

Name Signs in American Sign Language*

Mollie R. Wild

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Linguistics

Swarthmore College

April 29, 2017

Abstract

Here, I discuss the history and origin of name signs in American Sign Language from their first appearances in the early 19th century (Supalla 1992:23) to present day. Most name signs in American Sign Language are fully arbitrary, or based off the written name and providing no extra information about the subject, but many are also fully descriptive and do not reference the written name at all. In other signed languages such as French Sign Language and Sign Language of the Netherlands, descriptive name signs or direct translations of the written name like HOPE are preferred. I discuss descriptive name signs and their growing prominence in the ASL-signing Deaf community, the increasing use of combination-type name signs, and finally, I analyze the constraints Samuel Supalla proposed for arbitrary name signs in 1990. In this preliminary analysis, I find evidence for additions to his constraints—nonmanual components; a new location at the contralateral breast, opposite the main hand; and rotational contact in addition to simple and brushing—as well as some constraints that appear to have fallen out of favor, such as articulating a name sign on the contralateral arm or using multiple locations in a single name sign. This evidence is enough to suggest the need for a more in-depth study on name signs in the near future.

*There were a great many people who made this thesis possible. First, I would like to thank Melanie Drolsbaugh, who not only generously agreed to review and comment on my data but also provided many more resources and examples from her own life and taught me all of the ASL I know. I would also like to thank my thesis readers, Ian Holloway and Elizabeth “Beppie” van den Bogaerde, as well as Donna Jo Napoli for their support, critiques, and for sending me anything they thought might be useful. I would like to thank Julie Rothstein for her tireless support and for much-needed assistance in collecting data for my corpus as well as my roommate Sam Gray, Mark Gee, and Evan Greene, all three of whom have supported me, encouraged me, covered for me, forced me to sleep, and nagged me into working for the past year. I could not have done this without you. Finally, I would like to thank my advisor, Ted Fernald, for all he’s done.

Table of Contents

1	Introduction	3
2	Background	3
3	Phonology of ASL	4
4	Naming across Signed Languages	5
4.1	Descriptive Name Signs	7
4.2	Arbitrary Name Signs	9
4.3	Combination Name Signs	14
4.4	ASL Name Sign Usage Conventions	15
5	Methods	17
6	Analysis	18
6.1	Location	18
6.2	Movement	19
6.3	Contact	20
6.4	Orientation	21
6.5	Nonmanuals	22
7	Conclusion	23
References		24
Image Credits		24
Works Cited		25
Data Sources		26
8	Appendix	28

1 Introduction

American Sign Language, or ASL, is a manual-visual language most commonly used by Deaf communities in the United States and Canada but can be found worldwide. It has been gaining respect and traction after William Stokoe published *Sign Language Structure* in 1960. According to Ethnologue, American Sign Language has over 270,000 users world-wide, most of whom are Deaf, but also many hearing children of Deaf adults (codas) and some hearing people involved with the Deaf community. Most American Sign Language users are also fluent in English and have an English name in addition to their name sign, which they use for written documents (Supalla 1992:9).

Name signs themselves are special signs that uniquely identify a single person in the context of their community. They may be based on a characteristic of that person, their written name, or, in some rare cases, both. A name sign is a gift, not a choice, and follow very specific rules for usage. Arbitrary name signs, the name signs based on the written name, also follow very specific phonological rules that are a subset of the usual phonological constraints found in ASL (Supalla 1990). Here, I examine his conclusions to demonstrate potential need for an updated study.

2 Background

American Sign Language derives from French Sign Language, or LSF, which was brought to the United States in 1817 by Laurent Clerc and Thomas Gallaudet (Supalla 1992:23-25). The pair founded the first School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut and drew students from across the United States. The sign language Clerc and Gallaudet taught incorporated the regional signs that their pupils had developed at home as well as signs from LSF, and fostered a sense of Deaf community and Deaf pride across the country (Gallaudet University Hall of Fame). ASL has since diverged heavily from LSF, but evidence of its origin remains in the handshapes used for some common ASL words. Some signs in ASL are initialized but use the French word for an object or action rather than for English; for example, the handshape ‘V’ for *voir* is used in the sign SEE rather than handshape ‘S’.

Hearing educators, led by Alexander Graham Bell, attempted to block the spread of ASL, claiming that it was much more important to teach Deaf children to speak clearly, a theory called “oralism” (Drosbaugh 2008:49). While the ramifications of the 1880 International Congress on the Education of the Deaf in Milan, which blocked

educators from teaching sign, are still a problem today (Gallaudet University Hall of Fame), linguists have clearly demonstrated that American Sign Language is a complete and fully-developed language in its own right, not a codified version of spoken English. Since then, significant research has been done on the language; it is, however, still very under-studied.

Most ASL signers do not learn ASL as their first language. Roughly 90% of Deaf children are born to hearing parents, who are rarely able to sign (Supalla 1992:16). These children may not get access to a signing community until they start school, although Deaf children who receive an oralist education may not encounter ASL until college or even at all (Drolsbaugh 2008:115). Unfortunately, many parents of Deaf children fear signing will negatively impact their child's ability to learn English and actively seek to keep their child away from ASL. Deaf children with residual hearing or who get cochlear implants are often expected to behave as if they are hearing and are also discouraged from using ASL (Drolsbaugh 2008:12). As a result, many Deaf signers are not fluent in ASL, despite using it as their primary means of communication, and American Sign Language has a high amount of regional variation. The primary consultant for this paper, Melanie Drolsbaugh, uses a New England dialect of ASL.

3 Phonology of ASL

Because I remark later upon the sub-phonology of arbitrary name signs, I will first give a basic description of the phonology of lexical signs in order to compare the two. Every sign in ASL consists of three components: the place of articulation, the hand shape, and the type of motion (or lack thereof) (Battinson 1978:200). For many signs, orientation of the hand, region of contact for the hand, type of contact, and non-manual markers such as shoulder or eyebrow movement are also important; these are not relevant to every sign, however, as the sign may be articulated in neutral space or may not have any specific non-manual required.

