Wit and Humor in ASL

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WIT AND HUMOR IN ASL

(TITLE)

BY

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THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

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I HEREBY RECOMMEND THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE
ABSTRACT

In his article "Linguistics and the Study of Poetic Language," Stankewicz (1960) characterizes poetic organization as "completely embedded in language and fully determined by its possibilities." The purpose of this study is to examine the form that poetic function assumes in a language that itself has a structural organization fundamentally different from that of oral languages and in which, accordingly, the possibilities for poetic organization are radically different.

In wit and poetry, elements of form and meaning—a linguistic system—are used to create complex multi-layered expressions with multiple meanings and systems of form and meaning. Similarities—and differences—in form, function and meaning are exploited; the elements of linguistic system are manipulated and, sometimes, distorted to be significant. Such artful manipulations and distortions must stand out against a background of recognized regularities. Thus, how language is used in wit and poetry can inform us about the psychological reality of abstract constructs and about the awareness, on the part of language users, of regularities in the language.
Problems of sign language research come from both within and without. Extrinsic problems may be arbitrary, as when a source of funding discourages or forbids scientific curiosity about signing. But sign language research does take place, as this volume attests, and problems other than those of the data and of explaining it still arise. Such extrinsic problems have either an institutional source--from the nature of educational establishments and those of their subsystems devoted to teaching the deaf--or a popular source--from the ideas, beliefs, and misconceptions that most persons have about gesture and sign language.

Problems intrinsic to sign language research are also of two kinds: Some affect the practice of the research; others are problems of theory. Practical problems may appear troublesome, but they often yield to ingenuity and the passage of time (at least while science and technology are advancing). Theoretical problems will sooner or later frustrate sign language research, but considering them fully may well advance knowledge of things worth knowing.

Formal systems of public education are instituted by societies for the express purpose of maintaining the structures and value systems of those societies by inculcating them in the young. The institutions are therefore intentionally ethnocentric; and judged in terms of the purposes they serve, it may be well that they are so. Focusing on the values of one culture, they give strength to the social order they serve, and in a relatively stable population they contribute much to cultural integrity. However, when appreciable numbers of young whose cultural, linguistic, or other equipment is different from that of the social norm enter these educational systems, this ethnocentrism,
usually unexamined, may destroy instead of build, may shut out instead of lead out.

The impact of such ethnocentrism on sign language research is felt also by other research efforts which must regard cultural diversity. As long as teachers are trained to believe that whatever is in the reading series is right and that proficiency in the received standard of the society is the precious product of all their efforts, sign language research, like Spanish, Indian, and Black American cultural experience will face hostility, or worse, indifference in the schools.

The hostility and indifference of the establishment do not directly affect the undertaking of sign language research, which usually has a university and foundation base, but they do prevent the results of such research from accomplishing what increases in knowledge should do. Another problem for those who would study sign language is that the xenophobia of public education may work to lessen its use. But discouragement of the study and the use of sign language has a long history in the educational subestablishment specifically for the deaf.

An observer outside the field of special education for the deaf might reasonably suppose that there if anywhere sign language and research into its nature would flourish. This observer would be right if the period of time were between 1760 and 1830. However, the resolution adopted in Milan in 1880 by the International Congress of Educators of the Deaf has been questioned by some but never rejected by the established programs for the deaf in most countries:

The congress, considering the incontestable superiority of speech over signing in restoring the deaf mute to society, and in giving him a more perfect knowledge of language, declares that the oral method ought to be preferred to that of signs for the education and instruction of the deaf and dumb [quoted in Denmark, 1973].
Research problems multiply when unsupported claims are preferred to scientific knowledge, but institutions for the deaf raise further problems, especially when they support research designed to show that sign language is a poor second best to speaking, or that young deaf children may use signs at first but abandon them as they gain proficiency in "grammatical language." Like the general educational establishment, that for the deaf exists to fit every child to the—largely unexamined—norm. Hence it happens that much in print about sign languages comes from teachers of the deaf who give the impression that the signs they describe are only manually expressed code symbols for words (as finger spelling is in fact a code for letters), and that "proper sign language" is the language of these teachers encoded manually. As long as languages differ and educators equate difference with deficit—of vocabulary, of language, of cognition—so long will genuine research into the nature of sign language encounter problems.

Public education and special education for the deaf are both subsumed in governmental programs. These too often hinder sign language research. How native competence in sign language may affect the deaf child's learning of a language like English is just beginning to emerge from research (Mindel & Vernon, 1971; Moores, McIntyre, & Weiss, 1972, 1973; Quigley, 1969; Schlesinger & Meadow, 1972; Stuckless & Birch, 1966). But the Lewis committee in Britain (Lewis, 1968) found no need for the use of "finger spelling and signing in the education of deaf children." Even well-conducted studies by those who have been in schools for the deaf may reflect the built-in bias of the system.

The net effect on policy makers of the usual surveys is likely to be that the system needs support for its attempt to make the deaf
better consumers of the official language, and the less said and done about how the deaf communicate with each other the better.

