOKIE.

## 6. Cross-linguistic jokes

Cross-linguistic and cross-cultural jokes are also common in sign language humour. In some instances, the humour comes from a complex mixture and overlap between the gesture used by hearing people and a signed language. In many cases, language play links the spoken language and the signed language (in our case here, English and ASL or BSL), exploiting the ways in which signed and spoken languages differ and are similar in form or meaning.

However, there are also jokes that are meta-linguistic in a sense, in that they have fun with the fact that signed languages and spoken languages use different modalities. One type involves recognising the difference between a sign and a gesture. Another type relies on complex representations of cross-linguistic puns or other language play through meaning and visual form.

### 6.1. Gesture and signed jokes

It is clear that a great many jokes told in speech by hearing people recruit gesture, either as a central part of the humour or to greatly increase it. In fact, there is considerable mileage in looking at the similarities between the gestures used by hearing comedians and those used by Deaf comedians (Ling 2007). Philip Ashford's BSL joke (Joke 13) described in section 4 about the man who ran over the cat can be told in English as well as in BSL. As the punch-line for the English version, the speaker is obliged to switch to gesture, but hearing audiences may still find it funny. Hal Draper's (n.d.) BSL joke "Push and Pull," which also relies upon clear role-shift for its punch line, works just as well in English if the speaker gestures the crucial part, and loses a great deal if it is only spoken (or written, as it is here).

#### Joke 24:

A foreign man arrives at a hotel in London. He struggles to push open the door until a helpful porter shows him the word "Pull" written on the door. The man is grateful and understands that whenever he sees "Pull" on a door, he must do so. Once inside the hotel he struggles to pull open another door. The helpful porter comes to his aid again, this time showing him the word "Push" written on the door. The man is grateful and understands that whenever he sees "Push" on a door, he must do so to open it. Later the porter sees a great commotion in the lobby and pushes through the crowd to

see the man straining and struggling, apparently trying to lift an entire wall. Written on the wall is the word "Lift."

Some jokes capitalise on the fact that signs may look like commonly understood gestures and, thus, offer fertile ground for misunderstanding. The following joke exemplifies this:

**Joke 25:**

A Deaf man was on an aeroplane. Every time the stewardess gave him something, he signed THANK-YOU.

At the end of the flight, the stewardess was waiting for him. She said, "You've been blowing me kisses all flight long. What do you intend to do about it?"

Other jokes combine gesture with connotations of particular locations. In ASL, for example, an alternate sign for FATHER is to put the thumb of the 5-handshape at the side of the forehead and then wiggle the fingers (instead of the usual double tap). Likewise, one can make MOTHER with a wiggle at the side of the chin. A joke sign for MOTHER-IN-LAW is to put the thumb of the 5-handshape on the nose and wiggle the fingers (see Figure 26) -- appealing both to the thumb-nose gesture and to the fact that the nose is a location for signs dealing with unpleasantness.



Figure 26: Humorous insulting ASL sign MOTHER-IN-LAW

The next ASL joke (described in depth by Rutherford 1983 and generally widespread) is more complex linguistically.

**Joke 26:**

A Deaf man is driving along and stops at train tracks because the barriers at the level-crossing of a railway are down. The train passes. He waits a long time, but the barriers don't go up. So he gets out of his car and checks the control booth. Ah, the official there is asleep. The Deaf man writes a note, wakes the man, and hands him the note. The note says, "Please BUT." The official just stares at the Deaf man.

Here the joke is that the sign BUT in ASL starts with the forearms crossed at the wrist in front of the chest, with both hands in the 1-handshape. The arms then pivot apart, by holding the elbows in one place and rotating the arms away from one another. The sign looks like a gesture of the level-crossing barriers opening. (For more discussion of why this joke is funny, see Rutherford 1983.)

Another example that plays with an obscene gesture stems from the fact that a common prank among Deaf people is to teach wrong signs to a hearing newcomer. This example is reported on in Carmel (1989:29). Dr. Elizabeth Peet, a hearing woman who taught at Gallaudet University from 1910 to the 1950s, was taught several such signs by her students. Among them was the sign GOOD MORNING with the handshape of a fist with the middle finger raised, rather than the usual B-handshape. The unfortunate Dr. Peet used this sign in class, only to find out that she'd been tricked, much to her mortification. So the next day she made the correct GOOD MORNING to everyone, except to the smart aleck, to whom she wittily signed the middle finger version.

Sometimes jokes depend on the misperception on the part of hearing people that sign is mostly gestures or mime. There are three versions of the video "Sex for the Deaf" (n.d.) found on the Internet. In one version a male reporter is speaking in English; in another, in French; in another, in Spanish. Each reporter is giving a sex shop ad. And in each there is an ASL interpreter (same interpreter for all three) who is doing very graphic gestures and mime in addition to scattered ASL. A hearing person watching this would think ASL sex signs involve actual manipulation of the genitals and erogenous zones, a ridiculous conclusion and one that allows Deaf people to laugh at hearing people for their lack of common sense in thinking that is actually sign.

Almost the reverse point is made in another ASL video at the same website, "Signing for Deaf (with translation for dumb)" by Adam Buxton. Here someone is signing what looks like a news report while there is a video of a mob fighting with police in the background. The signer is using real ASL, but about ridiculous and sexual matters that have nothing to do with the mob scene. This alone is very funny to the Deaf viewer, who immediately sees the

disconnection between the mob scene and the signing. There's a voice-over in English telling what the ASL means. Many of the signs are transparent, so the sometimes elaborate voice-over makes anyone who doesn't see the transparency of the signs seem dumb indeed. While Deaf people cannot hear the voice-over, just knowing that it is there allows Deaf people to laugh at hearing people for their lack of common sense, this time in trying to understand ASL – all of which is reflected in the title of the video.

## 6.2. English and ASL/BSL

Although signed and spoken languages are fundamentally independent of each other, there are influences within a country from the spoken language(s) on the sign language(s). The influence of English upon sign languages may be seen in a variety of ways. Signers may use mouth patterns that are derived from the mouth patterns of the English word at the same time as they produce a manual sign. This is reported to be more common in BSL than in ASL, but many American signers do accompany some of their signs with mouthing derived from English (Sutton-Spence 2007, Sutton-Spence and Day 2001). English may also influence signs through the use of loan translation. In this process the signer may translate each word, or morpheme or perceived morpheme from English into sign language. Thus the English word *godmother* may be signed in BSL as a compound sign of GOD and MOTHER, *sports car* may be rendered as the signs SPORT plus CAR and *girlfriend* may be translated as GIRL plus FRIEND (Johnston and Schembri 2007). (The same happens in ASL, though with less frequency; *firewood* is rendered as the signs FIRE plus WOOD, and *middle school* is rendered as the signs MIDDLE plus SCHOOL.) In many examples, translations are essentially meaningless and they simply reflect the English morphemes, as can be seen in the signs for many BSL place names such as SWAN and SEA for the Welsh city of 'Swansea' or MOTHER and WELL for the Scottish town of Motherwell. The process of loan translation in BSL is a widespread source of signs for place names, as well as for personal names and names of television programmes and shops and businesses. These loan translations need not always be exact, so that the relatively new term Google and the surname or family name Fowler may be signed in BSL as GOGGLES and FLOWER. This tolerance of mere approximation to the target translation in everyday BSL can be used playfully in bilingual signed humour, as we will see later.

