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Shared Thinking Processes with Four Deaf Poets: A Window on “the Creative” in “Creative Sign Language”

A wealth of literature now exists on the subject of sign-language poetry. Building on the recognition of sign languages as bona fide languages, various authors have engaged with poetic, creative, expressive sign-language compositions and performances as a way not only to celebrate, analyze, and understand sign-language poetry and poets (Klima and Bellugi 1979; Sandler and Lillo-Martin 2001; Sutton-Spence 2001, 2005; Tommaso 2004) but also to critically examine and establish their rightful place in a wider literary tradition (e.g., Bauman 2003; Rose 1992). By taking existing, digitized recordings of poetry performances by largely established, professional poets, linguists are able to analyze sign-language poetry for creative uses of symmetry, neologism, iconicity, metaphor, repetition and rhythm, handshape and space (Valli 1990, 1993; Ormsby 1995; Blondel and Miller 2000; Russo, Giuranna, and Pizzuto 2001; Sutton-Spence and Kaneko 2007). Alternatively, analysis of established poems provides us with an opportunity to align sign-language poetry with other literary, cinematographic, and expressive art forms (Krentz 2006; Nelson 2006; Rose 2006). Occasionally, Deaf poets themselves offer insights.
into and analyses of traditions and features of sign-language poetry (Valli 1990, 1993; Bahan 2006; Lentz in Lerner and Feigel 2009) as performers with firsthand creative linguistic experience.

Other authors may (rarely) invite Deaf native signers to comment on and offer their own observations on sign-language poems (Tommaso 2004, although in this instance, they are simply thanked as advisors in the acknowledgments). Wolter (2006), to our knowledge, is the only person who has interviewed a Deaf poet (Peter Cook, United States) in a publication about traditions of sign-language poetry, its parallels with creative writing, and its importance for future Deaf generations. In this largely descriptive piece, Cook describes and offers perspectives on his established repertoire and reflects on his influences. In our research, we wanted to understand the thought processes that British Deaf poets engage in, the strategies they employ, and the resources they draw on—individually and jointly—as they begin to compose sign-language poems. We wanted to know how they approach, sidestep, overcome, challenge, and experiment with specific language problems that arise in specific language tasks.

Anthropomorphism and Sign Creativity
Sign-language poets draw on a wide range of tropes in their work, but we chose to focus on anthropomorphization as one that is very challenging to less skilled signers and yet so apparently effortless in the hands of certain poets. Although our focus in this article is the method we used to understand more about creative processes, it is helpful to explain a little about the end product they were working toward.

Anthropomorphization and personification overlap considerably, but, essentially, as a working definition, we take the trope as a figure of speech in which signers apply particular human characteristics to nonhuman entities or qualities, whether in form or behavior, including human communication, perhaps through the use of language (Bouchauveau 1994; Bechter 2008; Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2010).

As a framework for understanding how nonhumans are given human characteristics in creative sign language, we are guided by the understanding that the signs created in the process will be highly iconic, and thus we are able to draw on models of sign creation such as Christian Cuxac’s transfer of person (as described in Sallandre 2007,
for example), Sarah Taub’s analogue building model (2001), and Paul Dudis’s (2007) work on depiction using a conceptual blending model in ASL.

Taub’s cognitive-linguistic view of iconicity is that it “is not an objective relationship between image and referent; rather, it is a relationship between our mental models of image and referent” (2001, 19). Sign-language poets’ creativity extends to their unusual perspectives of the referents and the subsequently alternative mental models of the image, perhaps before they even set about developing the creative relationships between the two.

As Taub explains, using the now well-known example for ASL tree (a sign that is also used in many BSL dialects), the creation of an iconic sign involves four successive stages: conceptualization, image selection, schematization, and sign encoding. In normal signing, the concept of a tree will include all that a signer might be expected to know about a tree, including that trees are not human. However, during the process of anthropomorphization, creative signers create a world in which we “know” that trees do have human characteristics and thus will add attributes to what one might “know” about a tree (for example, that it has eyes and can use sign language). For normal image selection, the signer selects a prototypical sensory image of a tree. For ASL tree, discussed by Taub, the visual image is of a tree that consists of a trunk, spreading branches, and the ground in which it is rooted. The poets will explore the possibilities of leaving aside the prototypical image and finding new, less-expected ones such as images that show the tree’s head or eyes or focus on its twigs as fingers. In schematization, the essential features of the visual image that has been selected are extracted to form a simplified framework that can be represented by signs. In Taub’s example of ASL tree, only three fundamental features are selected: a long vertical shape representing the trunk, spreading branches, and a flat surface. Poets who are anthropomorphizing a tree may find they need to select the tree’s eyes or fingers as features. In encoding, appropriate articulators are chosen to represent the schematized elements: For Taub’s standard sign tree, example, the upright forearm represents the trunk, the open palm and fingers stand for the spreading branches, and the horizontal forearm of the signer’s nondominant hand is the ground. Poets, however, might
consider embodying the entire tree, in which case the human trunk represents the tree trunk, the arms represent the branches, and the fingers represent twigs.

