

An overview of sign language poetry

Rachel Sutton-Spence, *RachelLSpence@aol.com*

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What is Sign Language Poetry?

A general definition of poetry is "an aesthetically purposeful distortion of standard language". The language in poems deliberately breaks the rules of standard language in order for the text/utterance to be noticed as language. Sign language poets have also summarised what poetry means to them.

Dot Miles: "[It's] a way of putting meaning very briefly so people will see it and feel very strongly".

Clayton Valli: "Poetry is using esthetic criteria for placement of words, instead of custom...Beauty of phrase, intensity of motion, and ingeniousness of technique are poetry's substance."

Sign language poetry is the ultimate form of aesthetic signing, in which the form of language used is as important as - or even more important than - the message. Like so much poetry in any language, sign language poetry is a means of expressing ideas unusually succinctly, through means of heightened "art" language. It uses specific language devices to maximise the significance of the poem, just as in the poetry of spoken languages, although the language devices are rather different from the rhymes and alliteration that are familiar to most hearing audiences. The metaphors and images used in sign language poems may also be different from those in spoken language poems. In general, though, the basic idea of maximising the message through specially heightened language is the same in poetry in all languages, whether signed or spoken.

Our Western distinction between prose and poetry is artificial and is clearly only a relative one. We can easily find pieces of prose with poetic features, and poetry that often seems more like prose. Deaf communities have often had very strong storytelling traditions, but not necessarily what we would call poetic traditions. Storytelling uses an artistic form of language, and these stories may inform, be humorous or emotionally powerful, but the sign language storytelling traditions did not develop into poetry until very recently. Most people would agree that sign language poetry, as we currently understand it, only began in the 1960s, and a poetic *tradition* in any sign language reported so far only dates from the 1980s or 1990s, if indeed we can say that there is a tradition yet.

Because poetry is a social construction, a community's definition of poetry may also change as the community changes. Poetry is as much a matter of fashion as it is an elevated art form. Even though sign poetry has only existed for a short time, its features have changed as our understanding of sign language and signed poetry has changed, and as deaf communities have changed. Today, there are deaf artists around the world who compose and perform their sign language poetry and have very different styles. Wim Emmerik (Sign Language of the Netherlands), Rosaria and Giuseppe Giuranna (Italian Sign Language), Patrick Graybill and Ella Mae Lenz (ASL), Paul Scott and John Wilson (BSL) and Clayton Valli (ASL) are all recognised in their communities as poets. Their poetry is not all the same and they create their "aesthetic effect" using different linguistic techniques.

Geoffrey Leech, whose theories of linguistic analysis of poetry provide a framework for our commentary on the poems here, has summed up the problems facing linguists who try to analyse poetry. He has written, "The task of a linguist trying to discover by objective means the underlying conventions of poetic composition in English would be a thankless one, since each new poem he examined would be apt to contradict any generalisations he had been able to make. Rules are made only to be broken." (p12)

Poetry is a creative use of language. There are two basic ways that poets may use their language creatively. In the first place they may use the established possibilities of the language in a creative way. Alternatively, they may go beyond the established possibilities and create new possibilities that are not in the language at all (or at least, not yet). The linguistic creativity leads to some sort of literary effect, where it adds significance in some way to the poem. This "creative licence" allows poets to push the boundaries of their language to new limits and explore and communicate radically new ideas and experiences.

Describing Sign Language Poetry

In order to appreciate poetry to its fullest, a reader might wish to consider at least three key aspects: form and content of the poetic text, social and historical context of the poem, and knowledge and beliefs of the poet. For some analysts and critics, the text is the greatest priority, and in many cases, a text can be analysed in depth with no reference to anything external to it. However, it can also be useful to know about the social and historical context in which a poem was composed in order to appreciate the choice of a specific metaphor, for example, or the poet's attitude to a certain topic. Understanding of the experience of the poet's deaf community can often increase our appreciation of sign language poetry. There is also no doubt that knowing about a poet's life, and the events and experiences that shaped their poetic output, can also increase the understanding of some poems. When we are studying sign language poetry, it is important to bear in mind that Deaf people compose and perform it. Their life experiences are very different from the hearing people who live alongside them and this will inform their poems.

Foregrounding of Language

Geoffrey Leech (1969), working with ideas developed in the Prague school of linguistics in the 1950s, gives a clear account of a way to identify poetic language, using linguistic principles. He explains that poetic language deviates from, and even violates the norms of, "ordinary" everyday language. This deviation creates "foregrounding". The language norms (and other norms of social expectation) are challenged by the poem so that the deviation stands out - foregrounded - from the background of normal language. In other words, we notice poetic language because it is odd and this foregrounding serves to increase the significance of the poem.

Leech describes two distinct ways in which poems foreground language. The language can be so odd and deviant, that its irregularity is obtrusive. Using an entirely new word, for example, or breaking a rule of grammar for poetic effect is deviant. Alternatively, the language can be abnormally normal, so that its very regularity stands out and becomes obtrusive. Repeating the same speech sound unusually often so that it creates a rhyme, for example, is too regular to be normal. The obtrusive irregularity is termed "deviance" and the obtrusive regularity, "parallelism". As a very rough distinction, deviance (using new forms of the language) is especially relevant to the content of the poem, whereas parallelism (using established forms of the language in an unusually repetitive way) is particularly relevant to expression of the language. In other words, deviance is related to *what* the poet has to say, and parallelism is concerned with *how* the poet says it. Deviance is related to the meaning of the language used - the semantics - and parallelism is seen especially in the way that the

meaning of the language is expressed or made real by the sounds or hand configuration of the words - the phonology. The vocabulary used in a poem is relevant to both deviance and parallelism because the words carry meaning and they are made real by certain sounds or hand configurations.

The features of deviance and parallelism may be summarised in the table below.

Deviance	Parallelism
Obtrusively irregular language	Obtrusively regular language
Creation of something not already in the language	Unusual repetition of forms already established in the language
Adds poetic significance to the content of the poem	Adds poetic significance to the form of the poem
What the poet has to say	The way the poet says it
Linguistically linked to semantics	Linguistically linked to phonology
For example: new words or unusual grammar	For example: rhymes or alliteration

The choice of the foregrounded language used in a poem will bring considerably more "information" to a poem. Leech refers to this as "the communicative weight of each linguistic choice". Poetry uses language creatively, either by using possibilities already established in the language in an original way or by creating new possibilities, and this creativity in poetry makes its language unpredictable. Normally, our experience of everyday language lets us predict the general pattern that "chunks" of language will follow. Prediction and expectation allow us to pay relatively little attention to the individual words or signs in the language that delivers a message. Unpredictable poetic language forces us to concentrate on every word or sign, leading us to appreciate not only the word's meaning, but also its full significance in that context.

Ambiguity in poetry is a key tool to increasing the communicative weight of a word or sign. Ambiguity is best avoided in everyday language, where the priority is easy communication and the speaker and the audience normally work together to ensure clear communication. In poetry, however, ambiguity is a useful way to add meaning to a poem without adding any extra words. If a word has more than one meaning, each of which could conceivably make sense in the context of the poem, it can increase the significance of the word. Words with more than one meaning are well used in English poetry, but in sign languages, where the exact sense of many signs is only defined by their linguistic context, the scope for using ambiguity in poetry to increase the communicative weight is even broader.

The poems may create neologisms, or new words, in what might be called "lexical deviation". Sign languages differ from spoken languages in the amount of lexical creativity that occurs in everyday language. In the main, languages such as English are fairly stable, and creating a new word is notable. Sign languages, however, are much more productive in their vocabulary, and creating new signs is often a part of everyday signing. This productivity is common in other language art-forms such as narratives but it is most noticeable in some poetry. Sign poetry can produce striking new signs by selecting specific elements or by giving the signs unusual or unexpected meaning.

At another, higher, level we have also learned to expect poems to be "semantically deviant". The meaning of the words in the poem - or even of the whole poem itself - might deviate from the expected meaning in normal language. In the broadest sense, this is the area of metaphor. In some instances the surface meaning of the poem makes sense, but there is an alternative metaphorical meaning for the reader to draw out. In other instances perhaps the initial meaning appears to be absurd, and the reader has to seek out meaning from clues within the poem or its context.

The deviations summarised so far create foregrounding by their "obtrusive irregularity". They gain attention because they break or bend the rules of the language or do something that the language has not done before. However, foregrounding can also occur because the language has become "obtrusively regular" through the use of poetic repetition or "parallelism". The parallelism causes the poetic language to become extra regular and these unnaturally regular patterns bring the poetic language into the foreground.

In everyday language, the elements making up words and sentences are primarily chosen for convenient communication. We pay very little thought to their form when we speak, write or sign. However, poetry will repeatedly select elements that have similar forms, to create parallelism. Repetitive effects may occur from repeating elements in a word, or by repeating whole words or phrases. Repetition may simply create an aesthetic effect. It can make a poem sound or look elegant or entertaining and we can admire the poet's skill in achieving a poem within the strict discipline of certain repetitive patterns such as making a difficult rhyme scheme work. However, parallelism also highlights unusual relationships between words and ideas, creating further significance in the poem.

