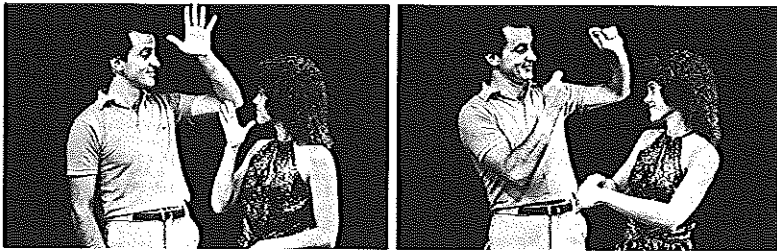


IV. The Heightened Use of Language



IS THERE language without speech? Our research shows that there most certainly is. Do the differences in mode make sign language a qualitatively different system from spoken language? That question can be answered only after a great deal more research. What is becoming increasingly clear, however, is that ASL is a highly abstract, rule-governed, combinatorial linguistic system while at the same time preserving its iconic roots and mimetic potential.

Nowhere are these two faces of the language more evident than in wit and poetry. The final chapters explore playful and heightened uses of the language to discover how such forms of expression, which are so directly sound based in spoken languages, manifest themselves in a language without sound.

In wit and poetry, elements of form and meaning—a linguistic system—are used to create complex many-layered expressions with multiple meanings and even to create whole new systems of form and meaning. Similarities—and differences—in form, function, and meaning are exploited; the elements of the linguistic system are manipulated and, sometimes, distorted. To be significant and meaningful, such artful manipulations and distortions must stand out against a background of recognized regularities. Thus, how language is used in wit and poetry can inform us about the psychological reality of abstract linguistic constructs and about the awareness, on the part of language users, of regularities in the language.

Wit and Plays on Signs

13 We have often been asked whether linguistic play—puns, plays on signs, linguistic wit—is natural or even possible in American Sign Language. Sometimes the question arises along with the much older question of whether or not the gesturing of the deaf does or does not constitute a language in the sense that English, say, is a language. Perhaps, or so this question sometimes implies, the existence or nonexistence of such plays on signs could give us clues to the status of ASL. Certainly the older literature on signs and signing contains much that would lead the uninitiated to question whether such possibilities exist. It has been suggested that the spontaneous use of signs in even an ironical or metaphorical way is virtually nonexistent. One might be led to suppose that creativity in the form of playful manipulation of linguistic units is also absent.

Such verbal activity relies heavily on subtle correspondences and quickly grasped associations not only of meaning but, very significantly, of form. In English, the mustard ad slogan *It brings the best out of the wurst* plays on the ambiguity created by two words with different meanings but identical sound forms and the natural association of the antonyms *best* and *worst*. Linguistic play is not limited to utterances where one and the same signal independently represents two or more words, each with its own meaning. Sometimes the segments of two words are overlapped, as when the Christmas season is referred to as *the alcholidays* or when someone says of Rockefeller, *He treated me quite famillionaire*.

In spontaneous ASL communication, plays on signs abound. They occur daily and readily evoke laughter. There are plays similar to those above, as well as many kinds of play that involve attributes spe-

This chapter was written in collaboration with Ella Mae Lentz.

cial to a visual-manual language, special to a language produced by the hands and perceived by the eyes.¹

Occasionally something very like a pun surfaces in our collections of sign plays. A pun in spoken language depends on exploiting equivalence or similarity of sound in two words that are different in meaning and compacting the two into a single linguistic context where both can apply. In ASL the ingredients for puns are available. There are signs with two meanings (though, by our accounting, a remarkably small number). There are also pairs of signs that are near homonyms in form but disparate in meaning.² The sign THIRTEEN, for instance, differs from a sign for EJACULATE in only minimal ways (see figure 13.1a,b). This pair of signs formed the basis for a pun when a deaf person signed: SUPPOSE (HE) MAN, (HE) AGE EJACULATE.³

You know he's a man when he's { age thirteen.
at the age of ejaculation. }

The double play was created by making the compound sign for 'thirteen years old' but with the slight change that characterizes the sign for 'ejaculate,' producing a pun—a double sign with double meaning in a context that evokes both (see figure 13.1c).

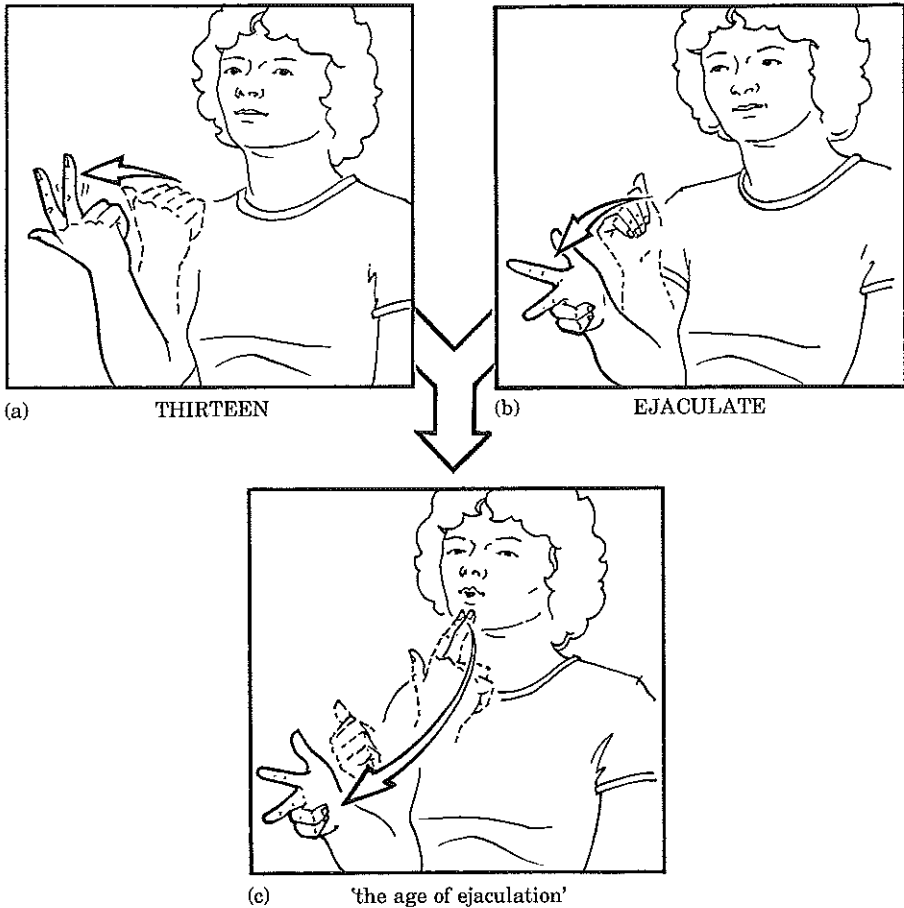
Punning is, in our experience, only an occasional form of sign play in ASL. Other forms of sign play spontaneously generated in conversation are much more common. Most of these differ from punning in the strict sense, for puns involve a linguistic context that forces the listener to recognize multiple meanings. For instance, on hearing or reading *Bad coffee is the grounds for divorce*, one must process the sentence twice to unpack its meaning.

