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The Greek poet Simonides once called poetry “painting with the gift of speech.” We have discovered a different kind of poetry, one that lacks the gift of speech but possesses in its place the gift of gesture. For some years we have been studying the structure of American Sign Language (ASL), a manual-visual language used by most of the deaf people in this country to communicate with one another. Among those who have aided us in our research have been members of the National Theater of the Deaf, a remarkably talented group of actors who are either deaf or the hearing offspring of deaf parents. These creative artists are developing before our very eyes a poetic tradition unlike any other—a tradition based on the very special characteristics of “signing.”

In order to appreciate the uniqueness of signed poetry, one must know something about the language in which it is composed. Hearing people, who have only limited contact with the deaf, sometimes confuse sign language with finger spelling, which is a derivative language at all. Finger spelling is a derivative system based on written English, which, in turn, is a derivative system based on spoken English. One simply uses the fingers to form, in the air, symbols that represent the letters of the alphabet. Fluent ASL signers use finger spelling primarily for names and for borrowing English words. Some sign systems are also connected with spoken language. For example, Signing Essential English uses signs to match English word order in a virtual sign-for-word translation of English, down to the last if, and, and but, including sign markers invented to match English affixes. Such English-based systems are often used in educational settings.

American Sign Language, on the other hand, is passed on from deaf parents to deaf children, and is a language in its own right, a full-fledged linguistic system. ASL signs are not based on English words, and a sign may or may not have an exact single-word English equivalent, just as a word in Russian or German may or may not have an exact English equivalent. Furthermore, ASL has its own methods for modifying the meanings of signs—for changing a sign from a verb to a noun, for indicating plural or temporal aspects, for extending the meaning of a sign from the purely literal to the metaphorical, for coining new terms, and so forth. Just as in a spoken language, ASL signs are not situation bound; signs can refer to other times, other places. And, as with spoken languages, individual signs may be combined into an unlimited number of statements. The syntax of ASL, the rules that determine what is and is not grammatical, is not based on any spoken.

POETRY
WITHOUT SOUND

Deprived of spoken language, deaf people express their poetic imagination with the language of their hands.
language, but makes full use of mechanisms available to a visual-gestural language, including the elaborate use of spatial constructs.

The radical differences between signs and words are apparent from the way they are organized. A spoken word consists of a sequence of contrasting acoustical segments called phonemes, arranged sequentially. For instance, the word “feeling” breaks down into the phonemes f, e, i, l, n, g, and y. A sign, on the other hand, is essentially the simultaneous occurrence of particular values of a limited set of formational parameters. Every sign is composed of a hand configuration (sometimes two, if both hands are used), a relationship between the two hands, a particular orientation of the hands, a place of articulation with respect to the rest of the body, and movements of the hands. To make the sign that translates as “feeling” in English, a signer uses one hand with the palm facing out.

Conventional ASL

since

feeling

true (“it”)

first

Note that in the signs since, both hands are active, and they operate symmetrically. Feeling and true are one-handed signs. In first, one active hand operates on the other as a base. Since Bragg is right-handed, he makes the one-handed signs with his right hand and leaves his left hand lax, by his side. As Bragg shifts from one sign to another, there are several changes in hand shape. The right hand starts with an “index” hand, changes to a “palm-up” hand, and then changes back again to an index hand for the last two signs. The left hand starts with an index hand, drops down toward the side of the body, and returns with a “fist” hand. There are various hand movements in the signs, and, although the illustration does not show them, there are also movements back and forth and up and down during transitions between signs. For example, at the end of since, the left hand relaxes and drops to the side, and the right hand moves down to the initial position of feeling.

Now consider the transformation of the poem into poetic style, in Bragg’s capable hands. First of all, Bragg replaces all of the signs except feeling. The first sign of the original version, since, is a literal translation of the English word, but it is not really semantically appropriate since in ASL it would ordinarily convey only the temporal sense of the word. The form of the new signs, because, is very different from that of since. Its final hand configuration is a fist with the thumb extended, and it moves from contact with the forehead to a final position off the side of the head. The choice of because is related to the

Poetic sign

because

—feeling

itself—

foremost—

A dash and a slash before or after the name of a sign indicates that one hand from the preceding sign maintains the position and/or hand shape of that sign.
other choices in the line, because the other new signs share the same hand shape. Instead of true, Bragg uses itself, and instead of first, he creates a sign using a one-handed rendition of most (which is normally a two-handed sign), combined with a marker for the superlative, -est. Bragg translated the new sign as "mostest," and we have called it "foremost." A deaf viewer would have no trouble interpreting it. The resulting line of poetry, then, has four signs made with one hand active, and the three made with the right hand share the same hand shape. We feel that this feature of hand shape similarity is probably analogous to the alliterative repetition of vowels or consonants in spoken poetry.