Exactly that which official surveys, studies, and commission reports ignore, the sign language used by deaf people interacting, can be the key to improved life chances for those people. Research is now showing how and why the study, use, and official recognition of sign language can lead to better educational achievement, subcultural solidarity, and meaningful integration. It is time that educational establishments stopped their discouragement of research effort and began to benefit by the knowledge it offers. Only by recognizing and respecting the integrity of linguistic and cultural minorities can a modern state win the loyalty and valuable contribution of such minorities to society as a whole.

What people in general believe about language and about sign language also poses problems. The layman may be willing to admit that physicists and biologists working with subatomic particles or DNA molecules know what they are about, even though their research goes against the grain of common sense and common knowledge. But the layman is not at all willing to admit that a language which has different rules from his own makes sense or that linguists can have anything of importance to say about it. Gleason (1965) shrewdly attributes this attitude to the history of American education:

Each parent considers himself as good as an expert, most particularly in those segments of the curriculum which have come down from the one-room schools—reading, writing, arithmetic, and grammar. . . . The typical American can hardly conceive of anyone having any special competence in these rudiments—all there is to know is common knowledge [p. 4].

This attitude toward grammar and grammarians may grow into suspicion that linguists are charlatans who make simple things hard for
their own purposes. Such suspicion threatens not just sign language but all language research. Yet, along with it, many people have completely different ideas about gestures—perhaps because gesture is not in the curriculum. One such popular idea is that "other people" gesture when they talk; its holder, of course, supposes that he and his kind are so superior in language, propriety, and ratiocination that they do not need or use gestures. Another idea, hardly compatible with this but often occurring with it, gives gestures universal meanings: Nods, smiles, frowns, headshakes, hand waving, and finger crooking will work any place on the globe where language difference makes speaking useless.

The crudity, slowness, and inaccuracy of such enforced gestural exchanges predisposes laymen to suppose that all sign language must be equally un languagelike. Nothing could be further from the truth, as Mallery pointed out long ago (1881/1972). But Mallery, zealous in proving that meaningful gestures are a human universal, also pointed out another fact—that many gestures are iconic. Both laymen and many researchers, after Mallery, have joined these two with an undistributed middle so that a serious problem of sign language research today comes from the false syllogism that:

1. All men use gestures
2. Gestures iconically reveal meaning.
3. "The sign language" is universal.

Add the historical fallacy and the false conclusion is further perverted—sign language is simple. But press the holder of these notions to recall his difficulty getting understood by gesture in a foreign situation, and he may add that "the sign language" he is talking about
is used by "primitive tribes," or by "the deaf and dumb," or by people "somewhere else."

No less important than extrinsic problems which need not arise, though they waste much energy and encumber research efforts, are problems intrinsic to sign language research. These latter are, of course, also much more interesting to those who would learn more about sign languages. They will therefore be treated here in more detail.

Whether the researcher comes to sign language from the discipline of anthropology, linguistics, psychology, or sociology, the first need keenly felt is that for means of recording, reducing, and retrieving data. Direct observation of people interacting by means of Sign is a necessary but tantalizing activity. Like listening to hearing persons converse in an utterly foreign language, watching an exchange of signing between two deaf people presents a hopeless variety of phenomena, but at first not a clue to its structure or patterns. However, the student of an exotic spoken language has definite advantages. The principle of alphabetic, i.e., phonemic, writing is ancient; and refinements starting with Panini and continuing through the International Phonetic Alphabet to the Sound Patterns of English make the task of phonology more manageable. The task of cherology (analysis of the submorphemic structure of the expressive system of sign language) has no such tradition of helpful studies. Other than the 1960 elucidation that three essential parameters of Sign are tab, dez, and sig—i.e., location, handshape, and action—there are only suggestions that facial and other visible activity and hand orientation are important.

The theory of descriptive or structural linguistics seemed to exclude sign languages, but not all structuralists were hostile to sign
language research. Sapir (1921/1949) lists sign or gesture languages beginning with Plains Indians and the deaf and moving toward the kind of signaling done at sea or in forests. He then concludes, "The intelligibility of these vague symbolisms can hardly be due to anything but their automatic and silent translation into the terms of a fuller flow of language [1949, p. 21]." Apparently he leaves open the question whether the less vague kinds of gesture systems may have languagelike structure. Bloomfield (1933), without adding justification, goes beyond this position. In words which echo Sapir he briefly discusses and dismisses gesture languages:

It seems certain that these gesture languages ["lower-class Neapolitan, Trappist, plains Indian, deaf-mute"] are merely developments of ordinary gesture and that any and all complicated or not immediately intelligible gestures are based on the conventions of ordinary speech [1933, p. 39].

Bloomfield limits his linguistic theory further:

Apparent exceptions [to this dictum that "speech and the manner of speech are our most effective method of signaling"] such as elaborate systems of gesture, deaf-and-dumb language, signaling codes, the use of writing, telegraphy, and so on, turn out, upon inspection, to be merely derivatives of language [1933, p. 144].

Unfortunately, for about 25 years no one did inspect any of these elaborate systems carefully, nor had Bloomfield himself done so, or it would have been discovered that a different theoretical relationship of language, speech, and other signaling methods was needed. Sign language research, ruled out of order by the theoreticians, had no problems in that era.

