

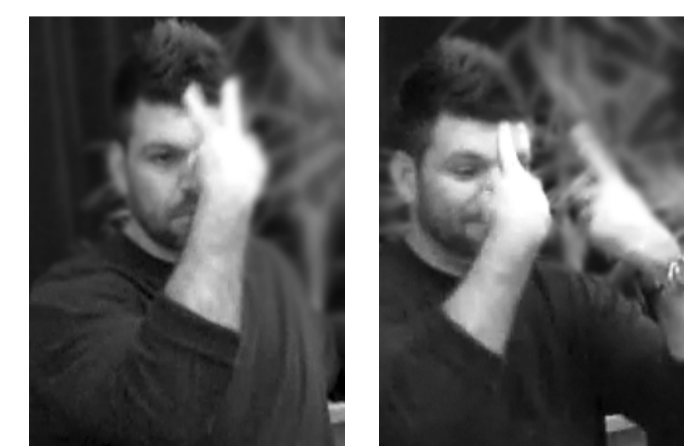
# Anthropomorphism in Creative Sign Language

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**Anthropomorphism** This poster addresses the significance of anthropomorphism in sign language literature, using a variety of examples from a developing anthology of creative signing (poetry and stories) and comments from Deaf poets during a conversation about signed artforms. The poets found the ease of anthropomorphisation of different types of non-humans varied (some were easy, some challenging and some almost impossible): Animals - [Monkey](#), [Snake](#), [Octopus](#), [Crab](#), [Snail](#), [Lion](#), [Tortoise](#), [Bat](#), [Spider](#), [Zebra](#) and [Pig](#); Inanimate Objects - [Lightbulb](#), [Bicycle](#), [Submarine](#), [Mirror](#), [Volcano](#), [Clock](#), [Star](#), [Knife](#), [Fork](#), [Spoon](#) and [Pencil](#); and Abstract nouns - [Anger](#), [Beauty](#), [Comfort](#), [Death](#), [Confidence](#), [Envy](#), [Fragility](#), [Generosity](#), [Honesty](#), [Indifference](#), [Loyalty](#), [Luxury](#), [Neglect](#), [Nostalgia](#), [Pride](#) and [Wisdom](#). Our approach to the anthropomorphic trope in signed literature is built upon cognitive views of metaphor; that our metaphorical understanding and representation of many concepts is based upon the everyday bodily experience of the language user, and that this is directly embodied in the artistic sign language by mapping elements of the non-human entity onto the signer's human form. Anthropomorphism occurs when we "ascribe human appearances and feelings to any animate or inanimate being" (Spada 1997: 37). Additionally, they may be given the power of human language (Paxson, 1994). This trope is widely used within artistic sign language (see for example, [Tree](#), [Too Busy to Hug](#), [Prince Looking for Love](#), [Snow Globe](#), [Ocean](#), [Turkey](#) at [www.bristol.ac.uk/bslpoetryanthology](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/bslpoetryanthology)).

**Shared Thinking Processes** We invited four Deaf poets, [Richard Carter](#), [Paul Scott](#), [Donna Williams](#) and [John Wilson](#), to participate in a conversation in which they shared their creative, cognitive and linguistic processes with each other to witness and share the 'live, real-time' development of anthropomorphisation within artistic sign language. These Shared Thinking Processes are developed from Think Aloud Protocols (see e.g. Jaaskelainen & Tirkkonen-Condit, 2000; also Stone, 2008, 2009). We asked the four poets to 'think aloud' (that is, sign openly) about the challenges for creation of anthropomorphic signing in relation to different entities – animate, inanimate and abstract. We asked, What is their appearance? How do they behave? How do they communicate? For the animals, we offered a scenario: A Victorian Animal Ball. The poets were asked to sign whatever they were thinking, doing or feeling as they made meaning of the questions asked and created anthropomorphic examples. This enabled them to explore the concept together and jointly create poetic examples of anthropomorphisation, while also giving us insight into the processes of task completion (rather than only its final product). As they worked on the three lists, they shared their responses and ideas with each other. They encouraged each other through questions and reinforcement, they discussed meanings, explored creative possibilities, built on and extended each others' initial creations, offered feedback, critique and counter-perspective to each other and developed humorous, poignant, clever, skilful and entertaining narratives and vignettes. Please see the QuickTime movie for edited highlights of their discussion.

