ATIYAH ASMAL AND MICHIKO KANEKO

Visual Vernacular in South African Sign Language

Abstract

This article explores a unique storytelling technique, called Visual Vernacular (VV), in creative texts in South African Sign Language (SASL). VV is known as a highly visual, gestural, and cinematic way of telling stories in sign language, but the precise nature of VV has never been explored in depth. Making use of the collection of SASL poems and stories recently assembled by Morgan and Kaneko (2018), we identify the elements of VV and their accompanying features, focusing on eye gaze, eye aperture, and mouth gestures. We also suggest a distinction between *action-based* VV and *description-based* VV, and discuss their features accordingly.

THE SIGNER ZOOMS in from the sky to a stadium full of enthusiastic supporters waiting for a World Cup Rugby game to begin; a rocket is launched as people hold their breath and watch; an anthropomorphized book with a charming smile opens up and entices a reader to read it—all of these are vividly portrayed in creative texts in South African Sign Language (SASL) using a visual storytelling method akin to cinematography.

This article explores how South African Deaf poets utilize this particular storytelling method, known as Visual Vernacular (VV), in their creative work. VV refers to elements of creative sign language that are highly visual and gestural and include aspects of theatrical mime (Nathan Lerner and Feigel 2009). VV comprises a strong sense of body movement, facial expressions, iconic and mime-like signing

---

Atiyah Asmal is a poet and a master's student at the University of the Witwatersrand. Michiko Kaneko is a lecturer in the Department of South African Sign Language at the University of the Witwatersrand.

style, and cinematic features. VV is a highly complex phenomenon, and although this art form largely comprises gestures, VV cannot be simply categorized as a form of mime.

As a term, Visual Vernacular was coined by American Deaf actor Bernard Bragg (1928–2018), who was a founding member of the National Theatre of the Deaf when it was established in 1967. In a documentary about American Sign Language (ASL) literature, *The Heart of the Hydrogen Jukebox* (2009), Bragg talked about VV in the following manner:

> It is a form of mime. It is not really a traditional mime structure. I changed it into a smaller frame size, and utilized film techniques. I used cuts and edits, close ups and long shots. I started that style, and I called it Visual Vernacular, for lack of a better term. (Bragg in Nathan Lerner and Feigel 2009, 18:33)

Visual Vernacular is not a new phenomenon. A unique cinematic way of telling stories has been used in the Deaf community for a substantial amount of time. The origin of VV can be traced to the practice of skilled Deaf signers retelling in sign language a movie they watched, adding some cinematographic effects such as manipulation of speed and size of signing, dramatic facial expressions, different angles, and zooming in and out (Bahan 2006; Krentz 2006; Sutton-Spence and Kaneko 2016). VV naturally emerges in the storytelling of skilled sign language users, and it is usually not explicitly taught.

While Visual Vernacular is used as an informally established term to describe the unique way of telling stories in sign language, the precise description of VV is available neither in research nor in non-academic discourse (such as websites dedicated to VV). To the best of our knowledge, no study has examined the extent of VV used in creative sign language (e.g., how often and when it is used) and its relation to thematic or linguistic features, except a recent bachelor's dissertation by Van Brandwijk (2018) in the Netherlands. This paper aims to identify the essence of Visual Vernacular in SASL using existing poems and stories in SASL. It is part of an ongoing project on Visual Vernacular in creative SASL, in which we identify the elements of VV and observe features that typically accompany them.

Our working definition of VV is a method of presenting a clear visual image of the story-world incorporating as many of the following elements as possible:

- clear characterization through dramatic facial expressions and body movement
- clear role shifting (constructed action)
- gestural/pantomimic performance
- long, medium, or zoomed-in shots
- different speeds (fast versus slow motion)
- shifts in perspectives/angles
- three-dimensional representation of place, people, and objects

This set of criteria will assist us in identifying instances of VV in our data and provide substantial discussion.

A Note on SASL Literature

Before moving on to our study, it is important to briefly introduce South African Sign Language and its literature for readers who are not familiar with SASL.

SASL is a national/primary sign language used by Deaf people in South Africa. The estimated number of its users is unclear, as there have been huge discrepancies in the statistics provided by the national census and Deaf organizations.[1]

SASL has not been given an official status, but the Constitutional Review Committee of Parliament recently made a recommendation that it be considered as the twelfth official language of South Africa.

There is anecdotal evidence that the South African Deaf community has its own folklore, sharing stories and jokes at social events, although there is little research on the literary tradition of SASL. With the advancement of video technology, skilled signers began to record their artistic work in SASL and share them, which resulted in the emergence of SASL literature. Several poets and storytellers are regionally and nationally known, such as Abram Moyaha, Atiyah Asmal, Ismael Mansoor, Modiegi Njeyiyena (previously known as Modiegi Moime), Troy Painino, and Zoliswa Flekisi. The Deaf Federation of South Africa (DeafSA) hosted the first workshop on SASL

poetry, called *Show of Hands*, in 2000. The twelve poems generated from this workshop were published as VHS videotapes (Morgan and Kaneko 2018).

In 2015, a new school curriculum for SASL as a home language subject was implemented in schools for Deaf learners. This is a milestone in the history of Deaf education in South Africa, "a new dawn for SASL" (Batchelor 2016, 14), and has significant implications for SASL literature. It pointed to an urgent need to develop creative texts in SASL, as very few poems and stories were available at the time. Various stakeholders, especially a nongovernmental organization called Sign Language Education and Development (SLED),[2] play an important role in producing a collection of SASL poems and stories for educational purposes and, in the process, developing skilled Deaf poets and storytellers.