However, credit and thanks should be given to those second-generation structuralists who, from 1956 onward, encouraged and helped the writer in his first investigations of the "phonology" and morphology of American Sign Language--especially William Austin, Henry Lee
Smith, Jr., and George L. Trager. Their position was not that Sign must be language but a true scientific willingness to let evidence that it might be come into court, as Bloomfield would not.

Since Chomsky (1957), linguistic theory is too protean to capsulize; however, one of its manifestations might well be a manifesto for sign language researchers. If important linguistic processes operate to make the surface appear quite unlike what is theorized to be the deep or abstract structure of language, then one might suppose that the language faculty lies so deep within (silent as well as motionless) human cognition that its expression may be indifferently vocal or gestural. In fact, however, few first- or second-generation transformationalists have found much to interest them in sign languages. One reason may be that sign languages, like American Indian languages, have more going on in the rearrangements, deletions, and other transformations of the strings of words, than do the languages most often studied (Abbott, 1975). Another reason may be that sign languages, like Chinese (Wang, 1973; Woodward, 1972), do not have the inflectional class systems of Indo-European and related languages which take up a large part of transformational grammars. Though the term "language universals" seems to deny it, much theory which is derived ultimately from its developers' competence in English raises problems for sign language research in the form of shibboleths.

However, enough time seems to have elapsed and theoretical positions to have evolved so that younger scholars can deal with portions of sign language systems in acceptably formal ways (see particularly Battison, 1974; Frishberg, 1974; Frishberg & Gough, 1973a, 1973b).

Nevertheless, problems of theory still arise to trouble sign
language researchers. Features and constraints have been formally described to show a systematic "phonology" of ASL hand configurations (Battison, 1975; Battison, Markowicz, & Woodward, 1974; Woodward, 1973b). Sign phonology thus appears to belong to the same genus as any systematic phonology. The rules governing sign locations and sign motions seem to be more recalcitrant but should be describable in time. A deeper problem applies as much to any language study as to sign language research: Can we be sure just those features or phenomena now accounted for in current phonologies are the lot? In terms of speech, were linguists correct in excluding paralinguistic phenomena from phonology proper? Among others, Yngve (1975) says no. And what of gestures and other nonverbal communicative behavior? Has it no direct, formal relation to language? Sarles (1975) argues that all this may be "louder"--i.e., more effective methods of signaling than Bloomfield and many others think. In sign language research, the question that haunts the researcher concerns what the eyes, the face, the head, the rest of the body are doing while the hands are working according to their rules.

There are no answers to the questions yet, but developing linguistic theory may enable researchers to cope better with them. Also significant to sign language research is recent work in discourse analysis, the ethnography of communication, semiotics, pragmatics, etc. Conversely, what is discovered about the relation of the expressive system of Sign to the more general language faculty may make significant contributions to theories of language and behavior.

When discussion turns to the adequacy of linguistic theory to explain human communication, human cognition, and the functioning of
language in social structures and processes, it becomes obvious that the shortcomings are not solely those of linguistics. Psychological, physiological, and social theory and all their branches fail also to answer important questions. If man emerged by long, slow evolution from the primate line, then so too did his language, and what do all our sciences know about it, for sure? If speech and language came all at once, by a sudden mutation perhaps, then what was the state of affairs just before it and immediately afterward?

Sign language research needs answers, but it also may be of some use in the quest. Other animals use vocal signals. Other animals use visual displays—"gesture" could be applied to more than primate activity. Man's use of voice and man's language are unique, and seemingly inseparable, now. But as pre-man became bipedal, erect, dependent more on noninstinctive reaction than on natural weapons, he made and used tools. While he was using hands and teeth and brain to make tools and weapons, was he not developing symbolic behavior as well? Premack's experiments (1970, 1971) and those of the Gardners (Gardner & Gardner, 1971) show at least that in a nonhuman species there is an unsuspectedly large potential for symbolic behavior. Hewes' suggestion (1973a, 1973b, 1974) that gestures could have played an important role in developing language and in evolving the neurological basis for language points to a direction not taken by previous research. But the future of sign language research will depend much on how soon the physical and the social, the biological, and the cultural sciences can evolve a unified science of man.

In wit and sign play, elements of form and meaning—a linguistic system—are used to create complex many-layered expressions with
multiple meanings and even to create whole new systems of form and meaning. Similarities—and differences—in form, function, and meaning are exploited; the elements of the linguistic system are manipulated and, sometimes, distorted. To be significant and meaningful, such artful manipulations and distortions must stand out against a background of recognized regularities. Thus, how language is used in wit and poetry can inform us about the psychological reality of abstract linguistic constructs and about the awareness, on the part of language users, of regularities in the language.

Nowhere are these two faces of the language more evident than in wit and poetry. These chapters explore playful and heightened uses of the language to discover how such forms of expression, which are so directly sound based in spoken languages, manifest themselves in a language without sound.

