

Names in Québec Sign Language and what they tell us about Québec Deaf Culture[†]

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1 INTRODUCTION

Numerous studies have been carried out on personal name signs in various sign languages, most of them dealing with ASL. Meadow [1977] mentions the interest that the study of name signs holds for our knowledge of Deaf American culture. Mindess [1990] et S. Supalla [1990, 1992] each describe numerous name signs in ASL. Mindess deals primarily with descriptive name signs whereas Supalla deals with arbitrary name signs.

As far as other sign languages are concerned, we have information on name signs in Swedish Sign Language and Chinese Sign Language: Hedberg [1989] and Yau & He [1989] describe the processes by which name signs are given under the particular conditions of a boarding school for Deaf children in China. The aim of this paper is to provide a description of personal name signs in LSQ. We will show that naming in Deaf families is characterised by the use of arbitrary initialized signs, but names given within the larger Deaf community are, in the majority of cases, descriptive in nature.

2 METHOD

In conducting this research, we compiled a corpus of 224 personal names expressed in signs. Our principal means of data collection was through a questionnaire, which gave us the following information:

whether the person bearing the name had deaf or hearing parents; whether he or she was deaf from birth, had become deaf at a later age; or was hearing, if an explanation for the name was known or whether it had been given arbitrarily; if the person had one or several names and in the latter case, what the reason for the multiple names was;

at what age the person had received his or her name sign; and where (at school, at home, etc.) the name had been attributed to him or her.

We transcribed the different name signs phonologically and took note of the explanations given by the Deaf respondents and any others involved in order to justify each name. We then analyzed the corpus and drew up a typology of name signs in LSQ.

The name signs that we have recorded correspond to the names used in the Deaf

community for people known to our informants or to their friends, for members of our research team and various associates at our University as well as for numerous political, religious, historical and artistic personalities. We retained only a portion of the total collection of initialized names, which we will use as examples. We will return later to this type of name.

More than half of the name signs that we have identified belong to persons who were either born deaf or had become so at an early age (137 names out of 224). Table 1 gives a breakdown of the personal background of each person bearing a name sign. Some persons have more than one name.

Table 1: Distribution of subjects for the study

	Hearing parents	Deaf parents	Deaf relatives	total
Deaf from birth	104	9	24	137
Became deaf	6	1	-	7
Hearing	43	1	1	45
Celebrities	24	-	-	24
Total	177	11	25	213 ¹

3 ATTRIBUTION OF A NAME SIGN

3.1 Differences between name signs and names in oral languages

Two characteristics distinguish name signs for oral language names. Unlike names in oral languages, name signs are not used to address an individual and they are not obligatory.

Unlike names in the majority of spoken languages, name signs are not used to attract somebody's attention; a name sign is used only in the absence of the person to whom it is attributed or when a signer refers to that person in a conversation (i.e. in the 3rd person).

It is rare that the creation of name signs is an absolute necessity such as in the situation described by Yau [1989], where monitors in the boarding school/home had to distinguish their 21 students by name in order to take roll call. In Québec, Deaf students are found only in a limited number of schools and the total of students per class is normally quite low.

3.2 Who has a name sign?

Sign names exist only in Deaf communities. The Deaf who live exclusively in hearing environments do not have name signs [Yau, 1989]. The Deaf living in Deaf families generally have at least two name signs: one for use within the family and one for use in the community.

Contrary to what one might think, it is not only the Deaf who have sign names. In

fact, the majority of hearing people who have frequent contact with the Deaf community are also given a name sign. Political and religious personalities, major historical and artistic figures, as well as certain organizations also have name signs. The principle reason is undoubtedly cultural: for the Deaf, name signs are far more significant than are names which appear on a birth certificate. Another probable reason is that it is more economical to sign a name sign than to fingerspell it.

3.3 At what time is a name attributed?

The Deaf do receive a sign name in their home environment, often during childhood, but at differing periods depending upon the hearing abilities of the family. In families where the parents are deaf, it is most often an initialized name which is used (One of our informants told us, however, that in a family comprising four girls and one boy, the girls had a name sign based on the initial letter of their first names whilst the boy was simply signed GARÇON (boy)). When a second boy was born, both boys had initialized name signs.) It is signed in neutral space by the dominant hand effecting a slight leftward movement, in a handshape representing the initial letter of the first name (in French). If several family members happen to have a first name with the same initial, then clarification is achieved by oralizing the names (i.e. the name is pronounced without voice at the same time as it is signed). As a general rule, Deaf children born to hearing parents do not have a name sign before starting school.

At school, Deaf children give each other short-lived sign names; a process which continues until adolescence, at about which time one name sign becomes more established and often permanent.

Hearing people acquire a name sign only if they have frequent contact with the Deaf community or if they are well-known personalities. Generally, when a hearing person is presented to a Deaf person, his or her name is fingerspelled. Afterwards, if the name is taken up in conversation, it is normally initialized and oralized. The attribution of a sign name does not generally occur until later, when the Deaf individual is better acquainted with the hearing person.

In the case of well-known personalities, their name signs are usually attributed at the moment when they come to prominence, at the same time as their names begin to appear more frequently in conversation. There are, however, exceptions, with certain individuals not receiving a name sign until after their death (for example, KENNEDY).