When you said 'old' that's two fingers,  
so an octopus could sign OLD with  
two tentacles couldn't he?  
Or he would sign OLD  
(with two I- handshape tentacles)  
Right! (laughs)



The spoon can't sign can it? Only facial expression and then when it leaves the drawer it says bye bye to its friends.  
But how? How does it say bye bye?  
Through its face.  
But it signed! So it means we accept that the spoon signs.  
I think we do accept it  
Yes, we have to but, when Richard did the spoon saying bye bye, in my head I saw a spoon without hands! So yes, I see his character, but I also see just a spoon. So Richard-as-spoon is blended with the image of a spoon.

Why don't you try the volcano?

A volcano? Hmm.

I think it would be really angry, ready to explode.

Like Global warming and all the lava explodes.

Or an earthquake?

An earthquake, yes it could be about some people who build a house, but the digging of the foundations really hurts the earth, so it explodes with anger.

Or it could be like a huge zit ready to burst (shoots out from cheek)

Or hand up, need to pee! Oh, lava bursts out.

Too late! And it's the same with maybe a sneeze.



I was thinking about e.n.v.y. with V in the middle. V has to stand there, keeping the other letters at arm's length. They're not happy, because the other side keeps trying to keep up with them, so V has to keep them apart. ENVY-PULLED APART. But Y is just there on the end, shrugging his shoulders.

Or, E means energy/enthusiasm? who keeps trying to butt in, which really irritates V.

And E wants to be the same as Y, and V has to keep them apart. And Y doesn't really know what's going on.

V says, "Oh it's nothing, don't worry" to Y then tells E to be quiet. V is stuck in the middle.

Yes, E is energy, who tries to get in, and N is saying No and Y is saying Yes! No Yes No Yes and V is stuck in the middle trying to keep them apart and struggling with the envy.

## Animals



**Appearance and behaviour** (Conventional): Monkey as mischievous or bawdy, Snake as untrustworthy, Lion as noble, Pig as weak, dependant, Tortoise as haughty, dismissive of youth. (Form of the sign): Octopus as detective, Crab as gossip (same handshape for CRAB as for GOSSIP). (Physiology): Crabs as waiters - claws and legs very useful. Spider as CCTV (many eyes) and secretary (many hands).

**Communication:** Monkey can sign with hands. Octopus can sign with tentacles - signs either use '1' handshape, or tentacles can fingerspell (Limbs = fingers). Lion's claw means it is possible to beckon COME- HERE. Snake can also beckon with its tail. If an animal has claws, it can sign (although limited). Pig can sign, but again, limited because of trotters (V handshape). Bats can communicate through semaphore. Snails can write messages in slime. Spiders can spin webs of writing. If the sign for Bat is WHISKERS rather than BAT-WINGS, then the sign for WHISKERS permits signed communication. Very difficult to know how a Zebra communicates. Hooves prevent signing, so perhaps the Zebra uses its lips. A Zebra needs to be lipread, so suits hard of hearing rather than Deaf people.

## Inanimate Objects

**Appearance and behaviour:** Clock can be anthropomorphised because it has a 'face' and 'hands'. Bicycle cannot breathe until its tyres are inflated. Sign for extent of Mirror can be adapted to LONELY. Lightbulb is anthropomorphised as sitting patiently waiting for tap on shoulder, and then 'light fire' and then 'blow out fire'. Volcano anthropomorphised as bodily response - to pain, to emotion - as a violent action or reaction.

**Communication:** For Clock limited to '1' handshape, e.g. TELL so Clock tells you what to do (anthropomorphised as parent: "Time for bed!"). Mirror, Spoon and Streetlamp can communicate via face, lip-patterns and body. With Submarine, Streetlamp and Bicycle thoughts and emotions are signed as human signs (Submarine: YOU DON'T-KNOW ME HUMAN HAVE). Fork can sign, as it has prongs, but only with V handshape. Pencil anthropomorphised almost exclusively with face (as pencil point) so emotions are communicated through facial expression, and reactions to paper rubbing on face (WRITING) and pencil sharpener sharpening head.