The sign plays we have collected from daily conversations do not depend for effect on their sentential contexts. For the most part, they are themselves complete utterances: the perfect retort, the compression of meaning and form into a single elegant whole. This seems to us the common shared property of linguistic play in ASL—compression of unexpected meanings into minimal sign forms. Sometimes the condensation results from substituting elements within a sign, sometimes from using the two hands to make two different signs simultaneously, sometimes from making one sign merge into another or one sign blend with another. The linguistic plays uniformly involve compression of meaning and form.

Compression is, of course, a frequently identified characteristic of wit. "Brevity is the soul of wit," says Shakespeare's Polonius. In a famed treatise on wit, Freud (1938) recognized brevity as a defining characteristic: "wit says what it does say, not always in few, but always in *too* few words" (p. 636).

Such brevity, such condensation, are essential characteristics of linguistic plays on signs in ASL, which use not only few signs, but ideally

Figure 13.1 A pun in ASL.

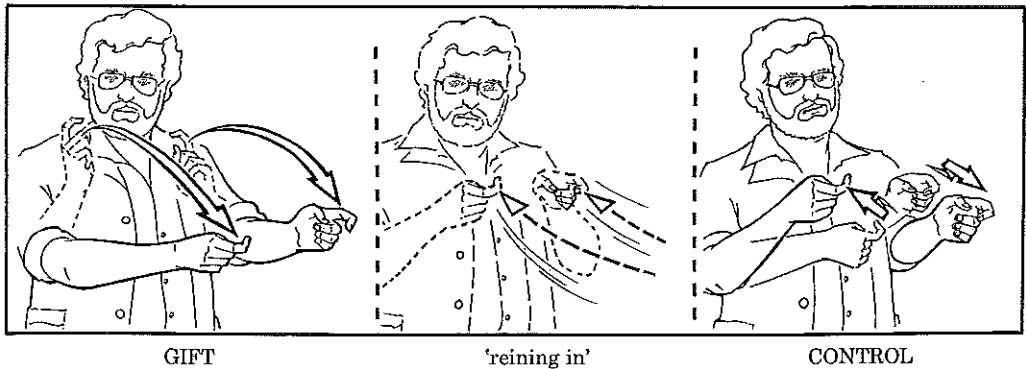


an all-in-one simultaneously compacted unit. It is as if wit in sign language represents the culmination of the underlying tendency toward conflation in the language: the ultimate in compression and in simultaneous display. At the same time such sign plays show awareness on the part of signers of linguistic parameters, awareness of regularities, as evidenced by breaking the rules to create plays with signs—an awareness of form.

The Play of Form against Meaning

In this chapter, we attempt to dissect and analyze the samples of sign play that have come our way. Linguistic play within a language is extremely difficult to translate, and the effort to explain invariably de-

Figure 13.2 A gift for control.



stroys the multiple effect that is encapsulated in the form. Nonetheless, the plays we will describe, as they were spontaneously created, provoked pleasure and delight as well as a sense that the signer made clever use of the form of a sign to compress multileveled meanings.

A gift for control. Organizational talent is a rare gift; one must have the ability to delegate authority to others while, lightly but carefully, keeping things in line. When a deaf man with such an ability was asked how he achieves this effect, he twinkled and signed EASY. Then in two signs he demonstrated his secret: GIFT, as in 'giving out authority,' and then CONTROL, 'keeping the reins in his grasp' (see figure 13.2).

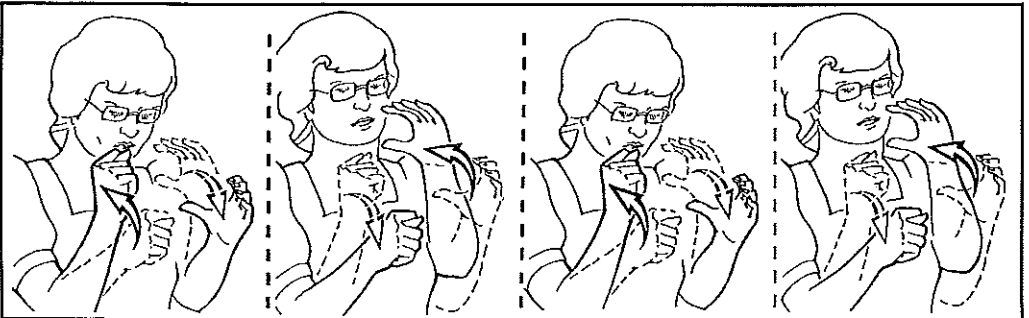
The two signs are well chosen and display an elegant simplicity. GIFT and CONTROL are both made with two active hook hands, /X/, both at the same plane of neutral space; they differ only in movement (GIFT has movement away from signer; CONTROL has a small alternating motion, symbolic of controlling a horse). The signer united the signs in the following way: he signed GIFT, then pulled in his hands as if pulling the reins of a horse, leading directly to the sign CONTROL. The pulling inward—not a part of either sign and not a normal transitional movement—evoked a sense of "drawing in" the sign GIFT: one gives authority, reins it in, and controls the gift carefully. To make his point the signer chose signs that are formationally similar, combined them with a dash of appropriate pantomime, and thus compressed several complex ideas into an effectively simple sign unit.

An experience of freedom. In this century, until very recent years, residential and day schools for the deaf have not encouraged (and sometimes not permitted) signing in the classroom. Now a growing number of schools permit total communication, as it is sometimes called, which includes—among other methods—simultaneous signing



(a) TOTAL-COMMUNICATION

Figure 13.3 The total communication of drinking and smoking: (a) TOTAL-COMMUNICATION (single sign); (b) SMOKING and DRINKING, SMOKING and DRINKING (alternating signs).



(b) SMOKING

DRINKING

SMOKING

DRINKING

and speaking in the classroom. For some deaf people total communication represents a newly discovered freedom, giving rise to a play on signs.

A visitor to a school for the deaf, so the story goes, asked one of the students why everyone seemed so carefree and happy. The student smiled and signed TOTAL-COMMUNICATION (see figure 13.3a), making the sign as it normally would be made, hands moving alternately toward and away from him. But as the movement continued, his hands moved gradually closer and closer to the mouth and his head began to tilt from side to side, until the single sign had become transformed into the two highly iconic signs DRINKING (alcohol) and SMOKING (marijuana), made alternately: 'drinking and smoking, drinking and smoking' (see figure 13.3b).

The play on meaning is multileveled. The student hooked together, by blending, a formal means of education and what he might have considered a form of self-education. Both have been restricted, both represent a kind of freedom: the one a freedom to communicate in the class-

room, the other a freedom to communicate with friends, out of sight of the authorities. For the student, smoking and drinking may themselves be a kind of total communication—a kind undreamt of by the school board.

The play on form too is multileveled. The sign TOTAL-COMMUNICATION is an initialized single sign that is relatively opaque;⁴ by contrast, the signs SMOKING and DRINKING are highly transparent, very close to mimed acts of what they represent. The single sign and the pair of signs are strikingly similar in form: the same handshape, the same relation between the hands, similar movement and location. In the play the sign TOTAL-COMMUNICATION is changed by degrees into two single signs, made alternately, by a process of manipulating what would otherwise be the transition between the two parts; gradually the opaque sign has been reanalyzed, shifted into two iconic alternating signs. Again there is a juxtaposition of meanings compacted into elegantly blended sign forms.

