

# Spatial metaphor and expressions of identity in sign language poetry

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## Abstract

Sign languages are visual languages. Signers place signs in space to represent both concrete and abstract meaning, drawing on literal and metaphorical uses of space. This paper considers the ways that four sign language poems use space metaphorically in the exploration of the poets' identities as Deaf people. Signs placed across the sagittal, vertical and transverse axes are used to signal different views of identity, drawing upon basic cognitive spatial and orientational metaphors to refer to self and others, as well as values and conflicts between identities and their resolution. The spatial metaphors identified here interact with several other inter-connected metaphors, none of which can work alone. The complex interaction of these metaphors to describe a signer's identity is inextricably bound up with the embodiment of sign languages, so that the form of the human body foregrounds – and, perhaps even, predetermines – the metaphors selected by signers to conceptualise Deaf identity<sup>1</sup>.

Gebärdensprachen sind visuelle Sprachen, in denen Zeichen im Raum vor dem Sprecher platziert werden, um sowohl konkrete als auch abstrakte Bedeutungen zu repräsentieren. Ausgehend vom wörtlichen und metaphorischen Gebrauch von Räumlichkeit, untersucht der vorliegende Aufsatz in welcher Art und Weise in vier gebärdensprachlichen Gedichten Raum und Räumlichkeit zur metaphorischen Taubstummidentitätsbildung herangezogen werden. Zeichen und Gebärden werden körperbezogen entlang horizontaler, vertikaler und quer verlaufender Achsen mit dem Ziel einer entsprechenden Identitätsbildung platziert. Die hier herangezogenen Raum- und Orientierungsmetaphern rahmen sowohl das Selbst und das Andere, als auch konfligierende Wertzuschreibungen an Identitäten und bieten Möglichkeiten für deren Auflösung an. Die in diesem Beitrag analysierten Metaphern stellen eine dichtes und gegenseitig konstituierendes Geflecht an Zeichen- und Bedeutungsbeziehungen dar, die gerade in Bezug auf die Bildung von Taubstummidentität zu einem nicht zu unterschätzendem Maß von der Körperlichkeit des jeweiligen Sprechers bestimmt, wenn nicht prädeterniert wird.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Paul Scott, Richard Carter and Donna Williams for their kind permission to use their poems and for their time to discuss the use of space in their poetry. Their work is anthologised as part of a larger project on signed metaphor, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC grant number: AH/G011672/1) which has also supported the research reported here. I am also grateful to Jon Savage for his kind permission to use his poem Bully ASL. Greg Judge gave me the idea of analysing these poems as a thematic set. Figure 1, from Dorothy Miles' performance of The Staircase, is used with kind permission of Don Read. I thank Donna Jo Napoli, Donna West and Michiko Kaneko for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper and Claire Ramsey for her help with ASL translations. Tim Northam modelled the signs in Figure 3.

## **1. Introduction**

This paper considers the potential for signed languages, as visual-spatial languages, to express spatial metaphors directly. Spatial metaphors expressed in spoken languages must be expressed through words that have no spatial dimension, but signers can articulate their signs in carefully chosen locations to reflect metaphorical spatial meaning. The metaphor GOOD IS UP (Lakoff/Johnson 1980 for more details of this and many other conceptual and orientational metaphors) may be realised through English words and phrases such as “look up to”, “praise to the rafters” and “be elevated to a peerage”, but the words themselves have no intrinsic spatial value, having only conventional relationships between signifiers and signified. Signs in sign languages, on the other hand, being articulated in three-dimensional space, may realise the same metaphor through signs that are located at, directed at or moving towards higher locations within the signing space of the language. Until now, although this use of metaphor in sign languages has been noted and explored by several scholars (Taub 2001a, Wilcox 2000, Brennan 1990), focus has mostly been upon the use of spatial metaphor at a lexical level and as it is used in everyday language. However, Taub (2001b) has considered some metaphorical uses of space in American Sign Language (ASL) poetry as part of her analysis of the use of complex metaphors within one ASL poem by Ella Mae Lentz. In this analysis she reveals the use of a range of metaphors, focussing specifically on the way that Lentz blends them to increase the poetic message in her work. Taub’s seminal work does refer briefly to the use of orientational metaphors including POWERFUL IS UP and OPPRESSION IS DOWNWARD PRESSURE but these are not the focus of her analysis.

Here, I will focus specifically on ways in which poetic sign language uses space directly to show a range of spatial metaphors, describing the work of Deaf poets that illustrate it. I will show that the poets build upon devices available in everyday signing to create far more complex and subtle metaphorical uses of space. My analysis will specifically consider the use of spatial metaphors to express the poets’ sense of Deaf Identity. As the very use of sign language is usually understood to be central to a positive sense of Deaf Identity, it is fitting that the qualities inherent in the language are used symbolically to express it. In signed poems considering their perspectives on

Deaf Identity, the Deaf poets place and move their signs in contrasting left-right, up-down, and front-back locations that are metaphorically meaningful.

The discussion of an abstract concept such as identity is a useful area for exploration because it has no physical form to place in space. In order for the poets' spatial metaphors to operate satisfactorily with the non-concrete, hard-to-define social constructions we might call "identity", the poets need to draw on other conceptual metaphors. For example, the insubstantial concept needs to be substantialised, and this is achieved through metaphor. Only once it has substance can the newly "concrete" concept of Identity occupy space in a way that has metaphorical meaning. Thus, I show here how creative sign language can afford a new perspective on thinking about the symbolic use of space.

## **2. Metaphor in the structure of sign languages: The case of spatial metaphor**

Sign languages are visual-spatial-kinetic languages that have arisen within Deaf communities. They are independent of – although they have often been influenced by – the spoken languages of the hearing communities that surround them. Each sign may be seen physically as a sequence of movements and holds of a handshape articulated at a certain location. Signed vocabulary is frequently visually motivated (for example, the sign DEAF usually indicates the ear in some way), as is grammatical information, through the location of signs in space and the direction, speed and path of movement of the articulating hands (For further information on the structure of signed languages see Johnston/Schembri 2007; Valli/Lucas/Mulroney 2005, Sutton-Spence/Woll 1998). The sign languages studied here are British Sign Language (BSL) and American Sign Language (ASL), but the underlying principles about the use of space in signed poems to express the identities outlined should hold for other national sign languages.

Normally, the handedness of a signer is irrelevant to language production. As most signers are right-handed, the right hand is normally the dominant hand, which articulates one-handed signs and is the active hand in relation to a static base hand in two-handed signs. However, this dominance is reversed in left-handed signers and is rarely remarked upon. Of the four poets whose work is considered here, the three British poets are right-handed (Donna

Williams, Paul Scott and Richard Carter) and the American poet, John Savage, is a left-handed signer. We should note, however, that poets can over-ride their natural handedness and deliberately select the hand they sign with for poetic effect – and this is especially relevant when discussing spatial metaphors.

