Chinese characters were written in the air with a light-emitting diode attached to the hand. The fleeting trails of light created in that way were recorded on videotape and presented to hearing and Deaf Chinese children in the first grade, with a request that they draw the pseudo-character that had been traced in the air. To do this accurately, the children had to maintain in memory the path traced rapidly by the trail of light, then analyze it into its component strokes, and finally reproduce those strokes on paper. In some ways the task resembles identifying an inflected verb from the path of its movement (and handsign). The Deaf signed-language speakers had a large advantage.

The body of research we have just reviewed employed a wide variety of tasks that tapped space perception and spatial thinking in Deaf and hearing people: subjects had to generate and rotate images, assemble blocks, recognize faces, detect peripheral movement, and integrate rapidly presented visual information. None of these tasks required the subject to know or use signed language, and yet the native speakers of ASL had a distinct advantage in performing them. This research gives depth and detail to Deaf people's oft-repeated self-description as "visual people." And it suggests that language and thought sometimes draw on overlapping intellectual resources.

**ARTISTIC EXPLORATION OF FORM IN ASL**

Because speakers know the grammatical rules of their language, those rules can be violated to artistic effect. Some forms of artistic expression play off rules concerning the surface form of languages, such as the carefully arranged patterns and timing of elements in poetry and their substitutions in puns and spoonerisms. We have seen that the rules of ASL concern shape, space and movement, so you may well ask, Are there poetry and humor in ASL and do they play with the form of the language? It is a most interesting discovery concerning human creativity that the answer is yes to both questions. The capacity for language play, then, must have roots deeper than the surface form expressing the play.

It appears that ASL speakers particularly like to play with the simultaneous layering of meanings that we have been describing. For example, there are substitutions of handsign. A Deaf person, when asked if he understood a technical explanation in linguistics, replied I understand, but instead of making the sign with his index finger as usual, he substituted his little finger. The little finger occurs in several signs associated with thinness or smallness, like THREAD; so his meaning was, of course, I only understand a little. Sign locations and movements are also interchanged for artistic or humorous effect. Since the signer has two hands, there are rich possibilities for playing with simultaneity. For example, a signer who wanted to convey that he was both happy and sad to be moving to a new city, signed EXCITED with one hand while signing DEPRESSED with the other. Signs may also be blended in the heightened use of ASL. One signer explained ruefully that whenever she is tempted by cookies, she eats them: she signed TEMPT (made by tapping the curved forefinger on the elbow), then slid the curved finger along her arm and up toward her mouth while transforming it into a round shape, index touching the thumb tip (COOKIE); then she gazed at her hand and suddenly "ate" the imaginary cookie. This plays on numerous rules, but perhaps the most basic one is the fundamental difference between a word and its referent. In this case she ate her words!

The distinguished Deaf actor Bernard Bragg illustrated some features of art sign in a translation of an English poem by c.e. cummings, since feeling is first. In the literal rendition (see Fig. 4-11), the title line consisted of a two-handed sign (two index fingers touching, since), two one-handed signs (bent middle finger grazes chest, FEELING; index leaves lips, TRUE), and a two-handed sign (index taps thumb, FIRST).

In the art sign rendition, the right hand announces a handsign theme (index finger folds into closed fist at forehead, BECAUSE) which is held throughout the line; in the second sign, the left hand enters (FEELING) and keeps that shape to the end of the line. In the third sign, the closed hand drops to sign ITSELF on the sign for FEELING and then returns to the forehead position (FOREMOST); only one hand has been active in each sign: right, left, right, right. The continuity of the signs is assured not only by the overlapping handsigns, but by making the final position of one sign the starting position of the following one. These techniques can be exaggerated, with the poet selecting locations in space or tempos that superimpose a particular shape or rhythm on the entire poem.
Finally she rolls free and clear, until hit back up by the flippers. Once more she goes through the head-knocking routine before rolling back past the flippers, where she is able to recuperate in line with her fellow metal balls. Her interactions with all these devices are described exclusively with classifiers.  

There is also poetry conceived and performed in ASL. In Ella Mae Lentz's ASL poem *Eye Music*, the narrator, facing the audience, is imaginatively seated inside a moving vehicle, perhaps a train, while telephone lines swoop toward her, past her, and out of view. Lentz uses her spread fingers alternately to represent telephone wires with an undulating movement, and the staff of sheet music with a tense horizontal movement, such that the undulating wires merge into music. The flow of the wires is punctuated by telephone poles (closed fist, index extended) which merge into drum sticks. Vision into sound, *Eye Music*. Here is an excerpt from the English translation of the poem:

*The eye music of the telephone wires*  
*With the music sheets*  
*With the lines that rise and quiver*  
*Sway and lower*  
*Along with the passing of space and time...*  
*Eyes are the cars*  
*And the piano and flute are the wires*  
*And the occasional pole is the drum!...*