Is linguistic play—puns, plays on signs, linguistic wit—natural or even possible in American Sign Language? Sometimes this question arises along with the much older question of whether or not the gesturing of the deaf does or does not constitute a language in the sense that English, say, is a language. Perhaps, or so this question sometimes implies, the existence or nonexistence of such plays on signs could give us clues to the status of ASL. Certainly the older literature on signs and signing contains much that would lead the uninitiated to question whether such possibilities exist. It has been suggested that the spontaneous use of signs in even an ironical or metaphorical way is virtually nonexistent. One might be led to suppose that creativity in the form of playful manipulation of linguistic units is also absent.
Such verbal activity relies heavily on subtle correspondences and quickly grasped associations not only of meaning but, very signifi-
cantly, of form. In English, the mustard ad slogan *It brings the best
out of the wurst* plays on the ambiguity created by two words with dif-
ferent meanings but identical sound forms and the natural association
of the antonyms *best* and *worst*. Linguistic play is not limited to
utterances where one and the same signal independently represents two
or more words, each with its own meaning. Sometimes the segments of
two words are overlapped, as when the Christmas season is referred to
as the *alcoholholidays* or when someone says of Rockefeller, *He treated me
quite famillionaire.*

In spontaneous ASL communication, plays on signs abound. They
occur daily and readily evoke laughter. There are plays similar to
those above, as well as many kinds of play that involve attributes spe-
cial to a visual-manual language, special to a language produced by the
hands and perceived by the eyes.¹

Occasionally something very like a pun surfaces in our collec-
tions of sign plays. A pun in spoken language depends on exploiting
equivalence or similarity of sound in two words that are different in
meaning and compacting the two into a single linguistic context where
both and can apply. In ASL the ingredients for puns are available.
There are signs with two meanings (though, by our accounting, a remark-
ably small number). There are also pairs of signs that are near homono-
yms in form but disparate in meaning.² The sign *THIRTEEN*, for
instance, differs from a sign for *EJACULATE* in only minimal ways (see
figure 1a,b). This pair of signs formed the basis for a pun when a
deaf person signed:
You know he's a man when he's (age thirteen.)
(at the age of ejaculation.)

The double play was created by making the compound sign for "thirteen years old" but with the slight change that characterizes the sign for "ejaculate," producing a pun--a double sign with double meaning in a context that evokes both (see figure 1c). Here is it important to note: As is any language, the pun, the joke, the meaning are inseparable. And for this reason, the joke is not funny in translation into
spoken English, for example. Because the confines of language prevent meaningful translation, the joke, its meaning, its humor can be retained only in ASL.

Punning is, in our experience, only an occasional form of sign play in ASL. Other forms of sign play spontaneously generated in conversation are much more common. Most of these differ from punning in the strict sense, for puns involve a linguistic context that forces the listener to recognize multiple meanings. For instance, on hearing or reading *Bad coffee is the grounds for divorce*, one must process the sentence twice to unpack its meaning.

The sign plays we have collected from daily conversations do not depend for effect on their sentential contexts. For the most part, they are themselves complete utterances: the perfect retort, the compression of meaning and form into a single elegant whole. This seems to us the common shared property of linguistic play in ASL—compression of unexpected meanings into minimal sign forms. Sometimes the condensation results from substituting elements within a sign, sometimes from using the two hands to make two different signs simultaneously, sometimes from making one sign merge into another or one sign blend with another. The linguistic plays uniformly involve compression of meaning and form.

Compression is, of course, a frequently identified characteristic of wit. "Brevity is the soul of wit," says Shakespeare's Polonius. In a famed treatise on wit, Freud (1938) recognized brevity as a defining characteristic: "Wit says what it does say, not always in few, but always in too few words" (p. 636).

Such brevity, such condensation, are essential characteristics
of linguistic plays on signs in ASL, which use not only few signs, but ideally an all-in-one simultaneously compacted unit. It is as if wit in sign language represents the culmination of the underlying tendency toward conflation in the language: the ultimate in compression and in simultaneous display. At the same time such sign plays show awareness on the part of signers of linguistic parameters, awareness of regularities, as evidenced by breaking the rules to create plays with signs--an awareness of form.

This section dissects and analyzes the samples of sign play. Linguistic play within a language is extremely difficult to translate, and the effort to explain invariably destroys the multiple effect that is encapsulated in the form. Nonetheless, the plays are described as they are spontaneously created, provoked pleasure and delight as well as a sense that the signer made clever use of the form of a sign to compress multileveled meanings.

A gift for control. Organizational talent is a rare gift; one must have the ability to delegate authority to others while, lightly but carefully, keeping things in line. When a deaf man with such an ability was asked how he achieves this effect, he twinkled and signed EASY. Then in two signs he demonstrated his secret: GIFT, as in "giving out authority," and then CONTROL, "keeping the reins in his grasp" (see figure 2).

The two signs, well chosen, display an elegant simplicity. GIFT and CONTROL are both made with two active hook hands, /X/, both at the same plane of neutral space; they differ only in movement (GIFT has movement away from signer; CONTROL has a small alternating motion, symbolic of controlling a horse). The signer united the signs in the
Figure 2 A gift for control.

following way: he signed GIFT, then pulled in his hands as if pulling the reins of a horse, leading directly to the sign CONTROL. The pulling inward—not a part of either sign and not a formal transitional movement—evoked a sense of "drawing in" the sign GIFT: one gives authority, reins it in, and controls the gift carefully. To make his point the signer chose signs that are formationally similar, combined them with a dash of appropriate pantomime, and thus compressed several complex ideas into an effectively simple sign unit.