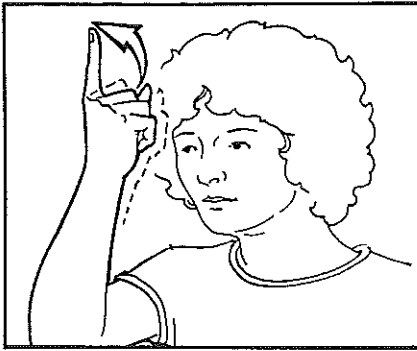
Formational Substitutions

One method of playing on signs is to substitute one regular ASL prime value for another, thus using elements of the linguistic code to create new sign forms. This occurs when a signer intentionally distorts a sign by substituting a value that adds a new dimension of meaning.

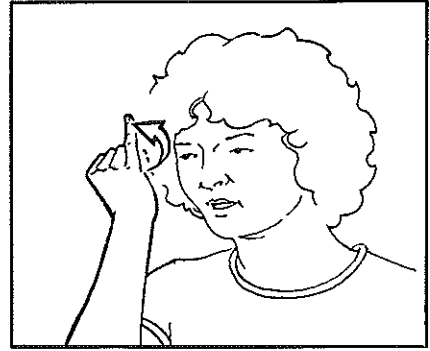
In a deliberate substitution for witty effect, when all but one of the basic characteristics of a sign are retained, the resulting distortion is a possible but not an actual ASL sign—neither a citation form nor a standard modulated form—which differs from an ASL sign in a way that is significant and meaningful, in terms of ASL and perhaps also in terms of more general spatial-gestural symbolism. Appreciating the wit (and often, in fact, recognizing an actual sign behind such a distortion) usually depends on knowing the context in which the distorted version is used. That is, the added meaning conveyed by a substitution generally comes from one of two sources: the substituted value may be part of a family of signs related in both form and meaning or the substituted value may have some general iconic significance that could be recognized even by a nonsigner.

Hand Configuration substitutions. After watching a lengthy explanation of a technical linguistic point, a deaf person was asked if he understood. The signer replied "UNDERSTAND," but instead of making the sign with the index finger normally used, he substituted his little finger. The basis for this distortion is clear: the little finger occurs in a symbolic way in some signs where it conveys the notion of thinness or extreme smallness (SPAGHETTI, THREAD, SKINNY-PERSON, INFINITESIMAL). At the same time it is physically smaller than any of

Figure 13.4 Hand Configuration substitution.



UNDERSTAND



UNDERSTAND-a-little

Figure 13.5 Place of Articulation substitution.



DEAF



DEAF-on-eye

the other fingers. The substitution in UNDERSTAND clearly carried the meaning 'understand a little' (see figure 13.4).

Other signers have used little-finger substitution to convey FAMOUS-a-little, HURT-a-little, APPLAUD-a-little. The opposite dimension, an increase in size or extent, has been conveyed by adding fingers: PUZZLED, ordinarily signed with a curved index finger (the hook hand), has been signed with four curved fingers to convey PUZZLED-many-times-over, and UNDERSTAND with one finger after another opening to convey, jokingly, increasing-UNDERSTANDING.⁵

Place of Articulation substitutions. In a break during an experiment involving signs presented under visual noise (clearly a strain for the eyes), a deaf person was advised to relax. The signer replied with a play on the sign RELAX; instead of making the sign normally on the torso, she transferred the location to just under the eyes thus conveying 'relax the eyes.' This kind of change depends for its effect on the

iconic values of specific locations. When a person had a black eye, a deaf person summed up the situation by making the sign DEAF across his eye (a 'deaf' eye) rather than across the cheek, as would normally be the case (see figure 13.5). Referring to a person who was inept at signing, a deaf person made the sign STUPID but transferred the location from the forehead to the hand, making the meaning 'hand stupid.'

Movement substitution. During another (interminable) discussion of linguistics and metalanguage, a deaf person signed UNDERSTAND but made the sign with a reversed movement. Instead of starting from a closed position and flipping open, the hand started in the final open position and closed to what should have been the initial position, thus conveying 'I un-understand,' or 'I understand less than I did when I started' (figure 13.6a). Such reversals of movement are common ways of playing with signs for special effect. The sign PROUD is made with an upward movement on the chest; when asked if he was proud of his achievements, a deaf person reversed the movement of PROUD, thus signing that he was 'unproud' (figure 13.6b).⁶

Minor parameter substitutions. When talking of the dark side of New York City, the corrupted side, a deaf person made the sign NEW-YORK, but instead of making it with the base hand in palm up orientation, he turned the palm down making the movement under the hand (figure 13.7). Thus the sign shared symbolic 'underhandedness' with the signs CHEAT, SWIPE, BRIBE, and OPPRESSION.

Still another sign play made special use of the two hands in a two-handed symmetrical sign. A deaf woman arrived one day and announced with pride that she had just become a grandmother. A friend of hers signed that she too looked forward to the time when she would be a grandmother. The first woman smiled, made the two-handed sign GRANDMOTHER and generously moved one hand over to make the sign on her friend, thus sharing the sign and its meaning.

Double Articulation of Signs

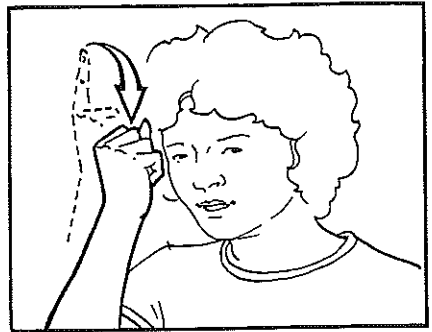
In signing, the existence of two autonomous articulators creates the physical possibility of producing two independent signs simultaneously, one in each hand, or of holding one sign with one hand while producing a different sign with the other. Such simultaneity is consistent with the tendency toward simultaneous expression in many of the regular processes in the language: the tendency to compress information into single sign units and the use of simultaneous (rather than sequential) modifications of signs to modulate meaning.

Double articulation of signs frequently occurs in self-conscious signing of preplanned material: in theatrical productions, in narratives, in poetic signing—and in plays on signs.

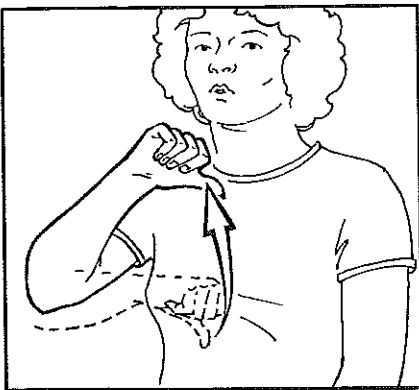
Figure 13.6 Movement substitution.