This excerpt may suffice for discussion of the poet's point, and to make one observation about formal devices in ASL poetry. A central claim of this poem is that there is a kind of music in vision, that form-in-motion serves some of the same aesthetic roles in the visual *Deaf-World* that harmony, beat, and so on serve in the culture and lives of hearing people. As ear music commonly connotes rather than denotes, so, too, eye music creates the mood and nuances of meaning. The form of poetry in English is dictated by the sound of the poetic line—its stress pattern, rhyme, etc.; the form of ASL poetry is dictated by the assonance and dissonance of handshapes, the flow of the movements of each hand individually, and the relations between the two hands. Other formal devices from ASL, such as body shift and facial expression, also play a role.
Linguist Clayton Valli, a leading poet of ASL, has presented an inventory of poetic devices in a recently released videotape of some of his work. The focus is on what is unique about ASL poetry, that is, its remarkable range of formal devices. When we speak of rhyme in spoken languages, we have in mind a patterning of sound. When the components of ASL signs—handshapes, movements, orientations, and locations—are patterned in a poem, the effect is also esthetically pleasing to the native speaker. Figure 4-12 illustrates three signs from the poem Circle of Life, along with an analysis of their patterning.

Fig. 4-12. Formal patterning in the first line of the poem Circle of Life

The theme, unending cycles of time, is clearly captured in the movement rhyme, and in the repetition of cycles in the successive signs of the first line, TIME, HOUR, and ETERNAL, which are shown in the drawing. The third row of the figure shows that there is in the first line also patterning of the “holds” (momentary arrests of the hands, H) followed by movement (M). TIME and HOUR differ only in the hand configuration on the active hand, as indicated in the fourth row; then both hands take on the same handshape in the last sign. Notice, too, how the eye gaze (last row) starts on the addressee, moves to the immensity of time, and returns to the addressee. These handshape and movement rhymes recur in the next and subsequent lines, both with variations. Table 4-1 presents, somewhat abridged, Valli’s inventory of poetic devices in ASL.
A Journey into the Deaf-World

Like poetry, humor is frequently creative with the form of its language, and this is part of the pleasure we take in it. A language that is visual in its form opens up remarkable and unique possibilities. It is always daunting to translate humor across the boundaries of language form and culture, but especially so when translating Deaf humor from ASL into English. For these cultures are quite different, as we shall see, and their languages are in different modalities exploiting utterly different possibilities of form. Unless you know ASL, these examples of humor will probably not strike you as very funny—not nearly as funny as they are to Deaf people; but we hope you will find them revealing about language form and culture, and that they will enable you to see ways in which the visual/manual language of the Deaf-World opens up particular possibilities for humor that have no close counterpart in spoken language.

French Deaf leader and humorist Guy Bouchoveau distinguishes three categories of humor in signed language. The first is a funny story whose punch line inspires laughter—we will come to an example in a moment. Another form is caricaturing animals or people. The third is the creation of absurd images, something like cartooning. Here is one of Bouchoveau’s examples using absurd images. A biplane is flying through the sky, when the upper wing prods the lower to suggest going north. The lower wing demurs. The upper wing then goes north but the lower insists on going south, with disastrous consequences.

Here, translated from ASL, is an example of humor based on a good punchline. It is a funny story, one that is particularly rich in elements of Deaf culture and whose humor lies in part in its play with the form of language.

A huge giant is stalking through a small village of tiny people, who are scattering throughout the streets, trying to escape the ugly creature. The giant notices one particularly beautiful blond-haired girl scampering down the cobblestone street. He stretches out his clumsy arm and sweeps up the girl, then stares with wonder at the sight of the shivering figure in his palm. ‘You are so beautiful,’ he exclaims. The young woman looks up in fear. ‘I would never hurt you,’ he signs. ‘I love you. I think we should get married.’

With the production of the sign MARRY the beautiful young woman is crushed. (Recall that to produce MARRY the speaker claps the cupped hands together.) The giant then laments, “See, oralism is better.”

Note that this tale is, in the first place, highly visual. The horror on the faces of the townspeople, who scatter, the beautiful frightened girl, the difference in scale between the giant and the town, all invite a dramatic performance, with not a word said until the middle of the story. Next, the story calls on the viewers’ knowledge of ASL: the sign MARRY ends with the two hands clasped, palm over palm. But the giant’s beloved is in his palm. Here now is the heart of the humor. It is a truism that words can’t kill, meaning that words merely signify actions, and it is the actions that kill. In this story, however, the boundary between signifying and signified is crossed; words do kill, simply by being uttered. That infraction of the rules is funny. Finally, the story is funny on another, sociological level, since oralism symbolizes oppression in the Deaf-World. Tongue-in-cheek, the story supports oralism. “There is something after all to be said for oralism,” it seems to say, “provided you are a dim-witted giant with a lady in your hand.”

The visual character of the story, the trespass on the axioms of ASL, and the reference to the hated oralism, together serve a larger function: they mark the story as coming from the Deaf-World; they invite the listeners to identify with the culture from which it arises and so enjoy the solidarity of attending, expecting, laughing and applauding. Thus the funny story is validating. Language is perhaps the most important force that bonds the members of the Deaf-World together. However, there is much more to Deaf culture, to which we now turn.