Battinson proposes five categories of sign based on the interactions between the hands: Single-handed articulation in neutral space; single-handed articulation that contacts the body but does not contact the opposite hand; symmetrical articulation, where both hands move with the same handshape, either moving in the same or opposite directions; two-handed signs where both hands share a common handshape but only the dominant hand moves; and two-handed signs in which only the dominant hand moves and which use different handshapes. In this last case, the non-dominant

hand must take one of a limited number of hand shapes. Battinson posits a combination of two or more of these as a 6th “type” of sign, but its existence is not relevant at all to name signs. In the two-handed case where hand shapes differ, the non-dominant hand must take one of seven handshapes: A, S, B, 5, G, C, or O (that’s , , , , , , or ).¹

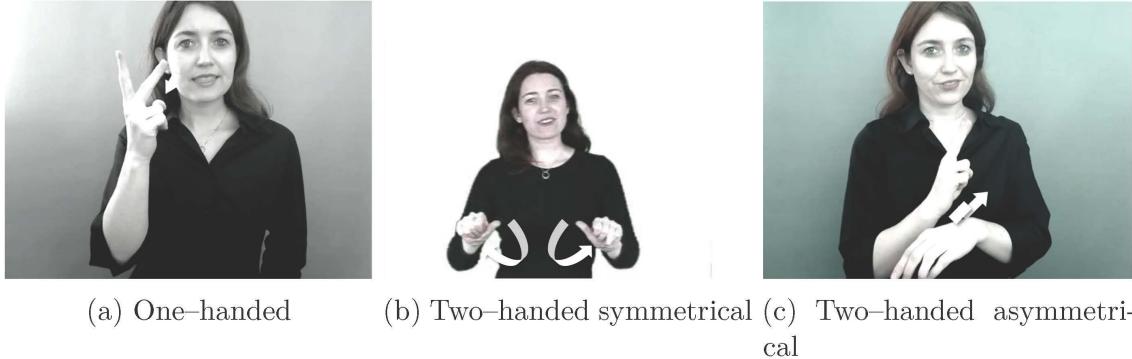


Figure 1: Three kinds of sign: retrieved from handspeak online ASL–English dictionary April 3, 2017

The Handspeak website lists a set of 54 ‘primes,’ an equivalent for handshapes similar to spoken phonemes. While these primes can be broken down into smaller features including selected fingers, aperture size, and joint configuration (Brentari 2011:14), for the purposes of this analysis, what is important is that these primes include handshapes found in the manual alphabet, such as their 10-n  as well as handshapes that are not, such as ‘10-num’  or ‘2-claw’  (Lapiak 2013), although that last may be used to represent ‘Z-Z’ in fingerspelling.

4 Naming across Signed Languages

Supalla defines name signs as “the proper names of persons in a community using a visual-gestural language” (Supalla 1990:99). So, wherever you might find a vibrant Deaf community, you will naturally come across some sort of name sign system. The structure of those signs varies from language to language, but all of them are used to identify individuals in the same way as spoken names.

Some customs of use remain constant across signed languages. For example, Schuit, in an investigation of signed names across various cultures, claims that “[a] signer will never start addressing someone with the addressee’s name sign” (Schuit

¹The handshape fonts are created by CSLDS, CUHK.

2009:25). Some of the most common kinds of name signs across languages are descriptive; descriptive name signs can have positive or negative connotations, although strong negative connotations are avoided. These appear in ASL, Swedish Sign Language, Québec sign language, British Sign Language, Sign Language of the Netherlands, and French Sign Language (Schuit 2009 and Supalla 1992), although they almost certainly exist in other signed languages as well.

Arbitrary name signs are the most common kind in ASL, although they also appear in Swedish Sign Language and, in a different form and less commonly, in British Sign Language. Supalla believes that the arbitrary name system in ASL may have been invented by Laurent Clerc, but he does not offer any suggestions as to where the system may have originated in other signed languages.

The third kind of name sign observed by Schuit is the loan translation. While Schuit described both this type of name sign and arbitrary name signs as “loan translations,” I feel like the label is more accurately applied narrowly. These name signs are based on the written name from the surrounding hearing culture. They could be translated directly from the meaning of the written name or can be puns on the written name; for example, Schuit shares an example signed name from BSL: CHERRY could be assigned to a person with the English name “Jerry” because *Jerry* and *Cherry* look identical when lipreading. This practice is common in British Sign Language and also occurs in Swedish Sign Language, Québec Sign Language, and Sign Language of the Netherlands. The construction is less common in ASL but may still sometimes occur in descriptive name signs, as in figure 2.

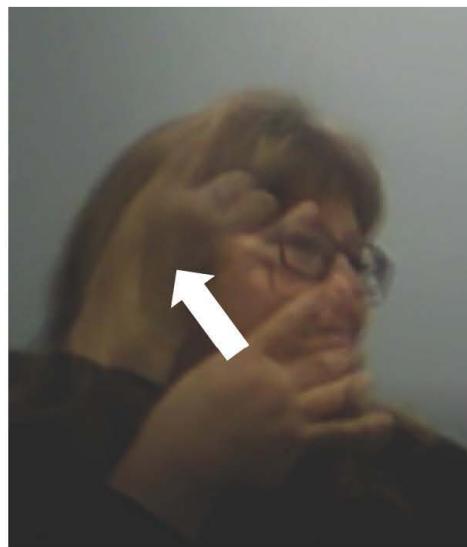


Figure 2: My consultant’s name sign, MELANIE: originally a combination of the signs MELON and HEAD but now just MELON.

4.1 Descriptive Name Signs

Descriptive name signs reference some stand-out trait, whether physical, such as a scar or a mustache; related to the individual's personality; occupation; or some other feature—for example, name signs based on locker numbers are common at some residential schools. These name signs are more commonly given by children or friends of an individual than their parents (Supalla 1992). Descriptive name signs may be used as nicknames, but they are not intrinsically so; they are as valid a form of name as arbitrary name signs are, if perhaps less popular (ASL Inside 2016).