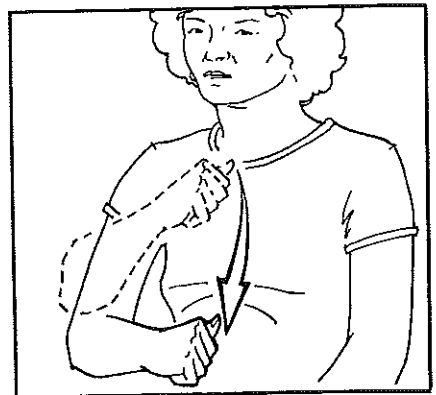
(a) UNDERSTAND



un-UNDERSTAND

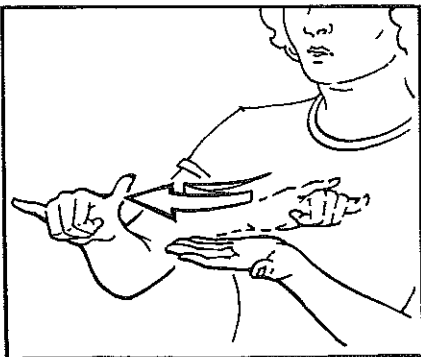


(b) PROUD

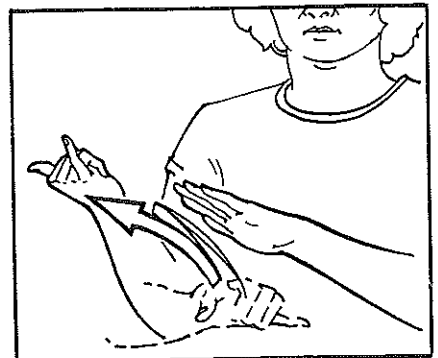


un-PROUD

Figure 13.7 Orientation substitution.

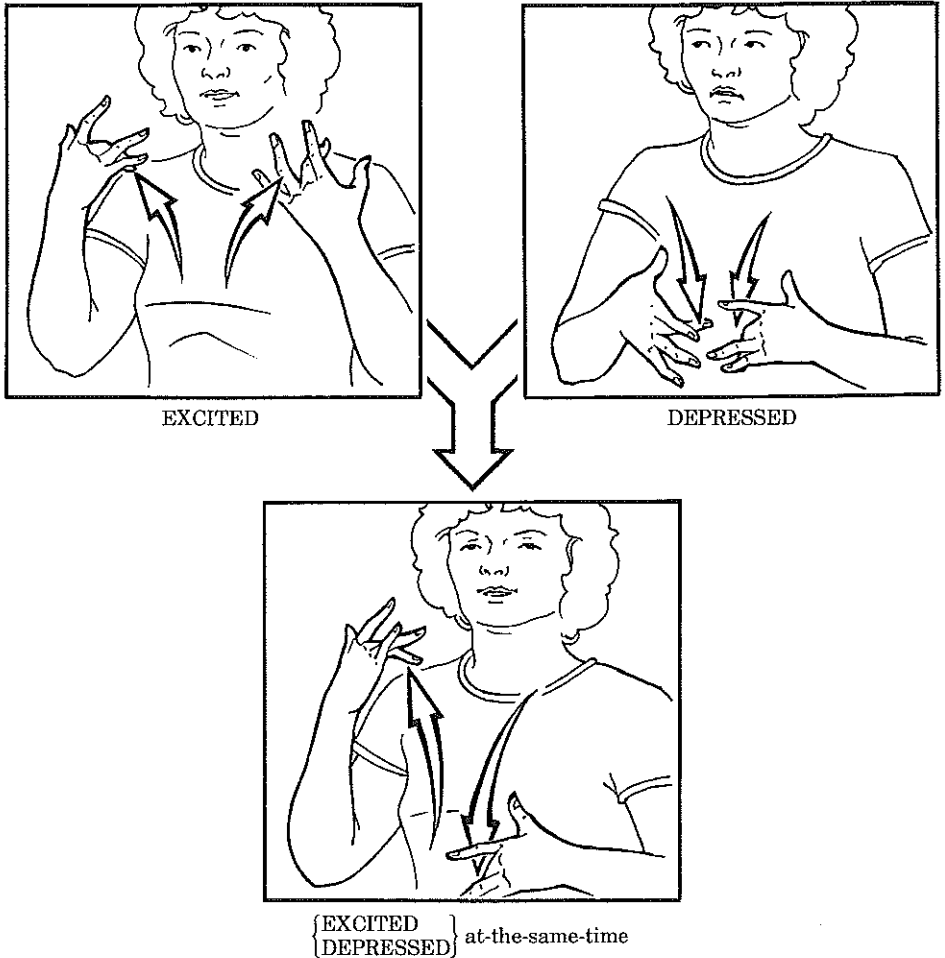


NEW-YORK



underhanded-NEW-YORK

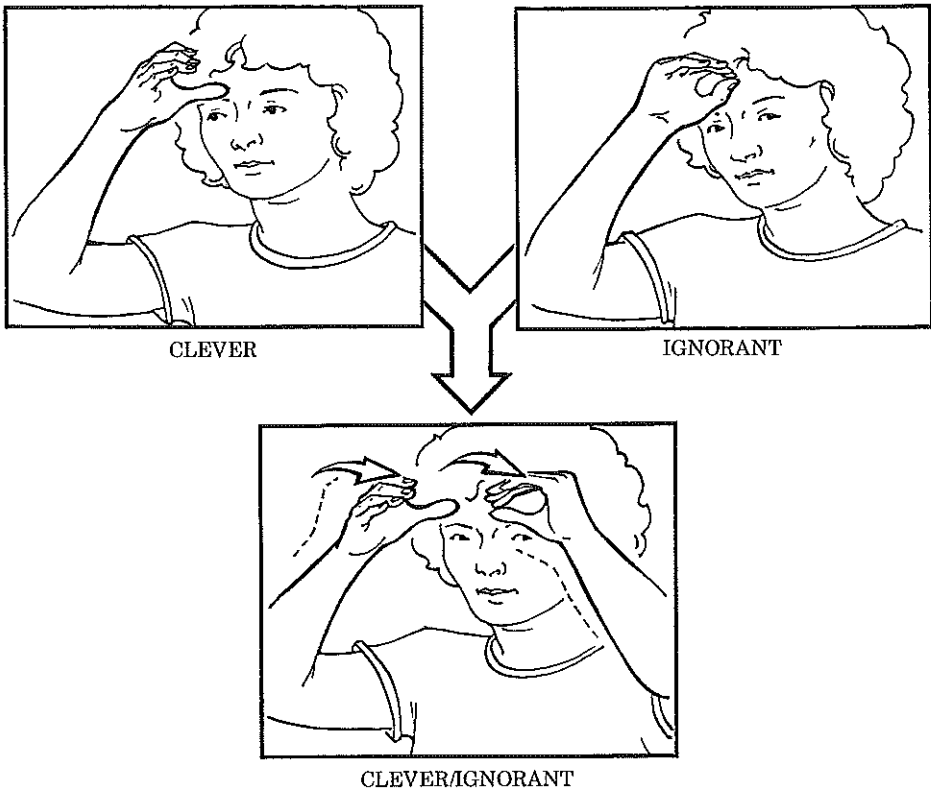
Figure 13.8 Simultaneous articulation.