Following the seminal work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), cognitive semanticists claim it is well established in principle that space is used symbolically in the thought processes and languages of most, if not all, people, and that orientational metaphors are widespread in languages, generating related phrases and expressions. Grounded in our experiences of interaction with the world, we understand, for example, that growth is often linked to health and strength. Thus, the metaphor GOOD IS UP is widely used in many languages, leading to understandings – and consequently to linguistic expressions – such as looking up to those we respect and down on those we don't; better employment and social success as climbing up and social or financial failure as moving down. While spoken languages use words with no spatial aspects to the speech sounds produced to convey these concepts, sign languages are able to use space directly to show them. This symbolic use of space is seen in core signed vocabulary items, as well as in the creative language such as is considered in this research. Thus signs for high status referents may be placed higher in space than lower status ones; the signs WIN and SUCCEED in BSL move upward, while the signs LOSE and FAIL move downward; the sign PROMOTION moves up and the sign BANKRUPT moves down (We should note that up is not always good. They may be neutral and may even be bad – things that are “up in the air” are unsettled and to “give up” is usually seen as an admission of failure. In BSL, at least, signs reflecting these ideas also move upwards.). The signed representation of ideas such as EMOTIONAL CLOSENESS IS PHYSICAL CLOSENESS is another category of signed spatial metaphor seen widely, although not exclusively (the BSL sign LOVE is articulated on the body while the sign HATE moves away from the body), as are other widespread frameworks such as THE MIND IS A CONTAINER or MENTAL PROCESSES ARE CONCRETE OBJECTS (see Brennan 1990; 2005). These observations also hold for ASL (Wilcox 2005) and other sign languages including Catalan Sign Language (Jarque 2005). While there remains a great deal of exploration to be done on

the symbolic use of space in signed vocabulary, the direct spatial representation of the spatial metaphors behind signed concepts is clearly widespread. These signed expressions of spatial and other metaphors may be informed by studies on gesture and metaphor as well as linguistics.

Whether signing or gesturing while speaking, humans often move their hands in relation to three key axes: left to right, along the transverse axis; front to back along the sagittal axis; and up and down along the vertical axis. The ideas of SELF IS CLOSE or GOOD IS UP (and, hence, OTHER IS DISTANT and DOWN IS BAD) are widespread in spoken language, and speakers often represent them gesturally by moving their hands across the sagittal and vertical axes (Calbris 2008). As the body is associated with 'self', gestures and signs referring to the self are articulated on, at or towards the body, and signs referring to others are articulated further away from the body. In Nigel Howard's BSL haiku poem *Deaf*, signs referring to the deaf baby when it is born are made close to the parent's body but when the medical professional operates on the baby to implant a cochlear implant, the signs for laying the baby gently down and operating on it are placed markedly forward in the signing space (see Fig. 4). Thus, the location of signs across the sagittal axis is clearly used to signal "us" and "them" in the poem, as well as EMOTIONAL CLOSENESS IS PHYSICAL CLOSENESS (and its converse for distance). GOOD IS UP is seen in Dorothy Miles' BSL poem *The Staircase* where she uses height of signs to signal success through education within the Deaf community. At the start of the poem, uneducated (and 'unenlightened' in various senses) deaf people are lost in a dark forest, with signs articulated at waist-to-chest height. They see glimmering lights at the top of a huge staircase – where the sign for the lights is articulated above head height – and move towards them. Signs describing their ascent of the staircase, as they gain their education, move progressively higher from waist to head height. It is clear that signs placed higher in the signing space are used to convey positive meaning as they move to better their lives (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1 a-c:** People (each person represented by a finger) at three different heights as they ascend the staircase from the forest.

**Fig. 1 d:** Lights twinkling far away at the top of the staircase (note the hands reach outside the camera frame).

However, despite the expectation that up-down metaphors will use the vertical axis and close-far metaphors should move along the sagittal axis, the transverse axis is also commonly used for speakers gesturing while talking about these topics. It is well-documented that most symmetrical signs are symmetrical across the transverse left-right axis in sign languages (Napoli/Wu 2003; Sutton-Spence/Kaneko 2007). The same is seen in the gestures of hearing people when they speak (Calbris 2008). This is because natural human symmetry locates our hands on the left and right so that it is physiologically easiest to use this distinction. Humans have very distinct ventral and dorsal sides, and our top halves are very different from our lower portions, but our left and right sides are remarkably similar. We may thus expect that division of space into left and right might carry dichotomous ideas symbolically. Ideas of difference and opposition (1/1), equivalence (1=1) and complementarity (1+1) can all be presented visually in the left and right fields, perhaps precisely because the two sides of the body are so similar. Calbris notes that, while the other two axes are also used in gesture, they are often projected on to the side-to-side axis, so that low, back and left are associated, and high, forward and right are also associated. These ideas of symbolic use of space are exploited by sign language poets when they explore expressions of their identity.

Using a particular metaphor foregrounds some aspects of the phenomenon under discussion at the expense of other aspects so that choice of metaphor frames phenomena or events in specific ways (Semino 2008). For humans generally, it is possible that our possession of two hands predisposes us to create so many dichotomous distinctions. In sign languages, where signs are

expressed with left and right hands, perhaps the very embodiment of the concepts leads signers to present issues as dyads.

In order for these and other metaphors to work in sign languages, it is necessary to re-iconise metaphor. In our basic conceptualisation of metaphor, through their embodied origins, we understand these metaphors at an iconic level, but as they are transferred into a spoken language representation they lose their iconicity. In sign languages, the linguistic realisations of the essential visual metaphors are rendered iconic again.

## **2.1 Other metaphors – container and manipulation metaphors**

There are many metaphorical uses of space in signed languages (for example, the use of space to depict different perspectives of time) but here I will focus on two widespread conceptual metaphors that are of particular relevance to the discussion of identity in these poems – THE BODY IS A CONTAINER and ABSTRACT CONCEPTS ARE PHYSICAL OBJECTS. Both are well-represented in sign languages, just as they are in spoken languages. Wilcox (2005), for example, has shown that ASL treats the chest and belly as containers for emotions, and the head is treated as a container for mental processes. I will show that the torso is also treated as a container for facets of the signer's identity by at least three of the poets here. The BSL signs SELF, I, MY and IDENTITY are located at the sternum – the mid-part of the torso – locating these concepts as part of the core of the person in a physical and emotional sense, rather than any intellectual sense (Fig. 2). The signs for these are also articulated at this location in ASL, although the handshapes and movements may differ, suggesting that it is the location that is especially meaningful here symbolically for the concept of self. It is well-established (see Brennan 1990, Jarque 2005) that signs relating to emotions are frequently located on the chest in many sign languages. This metaphor of EMOTION IS CONTAINED IN THE CHEST works in conjunction with the metaphor for the self and identity to be located in the chest, suggesting that in BSL and ASL (and many other sign languages) identity is more of an emotional entity than an intellectual one.



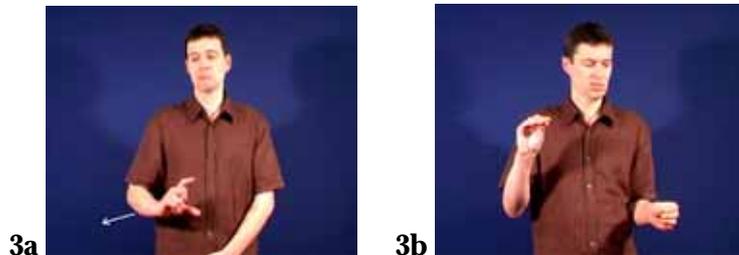
**Fig. 2:** IDENTITY signed at the sternum (by the right hand).

To remove things from the body is to remove a part of the self and, metaphorically, facets of identity may be moved in and out of the torso, removing or replacing these parts of the self. Associated with the container metaphor is the idea that objects within a container are hidden, and objects outside a container may be seen. This links to a further widespread metaphor KNOWING IS SEEING (a metaphor that is especially relevant for Deaf people, for whom vision is such an important way of perceiving the world). It allows signers to look at elements taken from within the chest for reflection and understanding of the now-visible elements. Using the poems discussed here, I will show how the poets place and move their signs referring to identity to describe revelation and concealment of their identities.