Creative anthropomorphization necessarily stems from the blending of two conceptual spaces—those of the signer and those of the entity depicted—as both the signer’s body and the surrounding space come into play and as events are depicted rather than simply described. As Dudis (2007) observes, depiction involves a signer representing an animate participant in an event. The result is a visual blend of the “Real-Space signer and the Event-Space interlocutor” (7), where the signer’s actions, posture, and expression are interpreted as those of the interlocutor.

Our research aimed to learn how the poets solved problems such as might occur at each of the stages Taub identified and how they achieve the conceptual blending required to enable audiences to interpret the anthropomorphic depictions.

Think-Aloud Protocols

The inspiration for our method of using shared thinking processes came from the problem-solving, cognitive-psychology elicitation technique of the think-aloud protocol (van Someren, Barnard, and Sandberg 1994; Tirkkonen-Condit and Jääskeläinen 2000). The think-aloud protocol is designed to reveal the ways in which a human subject solves a particular problem by describing out loud whatever thoughts come to mind as the person tackles the problem. This then yields information that cannot necessarily be gleaned by looking at or analyzing an end product or artifact (van Someren, Barnard, and Sandberg 1994). A think-aloud protocol can also be used to compare different problem-solving strategies.

Adopted by translation studies, as Stone (2009) outlines, the think-aloud protocol can be used to evoke the decisions one makes when one is creating (in Stone’s case) a translation of a text from English to BSL. Participants are invited to express out loud their thought processes relating to the translation task. Crucially, they are also invited to reflect on their work or artifact and retrospectively to suggest improvements in their translations. The usefulness of the think-aloud protocol lies in its fluidity and its cyclical process, together with its
creation of a reflective space. Stone’s (2009) appropriation of the think-aloud protocol for sign-language interpretation makes use of translation output for comparison between Deaf and hearing participants. We wanted to borrow from the think-aloud protocol but work it into an illuminating, collective, shared event. A potential limitation of the think-aloud protocol is the effect that the “observer” might have on the individual “subject” (van Someren, Barnard, and Sandberg 1994). By asking four people to come together to think about and discuss with each other their thought processes when solving problems in creative sign language, we hoped to minimize that effect.

Deaf Collective Research Practices

Aside from the inherent logistics of planning and arranging a group discussion using the shared thinking process, we were mindful of the fact that we were asking four professional Deaf poets with busy lives to spend an evening with us, working hard. Experience has taught us the importance of venue (Rachel’s sitting room works very well; a room in a university building does not), food (again, timing of the meal and the menu are of the utmost importance) and time before and after the work activity for warming up and cooling down (cf. Ladd 2003): chatting more generally, sharing news, and discussing things other than poetry. In terms of the task at hand, we negotiated our roles as hosts and as researchers with our own expertise. For the designated evening we devised a skeleton structure that we hoped would provoke curiosity, insight, questions, and observations. Although the conversation was mostly led by the poets, we occasionally allowed ourselves to intervene with questions or comments, while respecting the poets as the creative experts. The shared thinking event was filmed, copied to DVD, and sent to the poets as a record of their collective work.

What We Asked Them to Do

We invited four British Deaf poets (Richard Carter, Paul Scott, Donna Williams, and John Wilson) to participate in a conversation in which they shared their creative, cognitive, and linguistic processes with each other to witness and share the real-time development of anthropomorphization within creative sign language. We asked them to “think aloud” (that is, sign openly to each other) about the challenges of cre-
ating anthropomorphic signing in relation to a range of different entities that we chose for them—animate, inanimate, and abstract—and presented to them as single words on slips of paper. We deliberately did not use pictures of these entities as we did not want to influence the poets by the use of images.

