



INTRODUCING

SIGN

LANGUAGE

LITERATURE

folklore & creativity

RACHEL SUTTON-SPENCE
& MICHIKO KANEKO

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MICHIKO KANEKO



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For Bencie Woll

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All the errors, of course, are our own.

Conventions

‘Deaf’ and ‘deaf’

It has become a convention in some situations to use a capital ‘D’ (‘Deaf’) to refer to a cultural, social and linguistic minority, as opposed to a small ‘d’ (‘deaf’) which simply refers to an audiological condition of deafness. However, the distinctions are not always clear between these two concepts, and the two terms ‘deaf’ and ‘Deaf’ in the context of a book such as this can create unintended divisions that become unnecessarily distracting. In this book, we focus on the sign language literature and language art forms of deaf people and their cultures and communities that encompass the experiences of many people with many identities. We will use ‘deaf’ to refer to all deaf people, unless it is part of a quotation drawn from another source where the author has made a distinction.

Glossing

When we refer to signs in this book, we use sign glosses.

Following the convention in sign language linguistics, each sign is glossed or translated using an English word or words (in small capitals) that best correspond to its meaning – for example, BOOK, HOUSE, DOG, EAT, THINK.

In sign language, especially in creative sign language, which we will be looking at in this book, a great deal of information can be packaged simultaneously rather than sequentially. Information expressed through several separate lexical items in English is often expressed in one sign. Thus, in many cases, one sign corresponds to several English words. A hyphen connects these English words in the gloss. For example, CAR-CRASHES-INTO-WALL translates a visual, simultaneous, and coherent representation of the scene in one sign, not four separate lexical items.

Readers should be aware that in creative sign language, signs can have various meanings, and each gloss we offer is just one of many possible interpretations.

Abbreviations

The following national sign languages commonly appear in this book and are often referred to in abbreviation:

ASL (American Sign Language)

BSL (British Sign Language)

LIBRAS or Libras (Brazilian Sign Language, *Língua Brasileira de Sinais*)

SASL (South African Sign Language)

A note about the sign language literature we discuss in this book

This book aims to introduce the general features of sign language literature, which we believe are applicable to literature in many sign languages. However, we, the authors of this book, are most familiar with British Sign Language (BSL), having studied it for many years, and many of our examples will come from BSL work. In particular, we will highlight the work of five British deaf poets: Dorothy Miles (who also composed work in American Sign Language), Paul Scott, Richard Carter, John Wilson and Donna Williams. In addition, the work by a Swedish deaf poet, Johanna Mesch, will be mentioned frequently as she has worked closely with the British poets.

Michiko has also worked with the South African Sign Language (SASL) work of South African deaf poets and Rachel with the Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) work of Brazilian deaf poets, and we will include examples from these two national sign language literatures where we hope readers will find them interesting.

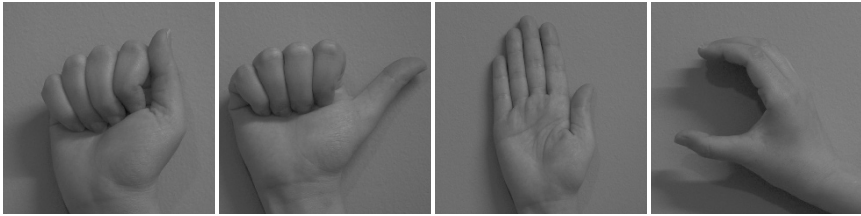
We will also refer to examples from American Sign Language (ASL) as most research so far about sign language literature comes from the USA. The ideas developed there are extremely helpful to anyone who wants to understand literature in the visual languages of deaf communities around the world. Where we know of examples of sign language literature from other countries, we will occasionally use them too.

The visual nature of sign language literature (and the fact that it uses more productive signs than those from the established lexicon, which is language-specific) makes it more 'transparent' and accessible to audiences who are not familiar with that particular sign language. It is possible to watch poems in sign languages we don't know, and still enjoy them. However, it would be a mistake to assume that all sign language literature

will be the same in all countries. Literature and culture are closely connected, and American, British, Brazilian or South African deaf cultures, or the culture of other deaf communities around the world, are not the same. We caution readers to test whether what is reported for a particular sign language will hold for other sign languages.

