THE NATURE OF A LINE IN ASL POETRY

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1. Introduction

Since the late 1970's an increasing number of original American Sign Language (ASL) poems have been recognized, but there has been no definition of the nature of this poetry. A basic difficulty in the effort to interpret ASL poetry and its elements has been the identification of a line. This paper presents the results of an in-depth study of the nature of a line in ASL poetry in terms of poetic and linguistic analyzes.

In 1960, William Stokoe published the first analysis of the structure of ASL (Stokoe, 1960), the language which is used by North American deaf people as their medium of daily conversation. Since that time, numerous linguists including Supalla (1976), Battison (1978), Padden (1978), Liddell (1984), have provided many intriguing findings about ASL and its structure and have drawn interesting parallels between spoken language structure and sign language structure. Each was influenced by Stokoe's basic idea that ASL is a language in which visible movement of hands and body in sign production fulfill the same communication function as the audible movement of mouth and tongue in speech production. Contributions to knowledge of the structure of ASL have made possible the linguistic analysis presented here. Since ASL has no orthography, use of videotape and detailed sign notations have provided the means, not only for publication, but also for recording and analysing the poetry.

Although most deaf adults who sign have learned ASL as their first language from their deaf peers, none have received formal instruction in that language. Instead, they have struggled to obtain an education including an appreciation of art forms such as poetry, through use of a second language. Most children are 'turned off' by their exposure to poetry through English and classify this form of heightened expression, with music, as made of sound which they cannot enjoy through vision, and of minimal value.

2. Segmental notation: Hold – Movement

The system used in notation is based on the fundamental distinction between movement features and articulatory features. In the system being developed by Liddell (1984) and Liddell and Johnson (1985), signs are viewed as segmentable into movements (M) and holds (H). H is produced when there is no change occurring in any of the other major descriptive features of a segment. If the hand configuration or the location or the way in which the hand is oriented is changing, the segment is called a M. There are six minor movement features of the fingers or wrists that occur in either H or M segments and do not affect any of the major movement paths. For example, the fingers may be
wiggling during a H segment (e.g. COLOUR) or during a M segment (e.g. MANY-PEOPLE-CONVERGE-ON-A-PLACE). In addition, if a movement (M) occurs on a path, the contour of the path may be described. For example, the M in MUCH is an arc, the M in OPPOSITE has a straight contour, and the M in PHILADELPHIA has a 7 contour. For the purposes of discussing the nature of a line in ASL poetry, this study has been narrowed to these particular features: movement details, hand configuration, and nonmanual signals.

3. Citation forms, prose and poetry in ASL

Sign language researchers and teachers often make reference to the so-called 'citation form' of a sign or group of signs. The citation form is roughly analogous to the 'standard' form of a spoken language word, in contrast to a dialectal or stylistic variant. Transcription of a citation form of a sign is a straightforward process. Citation forms are most frequently elicited in response to, 'what is the sign for ___________?'. But citation forms are often quite different from those occurring in prose. Prose is what is 'uttered' naturally during discourse. ASL prose is the medium through which deaf people communicate daily with ease. Two contrasting examples of the sentence, 'I want to go to the store', in ASL citation forms, and from ASL prose, are shown in Figures 1 and 2, along with the basic segmental notation. Notice again, that I am only examining movement details, hand configuration, and nonmanual signals; many other details would also differ in the two forms. In describing ASL it is often necessary to write down what each hand is doing, so in the following notations the top line is the 'strong' hand (right for righthanded signers; left for lefthanders) and the bottom line is the 'weak' hand (left for righthanders; right for lefthanders).