Simultaneous articulation. A young deaf man who had spent a summer with us in research was leaving for a new situation. When asked how he felt, his response could be paraphrased in English as *I feel excited about the new position but depressed about leaving*. He was far more concise, however: with one hand he made the sign EXCITED and with the other the sign DEPRESSED; the two were executed simultaneously. The signs are antonyms, and they are related in formation, differing only in direction of movement (upward versus downward brushing). Thus he condensed into a single new sign creation the ambivalence of his emotions (see figure 13.8).

A sign in either hand. Plays on signs are also created by holding one

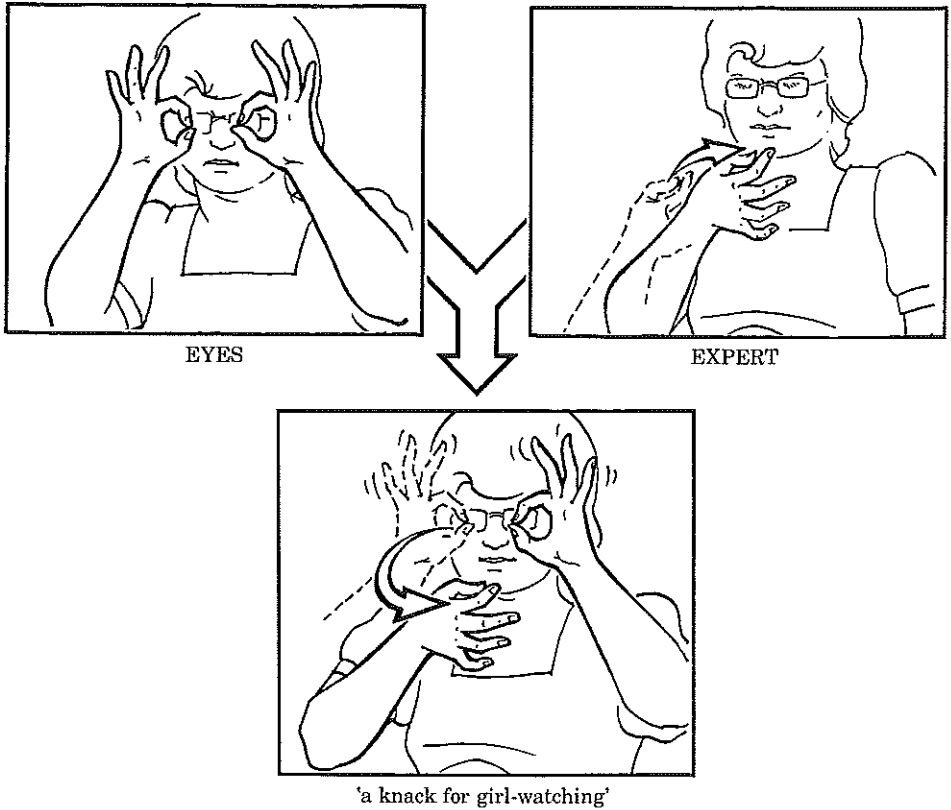
Figure 13.9 A sign in either hand.



sign while making another, thus presenting two signs simultaneously to the eye. Often the two signs share properties of form though they emphasize distinctions of meaning. For instance, a deaf woman commented in a sign play on her disparate abilities in research; she said that she was clever and skilled at reading signs made by young deaf children but very poor at remembering them long enough to write them down in their proper order. This combination of mental abilities—clever and incapable at the same time—was expressed by a simultaneous presentation of two signs, one with either hand. She first signed CLEVER with one hand and then added IGNORANT with the other, holding the two in place on the forehead (figure 13.9).

Double articulation may be used in other ways to maintain two parts of a condensed message. A young deaf man in our laboratory seemed to have an eye for pretty girls. When we commented, he laughed and summed up his sense of himself in two simultaneously presented signs, agreeing that he was really an 'expert girl watcher.' The signs he used were related in formation: a mimetic sign for EYES, and a sign for EX-

Figure 13.10 Overlapping signs.



PERT ('to have a knack for'). He first signed EYES (adding a mime of flirtation); then with one hand still in place the other slipped into the sign EXPERT (signing 'eyes-pert,' as it were), an effective doubly articulated message EYES/EXPERT (see figure 13.10).

Double articulation of signs plays on similarities in form and differences in meaning of lexical units. Since it depends on the independent use of the two hands at once, it is clearly unique to a gesture language.

Blending of Signs

A second method of conflating two signs in sign play is by blending. Forms of blending do not depend on using the two hands independently but, rather, on special formal properties of chosen signs which permit integration in particular ways—sometimes by manipulating the handshape or movement of the signs, sometimes by manipulating transitions between signs—but always dependent on form and meaning.

Epithets. A type of blending occurs frequently in creating new name signs as epithets, summing up the characteristics of a person by conflating a sign and a name. Name signs are commonly coined within a group or community by forming the handshape corresponding to the initial of a person's first or last name in English and arbitrarily choosing a movement and location for that handshape. On first occurrence the name might be fingerspelled; later a name sign would be coined for ease of reference within a group or community. But either as a play on signs or as a nickname, the name-initial may be blended with a lexical ASL sign that refers to some special characteristic of that person.

The name sign for Ursula Bellugi is a fingerspelled letter "U" on the side of the mouth. Because she has a habit of jotting down with great excitement any new sign she sees, one deaf person dubbed her "Ursula the Copier," substituting the "U" of her name sign for the handshape of the sign COPY. Others have had their name signs similarly elaborated: "Ray the Groovy," "Marilyn the Advisor," and many more (see also Meadow 1974).

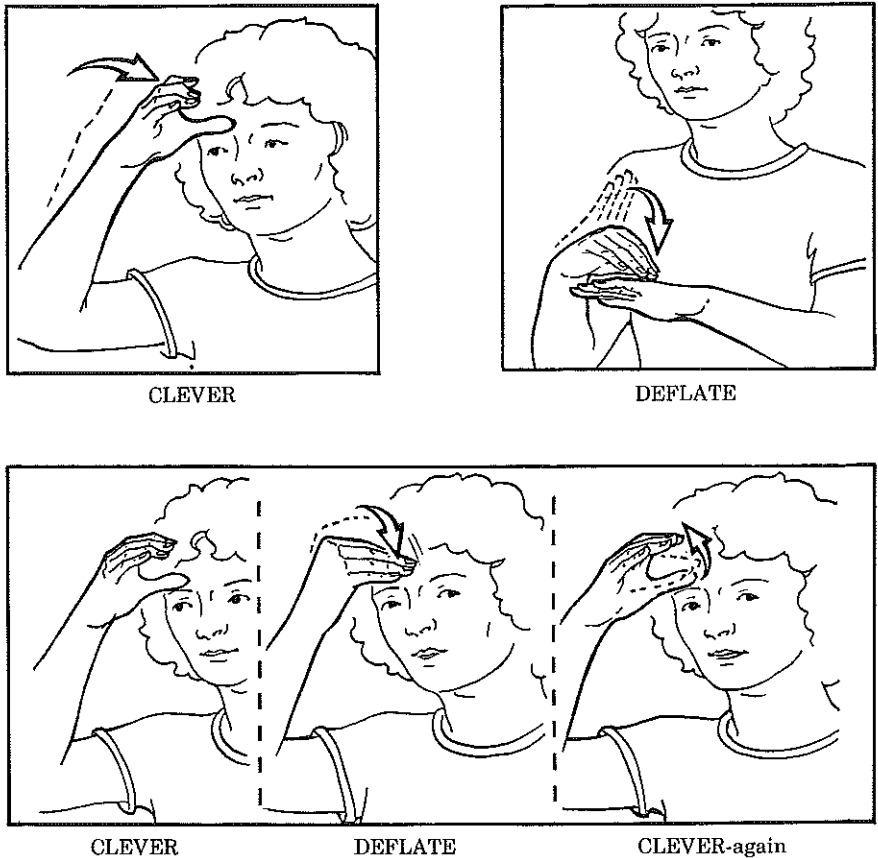
Even before the Watergate scandal and the resignation of former President Nixon, deaf people had a name sign for him that was used even on the news interpreted by signers. The name sign consisted of the letter "N" made across the chin with a brushing motion: a conflation of "N" for Nixon and the ASL sign LIAR. The English equivalent in effect (but not in form) might be a reference to him as "Mr. Trixon," combining his name with the word *tricks*. President Jimmy Carter has received his own epithet: he is referred to with two hands in "C" shapes surrounding a broad smile, playing on the ASL sign GRIN, and evoking the famous Carter toothy gleam.

