Poetics of ASL Poetry

Clayton Valli
Gallaudet University

This presentation will be an introduction to the art of “reading” ASL poems. “Reading” consist of watching a videotaped poem in ASL. If a reader watches it closely, a poem usually makes rhythmic and poetic sense, and the other kind of sense we call “meaning” will come with increasing pleasure if the right approach is made. Visual movement plays a central role in the structure of ASL poems. It creates an ASL poem by giving it an object’s shapeliness and contributes to both pleasure and wisdom.

Rhyme is arranged in ASL poetry with various poetic features, such as succession of the same handshape or alternative handshapes, succession of movement contour path, succession of nonmanual signals, and so forth. We will discuss these particular features from the videotape on which 15 Deaf performers recited 21 poems. But for this presentation, only 10 poems were chosen to demonstrate particular poetic features. The chosen poems are RABBIT, COW & ROOSTER, FLASH, SOMETHING NOT RIGHT, At the Park, DEAF WORLD, HANDS FOLDED, MUSHROOM, Season’s Greetings, and PAWNS. (These poems are not shown here because they are on videotape. If you have the tape, you can look at each poem as I discuss or demonstrate a poetic feature.) Discussion of what creates meter and rhythm in ASL poetry will also be included.

Rhyme

The repetition of the same or similar features, whether handshapes, movements, nonmanual signals, locations, palm orientation, handedness, or a combination of these, occurs at determined and recognizable intervals. That is rhyme. There are many ways to use rhyme to create a poem. I will give you some ideas of how to identify each poetic feature. Now we will look at each of these in turn.

Handshape Rhyme

Now we focus on handshapes themselves. There are many kinds of handshapes used to create ASL poetry:

• Numeral Handshape

This art form shows a frozen poetic pattern using numeral handshape forms from 1 to any number to create a story or a poem. A good
example can be seen in RABBIT, which uses the numbers from 1 to 10 to tell about a rabbit. Small children love this kind of art!

- **Particular Handshape**
  You can notice a particular handshape (there are over 150 different handshapes in ASL!) such as an open hand that is repeated in a line, in lines, or in an entire poem. Or two different handshapes can be used for repetition in a line. Or these handshapes can be used alternatively. Or a few handshapes dominate in an entire poem. There are many more ideas of how to use this kind of feature. COW & ROOSTER is a good example for using only three different handshapes in the entire poem: 5-handshape, Y-handshape, and 3-handshape.

- **Worded Handshape**
  Signs are produced with particular fingerspelled handshapes representing an English word to tell a story or create a poem in ASL. A name, a place, or a thing are good examples of how words are incorporated in an art form. The same word can be repeated in each line with different fingerspelled signs in each line. Or the same word can also be produced backward. In FLASH, the word is repeated both forward and backward. Look for it.

- **Initialized Handshape**
  An initialized sign is produced using the handshape that reflects the first written letter of the English word for that sign. Using initialized signs, it is possible to create a poem or a story. SOMETHING NOT RIGHT uses that kind of feature. Each initialized letter in this poem is added up to form a sentence that tells you something behind the poem itself. It is quite tricky, but it is perfect for creating an indirect message that a reader has to figure out by reading between the "messages." There is both a direct message and an indirect message in that poem.

- **Alphabetical Handshape**
  This is similar to the numeral handshape rhyme, but the form begins with the sign representing the particular letter of the alphabet (from A to Z) to tell a story. Any story can be created, such as a mystery, a romance, or stories about car races, computers, or morgues. The signs themselves do not represent English words that begin with the particular letter of the alphabet but, rather, the story itself reflects the signer's knowledge of the written alphabet, as the signs in the story
must be produced in the proper alphabetic sequence. It can be backward from Z to A, and it is also possible to use both numeral handshapes, such as from 1 to 15, and alphabetical handshapes in an art form. This alphabetical handshape rhyme is well-known in the Deaf community and has been handed down for many years. It is excellent for young people to create their own stories or poems with this useful poetic feature.