The research on SASL literature only started in the late 2010s (Asmal 2016; Baker 2017; Kaneko and Morgan 2019; Mesch and Kaneko 2017; Morgan and Kaneko 2017, 2018; Morgan and Meletse 2017; Morgan et al. in this volume). *African Studies* published a special cluster of four papers on SASL poetry in 2017, the first substantial discussion of SASL literature. Morgan and Kaneko (2018) analyzed seventy-three poems in SASL and provided the first overview of thematic features of SASL literature. Importantly, they note that SASL poets do not necessarily prioritize their Deaf identity in their work (only seventeen percent of the collection deals with the issue of being d/Deaf). Rather, the poets often focus on their racial and national identities, with no reference to deafness. This is in contrast to the majority of American or European sign language literatures, which mostly focus on the transnational notion of *Deafhood* (Ladd 2003), suggesting the importance of analyzing sign language literature within its local context. A subsequent study by Kaneko and Morgan (2019) further highlights the importance of studying SASL in conjunction with African literature and folklore (oral and written).

Previous Studies on Visual Vernacular

The concept of VV is largely under-researched. This can be attributed to the fact that it follows more visual (rather than thematic or linguistic) logic and is not readily analyzable in terms of the existing framework of literary criticism adopted from written literature.

Pollitt (2014) distinguishes between "genteel" art form and "vernacular" art form in sign language. The *genteel* art form makes use of linguistic features of sign language and, thus, is logocentric in nature. It usually has a clear theme or plot and utilizes features such as handshape symbolism, symmetry, or spatial metaphors to convey symbolic meaning (Sutton-Spence and Kaneko 2016). It is generally referred to as "sign language poetry" or "sign language literature" and has received significant scholarly attention (e.g., the seminal works by Clayton Valli in the 1990s and more recent works by Rachel Sutton-Spence).

In contrast, the *vernacular* art form refers to the more visual, gestural, and pantomimic use of the body in signed performance. The focus is not on language but on constructed action, facial expressions, and changes in perspective used in mime or theatrical performances. Compared to the genteel art form, the vernacular art form has received very little scholarly attention and is seen as less privileged. Pollitt coined the term *Signart* as an alternative to "sign language poetry" to cover both aspects of signed performance—"sign" reinforces the importance of sign language while "art" recognizes the importance of a more general visual artistry.[3]

As the name suggests, Visual Vernacular fits into the definition of *vernacular* art form. Bragg (1995, 20) mentions that VV is an art form that does not involve lexical units but relies on visual and three-dimensional filming techniques and natural movements of the human body. This allows VV to have universal appeal to Deaf performers and audiences. Cook (2006) affirms that VV allows the performer to stay in one place without moving and show different characters and camera angles. This technique gives clear visual illusion to the audience just like movies. In fact, the term VV is often used interchangeably with "cinematic" techniques.

Before the internet became widely available, one of the major entertainments in the Deaf community was to have a skilled signer retell a movie they watched in sign language, incorporating filmographic techniques (Bahan 2006). Some of the essential terms adopted from filmography include: *camera*, which records action and motion in different angles and position; *shot*, which records different scenes or pictures on a strip of film; and *editing*, which adds or removes certain effects after the movie is shot to add extra effects. Unlike a movie, which involves a number of people (actors, director, producer,

cameraperson, editor, and so on), Sutton-Spence and Kaneko (2016, 65) claim that a signed narrative is a *solo* performance of a film in which the signer is the narrator, the characters, and the scenery, as well as the camera and editor. The signer is acting as the camera and produces images by means of different angles and movements.

A good example of this is Bernard Bragg's "The Pilot and the Eagle,"[4] which is a short story of a pilot and an eagle making a flight together in the sky. Bragg acts as both characters (the pilot and the eagle) as well as presents the scenery using his hands as articulators (e.g., showing the vast field and how the aircraft takes off and lands). He also makes various decisions as a director and as an editor of this "movie," such as when to switch between the perspectives of the pilot and the eagle, how to manipulate the speed of signing, when to zoom in to each character and zoom out to show the scenery, and so on. Bragg's cinematic representation of the characters and scenery and his editing techniques help the audience gain a clear visual image of the flight of the pilot and the eagle. It contains all the elements we listed earlier as the criteria of VV.

Such strong visual and gestural storytelling techniques exist in the South African Deaf community, although the notion of VV is not widespread. In recent personal communication, the authors asked a few poets and storytellers in South Africa whether they knew the term VV. The majority of them did not know it, but when shown examples such as Bragg's "The Pilot and the Eagle" mentioned above, they all immediately understood what it referred to and could explain it using different terms such as constructed action, cinematic features, visual narrative, and anthropomorphism. This suggests that despite the unfamiliarity of the term Visual Vernacular, VV does exist in SASL storytelling.

Methodology

While VV has been discussed in terms of cinematic elements, there has been little attempt to quantify the instances of VV or closely examine the features associated with VV. The overall aim of this project is to identify instances of VV in substantial numbers of creative texts in SASL and describe its formational features.