Wilcox (2000) has also demonstrated the widespread presence in sign languages of the metaphor MENTAL PROCESSES ARE OBJECTS THAT CAN BE MANIPULATED (Brennan 2005 makes a similar observation for BSL). Thus one may grasp, hold or select ideas, thoughts or memories using the same handshapes as seen in signs referring to grasping, holding or selecting concrete objects. Once the concepts are substantialised so that they can be held, they can then be held up for inspection, moved around, laid out, and so on. In the poetry described here, we see that the abstract elements of identity may also be treated as concrete objects that can be manipulated in the same way.

Another, less common, metaphor in everyday sign language treats abstract concepts as animate beings capable of independent movement and even possessing language. In humorous or creative signing, for example, the idea of 'confidence' may be animated so that a loss of confidence may be expressed as confidence moving away, using a verb predicate sign normally used to refer to a hunched person moving away. This sign is a pun on the BSL sign CONFIDENCE that already has this curved handshape (Fig. 3a). In an even more

complex expression, the hands articulating the sign TEACHING may be animated so that they look at each other and question what they are doing (Fig. 3b) (Sutton-Spence/Napoli 2009, forthcoming). The attribution of independent movement to the concept of identity is seen in one of the poems described here.



**Fig. 3:** Substantialised signs treating abstract ideas as entities capable of independent movement.

**Fig. 3a:** Confidence wanders sadly away – the C handshape used in the sign CONFIDENCE altered to reflect a hunched upright entity moving.

**Fig. 3b:** Part of teaching falls by the wayside while the other part looks on – the closed handshape used in the sign TEACHING altered to reflect the snout and head of an animal.

### 3. Deaf Identities

We can see identity as the sense of being oneself, and not another. There has been a great deal written about Deaf identity – and how it is changing – over the last decade, and this is not the place to review the literature in depth (see Leigh 2008; Brueggeman 2008). However, this section will briefly summarise some of the salient points necessary for appreciating the use of spatial metaphor to express Deaf identity. Carty (1994) has outlined some characteristics of Deaf Identity that we may use to understand the expression of identity as it is explored in the signed poems. These include embracing deafness as an essential, positive part of oneself, recognising and participating in Deaf culture and customs (especially through sign language) and interpreting the surrounding world in a way that is compatible with one's experience as a Deaf person. While many hearing people will see deafness as a loss and the lack of spoken language as a disadvantage, within the Deaf community, Deaf people see themselves as a linguistic and social group where sign language is celebrated. The signed poems under consideration stem from the poets' attempts to define and live the reality of these characteristics and reconcile them with less positive views of deafness. It is perhaps significant

that none of the poets makes any reference to the question of a sense of identity as disabled. No poet here asks the question “Am I Deaf or am I disabled?” By using sign language the poets are already rejecting any idea based on a medical or social disability model that they might be disabled. Instead they embrace the idea that they are members of a language minority and the questions asked in the poems start from this point.

Deafness from a medical perspective may simply be defined by a loss of hearing. However, social, cultural and linguistic models of deafness frequently distinguish between a “deaf” person (note the lower case “d”) who has a hearing loss and a “Deaf” person (note the upper case “D”), who identifies culturally with a Deaf community and uses sign language. The question of what it means to “identify” with the Deaf community and who is or is not a community member is far more complex than some might expect. It has been considered by many scholars from a range of perspectives: by Padden and Humphries (1988, 2005) in relation to Deaf signers in America with strong ‘traditional’ Deaf experiences of Deaf school and Deaf club life; by Brueggeman (2008) from the perspective of a “late-comer” to the Deaf community; by Preston (1994) and Hoffmeister (2008) in relation to the hearing children of Deaf parents (again in America, but see also Napier 2008, with respect to the Australian experience) who may socially and linguistically identify most closely with the Deaf community while having no hearing loss; Breivik (2005) in relation to people (in Norway but also internationally) with varying degrees of hearing loss and varying degrees of closeness to the Deaf community depending on their school and language experiences; and Ladd (2003) who has considered, amongst others, the identities of British people who may be members or ‘allies’ of the Deaf community.

For many years there has been an understanding in American Deaf culture that one cannot be both Deaf and Hearing (Padden/Humphries 1988) and this dichotomous belief has been widely accepted in other countries, including the UK. In the Deaf community “ambiguity is rarely allowed; people are either *hearing* or *deaf*” (Preston (1994:16), referring to the American Deaf community, italics in the original). The possibility of a fully bicultural identity is rarely overtly explored (Brueggeman 2008). Increasingly, for younger people with a physical hearing loss, but who have been brought up socially, linguistically and educationally to adapt to the ‘hearing world’, a key identity struggle is

between being a Deaf person or a Hearing person – or partially both, or perhaps neither. Identities are as multiple and fluid for a deaf person as they are for anyone in periods of rapid social change such as we have seen in the last few decades, so that the questions “Am I Deaf or Hearing” or “Am I a Deaf person or a deaf person?” can be complex and demanding (Leigh 2008).

Multiple identities may thus be seen within one person. They also occur within a non-homogeneous Deaf community, leading to struggles to find a single collective identity. The final message in all four poems that I consider in this research is that the conflict can best be resolved by accepting the apparent conflicting differences as being parts of a greater, somehow unified, whole.

The development, discovery or acquisition of a Deaf identity is complicated. Perhaps as many as 95% of all deaf people are born to hearing families, where there is no knowledge or understanding of either sign language or Deaf culture. Traditionally, most deaf children’s Deaf identities began when they started school because they were educated at schools for the deaf. At these schools, sign language was often devalued or even proscribed, but the children signed together, covertly if necessary, and began to learn about Deaf culture and the Deaf community. The few children who came from Deaf families were especially important to the other children because they taught them the language and cultural customs of the Deaf community. These children who attended Deaf schools, despite knowing and understanding their place in the world as Deaf people, still have had to deal with the reality that they are part of a minority community and that mainstream society views deafness as something “lacking”, and sees sign languages as inferior to speech (Ladd 2003). However, at least they have had the benefit of deaf society and access to sign language during their education. Since the 1980s, education of deaf children on both sides of the Atlantic has steadily moved away from placement in deaf schools, so that most deaf children are now educated in mainstream schools with hearing children, relying on assistive hearing devices (hearing aids or cochlear implants) to access spoken language. They have limited or no access to either Deaf culture or sign language. They grow up in a ‘hearing world’ aware that they are different because they are deaf but with no clear affiliation to any ‘Deaf World’. Many only discover sign language and the Deaf community in young adulthood. For these people, a complex layering and mixing of identities is the norm.

The view of deafness as a state has been challenged by Paddy Ladd (Ladd 2003) with the suggestion that the social, political, linguistic and personal identities of deaf people should be seen instead as a process, encompassed by the term 'Deafhood'. Ladd explains that the process is used "by each Deaf child, Deaf family and Deaf adult to explain to themselves and each other their own existence in the world. In sharing their lives with each other as a community, and enacting those explanations rather than writing books about them, Deaf people are engaged in a daily praxis, a continuing internal and external dialogue" (Ladd 2003:3). Deafhood is seen by some Deaf people as a unifying and positive acceptance of all deaf people, no matter what their national or educational experience has been.

Although it is clear that members of the Deaf community are very aware of their identity as Deaf people, there is no simple identity dichotomy in reality. Social identities include those that arise from their national identities, gender affiliations, ethnic family heritages and age. An older Caucasian American deaf man, for example, has a different sense of identity from a late-teenage British Asian deaf woman. Despite this, social identification for Deaf people especially centres on the issue of belonging to the Deaf community – or not – and the linguistic identities for a deaf person are influenced by, and reflected in, their choice of language for different tasks and different forms of interaction. Most importantly, perhaps, they may feel the need to resolve the question of whether they identify with "The Deaf World" or "The Hearing World". Clearly, such concepts are abstract, arbitrary and ultimately artificial social constructs, and the simple dichotomies of 'signer' and 'non-signer' or 'deaf' and 'hearing' are anything but simple in reality. However, like so many dichotomies, they are very powerful concepts. The use of opposing signing spaces in poems relating to identity enables their representations and perhaps perpetuates them.

