

“TIGER BURN BRIGHT-EYES”
A Study of ASL Linguistics in Poetry

INTRODUCTION

It has long been documented that American Sign Language (ASL), like English, is a legitimate language, following Chomsky’s rules of language in its own fashion, as a lack of sound in a language does not preclude the language possessing its own phonology, morphology, and syntax, and indeed, all three are present in the linguistics of ASL.

However, language is not always used the same way. For example, a professor giving a lecture, a child writing a letter, and two people sharing an everyday conversation all use language differently, even if they all use the same fundamental language. In some instances, language is more formal, more closely following the structures of grammar. In other circumstances, the language is more relaxed, more laden with colloquialisms and slang.

A third instance of an internal change in language use comes from the artistic use of the language. The language of theatre, of poetry, of storytelling, is different in the same manner as the other circumstances mentioned above. It is this third instance that this paper will address – how linguistic features are used in poetry, and specifically relating to William Blake’s poem, “The Tyger.”

Some background is required at this point to explain some of the stylistic features of this poem in English. The poem dates to the Pre-Romantic period, when vivid style, if not melodrama, first began coming to the fore. Blake’s work was highly influenced by religion and mysticism – there are constant references to Christianity, God, Christ, and other religious aspects. These provocative subjects lend themselves well to Blake’s distinctive style of writing. However, the main focus is on the linguistics of the poem, first addressed in English, then addressed in ASL.

THE ENGLISH TYGER

First of all, the entire poem is a question – the speaker, presumably Blake, never receives an answer to any of his questions. This is not that surprising, given that Blake is addressing the Tyger, who is unable to respond. Blake is astonished at the magnificence of this creature, and yet cannot help wondering how God has managed to make both the Tyger and the Lamb.

The language used is both elegantly remote, and yet distinctly compelling. The imagery evoked here is not the simple, bland stuff that makes up most everyday conversations. Rather, Blake uses language to vividly create a mental picture of a powerful animal, the personification of Experience, and all the more fascinating when compared to the Lamb, the personification of Innocence, in one of Blake's other Songs.

Blake uses a fairly simple rhyme scheme – AABB, CCDD, EEFF, and so forth, known as couplets. This pattern persists from start to finish (“Tyger, Tyger, burning bright/In the forests of the night”), rather than changing at some point in the middle, or near the end, such as one sees in the sonnet. Blake uses the rhythmic form of trochaic meter (accented syllable, unaccented syllable) throughout the poem. This sort of rhyme scheme has a momentum all its own – driving, relentless, even, in its journey towards the end. Some consider these two forms to be both simplistic and confining, and yet Blake supersedes these limits with ease.

Now, to some people, these elements, namely description, rhyme, and rhythm, may or may not be transferable from one language to another, especially from a language based on sound to a language based on sight. However, as will be discussed, one can see that these elements are transferred over in a most capable fashion.

THE ASL TYGER

In an earlier class completed last spring, focusing on the use of ASL in film and literature, I was required to view, memorize, and perform a poem in ASL as part of the coursework. After perusing the list, I noticed that Blake's "The Tyger" was one of them, and requested permission to use that poem. I watched Bernard Bragg, a member of the National Theater of the Deaf, perform his ASL translation of the work, and was simply lost in amazement.

First, regarding aesthetics, Bragg's performance is both restrained and yet contains more than a hint of seething energy. Dressed entirely in black, Bragg is seen at first in close-up, then the camera retreats to encompass all of his signing space, before closing in again in the same manner in which it started.

Bragg's translation follows the English rather closely. Even allowing for the differences in grammar, it is evident that the poem was first composed in English, and then translated, rather than appearing like an original work. Bragg is somewhat constrained by the original modality of the work (even written English and spoken English are quite different), and yet he manages to incorporate more than a few of the features of ASL into the work.

By comparing the glossed version of the poem to its original English counterpart (see Appendix I), one can see the similarities between the two renditions. The ASL gloss reads much like a fractured English version, and yet certain word choices stand out as different, either because no ASL equivalent was available, or else Bragg found a better way to sign it where the ASL visual component is more effective than its glossed equivalent.

The three primary features studied in this paper are those related to descriptiveness (focusing on the use of classifiers), rhyme, and rhythm.

DESCRIPTIVE CLASSIFIERS

A classifier, technically, is not really a sign. Rather, it is used to show something, such as depth or width, surface, size, shape, and so on. There are, in fact, eight different types of classifiers, each with its own meaning: descriptive, locative, semantic, body, instrument, body part, plural, and element. Five of these types appear in Bragg's performance.

The first one seen is a body part classifier, used in the twelfth line of the poem ("What dread hand? & what dread feet?"). In ASL, since there is no sign for FEET (it is fingerspelled instead), Bragg opts instead to show the Tyger's padded feet moving forward with purpose by using classifiers. In ASL gloss, this is marked as follows, allowing for typeface: (2h)BPCL:5 "walking".