For the animate entities, we selected a range of animals for their different physical forms, especially body parts that might be recruited for signing or other forms of communication: monkey, snake, octopus, crab, snail, tortoise, bat, spider, zebra, and pig. The inanimate entities were chosen for similar reasons: light bulb, bicycle, submarine, star, mirror, volcano, clock, fork, spoon, and pencil. The abstract qualities were drawn from a list of abstract nouns in English: beauty, death, confidence, envy, fragility, honesty, indifference, loyalty, luxury, and pride. In retrospect, we now realize that an English list of these abstract qualities may not have been the best source because it hid the fact that many of these words appeared to have no direct translation into BSL as abstractions. The poets clearly understood all of the concepts, but they did not necessarily sign them as abstract nouns.

We asked the poets to consider these entities and qualities and solve the following problems for creative representation in sign languages: What is their appearance? How do they behave? How do they communicate? If you were to accord them human qualities, how would they behave, and how would they communicate? The poets were asked to sign whatever they were thinking, doing, or feeling as they attempted to answer these questions. In the process they often embodied the entity, made meaning of everyone’s questions and comments, and created anthropomorphic, poetic examples.

Think-aloud protocols—and therefore shared thinking processes—work on the principle that problem solving is about seeking answers to questions that seem to have no immediate answer. For example, “Can (or how does) a pencil experience the world and communicate?” Solutions are sought from the environment or from external information (van Someren, Barnard, and Sandberg 1994), in this case, from each other. We observed that various solutions can be co-constructed. The poets collectively owned the processes, used the shared thinking processes to support and bounce ideas off each other, and develop their thoughts to work up into new poems. They encouraged each
other by means of questions and reinforcement. They also discussed meanings, explored creative possibilities, built on each other's initial creations, offered feedback and counterperspectives, and developed humorous, poignant, clever, skillful, and entertaining narratives and vignettes.

The shared thinking process as a collective extension of the think-aloud protocol can be framed as an innovative problem-solving technique if we view anthropomorphism as presenting various challenges for sign-language poetry creation. That is to say, although anthropomorphizing animals, objects, and abstract nouns was presented as our overall aim, we were asking the poets to articulate and transcend the various problems the task presented. We were interested in how the problem-solving techniques were expressed and in the artifacts created as a result.

As the poets tackled these problems, we observed specific techniques. The poets watched each other's ideas, articulations, attempts, and vignettes and offered alternatives, based on their own knowledge, creative skills, and linguistic abilities. At other times we noted the “try it for size” strategy, in which a poet improvised a miniperformance for critique by the others. They also shared particular tasks, such as developing fast-paced poetic improvisations; they prompted each other, offered encouragement, made overt choices as to which task they wish to undertake (“I choose zebra”) or gave direction (“Why don’t you try the volcano?”). Finally we saw the “hang on a minute” interjection, when they offered specific, linguistic critiques of the task and related performance to the inherent problem of the anthropomorphism of inanimate objects.

Some Examples from the Shared Thinking Process Conversation

In this section we offer selected examples from the ninety-minute shared-thinking conversation on anthropomorphism and creative sign language, in which the poets developed their ideas and attempted to solve the problems the anthropomorphism presented. We watched as they identified the concepts they wished to focus upon, chose the images they wished to create to represent those concepts, and decided how to transfer these images to specific signs. In presenting these
examples, we reflect on the strengths and possibilities of this kind of methodology and the opportunities to witness the embryonic stage of poetic composition, which later becomes a refined, finished poem. We found that the poets used the shared thinking process to extend each other’s creativity and to collectively push the boundaries of their creative lexicon. Much of it was done humorously and in a collaborative environment that we might term “jamming.” The poets used the techniques they came up with to teach each other new insights and even new skills.

*Extending Each Other’s Creativity and Creative Lexicon*

In the following two examples, the poets observe, comment on, and stretch the linguistic and narrative possibilities when anthropomorphizing animals. In the first, Richard and Paul discuss whether an octopus, with eight tentacles, can sign and, if so, how limited its vocabulary might be:

RC: When you said “old,” that’s two fingers, so an octopus could sign old¹ with two tentacles, couldn’t he?
PS: Or he would sign old (with two 1-handshape tentacles)
RC: Right! (laughs)

Richard has come up with the idea that the fingers can represent tentacles because of the similarity of shape. He creates the established BSL sign old (which uses a bent V handshape—that is, bent index and middle fingers), using articulators that will be understood as tentacles rather than fingers. The choice of old is not random but comes from the fact that BSL octopus uses the bent index finger (X handshape) on both hands, and Richard is trying to find a sign using two bent fingers. Paul picks up this idea and builds on it by realizing that octopus tentacles are less ordered and constrained than are the fingers on one hand and that octopus can be easily modified, allowing him to come up with a highly productive sign that has the same number of fingers as old, articulated at the same location but made with the index finger of each hand (see figures 1a–c).

