

Research Briefing No. 2

Sign Language Poetry: Visual images and metaphors

Key findings

Signed poems use carefully chosen language to show deaf poets' view of the world. The visual language of space and movement shows deaf people's visual experiences.

- The powerful image is the main point of some poems.

Poems often tell short 'cinematic' stories, using techniques that come from film-editing to show close-ups, distance shots and intense action sequences. Many sign poets use their bodies to take on the roles of human and non-human characters and show them from new and different perspectives.

- Other poems use the structure of sign language to carry extra meaning behind the images in metaphors.

Where spoken language poems can use sounds to create metaphors, signed poems use the basic building blocks of sign languages. Poets have different styles: they might choose to use one hand or both, select particular handshapes, and carefully place or move signs, and they may create totally new signs.

- Deaf poets compose poems on a very broad range of topics

Some poems are about issues important for deaf people, such as education and sign language but others talk about general topics, such as loving your cat or pride and loneliness. Signed poetry is deaf poetry even when themes are not specifically deaf-focused, so any topic can become 'deaf' when it is shown through sign language.



The research

Our project made an on-line collection of over 100 sign language poems (www.bristol.ac.uk/bslpoetryanthology) performed by established and new British Sign Language (BSL) poets. We added a translation and commentary for most of the poems. We collected performances from four deaf poets of different ages, language and education backgrounds. The poets chose to compose on any topic but we also asked them to think about 'home', 'time' and 'non-humans'. We also added a small selection of BSL poetry from the 1980s and 1990s that is not easily available elsewhere. At Sign Poetry Festivals in the UK and USA, established poets gave public BSL poetry performances and ran workshops for Deaf people to appreciate and compose signed poetry. We added these to our collection. The festivals introduced new forms of poetry to the Deaf community, including Signed Renga (a type of 'group poetry') from Japan.



Poster for signed poetry festival 'Signing Hands Across the Water'

Research design

We asked the poets to 'think aloud' about possible ways of signing creatively, using 'Shared Thinking Processes'. This method worked well because they explained the processes behind composing their poems directly and also because sharing ideas is traditional in deaf learning.

We studied individual poems using close reading to think about ways they represent non-humans, how poets show different mental and physical 'spaces' through blending ideas, and how they create new signs. For existing and new signs we saw how handshape, eyegaze, symmetry and space could be used to create metaphors.

We also compared different poets' styles. We calculated the percentage of symmetrical signing in poems compared to non-poetic signing in BSL and its role in metaphors in BSL poetry. We asked how form leads to meaning (seeing how poetic use of language represents ideas) and how meaning leads to form, (asking the poets to create a poem on a specific theme/concept and seeing how they represent it).

Further information

The project has raised the profile of BSL poetry within the deaf community, among the general public and within the academy.

The project team had many invitations to speak on the subject, we saw sell-out performances at all three planned festivals, had three extra performances, and poets were invited to give workshops across the UK.

Many of the poems are now used in language teaching programmes.

Deaf people of all backgrounds, language experience and ages attended the live poetry performances. One elderly deaf lady at the Centre for Deaf People on festival night said she hadn't seen so many young deaf people at the Deaf Club for years.

The Deaf poets all gained confidence. Having their work associated with a prestigious university confirmed their skills. Engaging in our analysis of their work helped them understand principles of sign language poetry that as 'community poets' they were less aware of.

For the festival of Deaf poets, see:
<http://signinghandsacrosstthewater.com/>

Website

<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/bslpoetryanthology/>

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