

## Swarthmore College Works

---

Linguistics Faculty Works

Linguistics

---

7-1-2012

# Deaf Jokes And Sign Language Humor

R. Sutton-Spence

Donna Jo Napoli

*Swarthmore College*, [dnapoli1@swarthmore.edu](mailto:dnapoli1@swarthmore.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-linguistics>



Part of the [Linguistics Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

R. Sutton-Spence and Donna Jo Napoli. (2012). "Deaf Jokes And Sign Language Humor". *Humor*. Volume 25, Issue 3. 311-337.  
<http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-linguistics/95>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Linguistics at Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Linguistics Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact [myworks@swarthmore.edu](mailto:myworks@swarthmore.edu).

# Deaf jokes and sign language humor

RACHEL SUTTON-SPENCE and DONNA JO NAPOLI

## *Abstract*

*This paper describes the humor of Deaf communities, arguing that the humor is related primarily to the dominant visual experience of Deaf people, but also influenced by their knowledge of humor traditions in the hearing society at large. Sign language humor in America and Britain may be seen in the creation of new visual signs, the witty reanalysis of existing signs and in bilingual games in which English is manipulated within sign languages. The content of Deaf humor supports the in-group of community members who embrace their signing collective Deaf identity and denigrates out-group people, including deaf people who do not belong to the community and hearing people who are often seen as a threat to the community. Many of these jokes also make reference to sign language. We conclude that the visual nature of Deaf humor is one of its key characteristics and ask what else this can tell us about the Deaf cultural way of interacting with and presenting the world.*

*Keywords: Deaf, sign language, culture, visual experience.*

This paper will describe the humor of Deaf communities. We will argue that Deaf humor is visual humor—that is, not just conveyed in a visual-manual modality, but relying on that modality for the humor itself—so that the content of Deaf jokes, wit and humorous anecdotes is motivated by the visual Deaf experience of the world, and the form of Deaf humor is expressed through the visual linguistic medium of sign languages.

Our remarks are mostly limited to the humor of the British and American Deaf communities, because these are the ones we know best, but commentaries on humor in other national Deaf communities suggest that these are not unique.

Deaf jokes and humorous signing and language games rapidly spread internationally across Deaf communities through personal contact and, increasingly, through the Internet (especially via YouTube), frequently being adapted and naturalized with nationally appropriate details so that community members are not even aware where the jokes originated.

Readers unfamiliar with sign languages should note that American Sign Language (ASL) and British Sign Language (BSL) are separate and unrelated languages, mutually unintelligible, and both linguistically unrelated to English (although both show some influence from English as a result of language contact with wider hearing society in their countries).

### **1. What is Deaf humor for?**

Raskin's tripartite classification of theories — incongruity, hostility and release (Raskin 1985; Attardo 2007) — summarizes the different functions of humor that have been identified from classical times onwards. We see many of these functions in the Deaf humor we have observed and in the examples we present here: additional examples can be found in much of the work by Simon Carmel (1996, 2006). Humor in any culture may be expected to give pleasure, fun and laughter to the comedian and/or audience. Additionally it allows community members to share experiences and create a bond between jokester and audience (Bienvenu 1994). For the Deaf community, this sharing of experiences is important, especially because many Deaf people only become members of their community late, having grown up without the company of other Deaf people. Despite being, for the most part, sighted people, these newcomers to the Deaf community have had no experience of living with a visual culture. Hal Draper, one of the British Deaf Comedians (a troupe active in Britain in the 1990s) told us:

[All-Deaf] audiences . . . identified with the experiences and so they laughed. They could sit and watch and laugh and think, "Yes, I remember the same thing happening to me before." Also, for some Deaf people who were new to the Deaf community it brought out lots of things from deep inside about themselves. They watched things being performed that they felt embarrassed about and realised, "I am not the only one who's had this problem — all Deaf have this problem." So in some ways the show was about humor and laughter but in other ways it was a little bit of therapy for some Deaf people who found their identity. (Interview, March 2005)

Martineau (1972) details how humor may be used to support the in-group. Deaf humor supports the Deaf in-group by teaching new members of the com-

munity the rules of their society and reinforcing these rules for existing members. This may be done through humor that attacks and challenges behavior of the in-group. We will see in several of the jokes described below that cultural rules—and the penalties for breaking them—can be humorously outlined. Deaf humor may also attack the in-group in order to show up the less-desirable aspects of the culture.

Support of the in-group often involves attacking the out-group, and in Deaf culture the major identifiable out-group is hearing society (Bahan 2006). The following comment from Hal is well recognized by many signers: “I think most humor that Deaf people like is based on hearing people making idiots of themselves”. This form of humor is very widespread in sign languages, as we will see. Other out-groups targeted in Deaf humor are deaf people who do not sign and deaf people who reject their deafness or their cultural inheritance. Thus the humor may be a response to linguistic and other forms of oppression (Bienvenu 1994; Lane et al. 1996).

Taboo threatens any society, and is thus a suitable topic for humor. Jokes that focus on divisions among Deaf people are one manifestation of the taboo topics that may be licensed by the very fact that we are dealing with humor. Many taboo areas are held in common between American and British Deaf and hearing society such as scatological, sacrilegious, racist, homophobic, and sexual humor (plentifully represented in Deaf communities as in hearing societies). In fact, in New York City now (autumn 2009 as we write this) the show “American Sign Language in the Raw,” which features particularly raunchy jokes by the Deaf comedians Jason Norman and Doug Ridloff, is quite popular. The British Deaf comedian John Smith also includes sexual and potentially sexist jokes in his performance. (We should note that not all Deaf audience members necessarily appreciate this form of humor. We merely mention it to acknowledge its widespread existence.) Additionally, there are forms of Deaf humor that are told against physically and mentally disabled people. At first glance this may seem surprising, as people might view members of Deaf communities as disabled. However, a rejection of disabled status is properly considered to be part of Deaf community identification (Ladd 2002). Indeed there are jokes that focus clearly upon this point (see the joke immediately following). Jokes mocking disabled people show that the Deaf community considers them out-group. Despite (or perhaps because of) the Deaf community’s rejection of deafness as a disability, there are many jokes that use three characters of a Deaf man, a blind man and a man in a wheelchair (echoing the three-fold structure of many jokes in many societies). It should be noted that these jokes do not mock other disabled people. The following joke (told in BSL by

Clark Denmark) uses this threefold structure to show the community's rejection of the disabled label (by implicitly censuring the Deaf man's behavior):

- (1) *A Deaf man, a blind man and a man in a wheelchair are all in the pub one evening, complaining that the beer is weak and the pub is too crowded. Just then God walks in and sees them looking miserable and dissatisfied. He comes over to their table and says to the man in the wheelchair, "Be healed!" The man in the wheelchair stands up and runs from the pub shouting, "Praise the Lord!" God says to the blind man, "Be healed!" and the man looks around him at everything he can now see. He runs from the pub shouting, "Praise the Lord!" God turns to the Deaf man but before He can say anything, the Deaf man says in panic, "No, please don't heal me! I don't want to lose my disability benefits!"*

Cochlear implants are another issue that is a specifically Deaf taboo in some communities, as they are seen as controversial and presenting a major threat to the Deaf community, imposing an alternative to the visual Deaf world (Ladd 2002). In the past, hearing aids were the source of similar jokes for similar reasons. There are a great many jokes concerning cochlear implants. An example is given below in section 3.2, but there are many more (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009), frequently playing with the fact that implants require a magnet to keep the external processor attached to the head. Jokes include cutlery flying off tables to stick to the side of the head, babies being plucked from their prams to stick to the side of a passing bus, or two Deaf lovers unable to kiss because the magnetic poles of their implants are reversed and the force pushes them apart. (We thank Adrian Bailey and E. Lynn Jacobowitz for their BSL and ASL examples. The BSL comedian John Smith also tells such jokes.)