In our second example, the role of the spider, with many eyes and eight legs, is expanded through humor and neologism (see figure 2):
DW: I was thinking that the spider could be good for security, hanging from the ceiling.
JW: Yes, like a housekeeper with a huge ring of keys at her waist, bustling around [and] locking everything up, her skirt like a huge web.
DW: I missed how that is linked to the spider.
JW: A Victorian housekeeper with a big ring of keys, and so all the legs can each lock doors as she walks around, making sure everything is secure and safe.
RC: Or, imagine it’s a hotel, and the spider shows the guests to their rooms, and there are eight rooms (1 2 3 4 on one side of the hall-

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example-figure.pdf}
\caption{With help from Paul, Richard experiments with old (as signed by the octopus).}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example-figure.pdf}
\caption{The spider unlocks all eight doors simultaneously.}
\end{figure}
way and 5 6 7 8 on the other), so the guests all follow the spider, then the spider unlocks all eight doors at the same time (extends legs outward, unlocks, retracts legs) (much laughter). JW: And she can carry all the bags! And put them into the bedrooms at the same time, too!

Donna has introduced the specific concept of a spider that can provide scope for the language play by focusing on the spider’s eyes, web-spinning ability, and manner of hanging from the ceiling. Naturally, this would allow a spider to see everything and allow it to undertake the human task of providing security through surveillance. John then brings a rather different world knowledge about spiders to the discussion. He picks up on the idea of security and moves it from surveillance to locks and keys, thereby bringing in the new, related concept of spider silk as a web rather than a single strand, so that the visual resemblance of the round web can work for human clothing, in this case a Victorian housekeeper’s dress. Richard, in turn, builds on the idea of a host (taking a different aspect of the housekeeper who combines security with hospitality) but still thinking about keys. However, he now imagines that the spider’s eight legs, represented in BSL by eight fingers (four on each hand), could be used instrumentally to hold eight keys to unlock eight doors at the same time. In doing this, Richard has started to create a very different sort of blend of real and event spaces with a new partitioning.

The event blend created now invites audiences to see the actions depicted as including visible instruments held by invisible hands. John extends the same idea of the eight fingers and uses them as eight arms so that the hospitable spider can carry eight bags for eight guests. The events depicted in the new blend have changed again: This time the real-space signer’s hands, which are articulating the handling classifiers, depict the event-space spider’s visible hands holding invisible suitcases. (Note that nobody is bothered by the fact that the spider apparently has two more legs to walk on while using the eight legs as arms or hands. After all, the poets need to select only certain features from the basic concept, as we mentioned earlier in relation to the schematization in Taub’s model). Again, we can see how the poets trade ideas and build on them, resulting in the final signs that satisfy them all.
Offering Reflections, Analysis, and Commentary

The poets reflected on whether inanimate objects can communicate through signs or some other means. Their comments provide useful insight into how they expect their compositions to be interpreted. In this example, Richard has just improvised a spoon as it is taken from the utensil drawer, used to scoop ice cream, and then placed in the dishwasher, and the poets then ponder how the spoon communicated or might be expected to communicate:

RC: The spoon can’t sign, can it? Only facial expression, and then when it leaves the drawer, it says “bye-bye” to its friends.
JW: But how? How does it say “bye-bye”?
RC: Through its face.
JW: But it signed! So it means we accept that the spoon signs.
RSS: I think we do accept it.
JW: Yes, we have to, but, when Richard did the spoon saying “bye-bye,” in my head I saw a spoon without hands! So yes, I see his character, but I also see just a spoon. So Richard-as-spoon is blended with the image of a spoon.

The poets have all reached the agreement that a spoon can have a face (that is, the bowl of the spoon, which resembles the human face in shape and is positioned at the top of the handle, which can be seen as the spoon’s body); as such, the spoon can use facial expression to communicate emotions and reactions. However, they have also agreed that the spoon has no hands because there is nothing about the form of a spoon that can map on to the human hands. Their discussion acknowledges that it is not possible to modify any part of the object’s form to create logical “hands” in a way that they often did for the animals (such as the octopus mentioned earlier and other animals discussed later). Richard’s solution to combine facial expression with fully “human” signing is satisfactory because of the image it generates for the audience. Thus, in the blended space created, the poets are able to select the aspects of event space they wish to use in their depictions. As they selectively blend real and event conceptual spaces, the poets have decided which of the abstracted counterparts of the real-space signer and the event-space anthropomorphized character
they can practically use and which they cannot. Depiction of dialogue in this instance is separated from depiction of actions.