Loan translations can lead to mistranslations by selecting the "wrong" sign translation of the word. A phrase like *break-down* may be signed in BSL as BREAK DOWN in relation to the meaning of a car's breakdown, but then further applied to other uses including mental collapse and analysis (as in a *breakdown of figures*). While these may be used in everyday signing, there are also deliberately humorous mistranslations. In BSL the words *jacket potato* (used in British English to mean what is termed a *baked potato* in American English) can be signed as JACKET POTATO, in which the sign

JACKET refers to a coat rather than a potato skin, conjuring up the ludicrous but visually enjoyable image of a potato wearing a coat. We will see more of these examples later.

### 6.2.1 Fingerspelling

The third way spoken language can influence a signed language is through fingerspelling. Fingerspelling is typically based on the writing system of the spoken language. Where the spoken language uses an alphabet (in the ideal system, each letter corresponds to a single sound segment), the signed language often will use a manual alphabet corresponding to - and representing - the letters of that alphabet. For example, Italian uses an alphabet, and Italian Sign Language (LIS: *la Lingua italiana dei Segni*) uses a corresponding manual alphabet. Where the spoken language uses a syllabary (in the ideal system, each symbol corresponds to a single syllable), the sign language often will use a manual syllabary; Japanese uses a syllabary (in fact, two, as well as a character system), and Japanese Sign Language (JSL: Nihon Shuwa) uses a manual syllabary. Some manual alphabets and syllabaries are made with one hand and some are two handed. The manual alphabets in ASL and BSL are quite distinct, the ASL alphabet being one-handed while the BSL alphabet is two-handed. In some cases, the manual letter or syllable might visually resemble the written letter or syllable symbol, to the extent possible. The letter "L" in the ASL manual alphabet may be seen in Figure 27:

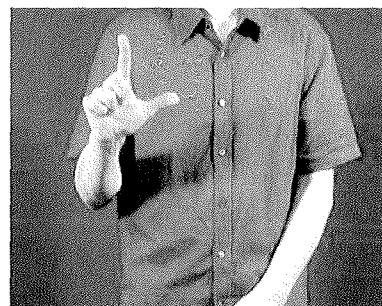


Figure 27: ASL letter "L"

It isn't hard to see the "L" in the extended, visually prominent, fingers. The letter "X" in the BSL manual alphabet is shown in Figure 28:

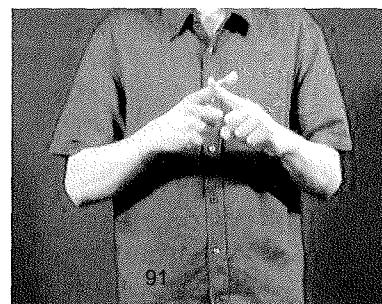


Figure 28: BSL letter “X”

For obvious reasons of physiology, the manual letter “X” in ASL (Figure 29), in contrast to BSL, looks very little like the written letter:

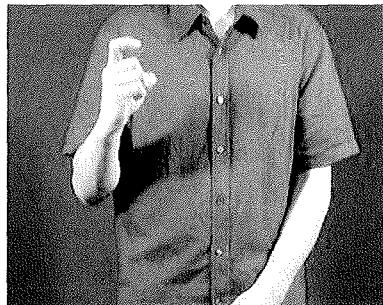


Figure 29: ASL letter “X”

But even a two-handed manual alphabet, like the one used in BSL, often has letters which don't look like the written letter, even though physiology might have allowed something much more similar to the written letter. Thus the manual letter “L” in BSL resembles a written “L” rather less clearly (Figure 30). In fact, there are many letters in both manual alphabets that bear relatively little physical relationship to the written letter.

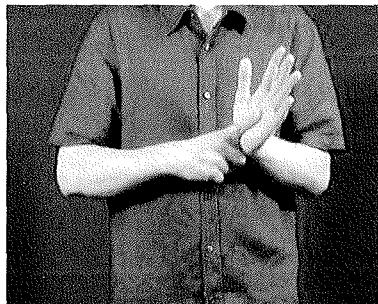
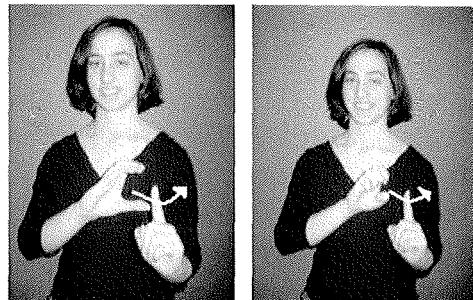


Figure 30: BSL letter “L”

The differences between these two manual alphabets affect the types of jokes the two languages create.

Fingerspelling allows signers to represent the spelling of any written word from the spoken language and can be inserted into the middle of a stream of signs with no difficulty. The writing/fingerspelling connection also offers a second type of influence of spoken language(s) on signed languages: signed languages may incorporate symbols from the manual alphabet or syllabary into signs in a variety of ways. For example, the handshape of a sign might be a manual letter that is (typically) the first letter of the English word corresponding to that sign. The other parameters, however, often remain visually motivated. This process is known as initialisation. In ASL the sign CULTURE uses the C-handshape, while the sign ENVIRONMENT uses the E-handshape (Figure 31).



CULTURE

ENVIRONMENT

Figure 31: Initialised ASL signs, sharing the same parameters of location and movement but differing in handshape determined by manual letters

This initialisation can be exploited in sign language humour, as we saw in section 5 in the incorporation example I-REALLY-LOVE-YOU.

Finally, fingerspelled words can change their shape over time to become signs, no longer recognisable as consisting of the original component letters or syllable symbols: so-called loan signs or lexicalised fingerspellings (see Battison 1978). The very sign for ASL today is an example. One can spell out A-S-L, or one can make a sign in which the A-handshape quickly and only slightly opens and closes repeatedly.

These three types of influences of spoken language on signed language are all lexical and these lexical influences are largely insignificant in the overall picture of the grammar. In general, the spoken language has little to no influence on the phonology, morphology, syntax, or semantics of the signed language except in those ways that its influence on the lexicon plays a role in these other major components of the grammar. Let us now proceed to humorous examples of these types.

A joke sign for HONEYMOON in ASL is to spell the word on both hands simultaneously, locating the hands at the side peripheries of the signing space and letting them work their way to the middle. The joke ends with both hands in the N-handshape side by side. This could look like two classifiers for people sitting or lying side by side. It also brings to mind a sign for FORNICATE that has two S-handshapes side by side which flick into V-handshapes, palms down, as though two people are lying side by side.

Number systems are also recruited into these language games. This may be because the manual alphabet and the signed number sequences are both systematic and are in some way self-contained and apart from the rest of the language. The handshapes of these two systems are often very marked (that is, noticeably unusual) compared to the simpler handshapes in the rest of the language's vocabulary, and some of the handshapes are only found in

number systems or the alphabet – or in signs that deliberately take their handshapes. Additionally, both the alphabet and number system are associated with writing, school, and English so it may not be surprising to see them join forces in this sort of creative language play. For example, in ASL the sign 69 means both the number and ‘mutual oral sex.’ Clearly this sign alludes to the shape of the written numerals 6 and 9. And since *sixty-nine* in English means the same thing, we have a loan translation here.

Some bilingual signed wit relies on fingerspelled words as acronyms and also on translations of those acronyms, or it might reinterpret an acronym in a different – and Deaf – way. As a humorous rejoinder to the telling of the joke described above with the barber who cut the hair of the blind man, the man in the wheel chair and the Deaf man, one signer asked, “Do you know why Deaf people are called ‘deaf?’” She continued to explain it is an acronym (or maybe an acrostic) D.E.A.F. for “Deaf Expect All Free”. This, clearly, is an attack on the in-group. Another famous attack, this time on the out-group, is the bitter claim by some members of the British Deaf community that the charity R.N.I.D. (The Royal National Institute for Deaf People) could stand for “Really Not Interested In Deaf People” (Alker, 2000). Alternatively, a fingerspelled acronym can be turned into a sign through loan translation. The Arts and Social Sciences library at the University of Bristol has an acronym too tempting for any signing student not to reproduce as a loan translation.

