Signed Renga: Exploration of ‘Genre’ in Creative Sign Language

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Example

- BSL World Renga II
- ISL Fruit Renga
What is Renga?

• A chain of brief (haiku-like) poems produced by a group of people

• It is collaborative, accretive, and dynamic.

• The essence of renga are: ‘continuity, ‘change’, and ‘development’

• Renga is a poetic event: process is as important as product
Why *signed* renga?

- **Linguistic reasons** - the brevity, strongly visual themes, and humorous aspects of renga makes it appropriate and approachable for sign language users.

- **Social/cultural reasons** - collaborative nature of renga seems to fit well with values, expectations and interests and abilities in Deaf community members.
The History of Signed Renga

• Existing signed haiku
• Bristol BSL Haiku festival - July 2006 (established Deaf and hearing poets work together; first contact with international poets; organisers learn what works – or not)
• Bristol BSL poetry festival – First BSL renga – workshops and performance – February 2010 (poets re-encounter; international participants)
• Trinity College Dublin, Ireland – March 2010. Seminar on humour and a workshop on poetry
• Nordic Culture Festival for Deaf in Stockholm, Sweden – June 2010
Necessary ‘Ingredients’

• Increased confidence and expertise among Deaf poets
• Development of research framework for analysing sign language poetry (Sutton-Spence 2005, Bauman, Nelson and Rose 2006)
• Successful rooting of signed haiku in Deaf communities
• Collaborations between Deaf and hearing poets
• International personal and professional connections
• Good relations between academic researchers, universities, members of Deaf communities and Deaf Clubs.
• Technological advances (greater availability of recorded materials for viewing, sharing and analysing – websites and YouTube)
• Financial backing
The Poems

• 4 BSL renga poems from Bristol Sign Poetry Festival, University of Bristol, February 2010

  World I, World II, Deaf-His, Countries

• 3 ISL renga poems from ISL Poetry Workshop, Centre for Deaf Studies, Trinity College Dublin, March 2010

  Spot My Addiction, Fruit, Untitled

• 2 SSL/FinSL/DSL renga poems from the Nordic Culture Festival for Deaf in Stockholm, Sweden, June 2010

  Love, Deaf World
Dynamics of Signed Renga

• A group of people performing on the stage → theatrical elements
• Blending of poetry and drama
• Previous sign poetry: single-authored, uni-directional (poet → audience), static (spatially and thematically)
• Signed renga: multi-authored, multi-directional (poets → audience, poets↔poets), more dynamic
• Implications for camerawork
Emergence of a ‘chorus’

- Renga distinguishes two types of poets: a foregrounded poet and ‘others’ (who are on the stage but not currently performing).
- Non-foregrounded poets are indispensable part of the performance and support the foregrounded poet in various ways.
- They often function as a non-individual, homogenous group like a chorus in classical Greek plays.
- The chorus can observe, support, react to, or exaggerate what the foregrounded poet is presenting.
Dynamic use of space

- Emergence of common (or shared) space
- Previous sign poems: mostly performed within the normal signing space of a single poet
- Renga poems: can use a larger space on the stage beyond individual signing area
- Order of signers (physically and thematically)
Continuity, Change and Development

- Overlapping
- Interacting
- Repetition of the sign
- Repetition of the handshape
- Repetition and development of the spatial structure
- Thematic continuity & development
- Expected or unexpected ending
Eyegaze

• Gaze to camera/audience is reduced – less intimacy with the audience, more interaction among the poets
• Discourse function of the gaze – turn-taking
• Gaze of the chorus
  1. **Spotlight** on the foregrounded poet
  2. **Highlight** the elements shown by the foregrounded poet
  3. **React** to and **comment** on the foregrounded poet
Summary

• Signed renga poems share a number of features that bind them together to become a unique form of creative signing.

• Recent development of signed renga across different Deaf communities tells us the way in which a particular form can be adopted as a new ‘genre’ in sign language poetry.
References


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All renga poems are available on Youtube

BSL World I http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hlOHFKXOLn4
BSL World II http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JENFqd9UwoU
BSL Deaf-His http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYWra9HtQVA
BSL Countries http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=46klJHl1mes
ISL Spot My Addiction http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gdvalZLbr4E
ISL Fruit http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4yXP3Z4gqs
ISL Untitled http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p7piDHC3KaY
SSL Love http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IODYFj78Jeo
SSL Deaf World http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZgGtWWk4VXs