We looked at a total of 70[5] SASL poems and stories from the SASL poetry collection put together by Morgan and Kaneko (2018). This

collection includes the works of thirty-two signers, of whom twenty are established poets/storytellers. All the poems we analyzed are available in the public domain such as DVDs and websites.

Our method is twofold. First, the Deaf poet Atiyah Asmal went through seventy poems and identified and transcribed the sequences of VV based on the elements of VV listed above. She identified elements of VV in twenty-five out of seventy poems in the data set. Once the extent of VV was identified, we analyzed a number of features that occur during the sequence of VV. As mentioned earlier, the project on VV in SASL is ongoing. This paper presents a preliminary analysis, focusing on seven poems performed by two signers and exploring three features: eye gaze, eye aperture, and mouth actions.

The first performer is Modiegi Njeyiyena, a black female signer. The second performer is Troy Painino, a white male signer. They are both known as skilled and experienced performers in the South African Deaf community. We chose four of Troy's[6] poems and three of Modiegi's poems and analyzed them in terms of the following:

1. The context in which VV appears (i.e., when and how VV begins)
2. The use of three nonmanual features—eye gaze, eye aperture, and mouth actions—and duration of the sequence of VV.

In order to see if correlation between these features and VV exists, we also chose one poem from our collection that does *not* have any elements of VV, Atiyah Asmal's "For My Aunt," and explore whether features identified in the sequences of VV are unique to them or are more general features of creative SASL. The synopsis of the poems is summarized in table 1 in the appendix.

Transcription

The data (poems) were analyzed using ELAN annotating software commonly used to transcribe sign language data. The summary of the symbols used in ELAN with an explanation for each are listed in table 2 in the appendix.

Eye Gaze. Eye gaze fulfils various linguistic functions as well as provides crucial information in artistic sign language (Kaneko and Mesch 2013). Eye gaze often determines mode of narration, which concerns *who tells the story* (narrative point of view) and *how it is told* (narrative

voice). Eye gaze can be seen as useful in VV, since it contributes to the clarification of different characters' roles and angles of shots.

We looked at four types of gaze. Three come from Kaneko and Mesch (2013), who propose different types of eye gaze in creative sign language:

1. Gaze to the audience (camera)
2. Character's gaze
3. Spotlight gaze (gaze on hands)

In addition, we identified:

4. Referential use of eye gaze (Sutton-Spence and Woll 1999).

Each type is described in table 3 in the appendix with an example.

Eye Aperture. The eye aperture involves the degree of opening of the eye. It shows the size of the eyes, which often provides additional information. It is used to indicate size and shape of the referent. For example, a small or thin object is usually accompanied by a squint. It also shows emotions. For example, widened eyes can indicate a feeling of surprise or shock.

VV provides a rich visual description as well as dramatic facial expressions, so the performer may utilize different eye apertures to contribute to meaning creation.

In our transcription, three types of eye aperture are annotated: squint, wide eyes, and closed eyes. If there is no annotation, eye aperture is understood to be "regular." The example of each annotated type is shown in table 4 in the appendix.

Mouth Actions. Mouth actions accompany some manual signs to provide an additional layer of meaning. In creative sign language, they are used to enhance imagery and add extra effect (see Kaneko in this volume). The basic distinction is made between mouthing and mouth gestures (Boyes Braem and Sutton-Spence 2001). Mouthing derives from spoken language; for example, the signer may articulate the English word "time" with the sign TIME. Mouth gestures are not linked to spoken language in any way and provide additional information visually (such as puffed cheeks representing something big). We

follow the framework from Crasborn et al. (2008) that categorizes mouth actions into five different types (mouthing and four types of mouth gestures). Table 5 in the appendix explains each type with an example.

Findings

Extent of VV

As mentioned earlier, twenty-five of the seventy poems we looked at (about thirty-six percent) include elements of VV, which is a substantial proportion but not the majority. Of these poems that contain VV, 60 percent of them (fifteen) use VV fully (i.e., the entire story is told through VV); the remaining poems (ten) use VV partially (see figure 1).

The Context in Which VV Appears

VV does not appear randomly. The seven poems we selected for our preliminary analysis that contain VV have similar thematic features. All of them involve a series of actions such as a sports game or a political uprising, or a series of events such as the description of manufacturing processes at a factory. This is not surprising as VV originates from describing actions in film-like manners.

Many of the poems contain different characters and their interaction. VV is used to indicate role shifting. For example, Modiegi's
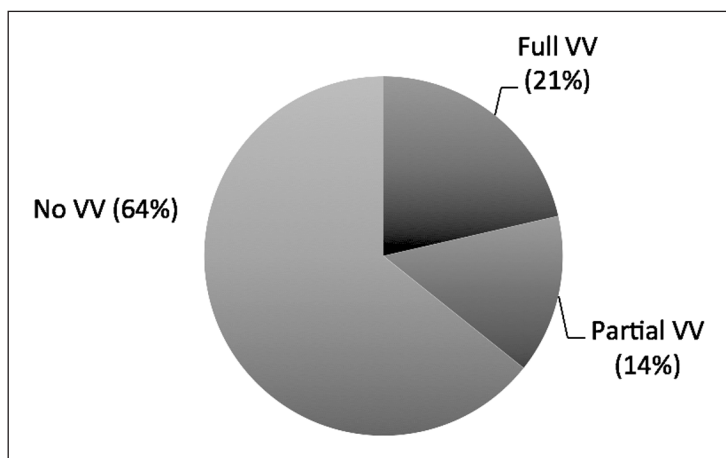

FIGURE 1. Distribution of VV across the poems.

