Eyegaze in Creative Sign Language

Michiko Kaneko
Researcher in Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol
35 Berkeley Square, Bristol, BS8 1JA, United Kingdom
Michiko.Kaneko@bristol.ac.uk

Johanna Mesch (Department of Linguistics, Stockholm University)
Lecturer in Department of Sign Language, Stockholm University
106 91 Stockholm, Sweden
johanna.mesch@ling.su.se
1. Introduction

This paper discusses the role of eyegaze in creative sign language. Eyegaze conveys various types of linguistic and poetic information. It is an intrinsic part of the linguistics of sign languages in general, and in creative signing in particular.

Creative sign language is the use of sign language for artistic purposes. It is different from everyday signing in that the form of the language, as well as its content, is foregrounded and becomes crucial in understanding of the overall message. In other words, how you say something is as significant as what you say. Eyegaze plays a crucial role in this presentational aspect of sign language poetry, while manual signing builds up the basic storyline of a poem. The same content of the poem can be delivered in completely different ways depending on a subtle difference in the performer’s gaze behaviours. In this sense, eyegaze is where “text and performance overlap” (Sutton-Spence 2005: 136).

In this paper, we will highlight the ways in which eyegaze contributes to the delivery of sign language poetry. The first half of the paper will discuss different functions of eyegaze in general. In the second half, we propose a possible categorisation of gaze patterns in creative signing.

We mainly draw on two recent collections of poems in British Sign Language (BSL) and Swedish Sign Language (SSL). The anthology of BSL poetry has been created as part of the research project on metaphor in creative sign language at the University of Bristol, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), and is available online at www.bristol.ac.uk/bslpoetryanthology. The SSL poems are available in DVD titled “Tio teckensprakskonstnarer (Ten sign language artists)”2. The poems by Dorothy Miles and Wim Emmerik are available through the webpage of the ECHO project (European Cultural Heritage Online, http://www.let.kun.nl/sign-lang/echo/). The BSL haiku poems in Figure 27 and 28 can be found at http://www.bslhaiku.co.uk/. All poems are composed and performed by Deaf people3. Note that although we build on poems from different sign languages, this is not a cross-linguistics paper. It is not our aim to compare poems in BSL and SSL.

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1 We use the word ‘poem’ or ‘poetry’ to refer to both poems and stories because it is difficult (and ultimately unhelpful) to draw a line between poetry and prose in sign language.
2 Part of the project funded by Kulturrådet (Swedish Culture Council). The DVD is available for purchase at http://www.sdrf.se/shop
3 Sometimes several renditions exist for the same poem, and the version used in this paper may be different from the one available online.
2. General Functions of Eyegaze

Eyegaze is an indispensable part of the linguistics of sign languages. As Bahan and Supalla (1995: 179) point out, the gaze behaviours in sign languages are “linguistic in nature”. Space doesn’t permit us to explore the linguistic aspects of eyegaze in detail, but for example, Sutton-Spence and Woll (1999) list six different linguistic functions of eyegaze in BSL:

1. to mark a lexical contrast (such as BOSS and GOD which are minimal pairs that only differ in the direction of eyegaze)
2. to point at a referent or trace its movement
3. to indicate a role shift
4. to distinguish genuine questions from pseudo-questions
5. to indicate turn taking in dialogues
6. to convey temporal information (i.e. when signers talk about past events, they tend to look sideways, while straight or downward gaze indicates present and upward gaze indicates future.)

Among these six functions, pointing and tracing referents, role shift, turn taking, temporal information, are highly relevant to poetic signing.

Apart from these linguistic functions, eyegaze has additional functions which are unique to artistic signing. In what follows, we will discuss some of the key functions of eyegaze in sign language poetry.

2.1. Show how the poet is involved in the poem

First of all, eyegaze reveals different ways in which poets are involved in their signing. For example, the poets often look straight into the audience, acknowledging their presence. In this case, the poets exist outside of the story, which allows them to ‘explain’ or ‘comment’ on their own creative work. In contrast, the poet’s eyes can be understood to be those of a character within the poem. In this case the poet is no longer addressing the audience and is immersed completely within the story world. The poets can also cast a glance at their hands or various points in the signing space, in which cases their gaze becomes an instrument to ‘spotlight’ particular signs or locations. Figure 1 shows different gaze behaviours of the same BSL poet (Richard Carter), each producing a different impression from the others: a) gaze to the audience; b) gaze of a personified caterpillar coming out of an apple; c) gaze cast upon his hand.
The degree and the types of involvement vary depending on the style of individual poets. Some poets keep eye contact with the audience throughout the performance, while others prefer not to. It also depends on the type of the poems. In case of narrative-based poems, the poet often takes a subjective perspective (either as a narrator or as a character) through eyegaze. In more ‘artistic’ poems (like some of the signed haiku which aims at brevity and objectivity), personal and emotional investment of the poet is reduced and the gaze is simply used to highlight manual signs (Kaneko 2008). It also depends on the situation of performance. Krentz (2006) points out that whether they are signing to a live audience or to the camera influences the gaze behaviour of the performers.

