



A Linguistic Approach to British Sign Language Poetry

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Sign Language Literature

- It refers to poetry & prose composed and performed by Deaf people.
- It is NOT the translation from spoken language literature.
- It makes use of visual, spatial, and kinetic features, which makes it a very different art form from written language literature.

Background

- Rapid development of BSL (British Sign Language) poetry since 2005
- Increasing number of poets and their work
- Development of analytical frameworks
- Technological advances (greater availability of recorded materials for viewing, sharing and analysing – websites and YouTube)
- ‘BSL poetry anthology’ (University of Bristol, 2010-): a large collection of BSL poems, enabling both qualitative and quantitative approach

www.bristol.ac.uk/bslpoetryanthology

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Poems

All poems



Poems by Poets



Paul Scott



Richard Carter



Donna Williams



Johanna Mesch



John Wilson



Kabir Kapoor

en.5

Textualisation of sign language literature

- In Deaf communities stories and jokes have been “passed on through a face-to-face performance tradition” (Bauman, Nelson, and Rose 2006: 5) - bearing strong similarities to ‘oral’ literature.
- The notion of ‘text’ emerged with the spread of video technology in the 1970s (Rose 1992). We can now record, preserve, and analyse a signed text.
- The ‘post-video’ sign language literature has more ‘literary weight’ (Krentz 2006) and ‘increase in aesthetic play’ (Peters 2000).

Difficulties in analysing poetic sign language

- Simultaneous, as well as sequential
- High frequency of 'productive' signs
- Each sign is visually explicit, but its reference can be ambiguous/underspecified
- Difficult to segment into discrete units that correspond to 'words', 'lines' and 'stanzas'.
- Symbolic interpretation mostly takes place at sublexical level (not lexical).
- Poetic context is important.

Different approaches

- early formal approach (Valli 1990, 1993)
- cinematographic approach (Bauman 2006)
- performative approach (Peters 2000, Rose 2006)
- thematic approach (Ormsby 1995, Sutton-Spence and Müller de Quadros 2006)

Linguistic approach

- Sign language literature is fundamentally *a linguistic art* (different from pantomime).
- Although they may not be directly applicable, established terms and theories in linguistics/literary criticism can contribute to the methodical analysis of BSL literature.
- These theories are specially useful in describing styles and genres within BSL literature.

Phonetics

- Detailed annotation of sublexical features developed by Johnson and Liddell (ongoing)
- Following their model, we can analyse a piece of poetic signing without having to segment it into distinct lexical signs.
- ELAN - allows you to see different aspects of the formal structure of the poem in one window.

Patterning

- Repetition of signs
- Repetition of parameters (handshape, location, movement)
- Repetition of motifs (light and darkness, natural materials)

Conceptual Metaphor

- Theory of conceptual metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) provides a solid foundation for the symbolic interpretations of a signed poem as it regards metaphor as our fundamental cognitive operation, applicable to any mode of representation (spoken, written, signed).

CMs in Macbeth

- LIFE IS A JOURNEY
- KNOWING IS SEEING (SEARCH FOR KNOWLEDGE IS SEARCH FOR A LIGHT)
- KNOWLEDGE IS AN OBJECT
- GOOD IS UP, BAD IS DOWN



Blending



- Theories of conceptual blending (developed by Mark Turner and Gilles Fauconnier, applied to sign languages by Scott Liddell) helps explain apparently bizarre phenomena which only make sense in sign language literature.
- Simultaneous blending of multiple narrative spaces on the 'real' space, resulting in 'body partitioning' (Wulf and Dudis 2005)
- Signers act across different spaces (a metalinguistic play on blending)
- Blending on the body (and the face) of the signer promotes personification in sign language literature.

Application to other poems



Conclusion

- Linguistic analysis generated detailed understanding of the form and theme of the poem.
- It highlights the systematic elements that help us appreciate the overall poetic meaning and intention.