

## Symmetry and the use of two hands in sign language poetry – some quantitative comparisons

### Presentation in BSL

Our presentation uses a quantitative approach to consider use of two hands and symmetry in sign language poetry. We demonstrate that it varies considerably depending on a poet's style. Symmetry is a well-recognised feature of the vocabularies of every studied sign language (eg Battison 1978, Napoli and Wu 2003) and has been recognised as a prominent element of signed poetry since the 1970s (Klima and Bellugi 1979). It is valued for the sense of balance and general aesthetic impression it presents and its contrasting use with deliberate asymmetry. Previous symmetry studies have often used close reading of a few poems in a specific genre (Sutton-Spence and Kaneko 2007, Kaneko 2008) or the works of a single poet (Russo et al 2001, Crasborn 2006). It is widely understood that symmetric signs occur much more in poetic than non-poetic utterances (lectures, or dramatic narratives).

Using material from a large poetry anthology, we analysed four poems each by three sign language poets (ranging in total from five to 12 minutes) and 10 minutes of their signing in a non-poetic register. As we were interested in the overall sense of balance and aesthetics we categorised signing into four types: where only one hand was linguistically relevant; where both hands were fully symmetrical; where both hands shared handshapes but differed in location or movement; and where both hands were linguistically relevant but had different handshapes (including asymmetric signs and buoys). We calculated the overall length of time these four types were used by all signers in the two registers. We chose length of time rather than number of signs because we were interested in the impact of the different uses of one or two hands on the overall visual impression of poetry; it was also sometimes extremely difficult to decide when a poetic sign began and ended. We will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of this choice.

The use of the four types was not evenly distributed. One-handed signing accounted for between 8% and 20% of all signing, showing that using two hands is the norm in both registers. All poets used two hands more in poetry than in non-poetic registers. All poets also used more asymmetrical signs in non-poetry than poetry. In non-poetry proportions for each category were very similar for all signers. In poetry, proportions of asymmetry were approximately equal, but other categories varied, demonstrating that they are driven by stylistic choices. Importantly, symmetry proportion varied greatly among poets. Two poets used considerably more symmetry in poetry than non-poetry, but one used the same proportion of symmetry in both registers, demonstrating that not all signed poetry privileges symmetry.

We conclude that decision-making for quantitative studies of signed poetry is not straight-forward. Poetic language defies categorisation even for apparently simple divisions like use of one or two hands. However, using larger amounts of signed poetry and actively comparing across poets reveals new information about the reality of poetic symmetry.

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