Figure 3: A potential name sign for someone with buckteeth

Despite having a particular meaning in addition to the designation of an individual, the logic behind a descriptive name sign might not be immediately obvious to outsiders. For example, if the sign is based off of a transient physical characteristic, like hair style or facial hair, the name sign will persist even after the feature is no longer relevant. Drolsbaugh's personality has changed significantly since she was at Gallaudet, but the name sign she received there—for a combination of her behavior and a pun on her written name—persists (see figure 2). Even name signs based off of more permanent characteristics may not be immediately obvious; Mindess describes one respondent who “realized [late] that one boy [in his residential school] had a name sign that made reference to the shape of his nose. But, [...] he had never thought of that while he was using the name sign; it was the boy’s sign name, it stood for the boy himself and not his nose” (Mindess 1990:7). During our consultation session, Melanie Drolsbaugh also told me about two of her friends who, independently of each other, named a child after their birth order. One, the second of three children, was named **SECOND**, and another, the youngest of three, was **THREE** (see figure 4). While these signs make sense in the context of their families and are clearly not arbitrary, they do not actually give outsiders any more information about the person.



Figure 4: The third child, Logan, gets the name sign THREE

Furthermore, as Thomas Holcomb demonstrates in his Youtube video “Name Signs,” a descriptive name sign may start out as a lexical sign but then change form over time. One example he gives is CRY transforming to an index finger swiping at a cheek to function as a name sign (figure 5).



(a) One-handed variation of CRY (b) A name sign for someone who cries often

Figure 5: The evolution of the descriptive name sign from the lexical sign CRY

The sign remains descriptive and is not initialized, but the handshape, motion, and orientation have all changed slightly. I believe this is similar to a process Mindess observed in fingerspelled names: “such names (e.g. J-O-E, A-L) were produced in a stylized way: the palm was not kept facing forward [...] for J-O-E but was twisted back to face the signer; and A-L was really an ‘L’ handshape with the index finger flicking up and down. These resemble fingerspelled loan signs (Battinson 1978) more than standard fingerspelling” (Mindess 1990:12). I believe this is a process used to

differentiate a descriptive name sign from its base lexical sign, although I do not have enough examples to observe further.

Now, in 1990, Supalla observed that most Deaf parents assign their children arbitrary name signs. Mindess supports this, noting that the four people in her group who had Deaf parents with descriptive names all gave their children arbitrary name signs (Mindess 1990:6). My consultant, however, provided several examples of Deaf parents who gave their children descriptive name signs (see figure 4). She noted that the child who received a descriptive name was usually the youngest and suggested that descriptive name signs might be making a resurgence. While, again, I do not currently have access to the data it would take to check that claim, it is an excellent avenue for further research.

4.2 Arbitrary Name Signs

Arbitrary name signs are initialized signs that usually consist of one to two handshapes (Supalla 1990:103). They are based off of an individual's written name in that they usually use the first letter of the first name as the handshape, but they do not resemble a pre-existing sign, and the form of the sign cannot be predicted from the written name. Arbitrary name signs may carry some small semantic information, but this is not meant to describe the bearer to an outsider. Often, this semantic content will take the form of a certain place of articulation "feeling right" to the namer (Mindess 1990:13) or else the location remaining constant between siblings (see figure 6 for one example).



(a) Melanie's first name sign

(b) Melanie's Deaf younger sister, Shawna



(c) Melanie's hearing older brother, Lance

(d) Melanie's hearing older sister, Shelly

Figure 6: Melanie Drolsbaugh with her siblings. All four share a common place of articulation.

Arbitrary name signs have a phonology of their own, a subset of that of general ASL, and it is relatively strict in what it allows. For example, whereas most words in ASL can use one of a variety of handshapes from the manual alphabet or number system as well as and a set of common variations on these, including FLAT B and 8-OPEN, name signs may only consist of the 25 distinct hand shapes in the manual alphabet (Supalla 1990). Z does not appear to be in common use in arbitrary name signs, probably because it requires movement.

Furthermore, the places of articulation and movements available for name signs are also a smaller subset of those available for general ASL words. Name signs are frequently articulated in places unusual for other words, such as the waist or the contralateral wrist, to avoid confusion with a lexical sign. However, name signs may also be articulated on the forehead or chin, which are more common locations in general, so long as the handshape is not used for a different sign in that area (Supalla 1990). Locations with strong semantic associations, such as the nose, are generally not used for arbitrary name signs, although they may be found in descriptive signs.

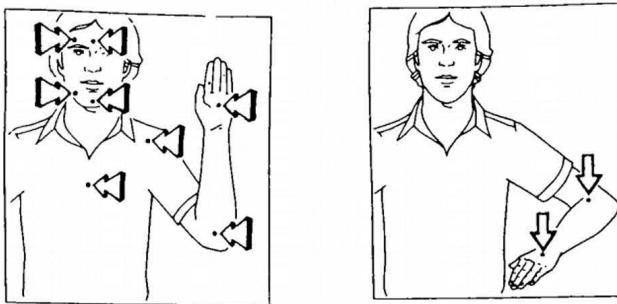
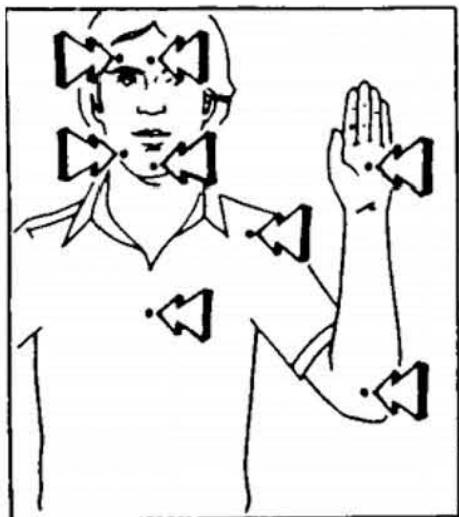


Figure 7: Supalla's list of valid locations for arbitrary name signs articulated in one spot (1990:107)

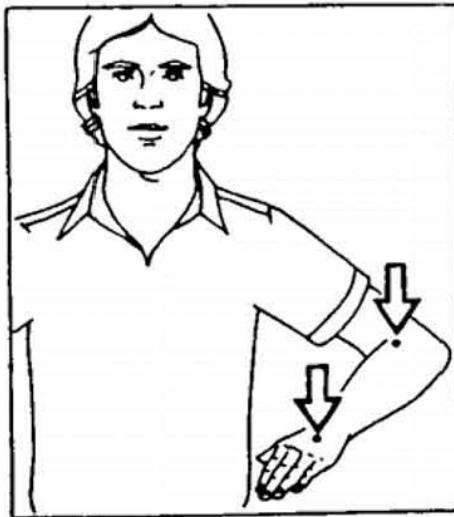
All arbitrary ASL name signs are one-handed. Supalla (1990) lists three possible contact types and the restrictions for each: neutral space (i.e. no contact), single location contact, and double location contact. For single- and double-location contact, a name sign requires two taps or two brushes, either contacting twice with a single handshape or contacting once with a first handshape and then again with the second, often used if the last name is incorporated into the name sign or to make two otherwise-identical name signs distinct (Supalla 1990:119) (see also figure 6d). For a name sign in neutral space, the hand should either shake from side to side or move laterally.