The second time a classifier is used, there is a perfectly legitimate sign for HAMMER. (This refers to line 13, "What the hammer? what the chain?") Normally, HAMMER is signed somewhat small and out from the body, as if hammering a nail into a wall to hang a picture. Instead, Bragg uses an instrumental classifier to show the pounding of the hammer on the anvil: ICL:"hammer pounding".

The third classifier type is a descriptive classifier. CHAIN is normally signed in front of the body, with minimal movement, simply describing the links. However, also found in line 13, Bragg uses the DCL:"chain linking back" to describe a chain, using backwards motion to show the chain being forged from the anvil he has set up in his previous segment.

A fourth type found in Bragg's performance is the element classifier. Referring to things like wind, smoke, and light, Bragg employs it for the word FURNACE. ASL has no equivalent for this English word (as seen earlier with FEET), so he translates the word as the phrase/classifier HOT FIRE-ECL:5"smoke billowing".

The fifth is a semantic classifier, used for the phrase, “what dread grasp/Dare its deadly terrors clasp?” in lines 15 and 16. Bragg sets up the “dread grasp” in normal ASL and the “deadly terrors” in front of him, and then lunges forward, using the classifier (2h)SCL:5”seize”. By using the bent 5 handshape, he demonstrates an animal’s grasp, not a human’s, as the regular sign for GRAB or SEIZE appears. Another example of the SCL, because it is the only type to show up more than once, is in line 17, “When the stars threw down their spears”. Once again, a normal ASL sign does exist for this concept. However, it denotes one spear, being thrown forward from the speaker’s body. Bragg signs this with the SCL:5”spears falling down” to show that the spears are being thrown from above, towards himself, and also neatly encompassing the idea that the stars are rejecting these war instruments and tossing them over their shoulders

ASL RHYME

Rhyme depends on phonology, and at first thought, a rhyme is usually thought to be associated with sound. Two words sound similar in some fashion (either by syllable number or by phonemic units), and so a poet employs those words rather than others that might be similar in meaning, but lacking this symmetry. In the visual format of English, the poet would select two words that look similar in length, ending, beginning (in the case of alliteration), and so on.

Since ASL does indeed have its own phonology, Bragg employs it with equal style. ASL’s phonology is made up of five primary components – handshape, location, movement, orientation, and non-manual features. These five components were determined by Liddell and Johnson in 1989, based on the work of William Stokoe of Gallaudet College, in approximately 1965. These five features are the equivalent of our phonemic units of language.

The visual phonology of ASL comes beautifully into play in the first two lines of the poem, arguably the two most famous lines: “Tyger! Tyger! burning bright/In the forests of the

night”. In English, these lines are dramatic and sensual. In ASL, Bragg uses ASL phonology in two ways. First, rather than signing NIGHT, he signs DARK. At first, this seems a bit “off,” because there is a legitimate sign for NIGHT. However, upon closer analysis, we can see that both BRIGHT in line 1, and DARK in line 2, employ the same “5” handshape. A slight sacrifice in semantics leads to a phonological rhyme.

This same sacrifice is visible in other parts of lines 1 and 2, where the first six signs of the poem all use the same handshape. Bragg signs THROUGH instead of IN, TREE++ for FOREST, DARK for NIGHT, and the first three signs naturally use the “5” handshape.

Another stunning example is what might be called ASL alliteration, also using the phonemic component of handshape. In line 3, “What immortal hand or eye”, Bragg signs WHAT ALWAYS-CONTINUE HAND AND EYE. Semantically, this means approximately the same as its English equivalent, given that ASL has no sign for IMMORTAL. At first, I was puzzled why Bragg selected ALWAYS-CONTINUE as the components of his compound for IMMORTAL. Possible translations might also include NEVER-DIE, ALWAYS-LIVE, or some other variant. However, the cleverness appears in the first, and then last three signs of the line. It starts with the left hand as a “5” and the right as a “1” (the other version of WHAT). The line ends in the same set of handshapes, with the left “5” held up denoting HAND, and the right “1” signing EYE.

Interesting to note, although not using phonology for its rhyme base, is Bragg’s method of rhyming lines 17 and 18 (“Did he smile his work to see?/Did he who made the Lamb make thee?”). Both times, Bragg indicates the Tyger to whom he is speaking – the first time to indicate that the Tyger is the work of God, the second time to specifically address the Tyger after being compared to the Lamb. Here, he uses syntax, moving around the order (and possibly meaning) of the signs to set up a rhyme scheme.

THE RHYTHM OF ASL

Incorporating the rhythm of one language into another is a difficult task. However, Bragg's translation carries it off rather well. The best example of this is, once again, in the first two lines.