*Development and Humor: Jamming*

One of the key features of the shared thinking process was the way in which the poets engaged in rapid-fire improvisation and poetic development, quickly building on each other’s ideas before collapsing with laughter. Here they attempt to anthropomorphize a volcano, working out a way in which the geophysical concepts associated with a volcano, such as shaking and forceful movements, can be transferred to a human, perhaps as indications of anger, while also exploring parallel causes of the volcano’s anger, including pain. They are working with the well-known conceptual metaphor that human anger is pressure in a container (Lakoff 1987), and they explore this in reverse by explaining the contained pressure in the volcano as anger. They map the concrete domain of the volcano onto the abstract domain of human anger, thereby anthropomorphizing it. This idea of pressure in a container leads them to think about other reasons to release the pressure in a container, with similar high-pressure emissions of a fluid. Poets are highly skilled linguistic wordsmiths, but even the finest wordsmiths can enjoy laughing about squeezing pimples or desperately needing to go to the toilet.

RC: Why don’t you try the volcano?
DW: A volcano? Hmm.
RC: I think it would be really angry, ready to explode.
JW: Like global warming and all the lava explodes.
DW: Or an earthquake?
JW: An earthquake, yes, it could be about some people who build a house, but the digging of the foundation really hurts the earth, so it explodes with anger.
PS: Or it could be like a huge pimple ready to burst (shoots out from cheek).
JW: Or hand up, need to pee! Oh, lava bursts out.
RC: Too late! And it’s the same with maybe a sneeze.

In the following instance, the poets, having played with the signing animals for a while, find that the novelty has worn off, so they take
on a new challenge. Playing with the imaginative range of possibilities of animal communication, they break free of the idea of signed communication and experiment with other visual means, while retaining certain Deaf cultural references such as subtitles or PowerPoint slides:

RSS: Can the spider communicate?
RC: Can. Spider can.
DW: Through fingerspelling.²
RC (to DW): But its legs are different. They’re hard and straight, compared to the octopus, whose tentacles are more flexible.
PS: But maybe the spider is more fragile and has to be more careful—when he’s fingerspelling it’s easier to break one of his legs off, so he has to fingerspell more carefully, and a spider could never work as a typist because that would definitely break his legs if he tried to type.
RC (to PS): But, also, a spider can communicate through shooting out his thread like a web but writing instead. And we could read that. That’s communication, isn’t it? And it could be really fast writing. He could get really good at it. Or like subtitles! (spider web-writing really quickly) or maybe PowerPoint even (spider web-writing projected onto PowerPoint slides).

Conceptually, the poets’ narrative development of the behavior of certain animals was idiosyncratically creative in some aspects but firmly located within British and, thus, British Deaf culture stereotypes. In the next section, we see how, as four Deaf people, they build on the shared conceptual image of what it would mean to be a “human pig” by considering the features of a Deaf “human pig.” They then revisit the other animals and find in them prototypical members of the Deaf community:

RC: The pig, I imagine that everyone looks at him and thinks he’s just a bighead because he thinks he’s really important, but he’s not. He’s not important at all. Actually more important is the zebra, compared to the pig. That’s what I feel anyway. The zebra’s pretty smart; the pig’s just ugly. He might be smart with money, but the zebra—he’s intelligent.
JW: And the pig is no good at looking after himself and needs others
to take care of him? Like a social worker, a doctor . . . he’s hopelessly lost by himself. He only communicates through “oink oink.”

RC: And the monkey . . .

JW: Ooh chat chat chat chat endlessly.

RC: I feel the monkey went to mainstream school, so his signing is all over the place, and so others don’t want to have anything to do with him.

PS: Like a clown.

RC: So the monkey became deaf, so they put him in mainstream school, where he had no idea what was going on, no communication. He was all over the place, and that affected his behavior. He was hyperactive, and as he grew up he got more and more isolated from other Deaf people.