## 2. Playing with sign language

A great deal of Deaf humor comes from content carried by sign language and we will explore this later. However, first we will consider sign language humor itself, in which the impact comes primarily from the linguistic form. This may be seen in three different ways: creating new and highly visually representative signs (especially using facial expression and other non-manual elements), playing with the internal structure of signs, and using bilingual humor to blend the form and meaning of spoken and sign languages.

### 2.1. *Creating new visual signs*

Classic traditional Deaf humor usually stems from the way it is signed. Indeed, funny signed stories may not need much plot or resolution and are merely enjoyed for the scenes and characters created. The stories may simply stop with no apparent conclusion, to the satisfaction of Deaf signers for whom entertaining visual images are the key element for the humor but to the mild bewilderment of hearing people more used to classic story structures of western literacy, who are expecting a punch line of some sort. In this type of signed humor, the gestural elements of sign languages work closely with the linguistic elements, creating performances that take the language to new and entertaining heights. Sign jokes with a punch line do exist but they make up only a small, and possibly recent, subset of Deaf humor and we will consider them in section 3.

Hal Draper told us:

I remember a friend coming to the Deaf club one evening when it had been snowing outside. He said he'd been walking to the Deaf club and a hearing person was behind him, and he had slipped and fallen over. If I was speaking and telling you that, you'd think, "OK, so what?" But the way he explained it with the classifiers and the body movement and facial expression of walking happily and carelessly chatting and joking about going to the Deaf club and having a pint and saw the man walking and slip and fall heavily, that was very impressive to me because I could really empathize with the man [literally signed to mean "change places with him"]. It is so fluid and expressive. (Interview, March 2005)

The use of the term *classifiers* in this quotation refers to predicative signs that position and move a given handshape that reflects a property of the entity (such as its size or shape) to show the movement and location of entities. Like so much wit in any language, conceptual creativity is needed to decide what aspect of a visual image to present and then select unexpected (but nevertheless logical) classifier constructions to represent them in a new and highly visual way.

Deaf adults repeatedly report that they value, and consider humorous, highly visual and original signing that uses these classifiers, as well as carefully observed and cleverly produced characterization in which the storyteller embodies the characters, also referred to in the sign linguistics literature as impersonation, transfer of person, roleshift or role playing (Risler 2007; Sallandre 2007). Hall (1989: 13) reports that impersonation is a part of Deaf culture and that it "may vary from impersonations which form a part of everyday

language to teasing impersonations used as a spontaneous joke, to formal stage performances”. Reflecting this, many jokes and humorous stories identify and describe the characters using extensive embodiment. This frequently allows the audience to identify and empathize with the character in the joke.

During characterization the entity may take over the joke teller, so that the character is simultaneously referred to and literally presented. The joke teller’s hands, body, eyes and face are understood to mean the character’s hands, body, eyes and face, so anything that the joke-teller does with the body while embodying a character is understood to refer to and represent what that character does with its body. Sallandre (2007: 108) mentions that the entity that takes over the signer may be “any entity: human, animal or thing . . . a little boy, a horse, a tree and so on”. In jokes and humorous anecdotes we have seen signers become any number of archetypal hearing characters conforming to stereotypical Deaf cultural images of these hearing people—teachers, interpreters, social workers, doctors and so on. Again, we should note that these are fun visual representations of people who are identified as non-visual, sound-related, out-group members.

Facial expression is an essential part of Deaf humor. This may be seen in the spontaneous facial expressions made by Paul Scott in Figure 1 and also by Tim Northam, who agreed to be the model for the signs illustrated in Figures 2–3, 5–10, and 12. Characterization is generally considered funny when it is over-exaggerated and caricatured. Facial expression is frequently exaggerated, and unusually big or small signs can be used, made with unusually fast or slow movements. Caricature is a highly valued part of humor within sign language folklore (Bouchauveau 1994; Ryan 1993; Rutherford 1993). As well as being entertaining for the audience and allowing signer’s to demonstrate their language skills, it is also a weapon against those considered dangerous to the



Disdainful hare



Patient tortoise

Figure 1. *Human facial expressions for a disdainful hare and patient tortoise (Paul Scott)*

in-group, such as powerful hearing oppressors. A caricature of a poor-quality interpreter or a fierce oralist teacher that forbids the use of signing makes them appear ludicrous and thus less threatening.

We have also seen jokers embody a wide range of animals — giraffes, penguins, bears, ants, reindeer, goldfish and birds, to name but a few. These representations of creatures usually portray them as Deaf as well as human, and they are often given the capacity to sign. The signer's facial expression shows attribution of human emotion to animals, in an incongruity that is often humorous. In the fable "The Hare and the Tortoise," it is commonly understood that the hare was arrogant and the tortoise was patiently determined. In sign versions, such as the one illustrated here in Figure 1 from Paul Scott's BSL telling of the story, these characteristics are entertainingly shown through his facial expression, which is manifestly human (while the manual articulators show the animals' limbs).

Much of the wit lies in anthropomorphizing just enough while retaining some non-human attributes to retain the ludicrous nature of the situation. In the hands of skilled humorous sign language storytellers, such as Richard Carter, animals are shown to sign using their animal limbs. All signs in any sign language are made up of a specified handshape, a location of articulation and a movement (although this movement may be null). To show signing animals, first the signer selects handshapes and locations and movements that present the form of the animal and then he uses these to limit the animal's signing skills. For example, the bird signs with flat hands to show its wings (Figure 2), the bear with spread fingers to show its huge paws, the goldfish with the hands anchored firmly to the signer's chest for its fins, and the reindeer, in a strikingly novel departure, signs with the hands on top of the head because it signs with its antlers (Figure 3).

The maintenance of other parameters allows the audience to understand the modified signing (so, for example, if the location is modified, the handshape and movement remain the same, but if the handshape is modified, the location and movement are retained). As with so many forms of humor, part of the entertainment lies in where the teller draws the line between the tale and reality. Audiences readily accept that these creatures can sign, but also that they cannot adapt their limbs sufficiently to do it like humans can. This creates the best visual entertainment.