Repetition at the sub-word level, choosing words with the same sound patterns, is an important part of spoken language poetry, and repetition at the sub-sign level is also important in sign language poetry. Sound patterns in poetry will make use of parallelisms at any stage during a word. The patterns include alliteration (**deaf/dome**), assonance (**greet/lean**), consonance (**steel/pearl**), reverse rhyme (**bread/break**) pararhyme (**shine/shun**) and rhyme (**feet/treat**). These sound patterns all depend upon the fundamental fact that words are pronounced and written in sequence. However, only spoken languages need to produce the parts of words in temporal sequences. Sign languages do not need to and most signs are created by the simultaneous expression of their elements, within the four main parameters of handshape, location, movement and palm or finger orientation. Because of this there are no exact parallels in sign poetry to concepts such as rhyme, assonance or alliteration in spoken languages.

Repetitive patterns in sign poetry will include signs sharing the same handshape but different locations (such as BUS and BLIND in BSL), or articulated in the same location but with a different orientation of the palm and fingers (such as FISH-AS-FOOD and FIVE-POUNDS in BSL), or making the same movement but different handshape (as in TREE and MIRROR). Two signs may share one, two or three of the same parameters, creating increasingly strong effects of parallelism. (Two different signs cannot share all four parameters because they would be the same sign.) For example, two signs may share only their handshape (as in TREE and FIVE-POUNDS), or they might share handshape and location but differ in their movement (such as THINK and IDEA). Signs sharing three of four parameters (such as TREE and MIRROR) are less common, but do exist.

Repetitive effects between signs do not need to be limited to repetition of the same elements in a parameter. A certain parameter might be altered systematically to create a pattern. For example, signs might employ a series of handshapes with an increasing or decreasing number of fingers open. Alternatively, signs could be placed in successively ascending or descending locations on the body or they could steadily move from one side of the signing space to the other.

Sign language poetry can take advantage of the fact that two hands are available for articulation. In their "citation form" (or "dictionary form"), some signs may be articulated using one hand while other signs are two-handed. The consequence of this for sign language poetry is that a poem can deliberately select one-handed or two-handed signs for a sequence. The use of symmetry, creating a visual balance on both hands is an important part of sign poetry.

The use of two hands also means that it is possible to make two signs at the same time. While it is physiologically impossible for a person to speak with two mouths and so to speak two words at the same time, it is possible to sign with two hands and this makes it possible to articulate two signs at the same time. There are many reasons why a signer would produce two signs simultaneously, and simultaneity may occur in any language style, but it is especially common in aesthetic signing, particularly poetry.

Normally, the use of space in sign languages is to show the grammatical and meaning relationships between objects. Space tells us "who does what to whom" in sign languages. In everyday language, the aesthetic positioning of signs is less important than clear, unambiguous communication. However, signed poetry can foreground the use of space by using it in an obtrusively regular way. Signs can be deliberately placed and held in certain areas and held for different periods of time. This may simply create aesthetically pleasing symmetries. Alternatively, though, it may add extra significance to the relationships between the signs. This obtrusively regular, overly repetitive use of signing space is an important feature of signed poetry that has very little parallel with spoken - or even written - poetry.

In many of the world's languages, rhythm is an important element in poetry. Some poets (such as Wordsworth) have claimed meter to be a defining feature of poetry, and even if this is not always the case, appreciating the rhythmic structure of a poem will add to its enjoyment. Poetic meter is essentially rhythmic parallelism or repetition of timing. In English poetry, the patterning of stressed and unstressed syllables is more regular than it would be in normal language, and the regularity becomes obtrusive, foregrounding the rhythm. Dot Miles summed up the importance of rhythm in sign language poetry. In a 1985 interview, she said "Hearing people [i.e. spoken language poetry] use different ways to make you notice their meaning, like rhythm. If they want to make it exciting, they will have a fast rhythm. If they want it slow, boring and sleepy, they'll have a long rhythm." These same techniques occur in sign language poetry, where long slow signing rhythms are used to convey slow and peaceful ideas, and fast signing shows fast-paced, exciting, more intense ideas.

Changing the speed and sharpness of movement in signs will create foregrounding. This is one way to create rhythm patterns in a poem. The rhythm of everyday signing is dictated by many things, such as grammar (for example, marking topics in a sentence or showing ideas of intensity), the emotions of the signer (excited or bored, for example) or the behaviour of characters described in the conversation. This rhythm and timing, though, is not especially chosen for aesthetics. In poetry, the timing and rhythm of signs can vary for good reason. It can be "obtrusively regular" so that the timing and rhythm is identical throughout the poem.

Sign language poetry as a specifically "oral" art form

Most of the world's several thousand languages are unwritten and, according to Walter Ong, only 78 languages today have a large enough body of writing to be termed a "literature". Despite that, many cultures that have a non-literate, oral heritage still have a vast body of "oral literature". Sign languages are essentially unwritten languages, like most spoken languages, and this has implications for the way that we treat sign language poems.

Although oral poems have many forms, the lyric tradition of short, intensely meaningful poems often occurs in oral poetry of spoken languages. For various historical and cultural reasons, the lyric tradition is the one that is currently used by most sign language poets. Composition is not the only element of oral poetry however. Performance is also relevant. The relationship between text,

performer and performance is very different for oral poetry and written poetry. In written poetry it can be meaningful to treat the poetic text *as* the poem, or at least an abstracted form of the poem. In oral poetry, however, there is an argument that the text cannot be separated from the performance or from the performer. A written poetic text always exists as a potential poem on a page but an oral poem does not exist unless it is performed. Observing the performance of many sign language poems, it is not always easy to see where the "text" ends and where the "performance" begins. The performance elements of many sign language poems - especially the emotional components - are an important part of the work.

One of the key elements of performance of sign language poetry is the device of personation. The BSL poet Dot Miles defined this as a "term to indicate the sign-language technique in which the signer becomes the person or thing he is talking about when he is doing straight description or narrative and not metaphor. This technique has also been called the "close-up." Principles of personation include:

- i. The signer should have a clear idea of the location, size, height, etc. of other images in relation to himself, and be sure that this relationship does not change inappropriately.
- ii. The signer can convey two or more personations by slight shifts in direction and posture, or by moving from one side to another. In both cases, action or conversation is directed towards the place where the other personation is supposed to be."

The recording and distribution of oral poetry is also very different from that of written poetry. "Pure" oral poetry cannot be recorded, but can only be remembered and its distribution only occurs through performance. However, increasingly, electronic recording (what Ong refers to as "secondary orality") impacts on the recording and distribution of sign language poetry. The performances of some sign poets are now commercially available on videotape and will become increasingly stored and distributed digitally, including via servers on the Internet, as in this presentation. The permanence of these performances allows them to be treated in many ways like written poems. Most significantly, it allows critical analysis for the first time. Prior to video recording, it was physically impossible to use the methods developed for written poetry to analyse a sign language poem in any depth because the methods required constant review of a piece of work. It is even possible to argue (as Heidi Rose has done) that sign language poetry truly dates from the development of video technology. Any aesthetic signing from before that time is not classed as signed poetry but as part of the aesthetic language tradition of the deaf community.

Sign Language poetry as a visual art form

Dirksen Bauman has suggested that sign language poetry can be appreciated using ideas from the appreciation of painting. Bauman suggests that it should be possible to view a sign poem's "visual composition" in terms of the poet's use of perspective, scale, size and shape. Ideas of contours, outlines, symmetry and static or dynamic images could be applied equally to sign poetry or painting.

Perspective is an important feature of visual arts such as painting, and shifts in perspective and size can also be a central feature of sign language poetry. Referents of different sizes may be represented in sign languages by the same handshape. For example, a loosely closed, circular handshape can represent an atom, a ball or a planet - anything spherical of any size. Individual fingers could refer to several people, several branches of a tree or several hairs - anything long and thin of any size. The fluid relationship between the size of the hand and the size of the referent provides great potential for poetic manipulation of signs.

It is possible for a handshape in a sign to be used in several different linguistically meaningful ways. An index finger could be a "pencil" whose tip traces the outline of a lightning strike. It could

represent an entire person or the wagging tail of a dog. It could be a part of the gesture that accompanies "shh!" to entreat someone to be quiet. Or it could directly mean "the index finger". As a last option, it could be a part of an arbitrary sign that has little or no visual motivation, such as the BSL sign WHAT. The different formation of these different types of signs is exploited by sign poetry to produce ambiguities and shifts in perspective that create aesthetic images and add extra significance.

In oral poetry, there is no option for a spatial layout of words - the idea is as meaningless as changing their colour from blue to red. In sign language poetry, however, the location of signs within the signing space can create visually aesthetic patterns and contrasts. Signs may be placed in different areas of space - some high and some low, for example, or left and right - or they may connect smoothly in different parts of space creating flowing patterns across space. Contrasting handshapes might be used in contrasting locations. Signs using all five fingers open and spread might direct upwards and signs using only the index finger extended might always move downward, for example.

Previous analyses of sign language poetry

In the 1970s, two sign language researchers in America, Ed Klima and Ursula Bellugi, analysed performance "art" signing, including some sign language poetry composed by Dot Miles. The "Klima and Bellugi" analysis of sign language poetry is robust and useful, and is often applied by commentators on sign language poetry. Within this overall framework, they identified a three-part poetic structure: internal, external and superstructure.