The following ASL joke is dependent upon knowledge of spelling and counting (although it’s impossible to tell if it’s fingerspelling or, rather, knowledge of the alphabet in general). The joke sign is the sequence of numerals 1 - 4 - 3 to mean the proposition ‘I love you.’ Here the 1 corresponds to the number of letters in the word *I*; the 4 corresponds to the number of letters in the word *love*; and the 3 corresponds to the number of letters in the word *you*. This is, of course, a meta-joke, similar to those in section 5 – but it calls for knowledge of another language (English), so it is cross-linguistic.

A popular form of ASL entertainment that is frequently humorous is the ABC Story, in which signers must create a coherent story from signs sequenced according to the handshapes of the manual alphabet. The first sign must use the fist A-handshape, the second sign must use the flat-hand B-handshape, the third must use the curved C-handshape and so on. This entertainment need not be primarily humorous, although it often is. Where stories are novel, the humour can come from the pleasure of the signer’s skill in using unexpected signs in the correct handshape context. Many of the stories, especially when created or told by adolescents, are on taboo topics (almost invariably sexual) and the additional taboo dimension can add to the humour. Again, there is no doubt that the humour is greatly increased when the constrained signs in these stories are accompanied by carefully selected facial expressions and body movements (often used to get the signer out of a tight corner when the sign required to move the plot along cannot be made manually without breaking the pattern).

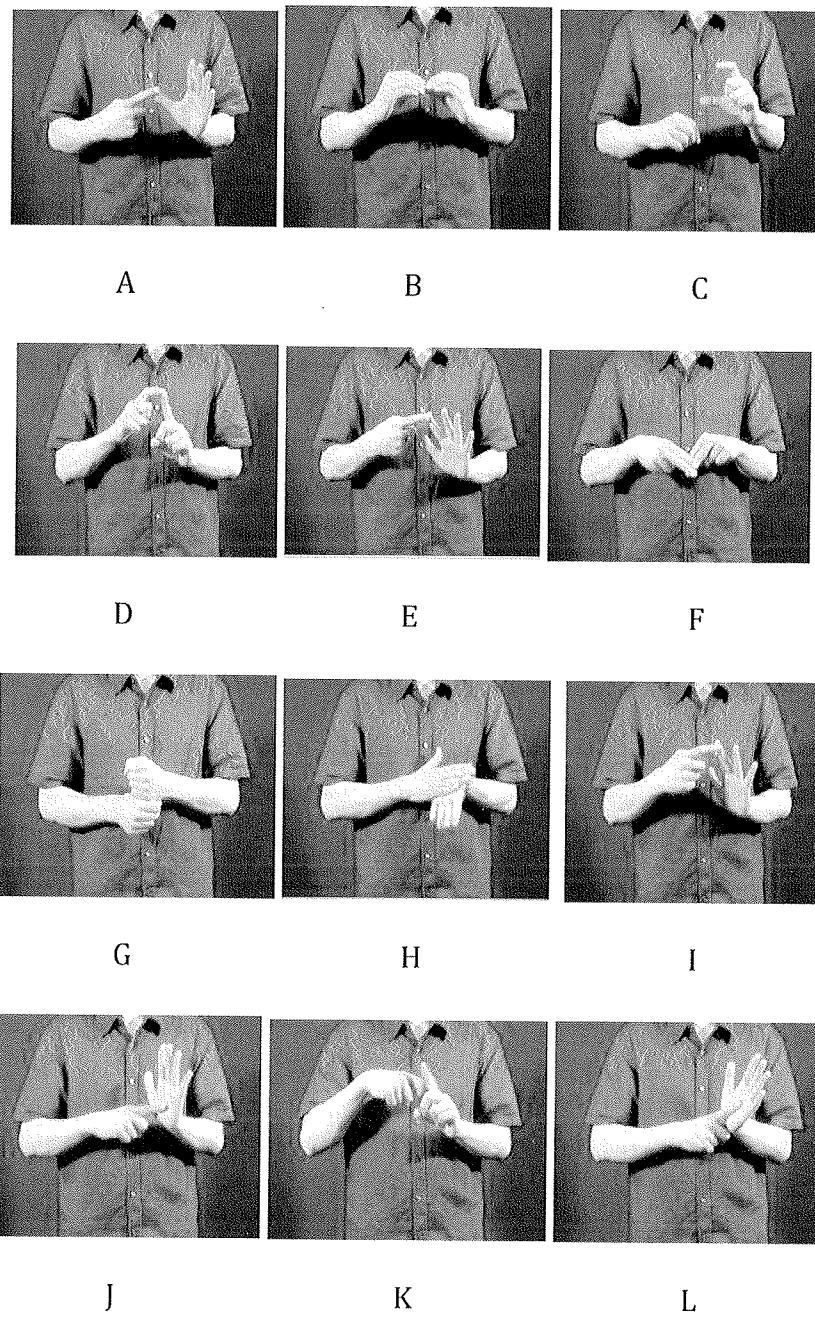
Rutherford (1993) reports that her informants believe this genre to be as old as sign languages themselves, and one Deaf woman dated it at least to the 1900s. Creative language is never static, however, and other forms of manual alphabet play have developed from these straight-forward ABC stories, which are also humorous in their own way. The examples we have found are much more recent and nothing seems to date from before 1960s. "Fingerspelled/ASL word characterisations" require the signer to make signs with each handshape related to the meaning of the word (e.g. B-A-B-Y or C-A-L-F or G-O-L-F). These have to show the character of the word spelled, so that, for example, in G-O-L-F, the G-handshape is orientated so it can be seen as a golf tee, the O-handshape forms the ball that is placed on the tee, the golf-club that swings and hits the ball is made with an L-handshape and the ball flying into the distance is made with an F-handshape.

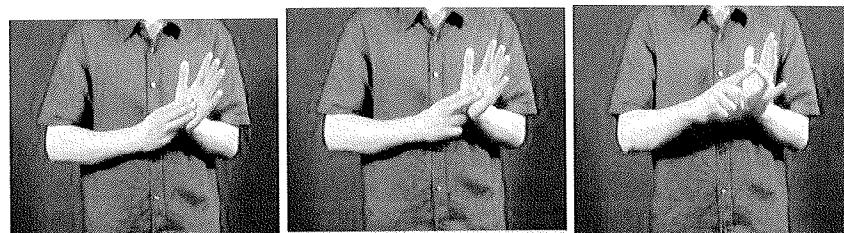
In contrast to these fingerspelled word characterisations, Rutherford identifies "Fingerspelled/Iconic representation," which uses the fingerspelling sequence of handshapes only (not the signs) but gives a visual portrayal of the word itself. For example the fingerspelled words L-E-A-F-F-A-L-L-I-N-G have the movement that echoes a falling leaf, and the letters in B-O-U-N-C-I-N-G-B-A-L-L bounce like a ball. So here the fingerspelling, similarly to what happens in lexicalization, becomes the movement predicate of the event. However, in the normal process of lexicalisation we would not expect a sign to have more than one change in handshape, especially not if it includes a path movement through space. Fingerspellings involve the internal movement of handshape changes but do not have a path movement through space. So in these witty signs of fingerspelled iconic representation some of the delight and humour comes from the fact that the sign bends (if not breaks) the rules of ASL by imposing the movement upon a sign with so many changes in handshape.

