Classifiers in Storytelling

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The title of this conference, “Visions of the Past...Visions for the Future,” is the perfect starting point for my presentation. My own “visions of the past” begin where my Deaf life began: at a residential school for the deaf. One of the things I see when I look back is the storytelling in the dorms. Without that storytelling, I would not have acquired my language, American Sign Language (ASL), and I would not have discovered my Deaf identity. That storytelling imbued me with my culture, my past, and the tools necessary for my future.

But when I look now to “visions of the future,” I become nervous. With more and more mainstreaming programs, and with discussions of closing some residential schools for the deaf, I see a grim future, indeed. One of the areas affected, but often overlooked, is storytelling as the purveyor of Deaf cultural heritage.

By this I don’t mean, necessarily, that storytelling has stopped. In many places it continues. But what bothers me is how the stories are told. Because Deaf Culture has an “oral” tradition, the preservation of our literature is key. In a workshop given in 1993 (as part of the American Sign Language Literature Series), I was given a copy of a checklist developed by Elizabeth McMahan and others analyzing written fiction (McMahan, et al., 1988). Ben Bahan modified that checklist so that it applied to Deaf ASL Storytelling (Appendix A). In this modified checklist, Bahan asks, “Does the Signer’s style affect your understanding of the work?” If our future storytellers lack the language skills necessary to make their stories understood, how can our culture flourish?

Our modern programs for deaf students usually lack our most precious resource: Deaf ASL models. Without proper language models, some of our current deaf storytellers are doing so with an impoverished input and, consequently, with an impoverished language output. Without intervention, this cycle may perpetuate itself, and my “vision for the future” becomes one of concern.

The Search

What brought me to this point was something that occurred in my own classes (I have taught ASL for 17 years). From time to time, I would require
my students to do some of their own storytelling on videotapes as part of their coursework. When I viewed these tapes, I would often feel that something was wrong, but I couldn’t pinpoint it. I knew it had to do with my own tolerance level of timing and classifier use, but I didn’t yet have the words to describe what was missing from my students’ stories. I just knew that one story or another was wrong, or even boring, but I couldn’t say why—at least not on any linguistic level.

I began asking my colleagues their opinions, but none had satisfactory answers. “I know what you mean,” they’d say, but that got me no further in my search for what troubled me. My luck changed when in 1988 I happened to enroll in a workshop given by Lynn Jacobowitz. It was there I learned that there actually were temporal restrictions on the use of classifiers in ASL (Jacobowitz, personal communication). This is not to be confused with the temporal aspect associated with inflected verbs; this deals specifically with classifiers. What Ms. Jacobowitz had discovered was that there was a three-to-five second time limit in the duration of any given classifier, thus necessitating a continuous shift between classifiers (i.e., turn-taking in the use of classifiers).

I was ecstatic that my “gut feeling” had been on target. I felt vindicated! Now I had research to substantiate my notion that something felt wrong. Of course it felt wrong! The internal rules of a language (even hidden from this native speaker) were being violated. All languages have rules inherent in their grammar and syntax. Whether a language is spoken or signed, certain restrictions will apply.

Spoken Language—A Starting Point

Spoken languages can be classified by their use of classifiers: either a language is labeled a “classifier language” (e.g., spoken Thai), or it is not (e.g., English) (Allan, 1977). In his research, Allan (1977) was able to delineate over 51 spoken languages that employ classifiers to such an extent that they could be labeled as such (p. 285).

In order to determine whether or not a language could be labeled a classifier language, Allan proposed seven categories of classifiers (Appendix B). In addition, Allan claimed that his first five categories (material, shape, consistency, size, and location) “occur only in classifier languages,” while the last two (arrangement and quanta) “occur in languages like English which are not classifier languages” (p. 297).

Incredibly, Allan’s categories are not new. The earliest work to delineate such classifications of things was by John Locke in 1689! Locke noted that these “primary qualities of bodies” are those that are “perceived by more than one” of the five senses (Locke, in Allan, p. 298). Allan also incorpo-
rates this constraint in his categories (p. 298). Later, Ted Supalla (1986) was to modify Allan’s seven categories for his work in ASL, and he delineated five: size and shape specifier, semantic classifier, body classifier, body part classifier, and instrument classifier (Supalla, 1986, pp. 184-185).