(a) Single-location, horizontal contact



(b) Double-location, horizontal contact



(c) Single-location, vertical contact



(d) Double-location, vertical contact

Figure 8: Valid locations and movements for arbitrary name signs (Supalla 1990:113)

Orientation for name signs in free space is the same as if the speaker were finger-spelling normally, but valid orientations for contact name signs depend on both the hand shape and the location of contact. Each hand shape licenses specific regions of the hand to make contact with the body: the tips of the fingers, the radial side of the hand, the ulnar side of the hand, the side of the thumb, or the palm. Each location of articulation also licenses a small number of possible hand orientations—when the point of contact in a single-location name sign or the second point of contact in a double-location name sign is the opposite arm held vertically, the face, or the torso, then the main hand moves on the horizontal plane and is oriented vertically. Licensed

contact locations include finger tips, the radial side of the hand, and the palm. When the location of contact is the opposite arm held horizontally, however, the radial side of the main hand is not licensed—instead, the side of the thumb and the ulnar side of the hand are valid contact regions, and the hand’s orientation is vertical. With these two sets of constraints, a hand shape at a given location may only have one or two possible orientations. Some contact regions that are valid in the wider range of ASL words, such as the wrist or the back of the hand, are not valid contact regions for arbitrary name signs (Supalla 1990).

For a name sign that contacts the body in one location, contact is either made twice, either with the same handshape both times or once with the first handshape and once with the second; or once with the first handshape which, after contact, moves into neutral space and the second handshape. Simple, tapping contact is required for two-handshape name signs, but the contact may be a brushing motion for single-handshape name signs. All three types of contact are demonstrated in figure 9.



(a) LYDIACALLIS with single contact and then second initial into neutral space
 (b) SOPHIE with simple contact
 (c) SOPHIE with brushing contact

Figure 9: Supalla’s three kinds of single-location contact, all name signs assigned by Deaf signers

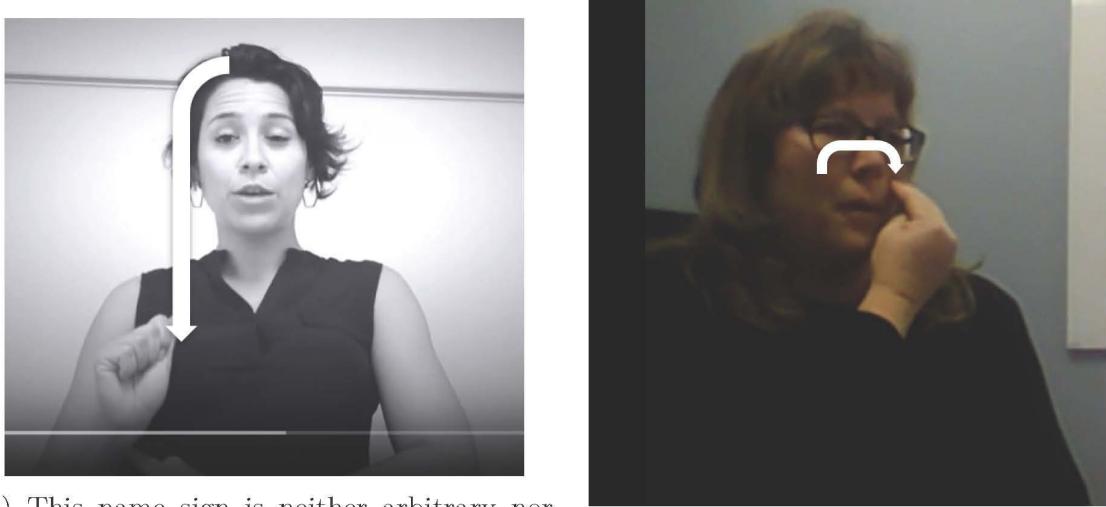
Double-location name signs do not differentiate between single, repeated hand shapes for a name sign based on a first name and two hand shapes based on a first and last name that happen to start with the same letter; for example, the single initial name sign T for TIMOTHY could be articulated in the same way as the double initial name sign TT for TIMOTHY TYSON (Supalla 1990). Valid locations of articulation for double-location name signs differ slightly from those licensed for single-location name signs, but they are also a subset of the contact locations valid in broader ASL. Path motion for double-location name signs must be either from left to right or from top to bottom (see figure 8).

4.3 Combination Name Signs

Combination name signs mix arbitrary and descriptive name signs. While they do pop up from time to time, combination name signs are not considered valid by most Deaf signers and are thus not mentioned in the beginning of §4 (Mindess 1990:15). Like an arbitrary name sign, a combination name sign makes use of the letters of an individual's written name, but it includes a strong descriptive component. The two name signs are combined through one of two techniques common in the formation of novel signs: "blending," where aspects of two or more signs are combined to create a new sign with elements of meaning from both constituents; or "incorporation," where two complete signs are combined simultaneously and both contribute to the meaning of the new sign (Hoeksema and Napoli 2009).

In general, combination name signs are used more as nicknames than actual names. Frequently, these signs are derogatory; consider the sign ALEXANDER-GRAHAM-BELL. Hated in the Deaf community for his support of eugenics and attacks on the legitimacy of signed languages, one potential name sign for Bell is AGB articulated at the forehead, which may be understood as the lexical signs DUMB, PINHEAD, and BASTARD sequentially (Mirus 2008:102).