#### **4. Sign language poetry and expressions of Deaf identity**

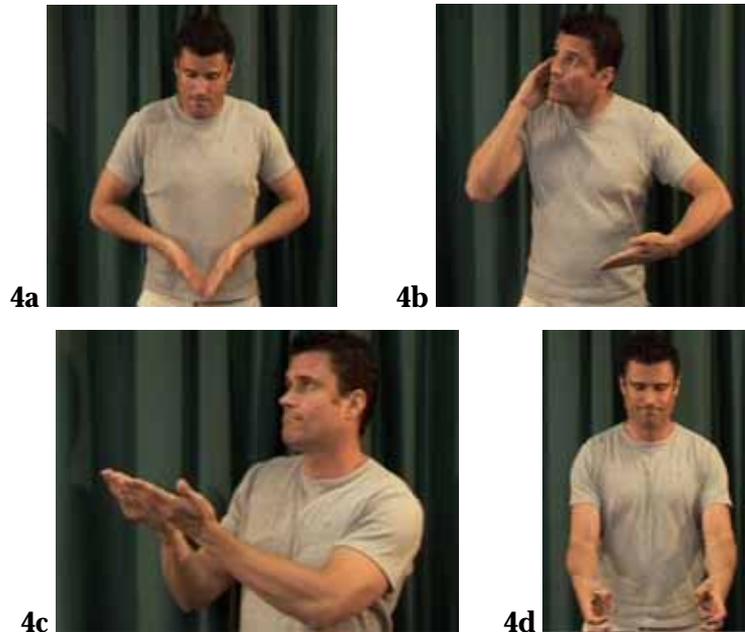
It is well recognised that sign language poetry is an ideal vehicle for the exploration and expression of Deaf identity (Ormsby 1995; Peters 2000; Sutton-Spence/Muller de Quadros 2005, Bauman/Nelson/Rose 2006). In many poems, explorations of Deaf experiences and identity are conveyed through anthropomorphic metaphors, so that Deaf audiences expect to see the

Deaf community's experiences, struggles and victories through vehicles such as trees and other plants, animals and even inanimate objects such as a pinball (Sutton-Spence/Napoli 2010). Issues concerning finding one's place in the world are tackled in Dorothy Miles' BSL version of *The Ugly Duckling* (e.g. in Sutton-Spence/Woll 1998) and Ben Bahan's ASL poetic narrative *Bird of a Different Feather* (2007), which both use anthropomorphised birds as the vehicle for exploring the experiences of deaf children born into hearing families.

Other explorations are seen through analogy with other characters easily recognised by members of the Deaf community, for example in Paul Scott's BSL poem *Macbeth of the Lost Ark* (2009), the Deaf hero is modelled on a fusion of images of heroes from Macbeth and Indiana Jones. Reference to King Arthur is seen in Dorothy Miles' poem *The Staircase* and to Icarus in her poem *Hang-glider* (see Sutton-Spence 2005 for English text translations of these BSL and ASL poems), again, using these characters to comment on Deaf ways of being. Real life parallels may also be drawn, as in *Blue Suits* by Paul Scott, in which a warning to Deaf people of the perils of fame and the tragedy of the fall from popular grace is shown through reference to Margaret Thatcher and to Diana, Princess of Wales (herself a BSL signer, whose close relationship with the Deaf community was best manifest in her patronage of the British Deaf Association).

Issues of identity and deaf-hearing relationships may also be expressed through linguistic form in signed poetry using handshapes that carry symbolic meaning and valence. The handshape of a sign may be open or closed, with straight or bent or "clawed" fingers. Although there are non-symbolic uses of these handshapes, there is a significantly high proportion of signs with clawed/bent handshapes that carry negative valence in BSL (such as ANGRY, JEALOUS, MISERABLE, POOR, THIEF, NAG, OLD and BLIND) (Kaneko 2008). Although I am unaware of any systematic research on this in ASL, the same pattern appears to hold, as signs such as ANGRY, NAUSEATED and WEAK are made with clawed handshapes. Thus we may wish to present this as GOOD IS RELAXED AND OPEN and BAD IS TENSE AND CLAWED. Nigel Howard's BSL haiku *Deaf* (2006) makes use of the valence carried within handshapes, as the signs relating to a deaf baby's birth and the innocently trusting parents giving it to the care of the medical profession are all related

using an open flat handshape (Fig. 4a-c). The final, shocking sign is made with a sharp movement and uses two closed, clawed handshapes (Fig. 4d). That sign may be translated as “implant the baby with two cochlear implants” (also punning with the BSL sign TRAP, implying that the baby is now trapped within the medical model of deafness).



**Fig. 4:** Handshape valence in Nigel Howard’s haiku *Deaf*.

**Fig. 4a:** BORN.

**Fig. 4b:** DEAF (on the right hand – usually made with the handshape seen in Figs 12 and 16 but using the flat handshape here for poetic effect).

**Fig. 4c:** PASS-THE-BABY-TO-SOMEONE.

**Fig. 4d:** IMPLANT-THE-BABY-WITH -COCHLEAR-IMPLANTS.

As well as these metaphorical representations of identity, space may be seen as one more available option for signers to use when creating poems in relation to Deaf Identity.

## 5. The poems under discussion

The four poems considered for this exploration of space and identity are *Bully ASL* by Jon Savage, *Identity* by Richard Carter, *Who am I?* by Donna Williams and *Five Senses* by Paul Scott. All poems are available for viewing on the Internet (for their URLs, please see reference list). The first of these is by an American Deaf poet and is performed in ASL (American Sign Language); the

remaining three are by British Deaf poets and are performed in BSL (British Sign Language). All the poems deal with the apparently oppositional Deaf or Hearing identities and signing or speaking identities. The three British poems reflect on issues of multiple identities for an individual Deaf person (while acknowledging that these are issues relevant to many Deaf people). *Identity* considers three aspects: being Deaf, using a sign language, and sexual orientation. *Who am I* reflects on these and other aspects of personal, linguistic and social identity including gender. Paul Scott's *Five Senses* takes a somewhat different approach, showing how a Deaf person's identity is complete, despite the apparent "loss" of one sense. In contrast to these more individualistic poems, *Bully ASL* considers the tensions within the American Deaf community between people who have grown up in the Deaf community using American Sign Language, and people who have grown up surrounded by hearing people using English and learned ASL as a second language. Within the American Deaf community, non-fluent signers and late-comers to the community often find themselves rejected by more established signers who do not consider them "Deaf enough" (Bauman 2008).

The four poems are provided in translation at the end of this article, with an attempt to place some of the words on the page in a way that represents, at least in part, the spatial layout of the signs. It is striking that all these poems use space to explore and express different aspects of identity. I will show how spatial metaphors are made real across the transverse axis by the poets standing to the left and right (or centre), using the left and right hands independently (or together) and placing signs in the left and right halves of space in front of them (or using the centre space). Across this axis, signs may be articulated far apart, at the extreme ends of the left-right space, or may be held closer to the mid-line. The dominant division is across this transverse axis, with opposing or enumerated concepts laid out on each side. Another division is along the sagittal axis, as ideas of the self are contrasted with the ideas of others. This use of space is further bound up in the "container" metaphor that uses the sagittal axis to locate signs close to or on the body (as being in the container) or in front of the signer, so that signs across the front-back axis express hidden and revealed identity. Placement in relation to the vertical axis also relates to visibility, as signs may be made lower and higher in space according to whether they can be seen or not, and status, as signs

referring to a more dominant character are articulated higher than those for a less powerful character.