The choice of signs in a poem is part of its internal poetic structure. Bragg's translation also reveals an external poetic structure defined not by the choice of signs but by the pattern of their presentation. One aspect of this structure is balance. In ordinary conversation, a signer usually uses his or her dominant hand to make one-handed signs and as the active hand in signs requiring one hand to act on another. Since only about a third of all ASL signs involve the use of two active hands, most of the time there is an imbalance in the use of the hands. In the poetry being created by the National Theater of the Deaf, however, the signer may maintain balance by imposing a pattern of hand alternation that keeps both hands more equally in use. One method is to change hands with consecutive signs. Note that after signing because with his right hand, Bragg does not sign feeling with his right hand, as he ordinarily would, but with his left. He leaves because hanging in the air, as it were.

Another way to achieve balance is to overlap two distinct signs. After making the first sign, Bragg uses both hands at all times. While he signs feeling, he holds the sign because in its final position. Then he holds feeling (made with the left hand), and, in a way that would never occur in colloquial signing, he directs it toward the one-handed sign itself (made with the right hand). This emphasizes the fact that itself refers to feeling. Then Bragg continues to hold the hand configuration and final position of feeling, still with the left hand, while he makes foremost with his right hand.

Besides achieving a balance between the hands, Bragg also creates a continuous flow of movement of signs, another aspect of external poetic structure. We have found that to create this sort of continuity a poet may distort the form of the signs themselves, going beyond the grammatical code of the language, and may also manipulate the transitions between signs, as if to avoid any wasted movement.

The picture above shows the signs since and feeling in nonpoetic signing.

The center drawing shows the transition between the signs. Notice that after since Bragg drops his left hand to his side, because it is not used in the sign that follows. During the transition, he moves his right hand from the final location of since to the initial location of feeling, at the same time changing hand shapes. In the poetic version of the line, however, Bragg manipulates the form of the signs so that effectively there is no transition: The final position of the hand after making each sign is precisely the starting position of the next. The final position of because, which as we noted before is held during the signing of feeling, becomes the starting position of itself, and the final position of itself becomes the starting position of foremost. This continuity of movement would not exist in conversational signing of the same sequence of signs.

Finally, Bragg creates an imposed superstructure: it results partly from some of the distortions we have discussed, but is a separate level of structure. In this case a pattern of movement is superimposed on the signs of the line, much as a melody is superimposed on the words of a song. We made flow charts of Bragg's hand movements in the nonpoetic and poetic versions of the Cummings line. You can see that in the poetic version there is a definite design in space, characterized by large, open, nonintersecting movements.

There are many problems in translating a poem from one language to another, and Bragg's task was even more challenging, since he was translating from one mode, the auditory, to another, the visual. In our laboratory we have also had the opportunity to study some original signed poetry. One of the poems we have analyzed, "The Seasons," by Dorothy Miles, is special in that the poet composed it simultaneously in American Sign Language and in English. (Miles, who has been profoundly deaf since the age of eight, has a brilliant command of both languages.) "The Seasons" consists
of four verses; in the English version each verse is in the standard haiku form: three lines, with five syllables in the first and last lines and seven in the middle line. The compression and rich imagery of poems in the haiku style seem especially suited to sign language.

Here is the English text of the verse entitled “Summer”:

Green depths, green heights, clouds
And quiet hours, slow, hot,
Heavy on the hands.

In addition to the conventional haiku structure, there is an individual structure that involves, among other things, repeated patterns of similar sounds. Here, though, we are more interested in the signed version. Miles’s rendition suggests division into three “lines” as shown in the accompanying illustration (which we made by tracing images on a video tape of Miles performing her poem).