When not used in a nickname, combination name signs are generally used by hearing people. Hearing people learning ASL who aren't very active in the Deaf community may try and assign themselves a name sign, or hearing parents may attempt to assign a name sign to their Deaf children. Frequently, they do not know the semantic and phonological restrictions on name signs and, accidentally or intentionally, pick a name sign based on their initials that still carries some non-arbitrary meaning. For example, coda and ASL interpreter Lydia Callis wrongly gives a combination name sign, A + LONG HAIR, in her Youtube video "Name Signs, What's That About" as an example of a common name sign.



- (a) This name sign is neither arbitrary nor descriptive.
- (b) This name sign is similar to those found in British Sign Language.

Figure 10: Two examples of combination name signs used by or given to codas.

Alternatively, Supalla claims, some Deaf people might assign hearing signers combination name signs either in order to mark them as hearing, or because that is what the hearing signer expects in a name sign (Supalla 1992:13). Drolsbaugh recalls the example of a coda named Nicole whose name sign uses the handshape R and the movement, orientation, and location of FLOWER to match her middle name, Rose (figure 10b). Political figures and religious figures are also usually assigned combination name signs.

4.4 ASL Name Sign Usage Conventions

All name signs in the ASL-using Deaf community have a set of strict constraints on their use that differ from those of English. For example, an individual can never choose their own name, *especially* if they are not Deaf. Instead, if they are not named by their parents, their name is given to them upon becoming active in the Deaf community and may change as their role in that community does. Until they have received a name sign, the individual will fingerspell their written name instead. People with short written names like *Lee* might never receive a name sign because their written name can be fingerspelled so quickly. Receiving a name sign is a great honor, whether one is hearing or Deaf.

The reasons that an individual may not choose their own name are twofold. First, if a person who is not fluent in ASL attempts to choose a name sign for themselves, there is a very good chance it will be structured incorrectly or too closely resemble

a pre-existing sign. For example, an L placed on the chin may seem like a plausible arbitrary name sign, but it is too similar to the sign LESBIAN and inappropriate for a name.



Figure 11: Not an appropriate name sign.

Secondly, and more importantly, name signs are very strongly rooted in the local Deaf community. An individual's name sign, especially if it is descriptive, defines them in the context of the Deaf community and how they fit into the larger whole. Furthermore, name signs are unique identifiers, so no two individuals in one area may share a name sign. If two people find themselves with matching name signs (for example, if one moves to a new city or starts at a new school after having already been assigned a name sign), one or both individuals must modify their sign. Usually, the person who is new to the community or younger in age is the one to change their name sign, but a Deaf person will always keep the same name sign over a hearing person regardless of standing or age. The new name sign will usually either expand to include the signer's last initial, some unique identifier—Mindess gives the example S-LITTLE and S-BIG for an adult and child with the same name sign (Mindess 1990:11)—or take on a new articulation. Of the 20 Deaf people Mindess interviewed, 35% had changed their name sign at least once.

Also, because name signs are not used in conversation with the named individual, and because when an individual is present they are usually indexed by pointing rather than by name, a person's name sign will very rarely be used when they are present (Mindess 1990:8). Furthermore, a person will rarely sign their own name sign. It is used mostly by friends and family to refer to them when they are not present, and, as such, a new acquaintance is only likely to learn it after talking to the person's friends.

To introduce themselves, people will generally fingerspell their written name rather than use their name sign (Supalla 1992:20).

5 Methods

In order to examine name signs currently in use, I gathered a small corpus of arbitrary name signs, reproduced here in Appendix I. I initially searched for school databases of students or faculty in hopes that, along with basic description like class year and written name, I would find name signs; but, this resource, if it does exist at some institutions, was not available to outsiders. I instead searched Youtube, articles written by or about Deaf people, and Twitter for examples of arbitrary name signs in use. Some of these sources were videos meant to teach the viewer ASL and gave examples of possible name signs; others were more personal, containing name signs belonging to the Youtuber or their family and friends. I searched mostly for videos of name signs but in some places used gif images or written description as well. In order to judge if a name sign was arbitrary, I first confirmed that the language in use was actually ASL, the handshape was a letter in the manual alphabet, and the sign was not a lexical sign. For this, I used an ASL-English dictionary as well as my own knowledge of ASL, and I later confirmed that each was arbitrary in my conversation with Drolsbaugh, and she provided more examples from her own life.

Because I was focused mostly on gathering arbitrary name signs at this stage, I discarded name signs that I knew to be combination or descriptive name signs. Therefore, most of the descriptive and combination name signs which I present below come from written examples given by Supalla in *The Book of Name Signs* (1992), Lydia Callis' video "Name Signs: What's That About?"(2015), or Drolsbaugh's description of her family and friends, rather than the broader pool of Youtube sources.

When I collected a sign, I segmented it into a number of components: handshape or handshapes, location of articulation, type of contact, contact location on the hand, and source. I also noted any other information I thought might be relevant. For example, if the name sign was used more than once in the source and varied, or if I thought there might have been a nonmanual component, I recorded this in a separate section. Finally, I went through and compared each component of each name sign in my corpus to the rules set by Supalla in 1990 to find support confirming them or exceptions that might warrant further research.

6 Analysis

Supalla's book and article were published 25 and 27 years ago respectively, so I expected to find some mutations to the name sign phonology he described. Most of the subsections below — location, movement, orientation, and non-manuals — focus on phonological features that exist in broader ASL. Contact is not a phonological feature, but because Supalla defines rules for it in his sub-phonology, I analyze it as well. I do not analyze handshape because, while it is an important feature in ASL, initialization is part of the definition of an arbitrary name sign and is thus unnecessary here.

It is important to note, before I begin, that Supalla's work did more than just document name sign conventions already in existence. His research is so well-known that it has also influenced name signs in the community, even before his 1990 article was published. One of Mindess' 1990 interviewees, for example, "heard about Supalla's work [...] and subsequently] changed his name sign" (Mindess 1990:9). Furthermore, almost all other information about name signs in American Sign Language refers back to Supalla's work as a source.