(a)   (b)

Figure 2. Two characters from Modiegi Njeyiyana's "The Book": (a) the book and (b) a reader.

"The Book" contains interaction between the anthropomorphized book and its reader, which is clearly indicated by clear characterization of book and reader through manual and nonmanual components (figure 2).

Interestingly, many of the characters are anthropomorphized non-human characters, such as a tree, a book, a teddy bear, and so on. While not all poems with VV contain anthropomorphized characters, all instances of anthropomorphism in our data were transcribed as containing VV since they meet the criteria listed above. The above-mentioned instance of the anthropomorphized book, for example, exhibits dramatic facial expressions and body movement, clear role shifting between the book and a human reader, gestural/pantomimic elements, shifts in perspectives (that of the book and that of a reader; see figure 2 above), and three-dimensional representation of the book when it opens. The actions, motions, and feelings of anthropomorphized characters seem to be best expressed using VV.

VV is also frequently used to establish a scene. For example, at the beginning of "World Cup Rugby," Troy uses various cinematic techniques to establish the stadium, the field, the crowds, planes, and so on. Similarly, in "Trucking," Modiegi uses VV in the scenes of driving mostly from the perspective of a truck driver, including speed of signing and movement of hands indicating passing trees and cars.

(a)   (b)   (c)

F I G U R E 3. Gaze shifts in Modiegi Njeyiyana's "The Book."

VV also indicates the stylistic choices of different performers. Some performers make use of VV almost all the time whereas other poets only use it sporadically. For example, Troy uses substantial (if not full) VV in all his works, whereas Modiegi seems to utilize more features of "genteel" (language-focused) art form explained above, such as handshape symbolism or symmetry.

When a poem contains VV *partially*, it is interesting to observe the moment in which the performer switches to VV (and the moment they come out of it). In our research, it is usually the poets' eyes that indicate the beginning or the end of VV. For example, in Modiegi's poem "The Book," she starts with the description of a bookshelf using depicting signs (figure 3a). During this sequence, her eyes simply follow her hands ("gaze on hands"). Then she puts her hands down and represents a book using her entire body (highlighting the flatness of a closed book). This moment is not yet the start of VV, and her eyes are cast forward rather vacantly (figure 3b). In the next moment, she starts to roll her eyes in an expectant manner, which indicates that now the performer has *become* the book as a character (character's gaze), rather than simply representing the physical features of a book (figure 3c). The shift in eye gaze marks the beginning of VV.

Eye Gaze

In what follows, we focus on the seven poems we selected and discuss three formational features that accompany Visual Vernacular. First of all, eye gaze seems to be a key element in VV. As discussed above, we can often identify the beginning of VV through a shift in gaze behavior.

Among four types of eye gaze we transcribed, poets frequently use *character's gaze* to "become" referents and express different emotions during the sequence of VV. Six of the seven poems we analyzed contain character's gaze, with the exception of Troy's "Canned," which we discuss later in this section.

For example, in "Soweto," Modiegi uses her eye gaze to anthropomorphize the township of Soweto. It shows how anthropomorphized Soweto feels lonely when all its residents leave for work and becomes excited when they return home. Another good example of character's gaze during the sequence of VV is Troy's "Blast Off." This story is unique in that the poet attributes gaze to a variety of characters, one after another, witnessing the launch of a rocket: the general crowd, reporters, the TV crew, and the space crew (figure 4). The shifts between different characters are swiftly done and are mostly indicated by eye gaze. This may be seen as equivalent to switching shots to show different characters in a movie.

Gaze on hands also frequently accompanies VV. For example, in "Soweto," Modiegi's gaze follows the manual signs illustrating rows of houses, to highlight their presence. The "spotlighting" function of gaze on hands (Kaneko and Mesch 2013) seems to be a useful tool to add a particular focus on one element of the scene.

Poets hardly use narrator's gaze (gaze to the audience) in conjunction with VV—i.e., they do not acknowledge the presence of the audience by looking at them (the exception is, once again, Troy's "Canned," which we will discuss below). This is in sharp contrast with Atiyah Asmal's "For My Aunt," a poem without VV. During the first half of this poem, the poet constantly looks at the audience (to the

Figure 4. Character's gaze in Troy Painino's "Blast Off."

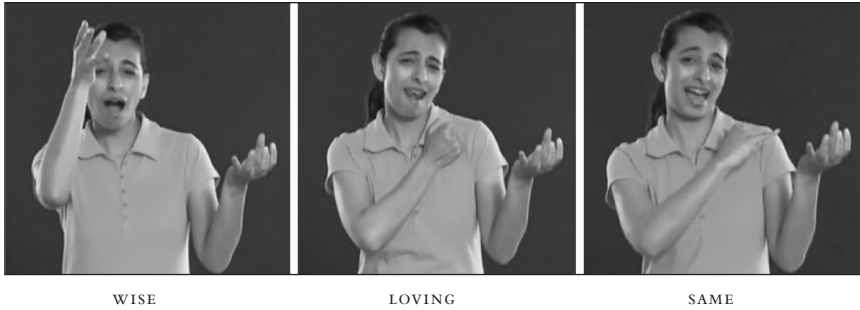WISE   LOVING   SAME

FIGURE 5. Examples of gaze to the audience in Atiyah Asmal's "For My Aunt."

camera) while she establishes what the poem is about. She comes out of the story and explains to the audience that the rose (her aunt) is wise, loving, caring, deaf (like the poet herself), and so on (figure 5). This is the equivalent of a documentary with a narrator or commentator explaining what is happening, whereas VV is analogous to a movie (in which the viewer directly access the events, actions, and emotions of characters).