One of the most striking things about this verse is that it uses only a few of the possible hand configurations in ASL, variously estimated at between 19 and 40. Of the 16 signs in the verse, 13 use a “five-finger” hand in their citation form, either as the active hand or as a base, and sometimes both. The signs may be bent and spread, straight and spread, or straight and compact, but in all 13 signs the five fingers are extended. Furthermore, through a distortion that is part of the external poetic structure, the five-finger hand becomes part of every sign in the verse after the first green. High and green are normally one-handed signs that do not use this hand shape, but Miles keeps the left hand in five-finger position as a kind of reference base or surface indicator throughout the signing of deep below, green high above. This modification provides a consistency to the forms of the signs in the first line.

In poetry, patterning is more important than mere frequency, and so we need to look at the patterning of hand shapes. The first line of the verse consists of two parallel halves, each beginning with an index hand (the first and second appearance of green). Each half ends with an active five-finger hand operating below or above a base five-finger hand (the signs below and above). In the second area, the second sign of the first half, deep, uses an index hand as the active hand; the second sign of the second half, high, uses what we call an index- and hand shape, which is only slightly different from the index hand. The first line is semantically patterned as well. The first signs of each half are the same (green and green). The second signs in each half are opposites (deep and right), and so are the third signs in each half (below and above).

The second line, white clouds and quiet hour, also reveals internal poetic structure. Notice that white and and are each one-handed signs with a five-finger hand closing to a tapered O. Both white and are followed by a two-handed, five-finger sign (clouds and quiet) repeated. It is clear that the pattern forms an intentional individual structure, especially since the sign white, the first sign in the pattern, is not represented by a word in the English version of the poem. Finally, the last sign in the line, hour, echoes in its active right hand the index-hand motif of the first line, and combines it with the five-finger motif that dominates the second line and, in fact, the entire verse.

The third and final line of the stanza, slow, hot, heavy on hands, consists exclusively of five-finger hands in signs made in front of the chest with the hands touching or close together. There is variation in movement, orientation, and intensity of the signs.

So far we have been discussing only the internal poetic structure of the poem. The patterns of external poetic structure that we found in Bernard Bragg’s translation of “since feeling is first” are for the most part absent in Miles’s rendition of “Summer.” When we talked to Miles about her poem, we learned that she intended to keep the signs as close to their normal form as possible. In this rendition, she does not alternate hands in order to create a sense of balance; she uses her right hand in all one-handed signs and as the active hand in signs where one hand acts on another, just as she would in conversation. Nor does she make a special effect to overlap signs. During one-handed signs she leaves her left hand either by her side, as in hot, or off to the side and without a specific shape, as in white and and. She does make some minor variations in the forms of signs in order to produce certain effects, but she clearly does not make the major distortions necessary to create a design in space. Where Bragg displaced signs spatially to produce a kinetic superstructure, Miles makes all of her signs within the normal signing space, not only in this verse but in her other ones as well.

However, a careful examination of “Summer” reveals a type of imposed superstructure that we did not find in the Cummings poem. It is not spatial, but temporal and rhythmic. Each of the three lines in the verse takes about 7.5 seconds to perform, although the individual signs vary in length. The first and second halves of the first line have a similar rhythm, with four accents. The other three half-lines of the verse have fewer accents. We can represent this rhythmic-temporal superstructure in musical notation, and we are tempted to compare its effect with that of an operatic recitative, in which there is something of a cross between speaking and singing.

Different signers may favor different styles of poetic signing. Therefore we asked Lois Past, who like Miles has been with the National Theater of the Deaf, to perform his own rendition of “Summer,” working from the English text alone. First of all, Past made the title a part of the first line of the poem. His other sign choices were not radically different from those of Miles, but neither were they identical. For example, he expresses the word “depths” from the English version not by a separate sign but by extending the sign green in a wide sweep of the arm, which gives the impression of moving into the distance away from him. His rendition differs from Miles’s in the direction of more structural regularity. All four signs in the first line use an index hand as active, and this motif has an echo in the last sign of the second line, hour. But the most significant distinction between Past’s version and Miles’s is in the external poetic structure. Past, like Bragg, modulates the form of the signs or aspects of their presentation to create an external structure. If you examine the
accompanying pictures, you will see that he uses a patterned alternation of the hands throughout the poem: green-deep is with the right hand, the second green with the left; heights with the right hand, white with the left, and so on. He also uses the technique of overlapping signs. By alternating the hands he can overlap even one-handed signs that occur in sequence; he holds the form of a just-executed sign with one hand, while he makes the next sign with the other. For example, the final position and shape of the right hand for heights remains through the signing of white with the left hand. In this way past can present two signs simultaneously to the eye of the viewer.