This is an example of what might be called same/different. The number of words versus the number of signs may be different, but their rhythm is identical. In English, we have four words in line 1, six words in line 2. In ASL, we have three signs in each line. TIGER, in ASL, has a twice-repeated movement. This can be construed as repeating the original sign; rather than signing TIGER twice, Bragg simply exaggerates the one sign to where it looks like two, thus conforming to the repetition in English. The pace of the rest of the lines fits with the English performance, and indeed, when watching and voicing this poem, there is no pause while waiting for Bragg. In fact, his timing and sign selection simply harmonize with the English, as if taking into account that voicing (whether aloud or internal) is taking place.

One example of the same/same rhythm pattern is in line 17. There are the same number of signs and words, and the only difference is Bragg's signing speed. The basic rhythm is still there. This is also seen in line 9, "And what shoulder, & what art", glossed as AND WHAT SHOULDER AND WHAT IMAGINE. There are few examples in this poem of identical numbers of words and signs in any given line, simply because English uses "the," "a," "an," and so forth. Articles such as these have no direct equivalent in ASL, and thus are not translated separately.

There are, however, times where rhythm is distorted (the different/different pattern), such as lines 15 and 16 (see above). Bragg signs these as WHAT STEEL WHAT YOUR FEAR HAND/DARE FEAR (2h)SCL:5"seize." When voicing aloud to the poem, one might not make

the connection between the English lines and the ASL performance. The fundamental rhythm found in the earlier lines is not present here. By comparison, for lines 17 and 18 (see above), Bragg's translation is slower, even though again, as in lines 1 and 2, the ASL gloss is the same or briefer than the English line. This, however, appears not to be a loss of rhythm as much as it uses rhythm for emphasis – by slowing down, he incorporates Blake's astonishment at the creation of the Tyger, and its relation to the Lamb as both are works of God.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, the linguistic features of a language can be used to great effect in poetry, and ASL is no different in that capacity. Bragg's performance and translation is no less striking in ASL than the original poem in English. The same brilliance that appears in Blake's original English verse is apparent in the ASL performance of the same. Bragg makes clever use of the classifiers, rhyme, and rhythm of ASL. He, like Blake, takes a form that might be considered, as described earlier, simple and confining, and within that form, creates a work of art. Had he not employed these features, the poem's translation would have been merely adequate, rather than equal.

It would be intriguing in seeing another version of the same poem, not only for variance in signing style, but also to see how the translation and sign choices would be different. Although it would mean a more serious departure from Blake's original work, a performance in true ASL, unhindered by English word order, would prove more of a challenge. It would be especially worth the time and effort to study other works, especially those composed in ASL (such as those by Ella Mae Lentz or Clayton Valli), to see how these same traits appear in the work of the "original language." It has been noted that oftentimes in these circumstances, the poem has no English equivalent, such as Lentz' "Wedding Poem."

ENGLISH

ASL GLOSS

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
 In the forests of the night,
 What immortal hand or eye
 Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

TIGER BURN BRIGHT-EYES
 THROUGH TREE++ DARK
 WHAT ALWAYS-CONTINUE HAND AND EYE
 CAN GIVE YOUR FEAR PERFECT FRAME

In what distant deeps or skies
 Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
 On what wings dare he aspire?
 What the hand, dare seize the fire?

IN WHAT FAR ROCK+HILL DEEP OR SKY
 GIVE FIRE IN YOUR EYES
 ON WHAT WINGS COURAGE GOD-HIMSELF GIVE
 WHAT HAND DARE GRAB FIRE

And what shoulder, & what art,
 Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
 And when thy heart began to beat,
 What dread hand? & what dread
 feet?

AND WHAT SHOULDER AND WHAT IMAGINE
 TWIST YOUR HEART
 AND WHEN YOUR HEART START BEAT
 WHAT FEAR HAND WHAT FEAR (2h)BPCL:5"walking"

What the hammer? what the chain?
 In what furnace was thy brain?
 What the anvil? what dread grasp
 Dare its deadly terrors grasp?

WHAT ICL:"hammer pounding" WHAT DCL:"chain linking
 back"
 FROM WHAT HOT FIRE-ECL:"smoke billowing" GIVE
 YOUR BRAIN
 WHAT STEEL WHAT YOUR FEAR HAND
 DARE YOUR FEAR (2h)SCL:5"seize"

When the stars threw down their
 spears,
 And water'd heaven with their tears,
 Did he smile his work to see?
 Did he who made the Lamb make
 thee?

WHEN STAR BRIGHT (2h)SCL:5"spears falling down"
 AND FROM HEAVEN COME-DOWN TEARS
 QUESTION HIMSELF SMILE SEE MAKE YOU
 QUESTION HIMSELF WHO MAKE SMALL SHEEP
 MAKE YOU

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
 In the forests of the night,
 What immortal hand or eye
 Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

TIGER BURN BRIGHT-EYES
 THROUGH TREE++ DARK
 WHAT ALWAYS-CONTINUE HAND AND EYE
 CAN GIVE YOUR FEAR PERFECT FRAME

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