Perhaps from this discussion we learn almost as much about the poets’ views on the intervention of support services for Deaf people and Deaf education—and the impact of this on Deaf people’s communicative abilities—as we do about the poets’ skills in attributing certain human characteristics to animals. When we devised the list of animals for this task, we included the monkey as the animal that most closely resembles the human form and is the only animal with hands. We thought that the monkey would be most likely to sign. Apes, after all, are the only animals who have learned to sign (reportedly—Pinker [1994] provides a useful assessment of the claims). Instead, however, John started the discussion by using the strong visual image of a monkey’s prominent, chattering teeth, with the lips drawn back, immediately taking us to a Deaf person’s view of communication through oralism. Perhaps the negative equation of monkeys with sign language is too powerful to explore further in a positive sign-language setting, or perhaps the similarity between monkey hands and human hands was too strong even to merit further exploration because of the lack of challenge. Once the image of the senselessly chattering monkey was selected, Richard picked up on the lack of meaning and developed it to show that the monkey could perhaps also sign, although only in a meaningless way. Following on that, he makes a very powerful statement about the effects of mainstream education on many deaf children.
Discovering New Techniques and Teaching Each Other

Anthropomorphization of abstract nouns proved the most challenging of the three tasks to the poets. Their easy mutual construction and development of ideas were replaced by more overt sharing of expertise and explicit guidance. We witnessed several emerging strategies for dealing with abstract concepts, one of which was to play with acronyms. This is a very new technique in BSL poetry and was developed by Paul. Here he gives Richard some ideas on the concept of envy (see figure 3):

PS: I was thinking about e.n.v.y. with V in the middle. V has to stand there, keeping the other letters at arm’s length. They’re not happy because the other side keeps trying to keep up with them, so V has to keep them apart. envy-pulled-apart. But Y is just there on the end, shrugging his shoulders.

RC: Or, E means energy or enthusiasm? And he keeps trying to butt in, which really irritates V. And E wants to be the same as Y, and V has to keep them apart. And Y doesn’t really know what’s going on. V says, “Oh, it’s nothing. Don’t worry,” to Y, then tells E to be quiet. V is stuck in the middle.

Figure 3. Paul and Richard experiment with e.n.v.y.
PS: Yes, E is energy, who tries to get in, and N is saying “No,” and Y is saying “Yes!” “No,” “Yes,” “No,” “Yes,” and V is stuck in the middle trying to keep them apart and struggling with the envy.

Immediately, Richard develops this new idea by drawing on a device used in some sign-language games in which the letter of an English word generates a sign whose meaning, when translated into English, also starts with that letter (Smith and Sutton-Spence 2007). Paul agrees and fine-tunes the idea to bring it closer to the idea of envy, so between them they have created an acronym that shows elements of envy.

**Encouraging and Stretching Creativity and Confidence**

A key feature of the shared thinking process is the way in which these poets, some more experienced and established than the others, encouraged creative and linguistic development in each other. They offered feedback, examples, and support when they judged it to be needed. Here, Donna, the least experienced of the poets, is eager to take on a particularly challenging task: anthropomorphizing a pencil. She has clear ideas about the narrative but struggles to express it using creative BSL, and Richard encourages her to think about viewpoint and expression (see figures 4a–c):

DW: I was thinking about the pencil. And the anticipation of being picked up and starting to be written with, but something’s wrong. I’m too blunt, so I need to be sharpened. Ow! Ow! And they keep turning me in the sharpener. It really hurts—until I’m sharp enough (shakes head, recovers), so I start to write, but, no, I keep making spelling mistakes, so in the end I’m thrown away . . . but I’m not sure where to go next with this. After that, I’ve kind of run out of ideas . . .

RC: (becomes pencil) And this pencil is selected—the pencil is brought upright suddenly, but before I know it, I’m heading straight for the pencil sharpener! (face is pushed into round hole of sharpener—sharpener rotates repeatedly around the face of the pencil, which is then sharply withdrawn—the pencil looks traumatized and relieved) (shows long, smooth, slim point extending}
forward from face), so I show what it is I can see as the pencil, being plunged into the sharpener. And then my face being vigorously rubbed all over by the paper as my point is used to write with. And the more I’m used, the blunter my face becomes (shows point becoming flatter), so back into the sharpener again I go, and that happens again and again and again.

DW: (Nods) But that feels more comedy than poetry, I don’t know . . . but yours looked better.

R.C: No, no, just give it a go . . . keep trying.

Narrative Extension and Backstory

As the challenges increased, the poets seemed eager to work with each other on developing narratives that utilized anthropomorphism. For example, when it proved difficult to become a bicycle in terms of communication, they instead found fun and satisfaction in telling the bicycle’s autobiography. There are many examples in this discussion of narrative extension, but in this one the poets decided to go back in time in order to reveal the bicycle’s history. Again, they watched each other and took turns building, developing, and linking.