The signs shown in Figure 1 are produced in isolation, independent from their surrounding phonological environment. Contrasted with prose signs, they are more laborious to construct in either expression or reception. Comparing the notation in Figure 1 with that in Figure 2 reveals significant differences. Use of only one hand to produce the utterance often occurs in spontaneous and rapid prose. Many segments are deleted. Signs in the sentence are subject to phonological conditioning in which a segment takes on the characteristics of a neighbouring segment. Note in Figure 1 the features in the first and the last segments of WANT: 5 and 5 (hooked) respectively. These features are mostly responsible for influencing neighbouring features in I-WANT and GO-TO-STORE in Figure 2. Also the last segment of GO-TO in Figure 1 reveals the feature, O (flat O) that is strong enough to absorb the neighbouring sign, STORE, in which its handshape shows only O. This is shown in Figure 2. The repetition of STORE is lost as it is attached to GO-TO. The segments are deleted as the strong segments of I take over WANT segments and the strong segments of GO-TO take over STORE segments. The non-manual behaviours are not included since both examples are shown as they could be produced neutrally.

Using the notation system to describe features shows the importance of understanding linguistic functions under various surrounding phonological environments like citation forms and prose. Which one could ASL poetry fit in? Are lines of ASL poems most accurately notated as 'prose' or as 'citation form'? Notation and the distinction between prose and citation form are needed for understanding how best to analyze lines of ASL
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poems. The same portions of the notation system that have been discussed with reference to everyday ASL conversation can be applied to ASL poetry, that is, Movement, Hand Configuration, and Nonmanual Signals. In this way, ASL poetry can be analyzed separately from prose forms and citation forms.

The use of the notation system clarifies the concept of a line in ASL poetry. Several lines from two ASL poems created by two deaf poets illustrate this. Two lines of each poem, 'SNOWFLAKE' by the author and 'CIRCLE OF LIFE' by Ella Mae Lentz are shown in notation below (Figures 3 and 4).

4. Rhyme and line division

Before discussing the features in Figure 3 and Figure 4, the term rhyme needs to be defined. Rhyme is defined as 'the repetition of the same or similar sounding movements, whether vowels, consonants, or combinations of these in two or more words or phrases' (Deutsch, 1969), and consists of alliteration and assonance.

Alliteration is the repetition of the same consonant sound in successive words in a line (Kennedy, 1978) -- a line from 'Atalanta in Calydon' by Algernon Charles Swinburne provides a good example:

The mother of months in meadow or plain

as does a line from 'a man who had fallen among thieves' by e.e. cummings:

citizens did graze at pause

Assonance occurs in the repetition of the same or similar vowel sounds at the beginning of successive words or within the words (Kennedy, 1978) as in a line from 'Virginia' by T.S. Eliot:

Slow flow heat in silence

In Figure 3 all hand configurations in both lines of SNOWFLAKE show similar open handshape (5) in both hands. The repetition of the same or similar hand configuration at the first H segment of the sign, or both first and last segment of the sign, or first, middle, and last H segments of successive signs in a line, appears to function in a similar way to alliteration in spoken poetry. I refer to it as handshape rhyme.

In Figure 4 all the movements except SUN are the same or similar, mostly in the strong hand and in both hands. In these lines, the movements occur as the repetition of the same or similar movement inside the successive signs, similar to assonance in spoken poetry. I refer to this as movement path rhyme. The lines in Figure 4 do not exemplify handshape rhyme as the hand configurations show some differences. Similarly, in Figure 3 movement path rhyme is not indicated as the movements show some variations. Thus, it would seem that SNOWFLAKE heavily exploits one rhyming device while CIRCLE OF LIFE exploits another.

Nonmanual signals (NMS) are another important factor to be included in a discussion of rhyme. Note the NMS in Figure 3 and Figure 4. Repetition of NMS occurs in an
orderly sequence in the lines of both poems, indicating their own rhymes. In Figure 3 at the beginning of the first line, eyebrow raise and pursed lips are indicated for the first two signs. The beginning of the third sign shows negation by headshake, and at the end of the line 'th' (tongue slightly protruding) is indicated. Eye gaze traces every sign. All the NMS are repeated in an identical sequence in the second line, expect for body shift. The body is oriented toward the right in the first line and then shifts to the centre when the second line is begun. This is called NMS rhyme. It is the same thing with Figure 4. In the first line eyebrow raise and eye gaze directed towards the addressee are used for the first sign, eye gaze follows the second sign, and then shifts back to the addressee during the last sign. This arrangement of NMS is repeated in the second line. In addition, the rightward orientation of the body remains the same in both lines.