An experience of freedom. In this century, until very recent years, residential and day schools for the deaf have not encouraged (and sometimes not permitted) signing in the classroom. Now a growing number of schools permit total communication, as it is sometimes called, which includes—among other methods—simultaneous signing and speaking in the classroom. For some deaf people total communication represents a newly discovered freedom, giving rise to a play on signs.

A visitor to a school for the deaf, so the story goes, asked one of the students why everyone seemed so carefree and happy. The student smiled and signed TOTAL-COMMUNICATION (see figure 3a), making a sign as
it normally would be made, hands moving alternately toward and away from him. But as the movement continued, his hands moved gradually closer and closer to the mouth and his head began to tilt from side to side, until the single sign had become transformed into the two highly iconic signs DRINKING (alcohol) and SMOKING (marijuana), made alternately: "drinking and smoking, drinking and smoking" (see figure 3b).

The play on meaning is multileveled. The student hooked together, by blending, a formal means of education and what he might have considered a form of self-education. Both have been restricted, both represent a kind of freedom: the one a freedom to communicate in the classroom, the other a freedom to communicate with friends, out of
sight of the authorities. For the student, smoking and drinking may themselves be a kind of total communication—a kind undreamt of by the school board.

The play on form too is multileveled. The sign TOTAL-COMMUNICATION is an initialized single sign that is relatively opaque; by contrast, the signs SMOKING and DRINKING are highly transparent, very close to mimed acts of what they represent. The single sign and the pair of signs are strikingly similar in form: the same handshape, the same relation between the hands, similar movement and location. In the play the sign TOTAL-COMMUNICATION is changed by degrees into two single signs, made alternately, by a process of manipulating what would otherwise be the transition between the two parts; gradually the opaque sign has been reanalyzed, shifted into two iconic alternating signs. Again there is a juxtaposition of meanings compacted into elegantly blended sign forms.

One method of playing on signs is to substitute one regular ASL prime value for another, thus using elements of the linguistic code to create new sign forms. This occurs when a signer intentionally distorts a sign by substituting a value that adds a new dimension of meaning.

In a deliberate substitution for witty effect, when all but one of the basic characteristics of a sign are retained, the resulting distortion is a possible but not an actual ASL sign—neither a citation form nor a standard modulated form—which differs from an ASL sign in a way that is significant and meaningful, in terms of ASL and perhaps also in terms of more general spatial-gestural symbolism. Appreciating the wit (and often, in fact, recognizing an actual sign behind such a
distortion) usually depends on knowing the context in which the distorted version is used. That is, the added meaning conveyed by a substitution generally comes from one of two sources: the substituted value may be a part of a family of signs related in both form and meaning or the substituted value may have some general iconic significance that could be recognized even by a nonsigner.

**Hand Configuration substitutions.** After watching a lengthy explanation of a technical linguistic point, a deaf person was asked if he understood. The signer replied "UNDERSTAND," but instead of making the sign with the index finger normally used, he substituted his little finger. The basis for this distortion is clear: the little finger occurs in a symbolic way in some signs where it conveys the notion of thinness or extreme smallness (SPAGHETTI, THREAD, SKINNY-PERSON, INFINITESIMAL). At the same time it is physically smaller than any of the other fingers. The substitution in UNDERSTAND clearly carried the meaning "understand a little" (see figure 4).

Other signers have used little-finger substitution to convey FAMOUS-a-little, HURT-a-little, APPLAUD-a-little. The opposite dimension, an increase in size or extent, has been conveyed by adding fingers: PUZZLED, ordinarily signed with a curved index finger (the hook hand), has been signed with four curved fingers to convey PUZZLED-many-times-over, and UNDERSTAND with one finger after another opening to convey, jokingly, increasing-UNDERSTANDING.5

**Place of Articulation substitutions.** In a break during an experiment involving signs presented under visual noise (clearly a strain for the eyes), a deaf person was advised to relax. The signer replied with a play on the sign RELAX; instead of making the sign
normally on the torso, she transferred the location to just under the eyes thus conveying "relax the eyes." This kind of change depends for its effect on the iconic values of specific locations. When a person had a black eye, a deaf person summed up the situation by making the sign DEAF across his eye (a "deaf" eye) rather than across the cheek, as would normally be the case (see figure 5). Referring to a person who was inept at signing, a deaf person made the sign STUPID but transferred the location from the forehead to the hand, making the meaning "hand stupid."
Movement substitution. During another (interminable) discussion of linguistics and metalanguage, a deaf person signed UNDERSTAND but made the sign with a reversed movement. Instead of starting from a closed position and flipping open, the hand started in the final open position and closed to what should have been the initial position, thus conveying "I un-understand," or "I understand less than I did when I started" (figure 6a). Such reversals of movement are common ways of playing with signs for special effect. The sign PROUD is made with an upward movement on the chest; when asked if he was proud of his achievements, a deaf person reversed the movement of PROUD, thus signing that he was "unproud" (figure 6b).6

Minor parameter substitutions. When talking of the dark side of New York City, the corrupted side, a deaf person made the sign NEW-YORK, but instead of making it with the base hand in palm up orientation, he turned the palm down making the movement under the hand (figure 7). Thus the sign shared symbolic "underhandedness" with the signs CHEAT, SWIPE, BRIBE, and OPPRESSION.