One poet also uses a variety of gaze patterns in a poem to add a dramatic effect to the description. In "Blast Off," the climax of the story when the rocket is finally launched is characterized by fast-moving signs and constantly changing gaze patterns. Troy looks at his hand (figure 6a), looks at the referent (rocket in the sky, figure 6b), takes on the gaze of the audience (figure 6c), and even briefly looks at the camera (figure 6d). This is analogous to the fast-switching scenes in a movie and contributes to building up to the climax.

As mentioned, another poem by Troy, "Canned," is an exception in terms of typical gaze behaviors associated with VV, as well as its

(a)   (b)   (c)   (d)

FIGURE 6. The gaze behavior in the launch scene in Troy Painino's "Blast Off."

thematic content. This story is clearly marked as containing VV because it exhibits a movie-like description of a manufacturing process at a factory—visual, three-dimensional, and dramatic. The audience witnesses a can-making process (liquid metal shaped into tins), which contains a series of motions and even "sound" effects (see our later discussion on onomatopoeic mouth gestures). Thematically, however, this poem is different from the other six we examined in that it does not have a clear plot or characters, nor does it contain actions (motions may be perceived as actions, but no one is "doing" anything in this poem). It is also exceptional in terms of its use of eye gaze, as Troy sometimes casts a glance at the audience, which is unusual for VV.

Although the number of poems we selected for analysis is too small to say anything definite, this may indicate that there are two types of VV: *action-based* and *description-based*. On one hand, we have VV that focuses more on characterization, role shifting, and actions. On the other hand, we have VV that focuses on the detailed description of objects, locations, and motions, using cinematic methods (visual/gestural movements, three dimensions, zoom-in and out, and so on). "Canned" may be seen as an example of description-based VV, while other six poems are more action-based VV.

To conclude this section on eye gaze, there is a strong connection between action-based VV and character's gaze, as six poems that contain actions and characterization utilize this gaze pattern. Gaze to the audience (narrator's gaze) is hardly used in action-based VV, as the poet exists within the story and presents the visual story directly to the audience. Description-based VV, as in Troy's "Canned," may allow gaze to the audience, but more examples are needed to make this claim.

Eye Aperture

Eye aperture in VV is closely associated with dramatic facial expressions, as well as three-dimensional techniques indispensable for cinematographic storytelling. While different degrees of eye aperture in conjunction with facial expressions are frequently observed in day-to-day signing, the VV sequences utilize them much more theatrically. For example, the tension built up during the scene of a car chase in "Trucking" is best shown through wide-open eyes (figure 7a), while a squint shows a regular, calm, but somewhat boring driving scene

(a)   (b)

FIGURE 7. Dramatic use of eye aperture during a VV sequence in Modiegi Njiyeyana's "Trucking."

(figure 7b). This is once again in sharp contrast to Atiyah's "For My Aunt." Atiyah's eye aperture is constantly marked as "regular" and no dynamic use of eye aperture is observed.

Van Brandwijk (2018, 14) describes an example of eye aperture used as a three-dimensional (3D) technique by an Italian VV performer, Giuseppe Giuranna. Giuranna uses squint eyes for physically distant referents and wide-opened eyes for close referents, which "adds depth (the third dimension) to the story." Such instances are observed especially at the beginning of the VV sequence when the performer establishes a visual scene. For example, in the opening scene of Troy's "World Cup Rugby," Troy "zooms in" to a stadium where a crowd of people await the start of the game. This zoom-in effect is not only achieved by the manual signs but by Troy's eye aperture changing from squint to wide eyes, as well as his mouth aperture (figure 8). This shows that eye and mouth aperture plays an important role in VV.

Apart from contributing to the three-dimensional presentation of a scene, eye aperture is also used *synesthesically* to complement manual signs—i.e., a squint represents darkness, narrowness, or smoothness, while wide eyes represent brightness, vastness, and roughness. For example, at the beginning of Modeigi's "Soweto," the poet's eyes are squinted to show the darkness before the sunrise.

A related feature to eye aperture is blinking. While we found no systematic correlation between blinking and VV (e.g., it does not mark

FIGURE 8. Troy Painino's "World Cup Rugby."

the beginning or end of VV), in one instance blinking is used with abnormal frequency to add extra effect. As discussed above, Troy's "Canned" describes the process of manufacturing tins in a factory. In the sequence in which the metals, which have been pressed into a sheet, are carried on a belt conveyer, Troy blinks about fourteen times in approximately four seconds (figure 9), analogous to clicking the shutter of the camera in burst mode. This blinking creates the clattering sound image of metals moving on a belt conveyer, an example of synaesthesia (visual element represents auditory image).

From the above examples, it seems that eye aperture is effectively used to add extra layer of affective and sensory information during the sequence of VV.