Internal structure covers the choice of signs (such as those with distinctive handshapes or movements), the rhythm and stress of signs and pacing and pausing in the poem. These are what we might call the essential text choices of the poem. External structure involves the layout of the signs chosen within the signing space. This also concerns the greater use of both hands to balance the placement of signs on left and right of the signing space. The flow of movement between signs to create the minimum of "wasted" transition movements between signs is considered external, as is the use of role shift. Superstructure refers to the patterns created in space as a result of the overall location and movement of signs in space and to the rhythmic pattern of the whole poem. This element of superstructure was identified by Klima and Bellugi after studying the "sign-mime" that was current within the performances of the National Theatre of the Deaf at the time. It was also seen in signed translations of songs and hymns and other English language poems. However, some poets do not use this element in their sign language poetry because they believe that imposing an elaborate superstructure on sign language poems can make the signs unrecognisable.

Analysis of signed poetry is increasingly common, although most published work still concerns ASL poetry. Both Alec Ormsby (1995) and Clayton Valli (1993) have analysed Clayton Valli's ASL poetic work. Valli was especially interested in rhyme and meter in signed works, while Ormsby focused on developing parallels between theories of written poetry and signed verse. Marion Blondel and Chris Miller have also analysed French signed poems, also from the perspective of rhythm and meter. Tommaso Russo, Rosario Giuranna and Elena Pizzuto have used Italian signed poetry to investigate the visual creativity used in the poems. All have used Klima and Bellugi's ideas as part of their analysis.

During the commentary and analysis of the BSL poems given here, I will refer to elements of internal and external poetic structure, as they inform our discussion using the framework of methods of foregrounding language and meaning, but will not use Klima and Bellugi's model directly. Much of the structure of the descriptions here is based on Leech's ideas of obtrusive regularity and irregularity

of form and meaning. Nevertheless, many of the elements of poetry that arise in this discussion can also be described in terms of Klima and Bellugi's framework.

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Five Senses

Composed and performed by Paul Scott

Excuse me, but who are you?
Who am I? Come with me and see.
Feel your arms tingle at my embrace.
Reach out - oh, that's cold!
Reach out - oh, that's hot!
So, now you know me.

Excuse me, but who are you?
Who am I? Come with me and see.
A lick of ice-cream - mmm
A scoop of that - yuck!
A scoop of this - yum!
So, now you know me.

Excuse me, but who are you?
Who am I? Come with me and see.
Pick a flower and sniff - lovely!
Take some cheese from the fridge - whiffy!
Pop this tasty morsel in your mouth,
Yes, and it smells good too.
So, now you know me.

Excuse me, but who are you?
Excuse me?

Excuse me, but what's wrong with him?
Oh, we're together.
Together?
Yes, come with us and see.
Eyes wide open, seeing and understanding.
Information and learning,
Colours, speed, action.
Learning and drinking in the world through the eyes.
So now you know us.

And now you know me.
(Translation by Rachel Sutton-Spence)

Themes

Paul Scott's poem *Five Senses* is a celebration of all the senses for a deaf person. As with any poem of empowerment for a minority group, this poem confounds the normal expectations of the majority culture. As deaf people do not hear, surely one of the senses will be missing? This poem shows that nothing is missing. In the poem, the description of first three senses (Touch, Taste and Smell) establishes common ground between deaf and hearing people, as everyday experiences are presented imaginatively and humorously. These sections of the poem provide an opportunity to showcase the capabilities of BSL, in the hands of a talented poet but are not especially "deaf-themed". The turning-point of the poem occurs when one of the hitherto obliging senses is unable to talk to the questioner. The first three senses have been able to explain what they do, but in the deaf poet, the sense of Hearing cannot explain sound because it has no experience. At this point, we start to see the perspective of the deaf poet as Sight helps Hearing to do its job.

We will analyse this poem from the perspective of repetition, symmetry and balance, neologism, metaphor, and elements of performance.

Repetition

Repetition is seen at several levels in the poem. The whole composition is clearly divided into stanzas. These stanzas are identified by repetitive patterns and phrases, with each one starting with the dominant hand tapping the non-dominant hand at the location of successive fingers. The finger representing each sense "wakes up", extends and asks WHAT-DO-YOU-WANT? The character or narrator asks WHAT-ARE-YOU? And the finger replies AH-HOLD-ON, before the hand closes to the 'A' handshape and the dominant hand traces out the path of sensation from that fist to the chest as the sense appears to "possess" the questioner and act through him. Examples of actions related to each sense are then performed, with attention paid to balanced locations in the signing space, before the sensation path is retraced, back to the closed fist. The finger for the relevant sense then extends again, confirms what it does and closes back to the fist. This pattern holds steady for the first three stanzas, creating an expectation in the audience that the fourth stanza will follow the established pattern. This expectation is confounded when the finger for the fourth sense is unable to oblige, and the pattern is only resumed when the final finger joins the fourth finger.

In sign language poetry, patterns of handshapes may be simple repetitive patterns in which the same handshape occurs again and again, or the patterns may be of changing handshapes. In this poem, the non-dominant hand starts open in a '5' handshape, and then closes to its polar opposite, the closed fist 'A' handshape. For the rest of the poem, there is a steady progression from this closed fist handshape to one with the thumb extended, then the index finger, then the middle finger (a highly marked, but legal, handshape in BSL), then the ring finger (an illegal handshape in BSL), then the little finger. From there, the extension of only the ring and little fingers creates another marked but legal BSL handshape. This pattern is enjoyable and predictable, and also satisfyingly symbolic because the one illegal and unsustainable handshape of the pattern is the one allocated to the unsustainable sense of hearing.

Apart from the changing patterns of signs, there are other rhymes created through repetition of handshape. Throughout *Touch*, there are many signs made using the open '5' or 'B' handshapes, but in *Taste*, the dominant handshape is the 'A' or 'A^', while in *Smell*, the 'F' handshape is noticeable.

Symmetry and Balance

The Italian sign language linguists Tommaso Russo and Elena Pizzuto worked with Rosaria Giuranna (a deaf poet composing in LIS) to compare the proportion of two-handed symmetrical signs used in sign language poetry and non-poetic language used in lectures. They found that 20% of signs in the lectures were two-handed symmetrical signs, compared to 50% of the signs in the poems, demonstrating that symmetry is indeed a significant feature of poetic sign language. In *Five Senses*, symmetrical signs are not so numerically dominant for most of the poem, because the poem uses an alternative device of keeping both hands in use, using different information on each hand. In this poem, the non-dominant hand is permanently active, producing information that is perceived simultaneously with the information from the dominant hand. For much of the poem, the non-dominant hand holds the simple 'A' handshape representing the group of senses, or the handshape appropriate to the particular sense - the 'Å' for Touch, the 'G' for Taste, the 'middle finger' handshape for Smell, the 'I' for Sight and 'BSL 7' for Sight & Hearing. This maintenance of the non-dominant hand serves to maintain the focus on the sense under discussion, but it also allows the creation of neologisms (see below) by providing unusual locations for the formation of signs. The balance of two hands is also aesthetically appealing.

Symmetry does occur in the poem, however. There are three main ways of creating symmetry in signed poems, and this poem shows examples of all three. Symmetry may be created by the sequential placement of one-handed or two-handed signs in opposing areas of space, or by the use of symmetrical two-handed signs, or finally, by the use of two one-handed signs that are simultaneously opposed symmetrically.

The use of symmetrical space in the poem has a pattern, so that for the first three senses, symmetry is predominantly through sequential location of signs in opposing areas of space but in the fourth and final sense, symmetry is created simultaneously through symmetrical two-handed signs. In *Touch*, the right hand reaches out to the right to touch something cold and then withdraws before the left hand reaches out to the left to touch something hot. The symmetrically opposing use of space and hands thus reflects the opposing semantics of hot and cold. The same device of using spatial opposition for semantic opposition occurs in *Taste*. This time the actions are all performed by the right hand but it first takes a scoop of something unpleasant-tasting from the left and then takes a scoop of something more pleasant-tasting from the right. In *Smell*, the nice scented flower is picked and smelled from the right, then the less-nice smelly cheese is taken from the fridge on the left, before the agreeable morsel (unspecified in the poem) that is eaten and then sniffed appreciatively comes from the right.

There are a few two-handed signs with symmetrical handshapes in *Touch*, and these are predominantly gestural neologisms such as RUB-HANDS or WRING-HANDS, although the neologism SHIVER-UP-ARMS and the sign HUG or CUDDLE are also symmetrical. These last two signs are especially notable because the hands cross the central vertical axis of symmetry. There are no two-handed symmetrical signs at all in *Taste* or *Smell*. In *Sight & Hearing*, however, the symmetry comes out especially strongly with the established two-handed symmetrical signs EYES-OPEN, TAKE-IN-INFORMATION-THROUGH-EYES (there is no ready English equivalent to this idea of "hearing through the eyes") INFORMATION, COLOURS, MOVEMENT, SPEED and LEARN. The signs are all essentially symmetrical across the vertical plane. The BSL sign COLOUR is not normally two-handed, but in this case the doubling of the second hand creates additional symmetry to this section of the poem. It is significant that these symmetrical signs come to prominence in this final section, as it is in this *Sight & Hearing* stanza that we see sign language coming to the fore, both as a topic and as a form of expression.

The poem also creates symmetrical "rhymes" of two one-handed signs articulated simultaneously, so that the dominant hand articulates signs with the same handshape as the current "sense" handshape. Thus, at the end of the encounter with *Touch* (represented with the 'Å' handshape on the non-dominant hand), the dominant hand signs OK and GOOD, using the same 'Å' handshape. With *Taste* (represented by the 'G' handshape on the non-dominant hand), the beginning of the stanza allows rhymes as the dominant hand signs WHAT, an index to the non-dominant hand and AH-HANG-ON, all with a 'G' handshape. At the end of the description, this balancing, symmetrical handshape rhyme recurs with the dominant hand signing ME (using a 'G' handshape). For *Sight* (using the 'I' handshape on the non-dominant hand), the balancing rhyme sign on the dominant hand is WRONG (also using the 'I' handshape).