- **Closed Handshape and Open Handshape**
  Some ASL poems have only one open handshape like 5-handshape, B-handshape, or with only one closed handshape like S-handshape, A-handshape. Some have both open and closed handshapes (some handshapes are either partly open or partly closed—L-handshape, Y-handshape, or 6-handshape) alternating in a line or lines similar to COW & ROOSTER’s Y-handshape and 3-handshape, or 5-handshape and 1-handshape in *Season’s Greetings*.

- **Double-Handshape**
  Using double-handshape signs (changing handshapes during the articulation of one sign) can be very practical for creating a poem. A double-handshape sign can start from a closed handshape and change to an open handshape such as USE-ASL (S-handshape to 5-handshape) or can start from an open handshape to a closed handshape such as GULP (5-handshape to S-handshape). Both of these can be used in a line or in an entire poem, alone or in alternation with each other.

Handshape rhyme is a main poetic feature, and it is amazing to see that one kind of rhyme can be used to create countless poems.

**Movement Rhyme**

Movement rhyme is the repetition of a similar movement of any sign in a line, or in lines, or in an entire poem. There are various kinds of movements as shown below:

- **Movement Contour**
  If a movement occurs on a path, the contour of the path may be described. For example, the movement path in CHILDREN is an arc, the movement in THINK has a straight path, and the movement in PHILADELPHIA has a “T” contour. There are more complicated movement contours as in ALWAYS; we call this doubled-arc. CENTER has both a doubled-arc and straight path. You can take
advantage of particular movement contours for creating this kind of rhyme in a poem. Look closely at *Hands Folded* that emphasizes arc and doubled-arc movement paths.

- **Movement Duration**
  The speed of signing can be controlled by using movement duration. It can be regular, slow, fast, accelerating (from slow to fast or reversed), or jerky. Creating another kind of rhyme is possible by using the repetition of a particular movement duration or combination of these movement durations. As for jerky movement, you can see that in *Season's Greetings*.

- **Movement Size**
  The size of movement path also can be controlled to create a different kind of movement rhyme by using enlarged path, reduced path, and/or regular path. For example, in *COW & ROOSTER*, in the sign COW or the sign ROOSTER, the repetition of movement can be reduced from twice to once in order to meet the rhythmic balance of a line or lines.

- **Hold Emphasis**
  The pause in between signs or in a sign can be measured by using a hold emphasis, so that there can be a long pause, a subtle pause, or a strong stop. Using particular hold emphasis is very powerful for controlling rhythm, much like silence pauses in music or spoken language poetry. Again in *COW & ROOSTER*, COW FAT LAY-DOWN or ROOSTER ELITE STAND-FIRM are good examples for using strong stops between these signs.

**Location Rhyme**

Some signs are made with reference to a location on the body (body locations), and some are made in the signing space (spatial locations). Using these locations helps determine repetition of body location, spatial locations, or combination of these and also helps identify hands that move between locations from high level to low level, vice versa, or in the same level.

- **Body Location**
  A poem can have only body location rhyme with no spatial locations at all. For example, head locations and chest locations can be used alternately in a line or lines.

- **Spatial Location**
  You can try only spatial locations with any contact on body in a line,
lines, or a poem in an effort to focus on this kind of rhyme. You can use a combination of both body location and spatial location to create another kind of rhyme.

- **Space Level**
  There is another kind of spatial location rhyme that determines hands moving between locations from high to low levels or reverse, from high to low and back to high or vice versa, or on the same level depending on the theme you intend to reveal. You can see this low to high space level rhyme on the right side in *Deaf World* to indicate the concept of growing up.

**Palm Orientation Rhyme**

Using palm orientation to create a rhyme is not easy, but it does happen. There are some different rotations: palm-up, palm-down, and palm-side up, and you can use one or more of these features to produce this kind of rhyme in a line, lines, or a poem.