2.2. Highlight and reinforce manual signs

One of the central issues in discussing gaze behaviours is its relationship to manual signs. Eyegaze can be dependent on or independent from manual signs. When it is dependent, it is cast upon the hands and follows their path. A particular sign or a sequence of signs is produced by the hands and reinforced by the gaze following them. As Sutton-Spence (2005) points out, such use of eyegaze is frequently deviant and is not commonly found in everyday signing. In everyday conversation, signers mostly look at their interlocutors. In artistic signing, gaze on hands can be found much more frequently. It is used to highlight the configuration of the sign and set “poetic expression on display” (Ormsby 1995: 240).

For example, in Juli af Klintberg’s *Mitt* (“My”), there is a sequence in which the poet outlines a hill ridge and then depicts an arc of arrows shot across the hill (Figure 2). Both actions are repeated several times (suggesting a range of hills and several shots of arrows). Each time the poet’s gaze
follows the movement of her hands, highlighting and emphasising the shape of the hills and the path of arrows.

Figure 2 Gaze following the signs HILL and ARROW in Juli af Klintberg’s Mitt

2.3. Provide additional information to complement manual signs

Eyegaze can support manual signs by providing different but complementary information to what hands are doing. Instead of following and highlighting the manual signs, the gaze takes a different angle to illustrate the same event. For example, in Paul Scott’s Too Busy to See, No Time to Hug, the poet illustrates a high mountain. Whereas his hands provide the outline of the mountain (similar to the example of HILL above), his gaze is fixed at an upper area, which corresponds to the summit of the mountain (Figure 3). Manual signs alone can describe the mountain, but the poet uses his gaze to emphasise the height of the mountain in a different way. Such gaze behaviours can also add stability to the delivery of a poetic scene. The hands are very transient as they need to make continuous movements to keep the story running. Eyegaze, while it is often momentary too, can also be fixed in a certain location for a much longer span of time than manual signs. It complements manual signs by retaining the most salient part of the information throughout the duration of corresponding hand movements. This can be seen as a “pegging” function of eyegaze.
2.4. Reflect on manual signs

The poets sometimes look at their hands as if to question what they are signing. Manual signs convey the basic story line of the poem, so by looking at their hands they are critically analysing what is happening in the poem, and/or highlighting the particular way a sign is produced.

In Donna Williams’ *Who Am I?*, the poet is labelled as “hearing impaired” by the mainstream hearing community. After the poet signs HEARING IMPAIRED with a straight frontal gaze (Figure 4 a), she repeats the sign IMPAIRED while looking at her hands (Figure 4 b). By doing this, she highlights the configuration of the sign and the negative impact it has upon the viewer (recalling the act of ‘crushing’ or ‘smashing’ something). The form of the sign is identical to the sign DAMAGED, and the poet actually mouth-patterns ‘damaged’ while signing it for the second time, as if to question “What do you mean by I’m ‘damaged’?”.

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Figure 3: Gaze pattern in Paul Scott’s *Too Busy to See, No Time to Hug*

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Figure 4: Different gaze behaviours in Donna Williams’ *Who Am I?*
2.5. Guide the audience smoothly during transition between signs

Unlike spontaneous signing, signed poems often have structured pauses and transitions. Eyegaze contributes to a smooth transition by ‘filling the gap’ caused by the halt of manual signs. The gaze during the pause can be used to reflect on the development of the story so far and link it to the next scene.
Donna Williams’ *Who Am I?*, which we have just discussed, illustrates the process in which the poet questions and examines her mixed identity. At one point, she ‘takes out’ her attributes from inside her (different aspects of identity, such as hearing, Deaf, woman and gay, are metaphorically understood as tangible objects) and lay them out one by one in front of her (Figure 5 a). Then she takes a pause and looks at her attributes (Figure 5 b and c). It is during this pause that the poet begins to accept and embrace her complex identity. It does not involve any manual sign but the gaze (and the reassuring nods) manages the transition smoothly.