Movement blends. Discussions of linguistics seem to bring out the creative powers of signers in our laboratory. One such discussion ended in a kind of impasse for the signer. He first made a newly coined sign LINGUISTICS; then he began again, this time starting as in LINGUISTICS but switching mid-sign-stream to the movement and shape of BALONEY. The blend of the two signs LINGUISTICS/BALONEY created a complex integrated form that conveyed his feelings precisely.

One day when a hearing person was being particularly inept at signing, the deaf teacher good-humoredly signed that his cleverness was deflated but that it would become inflated again. To convey this, she made the sign CLEVER with the cupped hand on the forehead; then she closed her hand, adding the movement of DEFLATE (usually made with one hand acting on another as a base); then she opened the hand, reinflating the sign back to CLEVER again (see figure 13.11).

Transition blends. Another form of blending two signs is by manipulating the transition between them. One sign is made and then is extended in different ways throughout what would ordinarily be the

Figure 13.11 Blending of signs.



transition to the next sign; by small increments the hands gradually move to the next sign. This kind of manipulation of transitions between signs occurs only in sign play and art sign; it is clearly a playful manipulation of what is ordinarily the nonsigning movement of the hands between the offset of one sign and the onset of the next.

One signer was trying to resist the temptation to eat sweets. When another person offered her a delicious-looking cookie, she succumbed, summing up the situation in two economical signs: *TEMPT* and a sign representing a small round object (the cookie). *TEMPT* is a noniconic sign made by tapping the curved forefinger on the elbow; the size-and-shape specifier used for 'cookie' is clearly iconic. The two signs were linked by blending: the arbitrary sign *TEMPT* moved from the elbow up the arm by degrees and was slowly transformed into a round object in front of the signer's mouth; the signer looked at her hand, then sud-

denly and unexpectedly “ate” the imaginary cookie. In this play there is a sudden shift in frame of reference. The elbow is a PA for a sign and at the same time a part of the signer’s body. That deaf people are aware of this double role of body parts as locations of signs is shown by another instance in which a deaf person signed what could only be interpreted as meaning ‘I wouldn’t be tempted if I cut off my elbow.’

Sign Play beyond the Linguistic System

ASL is a language in which the articulators are always in full view; furthermore it is a language in which HCS are also hands, in which PAs are also body parts; it is a language in which signs are composed of formational elements that serve as purely formal differentiators across the language but at the same time have global representational qualities. Sign play makes full use of these possibilities.

Some plays on signs go beyond the boundaries of the linguistic system to cast a visual reflection on the language itself. Such plays may consist of forming a sign and then transforming it, manipulating it, playing with it in ways that need not reflect the linguistic properties of the language directly but instead reflect back on them. By beginning with a sign and then carrying it beyond the bounds of ASL signing, signers create surprise effects.

Visual iconicity. To sign LONG, the index finger moves part way up the arm. One can exaggerate the meaning by actually lengthening the movement, drawing it out slowly or continuing it farther than normal. In chapter 1 we described the playful way in which one signer started at his toes, moved up his leg, then through the regular path of movement on the arm, and ended far above his head. Suddenly, the arm was no longer a PA for a sign but an arm, a part of the body.

A young deaf child was asked by her father for a LONG kiss; he elongated the sign as it was made. The child, bored with such requests for affection, agreed but on her own terms. She began the sign LONG, then after an inch or so indicated a sharp cut-off, effectively conveying, ‘Oh, all right, but make it a quickie’ (Maxwell 1977).

In the sign COMMUNICATE, the two hands have the same shape and move alternately back and forth. A deaf person wanted to describe a situation in which people attempted to communicate but failed and misunderstood each other. She could have used lexical signs; instead she made the sign COMMUNICATE and then gave it a playful twist, suddenly moving her hands in erratic uneven unsignlike patterns, representing failure of communication, ‘communication gone awry.’ Thus she brought out secondary iconic aspects of the sign by her distortion of it, and the form of the sign COMMUNICATE was freshly appropriate to its meaning: a two-way path, a smooth flow of interaction (see figure 13.12).

Figure 13.12 Visual iconicity.

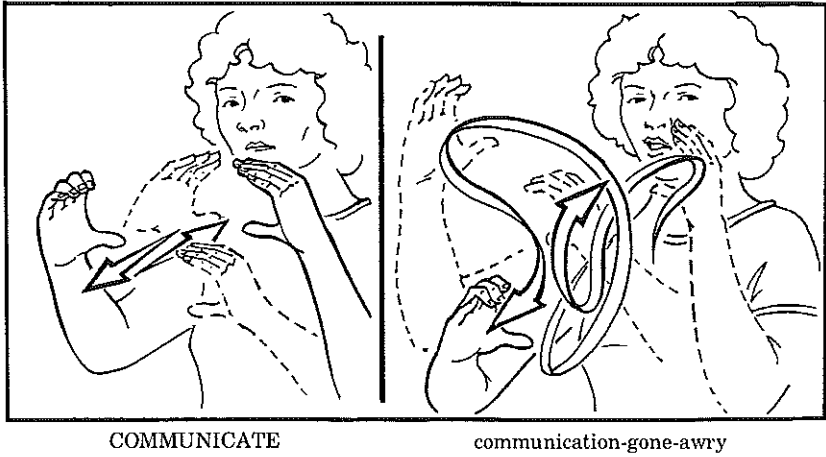
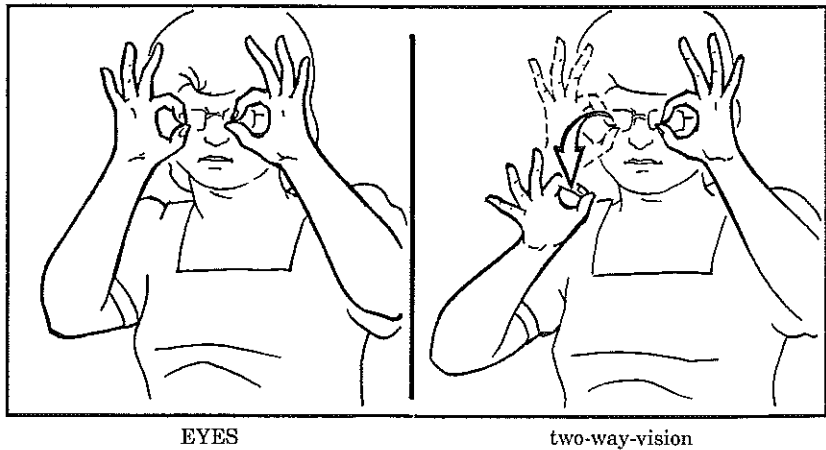


Figure 13.13 Visual iconicity.