- **Palm-Up, Palm-Down, and Palm-Side Up**
  There are some different ideas of how to use this particular palm orientation rhyme. Focusing on a particular feature, such as palm-up signs, is a big advantage, and you can create this palm-up rhyme in a line or lines by using all palm-up signs. The same can be accomplished with palm-down or palm-side up signs. Palm-up and palm-down features can be used alternatively in a line, lines, or a poem. This rhyme occurs in *At the Park*, using alternative palm-up and palm-down signs.

**Non-Manual Signal Rhyme**

Non-Manual Signals (NMS) as poetic features are important for breaking lines, functioning as grammatical signals, taking roles such as a narrator, and for personification. NMS include eye gaze, eyebrow movement, mouth movement (lips, tongue, and cheeks), head movement (nodding, shaking, tilting, shifting), and body shift. Particular NMS rhymes follow:

- **Eye Gaze**
  Eye gaze can be the factor in breaking a line and/or creating rhymes by using eye gaze shift or change in gaze direction.

- **Eye Gaze Shift**
  Eye gaze may function as a narrator in a line. Then, eye gaze can be shifted in the next line when the narrator mentions something else, such as another person (taking role) or a plant, an animal, or a thing.
(personification, representing characters as a person such as in COW & ROOSTER). If this particular eye gaze shift is repeated, its function can be taken advantage of as a rhyme. In some cases, it can be shifted in the middle of a line without breaking, depending on its content or meter (we will mention more about meter later).

• **Eye Gaze Direction**
Another kind of eye gaze function is that the specific eye level can be determined in every line in which eye gaze direction is indicated. It can be at audience level (eye contact with audience), lower level, or higher level. For example, left eye gaze direction may shift from audience level to higher level repeatedly.

• **Eyebrow Movement Rhyme**
Eyebrow movement has different functions in ASL prose, such as for yes/no questions, wh-questions, topicalization, conditional, relative clauses, taking roles, emotions, and so forth. Raised, squinted, or neutral eyebrows are the features you can pick to create rhyme.

• **Mouth Movement**
Mouth movement can function as an adverb or as one of the parameters (handshape, movement contour path, palm orientation, location, and non-manual signals) of a lexical sign. Closed lips, open lips, pursed lips, intense lips, tight lips, puffed cheeks, protruded tongue, and so forth are part of the mouth movement. You can see mouth movement rhyme in COW & ROOSTER, indicating its specific feature: puffed cheeks.

• **Head Shift Rhyme**
Head shifting often accompanies the eye gaze shifting, but not always. It can happen that both shifts are in opposite directions, for example, eye gaze to right side and head shift to left side. You can rely on the head shift (right, left, tilt, or neutral) for creating another kind of rhyme.

• **Body Shift**
In most ways, head shifts and body shift are related to the eye gaze function. However, in some cases body shift remains the same as the head and/or eye gaze turn or it can be reversed depending on its message. Adding rhyme by using this body shift is another possibility.
Handedness Rhyme

Handedness has to do with use of one hand, two hands, or combinations of these to create rhyme in a poem. It is something that produces a lot more possibilities in ASL compared to English or any spoken language that uses only the tongue to articulate sounds. One-handed signs can be used in a line, lines, or a poem. Or you can use two-handed signs, too. Or you can use them alternately. There is a good example of both one-handed and two-handed rhyme in Season’s Greetings. Using one hand represents a homeless person, and two hands are for merry, healthy people.

Other Poetic Elements

There are many more poetic elements in ASL poetry, but here are some elements to discuss:

- Symbols
  A symbol is anything that stands for a meaning that is vague. Here are some examples of symbols in MUSHROOM. “SUN” symbolizes truth or power. “PILES-OF-LOGS” is something that fuels energy. “MUSHROOM” is like a person who likes to take advantage of dark deceptions. Meaning is what we try to explicate: the whole impression of a poem on our mind, our emotions, and our bodies. We may not fully understand the meaning of a poem, but the only way to stretch and exercise our ability to read a poem is to try to understand and to describe our whole response.