We should also note here the shift in roles of dominant and non-dominant hands. In simultaneous signs produced as part of conversational BSL, it is expected that the non-dominant hand will be the less active hand and that the dominant hand will move. In this poem, however, the non-dominant hand is unusually active. In *Touch*, the non-dominant hand is active to describe the reaction to heat (something we would expect normally to be done by the dominant hand) and throughout the poem, the non-dominant hand moves independently of the dominant hand as it shows the actions of the senses represented by the individual fingers.

Neologism

Sign language poetry is made up of a careful balance of established "frozen" signing and creatively visual "productive" neologisms (although it should avoid over-use of mime or gesture). Russo, Giuranna and Pizzuto, working with LIS, compared the proportion of signs showing "dynamic iconicity" (which are essentially what we are terming neologisms here) in non-poetic lectures and in poems. They found that the productive, "dynamically iconic" neologisms did occur reasonably frequently in a normal, non-poetic lecture - accounting for 13% of the signs. However, they found that these signs occurred in 53% of all the signs in the LIS poetry that they analysed, concluding that neologisms are an important part of sign language poetry. *Five Senses* is full of neologism, so that approximately 80% of the poem is made up of signs that might be termed "productive" and only 20% of the signs are best described as "established" lexical items. In fact, glossing this poem is remarkably difficult because there are so few established signs, at least in the earlier sections.

In the first three stanzas there are very few established signs at all - although WHAT occurs in each one. In *Touch*, we also see the strongly visual HUG and the emblematic OK and GOOD, in *Taste*, we also see ICE-CREAM and ME and in *Smell*, there is FLOWER, FRIDGE, CHEESE and ME. Most of these signs are strongly visually motivated. Only in the final stanza of *Sight & Hearing*, are there many more established signs: WRONG, WITH, BOTH, EYES-OPEN, INFORMATION, MOVEMENT, COLOURS, SPEED, LEARN and ME. As with the comments on symmetry above, we can see that this is fully in keeping with the theme of the poem - where the sense is *Sight & Hearing*, we can expect sign language to come to the foreground as part of the celebration of the two senses working together.

Neologism also allows a poet to create signs using unusual, "marked" elements in the language. The tongue is not a commonly-used articulator of signs in everyday signing but in this poem it is a dominant part of two neologistic signs - once in *Touch* and once in *Taste*. In *Touch*, the tongue is an active articulator against the hand, as it licks the hand that has been burned. In *Taste*, it is the location for the articulating right hand as the hand removes the unpleasant food from the mouth. The tongue is also involved as a central articulator in signs such as LICK-ICE-CREAM, LICK-LIPS and SPIT-OUT-FOOD in *Taste*. Generally, this is a marked use of the tongue, as it tends not to be so noticeable in BSL signs.

Of the marked handshapes in the poem, the 'middle finger' handshape in *Smell* is very noticeable for its use at all. However, it is not involved in the production of any other signs. The 'BSL 7' is used more productively in *Sight & Hearing*, when it is twice a location for a directed sign BOTH (in the question "both of you together?") and when the extended fingers nod to answer "yes" to the question. The repetitive flexing and bending of these two fingers in this handshape is extremely uncommon to the point of being on the limits of what is acceptable in the language, but in this poetic context it is perfectly acceptable.

The handshapes of two other neologisms break the rules of the language entirely. The fist closed with only the ring finger extended (the bewildered, uncooperative sense for hearing) does not occur in any signs in BSL and is physically very difficult to articulate, especially with the non-dominant hand. The final sign of the entire poem on the non-dominant hand uses all five fingers open and all spread, except for the little finger, which contacts the ring finger. This sign summarises the senses for the poet and is highly creative and so marked that it requires considerable skill on the part of the performer to articulate on the non-dominant hand (indeed, some people find it physically impossible to do).

Metaphor

Each of the fingers extended as characterisation of the senses plays on the sign language practice of using fingers as proforms to represent people or other upright entities. Because the audience is used to interpreting digits as referring to both people or characters and markers for enumeration, the audience for the poem can easily accept each finger as a sense that has been given a "character" through anthropomorphisation (giving non-human entities the characteristics of humans). Neologisms also allow the signs to take additional meaning, most notably the anthropomorphised finger senses are made to nod by distalising the nodding movement to the finger joints. Usually manual signing of a nod is made at the wrist, but for *Touch*, the nod is made at the joints of the thumb and for *Sight & Hearing*, nodding occurs at the joints of the ring and little fingers. When each sense is addressed, it "stands up" and in each case the raising finger carries with it an anthropomorphised suggestion that the straightening finger is standing up or curling up again. For this reason, when the ring finger does not stand for any length of time, the curling at the joints is taken to mean the curling of the character.

Performance

So far we have commented directly on the elements of the text that signal that this is a poem in BSL. However, the performance of the poem is an integral part of the work, and the two cannot be separated as easily as they can be in written poems where the abstracted form on the page exists without any performance.

Although we have already seen that the anthropomorphisation of the senses has created a situation in which they can be treated as characters, it is through personation in the performance that the poem can show the dialogue between the questioning character and the five senses. The personation in this poem is seen through the use of space and the non-manual features accompanying the signs.

The facial expressions and body posture accompanying the senses convey some idea of childlike qualities. There is something endearingly naïve and obliging about them. When the questioner attempts to converse with Hearing, the non-manual features show this character as very sleepy and uncooperative, bewildered like a grumpy child who cannot be roused. The facial expression and body posture of the questioner show him as polite and attentive but definitely the more mature character in

the poem. These non-manual characterisations are not central parts of the text and emerge from the performance.

The location and direction of the performer's gaze to identify the characters is a crucial element of personation in the performance. While the senses are firmly located at the non-dominant hand, conversation between the questioner and each sense is conducted strictly left to right and right to left. The questioner always looks down and to the left (where the non-dominant hand is for this right-handed performer) to address the sense, and the sense always looks up and to the right to address the questioner. The feeling of scale, with the sense appearing small and the questioner appearing large is maintained throughout by the upward and downward direction of the gaze. When Sight informs the questioner that it works with the apparently recalcitrant Hearing, the dominant hand moves between left and right, between the locations that have been understood as between the senses and the questioner. At first, this may seem to imply that Sight and the Questioner are together, but we know from the facial expression and the direction of gaze that Sight is speaking and we are led to interpret the use of space as meaning that Sight and Hearing are together. Once the sense has possessed the questioner, however, the questioner looks forwards, yet there is still something about the body posture and other non-manual features that hint of the presence of the slightly childlike sense in the mature body.

An important element of the poem is left to the coda of the whole poem. This coda requires a shift of interpretation of the characterisation of the poem. Throughout the poem the characterisation has consisted of a single questioning character and the different senses, but in the coda, the poet/performer comes to the foreground of the performance and steps out of the expected role of narrator to say, "This is me". This is a strongly empowering moment, as the performer takes the boldly obtrusive step of explicitly "owning" the content of the poem. Although the poem could be performed by any deaf signer, if a hearing person were to perform it the meaning would be radically changed - perhaps to the point of meaninglessness. In the light of this, we may say that the poem is an extraordinarily strong expression of self-identity by a deaf person.

Three Queens

Composed and performed by Paul Scott

Prose translation

Here is a queen with red curly hair that stands up on top of her head. She reaches down and picks up a shell, which she opens and takes out something. It is a pearl. She wears a pearl necklace and strings of pearls cross her chest. She wears a high collar, and a head-dress with a pearl at its peak. Her dress has puffed sleeves and full skirts. The queen walks purposefully, with her two courtier scribes behind her. She stops and reaches out for the object before her. It is a potato. She orders it to be boiled then she spoons some from a dish. She eats it, nods in approval and orders her scribe to record it. This he does, diligently. The queen walks on purposefully again. Someone is smoking a cigarette. She takes the cigarette and puffs on it. It makes her dizzy and makes her cough. She nods in approval and orders her other scribe to record it. This he does. She walks on, with the two scribes behind her. She sees people signing and gesturing, and she is puzzled so she summons them to her. They are deaf. She orders the scribe to record it. This he does, watching them carefully, thinking that their signing is like signing in the air. The two scribes follow their queen as she moves on. They look up and see the flag flying above them. The flag has crosses on the vertical and horizontal and on the diagonals.

Time passes and a queen is born and grows. She has a long, thin, curved nose and is humourless. From her large stomach, nine children are born. The third of them is deaf. The deaf person grows up without speech, needing and pleading for education but the pleas are ignored and dismissed. Then one she meets the King of Greece and moves to live there.