While most of our categories in humour described thus far can be comparably exemplified with ASL or BSL jokes, the fingerspelling category cannot. There are relatively few jokes in BSL relying upon the form of the manual alphabet, primarily because of the two-handed nature of British fingerspelling. The different manual alphabets of ASL and BSL lead to very different opportunities for language play. In the British two-handed manual alphabet the non-dominant hand is the base hand against which the dominant hand may actively articulate the letter configuration. In the American one-handed manual alphabet the letters are articulated using a range of hand configurations of a single hand. There is evidence that the lack of fingerspelled items is greatly influenced by the form of the manual alphabet because the game has been adopted in other countries where the manual alphabet is also one-handed. One of the authors of this paper has seen the games played in Brazilian Sign Language (LSB), with V-A-C-A ("cow") spelled as a fingerspelled/LSB word characterisation.

However, the form of the manual alphabet itself is not reason enough to proscribe the creation of ABC games in BSL. Discussion with British Deaf signers makes it clear that ABC stories could be created in BSL if one set

one's creative mind to the task, but that it simply is not part of the tradition of British Deaf humour to do it. In fact, one of the authors here is aware of at least two complete ABC stories in BSL. Both were created and performed by younger signers and one, told to us by Tyrone Wolfe (personal communication, 10 September 2007) is sexually explicit (Rutherford 1993 reports that many ABC stories in ASL told by younger signers also have a sexual theme) and the great humour comes in no small part from the wit used to create the story. Readers unfamiliar with the British Manual Alphabet should refer to Figure 32 here to help understand this explanation.





M

N

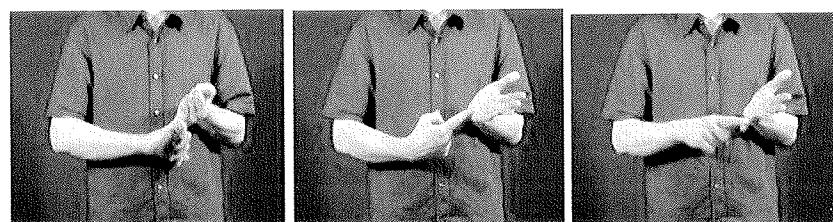
O



P

Q

R



S

T

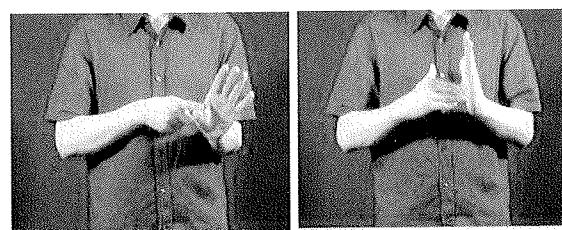
U



V

W

X



Y

Z

Figure 32: The British Manual Alphabet

The story is about love-making and creatively exploits the coincidental similarities between the hand-configurations of the manual letters and other elements of BSL, including signs from established, frozen vocabulary signs and classifier signs using a range of classifiers – whole entity, body part, handling, surface and sketching of size and shape. For example the manual letter A is reinterpreted with the thumb of the non-dominant hand as a body part classifier representing a small penis (this comes, after all, at the start of the activities) and the finger of the dominant hand acts as a handling classifier caressing the thumb. The manual letter B coincidentally has the same hand configuration as an established BSL sign KISS, although a different movement is added, with appropriate facial expression and mouth gestures. The letter C becomes a size and shape specifier as it sketches out the extent of growth of the penis to create the letter D (where the index finger of the non-dominant hand is again a body-part entity classifier – and longer than the thumb). The index finger of the dominant hand in the letter E (again reanalysed as a classifier for the penis) slips between the index and middle fingers of the non-dominant hand, which are reinterpreted as legs, blending into the letter F, which presents the opportunity for two pairs of legs to intertwine. The letter G is reanalysed with additional movement as a handling classifier caressing an increasingly enlarged member. Without going into detail about every letter, we can see that the signer is being particularly linguistically resourceful. For the letter L the index finger of the dominant hand against the palm of the non-dominant hand is reanalysed as a body-part classifier standing for the tongue (an interpretation reinforced by the signer's tongue mirroring the actions). The image is presented again in the letter M as a more close-up shot, using the index, middle and ring fingers to represent the whole blade of the tongue. By the time we get to the letter N, however, the fingers have become the legs lying on a bed. In the manual letter W the hands clasp with interlocking fingers; in the story the interlocking fingers are understood to stand directly for interlocking fingers of the hands of the two lovers. The written letter X is widely understood to mean a kiss, and in this story the signer's lips kiss the fingers of the letter X to mean KISS. In the final letter Z, we have the only letter that uses an established vocabulary item of non-native origin. An informal sign SNORE repeats the manual letter Z rising from the face, reflecting cartoon drawings in which a sleeping person is often depicted with several zeds spiralling upward from the face. It is fully apt then that this should be the final sign of the story as the two lovers drift off into contented sleep.

Another source of humour using the manual alphabet that is common to both languages is doubling or halving the message. A party trick demonstrated by some skilled ASL signers (for example, Mary Beth Miller or Simon Carmel) is to fingerspell two different words on the two hands. Not only does the physical skill required for this create humour, but there is also pleasure in resolving the incongruity of seeing twice the expected message at any one time. British signers, rather than doubling the fingerspelled message (which would require four hands), can halve it so the non-dominant hand is separated from the dominant hand. One game involves using another

person's hand as the non-dominant base hand (sometimes with one signer standing behind the other and putting her arm through to the front of the other signer's body under the other signer's arm, so that she can't see the other hand she is using for the fingerspelling). Another game uses the base hand virtually, so that the two signers in the game may be on opposite sides of the room but simultaneously using the correct hand configurations for their half of the fingerspelled message.

Another British fingerspelling game is to use another location instead of the base hand. Like all language humour, this has its origins in a non-humorous device in the language. We saw above that signers may use another surface such as their bag of shopping or the baby as a PoA for signing. However, when signers use a different PoA for humorous fingerspelling, there may be extra meaning. The word *mad* (used in British English with the same meaning as American English *crazy*) may be fingerspelled in a children's game up the side of the face, with the letter M starting at the mouth, the thumb from the letter A at the cheek and the curved index finger and thumb (in the baby-C-handshape) ending so that the curved index finger ends at the temple. This echoes the X-handshape and PoA of the sign MAD or CRAZY. An alternative form of this modified sign moves up the front of the face, going from the mouth to the nose and ending at the centre of the forehead. This allows children the opportunity to cock a snook by thumbing the nose as the hand moves up.

Less insulting but fun nonetheless is the creative spelling of *deaf*. The handshapes of the active hand form the BSL letters D, E, and A, working their way from the mouth up towards the ear, then the final letter F ends at the ear. The BSL letter F is made with the H-handshape – the same handshape used in the sign DEAF – so the final letter F of the fingerspelled word *deaf* also signs DEAF when articulated at the ear.

When the BSL letters of *bath* are spelled out, the final letter H, articulated by the temple with the brushing movement of the letter H, has an extra meaning of brushing one's hair after the bath. Figure 33 shows these three fingerspelling sign games.



