

A comparison of artistic mime and sign language poetry

We report on a study comparing artistic mime and the more mimetic elements of sign language poetry. To express complex ideas and feelings artistically, most poets use spoken words, while mime artists use their body without words. For signers, however, there are no spoken words and the medium for the poetry *is* the body. Previous sign language studies referring to mime focused on the difference between signed vocabulary and mimed representation of referents, often with a social-political agenda to demonstrate sign languages are 'language' (akin to spoken language) rather than 'not language' (akin to mime). Recognising unhesitatingly that sign languages are languages, we ask what sign and mime have in common, especially in signed poetry, an art form that often goes beyond the conventional lexicon.

Mime and signed poetry have in common a visual-corporal modality and production of basic iconic images, generated by an underlying cognitive iconicity. We also expect different depths of linguistic encoding embodied by sign language and pantomimic conventions.

In previous comparative studies (e.g. Klima and Bellugi 1979 or Eastman 1989), informants were usually people knowledgeable in both sign language and mime techniques. In this study, in order to keep the two art forms as separate as possible, four leading British Sign Language poets (not trained in mime) and four American professional mime artists (who knew no sign language) participated in the research. We asked both groups to try out and discuss together ways to anthropomorphize a range of non-humans (animals, objects and qualities) by 'becoming' them and attributing human characteristics to them. Our specific aims were to find out how sign language poets and skilled mime artists compare in *what* they portray in their anthropomorphic performances, and *in the way* that they build up these performances.

Each group was videotaped separately, documenting the 'shared thinking' about the processes they went through to build up their representations and the finished improvisations. We analysed the discussions and improvisations, comparing responses to the task and differences in techniques/form.

Responses to the task were often similar but differences included representation of multiple characters, linguistic and non-linguistic communication between characters, anthropomorphisation of abstract qualities and representations of lying, negating or ambiguity.

In techniques and form, we noted differences in Transfer of Person and Form (Cuxac & Sallandre 2008), individual and combined transfers, the frame of movement (the stage vs. the signing window), ways to show size and form, and the use of cinematic techniques.

The similarities we see between the signers and non-signers clearly reveal a shared way humans can use their body to show concepts involving actions and descriptions. We suggest that some differences observed come from the differing needs and abilities of their audiences to understand their performances. Different shared specific cultural behaviour / topics / allusions may account for our observations, and also different physical skills in the performers. Types of iconicity represented may be explained by Grounded Cognition Theories predicting the preference for handling gestures in mimes.