We should note that space is not the only way in which identity is poetically presented through foregrounded use of language or performance. *Bully ASL* is the most 'produced' performance of the four reviewed here, in which contrast is shown sartorially and through linguistic style as well as spatially. The poem inter-cuts two versions of the poet as two characters to show the contrasting and apparently conflicting aspects of Deaf community membership, divided by language experiences: the first character represents the 'Hearing Impaired' signer and the second represents the 'Deaf' signer (Within the Deaf community, the term "Deaf" has positive connotations not normally appreciated in hearing society). The Hearing Impaired signer wears a white shirt and the Deaf signer wears a black shirt. The use of contrasting colours is deliberate, as Jon Savage reports on his YouTube site that his decision to use black and white symbolises yin and yang. Opposing colours symbolise opposing camps within the American Deaf community, and yet they are both inextricably linked. This symbolic idea that there can be a union of opposites is further developed when the character advocating Deafhood to unite these opposing views of deaf identity wears red.

The style and speed of signing, and the posture and facial expression of the characters also highlight the contrasting elements in the poems as the poets attempt to reconcile apparent conflicts. In *Bully ASL*, the Hearing Impaired signer signs slowly, earnestly and almost apologetically, articulating each grammatical element of English in a signed form, while the Deaf signer signs faster, more assertively (almost aggressively) and with no reference to English grammar at all. This emphasises the strongly-held belief among many signers that signed English is slow, clumsy and inelegant, whereas "natural" sign languages enable fast, clear and unhindered communication. In *Identity*, the oppressive outside threats to Deaf Identity sign firmly and almost didactically, while the poet's Deaf character signs more tentatively and deferentially at first, but at the end, the certainty borne of clear identity and self-esteem leads to signs that are even larger, faster and firmer than the Oppressors'. The signs in the first half of *Who am I?* are made slowly and deliberately as the poet questions how to deal with the different aspects of her identity that she reveals. In the second half of the poem, however, as she

travels towards acceptance of her complex set of identities, the signs are faster and almost casually articulated, as the component parts are hastily reassembled to create the satisfied poet, who has come to accept the apparent chaos and conflict because she is not the neat and simple individual she might have expected to be. Paul Scott's *Five Senses* also speeds up towards the climax of the poem. As the senses of sight and 'hearing' work together to show the core identity of the Deaf person, movements are faster and less carefully articulated in the headlong rush of excitement of perception in a Deaf World. The signs are also noticeably different in this final section. In the first three senses of touch, taste and smell (shared by anyone with Deaf or Hearing identity) signs are highly productive and almost gestural and very little recognisable vocabulary is used. When the final two senses work together to produce the key element of the Deaf identity, the signs used are established lexical items from BSL vocabulary. This symbolises the fact that Deaf Identity is seen most clearly in the use of sign languages (as mentioned in the introductory section of this paper). When the poet expresses his uniquely Deaf identity he uses vocabulary items unique to his signed language, rather than using signs that are far closer to the gestures that might be shared by Deaf and hearing people alike.

### **5.1 Signing along the sagittal axis**

In *Bully ASL*, there is symbolic movement forwards and backwards along the midsagittal axis within the vocabulary signs used by the two characters, showing their contrasting senses of esteem and pride. The Hearing Impaired signer's signs move inwards as though the signer is withdrawing from others (TOWARDS SELF IS AWAY FROM OTHERS) while the Deaf signer's signs move forwards as though taking up a larger personal space with the idea that IMPORTANT IS LARGE . In *Identity*, when the poet finally stands up to the didactic outside oppressors, the repeated sign NO! moves outwards, again expressing IMPORTANT IS LARGE<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 5).

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<sup>2</sup> An alternative but related metaphor that could be used here is 'LOUD' IS LARGE, so that larger space equates to greater sound volume. I am grateful to Donna Jo Napoli for suggesting this.



**Fig. 5:** Strong Deaf Identity says NO! to the Oppressors, with a large outward movement.

Each of the BSL poems also uses this division of space for the ‘container’ metaphor, as the elements of Deaf identity are treated as though they are located in the chest. This division of space could be seen as a distinction of ‘in’ and ‘out’, rather than front and back, yet, because the body is the location for ‘in’ and the front of the body is the location for ‘out’, there is a noticeable movement of signs forwards and backwards. In order for the poets to reflect upon specific elements of their identity, the elements need to leave the more-personal chest area and come into less personal space. This is what Lindner (in Ekberg 1997:78) refers to as the “region of interactive focus” – “the realm of shared experience, action, function, conscious interaction and awareness”. Once out there, they can be seen, and so, using the metaphor KNOWING IS SEEING, they can be understood. Donna Williams opens the “body container” with the sign made as though pulling out the top of her shirt and looking down inside it (Fig. 6a). This sign is reasonably well established in BSL to mean “look inside yourself,” but still has definite poetic resonances. Richard Carter opens his “body container” laterally, as though opening both sides of a coat (Fig. 6b). Donna needs to reach down into her container to retrieve the characteristics of her identity (Fig. 7a), whereas Richard holds his open and lets them walk out on the level (Fig. 7b). Paul Scott’s animated senses are located in the fingers of one hand (clearly motivated by the human form of the poet having five fingers, one for each sense,) but in order to express themselves as part of his identity they travel up his arm and situate themselves firmly in his chest before revealing themselves by taking over his entire body (Fig. 8). In all three cases, the identity characteristic is openly revealed symbolically by the linguistic device of presenting the signs clearly and openly.



**Fig. 6:** signs opening the body to reveal identity.

**Fig. 6a:** Opening the container from the top.

**Fig. 6b1 and 6b:** Opening the container from the front.



**Fig. 7:** Elements of identity leaving the container of the body.

**Fig. 7a:** Element of identity to be handled.

**Fig. 7b:** Element of identity capable of independent movement.



**Fig. 8:** Elements of identity in *Five Senses*.

**Fig. 8a:** Element of identity capable of independent movement and conversation as Taste is shown in the left index finger (the right index finger is making the sign WHAT?).

**Fig. 8b:** Element of identity fully embodied including the right hand (enjoying a delicious taste, here).

We saw above that part of the definition of Deafhood entails the idea of an internal and external dialogue about living as a Deaf person. The poems here provide linguistic expressions that make real the metaphoric ideas of internal

and external dialogue. In *Who am I?*, this spatial metaphor of identity being contained within the body co-occurs with the idea that its elements are concrete objects to be manipulated, as Donna Williams picks up each one in her hand, holds it up for her scrutiny and lays it out in the space before her (Fig. 9a).



**Fig. 9:** Element of identity that can be held, looked at and considered.

In *Identity*, the spatial metaphor is possible because the elements are personified using whole entity classifiers, so that they can move independently and observed (Fig. 7b – note the signer’s gaze as it looks at the character emerging). Each one, once it has moved itself out from the container of “self” into the outside region of interactive focus, is able to converse with the poet and contradict the didactic oppressors.

In *Five Senses*, each sense is also allocated an entity classifier to allow it to be observed and given the power of communication with the signer outside the body (although this time to the side rather than in front) (Fig. 8b – note the signer’s gaze as it addresses the character on the left hand, in this case asking it, “What are you?”). When the sense has possessed the body to reveal its nature, it no longer converses but instead communicates through the very embodiment that demonstrates its nature. The container metaphor is also seen in signs that show the senses taking information “in” to the body. Movement of signs along the sagittal axis varies according to whether the senses may be considered distal or proximal but in both types the hands move in towards the body to show perception. The more proximal senses (touch, taste and smell) are signed initially with outward movements as the poet reaches out in order to engage with the sensations. The distal senses (sight, working with hearing) are signed with signs that move more immediately in to the body without the initial outward movement.