John started by applying human emotions and behavior to the bicycle: A small child’s bicycle became a baby bicycle that sucks its thumb, even though, formationally, a bicycle has no parallel for mapping onto the thumb. He then extended the concept to bicycles of other sizes, equating size with age and attitude (see figure 5):
JW: I was thinking about a baby bicycle, you know (thumb in mouth), first bike, with training wheels and little handlebars, [who] looks up with envy at a bigger bike, who sneers down at baby bike. This bike has two, bigger wheels, no training wheels, yawns, whatever, then looks up at an even bigger bike! This one has huge wheels, and it looks with disdain at the other two with their tiny wheels! So all the different-sized bikes . . .

Paul acknowledges the turn and then continues with a plot-driven narrative that maps more of the bicycle parts onto his body (see figure 6):

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Figure 5. John’s baby bicycle.

JW: I was thinking about a baby bicycle, you know (thumb in mouth), first bike, with training wheels and little handlebars, [who] looks up with envy at a bigger bike, who sneers down at baby bike. This bike has two, bigger wheels, no training wheels, yawns, whatever, then looks up at an even bigger bike! This one has huge wheels, and it looks with disdain at the other two with their tiny wheels! So all the different-sized bikes . . .

Paul acknowledges the turn and then continues with a plot-driven narrative that maps more of the bicycle parts onto his body (see figure 6):

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Figure 6. Paul’s bent bicycle spokes.
PS: Or, here’s a bike with a broken wheel, slowly spinning (the open fingers of one hand become bent spokes on the face as the wheel)—oh poor thing, poor bike. The story of what happened: It’s Christmas, and a child comes running down the stairs to see a big present (shaped like a bicycle—two wheels), and the present beckons to the child to come near it. She unwarps it—wow, a bike! “Come on! Put one foot here (L pedal) and the other here (R pedal).” Slowly the pedals start moving—uh oh! The bike hits his head on something—never mind, try again!

RC: (Laughs) Yes.

PS: Pedaling faster now, oh, really fast, the bike is getting out of breath, tongue out, panting with effort. Use the brakes! Brakes extend from handlebars out of bike’s ears. Brakes hard on now (two flat hands press tightly together in front of bike’s nose—as brake pads on wheel rim—bike is cross-eyed with the strain), but it’s too hard, and the child goes over the handlebars—that’s what happens!

RC: Or, to go even further back, to the factory where they made the bike . . . so here’s the first wheel, put in place, and here’s the second wheel, and then the frame is connected (becomes the bike), pained expression as the axle is fitted to the left and right hips for the wheels to be attached, then my body is lifted, rotated, and placed on the factory line, where my front forks are positioned and bolted on. Next the curved handlebars out to the sides from the back of my head . . .

Discussing, Reflecting on, and Giving Feedback on the Task at Hand

The end of the conversation offered the poets a chance to reflect on the shared thinking process and the task at hand:

RC: I feel when we’re here in this workshop environment, discussing ideas, it’s very different from standing on the stage and performing. On stage, I’m not actively thinking, how am I going to do this? I just switch to performance mode and improvise. But here we’re actually trying to think about that process, which is very different.

JW: Yes, here we’re being given words and having to think on our feet. But if you went away and thought about how you would create a performance, that would be very different. Being given
a word here forces you to think on the spot. And that’s very different. When you’re working creatively on your own, that’s very different from here, being given a word and trying to think out loud how you would do it. . . . I think it’s a bit like dipping a cup in the ocean. There are a thousand ways to do this. So maybe the first time, no good, throw the water away, fill up again. The waters will slowly recede, but there are plenty of choices about how to fill up your cup. Almost too many choices.

Concluding Thoughts

The conversation about shared thinking processes yielded a great deal of analysis, material, and information about technique, all within a supportive and fun environment. A great deal of what we saw that evening relied on the existing relationships among the poet-participants. In many ways, this was a leap of faith for all of us. Some poets are happier than others to be on display, to articulate their thoughts to others, to take risks, and to try out ideas in front of their peers. As researchers, we did not simply sit back in comfort and watch the show unfold. We remained mindful, critical, aware, and engaged throughout. We can only wonder where similar, one-to-one conversations between poet and researcher might have gone and what could be discovered and created in alternative research settings. However, we can say that, for the first time, we were able to glimpse some of a Deaf poet’s thoughts in the process of being creative in sign language. Most of the time this is an isolated process, an engagement between poet and image, analogy, event, observation, and emotion. It would be possible to interview poets one at a time and ask them what is going on inside their heads as they play with ideas. However, when we gave copies of the recording of their conversation to the poets, they reported how much fun it had been and how much they had enjoyed and learned from the experience. The collective process also permitted joint problem solving by creating a blend of mutual teaching and learning, both ad hoc and post hoc rationalizing (see van Someren, Barnard, and Sandberg 1994), narrative and linguistic development, and extension through improvisation and humor. None of this would have occurred if these poets had been working alone.
Some of the ideas first contemplated in Rachel’s living room emerged as fully fledged poems not two months later at the 2010 Bristol Sign Poetry Festival (see Richard Carter’s Mirror, and Paul Scott’s Two Books available within the anthology at www.bristol.ac.uk/bslpoetryanthology. As we were writing this article, the poets were making plans for the 2011 festival, at which they anticipated leading a sign-language poetry workshop for the next generation of Deaf poets, and we expect that they will make use of many of the insights we all shared after that night. We suggest, therefore, that shared thought processes not only reveal new insights into the moment of creativity but also allow for richer engagement with the problems of sign-language poetry. The result is new compositions and new knowledge to pass on to future Deaf poets.