Still another sign play made special use of the two hands in a two-handed symmetrical sign. A deaf woman arrived one day and announced with pride that she had just become a grandmother. A friend of hers signed that she too looked forward to the time when she would be a grandmother. The first woman smiled, made the two-handed sign GRANDMOTHER and generously moved one hand over to make the sign on her friend, thus sharing the sign and its meaning.

In signing, the existence of two autonomous articulators creates the physical possibility of producing two independent signs simultaneously, one in each hand, or of holding one sign with one hand while
Figure 6 Movement substitution.

(a) UNDERSTAND
(b) PROUD

Figure 7 Orientation substitution.

NEW-YORK
un-UNDERSTAND
un-PROUD
underhanded-NEW-YORK
producing a different sign with the other. Such simultaneity is consistent with the tendency toward simultaneous expression in many of the regular processes in the language: the tendency to compress information into single sign units and the use of simultaneous (rather than sequential) modifications of signs to modulate meaning.

Double articulation of signs frequently occurs in self-conscious signing of preplanned material: in theatrical productions, in narratives, in poetic signing--and in plays on signs.

Simultaneous articulation. A young deaf man who had spent a summer in research was leaving for a new situation. When asked how he felt, his response could be paraphrased in English as I feel excited about the new position but depressed about leaving. He was far more concise, however: with one hand he made the sign EXCITED and with the other the sign DEPRESSED; the two were executed simultaneously. The signs are antonyms, and they are related in formation, differing only in direction of movement (upward versus downward brushing). Thus he condensed into a single new sign creation the ambivalence of his emotions (see figure 8).

A sign in either hand. Plays on signs are also created by holding one sign while making another, thus presenting two signs simultaneously to the eye. Often the two signs share properties of form though they emphasize distinctions of meaning. For instance, a deaf woman commented in a sign play on her disparate abilities in research; she said that she was clever and skilled at reading signs made by young deaf children but very poor at remembering them long enough to write them down in their proper order. This combination of mental abilities--clever and incapable at the same time--was expressed by a
Figure 8 Simultaneous articulation.
Figure 9 A sign in either hand.
simultaneous presentation of two signs, one with either hand. She first signed CLEVER with one hand and then added IGNORANT with the other, holding the two in place on the forehead (see figure 9).

Double articulation may be used in other ways to maintain two parts of a condensed message. A young deaf man seemed to have an eye for pretty girls. When we commented, he laughed and summed up his sense of himself in two simultaneously presented signs, agreeing that he was really an "expert girl watcher." The signs he used were related in formation: a mimetic sign for EYES, and a sign for EXPERT ("to have a knack for"). He first signed EYES (adding a mime of flirtation); then with one hand still in place the other slipped into the sign

Figure 10 Overlapping signs.

'a knack for girl-watching'
EXPERT (signing "eyes-pert," as it were), an effective doubly articulated message EYES/EXPERT (see figure 10).

Double articulation of signs plays on similarities in form and differences in meaning of lexical units. Since it depends on the independent use of the two hands at once, it is clearly unique to a gesture language.

A second method of conflating two signs in sign play is by blending. Forms of blending do not depend on using the two hands independently but, rather, on special formal properties of chosen signs which permit integration in particular ways—sometimes by manipulating the handshape or movement of the signs, sometimes by manipulating transitions between signs—but always dependent on form and meaning.

Epithets. A type of blending occurs frequently in creating new name signs as epithets, summing up the characteristics of a person by conflating a sign and a name. Name signs are commonly coined within a group or community by forming the handshape corresponding to the initial of a person's first or last name in English and arbitrarily choosing a movement and location for that handshape. On first occurrence the name might be fingerspelled; later a name sign would be coined for ease of reference within a group or community. But either as a play on signs or as a nickname, the name-initial may be blended with a lexical ASL sign that refers to some special characteristic of that person.

The name sign for Ursula is a fingerspelled letter "U" on the side of the mouth. Because she has a habit of jotting down with great excitement any new sign she sees, one deaf person dubbed her "Ursula the Copier," substituting the "U" of her name sign for the handshape of the sign COPY. Others have had their name signs similarly elaborated:
"Ray the Groovy," "Marilyn the Advisor," and many more (see also Meadow 1974).

Even before the Watergate scandal and the resignation of former President Nixon, deaf people had a name sign for him that was used even on the news interpreted by signers. The name sign consisted of the letter "N" made across the chin with a brushing motion: a conflation of "N" for Nixon and the ASL sign LIAR. The English equivalent in effect (but not in form) might be a reference to him as "Mr. Trixon," combining his name with the word tricks. President Jimmy Carter has received his own epithet: he is referred to with two hands in "C" shapes surrounding a broad smile, playing on the ASL sign GRIN, and evoking the famous Carter toothy gleam.

Movement blends. Discussions of linguistics seem to bring out the creative powers of signers. One such discussion ended in a kind of impasse for the signer. He first made a newly coined sign LINGUISTICS; then he began again, this time starting as in LINGUISTICS but switching mid-sign-stream to the movement and shape of BALONEY. The blend of the two signs LINGUISTICS/BALONEY created a complex integrated form that conveyed his feelings precisely.