John Wilson’s *Winter* is a brief haiku poem that illustrates a contrast of seasons. In the first half of the poem, the poet describes a picture of summer hung on the wall on the right side of the poet. The poet carries on looking at the picture even after he finished signing. This prolonged gaze marks the end of the first part. Then his gaze slowly moves from right to left, ushering the audience to the next scene where he signs *SNOWFLAKE*, which represents winter, the real season of the poem. Eyegaze during this transition reflects on the previous sequence and foretells the next scene, while connecting the right and left spaces, summer and winter, and the picture and the reality.
2.6. Extend the poetic scene beyond the signing space

The articulators of sign language (hands, face, body) cannot leave the body to reach out for something located remotely. It is not very common, at least in the tradition of BSL and SSL poetry, for the poet to move around on the stage. Their feet are usually nailed to the ground and the poem is delivered within the normal signing space.

Eyegaze is one of the very few ways to physically refer to remote referents without creating ‘visual noise’ which, by moving and extending other body parts, would have been a problem. Gaze direction can extend the poetic scene by looking away from the immediate surrounding. This helps to layout a broad and open space in front of the poet. For example, the poet is illustrating a range of hills in Figure 7 a) but her gaze is cast beyond the manual signs to add depth in the sketch. Figure 7 b) describes the moment when the protagonists come out of a thick forest to an open area at the foot of the mountain. A broad view spreads itself in front of them, which is expressed through the far-reaching gaze of the poet.

Figure 7: Examples of extensive gaze
The far-reaching gaze is often used at the end of the poem for a prolonged poetic effect. Johanna Mesch’s *Aeroplane* illustrates the crash of a plane. At the end of the poem, the soul of the crashed aeroplane is called up to the heaven. During this sequence, the gaze first follows the hand (which represents the plane) as it moves upward, but the poet keeps looking upward even after her hand stops moving (Figure 8). This provides a solemn lingering effect, as the audience continues to “see” the plane’s ascend as the poem closes.

2.7. Refer to invisible referents

Because most referents do not exist in the immediate physical surroundings, they need to be made visible by the poet. They can be represented by manual signs, but they can also be introduced by the poet’s eyes directed at them. In other words, eyegaze confirms the presence of invisible referents. Such referents can be identified by the context (either preceding or following), or sometimes remains unspecified and left to the interpretation of the viewer.

In Paul Scott’s *Tree*, the presence of the tree is often expressed solely by eyegaze. Various people and animals pass by the tree and they look up to their left where the tree is understood to exist (except for the blind person who, for obvious reason, does not ‘see’ the tree but ‘touches’ it instead). The reference to the tree has already been established in the story, so the audience would know that characters are looking at the tree. Figure 9 shows a man who finds the tree and is overwhelmed by how tall it has grown. His gaze not only informs you of the presence and location of the tree, but also of its height, as the poet traces the invisible tree up and down several times.
The target of the gaze can remain unspecified. In Paul Scott’s haiku poem *Old Age*, the poet portrays an old man with his walking stick, who suddenly looks up in horror to his right (Figure 10). It is not clear what exactly he sees there. It can be interpreted as ‘Death’ approaching the old man as he tries to refuse its coming, but the interpretation is open to other possibilities.

In some cases, eyegaze can even develop the story by itself without accompanied by manual signs. Paul Scott’s *Too Busy to Hug, No Time to See* is a story about personified Mountain and Sea. Towards the end of the story, the Mountain looks to his left and realises that the sun is setting, and makes a face because it means it will get dark and cold. Then he looks down to get the Sea’s attention and jerks his gaze towards the direction of the sun as if to say “Hey, look!” (Figure 11).
All of this is done non-manually. Especially the gaze direction conveys the crucial information about this scene.

Figure 11: A non-manual sequence from Paul Scott’s *Too Busy to Hug, No Time to See*

Another notable example of the gaze developing the story by itself can be found in John Wilson’s haiku poem *Lift*. Almost the entire poem is told through the eyes of the personified lift eager to take on passengers but disappointed as no one wants to use it (Figure 12). Manual signs are present (representing the doors of the lift), but they remain inactive throughout most part of the poem. The expectant gaze of the lift, together with its lively facial expressions, provide enormous amount of affective information and humorous effect to this poem.