Four generations are born and in that fourth generation is Prince Philip, Philip Duke of Edinburgh. Two people meet and the flag flies above them. They marry and fly to Kenya. A woman climbs a tree. She is looking through binoculars when she feels the tree shaking as someone climbs it. She comes down the tree, asks what they want and they tell her that she is now the Queen, so she flies to England, where the flag is flying above them. Time passes and deaf people are angry and ready to fight. They say, "BSL is mine" and challenge the idea that it is not a language. They march together and finally succeed as BSL is recognised at last. And the flag flies above them. All three queens look up to the flag. Three queens from three times in three places under one flag.
(Prose translation by Rachel Sutton-Spence)

Themes

Three Queens considers the changing fortunes of deaf people under the reigns of three great English queens. The first detailed record of sign language use in Britain (in 1575) dates from the reign of Elizabeth I (1558 - 1603). Queen Victoria's family and descendants were often touched by deafness as her son, who later became Edward VII, married Princess Alexandra of Denmark, who was deaf. They had a deaf son, Prince Albert. Other descendants, as the poem shows, were also deaf. The infamous Congress of Milan in 1880 (after which sign language was officially outlawed in many European and American schools) also took place during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837 - 1901). Official recognition of BSL as a minority British language was only made in 2003, under the reign of the current queen, Elizabeth II (1952 -).

This poem contains substantial narrative as well as description of appearance and actions, so that it provides historical facts as well as visual entertainment. The poem combines general "common-knowledge" history (such as the discovery of the potato and tobacco in Elizabeth I's reign) with less well-known facts (such as the Duke of Edinburgh being four generations descended from Queen Victoria's third child). More crucially, it weaves deaf history into the fabric of national history - it is perhaps not so well known that sign language was first documented in England during Elizabeth I's reign or that deafness runs in the British Royal Family. The poem shows how the "Deaf Nation" is a part of the British nation and the strands of deaf history are integral to the national heritage, with everyone living under the same flag. Because the poem is composed and performed by a poet with a strong affinity to the deaf community, clearly with the views and values of deaf culture, the poem uses the commonly recognised visual symbols to describe the first two queens. The visual description of these two queens makes them immediately recognisable to the audience but also gives the poet the chance for creative sign language expression.

We will analyse this poem from the perspective of repetition, symmetry and balance, neologism, ambiguity and morphing, and elements of performance.

Repetition

The underlying motif throughout this poem is the number three. The poem begins with its title *Three Queens*, so that the first sign is THREE. From this stems a careful use of threefold repetition in many ways.

At the largest level, there are three stanzas, each dealing with one of the queens. However, the threefold repetition is seen at other levels, too. The description of Elizabeth I begins with three ways to describe her hair (red, tight curls and standing up) and the pearls she wears are placed at three locations at three different heights (around her neck, across her torso and in her head-dress). Repetition of the marked '4' handshape is also seen three times at different heights - once showing the hair piled up above the head, then to show the necklace at the neck, then to show it on the torso. As she makes her Royal Progress she sees three new phenomena (potatoes, tobacco and sign language). In this first Elizabethan section, there are phrases and signs repeated three times, such as WALK-PURPOSEFULLY for the Queen, TWO-PERSONS-FOLLOW-ONE-PERSON as the scribes scuttle obediently behind her and WRITE-DILIGENTLY for her scribes. The sign FLAG-FLYING also occurs three times throughout the whole poem, linking the events described in the three stanzas. This sign is especially important for the morphing device that occurs at the climax to the poem (see below). The final signs in the coda of the poem create an image of all three queens simultaneously looking to the flag that has flown above them all, and the three queens and their three deaf communities standing as part of the history of the nation.

The "threefold" device also occurs at the sub-sign level. Repetition of movement within a sign is not uncommon in sign languages and threefold repetition is an unmarked - although nonetheless aesthetically appealing - number of repetitions. However, in this poem that has such a strong "threefold" theme, even the triple repetition within signs becomes a part of the poetic design. Signs in this poem such as IGNORE and WALK-PURPOSEFULLY have a threefold repetition within the single sign. A similar effect occurs when the scribe is ordered to record the potato and the tobacco. In conversational BSL we might expect the sign WRITE to be repeated three times, but here it is repeated first six (two times three) times, and on the second occasion nine (three times three) times. However, in Victoria's stanza, the poem confounds our expectations that repetitions will be threefold. When describing the birth of Victoria's many children, the poet might have signed BORN three times and then given the number NINE to show how many children were born. This would be normal in

everyday conversational BSL. However, the sign is actually repeated seven times, making the repetition far more literal and obtrusively different from conversational BSL, and so lending poetic meaning to the text, delighting by surprising.

Apart from the threefold repetition that occurs in this poem, there are other general uses of repetition at the sub-lexical level to create poetic effects. In many cases, repetition of a handshape creates chiming effects through the poem. In Elizabeth I's stanza, the marked '4' handshape occurs unusually frequently. In Victoria's stanza, the marked 'baby C' handshape used for tracing out the markings on the Union Flag reappears a few signs later in the sign that traces out the monarch's long thin nose. The '5"' handshape seen in QUEEN in the same section reappears in the sign MISERABLE. This same handshape from QUEEN also occurs in the final sign of the whole poem, placing the queens (and perhaps their communities of subjects) in space and time.

Repeated patterns of locations are shown in the description of Elizabeth I's garments. The description of the necklace, the collar and the head-dress have the signs moving steadily and rhythmically upwards through signing space. Then they move steadily downwards for the description of the sleeves and skirts before using the lower location for a smooth transition to the correct location for the first occurrence of the sign WALK-PURPOSEFULLY.

Repeated patterns of movement also occur, at the section linking the end of the stanza for Elizabeth I with the stanza for Victoria. In the reference to the flag, the hands (in a 'baby C' handshape) move in every direction in the vertical plane. They move diagonally right to left, and then left to right, before moving from top to bottom and then horizontally from left to right. The next sign TIME-PASSES moves forwards across the horizontal plane and, shortly after this, the same 'baby C' handshape is used to complete the movement patterns in the sign LONG-CURVED-NOSE. Here the sign moves with an arcing movement forwards and downwards.

Symmetry and balance

The placement and location of articulation of signs in this poem allows the poet to produce symmetry and balance on many levels.

In general, the non-dominant hand is more active than we would expect in conversational BSL. The description of the necklaces of pearls is made using both hands - the non-dominant hand shows the pearls at the neck, sweeping right to left and the end point of the movement is held while the dominant hand shows the pearls across the chest and stomach, sweeping right to left. As both hands use the same '4' handshape, this gives the pleasant aesthetic effect of contrasting vertical symmetries of left and right hands, and of leftward and rightward movements and contrasting horizontal symmetries of making these movements at two different heights. This section is immediately followed by a two-handed vertically symmetrical sign HIGH-COLLAR and once the pearl has been located on her head-dress two more two-handed symmetrical signs for PUFFED-SLEEVES and FULL-SKIRTS. The overall impression from this section is thus one of balance in the signing space.

The potato and tobacco incidents show a balanced use of space with the alternating use of dominance of the hands to show opposition of the two ideas. The incident with the potato uses signs occurring to left and right but at first the potato is taken from the righthand side of signing space, using the right hand. Her imperious command to the scribe is made leftward with the left hand. The potato is boiled and eaten on the left and the left hand is then used to order the scribe on the righthand side to record it. To show the shift of role to the scribe, the scribe licks his pencil using the right hand. The incident with the tobacco shows a clear switch in dominance for the signer as the left hand indexes a location to the left and shows someone smoking a cigarette and holding it. The right hand takes the

cigarette for the queen, but she continues to smoke it using the left hand. This is held while the right hand then signs coughing and feeling dizzy - again creating a balanced use of both hands.

The section linking the stanzas for Elizabeth I and Victoria shows a noticeable section of one-handed signing. Just as extensive, uninterrupted two-handed signing is obtrusive, so is extensive, uninterrupted one-handed signing. From the moment the first reference is made to the flag flying to the reference to the Empress' large stomach, the signs are entirely one-handed. In the context of so many poetically-selected, balanced two-handed signs, this section of one-handed signing is refreshingly obtrusive and prepares the audience for the next, complex, use of both hands. The birth of Victoria's children shows a marked use of the non-dominant hand. For each repetition of BORN, the non-dominant hand changes from 'Å' (a marked sign in BSL meaning ONE) to 'L' (a marked sign in BSL meaning TWO) to '3' (THREE) '4' (FOUR) and '5' (FIVE). In normal conversational simultaneous signing, the non-dominant hand would retain its handshape while the dominant hand would change. Later description of the four generations that pass before Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, is born shows another interesting use of the non-dominant hand. The '4' handshape representing the four indicators of four generations is used as the location for the sign BORN. Normally, this sign is a two-handed sign that is located at the signer's lower abdomen. Moving it to locate it at the non-dominant hand, is a marked neologism (see below for more discussion of neologisms) and, while disturbing the natural balance of the symmetrical two-handed sign BORN, it produces a far more sophisticated use of the two hands.

As with Paul Scott's other poem, *Five Senses, Three Queens* shifts in its final stanza to use far more two-handed signs (both symmetrical and non-symmetrical). While such signs are present in the first two stanzas, they dominate the final one, echoing the idea that everything is now "coming together" as deaf people finally campaign for recognition of their language and succeed. The two-handed symmetrical signs are all established vocabulary items, such as ANGRY, CHALLENGE, MARCH, and SUCCEED-AT-LAST. The final sign of the entire poem is a neologism that produces additional symmetry by placing two signs (or classifier proforms) on opposing sides of signing space.