Acknowledgments

With grateful thanks to Richard Carter, Paul Scott, Donna Williams, and John Wilson. We also thank Michiko Kaneko for her comments on an earlier draft of this article.

Notes

1. In BSL, OLD uses a clawed, V handshape drawn down the nose.
2. This refers to two-handed BSL fingerspelling. As the spider has eight legs, it can fingerspell with eight fingers.
3. See “Acronym,” a poem by Paul Scott, available for viewing under his name at www.bristol.ac.uk/bslpoetryanthology.

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ABSTRACTS

No Dummies: Deafness, Baseball, and American Culture
This article begins by examining the historical and social factors that led to 1901 being the “deafest” year in major league baseball history with four deaf players. In particular, the author discusses the career of William Ellsworth “Dummy” Hoy, a deaf man from Ohio who became the most celebrated deaf player in history and explores the reasons why he is not more celebrated in the mainstream culture.

Shared Thinking Processes with Four Deaf Poets: A Window on “the Creative” in “Creative Sign Language”
This article discusses a new way of thinking about analyzing sign-language poetry. Rather than merely focusing on the product, the method involves observing the process of its creation. Recent years have witnessed increasing literary and linguistic analysis of sign-language poetry, with commentaries on texts and performances being set within and drawing on a range of disciplines and analytical techniques. However, attention has so far been paid to the texts and performances rather than to the process of their creation. While working with four of the UK’s most prolific sign-language poets, exploring and trying to understand more about British Sign Language (BSL) poetry, we became increasingly interested in the creative processes that occur and emerge in the composition itself. We decided to give them a task related to creative anthropomorphism and asked them to think “out loud” about the process as they created their compositions.

We took our lead from think-aloud protocols, which have been used extensively in studies of cognitive processes and knowledge acquisition to understand how we solve problems (van Someren, Barnard, and Sandberg 1994; Tirkkonen-Condit and Jääskeläinen 2000; Stone 2009). We invited the poets to reflect upon and share with each other how they tackle a particular challenging aspect that
is often incorporated in sign-language poems. This shared thinking process enabled them to explore anthropomorphic concepts together and jointly to create poetic examples, while also giving us insight into the processes of task completion (rather than only its final product).

ASL Discourse Strategies: Chaining and Connecting: Explaining across Audiences

This study takes advantage of a novel methodology—the use of a single culturally-meaningful text written in English and presented to different audiences in ASL—to examine the ways in which Deaf native signers utilize contextualization strategies in order to match the perceived linguistic and informational needs of an audience. We demonstrate, through close examination of the ASL text in comparison with the English source text, that signers use contextualization techniques (Gumper, 1982), which are discourse strategies that support the construction of meaning. We suggest that two strategies for supporting communication in ASL could be labeled contextualization cues: chaining (Humphries and MacDougall 1999/2000) and what we refer to as connecting-explaining. Both contextualization strategies appear throughout all of the ASL texts, though connecting-explaining is much more prevalent; it appears, on average, once every ten seconds with most audiences. This study of contextualization contributes to our knowledge of ASL discourse strategies and has implications for various professionals, including educators of Deaf children, signed-language linguists, signed-language interpreters, and interpreting educators.

Dictionaries of African Sign Languages: An Overview

This article gives an overview of dictionaries of African sign languages that have been published to date most of which have not been widely distributed. After an introduction into the field of sign language lexicography and a discussion of some of the obstacles that authors of sign language dictionaries face in general, I will show problems related to sign language dictionary making in Africa in particular. In the main part of this article I show who produced these dictionaries, why and for whom they were produced, how data was collected, and I compare their content and their structures.