One day a hearing person was being particularly inept at signing, the deaf teacher good-humoredly signed that his cleverness was deflated but that it would become inflated again. To convey this, she made the sign CLEVER with the cupped hand on the forehead; then she closed her hand, adding the movement of DEFLATE (usually made with one hand acting on another as a base); then she opened the hand, reinflating the sign back to CLEVER again (see figure 11).
Transition blends. Another form of blending two signs is by manipulating the transition between them. One sign is made and then is extended in different ways throughout what would ordinarily be the transition to the next sign; by small increments the hands gradually move to the next sign. This kind of manipulation of transitions between signs occurs only in sign play and art sign; it is clearly a playful manipulation of what is ordinarily the nonsigning movement of the hands between the offset of one sign and the onset of the next.

One signer was trying to resist the temptation to eat sweets. When another person offered her a delicious-looking cookie, she
succumbed, summing up the situation in two economical signs: TEMPT and a sign representing a small round object (the cookie). TEMPT is a non-iconic sign made by tapping the curved forefinger on the elbow; the size-and-shapespecifier used for "cookie" is clearly iconic. The two signs were linked by blending: the arbitrary sign TEMPT moved from the elbow up the arm by degrees and was slowly transformed into a round object in front of the signer's mouth; the signer looked at her hand, then suddenly and unexpectedly "ate" the imaginary cookie. In this play there is a sudden shift in frame of reference. The elbow is a PA for a sign and at the same time a part of the signer's body. That deaf people are aware of this double role of body parts as locations of signs is shown by another instance in which a deaf person signed what could only be interpreted as meaning "I wouldn't be tempted if I cut off my elbow."

ASL is a language in which the articulators are always in full view; furthermore it is a language in which HCs are also hands, in which PAs are also body parts; it is language in which signs are composed of formational elements that serve as purely formal differentiators across the language but at the same time have global representational qualities. Sign play makes full use of these possibilities.

Some plays on signs go beyond the boundaries of the linguistic system to cast a visual reflection on the language itself. Such plays may consist of forming a sign and then transforming it, manipulating it, playing with it in ways that need not reflect the linguistic properties of the language directly but instead reflect back on them. By beginning with a sign and then carrying it beyond the bounds of ASL signing, signers create surprise effects.
Visual iconicity. To sign LONG, the index finger moves part way up the arm. One can exaggerate the meaning by actually lengthening the movement, drawing it out slowly or continuing it farther than normal.

A young deaf child was asked by her father for a LONG kiss; he elongated the sign as it was made. The child, bored with such requests for affection, agreed but on her own terms. She began the sign LONG, then after an inch or so indicated a sharp cut-off, effectively conveying, "Oh, all right, but make it a quickie" (Maxwell 1977).

In the sign COMMUNICATE, the two hands have the same shape and move alternately back and forth. A deaf person wanted to describe a situation in which people attempted to communicate but failed and misunderstood each other. She could have used lexical signs; instead she made the sign COMMUNICATE and then gave it a playful twist, suddenly moving her hands in erratic uneven unsignlike patterns, representing failure of communication, "communication gone awry." Thus she brought out secondary iconic aspects of the sign by her distortion of it, and

Figure 12 Visual iconicity.
the form of the sign COMMUNICATE was freshly appropriate to its meaning: a two-way path, a smooth flow interaction (see figure 12).

The mimetic sign for EYES is used in many ways to create contradictory effects, and it can be elaborated to do many things the eyes can do: bat eyelashes, wink, open slowly, spring open, glance to the side. But since in fact the sign is made with mobile hands and arms, it is sometimes used for unexpected effects. A deaf person transcribing videotapes signed that it would be easy if she could only watch the screen and look down at her writing at the same time. She made the sign EYES and then, keeping one EYE-hand directed toward the TV screen, tilted the other downward toward the paper. The effect was startling—the hands, which represent eyes, can move in ways that the eyes themselves cannot (see figure 13).

Figure 13 Visual iconicity.

The sign IMPROVE is made with one hand contacting on the back of the other hand and then contacting again on the lower arm. The sign can undergo regular morphological processes, but it can also be
subjected to mimetic elaboration to convey "improve immensely," "improve an infinitesimal amount," "improve in one swoop." Its inverse counterpart is a lexical sign meaning "to disimprove" or "deteriorate" (contact is first on the arm and then on the hand). A deaf person was discussing his declining mathematical skills. He made the sign DISIMPROVE in small regular increments so that the active hand moved down along his arm to the end of the fingertips; then it surprisingly "fell off" the hand. Thus there was a sudden shift of reference at the fingertips: the hand was no longer signing and could be viewed as an inert object subject to the laws of physics.

**Manual ambiguity.** These plays involve transforming signs beyond the formal system in ways that highlight underlying iconic aspects of the signs themselves. Other sign plays depend primarily on the manipulation of potential ambiguities in the role of the hand: whether, at a given time, a hand is to be regarded as constituting a sign, as manipulating a sign, as a part of the signer's body, as representing some imagined physical object. Shifting between these functions can create further comic effects. A person signed WISE, with his hand in a well-defined /X/ shape, but then let the finger droop, as if the wisdom had wilted. By an imperceptible transition the hand no longer formed a sign and had become just a limp hand at the forehead.