In a device similar to the one used by Dot Miles in her poem *Trio*, the poem ends using "triple" simultaneity. We have already seen that creation of simultaneous signs showing separate information on both hands is an important part of poetic craft, but here the poem creates three signs simultaneously by using each hand to represent one character and the signer's body to represent the third. Thus, all three queens are able to look up at their flag at the same time by the left hand and right hand both signing LOOK-UP-RIGHTWARD while the signer's head and eyes are also directed up and rightward. The final neologism in the poem of the three queen (and their communities of subjects, perhaps) placed in space simultaneously by reference to their queen also makes use of this triple simultaneity through use of the face, head and body. By retaining the regal facial expression and posture of the body and head following the sign QUEEN, it is clear that the body and head are being used to refer to one of the queens, while each of the two hands (each with the '5'" handshape that is used in the sign QUEEN) then can be understood to refer to the other two queens.

Ambiguity and Morphing

Within this poem, there are examples of unspecified signs, ambiguous signs and those that change almost imperceptibly from one sign to another or "morph". The ASL poet Clayton Valli, observed in 1993, that in prose "classifier predicates tend to be used after identifying arguments of the verb", while in poetry they are "often used without identifying arguments explicitly." Examples here in *Three Queens* show this device. Elizabeth I takes something from a shell, holds it and looks at it. Only then are we told that it is a pearl. Later, the same pattern is repeated as she reaches for, holds

and looks at something that we are then told is a potato. This "guessing game" played with the audience serves to focus attention on the form of the language used in the poem.

Other signs that are not underspecified classifiers or proforms are also used to create ambiguities. During the Royal Progress of Elizabeth I, the proform sign TWO-PERSONS-WALK may also be taken to mean LOOK-AROUND, as both signs have the same handshape and the use of gaze allows either interpretation. On an earlier occasion the sign LOOK-AROUND morphs to become TWO-PERSONS-WALK, inviting us to interpret this second instance of the same sign formation in both ways. This sort of ambiguity allows extra meaning to be taken from the poem, at the cost of no more signs.

Fine examples of morphing also occur in the poem, where one sign merges and blends almost seamlessly with the next. In the description of Queen Victoria's appearance, the hands that show the extent of her famous imperial stomach shift very slightly to become the sign BORN with minimal transition. Nine children are born and this is shown with the non-dominant hand showing FIVE and the dominant hand showing FOUR - to make single sign NINE. The dominant hand then becomes an index, counting along the fingers of the non-dominant hand until it reaches the middle finger to identify the deaf child. The handshape that was simply a part of the sign NINE now means FIVE-INDIVIDUALS. It has not changed in any way, but the different meanings come from the context produced by the meaning of the dominant hand. When one of Victoria's descendants meets the King of Greece, the sign MEET morphs into a simultaneous construction in which one hand becomes the proform sign ONE-PERSON and the other becomes an index to identify the proform. When the second Elizabeth marries and then flies to Kenya, the signs MARRY and FLY blend seamlessly as the non-dominant base hand for both signs remains the same and the 'F' handshape of the dominant hand in MARRY morphs into the 'Y' handshape for FLY.

A sign near the end of the poem, however, contains perhaps the best example of morphing, as the reason for the repetition of the flag motif becomes clear. The dominant hand used in the sign RECOGNISE pulls back from the non-dominant hand and is raised - retaining the same handshape and orientation - to become the flag once more. This sign emphasises the national importance of recognition of the language.

There is considerable ambiguity in the final sign of the poem, which shows all three queens. The handshape used for the signs QUEEN and CROWN, but also meaning "person or group located there" is made by both dominant and non-dominant hands. This gives the meaning of all three queens being a part of the same heritage and also of three groups of people (perhaps by this stage of the poem, the groups may be understood to be deaf people, especially) at different stages in history being part of the same heritage.

Neologism

In comparison to *Five Senses*, the poem here contains a far greater proportion of frozen lexical items. This is partly because of the poem's dual purpose of informing as well as entertaining, and frozen lexical items are more commonly used for establishment of fact. The neologisms are used for descriptive elements in order to create strong visual images, but also have a further poetic effect, often creating repetitive patterns with the elements such as handshape or location in the signs. The description of Elizabeth I uses several neologisms to create powerful linguistic visual images that correlate strongly with the familiar visual images from the royal portraits. However, it also allows for the poem to create the patterns using the 'X' and then the '4' handshape, the steadily ascending and descending locations and the balanced symmetrical movements. The repeated sign representing the

two courtier scribes following their queen allows morphing devices to shift between TWO-PEOPLE and LOOK-AROUND. Many of the more "gestural" signs such as LICK-PENCIL or WOOZY-HEAD are used as part of the performance element of personation to create identifiable characterisations within the poem.

The neologisms in the stanza dealing with Victoria further allow repetitive poetic patterns, such as the description of the Union flag with the movements in so many directions across a single plane of signing, to contrast with the movement in the sign showing the long curved nose. The neologisms may also break established rules for the location of signs. The BSL sign BORN is located in front of the body at hip or waist height. In this stanza, BORN is made at a new location to give extra meaning. By articulating BORN at each finger of the non-dominant hand showing FOUR, the meaning of FOUR-GENERATIONS or FOUR-CHILDREN-BORN can be created.

The description of Elizabeth II learning she is queen allows for further language play through neologism. The neologisms are primarily two-handed, creating balance within the poem, and they are carefully placed to minimise transition between signs. The neologism of the person swaying while looking through binoculars is followed by the sign showing the tree swaying, so that the marked swaying movement is echoed in both signs -once on the whole body and once on the hand. The final complex neologism of the poem, is an opportunity for several poetic devices. It is highly deviant as, if the meaning of the sign is THREE-QUEENS-IN-DIFFERENT-TIMES, the sign QUEEN is being made at the wrong location. The correct location for the handshape in QUEEN is at the head. The handshape cannot normally be moved in order to place the queen elsewhere in signing space - this is normally done using a proform sign. To place the handshape from the noun sign in space instead of the proform representing the queen is technically "incorrect". However, here the poet has broken the rules of the language for poetic effect and the meaning is clear. This neologism also allows ambiguity as it locates either the three communities or the three queens in space and time. It allows repetition of handshape, as the same '5' handshape is used in this sign as it was in QUEEN. It creates a "triple" simultaneous sign, thereby not only creating an obtrusively noticeable sign but also finishing this poem of a "threefold" theme with a "threefold" sign.

Another way of using a "new" sign in BSL is to use a loan from another language. Even though the word is not a neologism in the original language, it can stand out as unusual in the host language. In this poem, there is noticeable use of fingerspelling of English words. This becomes obtrusive. Normally, fingerspelling is not expected in sign language poetry because we expect this highest sign language art form to be "pure" and free from the influence of English. The fingerspelling of p-e-a-r-l and p-h-i-l-i-p-o-f-e-d-b-h ("Philip of Edinburgh") is highly deviant in poetry, and as such makes us notice the language used even more. In both cases, the fingerspellings serve to identify the unspecified signs. We know that something has been taken from the shell but not that it is a pearl and we know that someone has been born but we don't know who is born. The fingerspellings are used to clarify and establish facts again.

Performance

The performance elements of this poem include the role of the face and body to create meaning of personation and the use of gaze and body posture to indicate roles.

There are several characters within this poem, as well as the narrator. In Elizabeth I there is the Queen herself, as well as the two scribes, the smoker and the signing deaf person. The Queen always has a pompously regal facial expression and the scribes are subservient. The head posture and levels and direction of gaze also serve to create the clear character distinctions. With Queen Victoria there

is the humourless Queen and the deaf person pleading for education. In the stanza concerning Elizabeth II, there is the Queen while she is on safari, the diplomat who breaks the news of her accession, and the angry deaf person demanding rights. The facial expression here for the modern queen is far less haughty than either of the previous queens.

The personation indicating the three different deaf people is shown through the performance alone. From the text, there is no suggestion that the Elizabethan deaf person is simple and uneducated, but the facial expression shows it, as it also shows the pleading facial expression in the sign NEED during the reference to the Victorian deaf person. In reference to the modern deaf person, the facial expression shifts markedly. When the sign DEAF is made, it is accompanied by an angry facial expression, which continues through the description of demands for language recognition and only ending at the sign SUCCEED-AT-LAST.

As with Paul Scott's other poem *Five Senses*, this poem is an example of a sign language poem that celebrates the experience of being deaf. In this poem, though, the poet weaves together the experience of being British, as well as being deaf. The blending of the two identities is reflected in the blending of different types of language in the poem - Frozen and Productive signs, Symmetry and marked Asymmetry, non-derived signs and fingerspellings. Artistic sign language brings a new dimension to British history and to deaf history, making the poem an important expression of Deaf identity in early 21st century Britain.

Trio

Composed and performed by Dot Miles

MORNING

Sunrise
The rain stops - and the wind dies
Stillness
See, in the pool,
Twin trees

AFTERNOON

I eat and sit, replete,
My dog does too.
A sparrow pecks and perches -
The three of us doz-z-z-ze!

EVENING

Like a flower the sun folds itself up.
Darkness, like a bat, flies close,
And closer -
Deaf-blinds me!

(Translation by Dot Miles)

The performance of *Trio* used on this website was broadcast in 1983 on the BBC television programme *See Hear!* The poem may be seen as a signed haiku made up of three very short, independent but connected poems, *Morning*, *Afternoon* and *Evening*, each creating powerful visual images on themes of "nature". We will analyse this poem from the perspective of repetition, neologism, symmetry and balance, ambiguity and morphing, themes and metaphor and elements of performance.