Mouth Actions

Mouth actions are constantly used during the sequence of VV, some types of mouth patterns more frequently than others. First of all, we noted that mouthing was hardly used during VV sequences, except when the poet enacts a character who uses mouthing (e.g., the an-

FIGURE 9. The use of blinking in Troy Painino's "Canned."

thropomorphized book in "The Book" mouths "ready" with the sign READY when it opens a page and invites a reader to read it). This is perhaps not surprising at all, considering that VV is a visual and cinematic storytelling technique that emerges spontaneously in sign language. Therefore there is little influence from a spoken language in the construction of VV. This is once again different from Atiyah's "For My Aunt," which does not contain VV. The first sequence of this poem is characterized by frequent mouthing of English words such as "wise," "love," "care," "deaf," and "same" (together with the gaze to the audience).

All four types of mouth gestures (A, 4, E and W) are used with VV. In conjunction with the frequent use of character's gaze in action-based VV, enacting mouth gestures ("mouth for mouth," Type 4) as well as the whole face type (W), are often found in the sequence of VV. Examples of enacting mouth gestures include SINGING (figure 10a) or PLAYING-A-WIND-INSTRUMENT (figure 10b). The whole face expression includes the example of the shocked and disapproving face of the anthropomorphized book (figure 10c).

Echo and adverbial/adjectival mouth gestures tend to be used when the poet is setting up a scene by describing people and objects in space, and these gestures can be found in both action-based and description-based VV. As we saw above, at the beginning of "World Cup Rugby," the "camera" zooms into the stadium and visually describes the crowd of people waiting for the match to start. This sequence is accompanied by a number of echo mouth gestures enriching the cinematographic description of the scene.
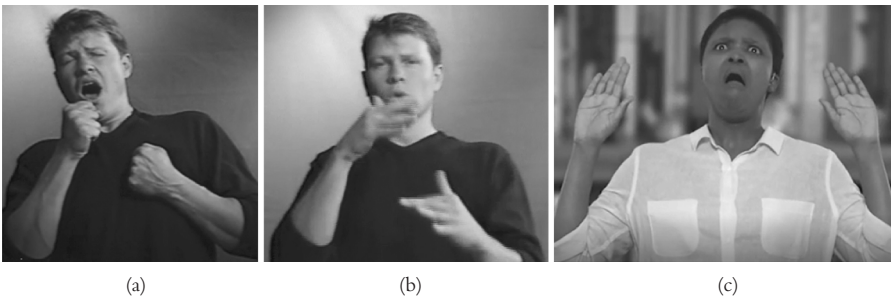

(a)   (b)   (c)

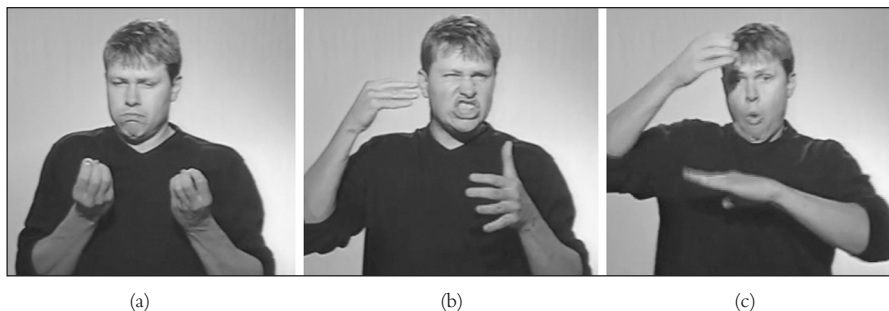FIGURE 10. Examples of 4-Type and W-type mouth gestures.

FIGURE 11. Onomatopoeic use of mouth gestures in Troy Painino's "Canned."

While none of these mouth gestures are unique or exclusive to VV (they are equally frequently used in "For My Aunt," which does not contain VV), mouth gestures in VV seem to fulfil a particular function that was not observed in non-VV sequences, which is the onomatopoeic use of mouth gestures (Kaneko 2016 and this volume; Van Reenen 2017) This seems to be especially relevant to *description*-based VV. Troy's "Canned" contains a number of examples. As mentioned earlier, this poem does not contain any plot (storyline) or characters. What makes this poem creative is solely the use of VV that meticulously (and cinematically) describes the different stages of production of the liquid metals into tins at a factory. The hot metals coming to a boil is accompanied by a bilabial "p" sound releasing the air (figure 11a). Troy even points to his ear when he describes the sound of the hot metal liquid being poured into a container (figure 11b). When the metal is shaped into a tin, Troy uses the onomatopoeia of "pon" to reproduce the sound (figure 11c).

In summary, with mouth actions, we observed that mouthing does not seem necessary in VV. Enacting mouth gestures are important in action-based VV as they describe the action and emotion of the character, as well as when the mouth is part of the whole face activities. Echo and adverbial/adjectival mouth gestures are useful in establishing the scene in a cinematographic way. Some mouth gestures can be interpreted as onomatopoeia, adding sensory images to description-based VV.

Conclusion

Visual Vernacular (VV) is an art form that allows dramatic three-dimensional representation of narrative using cinematic techniques. Bragg (1995) also states that VV can break the rules of the language—the performer can move, sign, describe, and personify to show characters' emotions.

There has been very little research on precisely defining VV or exploring its essence. Bragg coined the term based on his experience and intuition, rather than on a set of strict criteria. VV seems to be used as a holistic term to incorporate a number of features (constructed action, depicting signs, cinematic techniques, anthropomorphism), which makes sign language narrative uniquely visual.

