

Poetry in South African Sign Language: What is different?

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Abstract

Poetry in a sign language can make use of literary devices just as poetry in a spoken language can. The study of literary expression in sign languages has increased over the last twenty years and for South African Sign Language (SASL) such literary texts have also become more available. This article gives a brief overview of the linguistic devices sign language poetry can make use of, in particular those specific to the visual-spatial modality. As an illustration of these devices an analysis is then presented of the SASL poem *Soweto* by Modiegi Moime. This poem illustrates well the multi-layered meaning that can be created in sign language poetry through the use of the two hands and the non-manual components.

Keywords: South African Sign Language, sign language poetry, linguistic literary devices.

1. Introduction

Sign languages are used for creative expression just as spoken languages are. Sign languages are used in theatre, film, creative story-telling and poetry. This use was described in American Sign Language (ASL) as early as 1975 (Klima and Bellugi 1975). Since that time, far more attention has been paid to this aspect of sign language use, as a recent book, Sutton-Spence and Kaneko (2016), illustrates, providing an overview of sign language literature to date. However, the number of sign languages for which this literary expression has been described is limited. In addition to ASL, there is considerable research on British Sign Language (BSL) (Ladd 2003; Sutton-Spence 2005) together with some analyses.¹ Some work has also been done on Brazilian Sign Language (Libras; Klamt 2017), Italian Sign Language (LIS; Russo, Giurano and Pizzuto 2001; Russo 2005), and Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT; Crasborn 2006). It is definitely the case that such creative use exists in other sign languages, but it has not been documented or described. Literary work in South African Sign Language (SASL) is now becoming more well-known and more documentation is taking place. The exploration of literary texts has a clear place in the SASL national school curriculum and this has been a stimulus for works to be collected and described.

¹ For example, notes for the BSL story *The Owl* by Richard Carter are available at <https://signinghandsacrossthewater.files.wordpress.com/2015/09/richardcarterowl.pdf>

Sign language literary texts are performances since there is no generally accepted way of writing sign languages down. The works are performed live visually or exist on video. Analyses therefore have to refer to one specific recording of a work. Performances can vary in small details and there is often no clear established reference version. Artists sometimes use this possibility of flexibility deliberately since they want to react to their audience. Some artists do, however, post their work on YouTube or their own website and this becomes the main reference for that work

This article will focus on poetry in a sign language, discussing briefly the main linguistic features of such texts.² Then a SASL poem, *Soweto*³ by Modiegi Moime, will be analysed in detail as an illustration.

2. Differences between sign language poetry and spoken language poetry

One major difference between sign language poetry and spoken language poetry is the very common focus in sign language poetry on Deaf Identity. Sutton-Spence and Muller de Quadros (2005) discuss this in general and Morgan and Kaneko (2017) reflect on this with respect to SASL poetry. It is understandable that the struggle a minority group faces will be prominent in their literary works. However many works are a celebration of being deaf, as the classic BSL poem *Five Senses* illustrates.⁴ Reflection on the combination of a national identity together with a deaf identity is also a common topic.

Another striking difference is the form of literary devices used.⁵ Poetry in a spoken language can make use of the visual image on the printed page as in the poems of Guillaume Apollinaire, but it mainly uses the properties of sounds. In a sign language, the devices are different since they are only visual. Thus repetition is used to link meanings, but this is done by repeating, for example, handshapes or locations in different signs. This is similar to rhyme or alliteration in spoken poetry. The use and repetition of a specific handshape can also convey meaning in itself. For example, a round handshape as in Figure 1 can convey the feeling of being enclosed, although that may not be in the meaning of the lexical sign.



Figure 1: Example of a rounded handshape

² For introductory information on general linguistic properties of sign languages see, for example, Baker, Van den Bogaerde, Pfau and Schermer (2016).

³ *Soweto* by Modiegi Moime performed in 2009 <https://www.facebook.com/Signing-Hands-Across-the-Water-173650286067837/>

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BKsr9JUjVEg>

⁵ Some of these are explained in SASL by Modiegi Moime in a video clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eN7DmbG51g8>

In articulating a sign language, use can be made of both hands. Some lexical signs require this with both hands having the same handshape and making the same movement, as in SASL SIGN (see Figure 2). In other cases, the dominant hand (usually the right hand) articulates a movement on the weak hand, both hands having different hand shapes as in SASL BUY (see Figure 3). In poetry, the use of two hands can have different effects (Crasborn 2006). An effect of emphasis, for example, can be achieved by articulating a normally one-handed sign with both hands. In a two-handed sign, one hand or the weak hand can also be held in its end position while the other hand forms a new sign. The effect is that both meaning elements are present at the same time.