Repetition

In this poem there is considerable repetition at the sub-sign level, and each stanza is dominated by a different set of handshapes. The three stanzas, *Morning*, *Afternoon* and *Evening* are characterised by different themes - of freshness in the morning, contentment in the afternoon and fear in the evening – and the choice of handshapes reflects the themes. Ten signs in *Morning* use open '5' and 'B' handshapes because morning is symbolically seen as a time for openness and positive feelings, when everything is fresh and new. The final sign TWIN-TREES uses two hands, each with a '5' handshape. *Afternoon*, however, only contains three signs using '5' or 'B' handshapes, and instead this stanza is dominated by 'G^' and 'B^' handshapes, which occur in ten signs, including the final sign THREE-OF-US-DOZE. Extensive repetition of handshapes in *Evening* is less evident, but the 'V''' and '5''' handshapes do occur (being handshapes associated with tension) as well as signs in which the handshape closes, such as changes from an open '5' to a closed B^'. These “tense” signs and the closing of the handshapes help to emphasise the feelings of fear and withdrawal that can occur as darkness falls at night. Chiming (a poetic device that uses the similar forms of two words to make

the audience look for a connection between them) occurs in the use of the 'V' handshape in this stanza. The first line of the stanza is its title "Evening" and is signed with two different signs, both of which mean EVENING. The second sign, made with a small downward movement of the 'V' handshape at the nose, is only one parameter different from the sign used at the climax of the poem BLIND. BLIND is made with the same 'V' handshape at the bridge of the nose but has a small side-to-side movement. Clearly, there is a connection between the form of the two signs and between the two meanings - especially in this poem. In the evening, as it gets dark, a deaf person is also blind.

There is also a pattern of repeated locations, where signs may be articulated on, near, or farther away from the body. *Morning* only contains two signs (MORNING and SEE) that contact the body, and the rest are non-body-contact signs moving outward or made further away from the signer. EVENING has six signs that touch the body, two more that are articulated very close to the face, and two more that move toward the body. This is in keeping with the symbolism in this poem that we considered in relation to the handshapes. Morning is the time to be outward-looking, as the day is spread before us (out = forwards = good). Evening is the time to be more inward-looking as our horizons appear to shrink (in = backwards = bad). This metaphor is reflected in the location of the signs in the poem.

Although repetition can occur to create "rhymes" at the sub-sign level, it also occurs at the higher, grammatical level. There is a repetition of three noun-verb pairs of a specific type in *Morning*. The three sign pairs

SUN SUN-RISES

RAIN RAIN-FALLS-AND-DIES

WIND WIND-BLOWS-AND-DIES

are all similar in that the noun and the following verb differ only in their movement. In each case the handshape of the noun sign is included in the verb sign. This is not always the case for associated pairs of nouns and verbs because the noun may also be represented by a proform in the verb, using a different sign. The use of three of the noun-verb pairings in *Morning* creates a definite pattern that leads to the climax of the neologism TWIN-TREES. In *Afternoon*, there are again three noun-verb pairs (which, of itself creates an effect of parallelism across the two stanzas). This time, though, the handshape of the verb is not the same as the handshape in the noun but is the proform derived from the class of the noun. The signs I and (HUMAN)-EAT, DOG and DOG-EAT and BIRD and BIRD-EAT are paired in this way to create an effect of parallelism that leads to the final sign THREE-OF-US-DOZE.

Grammatical information in sign language is often shown by the movement and location imposed upon a sign. In *Trio*, there is grammatical information about the change in speed and duration of two different actions - the falling of the rain and the blowing of the wind. There is little clue to repeated grammatical patterns in the English translation, "The rain stops - and the wind dies". However, in BSL the signs RAIN-FALLS-AND-DIES and WIND-BLOWS-AND-DIES are made with the same movement that gives the same grammatical information and sets up a rhythmic pattern in the signing. In each one, the size and speed of the movement slowly lessens. In *Afternoon*, the movement of the signs describing how the poet, dog, and bird eat is repeated each time to show the same grammatical information. Each character in the poem eats quickly for a certain period of time before slowing down and finally stopping and resting. This is shown by each of the three different signs (HUMAN)-EAT, DOG-EAT and BIRD-EAT using the same patterns of movement. For each sign there is then an upward and backward movement (of the body for the poet, and of the hand for the dog and bird) before a hold, each time showing the grammatical information that the action came to a gentle end.

Symmetry and Balance

This poem uses symmetry extensively. We have already seen "front-back" symmetry in operation in our discussion of the metaphorical significance of the location and movement of signs in *Morning* and *Evening*. In this case, the signs may move outward or inward, creating images along the different planes in the signing space. However, vertical symmetry is probably the most dominant type of symmetry in this poem, although there is also a fine example of the less common and more challenging horizontal symmetry.

In the *Afternoon* stanza, vertical symmetry occurs through two-handed symmetrical signs close to the central vertical axis showing that she eats and sits replete. A gloss of the first part of the stanza shows this (two-handed symmetrical signs are highlighted):

***I-EAT-LOTS I-SIT-BACK FULL-TUMMY FULL FULL-TUMMY
MY DOG ALSO***

An example of the simultaneous creation of symmetry using two different one-handed signs also occurs in *Afternoon*. During this stanza, the character in the poem is joined by her dog and a bird. Although the BSL sign DOG used in this poem is two-handed, the proform that follows to show the dog eating, resting and sleeping is one-handed (using a B^ handshape). The sign BIRD is one-handed, as is the proform that follows (using a G^ handshape) to show the bird eating, resting and sleeping. The English lines of *Afternoon* run:

"I eat and sit, replete,

My dog does too.

A sparrow pecks and perches -

The three of us doz-z-z-ze!"

This may be glossed in BSL as follows (here the subscript letters refer to whether the sign is placed centrally, to the left or to the right):

I-EAT-LOTS_C I-SIT-BACK_C FULL-TUMMY_C FULL_C FULL-TUMMY_C

MY_C DOG_C ALSO_C

DOG-EAT-LOTS_R DOG-SIT-BACK_R

BIRD_L

BIRD-FLY-DOWN_L

BIRD-EAT-LOTS_L BIRD-PERCHES-BACK_L

I-LOOK-AT-BIRD(eyes_L) I-LOOK-AT-DOG(eyes_R)

THREE-OF-US-DOZE

We can see from this gloss that the proform relating to the dog is kept to the right-hand side of the central vertical axis while the poem refers to the dog eating and resting. This proform is then held below shoulder height (appropriate for a sitting dog) while the bird is introduced on the left-hand side of the axis. The movements for the bird eating and resting are identical to those for the dog, (although the handshape is different) and the proform is finally held above shoulder height (appropriate for a perching bird). Apart from the height difference, these signs are mirror-images. If we see the axis of symmetry as rotating slightly at this point, we can say that they are symmetrical across a diagonal vertical axis. In the following sign, THREE-OF-US-DOZE, the internal movements of the signs of the two proforms are identical - showing that both the dog and the bird were snoring - making a symmetrical pattern from two separate signs. We should also add that the central vertical axis of symmetry in this stanza is used by the human character.

The poem also provides a beautiful example of symmetry across the central horizontal axis in *Morning*, with the reflection is of a tree in still waters. The English version of the relevant lines runs,

"See, in the pool,
Twin Trees"

The English gives no direct indication of the horizontal symmetry of the sign used to show the twin trees. The glorious neologism in the BSL poem has the elbow of the non-dominant hand joined to the elbow of the dominant hand. Using the elbows as the dividing line of symmetry, the sign becomes horizontally symmetrical with the non-dominant hand signing TREE but pointing down in a direct reflection of the dominant hand signing TREE while pointing up in the usual way. Aesthetically, it is a treat almost unparalleled in sign language poetry.

Neologism

Trio uses a high proportion of neologisms, making up approximately 40% of the poem. The neologisms are used to build up an increasingly strong visual image of nature, animals and the emotions of the central human character in the poem. The neologisms also allow the introduction of considerable humour in the earlier part of the poem. Some of these neologisms bend (or even break) language rules, as with the signs glossed as TWIN-TREES (in *Morning*), THREE-OF-US-DOZE (in *Afternoon*) and BAT/DARKNESS-COVER-FACE (in *Evening*). The sign TWIN-TREES produces a strong visual image of the reflection of a tree in a still pool. It breaks the rules of ordinary BSL by having the two articulating hands in contact at the elbows. In BSL, the articulators are allowed to contact each other at various points (such as the palm, the back of the hand or the fingertips) but not at the elbows. The sign THREE-OF-US-DOZE occurs when the poet, her dog and a bird have all eaten and then all take an afternoon nap. It uses three signs simultaneously and this is unusual in BSL. Articulating two signs simultaneously is reasonably common, but the articulation of three simultaneous separate pieces of information is stretching the rules. (Paul Scott's poem *Three Queens* also uses this three-way simultaneity) The image of DARKNESS/BAT-COVER-FACE uses a sign that covers the face entirely. While the face is an important location for signs in BSL, there are no signs that cover the face entirely, so this sign also bends the rules of sign formation. In each of these three examples, the signs bend the rules of normal language to create extra poetic significance. It serves to foreground the aesthetic language used.

In general, *Trio* is far removed from English influence, but there is one use of fingerspelling in the final stanza, *Evening*. The line from the English poem runs "Darkness, like a bat, flies close". In the BSL poem, performs this line may be glossed as DARKNESS LIKE b-a-t, followed by a "non-sign" that is neither DARKNESS nor FLYING-BAT, but partway between the two. Many observers of the poem report that they do not like the use of fingerspelling here for "bat", as it breaks the smooth flow of the rest of the signs. However, it was part of Dot Miles' stated strategy to highlight similes clearly and using fingerspelling certainly draws our attention to the fact that something unusual is happening, making us notice the simile.