## 5.2 Signing along the vertical axis

Gravity and biology make verticality perhaps the most salient dimension for many cognitively based metaphors. There is a metonymic motivation behind ideas that MORE IS UP, because a rise in surface level is the most salient representation of some sort of increase. This metonymic device is extended to many associated metaphorical concepts (leading, for example, to GOOD IS UP and POWERFUL IS UP) and the poems use upward movement and location to show positive valence in various ways. We also see the idea that VISIBLE IS UP (and HIDDEN IS DOWN). Signs along this axis relating to these metaphors to express Deaf identity are seen in *Five Senses* and *Identity*.

In *Five Senses*, each sense appears to sleep in the closed fist. To converse with a sense, the poet has to wake it up by tapping it. As the sense wakes, the finger straightens. The idea that UP = AWAKE, HEALTHY OR ACTIVE and DOWN = ASLEEP, ILL OR INACTIVE is clearly operational here (see Wilcox 2005). The exception to this is when the poet tries to converse with the sense of hearing. This finger cannot straighten and repeatedly uncurls halfway before closing again. It can only straighten when it does so next to the finger representing sight (Fig. 10). Thus we see positive, upright and healthy elements operating with the orientational UP metaphor. A healthy Deaf identity is related to UP with the straight fingers. The sense that cannot operate alone and needs to work with sight for a Deaf identity stands up when sight stands up and the straightness of the fingers in the sign reflects this (in another performance of this poem, the finger can straighten when it is first called but curls up when the poet asks “What are you?” Thus the link between the straight and upright nature of the finger and the sense of knowing one’s identity is made even more strongly).



**Fig. 10:** Curled finger suggests something ill-formed; Straight finger suggests well-formed.

**Fig. 10a:** Sense of hearing (on left hand) as a curled finger when alone.

**Fig. 10b:** Senses of hearing and sight (on left hand) both straight fingers when together.

As the final senses work together to express the “true” full Deaf identity, signs are articulated at their highest in the poem, once again referring to the idea that GOOD IS UP. There is a pleasant poetic effect of upward direction of movement through the poem as the senses are presented in a steadily rising pattern (signs related to touch are articulated at torso height, then those for taste at mouth height, then smell at the nose) until, the signs for sight-with-hearing are at the level of the eyes. Clearly, we might expect signs related to sight to be at eye height because of the direct embodiment of the signs, but the fact remains that signs for the most valued sense in Deaf identity are signed the highest point on the vertical axis at the climax of the poem. The final sign in the sight-with-hearing sequence, however, starts at eye level and ends at the bottom of the sternum, at the centre of the body. This sign, which can be roughly translated as ACQUIRE, carries the meaning of thorough learning, reflecting the idea that knowledge that is truly learned and understood is taken not just into the mind but deep into the self. Normally the sign LEARN would be articulated at head height, as learning is associated with being a mental process. Again, then, the location of the sign is seen to have symbolic meaning of going beyond being merely a mental process but being part of identity and an emotion that is part of the self (Fig. 11).



**Fig. 11:** Acquire deep into the body.

Richard Carter's *Identity* uses height in signing space in two different ways. The first is to reflect power relations between the outside "hearing" world and his threatened inner Deaf identity, using POWERFUL IS UP. The three personified elements from the hearing world approach him from shoulder height, reflecting their power and status (Fig. 12a). They look down to talk to him and he looks up to talk to them (Fig. 12b and c). The second way uses the idea of HIDDEN IS DOWN as the three personified elements of his identity emerge from his chest and remain at chest height (Fig. 13). Richard has explained that although they are revealed to the poet as they leave his chest (referred to above while discussing movement along the midsagittal) they remain hidden from the outside world because they are low.



**Fig. 12:** Oppressor of Deaf identity represented higher up in space.

**Fig. 12a:** Oppressor approaches at shoulder height.

**Fig. 12b:** Oppressor talks down to the Deaf person asking "Are you Deaf?".

**Fig. 12c:** Deaf person talks up to the Oppressor replying "Yes, I'm Deaf".



**Fig. 13:** Element of Deaf identity represented lower down in space, as it leaves the container at chest height (see Fig. 12a where oppressive figure is at shoulder height)

### 5.3 Signing across the transverse axis

While the vertical axis might be the most salient, elements that might be expected to be treated in terms of verticality are frequently transferred to the transverse axis because of the natural structure of the human body. This is particularly the case in sign languages where meaning is embodied laterally because of our symmetry and the arrangements of our arms and hands.

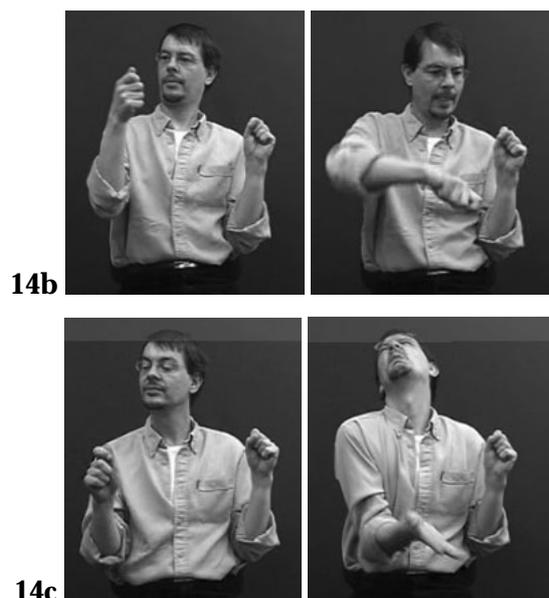
Division left and right, across the transverse axis, is used extensively by the signers to express contrast and conflict, as well as simple enumeration. Signing space is often divided into the left side and the right side, with signs placed to the left and right of the transverse axis. A right-handed signer, for example, may place a one-handed sign in the right hand side of the signing space (i.e. ipsilaterally) or cross over and place it in the left hand side (i.e. contralaterally). It is also possible, however, to shift dominance and use both sides of signing space while keeping signs ipsilateral, so that the left hand articulates signs on the left hand side and the right hand produces signs on the right side. This device of placing two signs ipsilaterally using both hands highlights the contrast between the concepts being expressed by keeping the signs even further apart than when they are produced by a single hand (first ipsilaterally and then contralaterally). Additionally, placing two signs ipsilaterally allows them to be shown simultaneously, which highlights the degree of contrast between the two concepts shown.

Richard Carter's *Identity* uses signing space divided across this axis to keep elements separate, but merely as locations for enumeration, rather than for contrast. Reference to being Deaf is made to the right; being a signer is articulated centrally and being gay is articulated to the left. There is no

implication that any of these three elements of his identity should be privileged over the others and no suggestion of opposition. In fact, in another performance of the same poem, Deafness is placed on the left and being gay is placed on the right, providing further evidence that the placement is arbitrary. It is more likely that the order in which the signs are articulated, rather than their location in space highlights their importance. The primary identity of being Deaf is signed first and the fact that he is a signer follows logically from this so it makes iconic sense to be signed second.