The mimetic sign for EYES is used in many ways to create contradictory effects, and it can be elaborated to do many things the eyes can do: bat eyelashes, wink, open slowly, spring open, glance to the side. But since in fact the sign is made with mobile hands and arms, it is sometimes used for unexpected effects. A deaf person transcribing videotapes signed that it would be so easy if she could only watch the screen and look down at her writing at the same time. She made the sign EYES and then, keeping one EYE-hand directed toward the TV screen, tilted the other downward toward the paper. The effect was

startling—the hands, which represent eyes, can move in ways that the eyes themselves cannot (see figure 13.13).

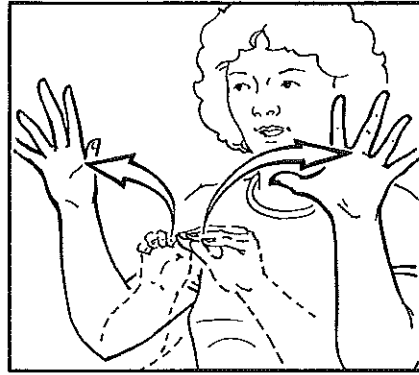
The sign IMPROVE is made with one hand contacting on the back of the other hand and then contacting again on the lower arm. The sign can undergo regular morphological processes, but it can also be subjected to mimetic elaboration to convey ‘improve immensely,’ ‘improve an infinitesimal amount,’ ‘improve in one swoop.’ Its inverse counterpart is a lexical sign meaning ‘to disimprove’ or ‘deteriorate’ (contact is first on the arm and then on the hand). A deaf person was discussing his declining mathematical skills. He made the sign DISIMPROVE in small regular increments so that the active hand moved down along his arm to the end of the fingertips; then it surprisingly “fell off” the hand. Thus there was a sudden shift of reference at the fingertips: the hand was no longer signing and could be viewed as an inert object subject to the laws of physics.

Manual ambiguity. These plays involve transforming signs beyond the formal system in ways that highlight underlying iconic aspects of the signs themselves. Other sign plays depend primarily on the manipulation of potential ambiguities in the role of the hand: whether, at a given time, a hand is to be regarded as constituting a sign, as manipulating a sign, as a part of the signer’s body, as representing some imagined physical object. Shifting between these functions can create further comic effects. A person signed WISE, with his hand in a well-defined /X/ shape, but then let the finger droop, as if the wisdom had wilted. By an imperceptible transition the hand no longer formed a sign and had become just a limp hand at the forehead.

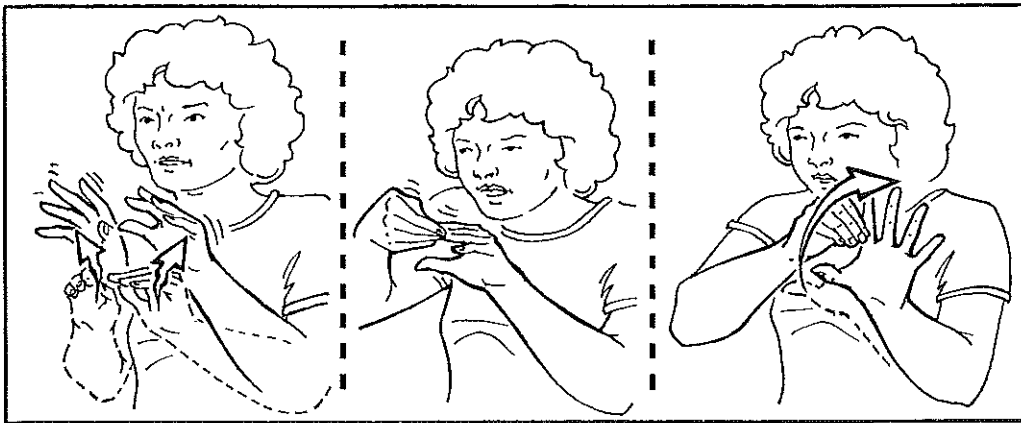
A deaf person started to sign CLEAR, a two-handed sign made by fanning open the fingers to spread hands as the hands move apart. The hands visibly attempted to open but appeared glued and stuck; finally one hand relaxed, became a hand rather than part of a sign, and pried open the fingers of the other hand in order to manually produce half of the sign CLEAR; it was as if each hand had independent volition and one hand was forcing the other to sign CLEAR clearly (see figure 13.14).

In a rendition of a children’s comic poem, Lou Fant, an accomplished actor-signer, makes elaborate use of this way of playing with hands as signs and hands as hands. In the poem “Eletelephony” by Laura Richards, the words *elephant* and *telephone* become entangled in various ways, as the title indicates. In Fant’s ASL rendition, his hand seems to have a will of its own, and though he vainly tries to control or steady it with the other hand, it gets away from him, slips down to the end of his nose, gets tangled behind his back, wobbles through space willynilly, and finally ends up with the thumb firmly planted in his mouth!

Figure 13.14
Manual ambiguity.



CLEAR

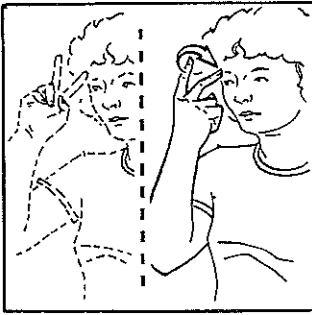


prying-open-for-clarity

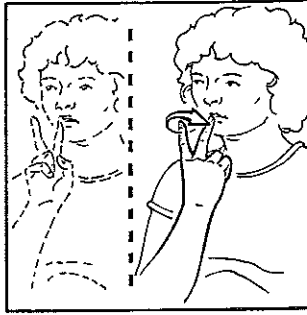
A Play of Sign Plays

Sign-play inventions can be based on both signlike and iconic properties of the language and can undergo rapid transformations, as a group invention in our laboratory demonstrates. We were discussing slips of the tongue, unintentional misordering errors in speech. One deaf researcher coined a sign for them by misplacing the sign MISUNDERSTAND (see figure 13.15a) from the forehead to the tongue—contacting, turning the hand, and contacting again, thus invoking the order reversal involved in a slip of the tongue (figure 13.15b). Another researcher then created a sign SLIP-OF-THE-HAND_{inv} based on the same principle: contact at the fingertips, turning the hands, and another contact, again with the suggestion of the reversal in a slip (figure 13.15c). Another signer laughed and then reversed the newly

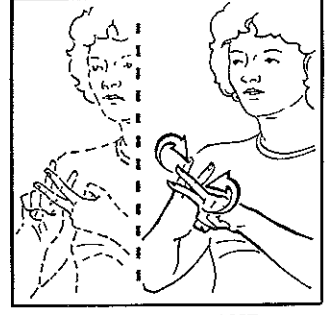
Figure 13.15 A play on sign plays. (Note play with invented sign for 'slip of the hand': orientation reversal in (d), flourish in (e).)



