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Alliteration in Sign Language Poetry

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Abstract

This chapter explores the notion of alliteration in sign language poetry. It suggests that the fundamental function of alliteration is applicable to sign language poetry, despite it being a soundless art form. Analogies can be made between the repetition of sounds and repetition of sign constituents (called ‘parameters’). They both fulfil aesthetic and metaphorical purposes in artistic language. A simplified definition of alliteration is the repetition of initial consonants (such as ‘Fly o’er waste fens and windy fields’ in ‘Sir Galahad’ by Alfred Tennyson). Among five parameters that constitute a sign (handshape, location, movement, palm orientation and non-manual features), handshape is argued to have the most consonantal quality. With its solid visual appearance at the onset of a sign articulation, handshape can produce the same initial impact as consonants do. As well as providing pure aesthetic pleasure, the repetition of the same (or similar) handshape can be used metaphorically. This I call ‘handshape symbolism’, parallel to the notion of ‘sound symbolism’ in spoken languages. For example, open handshapes are more likely to be associated with positive concepts, while closed handshapes, or those with ‘bent’ fingers, tend to create negative impression. Deaf poets make the most of such aesthetic and symbolic functions of handshape. They carefully select signs with certain handshapes that can convey their poetic message in the most effective way. The chapter provides a wide range of examples taken from actual poems composed and performed by Deaf poets.
Introduction

The phenomenon of alliteration is prevalent in our linguistic activities. It can be found not only in poetry, but in prose, proverbs, riddles, songs, tongue-twisters, speeches and adverts. It also underlies some grammatical phenomena (see, for example, Yip (1999) for alliteration in reduplication processes). Its aesthetic pleasure and mnemonic facilitation deserve this wide popularity. While alliteration is clearly not restricted to artistic language, this chapter focuses on alliterative power in poetic contexts, but not in poetry in the modality of spoken languages. Instead, it will focus on alliteration in sign language poetry – poetry in languages without sound.

It is true that alliteration has primarily been seen as an aural phenomenon, but the same (or similar) mechanism can be found in sign languages. The repetition of sounds can be paralleled with the repetition of parameters that constitute a sign, resulting in visual, rather than aural, pleasure. Furthermore, the poetic effects alliteration achieves in a given poem, such as symbolic interrelation between form and meaning, can equally be found across spoken, written and signed poetry.

This chapter applies the notion of alliteration to sign language poetry. I am not making a claim here for the existence of a clear homologue for alliteration in poetic signing. What I rather hope to do is to shed light on some aspects of the notion of alliteration which can go beyond the notion of sound and be fitted into the context of visual-manual language. Specifically, I would like to suggest that handshape (the configuration of a hand), among other basic parameters that constitute a sign, shows some poetic forms and functions which can be described as alliterative. Several examples will follow to illustrate my point.

Alliteration

Alliteration is one of the aural devices in poetic language making use of sound patterns and repetition. It can be defined as the repetition of consonants or consonant clusters. Whereas in a broader sense it includes repetition of word-internal consonants, or sometimes even vowels, it is most commonly understood as repetition of word-initial consonants. This aspect of alliteration can be highlighted when compared with other related terms, such as assonance, consonance and rhyme. Assonance is the repetition of the same vowel sound; consonance is the repetition of the final consonants or consonant groups; rhyme is the