Origins, Formations, Rules, and (Mis)Usage of ASL Name Signs

American Sign Language
Utah Valley State College

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1) What's wrong with a Deaf person's proper name? Why use a name sign?

- The use of proper names is important to the identity of any community. A human being isn't a member of a community until s/he has a name. What's often the first question asked of parents who have a newborn baby: "So, what did you name your baby?"

- ASL name signs in the Deaf Community function differently than English proper names function in non-Deaf society. Name signs = Identity = Member of Deaf Community = Deaf Community

Cases where community is or is not determined by name signs:
- Providence Island in the Caribbean has a cultural intermix of Deaf and hearing islanders. While all island residents sign, Deaf islanders do not socially congregate; there is no record of a name sign system and lack of a cultural identity.
- As isolated Deaf Chinese school children were studied in a group situation, they began to form complex social structures. Researchers found that the children independently created a naming system for identification purposes.

2) So where did name signs start? What's the history behind them?

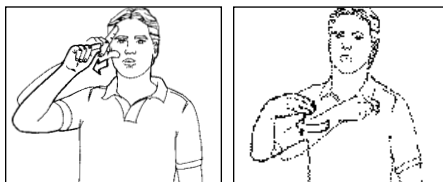Figure 1a: Descriptive name signs (DNS) for Abbe de l'Epeé, Laurent Clerc

Figure 1b: Descriptive name sign (DNS) for Thomas Gallaudet; Arbitrary name sign (ANS) for Edward Miner Gallaudet

- The earliest record or evidence of name signs is from the Paris School for the Deaf (1755-1817); prominent Deaf and educators (l'Epeé, Massieu, Clerc) are given name signs. Early records from 1820s and 1830s Pennsylvania and Hartford and Deaf schools describe teacher (T. Gallaudet, E. Gallaudet) and student name signs *(figure 1a/b).*

- For the most part, name sign systems have always exclusively included Deaf people. There have been traditional exceptions to this rule:
a) hearing teachers at residential schools
b) hearing children of Deaf adults

- Name signs systems have more recently expanded to include hearing people:
a) more hearing people learning ASL as a second language
b) more intercultural marriages
c) more hearing/Deaf friendships
d) more interpreters and other professional relationships with Deaf people
e) more hearing parents of Deaf children signing at onset/discovery of deafness

3) So what does a name sign look like? Are there rules to how they are produced?

Figure 2: ANS produced in a) neutral space, b) single location, and c) dual location

Just as there are rules in spoken English for naming items and people (one can't call a table "Ralph" or Judy "a mattress"), there are also rules for the American (or ASL) Name Sign System:

Arbitrary Name Sign (ANS):
- Represents *initial* of written first, middle, or last name. Can be combination of one or more initials *(see ANS Modification System)*
- *Does not* have an intrinsic or inherent meaning, i.e. "What does your sign mean?"
- *Does not* refer to physical characteristics of a person.
- Is produced in one of three places: neutral space, single location, and dual location *(figure 2a/b)*

Descriptive Name Sign (DNS):
- Uses *one* classifier to refer to the physical characteristics of a person (i.e. BUCKTEETH, SCAR-ON-HAND, PATCH-ON-EYE, etc.)
- *Must* follow proper ASL rules of movement, location, and handshape.

3) So what does a name sign look like? Are there rules to how they are produced? (continued)

There are exceptions to the rules of the ANS and DNS systems:
- Sometimes, although a person is part of the Deaf Community, s/he may not given an ANS or DNS. If a person's name is:
a) short (Lee, Jim, Pat, Jan) or
b) has an easily fingerspelled name, s/he will use a fingerspelled name sign.

- Deaf people may often mix humor, creativity, or a memorable occasion with the manual alphabet to create a name sign. These signs do not follow either ANS of DNS rules and tend to be:
a) used temporarily in private or single conversations, or
b) given to a famous person (i.e., NIXON + LIAR = N-LIAR)

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4) How does a Deaf or hearing person get a name sign?