List of Handshapes

Each handshape has a symbol that is conventionally used to describe it, and we will use the following handshape symbols to refer to a particular hand configuration in this book:

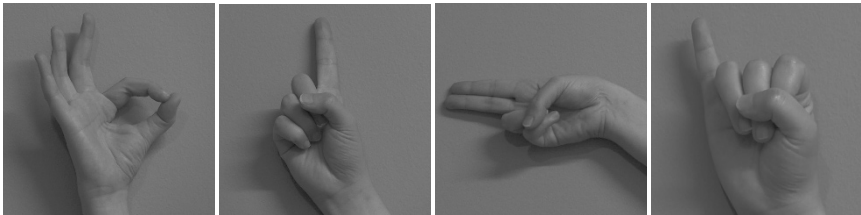


A

Å

B

C

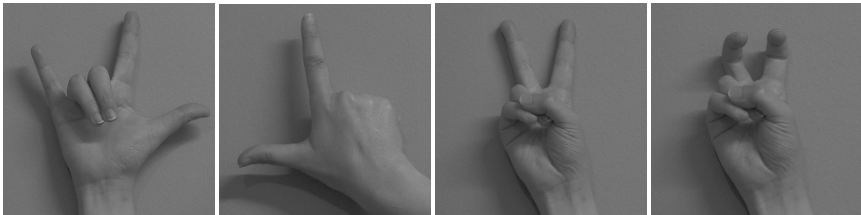


F

G or 1

H

I

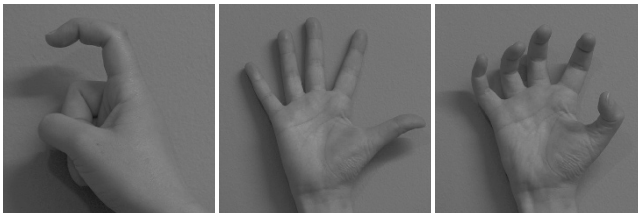


ILY

L

V

bent V



X

5

bent 5

I What is Sign Language Literature?

A superhero runs in slow motion to catch an assassin's speeding bullet, a sunbather grabs the fading sun to make it shine again and Father Christmas converses in sign language with his reindeer. Cleopatra's headpiece becomes a living snake that bites her and Macbeth encounters three witches plotting to teach deaf children using a form of language they do not understand. A person becomes a cat, a tortoise or a doll. A jilted woman stabs herself with the bread knife, before apparently miraculously returning to life and throwing the knife away in delight. Two men play at swapping identities until they find what they have in common, and a woman seeks to understand her identity as a deaf person moving in the hearing world.

All these scenarios have been played out visually, in artistic sign language, as we will see later in this book. The deaf performers presenting their work do so as part of a long heritage of visual creativity within the deaf community. The stories they tell, the riddles they set, the poems they perform and, above all, the language they use to produce it, show many aspects of the potential and pleasure of sign language literature.

This book is about sign language literature – a body of creative and artistic sign language (such as poems, stories and jokes) composed and performed by deaf people. It will explore the extended use of sign language and language creativity in deaf communities. We will describe and discuss a range of stories, jokes and poems from sign languages around the world to understand how they create the effect they do.

Sign language literature is the literature of deaf people in the language of deaf people. This much is clear, but beyond that, it is hard to define succinctly or exactly. It is literature created in a visual gestural language and it only exists when someone performs it. This means that sign language literature is different in many ways from the written literature that most of us are familiar with. Sometimes it seems to have more in common with painting, dance or film than written literature. Although it frequently uses sign language vocabulary, it builds on these signs to create something far more visually powerful and innovative, so that it seems to have moved beyond the boundaries of a language.

Defining sign language literature

The word 'literature' is perhaps problematic for an unwritten art form such as this, because it is derived from the same Latin word that gives us the word 'letter', and has long been associated with the written word. It is also a value-laden word: people expect to value and respect something called 'literature' more than something that is not. Earlier meanings of the word related it to the idea of education gained through reading and referred to the technical skills of reading and writing. Since then, it has also come to mean the body of writing produced during a certain period (for example, 19th century literature) or aimed at a particular group (such as children's literature), produced by a particular group (women's literature or French literature) or produced on a particular topic (travel literature). It has also taken another meaning as a special way of working creatively with written language. In literature, the form of the language often comes to the foreground, calling attention to itself in a way that everyday language does not.