Figure 12: A non-manual sequence from John Wilson’s *Lift*

2.9. Add metaphorical values to the poem

Eyegaze is often involved with metaphorical interpretation of the theme of the poem. First of all, direction of the gaze can function as orientational metaphor, in which our values are conceptualised through spatial orientation, such as ‘up’ is often associated with positive concepts (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Johanna Mesch’s *Aeroplane* (see 2.6) leaves a positive aftertaste despite of the sad incident of a plane crash, due to the poet’s upward gaze at the end.
Gaze direction also shows power relationship. Deaf people as a cultural/linguistic minority group often need to look ‘up’ to the mainstream hearing people. In sign language poetry, eyegaze is symbolically used to refer to such situations. For example, in Donna William’s *That Day*, a patronising hearing person looks ‘down’ at the Deaf poet, and the poet looks ‘up’ as she returns a sarcastic smile to the hearing person (Figure 13). Ormsby (1995) and Bauman (2003) report similar use of gaze symbolism in American Sign Language poetry.

![Figure 13 The gaze of the patronising hearing person (left) and the poet returning her gaze (right) in Donna Williams’ *That Day*](image)

Finally, the act of looking itself has a power to metaphorically change the meaning of a manual sign. Often the gaze is used to turn abstract or intangible concepts into visible and tangible objects. For example, Dorothy Miles’ *Evening (Trio)*, contains a simile “Darkness, like a bat, flies close”. This is a sophisticated association because the signs for *DARKNESS* and *BAT* are not only conceptually but also formally connected (their configurations are similar). What triggers this simile, however, is a shift in gaze pattern. While the poet signs *DARKNESS*, she does not look at her hands (Figure 14 a). Then she casts her eyes upon her hands, which ‘turns’ the darkness into a bat without changing the configuration of the hands (Figure 14 b). The gaze makes the hands ‘visible’ and instantiates a metaphorical transformation.
3. Classification of gaze patterns

In this section, we attempt to categorise gaze behaviours based on what we have discussed so far and some other criteria. There have been attempts since 1990s to look into different gaze patterns in creative signing. Bahan and Supalla (1995) and Engberg-Pedersen (1999) investigated the patterns of eyegaze in sign language narratives, based on the direction and function of the gaze. They came up with similar classifications:

**Bahan and Supalla (1995)**
1) Gaze to audience
2) Character’s Gaze
3) Gaze at hands

**Engberg-Pedersen (1999)**
1) Sender’s eye contact with the receiver (=1 above)
2) Imitative eye gaze (=2 above)
3) Configurational eye gaze (= 3 above)
4) Sender’s reference-tracking eye gaze

Both classifications distinguish gaze according to its direction (if the gaze is cast toward the audience (1) or on hands (3)) and the role/function of the poet (if the poet is taking a particular
character’s viewpoint (2) or not). Engberg-Pedersen adds one more type (4), in which the poet casts a glance at a certain place to refer to something.

These two categorisations are relatively simple, and work adequately with narratives. However, gaze behaviour in poetry is more complex and needs more detailed categorisation. This is mainly because in narratives and dialogues the primary purpose is communication. Thus signers constantly look at the audience or enact certain characters to keep the attention of the audience and make the story easy to follow. In poetry, however, the main purpose of signing is aesthetic pleasure - i.e. the sheer enjoyment of linguistic beauty. Communicative intent is reduced, resulting in a wider variation of gaze patterns. No single criterion is capable of explaining such complex gaze patterns.

We consider following seven criteria in order to classify the gaze patterns in sign language poetry.

1) Direction of the gaze

The first criterion is the direction of the gaze. This essentially distinguishes:
- gaze to the audience (or camera)
- gaze on hands (including the gaze that precedes or follows the hands)
- gaze on specified/unspecified referents
- gaze at a point in the signing space

2) Role of the poet

The poet can take on different roles and eyegaze is used to clarify which role he or she is in at a particular moment. The poet can be in the role of:
- a narrator
- a character
- an observer
- a poetic tool

3) Function of the gaze

As already discussed in previous section, eyegaze fulfills various different functions. It can
- explain or comment on the story
- directly show the story world through the character’s eyes
- highlight particular signs
- reflect on particular signs
- foretell the upcoming sequence

4) Extra- or intradiegesis (whether the gaze is internal or external to the story)

Another important criterion is if the gaze is extradiegetic or intradiegetic. The notion of ‘diegesis’ is used to explain whether something is happening within the story world or not (Prince 2003). It is originally developed in an attempt to account for the use of music in film. When a character in the film is playing an instrument or listening to the music, the music is ‘intradiegetic (i.e. part of the story)’; when the music is added at the time of editing for the sake of creating effect, and thus the characters cannot hear it, it is understood as ‘extradiegetic’. In a similar way, the gaze of the poet is intradiegetic when it takes place within the story (such as a character looking at something). When the poet comes out of the story by mainly acknowledging the audience, it is extradiegetic.

