Signs in BSL – Established or Productive?

Native versus Non-native Signs

We can often say the signs in a sign language are “native” or “non-native”. Non-native signs have come from other languages and in BSL this means especially English (mostly through fingerspelling) although there is some influence from other sign languages such as American Sign Language (ASL) or French Sign Language (LSF).

Borrowing from English includes:
1) Full fingerspelling
2) Borrowing of the initial letter of English words to signs (often with additional movement)
   - MOTHER, FAMILY, ENGLISH, YEAR, RECOMMEND
3) Abbreviations - B-S-L, N-Z (New Zealand)

In the poems in this anthology, there is not much use of fingerspelling, although we do see some examples (for example Donna Williams fingerspells D-L-A to refer to Disability Living Allowance in her poem *On that Day* and Paul Scott fingerspells P-E-A-R-L in *Three Queens*)

Native signs are part of BSL and have developed within BSL.

Different types of native BSL signs

1. Established (or “frozen” “core”) signs
2. Productive (or “classifier”) signs
3. Indexical (or “pointing”) signs

BSL does not have many of the ‘grammar words’ that we see in English, though, because timing, space and movement are more likely to do the job of those English grammar words.

Established signs

Established (“frozen” “core”) signs are established and recognised as the language's vocabulary. They are called “frozen” signs because their form and meaning are not easily changed (because of this they are often called “fixed” signs). They are also the “core signs” because they are at the heart of the language. Established signs can normally be found in the dictionary. They are often less strongly visually-motivated compared to productive signs.

Established signs refer to general ideas of a concept, rather than a specific example of that concept. Signs such as DOG, CHAIR or PARK could refer to dogs, chairs and parks of all sorts of sizes and appearances, but tell us clearly what the basic concept is. Signs like RUN and JUMP tell us the most basic information about an activity but tell
us nothing about who or what ran or jumped, nor where it happened, nor the way in which it happened. Productive signs do not identify the general concept but do tell us much more about what the individual looks like (for example, we may see that some animal is large and woolly and has floppy ears, but we don’t know for sure that it is a dog, or we know that something is long and narrow but not know it is a park) or how and where the action occurred.

In this aspect, we might say that established signs refer to more “abstract” concepts whereas productive signs are more “concrete”.

Established signs have a smaller range of permitted handshapes, locations and movements and these are usually “expected” in the language. The signs often have “English” mouth patterns (mouthings).

**Productive signs**

Productive signs (also known as "classifier signs") can be used at any time to create entirely new signs to describe the appearance, movements and locations of objects. A signer might use them to show the object on their hands (sometimes called a “transfer of situation”), or they might take on the role of a person or thing so that they become it (sometimes called a “transfer of person”).

Because BSL is a visual language, signers often want to produce clear visual descriptions of referents. This is especially important for poetry so we often see a lot of productive signing in poems.

For each productive sign (like any sign) the handshape that tells us something about object (often about its shape), and movements, locations and orientations of the hands tell us more about the object’s appearance or else its path or location in space.

They can have almost any physically possible handshapes, locations and movements, and poets often make the most of these opportunities to show variations.

The mouth patterns with these signs often have no relation to English.

Handshapes used in productive signs sometimes called “classifiers”

There are many different ways of talking about classifiers and productive signs but in our commentaries on the poems in the anthology we use these terms

*Handling classifiers*: These show how we use things (done by “acting things out”) and are often used during “transfer of person”, when the signer becomes another character. Although we focus on the hand, often the signer’s whole body represents the whole of the character, including its face, eyes and body.

- **Holding classifiers**: how we manipulate the referent e.g. HOLD-A-NEEDLE, HOLD-A-SPOON, HOLD-A-SCREWDRIVER
**Instrumental classifiers**: showing a physical feature of the object being manipulated (such as the needle, the spoon or the screwdriver). This overlaps with entity classifiers (below)

**Touching classifiers**: eg stroking a cat or horse’s nose or tickling its neck

**Entity classifiers**: These use the whole hand to “become” the referent. They can stand for a category of objects and reflect something to do with the shape of the object, or part of the object. This is often for the “transfer of situation” and usually we just need to focus on the hands for the meaning.

**Whole-entity classifiers** – They show how the whole object moves or where it is e.g. Index finger for long thin things (people or animals?), bent index and middle fingers (for things with legs) a flat hand for flat things (cars, leaves, boards), closed fist for spherical things (balls, heads, rocks) a clawed open hand for solid things (more rocks, cakes, apples), pinched index finger and thumb for small round things (buttons or coins) and fist with thumb and little finger extended for things with “pointy bits” (animal’s head, aeroplane, telephone).

For example CAR-MOVES, PERSON-MOVES

**Body-part classifiers** – they show the motion of the object (often a person or an animal) by showing how some part of the thing (or animal) moves e.g. EARS-TWITCHING, DUCK-FEET-WALKING

**Collective classifiers** – for large groups or liquids or gas eg the fluttering open hand for a large crowd of people or birds

**Extent classifiers** – how much water is in a bucket or its height in a flood, or how high a pile of papers is, or metaphorically how long a period of time is

**Size and shape specifiers (SASS)**: they sketch out the outline of the shape and size of the object to tell us more information about the object. Although the hands move to make these signs, there is no suggestion that the object is moving.

**Surface classifiers** – to show if the surface is flat or wide – eg ROLLING-MOUNTAINS

**Depth and width** – e.g. a thick tree trunk or a thin tree trunk- e.g. - LARGE-BOX, THIN-TIE

**Perimeter shape** – showing the external outline of the object e.g. frame of a mirror

For more information on these different types of signs, you can look at:
