



## Rhetorical Identification in Sign Language Poetry

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Drawing from rhetorician Kenneth Burke, Anastasia Dulle analyzes American Sign Language poetry by Ella Lentz and Christine Marshall, explaining how each poet uses the spatial and linguistic effects of signing to create rhetorical identification among signer and audience, thereby affirming the social cohesion of Deaf culture through poetic devices unique to ASL. This essay was written for Rhetoric & Composition with Dr. Ben Wetherbee.

**I**N HIS BOOK *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Kenneth Burke states, “You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his” (55). Identification, Burke argues, is the foundation of rhetoric. At the core of this quote is the essential concept that in order to identify with someone, you must be able to speak their language. This is true for all languages but is an especially relevant concept when discussing rhetoric in sign languages. Sign languages are inseparably intertwined with Deaf culture and are the only languages d/Deaf people can fully access (Cripps). In any geographical area, Deaf people belong to both a cultural and a linguistic minority, and as a group have faced oppression from hegemonic hearing societies throughout history. One writer in 1984

notes that “For the past 100 years, education of the deaf has had the central purpose of making deaf children speak, lipread, and use their residual hearing; in short, to identify with, and resemble, Hearing people” (qtd. in Glickman 11). It is only within the past few decades that Deafness has shifted to be understood as a cultural difference instead of a disability. Accordingly, Deaf people have a group identity that is heavily impacted by the oppression and marginalization they have faced in recent history and continue to face today. Because of this reality, the composition of creative works such as poems in sign languages is a powerful way of affirming Deaf identity and Deaf culture. Because the audience able to understand any given sign language is relatively small, and because Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing people are minority groups that have been oppressed throughout history and continue to experience oppression and marginalization by the hearing majority, the use of sign language in sign language poetry leads to an automatic identification with the poet that builds the poet’s ethos in the eyes of their audience and creates a powerful epideictic effect.

Although sign languages have only been recognized as real languages in recent history – the first argument that American Sign Language was a fully complex language with its own grammatical structure, and not a linguistically inferior “primitive form of English,” was published in 1978 (Glickman 3) – since then, a considerable amount of linguistic analysis has been done on sign language poetry. As sign languages are “the only language[s] that incorporat[e] the unique dimension of space” (Brueggemann 414), sign language poetry is unique to analyze, and many scholars have compared and contrasted elements of sign language poetry and spoken language poetry for this reason. Every sign consists of five parameters: handshape, palm orientation, location, movement, and non-manual signals (such as posture and facial expression). While poetry in spoken languages depends largely on the sound of words as well as – occasionally, in written poems – the shape words make on the page, poetry in sign languages depends wholly on these five

parameters. In addition to signed words, sign languages make use of classifiers, which are visual depictions of the appearance or movement of a person or object that are used to represent previously established signs (much like how in spoken languages pronouns represent previously established nouns) (Berke). Linguists have identified equivalents in American Sign Language (ASL) to a number of formal poetic elements, including meter, rhyme, metaphor, simile, and line breaks. Rhyme, for example, is created through the repetition of one or more of the five aforementioned parameters (Bauman). Sign language poetry has also been noted to make use of personification, anthropomorphism, and neologisms (Baker). In addition, however, the unique features of sign languages allow for poetic effects that do not exist in spoken or written languages. For example, “sign language poets are able to create aesthetically beautiful images through the direct use of bilateral symmetry in space. Balanced use of space permits signers to emphasize contrast and unity, drawing on the metaphorical interpretation of the symmetry” (Sutton-Spence and Kaneko 315). Additionally, in sign language poetry, a great deal of meaning can be expressed in a much shorter period of time than in spoken language poetry, as each hand can be signing something different, and facial expressions can add a third layer of meaning (Sutton-Spence and Kaneko).

Existing scholarship on rhetoric in sign languages is minimal and underdeveloped, possibly because sign languages have only in recent history been recognized among scholars as languages in their own right, and possibly because of an implicit belief that rhetoric applies to all languages comparatively. However, analysis of rhetoric in spoken language poetry, as well as linguistic analyses of sign language poetry, can give insight into how rhetoric functions in sign language poetry. In his essay “Rhetoric and Poetics,” Burke notes the natural relationship between poetics and epideictic rhetoric,

asking, “does not epideictic readily become transformed into a display art, pure and simple?” (*Language* 295).<sup>1</sup> In addition, there is a natural relationship between poetics and pathos, as much art, including poetry, invokes a pathetic response in the audience. While some rhetoricians have tried to make distinctions between rhetoric and poetics, Steven Weiss eloquently argues for an alternate perspective, stating:

Poetics becomes, in this view, an art defined as concrete object. . . . But rhetoric in its correct understanding is a theory, a deliberation, a contemplation about some future argument, which may or may not have as its end an object or product – and if it does have its realization in a product, that will not make it (the product) rhetoric. The product will be a speech, an essay, and yes, a poem, if the artist so chooses. (26)

In other words, rhetoric and poetics do not have to be viewed as two distinct categories, and as a result, one can analyze poetry – spoken or signed – through a rhetorical lens.

One example of sign language poetry is Ella Lentz’s ASL poem “To a Hearing Mother.” The poem is, as the title suggests, composed as a “letter” to a hearing mother who just found out her baby boy is deaf. From the beginning of the poem, Lentz sets up a distinction between where she (or the narrator) is and where the hearing mother (or the audience) is in space. This allows her to visually create powerful juxtaposition when discussing the differences between her experience growing up and the hearing mother’s experience growing up. Lentz also uses the established hearing mother’s position in space to refer to the wider hearing community, signing “hearing” with her dominant (right) hand and sweeping her other hand

<sup>1</sup> Editor’s note: *Epideictic* denotes the “ceremonial” branch of rhetoric Aristotle associates with matters of praise, blame, and cultural affirmation; it often contrasts with more “pragmatic” rhetorical genres, like political and judicial address (see Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, bk. 1, § 3).

across the space previously used to refer to “you” (the hearing mother). She then turns her dominant hand into a classifier for herself, and her other hand pushes it down towards herself in the sign for “oppression,” signifying the injustices hearing people have inflicted on the Deaf community.

Later in the poem, Lentz uses classifiers to introduce the metaphor of the boy being like a tree. Through classifiers, Lentz shows the tree shriveling up and dying, lonely without the Deaf community. This metaphor is referenced again at the end of the poem to describe how, if the narrator and the hearing mother come together, they can help the boy grow like a magnificently strong and tall tree. In addition, there is much that could be said about Lentz’s use of rhyme and rhythm.

A second example of sign language poetry is Christine Marshall’s poem “Deaf Heart,” which depicts the narrator’s journey toward finding ASL and the Deaf community. Marshall’s poem has a distinctly different style than Lentz’s. First, the poem is structured with a clear rhythm, and begins and ends with Marshall tapping her chest to indicate the beating of her heart. Marshall uses signs with open, extended fingers at the beginning of the poem, such as “world,” “speaking,” and the classifier she uses to signify being overwhelmed, or things going over her head. The use of these similar handshapes creates a rhyme that appears throughout the poem. Around the 1:13 mark, Marshall signs “heart” and uses classifiers to show it straining and breaking, while her facial expressions signify pain and distress. The pathos she creates comes to a crescendo when, after desperately attempting to speak but having her emotions still be trapped inside, the narrator looks down, alone.

Perhaps the most stunning poetic effect of the text occurs directly after. Marshall looks up, still signing “alone” with her dominant hand, and looks to her left hand, which is opening and closing in the sign for “signing.” With her right hand, the narrator then uses the sign for “fascinated” to “catch” the other sign, transferring it to her dominant hand and watching it with growing excitement. She

then signs “grow/develop,” looking upwards as she does and smiling, which connotes rising to the surface after being underground or underwater. Around the 1:38 mark, Marshall shows the tension between choosing speaking or signing, but then looks at the hand depicting “signing” and places it over her heart, the opening and closing of her fist in time with the rhythm she has established throughout the poem, like a heartbeat. Later, she pushes the sign for “speaking” away, turning to the other side and finding a community that signs, signing “same” and “relationship” between herself and where the community has been established in space. She signs both words to the same previously established rhythm.

Both poems are concerned with different aspects of Deaf identity. Lentz’s poem focuses on encouraging hearing mothers of deaf children to expose their child to sign language and the Deaf community, while Marshall’s poem explores the narrator’s experience as a d/Deaf person before and after finding sign language and the Deaf community. While not all sign language poems have content concerned with Deaf identity and culture, it has been noted that the most common “extended metaphor” found in sign language poetry “alludes to situations concerning Deaf people’s interaction with the wider ‘Hearing world’” (Kaneko and Sutton-Spence 113). Another researcher describes the common focus on Deaf identity in sign language poetry as a major difference between sign language poetry and spoken language poetry (Baker). It is logical that many sign language poems would discuss concepts related to Deaf identity and culture, as sign language is inherently tied to Deaf history and identity, and any given audience able to understand sign language poetry will likely possess a fairly well-developed understanding of Deaf culture, if they are not Deaf themselves. This context allows sign language poets to reference Deaf experiences comfortably.

Having said this, however, it is interesting to note that Lentz’s poem could appear to be an outlier, as it clearly and explicitly addresses hearing mothers of deaf children who have never had any

real exposure to sign language or the Deaf community before. Because of this, the fact that the video of Lentz's poem includes English closed captions allows a non-signing, hearing audience to be able to identify with the Deaf poet and thus have a chance to be persuaded by her arguments. As Lentz's main argument concerns encouraging hearing mothers to join with the Deaf community in raising her deaf child, the combined use of ASL and English captions supports this argument in a way that neither language could by itself. It may also be worth noting that the English captions to the poem do not interpret word for word nor mirror the creative poetic effects of the poem, but instead focus on capturing the overall meaning of each thought. This would also be logical if one of the poet's intentions was to effectively express their arguments to a non-signing audience. (As an aside, the rhetoric of interpretation between spoken languages and sign languages is a fascinating topic that deserves scholarly attention, though it exceeds the purposes of this essay.)

In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke argues that "to begin with 'identification' is, by the same token, though roundabout, to confront the implications of *division*. . . . Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division" (22). This dichotomy is visible in both Lentz's and Marshall's poems, as both concern aspects of Deaf culture and identity that imply, and in some cases explicitly signal, division, especially division between the Deaf and hearing "worlds." In addition to being evident in the semantic content of the poems, this division can be seen in the poems' physical structure in space. In "To a Hearing Mother," Lentz establishes the "hearing world" and the "deaf world" in different locations, and then draws attention to the division between them by repeatedly signing "different" (in which the index fingers touch and then are drawn away from each other, one towards the "hearing world" and the other towards the "deaf world"). Similarly, in "Deaf Heart," Marshall often represents speaking on one hand while simultaneously representing signing on her other hand, and then looks back and forth between the two, clearly displaying the disparity between them as well as the

concept that the narrator has to choose one. These visually show how division is implied in identification.

The identification made through sign language poetry has the potential to create powerful epideictic effects. First, the visual-spatial expression of language inherent in sign language poetry creates pathos by vividly showing emotions, thoughts, and concepts to the audience. The captivating use of visual, three-dimensional symmetry expresses concepts such as the aforementioned tension between hearing people and Deaf people in effective ways. In addition, the fact that facial expressions are almost always a significant feature in sign language poems makes arguments that appeal to pathos especially powerful. Furthermore, sign language poets, whether intentionally or unintentionally, build their ethos in the eyes of their audience through their signing skills, as well as the stylistic choices they make and, potentially, their decisions whether or not to provide captions or translations. Presumably, the more skilled a poet's sign language poem is, the more well received both the poem and the poet will be, as in spoken language poems. However, in the case of sign language poetry, the signing skill of the poet is arguably even more connected to their ethos, as the audience of any sign language poem is likely construed of many skilled signers who can easily identify a flawed sentence or a beginning signer. However, the fact that a sign language poem appears in sign language, given the marginalized position Deaf people have occupied throughout history and given the relatively small number of people who know any given sign language today, is arguably enough for many audience members to automatically identify with the poet. And ultimately, through the identification between the audience and the poet, the function of sign language poems as creative works that affirm Deaf culture results in strong epideictic arguments. In their paper "Sign Language Poetry and Deaf Identity," Rachel Sutton-Spence and Ronice Müller de Quadros state the following:

Enjoyment is a very important element of sign language poetry, and the importance of this function should not be lightly dismissed. However, much of the poetry is also – at some level – about empowerment of Deaf people. . . . Using sign language creatively and as an art-form is an act of empowerment in itself for an oppressed minority language group. (177)

This is an important concept and ties in with Burke’s argument for the relationship between epideictic and poetics.

Sign language poetry is a fascinating subset of language arts that is both interesting and constructive to analyze rhetorically. Burke’s arguments regarding rhetorical identification, applied to sign language poetry and specific poems such as the two analyzed above, reveal how identification occurs and is used in sign language poems to build the ethos of the poet and create appeals to pathos within the audience. In addition, sign language poems have powerful epideictic outcomes, as they affirm and build up the Deaf community through their use of sign language, the creative choices made in the poems, and their frequent reference or allusion to Deaf culture and Deaf identity. Lentz’s poem “To a Hearing Mother” and Marshall’s poem “Deaf Heart” are two examples of sign language poems that use ethos and pathos throughout their arguments, resulting in clear epideictic effects. Analyzing sign language poems such as these through a rhetorical lens begins to reveal the complexity and beauty of sign language poetry, and at the same time has the potential to be of great value to the field of rhetoric, as such analysis expands on previously existing rhetorical scholarship to apply rhetorical concepts in unique ways in an understudied field. ►►

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