M

A

D

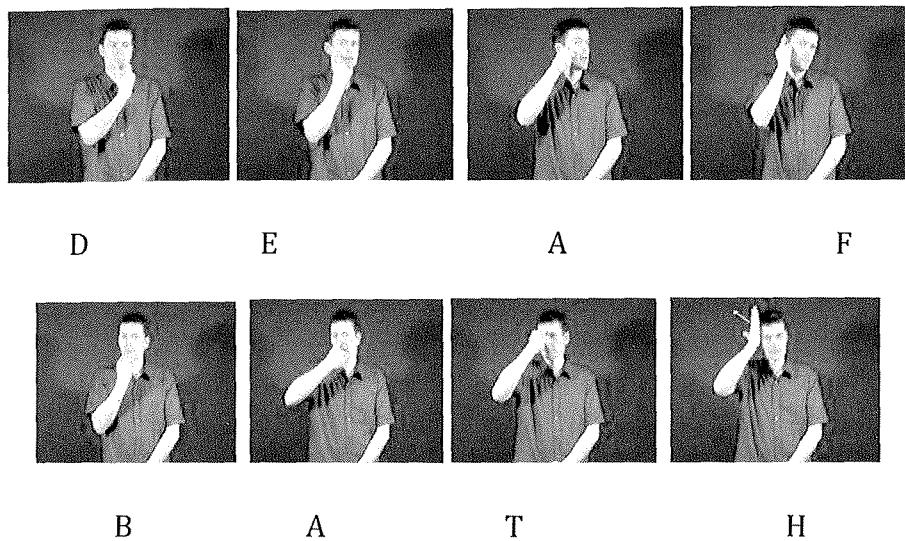


Figure 33: MAD, DEAF and BATH fingerspelled using the face and head as PoA

### 6.2.2 Signed Exact English

Signed Exact English is a form of signing that draws upon the vocabulary of a sign language such as ASL or BSL but produces these in English order with extra elements of English grammar. Bienvenu (1994:22) reports that coded English signs for verb endings, such as -ING or -ED, as well as forms for the verb "to be", such as AM or WERE, "have been reclaimed by Deaf speakers and are used with sarcasm directed toward those who created them. Of course the humour is most pronounced when a contorted face accompanies the deviant signs – an editorial on the ineffectiveness of these codes".

### 6.2.3 Puns

Bilingual puns are common in the humour of many communities where there is at least basic knowledge of two languages. The source of humour requires the audiences to appreciate a complex relationship between form and meaning in both languages. A well-known British children's riddle asks:

#### **Joke 27:**

Q: There are two cats, an English one called "One Two Three" and a French one called "Un Deux Trois". They had a swimming race across the channel. Who won?

A: The English cat, of course, because the Un Deux Trois Cat Sank.

(This needs to be said aloud for the bilingual pun, in which there are similar pronunciations of *cat* and *quatre* and *sank* and *cinq*, to come out most strongly.) A marginally more adult riddle is:

**Joke 28:**

Q: What is the motto of the French navy?

A: "To the water. It is time!"

The riddler has to wait for the victim to translate this into "À l'eau. C'est l'heure!" and then re-parse this into words that sound like the English words "Allo, Sailor!" before applying their knowledge of saucy greetings to sailors on the quayside and the French reputation for romance, coupled with an understanding that military national mottos must not be saucy. The joke is hard work to resolve but often the funnier for the effort invested. Deaf signers are prepared to put the same amount of effort into their bilingual jokes.

Some jokes by English speakers rely on puns between gestures and words. Children's riddles include asking, "What's this?" and pushing their wrist rapidly and threateningly towards the joke's victim, while making a terrifying roar and pulling a scary face. The answer is "A terror wrist". This can be followed up with the fingers of both hands joined to form a large circle, moved in the same way towards the victim, with similar noises and facial expression.

**Joke 29:**

Q: What's this?

A: A vicious circle.

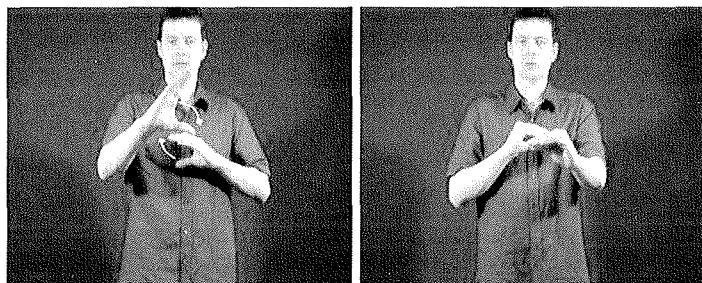
An ASL-English pun is found in the video "Karaoke for the Deaf" performed by Adam Buxton (n.d.). In here Buxton does some ASL, but mostly gestures, as a song plays. Many of the gestures are puns. For example, he mimes someone reeling in a fish as the word *real* is being sung.

Not all bilingual puns are necessarily accessible to all language users. The eighteenth century British soldier Clive of India, on capturing the Indian city of Sind is reported (perhaps apocryphally) to have sent a message back to England saying, "Peccavi". It requires knowledge of Latin to understand the

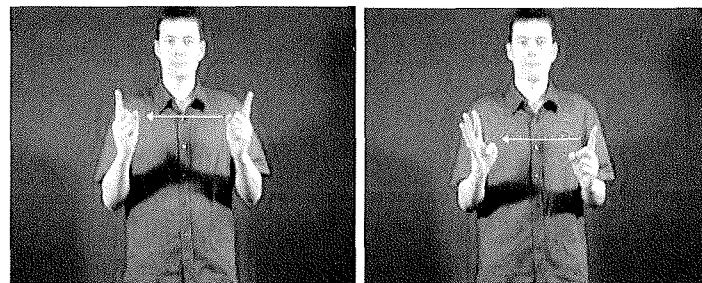
pun "I have (perfect tense) sinned/I have (possessive) Sind". Similarly, not all signers enjoy bilingual puns between BSL and English (and Nakamura 2006 reports on such controversy in Japan between spoken and signed language), and yet loan translation puns are widespread.

Again, the puns have their origins in non-humorous language processes where loan translations are very common as we saw above in the introduction to this chapter.

Humorous attempts at re-analysis of words as signs can lead to games such as ALL MY TEA GOD to translate the English words *Almighty God*, EYES-LOOK-UP (i.e. eyes higher) for *Isaiah* and OUR FATHER ART IN HEAVEN for the opening line of the Lord's Prayer, in which *art* (the obsolete form of the present tense second person intimate singular of the verb *be*) is reanalysed to mean 'fine art' or 'painting'. The BSL message is meaningless, and requires the audience to look beyond the apparent BSL message to the real meaning carried through the back-translation into English. Numerous examples at this level include IN VOICE (*invoice*), ASS SIT (*asset*), MAN GO (*mango*) and MAN GET OUT (*mangetout* - also known as snow peas in the USA). The word metaphor can be reanalysed as MET-A-FOUR. Figure 34 shows the widespread BSL sign METAPHOR, as well as the standard sign MEET (which can be analysed as "one person meets one person") and the playful sign MET-A-FOUR (which can be analysed as "one person meets four people").



Widespread sign METAPHOR



Standard sign MEET

Humorous punning sign MET-A-FOUR

Figure 34: Non-derived BSL sign METAPHOR and punning loan translation MET-A-FOUR

More in-depth games with the language involve creating parameter changes to existing BSL signs, based on the form of the English word. The sign PLAY in both BSL and ASL if articulated at the ears can be enjoyed as a creative pun on the phrase *play it by ear* (Figure 35).