Beyond this, signers may become inanimate objects. We have seen them become trees, mountains, elevators, apples or a volcano. Inanimate objects are sometimes allocated hands to enable them to sign but it is more common for the hands not to be part of the embodiment. Instead, the manual component of



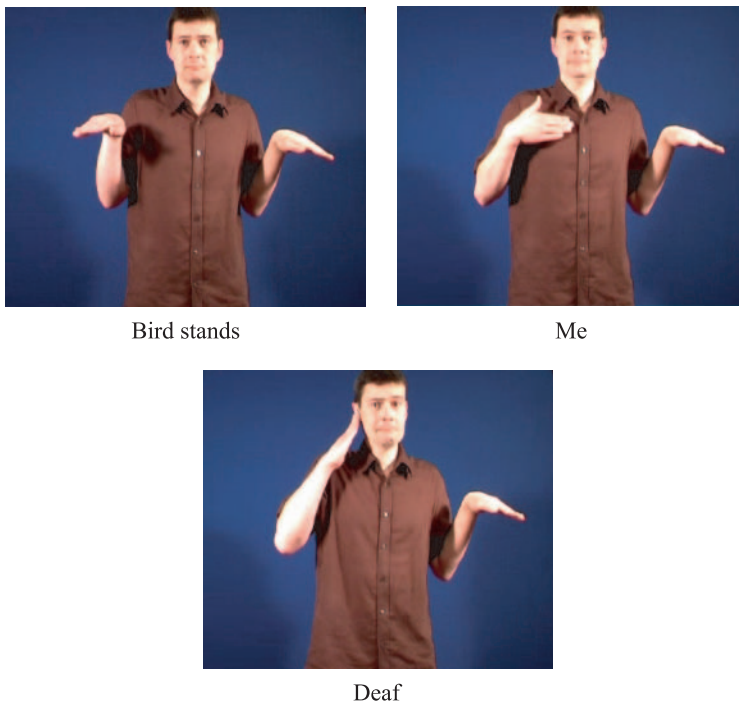
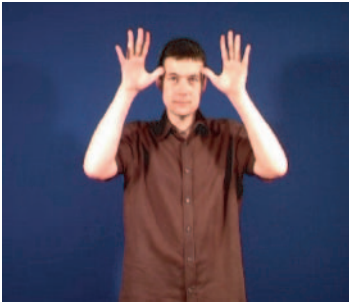


Figure 2. *Using the flat hands to show a bird signing with its wings. In BSL ME is usually made with an index finger extended and DEAF is usually made with index and middle finger extended (originally told by Richard Carter; modeled by Tim Northam)*

the humorous signing depicts a physical characteristic of the object, such as its outline, while embodiment allows the object to communicate non-manually, especially through the eyes and facial expression. This humorous signing tends to focus on the objects' emotions (as they are most easily shown by the face). Thus, for example, a tree looks around furtively when it begins to sprout in the forest (see Figure 4), a mountain looks up at the sky in annoyance when the rain falls, the elevator looks out hopefully upon opening its doors and adopts a disappointed face when nobody wants to ride in it, the apple is malicious when it knocks another from the tree, and the volcano screws up its face in discomfort as it suffers terrible indigestion. The late ASL comic Bill Ennis is famous for embodying a golf ball that grimaces as the club comes down to the side of its head, which is, of course, the signer's head—and storytellers and comics often use their head to anthropomorphize round objects (Bahan 2006). Facial expression is human (after all, these objects do not have a face, so the signer



Reindeer



Late



Christmas

Figure 3. *Locating signs on the temple to show a reindeer signing with its antlers. In BSL LATE and CHRISTMAS are usually made at waist height with no contact with the body (originally told by Richard Carter; modeled by Tim Northam)*



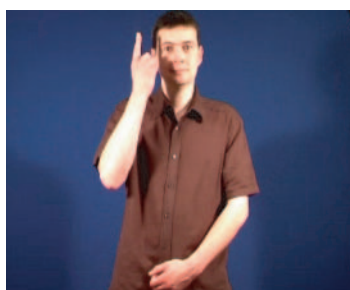
Figure 4. *Furtive seedling looks around as it emerges from the ground (Paul Scott)*

cannot mimic that) but the laughs come from seeing human emotions in non-human things (trees are not furtive, apples are not malicious, volcanoes do not suffer the distress of indigestion, and golf balls don't anticipate pain). The facial expressions are usually highly exaggerated as part of the fun.

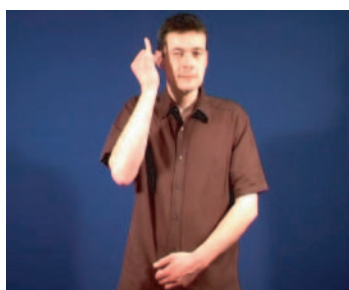
## 2.2. *Playing with the internal structure of signs*

We observed above that signs have a given handshake, location or place of articulation, and a movement, and that humorous signing may alter one of these parameters to reflect animal body parts. Witty signers can also change one of these parameters in a sign to give it extra and entertaining meaning by reinterpreting or revitalizing the conventional and almost arbitrary meaning of the original parameter (Klima and Bellugi 1979). These playful ideas build upon an in-depth knowledge of the motivating forces behind creation of visual signs and the conceptual metaphors that often drive them (Napoli and Sutton-Spence 2010). A sign meaning UNDERSTAND in both ASL and BSL is located beside the temple and made with the index finger opening from a closed fist. Signing it with the little finger (what in the ASL literature is called the pinky finger), can mean “understand a little”, calling on signers' knowledge that the relative sizes of the two fingers have been mapped on to the relative amounts of understanding in a novel and witty way (Figure 5).

Closing the index finger into a fist instead of opening it from a fist, can mean “I did understand, but now I don't”, by analogy (that is, if opening the finger means the successful growth of an idea, closing it will imply the idea collapsing). Opening all the fingers one by one can mean “OK! I understand all of it!”



Understand



Understand-a-little

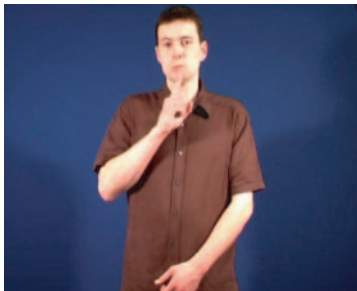
Figure 5. *UNDERSTAND and UNDERSTAND-A-LITTLE*

by playing with the knowledge that one finger may signify one instance of understanding, so five fingers may show understanding something five times over.

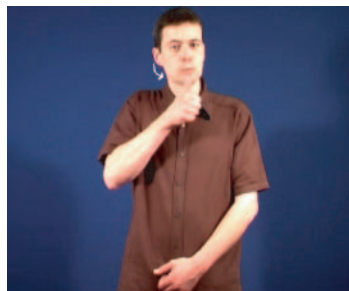
Some handshapes, locations or movements in signs are generally associated with certain connotations. For example, in BSL, the thumb extended from a fist is used in signs with positive connotation (such as GOOD, PROUD, HEALTHY, BEST, CLEVER and NICE) while signs with the little finger extended from the fist have negative connotation (such as BAD, ILL, BITTER, CRITICISE, WORSE and POISON). The British Deaf comedian John Smith has built upon a joke that has been around for a while in Britain, substituting the little finger for other fingers in signs to imply the person is bad in some way. A widespread sign in current use meaning HEARING-PERSON uses the index finger (and, a generation ago used the thumb), so using the little finger creates a sign that looks like BAD-HEARING-PERSON, thus mocking members of the powerful out-group. The pejorative connotation of an extended little finger from a fist can be used creatively to insult different people so that signing TEACHER or INTERPRETER using the correct location and movement but substituting little fingers for the normal handshapes would have the same humorously witty effect (Figures 6–7).