Signed Language—The Next Step

Sometime after my learning of the temporal restrictions on ASL classifiers, I happened to see a copy of Gil Eastman’s videotape, “Mime to Sign” (Eastman, 1989), and I got an even better idea of how these rules operate by watching Chapter 7, “All Hands On Deck: Handshapes Representing People in Action.” Eastman’s explanations in this chapter show the proper use of classifiers in storytelling. Although, at the time, he claimed that these handshapes were gestures, not classifiers, and although he didn’t specifically address the notion of temporal restrictions, Eastman nevertheless unconsciously incorporated these restrictions in his examples. He also developed a set of symbols to represent the six handshapes for the category of “people” (Appendix C). Eastman felt strongly that ASL was largely made up of gestures, and that these representative handshapes were, in fact, gestures.

The next confirmation I had came from Clayton Valli, noted ASL poet and linguist. He felt strongly that these “handshapes” employed in ASL storytelling were not merely gestures, but were in fact classifiers (Valli, personal communication).

I was fortunate to have Dr. Valli as my supervisor from 1991 to 1993 when I taught “Intensive ASL” to interpreting students (Levels I and II) at Gallaudet University. I incorporated into the course Babs Riggs’ videotape, “Hunting Baboons.” Valli pointed out that in this story, Riggs makes use of classifiers (not gestures), and that they follow temporal restrictions. He also began using a modified set of symbols he had learned from Eastman (Appendix D). As I began to use these symbols, I found that they were unintelligible to my Deaf and non-Deaf colleagues. It was a non-Deaf student, Juanita Cebe, who suggested a slight modification, and I have adopted her suggestion for these arbitrary symbols (Appendix E).

In the Classroom

What was left to me at this point was to design my curriculum so that any section on classifiers included the temporal aspect. In my ASL I-IV classes, I use the Vista curriculum: Signing Naturally (Smith et al. 1988, 1989) (Appendix F).

For my ASL V classes, I use the ASL Literature Series: Bird of a Different Feather by Ben Bahan and For a Decent Living by Sam Supalla. I also now require viewing of the recently released video, “Mask.”
For the classes I teach at Gallaudet University’s English Language Institute (ELI) for international Deaf students, I have found that it is easier to separate the students into four categories:

a. Students with no signs and no written English,
b. Students with no signs and some written English,
c. Students with some signs and some written English, and
d. Students with some signs and more written English (than group C).

Then, when I review the unit on classifiers, I reclassify the four groups into two: those with some signs, and those with no signs. For the group with some signs (which can range from a small amount of signing to those with a native sign language), I find that I only have to tap into their already internalized use of classifiers from the sign language of their home countries. Once I do this, I can expand what they already know internally, and then help them monitor themselves until they are able to utilize the temporal restrictions.

For the other group, it becomes a teaching proposition. Employing standard methodologies for teaching a second language, I concentrate on receptive and expressive skills with classifiers until the students are able to produce classifiers correctly with their temporal restrictions. One assignment would have them analyze a videotaped ASL story by counting the number of classifiers used (Appendix G). The obvious point of this exercise is to see if the students can identify the six “person” classifiers as they occur naturally in ASL storytelling. What is not so obvious is my hope that once students have consciously analyzed these symbols receptively, they begin to use them expressively. Perhaps a more advanced assignment could include the actual timing of the classifiers’ duration (e.g., counting the number of frames in the videotape) (Roth, 1993, 1994).

Finally, it is worth mentioning here that here is yet another area that cannot be overlooked in any curriculum concerning classifiers. That area concerns eye-gaze. Recent research (Bahan, 1995) discusses the importance of eye-gaze in ASL storytelling. Specifically, Bahan mentions the signer’s shifting his eye-gaze to his hands (p. 179). If emerging storytellers are to convey all the nuances of a story while adhering to the intenal rules of the language used to tell that story, such research cannot be overlooked.

Conclusion

As you can see, my foray into enriching the language input for future ASL speakers is a new one. My goal, indeed our goal, should be to influence the output of ASL speakers. Examining the temporal aspect of classifiers is just a beginning. Up to now, my focus has only been on classifiers for people (or animals with two legs, as in Bird of a Different Feather). But what about
vehicles? To be sure, the same temporal restrictions apply, but what symbols are used? What curriculum can be developed that will allow us to teach proper classifier use for vehicles? An airplane was personified by Guy Bouchauveau during his storytelling at The Deaf Way in July 1989 (Bouchauveau, 1994), but how would a car be portrayed? There are six classifiers for people and animals with two legs. How many are there for vehicles?

And what about things? Bill Ennis (renowned Deaf ASL comic and storyteller) tells a wonderful story about golf, and in it he makes use of classifiers for the golf ball and the golf club. But what restrictions—if any—are there for things?

Finally, eye-gaze. Research in this area is brand new, but it cannot be ignored.