5) Display of Personality

Whether the gaze reveals any personality - that is, whether it involves any personal, emotional and subjective viewpoint of a volitional being - is another way to look at gaze patterns. The same gaze can be interpreted differently depending on whether it involves emotion and intention of the looker or the gaze is simply used as an articulator to fulfill some linguistic functions such as agreement marking. The eyes are understood to be the eyes of someone in the former case (usually with facial expressions), whereas in the latter case the act of seeing itself is no longer significant.

6) Relation to manual signs

As pointed out earlier, the relation between the gaze and the hands is crucial in understanding gaze behaviours. The gaze can be independent or dependent on manual signs, it can follow or precede them, it supports or reacts to what the hands are doing.
7) Omniscience of the poet

It goes without saying that the poet in the real world knows what they are doing. They are the maker of their fictional world and thus are supposed to have an omniscient power over the development of the story, its characters, how it ends, and so on. However, they can also feign ignorance and pretend that they don’t know anything about it. Eyegaze can reveal if the poet is omniscient or ignorant. If the gaze is omniscient, the gaze can precede manual signs and/or foretell what is going to happen next. When the gaze is ignorant, it normally follows and reacts to manual signs.

Considering different aspects of gaze features explained above, we propose the following six categories.

3.1. Gaze to the audience

Gaze to the audience is the gaze directed toward either a live audience or an imagined audience through the camera. Dorothy Miles emphasised the importance of maintaining eye contact with the audience. She wrote:

Do not become so engrossed in your images that you ignore the audience. Glance at the audience from time to time to emphasize an image or event, to indicate a pause or change of image, and especially to convey an emotion or ask a question, or make a direct statement.


By looking at the audience, the poet can create intimacy with the audience, and blur the boundary between the fiction and the reality to make the narrative more familiar or convincing. They can also check, in case of a live audience, if the audience is understanding what they are saying and adjust if necessary. This happens in less-structured, more casual story-based poems.

In this type of gaze, the poet functions as a narrator. As Bahan and Supalla (1995) stated: “Unlike a speaker telling a story, a signing storyteller is not able to gaze away from the audience and still
narrate” (178). As a narrator, the poet can explain or comment on the story (not necessarily verbally, but through facial expressions). While they are narrating, the poets exist outside the story world (thus the gaze is extradiegetic). The poet exists as him or herself: the gaze is that of the poet, and personality and emotion expressed through facial expressions also belong to the poet. With the poet acting as the all-seeing narrator, the gaze is omniscient.

There are certain types of signs that are likely to be accompanied by the gaze to the audience. Titles are often signed with the poet’s gaze fixed at the audience/camera. This is because the poet needs to establish the initial connection with the audience, and also because the titles are outside of the story so the external gaze suits them best. Established lexicon also tends to be accompanied by the gaze to the audience. They are used to ‘explain’ or ‘set up’ the background which is compatible with the function of the gaze to the audience. Moreover, because they are conventionalised signs, their form does not need to be foregrounded by the gaze. This is in contrast with productive signs, whose form (which is highly visual and creative) is often highlighted by the gaze on hands. Key words are also signed with the gaze to the audience. The poet looks straight into the audience in order to emphasise something.

There are abundant examples of the gaze to the audience. In ÅsaMy Bjurling’s Arv, the poet, holding a baby in her arm, suddenly shifts her gaze to the audience and explains in a rhetorical question: “Who is this? - It’s my son.” (Figure 15).

In Wim Emmerik’s haiku poem Falling Leaf (in Dutch Sign Language), the poet avoids eye contact with the audience throughout the poem, but casts a glance at them just once at the very end of the
poem. The poem is filled with visual imageries of a falling leaf which are foregrounded by the gaze on hands (an example of ‘spotlight gaze’ which we will discuss later). The last sign, however, is an established sign **PURPLE**, which represents a concept that cannot be visually expressed in sign languages. At this point, the poet comes ‘out’ of the poetic scene by fixing his gaze to the camera, and makes a statement that the leaf is purple (the last sign in Figure 16). It is also a concluding remark of this poem, and a shift in the gaze pattern adds emphasis to it.