Reinterpreting the meaning of the signer's hands can give two interpretations of a sign. Signers are used to the idea that the hands are articulators that create signs, so it is funny to be reminded that they are also simply hands. One sign meaning VOLUNTEER (recognized in both ASL and BSL) is articulated by raising one hand, but when a signer uses the other hand to pull that articulating hand down and shove it firmly into a pocket, it means "I've just realized it was stupid to volunteer so I have changed my mind". By reminding everyone that the signing articulator is also a hand, and by attributing autonomy and volition to the hands, the action becomes much funnier than simply signing conventional signs such as CHANGE-MIND, VOLUNTEER NO. A similar game may be played with a BSL sign CONFIDENT, which is usually made with the hand located at chest height. If someone is lacking in confidence, the hand may be lowered to show they are, literally, under-confident. The signer's other hand can reach out to bring up the signing hand to restore and raise confidence by literally raising the hand that signs CONFIDENT (Figure 8).

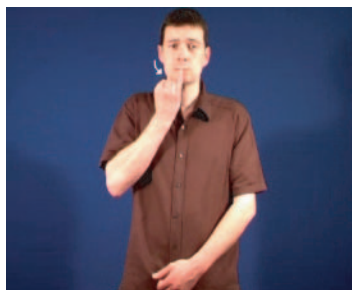
Another internal part of the sign that is often played with to humorous effect is prosody. The ASL comic Mary Beth Miller in *Live at SMI!* does exactly this in her renderings of the American national anthem. She signs the song three times, each differently and each typical of how the song would have been signed at distinct points in history. Preceding these performances she gives



Hearing person (normal)

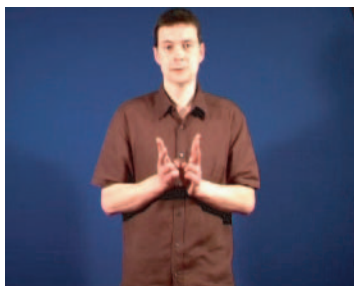


Hearing person (good)

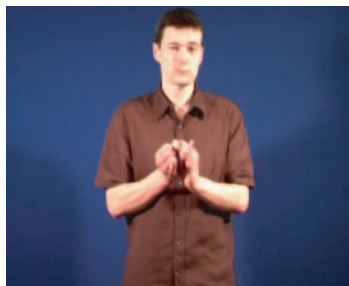


Hearing person (bad)

Figure 6. *Standard BSL sign HEARING-PERSON (with the index finger extended), "GOOD"-HEARING-PERSON (with the thumb extended) and "BAD"-HEARING-PERSON (with the little finger extended)*



Interpreter



Interpreter bad

Figure 7. *Standard BSL sign INTERPRETER with index and middle fingers extended and "BAD"-INTERPRETER (with little finger extended)*

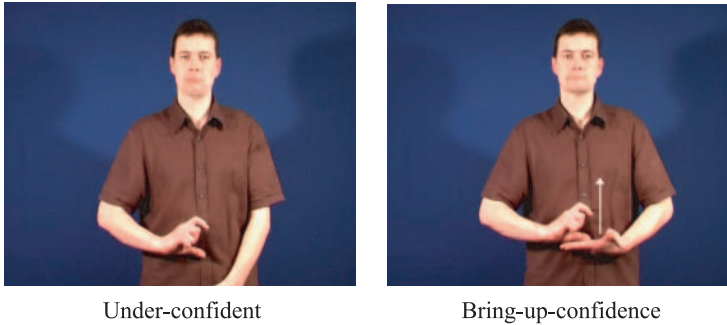


Figure 8. *Example of the articulating hand being treated as a manipulable body part*

what Peters (2000: 70) calls “an impromptu language study”, which details the ways in which the three renderings represent how Deaf Americans related to hearing society (and the history of hearing society) in the 1940s–1950s, then the 1960s–1970s, and finally in the period at the end of the millennium. The first signing is graceful and inspiring, and Miller taps her foot throughout, even though the rhythm has nothing to do with the rhythm of the original music, nor are many of the words of the original song translated, showing that in those days Deaf people did their own thing when adapting music to sign. The second signing gives a much closer translation of the original and “attempts to approximate the tempo and pitch”, but it lacks flow (Peters 2000: 71). Miller says this shows that the Deaf felt oppressed at that time, and tried to mimic hearing people, even if doing a close translation meant signing something that took so long that Deaf people felt uncomfortable standing through it all. The third signing is a summary of the historical facts the words of the anthem report on, and nothing more. It does not attempt to be inspiring or musically faithful; it is factual and, in the end, about something of little interest to Deaf people. The presentation is humdrum and shows that Deaf people now feel free to say what does and does not interest them. The pacing carries the humor here, and remarkably well.

Overall poor signing by hearing people who are not part of Deaf culture is a great source of belly laughs for Deaf people (and exactly what Hal Draper was talking about when he mentioned jokes based on seeing hearing people make idiots of themselves). The ASL signers Keith Wann, Peter Cook, and Crom Saunders join together in the video “ASL Comedy Tour” to poke fun at a range of grammatical errors that poor signers make, from slapstick (such as putting nose to nose to show they understand that “eye contact is important in ASL” — one of the premier rules of signing) to linguistically sophisticated (such as a

poor signer mimicking multiple features of a movement—essentially doing mime, and outside the signing space—rather than simply using classifiers). They also poke fun at non-grammatical “errors”, such as hearing people literally accosting Deaf people, so they can practice their signing skills.

### 2.3. *Bilingual sign language-English humor*

Some sign humor is bilingual and signers need to know both the spoken and sign languages under discussion to get the joke. In fact, the ASL humorist Ken Glickman publishes books, does shows, and maintains a website primarily based on humor accessible only to those who read English as well as sign ASL.

A famous bilingual joke is discussed by Rutherford (1993) and is well-known in ASL:

- (2) *A Deaf man was driving along and stopped at some train tracks because the crossing signal gates were down. He waited for a long time, but no train came. The man decided to get out of the car and walk to the booth where there was a man who controlled the crossing gates. He was talking on the phone. The Deaf man wrote, “Please b-u-t,” and gave the paper to the controller. The controller looked back at the Deaf person and didn’t understand, “Please but? What?”*

To enjoy this joke, signers need to understand that the ASL signs BUT and OPEN-CROSSING-GATES are formationally very similar so that they are essentially homonyms, and that the Deaf man in the story chose the wrong meaning to express in written English, to the confusion of the hearing controller. Like so many puns, this joke does not work in translation. It also does not work in BSL, whose sign BUT is formationally unlike the sign OPEN-CROSSING-GATES.

There are playful-language jokes that translate words or phrases wrongly, using mistranslations of morphemes or inaccurate translations of extended metaphors. If someone signs BEE WRITE BACK, it is fun to work out they really mean “Be right back” (Hall 1989). Parts of one word can be translated, too, like –b-FOUR for *before*, MEET-FOUR for *metaphor* (Figure 9). (BSL, like many sign languages, does not inflect its verbs for tense, so the same sign is translated in English as both *meet* and *met*. This pun could also be made in ASL but to our knowledge it is not.)

Playful mistranslations of English idioms are also a source of humor often by revitalizing the literal meaning of the words in the idioms to show their absurdity. Signing DEAD and LINE instead of DEADLINE is one example.