Paul Scott's *Five Senses* places opposing aspects of different senses in opposing left-right areas of signing space. Thus while describing 'touch', the concepts of cold and hot are articulated to the right and left; while describing 'taste', pleasant tastes are on the right and unpleasant ones are on the left; and for smell, pleasant smells are on the right and unpleasant smells are on the left. Although these different senses are apparently oppositional (1/1) there is a sense of simple complementarity too – touch involves both heat and coldness (1+1); taste and smell involve pleasant and unpleasant experiences (1+1). For Touch, the signs are articulated by each hand, so that the locations are ipsilateral (Fig. 14a). For Taste and Smell, the non-dominant left hand retains the closed fist representing the dormant senses while the dominant hand shows the embodied sense, and this hand uses right and left space by placing referents ipsilaterally and contralaterally (Fig. 14b and c). I am grateful to Donna Jo Napoli (personal communication, June 2010) for pointing out to me that where only one hand is used in both halves of the signing space, signers seem to sign ipsilaterally first, and then contralaterally.





**Fig. 14:** using left and right to show different sensory experiences.

**Fig. 14a:** Touching something cold to the right with the right hand; touching something hot to the left with the left hand.

**Fig. 14b:** Right hand signs ready to taste something nice to the right; ready to taste something nasty to the left (note the left hand marks the source of the sleeping sense).

**Fig. 14bc:** Right hand signs smelling something nice to the right; smelling something nasty to the left (note the left hand marks the source of the sleeping sense).

In the two examples in Fig. 14 b and c, we can see space and the different hands used metaphorically with considerable complexity in a rather different way. Only the dominant hand is understood to be part of the embodied character, so the use of space is then used in relation to that, while the different sensory experiences are expressed on the non-dominant hand. The non-dominant hand uses surrogate space, representing the location of the five senses as they sleep in the hand, while the dominant uses the real world space as the body moves through space exactly as we would expect it to do non-linguistically. So this use of blended spaces, where aspects of the same sense are simultaneously shown on either side of the transverse axis is one more use of laterality in creative signing.

In *Bully ASL*, the oppositional 1/1 contrast between the characters is highlighted most strongly using divisions across the transverse axis at a performance level even beyond the linguistic level. The Hearing Impaired signer stands Stage Right; the Deaf signer stands Stage Left. Such strong distinction of physical locations of signer highlights the gulf between the two

positions of these two “deaf” people in the American Deaf community. They are physically far apart, representing the distance of their linguistic and social differences (Fig. 15).



**Fig. 15:** Character of Hearing Impaired signer using right hand and standing to the right; Character of Deaf signer using left hand and standing to the left.

Additionally, the Hearing Impaired signer signs predominantly with his right hand and the Deaf signer signs predominantly with his left hand.

Donna Williams’ *Who Am I?* also uses space across the transverse axis to emphasise contrast. She places aspects of her identity related to being a hearing person on the left and those aspects related to her deafness on the right. Some of this is further reinforced by using the left hand to articulate signs placed on the left side and the right hand to articulate signs on the right side. At one stage in the poem she signs DEAF and HEARING simultaneously, one with each hand, on opposite sides of the head (Fig. 16). It would have been possible for her to sign these two signs in sequence, using the same hand on the same side of the body but the impact of the sharp contrast between these apparently irreconcilable identities would be greatly lessened.



**Fig. 16:** DEAF signed on the right and HEARING on the left hand.

Williams’ effect of using opposing hands to show the opposing ideas, as with *Bully ASL*, is to make the opposing signs even more contrasting because they are physically ‘doubly’ separated – by location in signing space and by articulating hand. It might be expected that the widespread valence metaphor

GOOD IS ON THE RIGHT and BAD IS ON THE LEFT would be recruited for this use of space. Indeed, we do see the nicer sensations on the right and the less nice ones on the left in *Five Senses*.

Given this, perhaps the poems celebrating a Deaf identity perhaps should place Deaf issues on the right and hearing issues on the left. Indeed, this is the case in Donna Williams' poem, as we can see in Fig. 16. However, in an interview for this research Donna explained that she attributes no distinct values to the left and right hand sides. Thus it is possible that she simply signed HEARING to the left first because that is the order of first and second items, determined by the way in which people who use our writing system naturally write (see Calbris 2008 for a similar argument in relation to gestures made by speakers). This suggestion that Deaf-related concepts do not need to be on the right because they are 'good' is reinforced by Jon Savage's *Bully ASL*, in which the "strong Deaf" character is placed on the left and the hearing impaired signer on the right. Given the values of most Deaf signers, these locations should be reversed if GOOD IS ON THE RIGHT were to be followed. As Jon Savage appears to be a left-hand-dominant signer it is perhaps more likely that the spatial differences arise from the use of dominant versus non-dominant hands, rather than specifically right or left hands. Indeed, Donna Williams commented that she would feel more comfortable signing HEARING with her right hand because the sign moves between two locations on the head and this is easier done with her dominant hand (DEAF in BSL is only articulated at a single location and could be more easily signed with the non-dominant hand.). Although this is an area requiring further investigation, it does appear from limited observations that the GOOD IS ON THE RIGHT; BAD IS ON THE LEFT is not a prevailing spatial metaphor in BSL (see also Sutton-Spence/Kaneko 2005).

The fact that our body is symmetric on this axis means that the poet can choose how to use left and right spaces in each performance of any poem. Donna has used the right-hand space to represent something negative and left-hand space to something positive (in her poem *Dissertation and Duck* the pressure of the imminent deadline of her dissertation is placed to her right and the unthreatening, relaxing duckling is on her left). Thus we may say that although contrasts made on the transverse axis are maintained within a poem they can be re-set and re-established each time they start a new poem,

whereas those made on the vertical/sagittal axes cannot be easily altered because they are much more deeply rooted in our experience with gravity, body structure and movement.

Distance across this axis can also be used to show of contrast. As Donna starts laying out the differences between her Deaf and Hearing identities, she signs DEAF IDENTITY HAVE and HEARING IDENTITY HAVE. All these signs are one-handed, allowing her to maintain the first instance of HAVE on her left hand while she continues to sign HEARING IDENTITY HAVE with her right hand, finishing with HAVE on the left hand and HAVE on the right hand. These two signs are held far apart, left and right, across the signing space, showing how apparently different and irreconcilable the two elements are (Fig. 17). So, this shows the metaphor STRONG CONTRAST IS PHYSICALLY FAR APART.



**Fig. 17:** Sign HAVE for Hearing identity held far to the left and sign HAVE for Deaf identity held far to the right.

When she has re-assembled most of the apparently competing aspects within herself, she finally holds her deaf nature in one hand and her hearing nature in the other. Again, these two are signed simultaneously, but this time they are signed much closer together, nearer to the central axis, showing WEAK CONTRAST IS PHYSICALLY CLOSE (Fig. 18). Perhaps by this stage we are starting to see how the two elements are seen less as oppositional (1/1) and more in a complementary relationship (1+1).



**Fig. 18:** Deafness and Hearingness held closer prior to being returned to the Chest container.

Signs articulated in centre space at the axis bring together apparently conflicting elements. Donna's hands put both Deaf and Hearing identities next to each other in the small chest container (Fig. 19).



**Fig. 19:** Deaf and hearing identities held close to the central axis within the chest container.

She then brings her hands together in a circling movement in the centre of her chest, showing that her identity brings together both Deaf and hearing characteristics and outlooks of her self. The final character in *Bully ASL*, representing the unifying character of Deafhood, stands centrally and signs UNITY across the central field with both hands. Even though the word D.E.A.F.H.O.O.D. is signed on one hand (American fingerspelling is one-handed, unlike the two-handed British manual alphabet), the hand is held unusually centrally. In the final sequence of the senses in Paul Scott's *Five Senses*, in which sight and hearing work together, all the signs are symmetrical, and are made with both hands and articulated centrally. Again there is a sense of "coming together" in identity as the two hands come closer together.