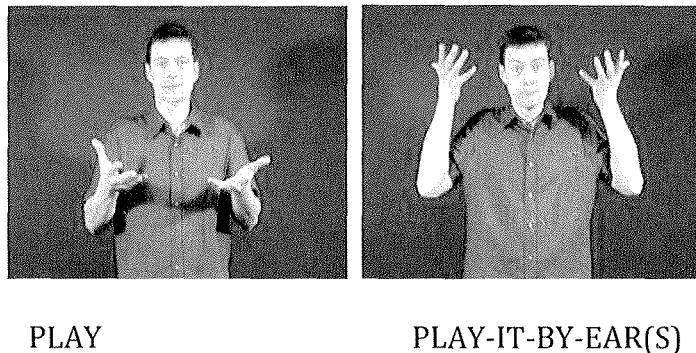
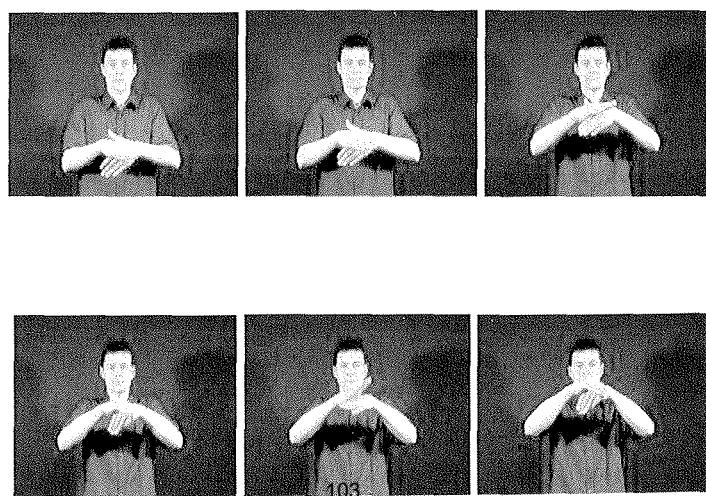


Figure 35: Punning change of location to create a loan translation of the phrase  
“Play it by ear”

Many of these parameter changes in bilingual sign play are coarse, but we have often acknowledged that a great deal of humour is coarse. The phrase *flying fuck* (as in *I don't give a flying fuck what you think* to mean ‘I don't care what you think’) reanalyses one of the signs in BSL meaning ‘fuck.’ This sign uses two B-hands that interlock between the thumb and forefinger. The two hands are thus fairly easily reinterpreted as wings (as the same handshape in similar configurations is seen in signs such as ANGEL and BUTTERFLY). Although the sign FUCK has a sharp inward movement as the two hands interlock, the playful sign FLYING-FUCK has them flapping gently as the hands rise, so that the sign FUCK quite literally flies (Figure 36). Here, again, transformation of one sign into another has happened through the mechanism of incorporation via handshape (the handshape of FUCK is incorporated into the predicate for flying, just as though it were a classifier), similarly to the examples we saw in Section 5.



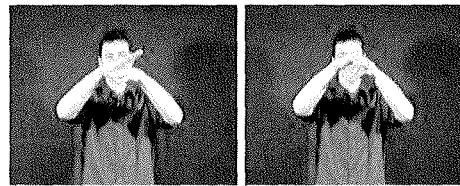


Figure 36: Sequence of movements within the BSL sign FUCK reanalysed as representing wings to create the humorous sign FLYING-FUCK

Less poetically, the English phrase *fucked up* (meaning ‘messed up’) may be humorously signed with the sign FUCK moving upwards (Figure 37). This time the sign FUCK is literally up, giving us an example in which the movement parameter has been modified for humorous effect.

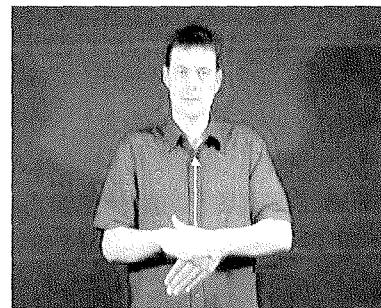


Figure 37: The BSL sign FUCK moved upwards to mean *fuck-up*.

Again, this process occurs in BSL generally, not just in humour. The English phrase *a write-off*, meaning that something cannot be repaired and must be discarded completely, is signed using the sign WRITE but the hand that “writes” leaves the base hand. In this sense, the WRITE is literally off the hand. It is not used humorously but absolutely mundanely, for example, after a car accident in which the car is a write-off.

In both ASL and BSL to indicate that one wants to take a break, normally one signs PAUSE or REST. But, as a joke, one can sign BREAK, which has both S hands mimic breaking something such as a stick. The joke here in a way pokes fun at English for using the same set of sounds and even orthography for two quite different meanings.

One cross-linguistic joke we found in ASL takes into account a pun in English, while poking fun at how ridiculous it is in ASL. The sign for MILK takes an O-handshape in neutral space and squeezes it shut a few times. Moving that squeezing O-handshape from one side to the other in front of the eyes, creates the joke sign for PASTEURISED-MILK (a pun between *past-your-eyes* (which is the movement path of the sign) and *pasteurised*). Other coarse

examples from BSL include CLEVER-DICK and SMART-ARSE, in which the signs CLEVER and SMART are made at the PoAs of signs recognised as meaning PENIS and ARSE respectively.

Another ASL and BSL cross-linguistic pun reported on in Carmel (2006) that is wildly complex involves the joke sign UNDERSTAND in which the signer takes the sign STAND (made by the dominant hand in a V-handshape standing on the nondominant B-handshape) and then rotates the nondominant wrist 180°, so that the dominant hand is now standing underneath the nondominant hand, upside-down (see Figure 38). The play here involves many things. First, the English word *understand* at first glance looks like a compound of *under* plus *stand*, whereas its meaning today (setting aside all history) certainly is not compositional. Second, a loan translation from English into ASL that treated *understand* like a compound would result in a sign (this particular joke sign) that makes apparent the ridiculousness of a compositional analysis of the word/sign. And, third, the articulators in sign have physical realities that allow one to actually see what standing under would mean. In other words, this is a meta joke like those we saw in section 5 which play on the fact that signs are made of body parts in space, and we can see them as physical objects and not just as linguistic entities.

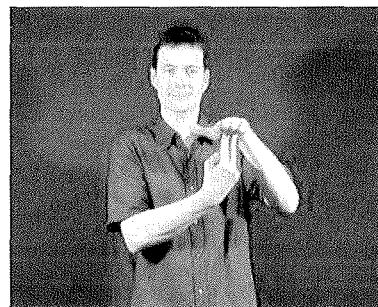


Figure 38: "Understand" reanalysed as "stand under"

Another devious example is in the BSL sign that is derived from the English phrase *[who the] fuck knows* (meaning 'I have no idea'). An F-handshape repeatedly covers the nose as a representation of 'fucking a nose.' (Figure 39) In this wonderfully rude sign the pun on the English words *nose* and *knows* is taken further and turned into a visual representation of what 'fuck nose' would look like as a loan translation.

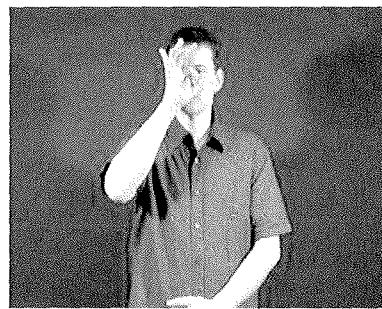


Figure 39: "Fuck knows" reanalysed as "Fuck nose"

Precisely such a loan translation pun occurs also in ASL, with the sign for the name of the Poconos Mountains of Pennsylvania. One needs to know that the word *poconos* has primary stress on the first syllable in order to get the joke. The normal sign is simply to fingerspell the name. The joke sign, however, is to poke one's nose with the index finger of the dominant hand. Here we're playing with the sounds of English and the physical act of poking one's nose, and perhaps also with the fact that the sign FUN is made with the U-handshape (which is the same as the H-handshape) of the dominant hand grazing the tip of the nose before landing on a non-dominant U-hand waiting for it in neutral space.

Another ASL joke we found involves a near pun. For BOEING, the aeroplane company, the standard sign is AEROPLANE (the I-L-handshape bounced forward twice in neutral space) while the lips mouth the English word *boeing*. But a joke sign for BOEING is to make the sign for BORING (a 1-handshape with the tip of the index finger at the side of the nostrils, twisting the wrist), replacing the 1-handshape with the I-L-handshape. Here we have the play on sound similarity in English *Boeing* and *boring*, and the handshape for the first being substituted into the second – that is, a phonological parameter substitution.