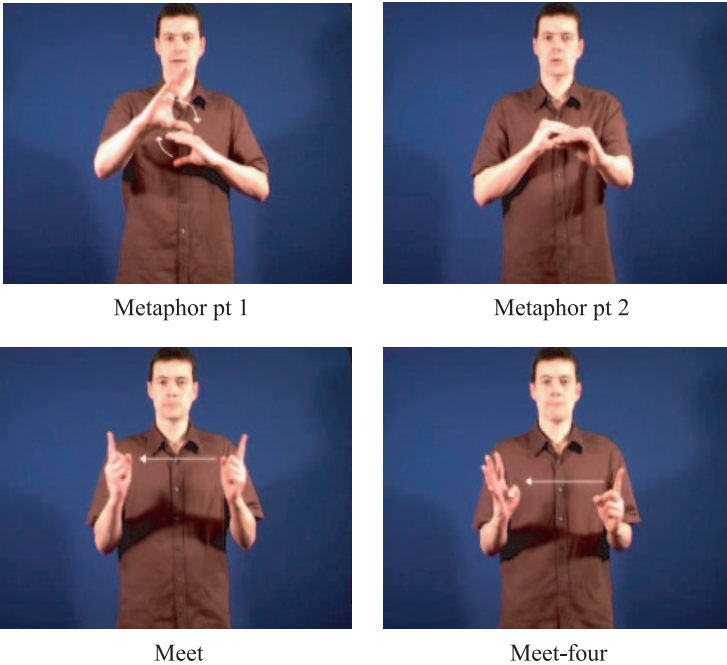
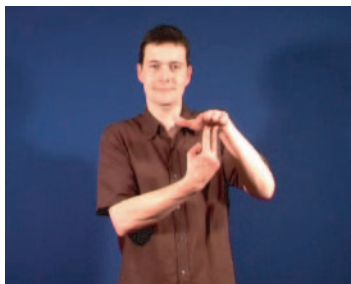


Figure 9. Standard BSL signs METAPHOR and MEET and punning sign MEET-FOUR for “met a four” (= metaphor)

Signing *surfing the internet* using the sign SURF as in standing on a surfboard is another. When signing the idea that someone’s nose is running, the correct sign is to refer to a thin stream of liquid. Using the sign RUNNING that refers to a human running is entertaining for the mental image of a nose engaged in sporting pursuit and also for the challenge of having to back-translate that use of “running” to the meaning of the word in the idiomatic English phrase of *nose running*. Twisting the movement of the articulators in the sign KNICKERS (underpants) creates a literal meaning of “knickers in a twist” (a British phrase meaning to get obsessively worried by something, like having a bee in one’s bonnet or getting wrapped around the axle). Hall has suggested that these macaronic sign games are useful for signers to learn how not to invent a new sign and that these might parody attempts by poor signers—especially hearing teachers—trying to make signs fit English structure. She claims that the jokes and riddles that mix the two languages “help teach ASL, instill and express a sense of history and pride in sign language and protect ASL from unwanted intrusion from English” (1989: 207). Additionally, however, it is also possible





Understand

Figure 10. *UNDERSTAND* reanalysed as *STAND UNDER*

that the games are simply challenges for signers who know that they occur and enjoy tracing them back to their origins.

Hands can be placed and moved in space to make literal spatial images of phrases using spatial words in English. A joke form of UNDERSTAND consists of the sign STAND upside down, so that the hand that looks like standing legs is literally under the other hand.

Putting one's hand over the sign KEY can mean "hand over the keys", as a thief might say to a bank clerk in a hold-up. Articulating the active hand from the sign WORK over the location of the sign for TIME comes to mean "work overtime". A slightly mischievous sign puts the sign WHERE under the other hand to make UNDER WHERE (*underwear*). An even more socially unacceptable example (and hence even funnier to some people) is made with a BSL sign FUCK. This particular instantiation of "fuck" is made with two open flat hands interlocking at the thumbs. When these hands are reinterpreted as wings they can be used to flap like a bird and the sign rises, creating the meaning "flying fuck" (as in *I don't give a flying fuck what you think* to mean "I don't care what you think") (Figure 11).

Hall (1989) gives the complex example of three languages working together in the playful ASL sign for *El Paso*, where one hand makes the letter O and the other makes the letter L. The L-shaped hand is then moved to pass the O-shaped hand. Thus we can see "L pass O". Some signers do not enjoy this sort of humor, claiming that it is "hearing" because of its relation to English, but younger signers, particularly, enjoy it in many different Deaf communities around the world, such as in Japan (Nakamura 2006).

Signed stories built around the manual alphabet may also be humorous. The stories are created entirely from signs in the sign language vocabulary but are driven by the manual alphabet, which is closely related to the written English

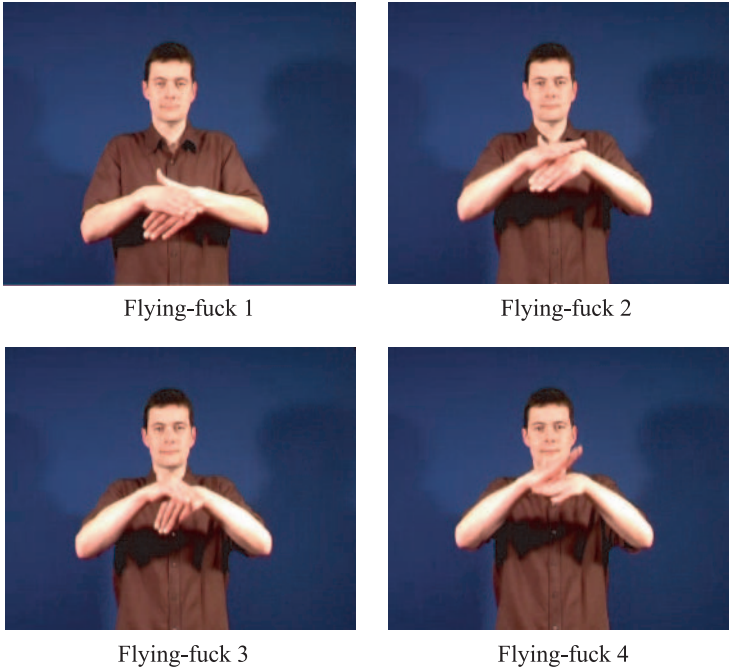


Figure 11. *Sequence of movements within the BSL sign FUCK reanalyzed as representing wings to create the humorous sign FLYING-FUCK*

alphabet. At their simplest, ABC stories require the signer to create a coherent story from signs each with the handshape corresponding to the successive letters of the manual alphabet. Thus, the ASL manual letter A is made with a closed fist, so the signer must choose a sign with a closed fist handshape to begin the story. The manual letter B is made with a flat hand so the next sign must use that handshape. The C handshape is made with the fingers curved into a C-shape, so the following sign must use that. The signer progresses through 26 signs using the 26 letters of the alphabet until the last sign in the story uses the handshape corresponding to the manual letter Z. The handshapes of the signs are driven by the English alphabet, but much of the entertainment comes from the non-manual elements that are added to the stories. Although this game almost certainly started in the USA, it is now seen in the sign languages of many countries. We have even seen it in BSL, where the use of a two-handed manual alphabet makes the story even more challenging to construct. These stories have traditionally been the preserve of younger people and college students. They are frequently on sexual topics, which is often additionally

hilarious for this age group. The “A-Z of Sex in BSL” described in Sutton-Spence and Napoli (2009) is outrageously visually graphic, very funny, and conforms exactly to the rules of the manual alphabet story-telling game.