In this paper, we attempted to examine how frequently poets actually utilize VV in their work. Out of seventy poems in our collection, we identified that twenty-five (thirty-six percent) make use of VV, fifteen fully and ten partially. These twenty-five poems are mostly action-based stories, many of which include anthropomorphized non-human characters.

We focused on seven poems by two poets, and we explored three features (eye gaze, eye aperture, and mouth actions) that accompany the sequences of VV. In the process of analyzing these seven poems, we saw a potential classification of VV into two types: action-based VV and description-based VV. Action-based VV involves a series of actions and characters, many of which include anthropomorphized nonhuman characters, and utilizes rich facial expressions, character's gaze, and enacting mouth gestures. Description-based VV may not involve actions or characters but fulfil the essence of VV through cinematographic description of people, objects, and places.

Eye gaze plays a crucial role in marking the beginning of VV as well as providing clear character's gaze to bring emotions into VV. During VV, the performer hardly acknowledges the presence of the audience by looking at them. Eye aperture adds affective as well as sensory information to the cinematic presentation of a narrative scene. As expected, mouthing was not observed since VV has a strongly visual and pantomimic nature and is influenced very little by spoken

language. In contrast, mouth gestures (spontaneous use of the mouth in accompanying manual signs) are indispensable in making the audience "feel" VV. These three features work together and contribute to the creation of imagery and extra effect, which are essential in Visual Vernacular.

VV allows Deaf performers to take any ordinary topic and change it into an art form (as we saw in Troy's "Canned"). The story becomes more visual and three-dimensional, which makes the audience feel like they are at the cinema. As Bragg says, VV is not bound by existing rules of poetry or storytelling and therefore is highly innovative and unique. This makes it hard to precisely define it, but we hope this paper has contributed to the deeper understanding and discussion of VV by scholars, performers, and audiences.

Notes

1. In 1994, the Central Statistics Service in South Africa indicated the total number of *signing* Deaf South Africans as 1,609,386 (the 1994 mid-year estimates). However, in 2003, DeafSA (Deaf Federation of South Africa) provided a figure for the deaf population of only 500,000. A more recent national census, conducted in 2011, estimates this number even lower, at 235,000.

2. Forty-five of the seventy-three poems Morgan and Kaneko (2018) analyzed were produced by SLED.

3. While we understand the significance of the idea of Signart, in this paper we will continue using "sign language poetry" or "sign language literature" to refer to a body of creative work by Deaf artists, as they are well established and more accessible to most readers.

4. Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2cCMOYkre58.

5. The final number of poems discussed in Morgan and Kaneko (2018) is seventy-three, but when we obtained the collection, it only contained seventy poems.

6. We refer to South African Deaf poets by their first names, as they are mostly known by their first names in the country.

7. The abbreviation for the South Western Townships—the largest black settlement located southwest of Johannesburg.

References

Asmal, A. 2016. Themes in SASL Poetry. Unpublished honors essay, University of the Witwatersrand.

Bahan, B. 2006. Face to Face Tradition in the American Deaf Community. In *Signing the Body Poetic*, ed. H-D. Bauman, J. Nelson, and H. Rose, 21–50. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Baker, A. 2017. Poetry in South African Sign Language: What is Different? *Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistics* 48:87–92. https://doi.org:/10.5774/48-0-282.

Batchelor, M. 2016. Implementation of SASL in Foundation Phase: A Case Study about Transformational and Transformative Leadership. Unpublished MEd diss., University of the Witwatersrand.

Boyes Braem, P., and R. Sutton-Spence. 2001. *The Hands Are the Head of the Mouth: The Mouth as Articulator in Sign Languages.* Berlin: Signum Verlag.

Bragg, B. 1995. The Past and the Present of Deaf Theatre around the World. Presentation given at the First Annual Conference of National and Worldwide Deaf Theatres, Connecticut, August 2–12, 1995.

Cook, P. 2006. DVD clip 5.5: Visual Vernacular. In *Signing the Body Poetic*, ed. H-D. Bauman, J. Nelson, and H. Rose. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Crasborn, O., E. van der Kooij, D. Waters, B. Woll, and J. Mesch. 2008. Frequency Distribution and Spreading Behavior of Different Types of Mouth Actions in Three Sign Languages. *Sign Language and Linguistics* 11 (1): 45–67.

Kaneko, M. 2016. Onomatopoeic Mouth Gestures in Creative Sign Language. Paper presented at The 12th International Conference for Theoretical Issues in Sign Language Research (TISLR12), Melbourne, Australia, January 4–7, 2016.

———, and J. Mesch. 2013. Eye Gaze in Creative Sign Language. *Sign Language Studies* 13 (3): 327–400.

———, and R. Morgan. 2019. Izihlahla Ezikhuluma Ngezandla ("Trees Who Talk with Hands"): Tree Poems in South African Sign Language. *Southern African Journal for Folklore Studies* 29 (1): 1–19.

Krentz, C. 2006. The Camera as Printing Press: How Film Has Influenced ASL Literature. In *Signing the Body Poetic*, ed. H-D. Bauman, J. Nelson, and H. Rose, 51–70. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ladd, P. 2003. *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Mesch, J., and M. Kaneko. 2017. Signed Renga: Exploration of Collaborative Forms in Sign Language Poetry. *African Studies* 76 (3): 381–401.

Morgan, R., and M. Kaneko. 2017. Being and Belonging as Deaf South Africans: Multiple Identities in SASL (South African Sign Language) Poetry. *African Studies* 76 (3): 320–36.