- Metaphor
  A metaphor talks about one thing in terms of the meaning of another. Metaphors abound in poems, a lot more than they do in prose. Metaphors in poems often happen quickly, and often the readers are moved without knowing what has touched them. Unless they are explained, the audience may not even notice that the poet has used a metaphor. For example in MUSHROOM, a sign for the head of the mushroom growing is a clear metaphor. It can be interpreted as BIG-HEADED or BIGOTRY. Also, in PAWNS there are many metaphors you have to figure out because the poem itself is quite complicated with various rhymes and heavy meanings.

- Classifier Predicates
  In prose, a classifier predicate tends to be used after a subject. If the subject is not mentioned, the classifier predicate may be vague or misunderstood. Suppose you want to tell a bicycle story but don’t use the sign for this specific vehicle. You use the 3-classifier to describe
the action of the bicycle. Someone has to figure out which vehicle you are talking about. In ASL poetry, it can be used without a subject. However, you need various classifiers to reveal a particular meaning. In PAWNS, there are a lot of classifier predicates related to chess, two friends, and quilts, even though these subjects are not mentioned in the first place. Using classifier predicates without subjects in ASL poetry helps define it as distinct from ASL prose.

- **Taking A Role**
  You have to know who is revealing messages in a poem. The poet him/herself? Or the narrator? Or someone else? Taking a role is often very subtle, and you have to figure out which person the poet is becoming. Good examples can be seen in COW & ROOSTER, HANDS FOLDED, MUSHROOM, Season’s Greetings, and PAWNS.

- **Personification**
  Personification is similar to taking a role, but it is a figure of speech by which we humanize the nonhuman. A good example in MUSHROOM is that the poet becomes a mushroom with human characteristics. Also in RABBIT, the narrator becomes a rabbit.

- **Irony**
  Irony is a statement that differs from the actual attitude of the speaker or a situation that contrasts what is expected with what occurs. HANDS FOLDED has its irony at the very end, reflecting the poet’s habitual attitude. Another kind of irony related to a situation is indicated in PAWNS, especially at the very end.

- **Stanza**
  A stanza consists of lines of verse grouped to compose a pattern that is usually repeated in the poem. Its distinguishing features are the number of lines, the number of feet or stresses in each line, and the rhyme scheme. (We will discuss more on meter that relates to the number of lines, the number of feet or stresses in each line, and the rhyme scheme later.) One poem, PAWNS, is a good example of the use of stanzas. There are some stanzas in the poem, but we will focus on two stanzas because they can provide a clear understanding of these patterns in the stanzas by determining the number of lines and the number of feet or stresses in each line. These stanzas describe two persons. The first is about a guy who wears an earring, mustache, and a colorful skull cap and says that Death is beautiful. The other is
about another guy who wears purple Mohawk hair, mustache, and sleeveless shirt and says that Life is beautiful. Both parts share the same number of stresses in their two lines to create their own stanza.

Meter

Meter is a count of something we can see. Meter in ASL poetry is somewhat similar to that of English poetry. English is an accentual language, and poets take advantage of that to govern their works by using syllabic metrics in which meter is a count of something hearing people can hear. It counts relative loudness and softness of syllables, or more accurately a “weak-stress-strong-stress” recurrence. Unlike English, ASL is a modulatory language in which lexical signs consist of hold and movement segments in sequence that can produce syllabic metrics by using stress. Stress can be of three different kinds as shown below:

1. Hold Emphasis:
   - long pause
   - subtle pause
   - strong stop

2. Movement Emphasis:
   - alternating movement
   - repeated movement
   - reduced repetition

3. Movement Size:
   - regular movement path
   - enlarged movement path
   - shortened movement path

A particular sign can be changed by one of these stresses or combination of some stresses while producing poetry. It doesn’t indicate any accentual stress, but more likely a modified stress. Stress in English and in ASL are similar from the perspective of poetics because each provides contrasts between “heavy” and “light” syllables, which is the essence of meter.