Thus we can see that opposing views about elements of identity are articulated using opposing sides of space and opposing hands, while united views are symbolically produced centrally, often with both hands.

## 6. Conclusion

The examples from the four poems considered here show the strong use of linguistic spatial metaphor directly re-iconised in the poetic expression of Deaf identity in sign languages. Many of the essential conceptual spatial metaphors are similar to those seen in spoken languages, but their direct representation is notably different. The visual and kinetic aspects of sign language often use spatial metaphors, however, in conjunction with other conceptual metaphors. Thus the ideas concerning aspects of identity moving

from inside to outside the signer rely on further metaphors about treating the body as a container and the elements of identity as being concrete and manipulable or capable of their own independent movement. At times the use of space would be unremarkable in normal signing but when seen in the context of the poems the space takes on a clear metaphorical meaning. At other times the poets deliberately stretch or bend the rules of location in space in order to highlight the relationships between aspects of their identities. I have shown that the four poets use signs placed along the sagittal axis to build on ideas of revealing hidden identities, working with container metaphors of the body and self, as signs nearer the body express suppressed or concealed identity and signs further from the body express revealed and publicly acknowledged identity. Signs placed higher or lower along the vertical axis reference not just that GOOD IS UP but also that VISIBLE IS UP. Signs placed across the transverse axis clearly set ideas that are conceptually opposed (such as Deaf and Hearing or Deaf and Hearing-Impaired) in laterally opposing space. In almost all cases the signs do not need to be placed where they are in order for their basic propositional meaning to be understood. Their location in signing space shows additional metaphorical meaning. Without the fundamental substantialising metaphor of the abstract concept of identity, however, none of this would be possible.

A great deal of research remains to be done –on signed metaphor, on the symbolic implication of signing space and on metaphors in sign language poetry. Further exploration of poetic signed metaphor is currently underway, as we are exploring the role of gaze, iconicity and handshape in poetic signed metaphor, drawing on the increasing numbers of signed poems that are becoming available for analysis. It is clear even from the small set of examples presented here, that the poetic exploitation of space highlights the extraordinary potential for spatial metaphor in visual language. As we investigate the work of Deaf poets in more depth we will gain new perspectives on creative and fundamental, more everyday metaphors that are made possible through their embodied visual linguistic expression.

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### **Five Senses by Paul Scott**

Excuse me, who are you?

Who am I? Come with me and see.

Feel your arms tingle at my embrace.

Reach out - oh, that's cold!

Reach out - oh, that's hot!

So, now you know me.

Excuse me, who are you?

Who am I? Come with me and see.

A lick of ice-cream - mmm

A scoop of that - yuck!

A scoop of this - yum!

So, now you know me.

Excuse me, who are you?

Who am I? Come with me and see.

Pick a flower and sniff - lovely!

Take some cheese from the fridge - whiffy!

Pop this tasty morsel in your mouth,

Yes, and it smells good too.

So, now you know me.

Excuse me, who are you?

Excuse me?

Excuse me, what's wrong with him?

Oh, we're together.

Together?

Yes, come with us and see.

Eyes wide open, seeing and understanding.

Information and learning,

Colours, speed, action.

Learning and drinking in the world through the eyes.

So now you know us.

And now you know me.

## **Bully ASL by Jon Savage**

**Bully**

ASL

**I am hearing impaired**

I am deaf

**I use sign language. SEE or PSE**

I sign ASL

**I sign from what I read**

I sign (from) what I understand

**I want to have hearing people understand me**

Those hearing people can learn ASL

**I like to tell short stories**

I can sign all day

**I want to learn ASL, but**

Get away! Me teach-you ASL?! No way! Don't bother me.

**I have to step back**

So clever of you to join that clique

**I am lonely**

There aren't many deaf out there

**I want uni...**

Want

[a flash of exchanges – unity and **unity**]

Unity! Deafhood! Unity!

### **Who am I? by Donna Williams**

Who am I?

Who am I?

I grew up with hearing culture

I came late

To join deaf culture

I have a hearing identity

I have a deaf identity

Both inside me create emotional turmoil/don't fit together

I feel angry/torn-apart

I go to the hearing world and am labelled hearing impaired, damaged

That's me

I go to the deaf world and am labelled "faow"<sup>3i</sup>, oral  
well

I'm divided in half - hearing

Divided in half - deaf

Together what have I become?

So, who am I?

Well, I open myself to look inside

I take out that I am deaf, hold it up and look at it,

I toss it down

I reach in and take out, hold up and look at that I am hearing,

I toss it down

I look into myself; look around inside myself

I take out, hold up and look at that I am a woman,

I lay it down

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<sup>3</sup> Insulting term meaning a deaf person who is 'half hearing'.

I take out hold and look at that I am gay,

I lay it down

I look into myself, take out, hold up and look at my love of language,

I lay it down

I take out, hold and look at my love of reading and writing

I lay it down

I take out, hold and look at my love of science, futurology

I pull [something] out

I pull [something] out

I look around inside myself

I close myself up and look around at what is now laid out

There are many different things there

They are all mixed

I see a winding unclear path/uncertainty

[nod three times across left to right]

I open myself

I put [something] back in

I put [something] back in

Science and futurology, I put in

I pick up reading and writing

I put them in

I pick up my love of language

put in

I pick up that I am gay

I put it in

I pick up that I am a woman

I put it in

I pick up, hold and look hard at that I am hearing

I hold it

I pick up, hold and look hard at that I am deaf

I hold it

I weigh up both

I put both in

I move both around inside

Feelings

Gently, I hold myself closed

That's who am I

### **Identity by Richard Carter**

[Shoulder height] A person approaches and taps my shoulder. I look up

[LOOKING DOWN] Are you deaf?

[LOOKING UP] Yes, I'm Deaf

[LOOKING DOWN] You should be hearing

[LOOKING UP] I should be hearing? OK, I'll think about that

[Shoulder height] The person leaves

Thinking

[Shoulder height] Person approaches and taps shoulder. Look up

[LOOKING DOWN] Do you speak?

[LOOKING UP] Me? I sign

[LOOKING DOWN] You should speak

[LOOKING UP] I should speak? OK, I'll think about that

[Shoulder height] Person leaves

Thinking

[Shoulder height] Person approaches and taps shoulder. Look up

[LOOKING DOWN] Are you gay?

[LOOKING UP] Yes, I'm gay

[LOOKING DOWN] You should be straight

[LOOKING UP] I should be straight? OK, I'll think about that

[Shoulder height] Person leaves

Thinking

Open up chest like a coat

[Chest height] Person emerges from chest to Right, Person emerges from chest to Centre,  
Person emerges from chest to Left

You should be Deaf. Definitely!

You should sign, don't speak. You should!

You should be gay, not straight. You should be gay!

[Chest height] Person returns to chest from Right, Person returns to chest from Centre,  
Person returns to chest from Left

[Shoulder height] Person approaches and taps shoulder. Look up

[LOOKING DOWN] You should be hearing

[LOOKING UP] No! I'm deaf and proud of it! No!

Thinking

[Shoulder height] Person approaches and taps shoulder. Look up

[LOOKING DOWN] Do you sign?

[LOOKING UP] Yes, I sign

[LOOKING DOWN] You should speak

[LOOKING UP] No! I'm proud of my signing! No!

Thinking

[Shoulder height] Person approaches and taps shoulder. Look up

[LOOKING DOWN] Are you gay?

[LOOKING UP] Yes, I'm gay

[LOOKING DOWN] You should be straight

[LOOKING UP] No! I'm proud to be gay!

Now (2 handed sign)

[LOOKING LEVEL AHEAD] My identity

Deaf

Signing

Gay

Definitely

No! (2 handed sign)

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