———. 2018. Deafhood, Nationhood, and Nature: Thematic Analysis of South African Sign Language (SASL) Poetry. *South African Journal of African Languages* 38 (3): 363–74.

Morgan, R., and J. Meletse. 2017. Rainbow: Constructing a Gay Deaf Black South African Identity in a SASL poem. *African Studies* 76 (3): 337–59.

Nathan Lerner, M., and D. Feigel. 2009. *The Heart of the Hydrogen Jukebox* DVD. New York: Rochester Institute of Technology.

Pollitt, K. 2014. Signart: (British) Sign Language Poetry as Gesamtkunstwerk. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Bristol.

Riggs, T. 2003. *Visual Vernacular: Storytelling in ASL.* East Bend, NC: Signs of Development.

Sutton-Spence, R., and M. Kaneko. 2016. *Introducing Sign Language Literature: Folklore and Creativity.* Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sutton-Spence, R., and B. Woll. 1999. *The Linguistics of British Sign Language: An Introduction.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Van Brandwijk, M. 2018. Visual Vernacular: An Inter and Intra Sign Language Poetry Genre Comparison. Unpublished BA thesis, University of Leiden.

Van Reenen, R. 2017. Comparison of the Use of Mouth Actions in Poetic and Nonpoetic South African Sign Language. Unpublished honors research essay, University of the Witwatersrand.

Appendix: Tables

Table 1. The List of the Poems and Their Synopsis

Name of performer	Title of poem/story	Synopsis
Atiyah Asmal	For My Aunt (contains no VV)	The story of the bond between the poet and her aunt, who are metaphorically represented as a bee and a rose, respectively.
Modiegi Njeyiyena	Soweto	The daily life in a township seen through the eyes of the anthropomorphized Soweto.
Modiegi Njeyiyena	The Book	An anthropomorphized book in a library that is read and mistreated by readers.
Modiegi Njeyiyena	Trucking	A truck driver gets into a skirmish with drivers of smaller cars on the road.
Troy Painino	A Moment	A person carries out a series of actions (getting dressed formally, carrying a case, entering a room with a crowd, etc.) without revealing what he is doing. At the end, it turns out he is a violinist at a concert hall.
Troy Painino	Blast Off	Rocket taking off, being watched by a crowd.
Troy Painino	Canned	Shows the step-by-step process of manu-facturing tins from liquid metal to trans-porting them away
Troy Painino	World Cup Rugby	1995 World Rubgy Cup in South Africa, describing crowds in the stadium, a band playing music, the team coming onto the field, war cries, the national anthem, a referee blowing a whistle, kickoff.

TABLE 2. Summary of Annotation Symbols used in ELAN

Feature	Types	Symbol/Key
Eye gaze	1. To the audience	A
	2. Character gaze	C
	3. On hands	H
	4. Reference	R
	5. Other	O
Eye aperture	1. Regular	(blank)
	2. Squint	S
	3. Close eyes	C
	4. Wide eyes	W
Mouth actions	1. Mouthing	M
	2. Adverbial	A
	3. Enacting	4
	4. Echo	W
	5. Whole face	E

TABLE 3. Types of Eye Gaze

Symbol	Gaze type	Definition	Example
A	Gaze to the audience	Gaze is directed to the audience (to the camera), acknowledging their presence. Often seen as a narrator's viewpoint or first-person narrative.	SAME (the signer explains to the audience that she and her aunt are both Deaf)
C	Character's gaze	The performer becomes the character and tells the story through the character's eyes.	SOWETO (the signer anthropomorphizes a township that "feels" bored as the residents leave for work)
H	Gaze on hands	Gaze follows manual signs, highlighting its movement.	BEE–FLYING–TO–ROSE (the signer traces the movement of the bee flying to the rose)
R	Referential gaze	Gaze points to a referent or traces its movement in space (Sutton-Spence and Woll 1999)	LOOK–AT–CARS–ON–RIGHT (the signer is looking at cars on her right)

Table 4. Types of Eye Aperture
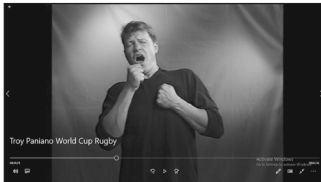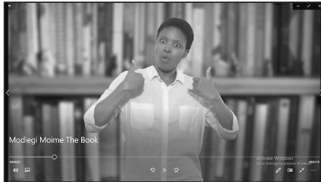
Symbol	Name	Example
S	Squint	
W	Wide eyes	
C	Closed eyes	

TABLE 5. Type of Mouth Action in Sign Language (Crasborn et al. 2008)

Symbol	Name	Description	Example
M	Mouthing	Mouth actions that are borrowed from spoken language.	Mouthing of "enjoy" accompanying the sign ENJOY
A	Adverbial/Adjectival	Mouth actions modify the meaning of the sign/provide adverbial (adjectical) information.	ROCKET–GETTING–SMALLER–AND–SMALLER
4	Enacting ("mouth for mouth")	The mouth enacts an action, i.e., chewing, screaming, or eating	SINGING
E	Echo	Mouth actions that "echo" the movement of the manual articulators.	The mouth action "pom" accompanying the opening of the hands in the sign LIGHTS–TURNED–ON
W	Whole face	The mouth is part of the whole facial expression.	SURPRISED