What our visions for the future need is more storytelling. It will have to be done on videotape by Deaf ASL models. Deaf Culture has an “oral” tradition without a written system. Its storytelling genre represents the literature of that culture (Bahan, 1992; Frishberg, 1992; Jacobowitz, 1992; Kelleher & Fernandes, 1992; Kuntze, 1994; Supalla & Bahan, 1992). It is imperative that we preserve our heritage for future generations, but that we also preserve it in its proper form: with all its internal rules intact.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix A

LIST OF QUESTIONS FOR LITERARY ANALYSIS

Modified for the purpose of ASL Literature Series Workshop
by Ben Bahan, 1993

1. Who is the main character (the protagonist)? Does this person’s character change during the course of the work? Do you feel sympathetic (favorable) toward the main character?

2. Why are the minor characters there? Do any of them serve as foils? Consider each one individually.

3. Can you see a pattern in the way the plot is constructed? That is, can you describe the way the events are organized? Does the Signer use flash-back? If so, for what purpose? Does surprise play an important role in the plot? Is there any foreshadowing?

4. Is anything about the work ironic? Consider verbal ironies as well as ironic situations.

5. How does imagery function? Are there repeated images (motifs)? Do any of these images gather symbolic meaning?

6. What is the setting—the time period and the location? How important are these elements in the work? Could it be set in another time and place just as well?

7. Consider point of view: Who is the narrator? Is the narrator reliable? What effect does the point of view have on your response to the work? What would be gained or lost if the point of view were different—told by another character, for instance, or told in the first person?

8. Does the Signer’s style affect your response to or your understanding of the work? If so, how would you describe the style? For example, what is the tone? Is it ironic, satirical, somber, light, wry, humorous, or simply neutral? Is the sentence construction fairly simple or elaborate? Can you detect a rhythm? Are the words familiar or fancy? Does the style create a mood? Do you think the style is important in contributing to the effectiveness of the work?

9. What is the theme? Can you state it in a single sentence? How is this meaning conveyed? In other words, how did you figure it out?

Appendix B

CATEGORIES OF CLASSIFICATION

by Keith Allan, 1977

I. MATERIAL
   A. Animacy
   B. Abstract and verbal nouns
   C. Inanimacy

II. SHAPE
   A. Long
   B. Flat
   C. Round
   D. Shape with dimension
      1. One-dimensional
      2. Two-dimensional
      3. Three-dimensional
      4. Nondimensional
         a. Prominent curved exterior
         b. Hollow
            1.) Container-like object
            2.) Pipe-like object
            3.) Often label by material
               a.) Stick-like
               b.) Rope-like
               c.) Fabric-like
               d.) Plank-like
               e.) Stone-like
               f.) Bush-like
               g.) Seed-like

III. CONSISTENCY
   A. Flexible
   B. Hard or rigid
   C. Nondiscrete

IV. SIZE
   A. Big
   B. Small

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V. LOCATION
(Still under research, not clearly defined yet)

VI. ARRANGEMENT
A. Some specific and noninherent configuration
B. In a specific position
C. In some kind of specific noninherent distribution

VII. QUANTA
A. Grammatical number
B. Collection
C. Volume
D. Instance
E. Partitive
F. Number names
G. Dimension (measure)
H. Volume (measure)
I. Weight (measure)
J. Time (measure)
K. Collection (some combine with the arrangement)
Appendix C

Gil Eastman's symbols

Head to feet

Feet

Waist to feet

Head and Torso

Legs

Head, torso, arms, hands and fingers

(Mime)
Appendix D

Clayton Valli’s symbols
Appendix E

Holly Roth’s symbols
### Appendix F

**Symbols for Classifiers**  
(from page xv of *Signing Naturally: Level I*)

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<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
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<td>DCL</td>
<td><em>Descriptive classifier</em>—sign used to describe an object or a person. Sometimes referred to as size and shape specifiers or SASSes.</td>
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<td>LCL</td>
<td><em>Locative classifier</em>—sign representing an object in a specific place (and sometimes indicating movement).</td>
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<td>SCL</td>
<td><em>Semantic classifier</em>—sign representing a category of nouns such as vehicle or person.</td>
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<td>BCL</td>
<td><em>Body classifier</em>—sign in which the body “enacts” the verb of the sentence. Role shifting is usually required.</td>
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<td>ICL</td>
<td><em>Instrument classifier</em>—sign in which part of the body (usually the hands) manipulates an object.</td>
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<td>BPCL</td>
<td><em>Body part classifier</em>—sign representing a specific part of the body doing the action. (This would include the action of eyes.)</td>
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<td>PCL</td>
<td><em>Plural classifier</em> sign, indicating either specific number or nonspecific number.</td>
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Appendix G

(checklist for the symbols)

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