When Brug translated the Cummings poem, he controlled the flow of movement for poetic effect. Past does the same in “Summer.” Signs do not begin and end in the same positions as in ordinary signing. Past also manipulates the transitions so that the final position of one sign becomes the starting position of the next. This eliminates superfluous movement and one sign simply flows into another. There is also an obvious design in space that is consistent with the theme of the verse: heaven. Past makes the signs of the first two lines much higher than they would otherwise be. Beginning with the second line, the signs slowly descend from far above the signer’s head—a location not used in everyday signing—to below the waist. At the end of the verse, the body is bent over, the shoulders are hunched, and the hands are low in the signing space.

This rendition of “Summer” exhibits one other feature that is quite prominent in signed poetry. In some of the signs, Past exaggerates the representational or pantomimic aspects. Consider the title sign, summer, which Past incorporates into the body of the poem. The usual form of this sign involves a bent index finger that brushes across the central part of the forehead. When we asked Shansy Mow, a deaf signer, to review our video tapes of the poem, he noticed that Past elaborates summer by “increasing its length . . . thus producing more pantomime-like action.” He uses an outstretched index finger that gradually bends to form the conventional hand shape, and he “wipes” the entire length of his forehead—as if to wipe away the sweat caused by the summer’s heat.

Mow also pointed out that in signing clouds, the hands rotate slowly across the space overhead, to portray the drifting of the clouds. The sign heavy, Mow observed, “certainly looks heavy, so heavy that the bottom drops . . . . One begins to feel the oppressive claustrophobic heat and time standing still as the long summer drags on.” The sign slow, in Mow’s rendition as well as in Past’s, is longer than usual in terms of both time and space. Ordinarily the fingertips of the active, flat-five-finger hand brush once over the back of the base hand from the fingertips to the wrist. In Mow’s version, the active hand, as it brushes over the base hand, continues well up toward the shoulder.

Poetry in sign language is still actively evolving and new poetic forms constantly emerge. Joe Castronovo and Ella Lentz, two deaf signers who have worked with us, experimented with the signed equivalent of a duet. They were inspired by a well-known children’s game called Double Personality. One person stands with his arms at rest and allows them to be replaced by the arms of a second person standing behind him. The effect is reminiscent of the many-armed Hindu god, Shiva. In the culture of the deaf, the game often involves singing. Castronovo and Lentz noticed that when both people signed, it seemed as if the person in front was talking to himself and was answered by his “other voice.” They decided to compose a poem for four hands.

At the beginning of the poem, a male stands behind a female, and both sign. The resulting blend describes the sun rising on the horizon, where there is a house. As we approach the house, the door opens. At this point the two signers split apart, the male going to the right and the female to the left. Now each begins to sign a separate message. The male signs father, and then hammering (a very iconic sign that mimics the motions of hammering). At the same time the female signs mother and sitting (also iconic). The male signs big and brother while the female signs little and sister. The male signs bathe and the female signs playing the man sings grandma and rocking while the female sings grandma and knitting. The signs are made with strong, rhythmic beats; in clusters of three beats at the end of each line. Then, in the final section of the poem, the signers blend once again to describe the door of the house closing, the house receding into the distance, and the sun setting on the horizon.

An interesting feature of this poem is that the signs in the middle section form minimal pairs. The signs father, brother, and grandma are exactly like their matched pairs mother, sister, and grandpa, except that the male signs are made on the forehead while the female signs are made near the lower cheek. Big and little are identical except for location. Bathing and playing differ in location and hardness, but they are made here with similar up and down movements. Rocking and knitting have different lateral and lateral shapes, but both are made with the same strikingly similar to-and-fro rhythmic movements. These similarities give the poem a very symmetrical internal structure.

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