## Abstract Nouns

**Appearance and behaviour:** Luxury, Envy, Death and Wisdom anthropomorphised as literary or conventional entirely human forms (Luxury as fat/lazy; Death carries a scythe; Wisdom as old/Greek philosopher; Envy has green eyes). Pride is offered as a humorous story about sexual reproduction where anthropomorphised sperm compete in order to reach and fertilise the egg. Attempts to move away from human form: Death as fortune teller's crystal ball, or as an aggressive dog (theriomorphism). Envy as a house, envious of neighbouring house's new windows. Confidence as substantialised form of the sign: CONFIDENCE (C) experiences the emotions associated with NOT-CONFIDENT and then CONFIDENT through a brief vignette. Beauty transcends cliché of 'beauty on the inside' or 'plastic surgery/fake beauty' and becomes exemplar: BEAUTY AS PLASTIC SURGEON. Fragility exemplified as both elderly person sensitive to noise, and then as person on operating table having open surgery.

**Communication:** Envy is developed acronimically: N = NO, Y= Yes, E= ENERGY and V keeps N and Y apart. Envy as a house also makes increased demands in order to 'keep up' with the neighbours.

**Observations** Deaf poets use anthropomorphism, personification, exemplars and theriomorphism in these examples. They experiment with familiar imagery, and sophisticated linguistic and narrative development. **Anthropomorphism also incorporates Deaf cultural norms, communication and behaviour.** In addition to signing, for example, Monkey is ex-mainstream, and Pig relies on his social worker. **Narrative development and extension enable creative, poetic and humorous shared interactions among the poets.** Spider who is good for security (see CCTV example above) becomes the housekeeper, with the keys to all the guest-rooms. Being a spider, with eight legs, eight doors can be unlocked simultaneously. The sign OCTOPUS uses the same handshape and movement as CAREFUL. This extends to "Here comes the Octopus, we must be careful", and the Octopus becomes a Detective. If there is a Detective there must be a crime. The Ball becomes a murder mystery!

**All communication is visual:** Animals can sign if they have limbs, claws, whiskers, hands, trotters; they can gesture or communicate if they have faces, or moveable limbs; they can write if they can leave a trail, or spin a web. They can communicate through facial expression. **We accept the poet using 'human' signs to convey an animal's thoughts or emotions in the absence of limbs or mouths. The poets turned to vignettes or extended narrative with inanimate objects.** The harder it is to embody an object by direct mapping, the more likely poets are to construct a narrative to demonstrate human characteristics. Very few objects lend themselves to signed communication. In the absence of limbs, the face and body movement become far more important. Thoughts and emotions are also conveyed through actions, and through the poet's human signs. We accept the migration from an unhappy Submarine as conveyed on the face, to the thoughts of Submarine as signed by Richard Carter. **Some inanimate objects do not communicate; they act, behave or respond as human actions** (Volcano sneezes or loses its temper, Lightbulb blows out the fire when tapped on the shoulder).

Abstract nouns are far harder to work with and several were rejected by the poets. The English word on paper lacks a visual clue, or results in ambiguity. Abstract nouns in BSL are generally derived from adjectives or verbs through embodied actions; BSL does not distinguish 'confidence' from 'confident', from 'being confident'. **Some attempts to anthropomorphise abstract nouns begin with animate exemplars** (for example, Death as crystal ball, or Envy as a house) yet seem quickly to **become human forms possessing or expressing those abstract nouns** (Death is not a crystal ball but the fortune teller who foresees death; the house is envious of the neighbouring house's new windows, but envy is then transferred to the owner of the house, who then demands a new car). **Poets may also animate the sign** (e.g. CONFIDENCE, E-N-V-Y). Exemplary characteristics of the qualities described by the word are seen in the letters of the word, that is, the signifier.