6.1 Location

I was able to verify the following locations for single-contact name signs proposed by Supalla: ipsilateral forehead, ipsilateral chin, central chin, lower chest, contralateral shoulder, back of contralateral palm, and neutral space. Almost 60% of the name signs I encountered began on the face or were signed only on the face. The back of the palm name sign MAURICE POTTER was an outlier for the name signs as the only one that made use of the contralateral arm. Unlike most of the people on this list, however, Potter was born in 1907. While the name sign was used by his son Jim as well (Clark 2016), it might be reasonable to assume that the use of the contralateral arm in arbitrary name signs is somewhat outdated and has fallen out of favor in the Deaf community.

I did observe two locations in use that Supalla did not include as valid locations for arbitrary signs. The first is over the contralateral breast. Supalla supplies the lower chest and contralateral shoulder as valid locations for signs; however, the signs DAVID and BONITA given as examples in "Name Signs - ASL and Deaf Culture" both clearly appear between these points, on the contralateral breast (see figure 12).



(a) DAVID



(b) BONITA

Figure 12: Arbitrary name signs on the contralateral breast.

While these are both from the same source and produced as example names rather than names in use, and, as such, could be unique to the signer, I found two instances of the cheek as a place of articulation. However, both signers were hearing, and so I cannot yet posit that the cheek is becoming a valid location for name signs. While my consultant did accept these two signs, she did believe they had some descriptive component to them.



(a) RYAN



(b) LYDIA CALLIS

Figure 13: Two name signs with cheek locations

6.2 Movement

Arbitrary name signs also have a limit to the way they can contact the body and the way they can move for dual-location signs. Only four of the 37 name signs in my corpus contained any sort of motion. Two of them started at the ipsilateral forehead location and moved down to the ipsilateral chin, a path already proposed by Supalla. One, LYDIA CALLIS, moves from the face into neutral space, a single point of contact and also supported by Supalla. The final name sign with motion was articulated in neutral space, MORITZ (see figure 14), but it did not move laterally

but rather vertically. This motion is unsurprising given the vertical motion used when fingerspelling Z, however, and is not sufficient to suggest a change to Supalla's findings.



Figure 14: This name sign in free space moves vertically because it uses Z.

While none of the path motion I observed contradicted Supalla, I did notice that it was particularly uncommon in my dataset. Only one of his dual-location name sign paths was used, the forehead-to-chin, out of 12 possible paths.

The distinction Supalla draws between names with path movement and names without is that “ANSs without path movement are considered plain, equivalent to ‘Joe’ or ‘Jane.’ ANSs with path movement are considered fancier, equivalent e.g. to ‘Richard’ or ‘Jacqueline’ ”(Supalla 1990:67). With that said, even though some of the names in my corpus were relatively ‘fancy,’ such as MELCHIOR, SYLVIA, and SABRINA, these did not have any kind of path movement. It is possible this sort of complicated sign is becoming less popular in the Deaf community in favor of descriptive signs, but more research is necessary.

6.3 Contact

The type of contact Supalla licenses in his arbitrary name sign system is a repeated one, either two taps or two brushes. This was also the area in which I found the widest variation. In casual signing, I found name signs with anywhere between one and three taps (see figure 15), sometimes for the same name at different times. While, in speech, casual speech does frequently obscure rules more evident in careful speech, this does imply that exactly two instances of contact is not inherent to name signs.



(a) A name sign with single contact



(b) A name sign with triple contact.

Figure 15: These two name signs, given by Deaf parents to their children, do not use double contact.

Furthermore, while I noticed brushing and tapping, I also encountered a third kind of contact: rotating. This name sign contrasts with Supalla's prime example of an invalid combination name sign, s-WINK(Supalla 1992:11), which has an S sign at the temple that rotates forward to mimic an eyelid. The only difference between the two signs is in the location of articulation, which was invalid for s-WINK but is valid for SOPHIE, suggesting that the rotating contact in s-WINK was not the problem. SOPHIE was the only example of rotating contact I observed, but the issue is worth investigating further.



Figure 16: The contact for this version of 'Sophie' is rotation.

6.4 Orientation

As well as a limited number of valid locations and motions, Supalla also proposes a limited number of orientations for the handshape, based what letter of the manual alphabet is used and its location of contact on the body. This also affects the region of

the hand which contacts the body. Most of the names in my corpus followed Supalla's prescriptions in this regard with the lone exceptions of DARLENE and SHELLY.

The name sign SHELLY, in figure 6d, violates the contact location restraints imposed on H articulated at the contralateral shoulder. According to Supalla's rules, it should only be able to contact on the radial side. SHELLY was one of the very few double-handshape name signs I observed, so I would posit that contrast from the first handshape is more important in double-handshape, double-contact name signs than orientation is, but further evidence is necessary.

DARLENE, on the other hand, was not a name in use but was an example name given by a Deaf signer. The handshape  was located at the center of the chest but oriented horizontally rather than vertically. Because this change in orientation is not repeated elsewhere in the corpus, it is not significant enough to propose a change to Supalla's constraints.



Figure 17: The  handshape in DARLENE is oriented horizontally.

6.5 Nonmanuals

Supalla focuses almost exclusively on the manual components of arbitrary name signs. All drawings he includes portray the hand shape and motion with a neutral face and shoulders. However, in my corpus, I noted at least one instance where facial expression may have played a part in the name.



Figure 18: The signer’s eyebrows were much higher on DANIEL than any other name he signed in the list of examples he gave.

Because the relevant names are only ever signed once, I cannot compare multiple uses of the same name sign in different contexts to see if the nonmanual markers persist. That said, because nonmanuals are so important in other ASL signs, it is reasonable to expect them to be present in name signs as well. This corpus is not expansive enough for this sort of investigation, but it would be another excellent point for further research.

7 Conclusion

The data I collected from both a consultant and the internet demonstrated the need for an update to Supalla’s ground-breaking 1990 article. I was able to verify eight of his observed locations for arbitrary name signs and found evidence for two more, the contralateral breast and the cheek. I also found significantly less path motion than I would have expected from his description. With regards to contact, I found arbitrary name signs that contacted the body once or three times as well as the double contact he put forth, and I noticed rotating contact in one instance in addition to brushing and tapping. I found some evidence to suggest changes to the rules of orientation Supalla put forth in two name signs, SHELLY and DARLENE, and, finally, I found some evidence for non-manual components to arbitrary name signs, which were not mentioned in Supalla’s analysis.