Figure 2: SASL sign, SIGN



Figure 3: SASL sign, BUY

Sign languages also make use of non-manual features. These can be facial expressions such as eyebrow movements or movements of the trunk or head. Such non-manual features can have a grammatical function such as to mark questions, but they can also be used to modify the manual sign. In poetry, these features can have all these functions, but they are also used extensively to express emotion on the part of a character in the narrative. Eye-gaze in regular discourse can be used to specify the addressee or the focus of attention. In poetry, it is used in the same way, but sometimes to marked effect by changing the attention from the characters in the narrative to the audience.

Personification is common in spoken language poetry. A famous example is *The Mirror* by Sylvia Plath where the whole action is related by the mirror. In sign languages, it is common to relate events from the point of view of a participant, so-called *constructed action*, even in regular conversation. The effect of projecting human characteristics on to animals or inanimate objects called personification or anthropomorphism creates a connectedness with the topic of the poem. In sign language poetry, this is extremely common (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2010).

This brief overview of specific linguistic features in sign language poetry will now be illustrated by a detailed analysis of a specific poem in SASL.

3. Analysis of the poem *Soweto* by Modiegi Moime⁶

Modiegi Moime is a young South African deaf poet. She has been performing her poems since at least 2009 and is very well known throughout South Africa. She lives in Soweto, near Johannesburg; this is a township strongly associated with the fight against Apartheid.

In the early morning, there are many houses, rows of houses, rows of fires.

There is smoke in the air, smog.

In the early morning, people leave the houses, they go by taxi.

The houses are sad.

Night falls and the taxis return.

The houses are happy.

There are rows of fires, rows of smoke.

The houses cough and splutter.

The fires go out and the houses sleep, content.

Figure 4: Translation of the poem *Soweto*⁷

As the translation in Figure 4 indicates, the poem describes a day in the life of the township, with the people leaving and returning. Emotions of sadness are attributed to the township when the people leave and of happiness when they return. The figurative meaning is that the township cares for its people. The poem conveys the feeling of community in the township. It also conveys aspects of South African Identity (Morgan and Kaneko 2017). It is clear that the poem is set in a township from the first description of the houses and the fires and smoke. Interestingly, in the recording, the title *Soweto* is not provided and this precise location could only be made clear from this title.

There are no specific characters in the poem. The inhabitants of the township are portrayed as a group using the classifier handshape meaning ‘people’ (see Figure 5).

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/Signing-Hands-Across-the-Water-173650286067837/>

⁷ The translation was provided by the SASL Literary Archive from University of Witwatersrand (organizers: Ruth Morgan and Michiko Kaneko)



Figure 5: Classifier handshape used to convey “row of people” in SASL poem *Soweto*

The township itself is a character since it is anthropomorphized. This anthropomorphism is established from the beginning of the poem. The signer expresses the emotions of the township in her non-manual facial expressions while signing manually what is taking place. So we see in the first seconds of the poem, the sign MORNING signed with the eyes closed expressing that the township is still sleeping (Figure 6). The signer’s eyegaze is always in the character of the township, watching the fires and the smoke, the people leaving and returning. There is no eyegaze to the audience.



Figure 6: SASL sign, MORNING, in *Soweto*

The handshape of MORNING flows into the curved version of the handshape HOUSE. This flowing movement creates a calm rhythm, but also in the repetition, links the meaning of the two signs. The sign HOUSE is articulated slightly differently than the dictionary entry (Figure 7). In fact, it is a neologism. The hands are slightly curved and the sign is articulated high on

the chest close to the body. This expresses a closeness and caring attitude. This handshape is held on one hand for most of the poem holding the audience's attention on the township, as we can see in Figure 8.



Figure 7: SASL dictionary entry, HOUSE



Figure 8: SASL sign, HOUSE, in Soweto

The houses are articulated in three rows as are the fires and the smoke. The rhetorical device of three is, of course, common to all types of literary works. The repetition of the signs HOUSE, FIRE and SMOKE also create a rhythm and link the meanings.

As the township wakes up, the eyes of the signer also open. Three rows of people leave their houses and the facial expression indicates some dismay. The rows of people get into taxis and leave and again the face simultaneously expresses sadness.

The second half of the poem starts with the sign EVENING, similar to the sign MORNING except the movement is reversed moving down like the sun. The facial expression expresses gladness and anticipation. The sequences of the people returning and the fires and smoke are also repeated, mirroring the first half of the poem. The fires then go out and the face expresses contentment, including a sigh.

4. Discussion

As was shown above, the poem *Soweto* illustrates many of the specific sign language literary devices. What is highly characteristic of sign language poetry is the simultaneity of the performance. The two hands can be articulating different signs and the non-manual facial expression can add a third layer of meaning. To convey all this in the translation, there would have to be many words used. For example, the first four seconds of the opening could be translated as:

It is morning and the township sleeps peacefully. The people in their houses are still snuggling in their beds.

The discussion of multi-layering is common in the analysis of spoken language poetry through devices such as irony, metaphor, etc. But sign languages can use their possibilities of simultaneous articulation to add layers of meaning in a different way. This makes it different again and very special.

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