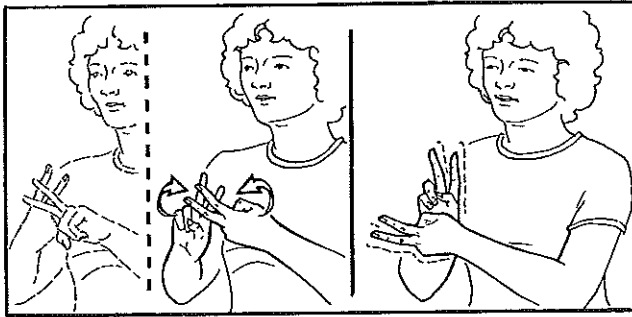
(a) MISUNDERSTAND



(b) SLIP-OF-THE-TONGUE_{inv}

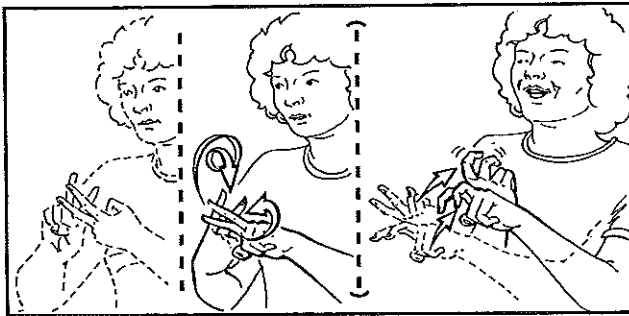


(c) SLIP-OF-THE-HAND_{inv}



(d) SLIP-OF-THE-HAND_{inv}

FUCKED-UP



(e) elaborated-SLIP

LAUGHING-uproariously

coined sign, making it backwards and thus simulating a slip of the hand while signing SLIP-OF-THE-HAND_{inv} and from there her hands slipped easily into a sign best translated, inelegantly but accurately, as 'fucked up' (figure 13.15d). At that point a fourth signer joined the game, beginning again with SLIP-OF-THE-HAND and making an

elaborate flourish between the contacts; a quick addition to the movement of this 'slliiip of the hand' added still another meaning, 'laughing uproariously' (figure 13.15e). And by that time indeed we were.

Linguistic Play in Other Forms

The sign plays discussed thus far occurred primarily in everyday conversations. For the most part, such plays are neither elaborate nor carefully constructed, concocted, or preplanned. They are, rather, samples of folk humor.

Linguistic play with signs occurs as well in contrived parlor games, social competitions, and group amusements in which manipulations of linguistic elements are prescribed by the rules of the game. Some uses of signs in such games exceed the bounds of the language proper, moving freely from sign to mime to pure visual form and back again. But some of the games directly reveal an awareness of linguistic form.

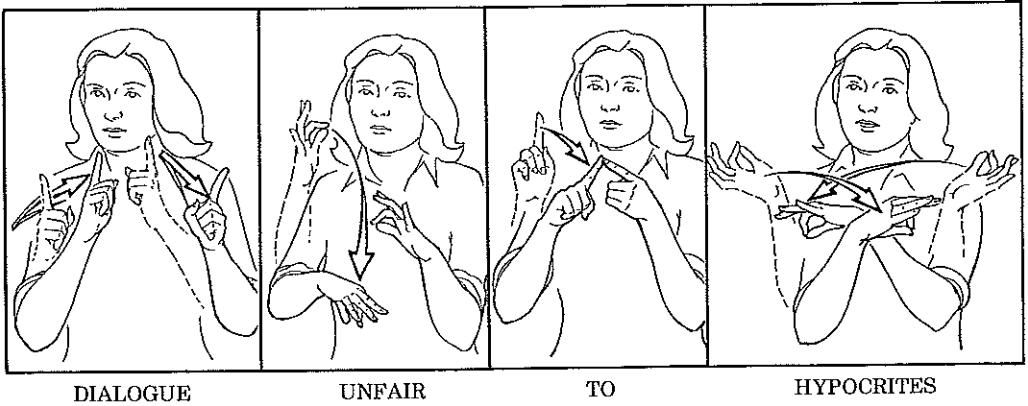
In one common game a leader begins with a sign and each person in turn must contribute a different sign using the same handshape. In another game signers invent thematic stories based on the alphabet or numbers. First a theme is chosen, such as a car race (or something more racy still) or a mystery story. One signer begins a story with a sign using an "A" hand, the next must add a thematic sign using a "B" hand, and so on until a fully developed narrative using an ordered arrangement of handshapes has been group created. One story began with KNOCK-on-the-door ("A"), continued with DOOR-open ("B"), SEARCH-all-around ("C"), suddenly-HEAR ("D"), reverberating-SCREAM ("E"), and became a full-fledged mystery story replete with ghosts.

Another game involves fingerspelling combined with mime, so that the meaning of a word is doubly evoked: through spelling and mimetic elaboration at the same time. For instance, the word *butterfly* is spelled out but with the hands moving from one manual representation to the next in a way that evokes an image of a flitting butterfly. In such a game one signer spelled the word *impotent* but with the manual "I" (an extended pinkie) lying on its side rather than straight up: \dashv -M-P-O-T-E-N-T.

Another kind of language play with signs is the invention of finger fumlbers, analogous to tongue twisters in spoken language, *She sells sea shells by the sea shore*. One such invention from our laboratory is DIALOGUE UNFAIR TO HYPOCRITES (see figure 13.16); it is almost impossible to sign that sequence several times quickly without error.

Play with signs occurs in still more structured forms. We have videotaped football cheers, poems, limericks, and songs, performed not only

Figure 13.16 A finger-fumbler.



by individual signers but by sign choruses, by a sign rock group, and as sign duets. In duets the double articulation of signs provides special possibilities: each person can contribute a hand to make up a two-handed sign; two people can sign on or around each other; the signs (and hands) of one can be intermingled with the signs of the other. The elaboration of signing into poetry and song involves further complexities of structure which are considered in chapter 14.

Wit and sign play involve manipulation of signs in ways that are special to the form of sign language itself. A language based on gesture and vision may lend itself to particular types of playful extension and distortion of the shapes of its units far more readily than a language of spoken words, which cannot so easily blend, overlap, appear simultaneously, or otherwise change shape. In language games signers use their language in a playful way. Such deliberate use of linguistic elements clearly reflects signers' intuitive awareness of linguistic form.