### 3. What else makes Deaf people laugh?

Sign language humor that derives from the form of the language is not the only source of humor in Deaf communities. Much else that makes up Deaf humor, however, is also determined by the visual experience of Deaf people. Some types of visual humor do not need sign language—or any language—for enjoyment. The visual elements of slapstick in the films and television made for the wider hearing society are very popular in the Deaf community, from Charlie Chaplin and Laurel and Hardy to *Mr. Bean* and home-video disasters on television. The crazy visual humor of cartoons is as popular with Deaf children as it is with hearing ones. However, signers also use sign language as the visual medium to create and convey specifically Deaf humor in sign jokes and funny stories.

#### 3.1. Sign jokes from English

There are plenty of jokes that can simply be translated from English into sign language. Many jokes told in ASL and BSL originated in English and so may not be central to Deaf humor, but they are still amusing partly because of the shared appreciation of humor in Deaf and hearing culture and partly because of the additional entertainment afforded by the way they are told in sign language because of their visual form. For example, one simple riddle was told in BSL to great amusement of a mixed audience of hearing and Deaf signers. In English it runs:

(3) Q: *Why did the skeleton cross the road?*

A: *To get to the Body Shop*

The bilingual audience all understood the English pun behind the idea of a place where a skeleton might look for a new body and a Body Shop, even though this pun barely translates into BSL because it relies upon a loan translation of *body shop*. (In the UK the primary meaning of *Body Shop* is the beauty products retailer rather than the vehicle repair establishment recognized in the USA, but this distinction makes no difference to the joke.) However, it was

additionally funny because the signer took on the role of the skeleton walking across the road looking for a new body. Even though the bilingual humor was appreciated, the joke would not have been especially amusing to the Deaf audience (beyond their intellectual appreciation of a joke told in another language) had it not been for the signer's visual depiction of the walking skeleton through embodiment (a fitting term, given the content of the joke).

When jokes from English are retold in sign language they become much more owned by the Deaf joke teller and their visual portrayal makes them far more acceptable to a Deaf audience. Frequently the joke's protagonists can be portrayed as Deaf, even though they are not Deaf in the original English joke, allowing the audience to identify more closely with them. The very telling of the joke in sign language may imply that the protagonist is Deaf. Hal Draper tells a joke in BSL that is fairly well-known in English.

- (4) *A man found a penguin wandering the streets. A passing policeman told him to take it to the zoo. The next day, the policeman saw the man again walking along the street with the penguin. "I told you to take it to the zoo," said the policeman. "Yes," replied the man, "we went there and really enjoyed it. Today we are going to the movies."*

We may assume in Hal's joke that the man was Deaf because he signs and because a Deaf person is telling the joke to other Deaf people. It is less likely that the policeman is Deaf (again, reality can be suspended only so far in jokes, so taking a penguin to the movies is acceptable but a signing Deaf policeman is too unlikely). There may be an added dimension: Deaf cultural knowledge includes the fact that the lack of clear communication between Deaf people and hearing authorities frequently leads to misunderstandings (and there are plenty of Deaf jokes in which Deaf people encounter hearing police officers). But this joke would work just as well in an all-Deaf world where the man simply doesn't understand why he is being told to take the penguin to the zoo. In fact, as Hal tells it, the policeman signs fluently and there are no language problems between them.

### 3.2. *Sign jokes originating in the Deaf community*

Deaf jokes and humorous anecdotes are often on topics that are of particular relevance to the Deaf community. They show the Deaf worldview of community members' experience as visual people so that jokes on these topics repeatedly come back to the point that much of the experience of hearing people

comes via sound, but much of the experiences of Deaf people comes via vision. The same topics arise repeatedly in other Deaf folklore including storytelling and skits (both of which are frequently humorous as well). Hall (1989) identifies common traditional themes as the trials of marriage, events in doctors' and dentists' surgeries, and Deaf travelers who meet hearing people and either outwit them or solve some sort of problem in a way that the hearing people never thought of. There are plenty of jokes on these traditional topics given by Hall, and also on the following topics: sign language-spoken language interpreters, teachers and educators, oppressive or foolish hearing people, and hearing aids and cochlear implants. In fact, in E. Lynn Jacobowitz's ASL joke "The Liberty Bell, Philadelphia", perhaps the funniest element does not even pertain to the joke itself, but is simply an opening commentary (returned to at later moments in the joke) about what it's like to try to learn to vocalize the word *Philadelphia* for people who cannot hear it—how hard it is and how ridiculous they feel and look trying to do it. These are all matters where sound and speech are set against vision and signing. Jokes about Deaf misunderstandings and miscommunication with hearing people also show the visual side of deafness. Hearing people doing stupid things and Deaf people making fools of themselves by trying to pass as hearing, are examples of jokes that mock out-group people and wayward in-group members but they, too, frequently come back to the contrasts between sound and vision. There are also jokes that specifically mention sign language or rely on it as the source of humor, and these are clearly strongly linked to the visual world per force because of the visual nature of sign language.

Many signed jokes created within the Deaf community could translate into English because they do not rely on the exact form of the language used to tell the joke for their punch line (unlike the specific sign language humor described above), but considerable cultural information would be lost. The following joke, one version of which is also told by Hal Draper, is known in both ASL and BSL, and is another example of the structure established in several Deaf communities involving a Deaf man, a blind man and a man in a wheelchair.

- (5) *A blind man, a man in the wheelchair and a Deaf man all go to the barber. He cuts their hair for free as part of his commitment to National Disability Week. The blind man gives him a bunch of 12 roses to say thank you, the man in the wheelchair gives him a box of 12 chocolates to say thank you and the Deaf man tells 12 of his friends who also come for a free haircut.*

Non-Deaf people would understand the joke as it is written here, and might laugh because the Deaf man showed unexpectedly ungrateful behavior. Deaf

people, however, will find it even funnier because they understand the other cultural meanings within it. Deaf community members know that Deaf people always tell each other when something good is happening; they like free things; and they like to take advantage of hearing people because hearing people so often take advantage of them. Additionally, the way the joke is told is often funny, with the visual characterization of the dramatis personae being developed in the humorous way outlined above also including exaggeration and caricature.

Some sign jokes rely on gestures for their punch lines. Where these gestures are shared between Deaf and hearing people in the same local or regional or national society, the jokes can be translated between the spoken and sign languages with relative ease, and indeed there are jokes in English that require gestures for their punch line. A joke that could be told in English or sign language (told to us in BSL by Philip Ashford) needs a gesture that can be understood fairly universally:

- (6) *A man is driving down the road really fast when a cat runs in front of his car. He slams the brakes on but he's too late. He knocks on the door of the nearest house and a sweet old lady answers. "Do you have a cat?" he asks. "Oh yes, I have a cat", she says. "I'm really sorry", he says. "I've run over it". "Hang on a minute", she says. "What did the cat look like?" "Like this", he says [and does an impersonation of the dead cat]. "No, no", she says. "I mean before you ran him over?" "Like this", he says [and does an impersonation of a frightened cat].*

Other jokes originating within the Deaf community rely on the existence of sign language as part of the joke's structure, but the gestural element behind the humor still may be appreciated by signers and non-signers alike. An ASL joke told by E. Lynn Jacobowitz exemplifies this. Out of context, without a visual performance, this joke may appear a little flat, but when told with good timing and appropriate characterization, especially with respect to the use of gesture, it is very funny and needs no knowledge of any sign language. It merely needs world knowledge that Deaf people sign and that they need their hands to do so.