None of this can be directly applied to sign language literature, which is produced live in sign performances. However, contemporary understandings of the word 'literature' have come to include more than the written word so that even in languages that do have a written literature, there is scope to use the word to mean a special way of working creatively with language in any modality (written, spoken or signed). It is within this understanding that creative sign language, respected and valued within deaf communities as an art form that represents their culture, can be called literature.

The language used in signed literature is particularly aesthetic, that is, it appeals to the senses, especially to the sense of beauty. Aesthetic language aims to do more than simply communicate information. It allows signers to increase the significance or communicative power of the message.

Often we think of literature as a 'thing' and sign language literature has rightly been described as an important artefact of deaf culture. However, sign language literature is a process as well as a thing. People perform and take part in sign language literature, and we should remember that it is an activity that people do (both performers and audiences 'do' sign language literature), as well as a collection of artefacts. It is also a body-centred art form. Sign language authors compose using their whole body, including facial expressions, not just their hands, as many non-signers expect. This makes sign language literature highly performative, and is one of the ways in which it is closer to dance than written literature.

In the light of these thoughts, we can work with a definition of sign language literature proposed by the American researcher Heidi Rose (1992) that it is 'a union of language and gesture that results in linguistically organized aesthetic movement' (p. 157). It is a 'literature of the body' (Rose, 2006, p. 131) that shows deaf people's views of their place in the world. It prioritises the visual image. Importantly, it often plays with sign language, exploring its creative potential, primarily for aesthetic pleasure. Put simply, a great deal of sign language literature is beautiful and fun.

Many frameworks for understanding written literature have been developed and refined over the years and they can help us considerably as we use them and their terminology to understand and explain sign language literature. However, they can also limit our understanding of this visual, body-centred, signed art form because they were not designed for it. For this reason, although in this book we treat creative sign language primarily as a language art form, we also treat it as a visual art form, most especially a moving visual art form. Ideas developed for understanding the grammar and impact of cinema (as developed by Dirksen Bauman (2006) in the USA) can provide different but very enlightening ways to approach these visual, moving performances.

'Deaf literature' or 'Sign language literature'?

The scope of deaf literature can include work written in the majority language of the hearing society that surrounds a deaf community. A piece of literature written by a deaf person could be considered part of deaf literature, but so too could a piece of literature written about a deaf person (or deaf people). Some hearing authors with extensive knowledge of sign language and deaf culture have written about deaf people to show deaf people's experiences in a way that many deaf people find credible. Examples include *Ancestors* by the Zimbabwean author Chenjerai Hove, *Apple is My Sign* by Mary Riskind in the USA and *Tibi and Joca (Tibi e Joca)* by Cláudia Bisol in Brazil. Although these could come into the category of deaf literature because of their content, there is an understanding that works produced by deaf authors form the main canon of deaf literature (although some deaf authors and illustrators work in partnership with hearing people to create deaf literature).

It is not enough that the authors should be deaf, however. Readers often expect deaf literature to concern itself in some way with the lives or experiences of deaf people, so a book written by a deaf author that does not address these topics is not considered central to deaf literature.

The *Tales From Signtown* series by the British deaf author Nick Sturley is a good example of deaf literature, written by a deaf person and referring to deaf culture. In this playful series, Sturley uses written English to retell a range of fairy stories, filled with deaf characters and references to deaf history, deaf culture, deaf behaviour and sign language. The *Inspector Morse* series by Colin Dexter, on the other hand, is also written by a deaf person but with no mention of deafness (with the exception of *The Silent World of Nicholas Quinn*) and is not usually considered to be deaf literature.

Sign language literature may be considered part of deaf literature, but the term specifically refers to pieces that are performed in sign language and are almost always produced by deaf people. It includes faithful signed translations of written pieces of literature, and detailed representations of a film, in sign language. In such cases, the signing will be valued because it is especially visual and aesthetically very satisfying, but the content does not relate to the lives and experiences of deaf people. Other pieces have been adapted in their translation, so that the basic story has its origins in a non-deaf setting, but is retold in sign language with deaf characters. Original sign language literature (the focus of this book) is composed in sign language by culturally deaf members of the deaf community, and comes from a deaf perspective.