- Name signs are given to a person by another Deaf person—not by him/herself. Name signs are often given (regulated) by an influential leader or authority figure in the Deaf Community. Deaf children of Deaf parents are looked to by their Deaf-children-of-hearing-parent-peers to assume this role.

- While Deaf and/or hearing children of Deaf parents receive name signs at birth, Deaf children of *hearing* parents typically do not receive name signs until they enter school or even later. (School view: English is better than ASL, therefore ASL is bad. (Name sign=identity.)

What or who determines if a person receives an ANS or DNS? Typically, this depends on *who* (age and social group) gives the name sign. Here are some general preferences:

Arbitrary Name Sign (ANS)
- ANSs most preferred by Deaf parents; many dislike basing name signs on physical traits.

Descriptive Name Sign (DNS)
- While Deaf children give both ANSs and DNSs, DNSs are more popular with children; tend to focus on physical traits (i.e. "KID" > "FAT KID" or "BIG KID")

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5) So, can a person incorrectly create a name sign?

Figure 3a: Incorrect creation of a name sign based on the idea that "because Susie winks alot," her name sign is S-ROTATING-AT-EYE

Figure 3b: A correct DNS (WINK) or ANS (S-AT-TEMPLE) alternate for Susie

- In theory, a name sign is used to identify a person as a member of the Deaf Community; ergo, any name sign should be correct. However, just as English speakers are upset at the mispronunciation of their own name, Deaf people who understand correct name sign conventions cringe at the continuing pollution of the ANS and DNS systems.

- Many current name signs are incorrect because novice signers devalue the cultural importance of a name sign by making up name signs "for fun" or by assuming that a name sign must carry some meaning. This displays a disregard for an important traditional value of the Deaf Community.

- As a result, Deaf children and adults often give non-traditional name signs because their signing models, teachers, and counselors are novice signers. Other reasons that Deaf people give nontraditional name signs:
a) A gradual loss of traditional name sign knowledge and application. Residential schools used to be the laboratories for name sign creation; Deaf education focus has since been shifted
b) Deaf children who are born to hearing parents have a lack of contact with the Deaf community.
c) Although speculative, incorrect name signs purposely identify hearing signers
d) A sense of "hearing people have taken over; give them what they want"
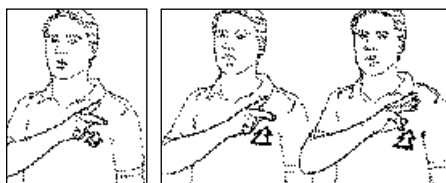
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6) How are name signs actually used?

Figure 4: Using the Name Sign Modification System. Modifying an ANS requires an additional initial, generally produced in the same location. (K-ON-SHOULDER to K-W-ON-SHOULDER)

- Name signs are only used in conversations
a) where the person is not participating or is not present and/or
b) in a third person reference (i.e., KNOW M-ON-SHOULDER? YOU TELL-him ABOUT PARTY TOMORROW? *(Can you tell Mike about the party tomorrow?)* (Note: Any question of "Mike who?" is eliminated because of the specific placement of the name sign.)

- Name signs are *not* used at a greeting (i.e., HELLO E-ON-TEMPLE *(Hello, Elaine)* is improper. Using or exchanging name signs at a first-time formal introduction is also improper. It is not until a more casual relationship is formed that it is okay to use that person's name sign in a third person reference.

Name signs may be modified because:
a) 2 people have the same name sign. The older person keeps his/hers; the younger person must modify
b) A new person moves into the community. If another person has the same name sign, the new person must modify
c) A Deaf and hearing person have the same name sign; hearing person modifies

ASL Name Sign Modification System:
Arbitrary Name Sign (ANS)
- Add additional initial to current name sign, i.e., K-ON-SHOULDER becomes K-C-ON-SHOULDER (figure 4)

Descriptive Name Sign (DNS)
- Because DNSs are based on characteristics, it is rare to find same DNS; no modification.

References and Bibliography   Supalla, Samuel J., The Book of Name Signs: Naming in American Sign Language, DawnSign Press: San Diego, 1992.