- (7) *A Deaf couple go on vacation and discover that they have accidentally booked themselves in at a nudist camp. They strip, very embarrassed, and emerge from the bathrooms with their hands covering their modesty. Someone asks them for directions and they realize they cannot sign with their hands to answer. So in the end they reply by signing with one leg.*

The British Deaf comedian John Smith uses a similar device when he talks about lovers in a passionate embrace. The man is holding the woman but he

drops her when he signs to her because he cannot use his hands for two things at the same time. Exactly what the amorous man wishes to say is irrelevant because merely signing is enough to drop the object of his affections.

A step beyond these combined language-gesture jokes are jokes that carefully blend the form of the sign with the gestures of the characters in a story, making them increasingly difficult to translate into English. These jokes only work in sign languages, not in English, because the signer of the tale uses his or her hands to show both how the characters used their hands and what they signed. The best known example of this is the King Kong (or Giant) joke told in both ASL and BSL (Rutherford 1993; Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009), in which the huge character holds a beautiful maiden in the palm of his hand and tells her he wishes to marry her. In both languages this leads to disaster because in ASL the sign MARRY involves clapping the hands together, so that the maiden is crushed, while in BSL the sign MARRY reflects the placing of a ring on the finger of the pronate hand, so that the maiden falls when the palm is turned over (Figure 12).

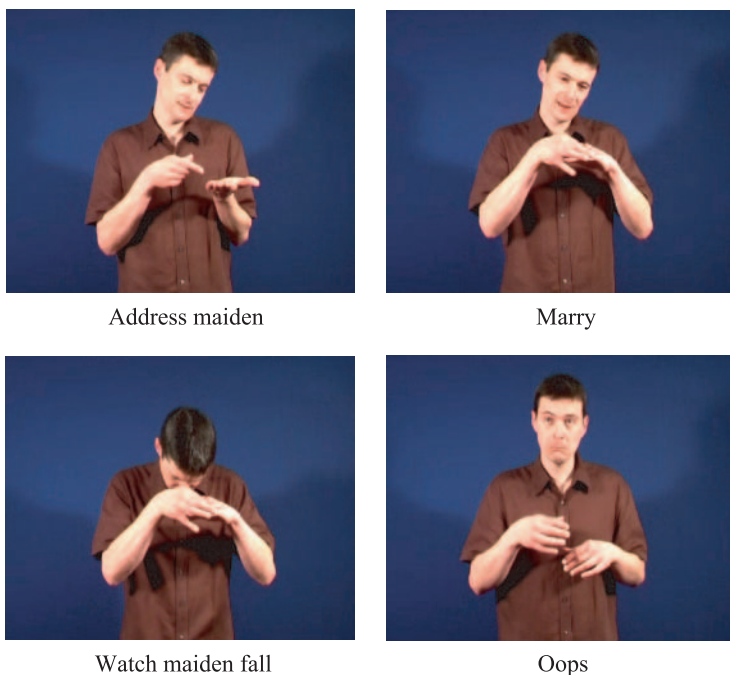


Figure 12. *The Giant's (or King Kong's) brief love affair destroyed by marriage (BSL version)*

There are other examples of this sort of joke, including this one told by E. Lynn Jacobowitz in ASL but which also works in BSL:

- (8) *Two Deaf soldiers who were enemies parachuted on a mission but one soldier's parachute failed to open. The other soldier caught him and held on to him. As they floated down together they realized they were both Deaf. The rescued soldier said, "We are both Deaf, we should be friends, so why are we fighting each other?" The one who had rescued him realized he was right and said, most emphatically, "I don't know!" and he dropped him.*

In this joke, the signer shows the rescuing soldier holding the other soldier with both hands through the standard sign language use of roleshift in which signers embody the characters they are referring to. When the signers have embodied the characters through a transfer of person to themselves, their body movements are understood to be the body movements of the character. Thus the signer's arms wrapped around an imaginary person are understood to be the soldier's arms holding his enemy as they parachute together. However, the key elements of any narrative are told through the use of standard sign language vocabulary, some of which is made with one hand and some with two hands. This joke is only funny if we know that when he signed "I don't know", which requires both hands in the emphatic form, he had to let go of the other soldier. Since this joke depends upon the linguistic form of the signs, it doesn't work at all when translated into English.

A complex and very elegant joke told by Richard Carter in BSL also relies upon the use of sign language but not directly upon its form. This time the fact that signers need to use their hands is not the relevant issue, but rather that signing is in direct contrast to speaking, once again emphasizing the distinction between the visual Deaf world and the sound-based hearing world. Translation into English to show the humor isn't easy, but almost works:

- (9) *A shipwrecked Deaf man is washed up on a desert island. He finds a teapot in the sand, polishes it and out comes a genie who signs to him,  
"Are you Deaf?"  
"Yes, I'm Deaf"  
"Do you sign?"  
"Yes, I sign."  
"You can have three wishes."  
"Three wishes? OK. I'm alone. I can't hear anything. I want to hear. If there is help coming from a boat I can see far away I want to be able to hear it too. OK I want a cochlear implant."*



*“Are you sure? You really want a cochlear implant? OK.”*

*The genie grants his wish.*

*“Wow! I can hear! I can hear the birds and the waves.”*

*“OK, you have two more.”*

*“Hmm. OK, I don’t want to sign now. I want to speak. Maybe when a boat comes to rescue me I can communicate.”*

*“Are you sure? You want to stop using sign language and to be able to speak magically?”*

*“Yes, OK, I’m ready.”*

*The genie grants his wish.*

*[The joke teller now shows the man making the conventional gesturing BSL mouth pattern that mimics meaningless mouth patterns associated with incomprehensible speech]. The man is delighted that he can speak.*

*The genie signs, “Third wish.”*

*The man says, “What?” [Again, the joke teller now makes the gesture to show the man’s meaningless mouth movements]*

*The genie disappears back in the teapot because he doesn’t understand speech, so the man loses the last wish.*

The overall structure of the joke shows clear influence from the wider hearing society, where the setting of shipwreck survivors finding a teapot with an imprisoned genie who will grant three wishes is part of widely known folklore. This demonstrates the strong relationship that Deaf and hearing folklore have. However, the format has been adapted to match the needs of the visual Deaf world. It is crucial for the joke to establish that both the man and the genie are Deaf and use signs. Culturally this joke works because the value system of the Deaf community rates cochlear implants negatively, so the man’s request for one is expected to lead to trouble. Speech is also often regarded with suspicion within traditional Deaf culture because of its threat to sign language, so the man’s wish for speech is also distrusted. The man’s failure to appreciate the value of sign language is his undoing as he forgets that he and the genie will no longer be able to understand each other. The language key to this joke is the switch to the use of gestures to show the visual appearance of unintelligible speech, but the exact form of the mouth gestures does not matter.