Types of sign language literature

Perhaps the peak of sign language literature is the highly polished, original, signed performance art sometimes called sign language poetry, where deaf artists can present new ideas in new ways, using original forms of signing. Community members recognise it as an art form, displaying the fullest potential of their language. It is usually strongly visual and carefully constructed for maximum impact on the senses. As an expression of the community's sense of deaf identity, it is an art form with its own rules and patterns.

Folklore (which includes traditional narratives, jokes and language games) is sometimes seen as a contrast to literature but we will see in Chapter 4 that there is good reason to include performances and texts that are usually called folklore in a study of literature.

Many people think of fiction when they think of literature, and plenty of sign language literature is fiction, but non-fiction can also be sign language literature. Nancy Frishberg (1988) was one of the first researchers to note this as she identified different forms of sign language literature. *Oratory*, or making speeches, is a way of using language to

catch people's attention and deliver more than simply a message, as speeches use many of the same language devices as poetry or theatre, such as repetition, timing and rhythm, to generate emotions in their audiences. Frishberg noted that sign language oratory occurs at banquets or formal occasions, in sermons and at political rallies and campaigns. Political works form part of literature, especially those that highlight social injustice and fight oppression, and we will see that political expression occurs in a range of signed art forms. It may present a deaf perspective on politics generally. For example, many poems in South African Sign Language (SASL) deal with racial segregation and apartheid. Alternatively, it may address specific deaf-related political issues, such as provision of services for deaf people or access to education. Autobiography is a common form of literary non-fiction and we will see that narratives of personal experience are a central part of sign language literature that emerges in stories and poems, and even in jokes and theatre. Chronicles are critical descriptions and narratives of people, events or daily life, sometimes in other societies or in other times. When we see sign language stories about deaf history (such as the BSL piece *Three Queens* by Paul Scott), we are seeing deaf chronicles, which may take the form of a creative story or a factual account of events or people. Political literature, autobiography and chronicles, whether written or signed, are often valued as literature, and can be funny, ironic or lyrical as they comment on the events they describe and often seek to change them.

Signed religious literature is important for many signers. For years, churches were some of the very few places where people used sign language in a formal situation. Signing ministers (many of whom were deaf or were the hearing children of deaf parents) were widely respected in their communities for their signing skills. Churches today are still places where sign language is recognised and promoted. Much of signed religious literature is translated as faithfully as possible from written religious literature, especially the Bible or hymns in the Christian religion, but when the translation is done with careful attention to the form of the signed language, it can create a signed art form in its own right. There are also examples of adapted religious stories. For example, the British signer Penny Beschizza retold the Old Testament bible story of Moses and the parting of the Red Sea, to include some deaf characters in her BSL translation. Deaf people who saw her adaptation said afterwards that it helped them feel that the Bible was more relevant to them.

In this book, we have chosen to include creative pieces from a range of genres, all produced by deaf signers and all with some aesthetic aspects. We will think about what they say and how they say it, focusing on the language they use, other elements of performance and the structure of the

texts. We will also consider the people who create and perform it and the audiences who watch it.

The content of sign language literature – it’s what you say

Anything that is presented in sign language carries a mark of being deaf simply because it is signed, even when deafness or deaf people are not the focus. However, a good deal of sign language literature does address deafness in some way because it represents the views of the deaf community. The importance of focusing on deafness in sign language literature varies according to time and place. In the USA, for example, researchers such as Stephen Ryan (1993) and Ben Bahan (2006a) suggested that in the 1980s and 1990s ASL poetry was expected to address the idea of deafness directly, but two or three decades later it rarely does (according to a review by John Lee Clark, 2009). In South Africa, racial and political issues can be prioritised over deafness as a topic for sign language literature, due to its complex historical background. In Britain and Brazil, deafness is still considered a suitable topic for sign language poetry.

Sign language literature often celebrates deaf people’s lives and experience, and focuses on what is valued about the deaf community and its language, so it rarely describes deafness as a loss. Much of the early written literature by deaf people addressed the oppression of deaf people and their culture by hearing society. These themes still occur in sign language literature, although Karen Christie and Dorothy Wilkins (2006) have shown that sign language poetry often includes themes that show deaf resistance to this oppression. It often shows the sensory experience of deaf people, celebrating a world understood through sight and touch (and even occasionally taste, for example, in a sign language poem about jam by Richard Carter). We will explore this more in Chapter 9.