Further "rule-breaking" of the language for poetic effect occurs in *Morning*, when we see a deviant use of gaze during the sign TWIN-TREES. Normally, in the production of a sign that is part of narrative fact the signer looks at the audience, not at the sign, but in TWIN-TREES this does not happen. The poet looks down at the sign she has made then she looks up at the audience before looking down at the sign again and finally back up at the audience. At one interpretation of this, the gaze might be that of someone looking delightedly at the reflection of the twin trees in the water, so perhaps it is not narrative fact at all but shows a role-shift into a character admiring the reflection. However, with a different reading of this sign, the poet (or performer) is inviting the audience to share in the enjoyment of the new sign. In *Evening*, there is another similar deviant use of gaze, when

the eyes stare directly at the partially-formed non-sign that is a combination of DARKNESS and BAT. It is almost as though she is saying, "What is this sign? What is this thing?"

In another instance in *Evening*, the series of signs describing the sunset are articulated on the left-hand side of signing space and then suddenly, the eyes are directed to the right. They appear to be looking at nothing at all and for no reason. After a pause, the sign DARKNESS occurs at this new right-hand side location. An important device in signed poetry is to minimise transitional movements by blending signs, so to make a sharp shift from one side of signing space to the opposite side is obtrusive in poetry. To highlight that it is breaking the poetic rules for a good reason, the poem breaks another language rule, this time of gaze. The effect is to create considerable tension to show the fear of approaching night.

Ambiguity and Morphing

The concise nature of this poem means that the potential for ambiguity and morphing signs is carefully exploited to maximise the meaning in the small number of signs used. In *Evening*, the ambiguous sign that can mean both EVENING and OLD is an important sign for the poem. We know that the poem is concerned with the three stages of the day, and the other two stages have been introduced with the signs MORNING and AFTERNOON, so the primary meaning of this ambiguous sign at the start of the third stanza is EVENING. However, this poem can be seen as an extended metaphor (see below) for the ideas of youth, middle age and old age. With this in mind, it is possible to take the second meaning of that sign as OLD and use it to interpret the metaphorical meaning of that last stanza with reference to the closing stages of life.

Morphing occurs as location and movement of signs are selected to reduce the transition movements between each one. In the first stanza, *Morning*, the wind dies and the pool becomes calm enough to show the reflection of the tree. The orientation of the sign WIND-DIES slowly changes so that the palms move from facing outward to facing downward, so that the sign morphs from WIND-DIES to show RIPPLES-ON-WATER and then, as the fingers cease to flutter, the sign morphs to CALM or STOP. In *Evening* there is a line that is translated as "Like a flower the sun folds itself up." In the BSL poem this is signed as:

SUN (right) LIKE (centre) FLOWER (right to left across the nose) SUN-SETS (left).

Here the sign FLOWER carries signs from right to left in the signing space, allowing the signs to move across the signing space with minimal "wasted" transition movement. There are further uses of morphing and ambiguity to create signs used in similes, as we will see in the next section.

Themes and Metaphor

Trio makes use of two themes that were very common in Dot Miles' compositions: trees and nature. These themes are central in the construction of the haiku form, from which *Trio* clearly originated. However, the formational properties of the sign TREE, with its open, upward-pointing fingers, also allowed the development the powerful poetic effects that we have seen in our discussion of the repetition of elements and the neologisms. The introduction of animals - the dog, the bird and even the bat - allowed her to develop signs showing enactment of animals, especially in *Afternoon*.

Themes of vision and sight are especially relevant to a deaf poet (and this theme is also strong in Paul Scott's poem *Five Senses*). The particular deaf discomfort in darkness is seen in *Evening*, where the ideas of night, darkness and being deaf-blind (with the accompanying associations of death) occur. Touch also becomes very important in *Evening*. When the sun sets, there is no suggestion of touch in

the line of the English translation “Like a flower, the sun folds itself up”. However, in the BSL poem, the sun becomes something that can be held once it has closed like a flower.

SUN LIKE FLOWER SUNSET HOLD-SUN/HOLD-FLOWER-FOLDED

Similarly, when the darkness falls, the English translation simply says, “Darkness, like a bat, flies close / and closer - / deaf-blinds me!” In the BSL poem, the darkness (and or the bat) physically wraps itself around the poet's face so that contact is made and the darkness touches her.

Trio can be read as an extended metaphor on another subject. Although it is ostensibly about three stages in the day – Morning, Afternoon and Evening - further study of the poem allows us to read it at another level with ideas of Youth, Middle-Age and Old-Age. The freshness of morning and youth give way to the contentment of middle age and the afternoon before the fear and uncertainty of darkness and old age. Although the poem is a general observation of the experiences of a life in a day (a common metaphor), it is told from a deaf perspective. The final image that darkness “deaf-blinds me” is one that only a deaf person can truly understand from experience. When hearing people are in the dark, they can still make use of sounds around them. For a deaf person in the dark, touch is the sense that is left. Although the English poem ends with the words “deaf-blinds me”, the BSL poem goes two lines further, with the reaching out of both hands to grope in the darkness and the eyes blinking desperately against the dark. (Again, we can note that the linking of Sight and Hearing occurs in Paul Scott's *Five Senses*.)

In further discussion of metaphor, we should note that the final stanza uses two clear similes, translated in English as “**Like** a flower, the sun folds itself up” and “Darkness, **like** a bat, flies close/ and closer - / deaf-blinds me!”

We have been told clearly that the sun is like a flower but we have to decide why the sun is like a flower. From the comparison, we can say that some flowers close up when the sun goes down. We can also say that flowers are fragile so this simile makes the sun seem fragile and delicate when compared to the terrifying darkness that is approaching. We can also draw on the allusion to the psalmist's observation that the days of man are like the flowers of the field that fade as the sun sets (Psalm 103: 15-16). This might be especially useful when interpreting the poem as being about the passage of life described in the passage of a day.

However, when we look at the signs SUN and CLOSING-FLOWER we also see that their forms are similar. This is the key to understanding the simile. The BSL sign SUN is visually motivated, with the idea that something is open and giving out rays of light. In fact, the manual component of the signs SUN and LIGHT can be almost identical, with an 'O' handshape opening to a '5' handshape. When a light is turned off, the sign LIGHT-OFF has a '5' handshape closing to an 'O' handshape. Given the relationship between the sun and light, we can understand that as the sun goes down, the light fades, so we should expect the handshape in SUN to close. This is also what would happen when the petals of a flower close. The parallel between the sun “closing” and the flower closing is made so exact that the resulting sign is ambiguous so that we could interpret it as either the sun setting or a flower closing.

We are also told that darkness is like a bat. Again there are many ways that we can seek to interpret the ground of this metaphor. Bats come out at night - in the dark - and many people are afraid of both bats and the dark. Darkness can seem to wrap itself around a person, just as a bat might wrap its wings around a face. Darkness is also a time when sight is of no use, and bats do not rely on sight but sound. Bats are therefore the complete hearing antithesis to deaf people who rely on sight. There is

also a strong formational similarity between the BSL signs DARKNESS and BAT-FLYING. In DARKNESS the two 'B' hands cross over in front of the face. In BAT-FLYING the two 'S' hands cross over and link at the thumbs. In this way darkness is indeed like a bat because the signs are so similar. We should note that in both of these similes, there is a pause in the performance to emphasise the relationship between the two ideas.

Performance

The performance of *Trio* presented here (recorded for *See Hear!*), is performed against a backdrop of a scene of an English garden, complete with a stone urn and a stone bench. The changing mood in the three stanzas that goes with the changing time of day is also marked by changes in the lighting. Clearly such production techniques are not essential to the interpretation of the text of the poem, but they do add to the audience's experience of the overall performance.

Personation is used to good effect in this poem. Although there is only one central character in the poem, in the middle stanza *Afternoon*, the poet is joined by a dog and a bird. The placement of the dog and bird is important for the poem. In the other two stanzas (*Morning* and *Evening*) she is alone (as we are at birth and death) but in the afternoon she is surrounded by companions (as we hope to be in the midst of life). For this reason, the dog needs to be placed on one side of her character, and the bird to be placed on the other side. The bird perches correctly at shoulder height and the dog sits beside her, lower down. The performer looks at the correct height both at the bird and then the dog before they all sleep. Part of the enjoyment of the final line of *Afternoon* ALL-THREE-SLEEP ("The three of us doz-z-z-ze!") occurs because the personation is retained non-manually, while simultaneously showing the other two characters manually.

The emotions in *Trio* also come through powerfully as a result of personation, so that it is not clear what is part of the text of the poem and what is added through performance alone. The poem starts with a wide smile even before the first sign is made. Throughout *Morning* there are smiles. In the interlude between *Morning* and *Afternoon*, the smile is smaller and more peaceful. That smile occurs again at the end of *Afternoon* and then disappears as *Evening* starts. The end of *Evening* has wide eyes, blinking and staring fearfully into darkness and nothing.

This poem is probably one of the "purest" BSL poems that Dot Miles composed and performed. It was composed in the mid-1980s, when she had had the time to develop the idea of sign poetry without reference to English. The elements described here are created entirely independently of English, so that the poetry comes entirely from the sign language imagery and the patterns and symbolism produced by the signs. This form of sign language poetry, perhaps more than any other, has come to be the template for sign language poetry on both sides of the Atlantic.