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Defining visual vernacular in South African Sign Language (SASL): exploration of how the visual vernacular form is represented in creative SASL

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Research title: Defining Visual Vernacular in South Africa Sign Language (SASL): Exploration of how the visual vernacular form is represented in creative SASL

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Abstract

This research explores a storytelling style called visual vernacular (VV), in creative South African Sign Language (SASL). VV is known as a highly visual, gestural and cinematic way of telling stories in sign language. However, the exact nature of VV in SASL has never been explored in depth. In 2018 Morgan and Kaneko created a collection of SASL poems and stories. I used this collection to identify elements of VV in SASL poetry.

I first explored the notion of VV to find out more about the essence of VV in relation to other closely related terms such as constructed action, visual narrative, classifiers, cinematic techniques, anthropomorphism and so on. There are two types of storytelling techniques in sign language: one is to *show* and the other is to *become* (Sutton-Spence and Kaneko, 2016). These two types correspond to the notions of 'genteel' (more linguistic) and 'vernacular' (more theatrical) art forms proposed by Pollitt (2014). Visual vernacular is key to understand the 'becoming' of sign language narratives and to investigate the 'vernacular' form of creative sign language.

Secondly, in order to identify how VV is actually used by SASL poets, I went through the 70 poems collected by Morgan and Kaneko (2018). I identified elements of VV in 25 poems. I selected nine poems (seven that contain VV and two that have no elements of VV) and explored their accompanying features, focusing on eye gazes, eye aperture, and mouth gestures. These features are related to the distinction between action-based VV and description-based VV used frequently in signed poems and stories (Asmal and Kaneko, 2020). I did not find any meaningful correlation between elements of VV and any of these non-manual features. The results suggest each performance of VV is unique and tied to the co-occurring elements (such as different themes, elements of action and description, anthropomorphism and so on) of a poem or story. Finally, I had an in-depth discussion with

two groups of participants (one group consisting of experts in sign language poetry; the other group consisting of members of the Deaf community who do not have any particular knowledge of sign language poetry) regarding their views of VV in the South African context. I found that while the term VV was not widely known in South Africa, Deaf people have been using the same/similar technique when they tell stories in SASL.