Figure 16: Gaze behaviours in Wim Emmerik *Falling Leaf*

3.2. Character’s gaze

Character’s gaze is defined by Bahan and Supalla (1995: 179) as “seeing the story-world through the eyes of the character”. Its main function is to *directly show* a poetic scene through the action and emotion of a character. The signer takes the role of a character, and the eyes of the signer become the eyes of the character. The direction of the gaze varies, depending on where that particular character is looking. In many examples not only the eyes but the hands and/or the body of the signer represent the character. The poet is fully involved in the story (therefore it abandons the omniscient power of the poet as the narrator), making the gaze intradiegetic. The gaze displays the personality of the character through facial expressions. By presenting the story through the eyes of a character, the poet can create strong empathy in the mind of the audience.

Figure 17 shows some examples of character’s gaze: the poet in the role of a female school teacher (a); of a tiger (b); of a personified book being opened (c).
As clear from Figure 17, characters can be humans, animals, or inanimate objects which are personified (or ‘anthropomorphised’) through being taken into the poet’s body. Anthropomorphism of nonhuman objects is an intrinsic part of sign language poetry (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2010). Character’s eyegaze contributes hugely to the poetic effect of anthropomorphism. For example, in Paul Scott’s *Doll*, the poet enacts the character of the protagonist (presumably a young girl) and her doll through eyegaze, and tells the story from their viewpoints alternatively. The doll’s gaze is especially effective as it introduces a completely new and comical perspective to the story, such as when the girl tries to draw eyebrows on the doll's face (Figure 18).

Poetic-I

In sign language poetry, it is very common for the poet to represent a subjective viewpoint without taking in any particular character, which is termed here as ‘Poetic-I’. Poetic-I is a distinctive voice in the poem whose identity is not specified, and can be understood as a special case of the
character’s gaze, or rather as a “default”. Although it represents the eyes of a volitional being, the
gaze of Poetic-I does not involve strong personality. Bauman (1998: 148) calls it an “identity-less”
gaze. Because it is identity-less, there is a certain universality and flexibility in the character of
Poetic-I, which makes it easier for the audience to project their own feelings.
When no other character is referred to, the audience is often naturally drawn to identify Poetic-I
with the poet (although this may not be the case). Unlike other instances of character’s gaze, in
which there is an understanding that the poet and the character are separate identities, the distinction
between Poetic-I and the poet is usually very vague, especially in poems that deal with the situation
regarding Deaf people. Most of Donna Williams’ poems, for example, can be understood as being
told through the gaze of Poetic-I (Figure 4, 5, 13).

3.3. Spotlight gaze

Spotlight gaze is cast upon the signer’s hands and highlight their configuration or movement.
Particular signs or movements are foregrounded as if they are illuminated by a spotlight. We have
already seen an example of this in 2.2. In spotlight gaze, the poet functions as a poetic instrument
and ‘submerges’ into the narrative (with little facial expression). Their gaze becomes internal to the
storytelling, and the poets do not show any distinct personality (Bahan and Supalla (1995: 179)
claim that such eyegaze is “not that of a narrator or character, but rather that of the narrative itself”).
The audience is drawn into the story not through someone’s perspective but by directly watching
the sign mediated by the poet’s own gaze. We cannot tell whether the gaze is omniscient or not
because the eyes do not reveal all-seeing power but they also do not feign ignorance.

We have already seen some examples of spotlight gaze in Figure 2 and 16. To list other examples,
Paul Scott’s gaze follows the movement of his right hand in Tree, as he represents the circular
movement of the sun (Figure 19 a). A very similar sign with the same gaze behaviour can be found
in Richard Carter’s Surprise Apple (Figure 19 b). In both cases, the track of the sun is foregrounded
and the passing of the time is emphasised.
Figure 19: The circular movement of the sun highlighted by the gaze in Paul Scott’s *Tree* (a) and Richard Carter’s *Surprise Apple* (b)

The opening sequence of Richard Carter’s *Surprise Apple* is a good example of spotlight gaze. The gaze traces the configuration of the hands from left to right, and back to left again, as the tree blossoms and the ground ‘slides’ away (Figure 20). The gaze is deliberately used as an instrument to highlight the manual signs and is fully under control of the poet. Richard Carter explained that he wanted to use his gaze as a camera shooting a close-up of his articulators (Richard Carter, in personal communication). What is also interesting in this example is that when two hands represent separate objects the gaze only follows the left hand. The right hand, representing an apple falling from the tree, is completely ignored by the poet (see the last two pictures in Figure 18). In fact in the next scene, the poet-protagonist seems to be ‘surprised’ to find the apple on the ground. Bauman (1998) observes a similar example of feigned ignorance in ASL poetry and concludes that such gaze is “wholly separated from the convincing movements [of a manual sign]” whereas the gaze cast upon the hand creates “a link between the artist and his image”.