An ASL joke sign for the retail company SEARS is made with two S-hands at the ears – that is, s + ear + s. But what makes it a pun is that often signers will push their tongue against a cheek in doing it, to give a visual loan translation that makes clear the tongue-in-cheek nature of the sign.

Similarly, by placing the Y-handshape at the ear we create a joke sign for YEAR – that is, y + ear. It's used often in the phrase HAPPY NEW YEAR. In ASL this is clearly marked as a joke sign but in BSL some older signers use a sign that indicates the ear to mean YEAR and it is not a joke. It may have had its origins in a humorous sign but those origins are no longer immediately obvious to people who use it. In some varieties of both BSL and ASL the sign BIRTHDAY is a tug on the earlobe, which perhaps also has its origins in the sound of the English word *ear*.)

This type of sign play is not unique to ASL and BSL. Nakamura (2006) describes young Japanese signers playing with humorous loan translations. She makes the following observation about their sign PIZZA: "You simply make a P sign on your knee (*hiza* in Japanese). Get it? P + *hiza* = pizza." (2006: 24). She notes that it is a new phenomenon and not one widespread in Japanese Sign Language. Yet the fact that it exists at all is testament to the pleasure that Deaf people with bilingual skills take in playing with the two languages.



## 7. Conclusions

Sign language humour, without a doubt, relies heavily on elements of a language that are usually regarded as being outside the limits of conventionalised language and its established lexicon. These elements may be thought of as gestural activity, particularly non-manual gestural activity. We've seen this throughout the examples in the work here. This should come as no surprise: gesture is widely used in humour regardless of the particular language of the community. The visual gesture in sign language humour, however, is remarkable for its extent, its complexity and its integration with the established lexical and grammatical elements of signed languages.

We have also seen that linguistic play is a wonderfully variable mechanism used in sign language humour. Signers make minor to major modifications of the phonological parameters. The qualities of independence and fertility that we noted in handshape and the qualities of memorability and flexibility in PoA allow multiple types of opportunities for humour. Movement, a flexible and prosodic parameter, is exploited to a significant degree, as well. Additionally signers make creative use of morphology, syntax, and semantics, capitalising on processes that exist in the grammar already, such as incorporation and faceting.

What we conclude, though, is that neither gestural activity nor linguistic play alone is enough to constitute sign language humour. In our viewing experience, a true joke based on linguistic play is never performed without accompanying gestural activity. If one were to try to do so, the result would be nothing more than clever. And, while slickness of that sort might elicit admiration for the skill or intelligence of the signer, it probably wouldn't produce laughter or delighted amazement. Facial expression, in particular, marks one as using signs as language – rather than treating signs as though they are nothing more emotive than, say, a mathematical formula.

On the other hand, gestural activity that doesn't somehow involve linguistic play also isn't quite true sign language humour. To pull in the audience, we need the awareness of the vehicle, that is, of the fact that we are using a community's sign language. Use of a sign language is the cohesive factor; it's what defines the audience as being the right audience for this joke.

We want to end this monograph, then, by stressing two major points – one important to the field of cognitive science and one important to the field of Deaf studies.

First, everything in this monograph is evidence for double-scope blending of the type discussed in works on Conceptual Integration Theory (Fauconnier and Turner 2002). We have seen repeatedly that sign language humour does not invent new linguistic forms, but instead uses a cognitive blend to exploit

existing grammatical apparatus through the acts of compressing and making analogies, metaphors, and category extensions, often between things as disparate as human beings and bouncing balls. Sign language humour is a playground for mental spaces and their relations to revel in conceptual integration networks.

Crucially, it is hard to imagine a signed language that couldn't do such a thing. Indeed, what would a signed language consist of if it couldn't do these things? Signs, by calling for cooperation of so many body-parts in the act of communication, beg for the signer to blend the various human singularities. It would be almost impossible to sign without them (and see Napoli and Sutton-Spence (in progress) for discussion of the potential relevance of this point to the debate on the origins of language).

Our second concluding point is that the role of sign language humour is both personal and social. Being able to play with your language involves a profound understanding of the language, whether conscious or not. So for a Deaf person, who maybe came to human language later than his hearing counterpart, being able to tell a joke is like a diamond - the best treasure of all. This may well be part of why Deaf people love jokes so much, and sign language jokes (as we have defined them in this book) especially. Language itself – the very entity, the very human capability – is so dear to Deaf people, and being able to play with it means they own it absolutely. This is the personal importance of sign language humour.

The social importance is only slightly less extreme. Linguistic play strengthens community bonds, allowing for laughter based on shared experience and knowledge. A pun may be just a pun in a spoken language, but in a signed language, it is often a gem, a precious stone to be held up for deep appreciation.

This is not to say that awareness of language structure is unimportant to the hearing person or to creating bonds within hearing communities. Certainly, it is important. But awareness of language structure is essential to the identity of a Deaf person and to the cohesion of Deaf culture, and these are the crucial roles of sign language humour – helping to define and celebrate sign languages, Deaf identity and Deaf culture.

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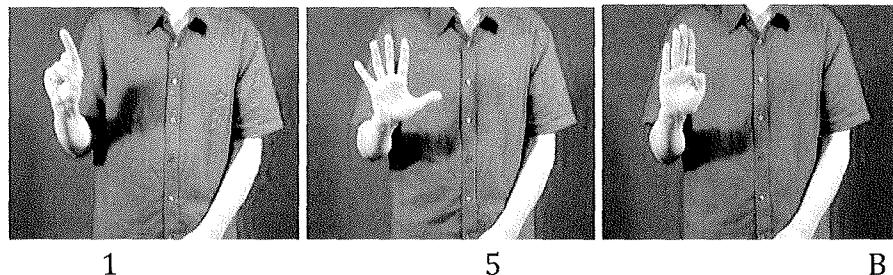
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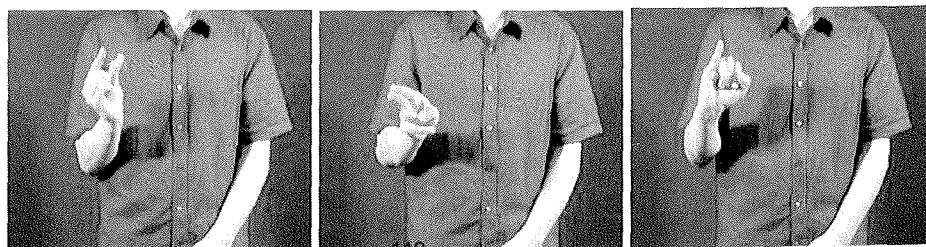
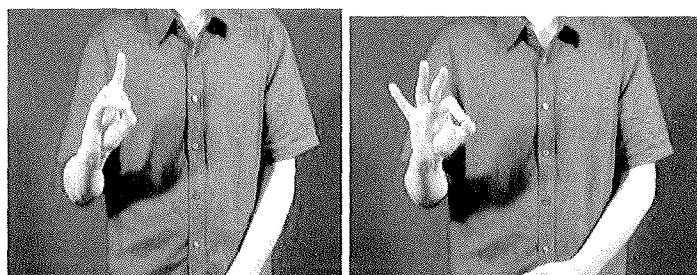
## Appendix 1: Conventions