So, there is exploration to be done in arbitrary name signs in the areas of location of articulation, contact type, and path motion to confirm the possible changes observed in this corpus. Furthermore, an analysis of the growing popularity of descriptive name signs is also warranted, as is additional research on combination name signs and their changing role as more hearing signers get involved in their local Deaf community.

References

Image Credits

- Figure 1a: Lapiak, Jolanta. “ASL sign for: see”. *Handspeak*. <http://www.handspeak.com>. Accessed April 3, 2017.
- Figure 1b: Lapiak, Jolanta. “ASL sign for: try”. *Handspeak*. <http://www.handspeak.com>. Accessed April 3, 2017.
- Figure 1c: Lapiak, Jolanta. “ASL sign for: use”. *Handspeak*. <http://www.handspeak.com>. Accessed April 3, 2017.
- Figure 2: Drolsbaugh, Melanie. March 2017. Personal communication.
- Figure 3: ASL Inside. 2016. “Student Lesson 2: Name Signs - with voiceover” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OmFSuS5zITc> (Accessed April 2, 2017).
- Figure 4: Drolsbaugh, Melanie. March 2017. Personal communication.
- Figure 5: Holcomb, Thomas. 2012. “Name Signs” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhlzXcZ1Vw> (Accessed April 2, 2017).
- Figure 6: Drolsbaugh, Melanie. March 2017. Personal communication.
- Figure 7: Supalla, Samuel J. 1990. The Arbitrary Name Sign System in American Sign Language. *Sign Language Studies* 67(3). 107.
- Figure 8: Supalla, Samuel J. 1990. The Arbitrary Name Sign System in American Sign Language. *Sign Language Studies* 67(3). 113.
- Figure 9a: Callis, Lydia. 2015. “Name Signs, What’s That About?” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4sldDccS8vI> (Accessed April 2, 2017).
- Figure 9b: Bennett, Mela T. 2009. “Sophie’s Sign Name, ASL Version, Take Two” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tNZKJIOKs4E> (Accessed April 2, 2017).
- Figure 9c: Bennett, Mela T. 2009. “Sophie’s Sign Name, ASL Version, Take Two” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tNZKJIOKs4E> (Accessed April 2, 2017).
- Figure 10a: Callis, Lydia. 2015. “Name Signs, What’s That About?” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4sldDccS8vI> (Accessed April 2, 2017).
- Figure 10b: Drolsbaugh, Melanie. March 2017. Personal communications.
- Figure 11: Lapiak, Jolanta. “ASL sign for: lesbian”. *Handspeak*. <http://www.handspeak.com>. Accessed March 31, 2017.
- Figure 12: ASL Inside. 2016. “Student Lesson 2: Name Signs - with voiceover” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OmFSuS5zITc> (Accessed April 2, 2017).
- Figure 13a: Sign Duo. 2016. “Deaf and Hearing Couple Vlog: Knotts Berry Farm” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S995Zjz7DSY> (Accessed April 2, 2017).

- Figure 14: Gambino, Joe. 2015. "What's a Name Sign? Spring Awakening Cast Show Off Their Unique Identities in ASL." *Playbill*. <http://www.playbill.com/article/whats-a-name-sign-spring-awakening-cast-show-off-their-unique-identities-in-asl-com-360165> (Accessed April 2, 2017).
- Figure 15a: MyDeafFamily. 2010. "My Deaf Family "Pilot"" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-Gc85nQK8w> (Accessed April 2, 2017).
- Figure 15b: Holcomb, Thomas. 2012. "Name Signs" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhilzXcZ1Vw> (Accessed April 2, 2017).
- Figure 16: Bennett, Mela T. 2009. "Sophie's Sign Name, ASL Version, Take Two" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tNZKJIOKs4E> (Accessed April 2, 2017).
- Figure 17: ASL THAT. 2012. "Name Signs - ASL and Deaf Culture" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9hHt3wzxXje> (Accessed April 2, 2017).
- Figure 18: ASL Inside. 2016. "Student Lesson 2: Name Signs - with voiceover" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OmFSuS5zITc> (Accessed April 2, 2017).

Works Cited

- American Sign Language. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. (Accessed March 31, 2017.)
- Armstrong, David F. 2000. William C. Stokoe, Jr, Founder of Sign Language Linguistics, 1919-2000. Gallaudet University Press. <http://gupress.gallaudet.edu/stokoe.html> (Accessed March 31, 2017.)
- Battison, Robbin. 1978. Analyzing Signs. *Lexical Borrowing in American Sign Language*. 19-58. Silver Spring, MD: Linstok Press.
- Brentari, Diane. 2011. Handshape in Sign Language Phonology. Oostendorp, M van, Ewen, C & Rice, K (eds.), *Companion to Phonology*. New York/Oxford: Wiley-Blackwells
- Clark, Adrean. 2016. *Adrean Clark: Finding my ASL name sign*. <http://limpingchicken.com/2016/04/24/adrean-clark-finding-my-asl-name-sign-2/> (Accessed April 2, 2017.)
- Drolsbaugh, Mark. 2008. *Deaf Again*. Springhouse, PA: Handwave Publications.
- Gallaudet University Hall of Fame. Edward Miner Gallaudet. <https://giving.gallaudet.edu/HOF/pastinductees/edward-miner-gallaudet> (Accessed April 3, 2017.)
- Gallaudet University Hall of Fame. Laurent Clerc. <https://giving.gallaudet.edu/HOF/pastinductees/laurent-clerc> (Accessed March

31, 2017.)