The form of sign language literature – it’s how you say it

The form of sign language literature refers to how it is delivered through the visual, spatial and kinetic (moving) modality of sign language. Whereas written or spoken forms use a string of words in sequence, signed forms utilise both sequential and simultaneous combinations of manual components (what the hands are doing) and a variety of non-manual components (what other parts of the body are doing – such as the

eyes, mouth, head and torso). The space surrounding the signer can also be an essential part of sign language literature.

Cynthia Peters (2000) has observed that much of the cultural meaning and value of sign language literature comes from the way it is signed, and from the fact that it is signed at all. These aspects are often more important than what is signed. Most deaf people growing up in hearing families without access to deaf culture and sign language have never learned about the possibilities of sign language nor how to perform it. This means that when they finally do see creative sign language they often value it more for its fluency and expressive potential than for its message.

The form of language often highlights the importance of linguistic play in literature. Some playful language is only possible in writing, such as crosswords or graffiti. On the other hand, tongue-twisters, puns and mimicry are language games that can be played in speech or sign language as they rely on live language play. A lot of sign language literature has the important function of being for enjoyment, and much of it includes an element of playing with language. In fact, even though we can talk specifically about deaf humour (see Chapter 18), humorous language is valued in many sign language poems and stories, even ultimately serious ones.

What sign language literature has that spoken language literature has not

Whereas most spoken or written literature relies heavily upon the established words of a language, sign language literature uses many productive signs, which are basically new signs, created *ad hoc* to describe a particular scene. They often use so-called classifiers – signs that are shaped to provide an accurate visual description of objects and people. For example, a closed fist represents spherical objects (rocks, heads, balls), whereas an extended index finger can represent a long thin object (a pencil, a piece of string, an upright human being). Although everyday signing makes use of classifiers, they are particularly relevant in creative signing, as poets constantly seek new and productive ways of saying something, without relying on existing signs. For example, instead of using an existing sign CAT and adjectives such as SMALL, CUDDLY and SOFT to describe a cat, signers can use classifiers to illustrate the details of the cat (its size, the shape of its ears, tail and paws, the texture of its fur, and how it behaves), while indicating the cat's expressions on the face. (See, for example, Dorothy Miles' *The Cat*, Donna Williams' *My Cat* and John Wilson's *For Two Special People*.)

Sign language literature also consists of elements that do not occur in written literature (although there may be some parallels with spoken

performance literature). As we explore sign language literature throughout this book, we will see that signers draw on a range of language devices to create extra enjoyment or new meanings. They can vary the speed at which signs are made, to be unusually fast or slow. They can place signs in different parts of their signing space and move them through the space. They can select and repeatedly use specific handshapes for the signs. They can show multiple perspectives at the same time. For example, a signer can use the hands to represent a child holding a doll ('I am holding a doll') while the face simultaneously expresses the emotion of a personified doll being held ('I am the doll you are holding'). (See Paul Scott's *Doll*.) Signers can take on the role of humans, animals, plants and inanimate objects by mapping the physical features of these referents onto their body, so they seem to become the referent. In all these examples, the signers are drawing on the options available in their bodily language to create powerful visual images with movement, in ways that words in a spoken language cannot do.

This means that to understand what deaf people value in sign language literature we must see it in its original form. Thus, we strongly encourage readers to view original performances by deaf performers (either live or video-recorded) to appreciate fully their aesthetic values. The pieces we cite in this book are all available either on commercial DVDs or on Internet sites.

Why should we study sign language literature?

When we study sign language literature, we aim to understand what drives it and what deaf audiences appreciate in it. Careful study will allow us to understand what makes some pieces 'work'. However, different people respond to different pieces differently at different times, and a performance that is appropriate in one situation may not work in another. We will not make value judgements on the examples we describe here but rather will attempt to describe and explain how they achieve a certain literary effect.

Sign language literature can change people's attitudes about deaf people and sign language. Hearing people have often labelled deaf people as disabled rather than members of a community that uses a different language. For many years, neither deaf nor hearing people believed that sign languages were real languages or that they were capable of expressing complex ideas. Sign languages were certainly not acceptable languages for literature. These attitudes have now changed considerably but there is still a long way to go before wider hearing society stops seeing deaf people as disabled. Study of sign language literature shows clearly that members of a deaf community have a rich language heritage, and that we should