#### **4. Conclusion and invitation**

The visual world is a crucial element of Deaf humor and this visual world is intimately tied to the use of the visual medium of sign languages. The stories,

jokes and wit outlined here demonstrate that there are many shared features between the humor of Deaf and hearing people in the USA and the UK but that Deaf humor, no matter what its origins, requires a strong visual motivation for its full appreciation. Signers combine conventionalized linguistic forms with less-conventionalized gestures to create humor, always within the rules of their sign languages.

We have demonstrated here that the fact that Deaf humor's sensibility is fundamentally visual goes far beyond the fact that the language is visual. Indeed, we are arguing for a way of looking (if you will) at humor. Two questions arise from this that we would like to offer for further consideration. First, does this developed visual sensibility evolve from or is it otherwise correlated to language modality? Second, is this developed visual sensibility manifest only in language-related activities (like jokes, poems, stories), or is it part of the overall sensibility of a person, so that it should manifest itself in all kinds of activities, such as approaches to problem solving and methods for remembering things? Such questions need to be addressed. We suspect both that this developed visual sensibility is correlated to language modality and that it manifests itself in cognitive activities not limited to language. We invite other researchers, psychologists and cognitive scientists in particular, with an interest in Deaf Studies and a fascination with this rich and elegant cultural object and tool to delve in.

### **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to, Adrian Bailey, Hal Draper, Jenny Smith, E. Lynn Jacobowitz, Paul Scott, Philip Ashford, Richard Carter, Tim Northam. Illustrations are reproduced with kind permission from Trinity College Dublin Press

### **Note**

Correspondence addresses: rachel.spence@bristol.ac.uk; donnajonapoli@gmail.com

### **References**

- Attardo, Salvatore. 2007. A Primer for the linguistics of humor. In Victor Raskin (ed.), *Primer of humor research*, 101–156. Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Bahan, Benjamin. 2006. Face-to-face tradition in the American Deaf community: dynamics of the teller, the tale and the audience. In Bauman H. Dirksen, J. Nelson and H. Rose (eds.), *Signing the body poetic*, 21–50. University of California Press.

- Bienvenu, Martina J. 1994. Reflections of Deaf culture in Deaf humor. In Carol J. Erting, Robert C. Johnson, Dorothy L. Smith, & Bruce C. Snider (eds.), *The Deaf way: perspectives from the International Conference on Deaf Culture*, 16–23. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Bouchauveau, Guy. 1994. Deaf humor and culture. In Carol J. Erting, Robert C. Johnson, Dorothy L. Smith, & Bruce C. Snider (eds.), *The Deaf way: perspectives from the International Conference on Deaf Culture*, 24–30. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Carmel, Simon J. 1996. Deaf folklore. In Jan Harold Brunvand (ed.), *American folklore: An encyclopedia*, 197–200. New York & London: Garland Publishing.
- Carmel, Simon J. 2006. Deaf communities. In Bronner, S. J. (ed.), *Encyclopedia of American folklife*, 274–279. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe.
- Draper, Hal. nd. Free Barbers Joke. <http://www.deafstation.org/deafstationDev/getAllIPC.do;jsessionid=8C068A6973D0091B4507A55AE37413F5?preferredClientId=1&preferredClipId=3&PCCContentItemMasterId=3730> (accessed 5 May 2009).
- Draper, Hal. nd. Penguin Joke. <http://www.deafstation.org/deafstationDev/getAllIPC.do;jsessionid=8C068A6973D0091B4507A55AE37413F5?preferredClientId=1&preferredClipId=3&PCCContentItemMasterId=3729> (accessed 5 May 2009).
- Ennis, Bill. 2002 [1994]. *Live at SMI: Bill Ennis*. DVD. Eden Prairie, MN: Harris Communications (in VHS, Burtonsville, MD: Sign Media).
- Glickman, Ken. nd. DEAFology website. [http://deafness.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?zi=1/XJ&sdn=deafness&cdn=health&tm=160&f=10&su=p284.9.336.ip\\_p736.8.336.ip\\_&tt=2&bt=0&bts=0&z=0&zu=http%3A//www.deafology.com/](http://deafness.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?zi=1/XJ&sdn=deafness&cdn=health&tm=160&f=10&su=p284.9.336.ip_p736.8.336.ip_&tt=2&bt=0&bts=0&z=0&zu=http%3A//www.deafology.com/) (accessed 10 September 2009).
- Hall, Stephanie. 1989. *“The Deaf club is like a second home”: An ethnography of folklore communication in American Sign Language*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania dissertation.
- Jacobowitz, E. Lynn. n.d. The Liberty Bell, Philadelphia. <http://revver.com/video/205048/the-liberty-bell-philadelphia/> (accessed 14 September 2009).
- Klima, Edward & Ursula Bellugi. 1979. *The signs of language*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ladd, Paddy. 2002. *Understanding deaf culture: In search of deafhood*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Lane, Harlan, Robert Hoffmeister & Ben Bahan. 1996. *A journey into the DEAF-WORLD*. San Diego, CA: Dawn Sign Press.
- Martineau, William H. 1972. A model of the social functions of humor. In Jeffrey H. Goldstein & Paul E. McGhee (eds.), *The psychology of humor: Theoretical perspectives and empirical issues*, 101–125. New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Miller, Mary Beth. 2002 [1992]. *Live at SMI: Mary Beth Miller*. DVD. Eden Prairie, MN: Harris Communications (in VHS, Burtonsville, MD: Sign Media).
- Nakamura, Karen. 2006. Creating and contesting signs in contemporary Japan: Language ideologies, identity, and community in flux. *Sign Language Studies* 7(1). 11–29.
- Napoli, Donna Jo & Rachel Sutton-Spence. 2010. Sign language humour, human singularities, and the origins of language. In Gaurav Mathur & Donna Jo Napoli (eds.), *Deaf around the world*, 231–250. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Peters, Cynthia. 2000. *Deaf American literature: From carnival to the canon*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Raskin, Victor. 1985. *Semantic mechanisms of humor*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic.
- Risler, Annie. 2007. A cognitive linguistic view of simultaneity in process signs in French Sign Language. In Miriam Vermeerbergen, Lorraine Leeson & Onno Crasborn (eds.), *Simultaneity in signed languages*, 73–101. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Rutherford, Susan. 1989. Funny in Deaf—Not in hearing. In Sherman Wilcox (ed.), *American Deaf culture: An anthology*, 65–82. Silver Spring, MD: Linstok Press.

- Rutherford, Susan. 1993. *A study of American Deaf folklore*. Burtonsville, MD: Linstok Press.
- Ryan, Stephen. 1993. Let's tell an ASL story. In Gallaudet University College for Continuing Education (ed.), *Conference proceedings, April 22–25, 1993*, 145–150. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Sallandre, Marie-Anne. 2007. Simultaneity in LSF discourse. In Miriam Vermeerbergen, Lorraine Leeson & Onno Crasborn (eds.), *Simultaneity in signed languages*, 103–126. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Sutton-Spence, Rachel & Donna Jo Napoli. 2009. *Sign language humour: The linguistic underpinnings*. Dublin: Trinity College Dublin Press.
- Wann, Keith, Peter Cook, & Crom Saunders. nd. ASL comedy tour coming to your town. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EdjEFh78nEY> (accessed 14 September 2009).