*Most common handshapes used in ASL and BSL:*

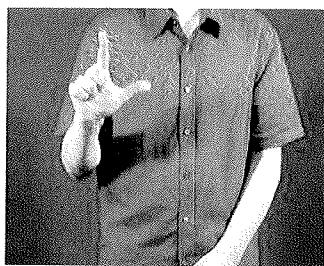


*Other, less common handshapes:*

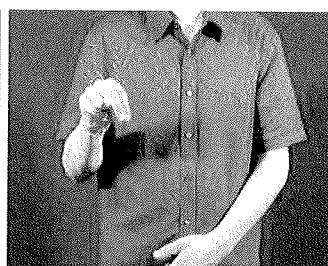
Handshapes named from letter handshape used in the ASL manual alphabet:



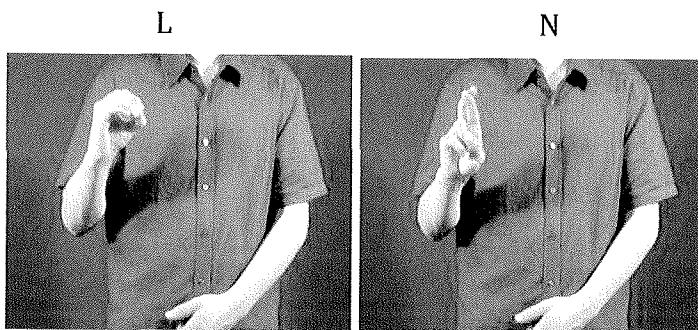
G



H



I



O

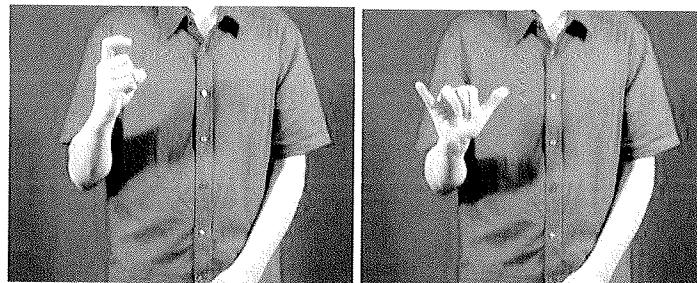
N



S

T

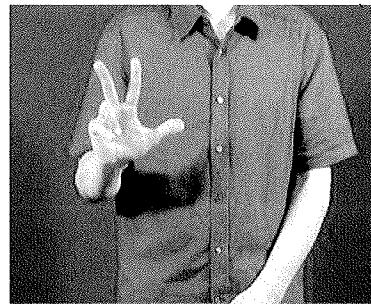
V



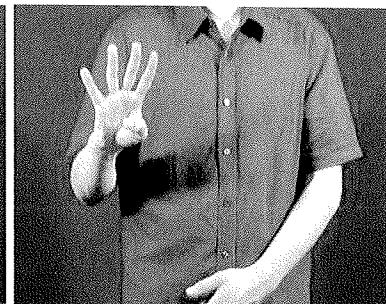
X

Y

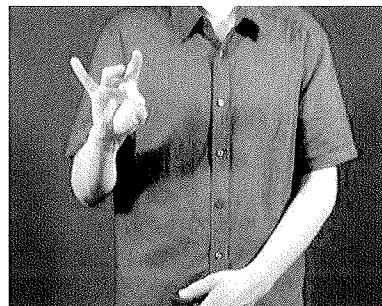
**Handshapes named from number handshapes in ASL counting system:**



3

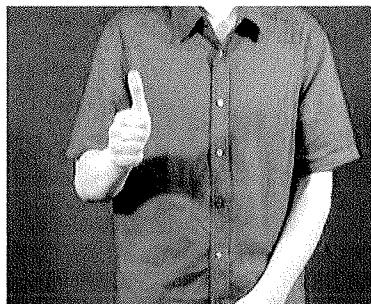


4

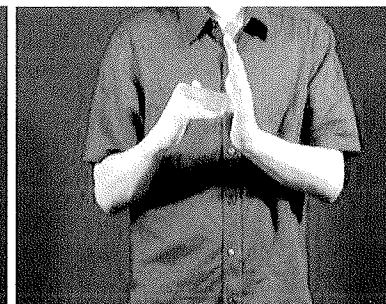


8

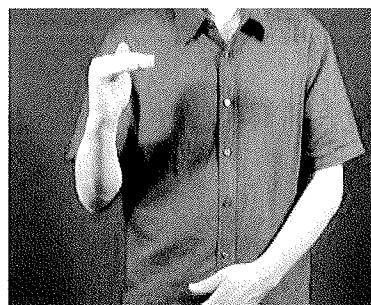
**Other handshapes mentioned in the text:**



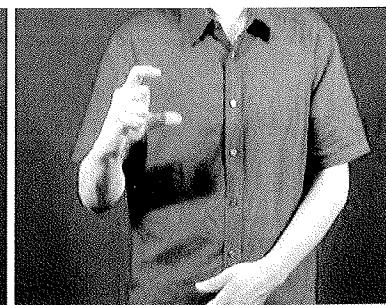
'GOOD', A with thumb out



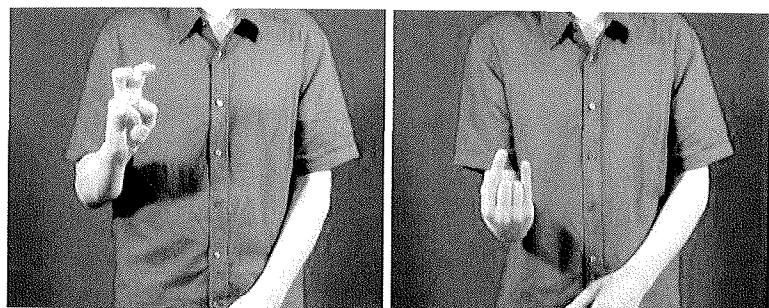
BSL Z



Flat B

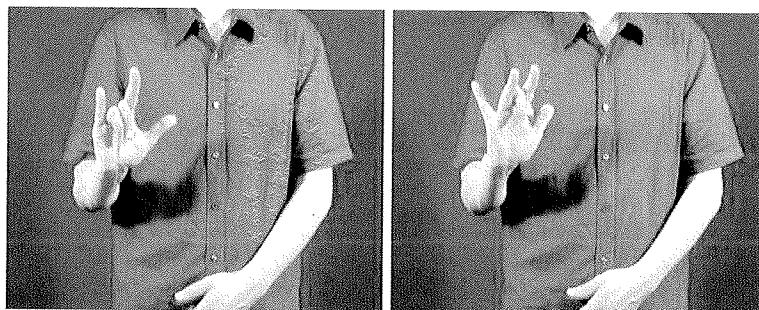


BSL-C



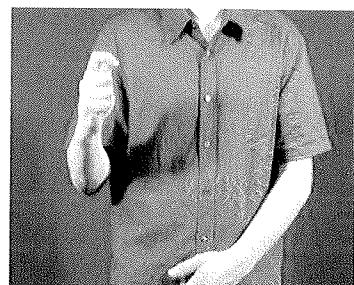
Clawed V

1-I



IL or ILY

Open-8



Irish T

It is a serious book about humor—this is what the best of them are. Yes, the authors do understand and savor the deaf jokes but they never forget the ASL/BSL linguistics behind every single one of them. The coverage of the techniques is pretty exhaustive. One leaves the book with an incredibly ingratiating feeling of having learned something new quite well. And it is written with gusto and passion. The authors are also free of the “first-timer” syndrome: writing about humor like nobody has done it before—they have certainly done their homework in humor research as indeed in everything else. Rarely do outsiders, two hearing authors, achieve so much insight and share it in such an accomplished manner.

*Victor Raskin, Distinguished Professor of English and Linguistics, Purdue University; Past President, International Society of Humor Studies; Founder, *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research**