I use an “o” to mark metric weak stresses and an “s” to mark metric strong stresses (the idea of using “o” and “s” is borrowed from the meter in English poetry to determine the feet of each line), and two successive lines from COW & ROOSTER (second and third lines of the entire poem) are picked to give an example of meter:

\[
\begin{array}{llll}
\text{t} & \text{COW,} & \text{FAT} & \text{LAID-DOWN} \\
\text{o} & \text{s} & \text{o} & \text{s}
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{llll}
\text{t} & \text{ROOSTER,} & \text{ELITE} & \text{STAND-FIRM} \\
\text{o} & \text{s} & \text{o} & \text{s}
\end{array}
\]
The form of COW is indicated by reducing its repetition from twice to once and is produced with only one syllable. It has a weak stress because the stress of its movement and hold has no change except its reduced repetition. The next one, FAT, is somewhat different when it is produced with an enlarged movement and strong hold syllable. Thus, it has a strong stress. The last one in this line, the form of LAID-DOWN, is produced with two different kinds of movement and two different kinds of holds, and also consists of two syllables. The first syllable is weak because the movement and hold are regular. The second one is strong because the movement is a long, strong arc movement, and the hold is sharp stop. It is repeated in the next line even though the meanings of the signs are not the same: ROOSTER (reduced repetition, regular movement, and hold), ELITE (its movement and hold show strong), and STAND-FIRM (consists of two syllables, first one indicating weak stress and the second one strong stress).

The unit of meter is measured by naming the number of feet in each line. Both of these lines are dimetric because each shows os os, two feet in a line. Also, all the feet are iambic. An iambic foot is a weaker syllable followed by a stronger one: os. Here are some examples of various metric stresses and unit of meter (feet) in a line found in ASL poems:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metric Stresses</th>
<th>Unit of Meter (feet) in a line</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iambic (os)</td>
<td>Dimeter (two metrical feet)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spondees (ss)</td>
<td>Trimeter (three metrical feet)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trochees (so)</td>
<td>Pentameter (five metrical feet)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is very easy to identify the movements and holds and count syllables in some signs. But some signs’ movements and holds and syllables are not easily identified. I am beginning to understand the concept of meter in ASL poetry, but we still need further study in that area.

Rhythm

Meter is not the same as rhythm. Meter has to do with counting. Rhythm implies an approximate recurrence in the pacing of motion. It can be fast, slow, staccato, or flowing. Also rhythm is arranged in ASL poetry with various poetic features such as rhymes (repetition of handshape, movement path, non-manual signals, location, and/or palm orientation), handedness, assimilation (particular signs blending together), choice of signs, change of a sign (at least one parameter is changed), creation of sign (creating a sign to fit other signs), movement emphasis, hold emphasis, movement size, and movement duration. From this combination comes much of the appeal of ASL poetry.
ASL Poetry and its Poetics and Techniques

There are many deep questions about ASL poetry and its poetics and techniques because we don’t have much information about sign language poetry. Unfortunately, in Deaf communities in the world, there are very, very few sign language poems, and their poetics have not been analyzed either. So far, in the United States, there are only a handful of articles concerning ASL poetry and its poetics.

What is ASL poetry? This question is hard to answer, as hard as answering the same question about spoken language poetry. I like Robert Frost’s simple saying: “Poetry begins in delight and ends in wisdom.” When ASL poetry is performed, often the audience delights in its beauty, its movement, its mastery, and its feeling. After the serious study of an ASL poem, people often find it vivid because of features in the poem that are different from what they use daily in prose. Beauty of phrase, intensity of motion, and ingeniousness of technique are poetry’s substance. Without a doubt, substance is the most important aspect of poetry. Like all the arts, poetry is a complex meshing of substance and manner, of thought and form, of argument and technique.

Once you understand the art of reading ASL poetry itself, you can go beyond and reach both pleasure and wisdom.