- Hoeksema, Jack, Napoli, Donna Jo. 2009. The Grammatical Versatility of Taboo Terms. *Studies in Language* 33(3). 612-643.
- Lapiak, Jolanta. 2013. Sign language handshape chart. <https://www.handspeak.com/study/index.php?id=144> (Accessed April 27, 2017.)
- Mindess, Anna. 1990. What Name Signs Can Tell Us About Deaf Culture. *Sign Language Studies* 66(Spring). 1-23.
- Mirus, Gene. 2008. *The linguistic repertoire of Deaf cuers: An ethnographic query on practice*. Austin, TX: University of Texas at Austin dissertation.
- Schuit, Joke. 2009. What's in a name sign? Name signs in NGT. In A. Ender, M. Matter & F. Tissot (eds.) *Proceedings of the 39th Studentische Tagung Sprachwissenschaft (StuTS)*, Bern: Universitaet Bern Arbeitspapiere, 21-34.
- Supalla, Samuel J. 1990. The Arbitrary Name Sign System in American Sign Language. *Sign Language Studies* 67(3). 99-126.
- Supalla, Samuel J. 1992. *The book of name signs*. San Diego: DawnSignPress.

Data sources

1. ACT Theatre. 2017. "Meet Billy" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1hmyGzrgh0> (Accessed April 2, 2017).
2. ASL Inside. 2016. "Student Lesson 2: Name Signs - with voiceover" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OmFSuS5zITc> (Accessed April 2, 2017).
3. ASL THAT. 2012. "Name Signs - ASL and Deaf Culture" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9hHt3wzxXjc> (Accessed April 2, 2017).
4. Bennett, Mela T. 2009. "Sophie's Sign Name, ASL Version, Take Two" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tNZKJIOKs4E> (Accessed April 2, 2017).
5. Callis, Lydia. 2015. "Name Signs, What's That About?" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4sldDccS8vI> (Accessed April 2, 2017).
6. Clark, Adrean. 2016. "Adrean Clark: Finding my ASL name sign" *The Limping Chicken*. <http://limpingchicken.com/2016/04/24/adrean-clark-finding-my-asl-name-sign-2/> (Accessed April 2, 2017).
7. DHN. 2015. "Two Deaf Women Show Us Bilingualism At Its Finest" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M5vPEhAuLWQ> (Accessed April 2, 2017).

8. Drolsbaugh, Melanie. 2017. Personal communications.
9. expertvillage. 2008. “Sign Language Basics : Sign Language: Names” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYttECPdGSQ> (Accessed April 2, 2017).
10. Gambino, Joe. 2015. “What’s a Name Sign? Spring Awakening Cast Show Off Their Unique Identities in ASL.” *Playbill*. <http://www.playbill.com/article/whats-a-name-sign-spring-awakening-cast-show-off-their-unique-identities-in-asl-com-360165> (Accessed April 2, 2017).
11. Holcomb, Thomas. 2012. “Name Signs” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhilzXcZ1Vw&feature=youtu.be> (Accessed April 2, 2017).
12. MyDeafFamily. 2010. “My Deaf Family “Pilot” ” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-Gc85nQK8w> (Accessed April 2, 2017).
13. Sign Duo. 2016. “Deaf and Hearing Couple Vlog: Knotts Berry Farm” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S995Zjz7DSY> (Accessed April 2, 2017).
14. Walker, Ashlyn. 2016. “Introducing myself a Deaf Beauty Vlogger! :)” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OzTsLxwqz4c> (Accessed April 2, 2017).
15. World Language Movies. 2010. “Good News ENGLISH ASL American Sign Language Subtitled People/Language Movie Part 1/4” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MY9c5y5Wgws> (Accessed April 2, 2017).

8 Appendix

Hand-shape	Written Name	Location	Contact type	Contact region	Path movement	Notes	Src #
A	Adam	Forehead (IPS)	Double tap	Thumb side			15
A	Alex	Forehead (IPS), chin (IPS)	Double tap	Tips	Forehead to chin		7
A	Ashlyn	Neutral space			Shake side to side	Had separate signs for first and last name	14
A		Forehead (IPS), Chin (IPS)	Glide	Thumb tip	Forehead to chin		8
A		Forehead (IPS)	Double tap	Thumb side			8
B	Bonita	Breast (CON)	Double tap	Radial side			3
B	Brandon	Forehead (IPS)	Double tap	Radial side			8
C		Chest (CEN)	Double tap	Radial side			11
C	Caitlin	Chin (CEN)	Double tap	Radial side			8
D	Donald	Forehead (IPS)	Double tap	Tips		Raised brows	3
D	David	Breast (CON)	Double tap	Radial side			3
D	Darlene	Chest (CEN)	Double tap	Tips		Oriented horizontally	3
D	Dave	Forehead (IPS)	Double tap	Tips			2
D	Darren	Neutral space			Shake side to side		8
E	Emily	Chin (IPS)	Double tap	Radial side			3
E	Eve	Chin (IPS)	Double tap	Radial side			15
G	Gideon	Forehead (IPS)	Single tap	Radial side			12
J	Joe	Chin (IPS)	Double brush	Tip of pinkie finger			3
J	Jacob	Neutral space			Lateral	Probably assigned by hearing parent	7
L		Neutral space			Shake side to side		11
L	Lance	Shoulder (CON)	Double tap	Thumb tip			8

Hand-shape	Written Name	Location	Contact type	Contact region	Path movement	Notes	Src #
L-C	Lydia Callis	Cheek (IPS), neutral space	Single tap	Tip of thumb	Lateral		5
M	Melchior	Forehead (IPS)	Triple tap	Tips			10
M		Chin (CEN)	Double tap	Radial side			9
M	Melanie	Shoulder (CON)	Double tap	Tips			8
M-Z	Moritz	Neutral space			M moving vertically into Z		10
P	Maurice Potter	Back of palm (CON)	Double tap	Unclear from description		Only written description	6
R	Ryan	Cheek (IPS)	Single or double tap	Tips of middle and index			13
S	Sophie	Chin (IPS)	Double brush	Radial side			4
S	Stacey	Chin (IPS)	Double tap	Radial side			3
S	Sylvia	Neutral space			Shake side to side		1
S	Sabrina	Chin (IPS)	Single tap	Radial side			12
S	Sophie	Chin (IPS)	Double tap	Radial side			4
S	Sophie	Chin (IPS)	Double rotate	Radial side			4
S	Shawna	Shoulder (CON)	Double tap	Radial side			8
S-H	Shelly	Shoulder (CON)	Double tap	Radial side (S), ulnar side (H)			8
T	Thomas	Chest (CEN)	Triple tap	Radial side			11
T		Chin (CEN)	Double tap	Radial side			11