![Figure 19: The circular movement of the sun highlighted by the gaze in Paul Scott’s *Tree* (a) and Richard Carter’s *Surprise Apple* (b)](image-url)
3.4. Reactive gaze

Similar to spotlight gaze, reactive gaze is cast upon a manual sign. However, instead of reinforcing or reassuring the sign, it reacts to and reflect on it. The poet is understood to be in the role of an observer, in the place of the audience, and pretend as if they don’t know anything about the poem (making the gaze ‘external’ to the poem). The poets look at their hands as if they are remote and unfamiliar objects with their own will. This creates a separation between the hands (which develop the story) and the gaze (which fulfills analytical or critical functions of the narrative). The gaze displays the personality of the poet as an observer, revealing various emotions such as surprise, distrust, confusion or satisfaction. The poet is not omniscient as they feign ignorance of what their hands are doing.

We have already discussed such reactive use of eyegaze in 2.4, taking an example from Donna Williams’ poem (Figure 4). Sutton-Spence (2005) mentions another example of a reactive gaze in Dorothy Miles’ Trio. There are two occasions where the poet creates a new sign and looks down at her hands as if she is not certain of what they are signing. As Sutton-Spence puts it:
It is almost as though she is asking, “What is this sign?” Clearly, such a question would rarely be asked in normal everyday signing because signers would expect to know what signs they were making. (193)

Johanna Mesch’s poem from her *Three Haiku* makes use of a humorous aspect of reactive gaze. The poet is happily sunbathing but the sun soon starts to set, and the unsatisfied poet reaches out for her left hand representing the sun and ‘unfolds’ its fingers to get the sunlight back (Figure 21). This amusing interaction between the poet and her articulator is done at a metalinguistic level, which is triggered by a shift in her gaze. She does not look at her hand while she takes the sun for granted, but once it starts to dwindle, she glances at her hand which allows her to literally ‘reacts’ to it (in a similar way that Dorothy Miles turns the darkness into a bat by looking at it).

![Figure 21: Reactive gaze in Johanna Mesch’s Three Haiku](image)

In Richard’s Carter’s *Looking for Diamonds*, the sequence of the protagonist running after a diamond is repeated. The first time it happens in a dream. On the second time the protagonist is awake (or he believes he is) and yet the events in his dream recur. There is a difference in gaze behaviour for these two occasions. The second time he starts to run after the diamond, he looks at his own arms and hands, wondering and reflecting as he goes through a déjà-vu-like experience (Figure 22).

In all cases, the reactive gaze on hands is used to show metalinguistic awareness of the poet on what they are signing.
3.5. Panoptic gaze

A successful poem offers a clear mental representation of a poetic scene, only part of which can be manually encoded. But all-seeing poets have the whole picture in their mind, and thus they can look at various points in the signing space to acknowledge unseen elements of the picture. This is called ‘panoptic gaze’. In panoptic gaze, the poet functions as a poetic tool to provide a holistic illustration of the poetic scene by working separately, but in conjunction with, manual signs. The poet becomes part of the narrative itself and thus does not show personality or emotion through eyegaze. The gaze is intradiegetic as it is incorporated in the construction of a poetic scene.

For example, Johanna Mesch’s *Twin Leaves* illustrates a tree full of leaves. Each hand represents a single leaf, and thus only two leaves can be represented simultaneously (Figure 23). But the gaze is cast at various points in the signing space, suggesting the presence of ‘other leaves’. The hands and the gaze complement each other to provide the whole picture (Figure 24).

Figure 23: Panoptic gaze in Johanna Mesch’s *Twin Leaves*
Another example can be found in Donna Williams’ *My Home is My Castle*. The poet makes an analogy between the objects in her shelf (books, DVDs and CDs) and bricks that constitutes a castle. When she represents a pile of bricks surrounding her, her gaze is cast upon various spots in the air, while her hands represents a couple of bricks, drawing attention to different parts of the overall picture (Figure 25).

![Figure 25: Panoptic gaze in Donna Williams’ *My Home is My Castle*](image)

### 3.6. Prescient gaze

A prescient gaze *foretells* the location of an upcoming sign by looking at its location. Like spotlight gaze or panoptic gaze, the poet becomes a poetic tool and submerges into the narrative. Thus the poet ceases to exist as a volitional being and the gaze does not reveal personality. The role of prescient gaze is to foretell the location of the next sign and allow the audience to prepare for the
next scene. In prescient gaze, the gaze precedes the manual sign and the hands follow it (in contrast to spotlight gaze).