A deaf person started to sign CLEAR, a two-handed sign made by fanning open the fingers to spread hands as the hands move apart. The hands visibly attempted to open but appeared glued and stuck; finally one hand relaxed, became a hand rather than part of a sign, and pried open the fingers of the other hand in order to manually produce half of the sign CLEAR; it was as if each hand had independent volition and one
hand was forcing the other sign CLEAR clearly (see figure 14).

In a rendition of a children's comic poem, Lou Fant, an accomplished actor-singer, makes elaborate use of this way of playing with hands as signs and hands as hands. In the poem "Eletelephony" by Laura Richards, the words elephant and telephone become entangled in various ways, as the title indicates. In Fant's ASL rendition, his hand seems to have a will of its own, and though he vainly tries to control or steady it with the other hand, it gets away from him, slips down to the end of his nose, gets tangled behind his back, wobbles through space
willynilly, and finally ends up with the thumb firmly planted in his mouth!

The sign plays discussed thus far occur primarily in everyday conversations. For the most part, such plays are neither elaborate nor carefully constructed, concocted, or preplanned. They are, rather, samples of folk humor.

Linguistic play with signs occurs as well in contrived parlor games, social competitions, and group amusements in which manipulations of linguistic elements are prescribed by the rules of the games. Some uses of signs in such games exceed the bounds of the language proper, moving freely from sign to mime to pure visual form and back again. But some of the games directly reveal an awareness of linguistic form.

In one common game a leader begins with a sign and each person in turn must contribute a different sign using the same handshape. In another game signers invent thematic stories based on the alphabet or numbers. First a theme is chosen, such as a car race (or something more racy still) or a mystery story. One signer begins a story with a sign using an "A" hand, the next must add a thematic sign using a "B" hand, and so on until a fully developed narrative using an ordered arrangement of handshapes has been group created. One story began with KNOCK-on-the-door ("A"), continued with DOOR-open ("B"), SEARCH-all-around ("C"), suddenly-HEAR ("D"), reverberating-SCREAM ("E"), and became a full-fledged mystery story replete with ghosts.

Another game involves fingerspelling combined with mime, so that the meaning of a word is doubly evoked: through spelling and mimetic elaboration at the same time. For instance, the word butterfly is
spelled out but with the hands moving from one manual representation to the next in a way that evokes an image of a flitting butterfly. In such a game one signer spelled the word *impotent* but with the manual "I" (an extended pinkie) lying on its side rather than straight up: \[\text{-M-P-O-T-E-N-T.}\]

Another kind of language play with signs is the invention of finger fumblers, analogous to tongue twisters in spoken language, She sells sea shells by the sea shore. One such invention from our laboratory is DIALOGUE UNFAIR TO HYPOCRITES (see figure 15); it is almost impossible to sign that sequence several times quickly without error.

Figure A finger-fumbler.

DIALOGUE UNFAIR TO HYPOCRITES

Play with signs occurs in still more structured forms: in video-taped football cheers, poems, limericks, and songs, performed not only by individual signers but by sign choruses, by a sign rock group, and as sign duets. In duets the double articulation of signs provides special possibilities: each person can contribute a hand to make up a two-handed sign; two people can sign on or around each other; the signs
(and hands) of one can be intermingled with the signs of the other.
The elaboration of signing into poetry and song involves further complexities of structure.

Wit and sign play involve manipulation of signs in ways that are special to the form of sign language itself. A language based on gesture and vision may lend itself to particular types of playful extension and distortion of the shapes of its units far more readily than a language of spoken words, which cannot so easily blend, overlap, appear simultaneously, or otherwise change shape. In language games signers use their language in a playful way. Such deliberate use of linguistic elements clearly reflects signers' intuitive awareness of linguistic form.
NOTES

1. Many people from The National Theatre of the Deaf, Illinois School of the Deaf, and Florissant Valley Theatre of the Deaf have contributed—through either conversation or video tape—by creating, interpreting and discussing playful signing; among them are: Linda Bragg, Lou Fant, Bonnie Gough, Wayne Gough, James Keily, Terrence O'Rourke, Ted Sapalla, Steven Turner, and Jane Wilk.

2. Two signs that are near homonyms are frequently not just specific changes in movement but also unique facial expressions required of one member of the pair as in: late/not yet and furniture/unimportant.

3. The sign for thirteen years old is a compound, formed with the first component on the chin followed by the sign thirteen. In the pun the same first component is followed instead by the near-homonym ejaculate, as in "the age of ejaculation".

4. The sign total-communication is a two handed doubly initialized sign made with two different hand configurations: one hand in the manual alphabet "T"; the other in "C" formation this difference in configuration though it violates ASL formal constraints, provides the basis for double play.

5. A regular grammatical process (an augmentative inflection) for conveying this meaning imposes an upward reduplicated movement.

6. Such substitutions rely upon antonymous ASL sign pairs that are similar in form except for the direction of movement: join/disconnect are opposite in movement, as are many other sign pairs.
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