Regarding the question of line divisions, a line division is identified by looking at rhyming patterns and finding their repetition. In Figure 3 note the movements in the last segments in both lines. They are similar, both go downward. The movement path rhyme functions as a line terminator. Similarly, in Figure 4, the handshape rhymes in both of the last segments represent another kind of line terminator. Also, the NMS in Figure 3 and Figure 4 in both last segments are similar, showing another sort of line terminator. This is called line division rhyme. In any last segment, hand configuration, movement, or NMS may involve repetition. That repetition verifies our earlier observation as to where the line could be broken. Thus, the function of rhyme in marking line divisions make it clear that it is poetry rather than prose, which does not display this kind of phenomenon. It begins to look very much like 'verse', which rhymes at the end of lines.

Four different kinds of rhymes are found in ASL poetry: handshape rhyme, movement path rhyme, NMS rhyme, and line division rhyme. They are not exact analogies to alliteration, assonance, and line termination because of structural differences between sign and speech.

5. Rhythm

Rhythm and line division in ASL poetry have been explained. I would like to add some information about rhythm as I have observed it in citation forms, prose, and poetry. Rhythm is metrical movement determined by various relations of long and short or accented and unaccented syllables, measured flow of words and phrases in poetry or prose (Fussell 1965, Lanz 1968, and Guggenheimer 1972). Stresses and pauses are part of rhythmic movement. Citation forms seem to show more stress and pause than prose or poetry, while prose seems to indicate less stress and pause than citation forms or poetry. Poetry seems to incorporate movements found both in citation forms and prose. I suggest that further study of rhythm in citation forms, prose and poetry is needed.

6. Conclusion

ASL poetry is videotaped and performed by a number of poets, but there is no definition of the nature of the poetry. With the help of linguistic analyzes of ASL and poetic analysis derived from the analysis of spoken language poetry, the results of an in-depth study.
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of the nature of a line in ASL poetry have been presented in this paper. Rhyme and line division have been focused on in this study since the identification of a line in an ASL poem is difficult to interpret. For sign language the eye has the power to identify the movement of visual signals. Visual movement depends on body movement which has structured, sequential components. Such components are each composed of a number of parts. This study focused on different features of a sign: hand configuration, movement, and nonmanual signals. Examining these features contributed to the identification of the nature of rhyme and line division in two ASL poems. I am certain that other ASL poems will exhibit a poetic structure that is equally rich and intriguing. The analysis of ASL literature, and of the language and traditions of deaf peoples is a promising and fruitful field of scholarship.
Figure 1  Citation Forms in ASL
Figure 1  Citation Forms in ASL

I-WANT

GO-TO-STORE

English Gloss
Segments (strong)
Movement
Hand configuration
Non-manual signals

Figure 2  Prose in ASL
Figure 3 Two lines in SNOWFLAKE
Figure 3 (continued)
English Gloss

TIME

H M H
T T

Segment (strong)
Movement

H M H
1 1

Hand configuration

H
B

Segment (weak)
Movement

H
B

Hand configuration

H M M H
A A A

Non-manual signals

brow raise
eye gaze at addressee
body facing right
eye gaze at signing
eye gaze at addressee

Figure 4  Two lines in CIRCLE OF LIFE

Line 1

Line 2
Hand configuration

Non-manual signals

brow raise
eye gaze at addressee
body facing right

Figure 4
Two lines in CIRCLE OF LIFE

English Gloss

SUN
FROM-SUNRISE TO-SUNSET
ETERNAL

Segments (strong)
Movement

Hand configuration

Segments (weak)
Movement

Hand configuration

Non-manual signals

brow raise
eye gaze at addressee
body facing right

eye gaze at signing

Figure 4 (continued)
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References