Both panoptic and prescient gaze reveal omniscient power of the poet, but while panoptic gaze is synchronic (seeing everything in a given moment), prescient gaze involves a sequence of events (knowing what will happen next). The poet knows precisely what is happening next, so their gaze can go one step ahead of the manual signing.

Panoptic gaze and prescient gaze are unique to poetic signing. It is rare to find them in spontaneous signing, because in order to provide a panoptic view or predict the upcoming location, the poem needs to be pre-structured. They are also less popular in poems which involve a great deal of action, in which the poet is likely to take in someone’s perspective. In contrast, panoptic and prescient gaze can be found in more descriptive and conceptual poems, which may involve motion but less human agency.

Johanna Mesch’s *Winter* (from her SSL haiku quartet) illustrates a brief sequence of snowfalls and how they ‘bounce back’ or ‘raise from’ the ground. She looks straight into the camera when she signs the title WINTER (gaze to the audience, Figure 26 a). Then she looks to her left (b), foretelling the location of the next sign of SNOWFALLS (c). After this sequence, she shifts her gaze to her right (d) before her hands move for the next sign (e). This repeated pattern of a prescient gaze followed by a manual sign produces a contrast characteristic of a haiku poem.
Prescient gaze is often used to indicate the second element in juxtaposition (contrast of two objects or concepts) while the hands are still referring to the first. For example, Donna Williams’ haiku poem Identity contrasts Deaf and hearing. At the end of the sign DEAF, her gaze shifts to her right to foretell direction associated with the next sign HEARING (Figure 27). Similar use of prescient gaze can be found in Penny Beschizza’s BSL haiku Politics, when she juxtaposes politicians in the United States (left) and Britain (right) (Figure 28). She shifts her gaze to right while her left index finger is still pointing toward the left.

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\[\text{DEAF} \quad \text{DEAF (prescient gaze to right)} \quad \text{HEARING}\]

Figure 27: Examples of prescient gaze in Donna Williams’ Identity (DEAF on the hand, eyes cast toward the location of the next sign HEARING)

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4 This is an earlier version of “Who Am I?” which we discussed in 2.4.
3.7. Summary

In this section we have identified six gaze patterns in creative signing. Table 1 below summarises our classification of eyegaze. Note that gaze constantly changes its direction and roles, and it is unlikely that the poet sticks to one gaze pattern throughout the poem. They often alternate or switch between different gaze patterns (such as the poet in the role of a character casts a glance at the audience from time to time). Bahan and Supalla (1995: 189) characterised such instantaneous gaze as “eye gaze behaviour without duration” ([−duration]), as opposed to eyegaze that occurs along with the sequence of manual signing ([+duration]). Moreover, gaze behaviour is often ambiguous and not clearly classified into a single pattern (for example, gaze on hands can be interpreted as a character looking at his/her hand, or as the poet’s gaze as poetic tool to highlight manual signs). The aim here is not to provide a clear-cut, comprehensive classification, but to find a way to approach the complex maze of gaze patterns in sign language poetry.
Direction | Role of poet | Function | Internal/External | Personality | Relation to hands | Omniscience
--- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | ---
Gaze to Audience | audience/camera | narrator | explain, comment | external | + independent | +
Character’s Gaze | various | character | Show | internal | + independent | -
Spotlight Gaze | on hands | poetic tool | highlight, foreground | internal | - follows hands | ?
Reactive Gaze | on hands | observer | reflect, react | external | + follows hands | -
Panoptic Gaze | various | poetic tool | provide whole picture | internal | - complementary | +
Prescient Gaze | various | poetic tool | foretell | internal | - precedes hands | +

Table 1: Six gaze patterns in creative sign language

4. Conclusion

This paper has observed several distinctive gaze patterns and functions in sign language poetry. Although it is impossible to account for all gaze behaviours, attempts to classify them are useful in understanding the complexity of the role of eyegaze across different poems. The craft of eyegaze is often subtle and intuitive, and thus harder to control than other common techniques in sign language poetry, such as manipulation of handshape, rhythm, and use of space. However, the subtlety of eyegaze can convey delicate nuances of each poem which can otherwise be overlooked. In particular, gaze can reveal the poet’s stance to his or her own work and contributes to the overall impression of the poem (emotional or detached, subjective or objective, fictional or realistic, and so on). The use of eyegaze can be an art in itself, which is accessible only in the poetry of visual modality.
References