3.4 Multiple name signs for the same individual

A Deaf child of Deaf parents will almost always have two name signs. It is also possible that an individual's name sign may change in the Deaf community. This

can happen if the physical, intellectual or behavioral particularity which had initially prompted the name changes or disappears altogether. Notwithstanding, such a name-change rarely occurs. Nor can an individual change his or her name for the simple reason of not liking it. On the contrary, in such an instance, it seems that the name may become even more firmly established. Yet, it can happen that separate groups give different names to the same individual, in which case the most recent name may replace the older name.

3.5 How is a name sign created?

LSQ name signs are most commonly in the descriptive category and we find it interesting to compare the process by which they are formed with that used to form other types of signs.

Klima and Bellugi [1979: 16-17] describe the process of creation of a nonce-sign by the deaf. Their aim was to analyze the distinction between miming and signing. In an experiment, they asked some ASL signers to recount the story of "The Unicorn in the Garden" (James Thurber). This story includes the mention of a "strait jacket", for which there was no unanimously accepted sign. At the beginning of their narrative, in order to illustrate this concept, each signer performed his or her own pantomime depicting the principal characteristics of a strait jacket and the act of being forced into one. But pantomime is not an economical procedure and the more the story advanced, the more the pantomime was curtailed. An evolution could be observed towards the formation of a sign, representing only one or two characteristics of the concept, as it gradually assumed the handshake, location and movement of a possible sign.

Our observations indicate that the creation of a name sign follows approximately the same steps as those described by Klima and Bellugi for everyday signs: in essence, only one of the characteristics of an individual is retained and used to name that person.

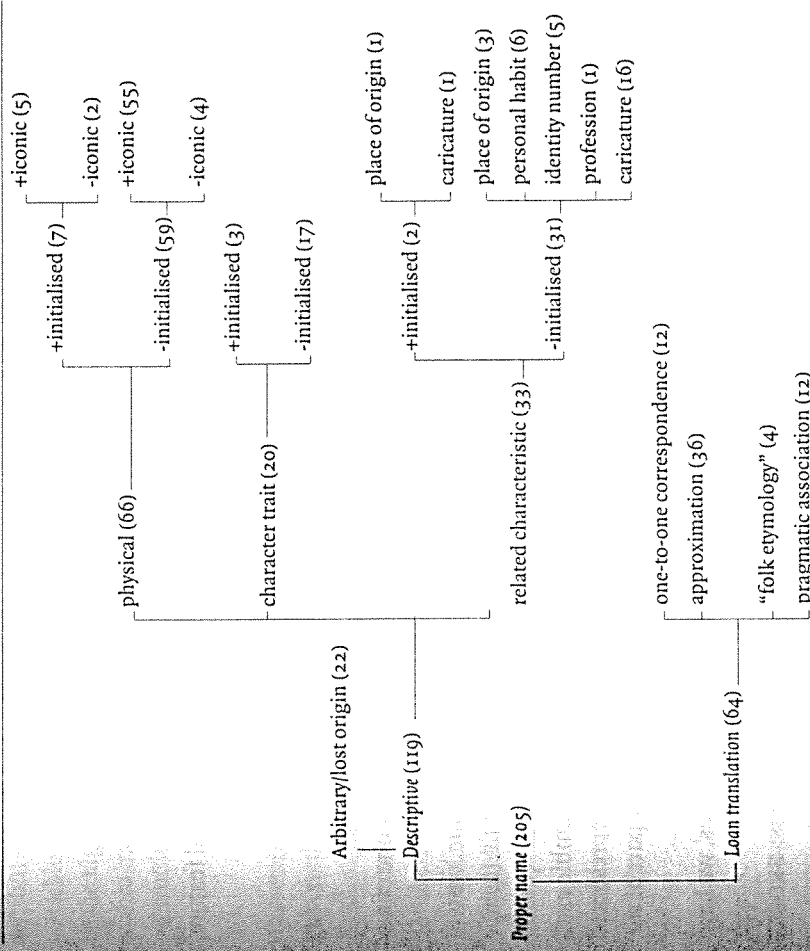
4 DESCRIPTION OF NAME SIGNS

Thus, sign names frequently represent only a single characteristic of the person to whom they are attributed. In this case, using the terminology of S. Supalla [1990] we will say that they are personalized or descriptive. They also may be initialized. Table II illustrates the different types of name signs of persons that we have recorded to date: the numbers in each box indicate the number of names found for that category.

4.1 Descriptive names

A descriptive name is attributed to a person according to either a physical feature, a character trait or a related characteristic.

Table 2: Different types of name signs



Mindess [1990] divided her corpus of descriptive name signs into two categories: a class of initialized names of more recent origin referring to behaviours, hairstyles or hobbies; and a class of more traditional names, older in origin, describing physical traits, and which are not initialized. According to Mindess, the form of the names belonging to the newer class may be attributed to an imperfect understanding/knowledge of Deaf culture.

In LSQ, name signs are found in both initialized and uninitialized form. In general, initialization is used to distinguish name signs from others with a similar form: nothing leads us to believe that initialization of name signs is due in any way to a lack of understanding of Deaf culture. The table 3 shows that initialized name signs make up only a small percentage of the total of descriptive name signs; we see in addition that they are given about as often to Deaf individuals as to hearing individuals.

Table 3: Distribution of initialization in descriptive names

Descriptive name signs	Deaf	Hearing	total
+ initialized names	5 (4.2 %)	7 (5.9 %)	12 (10.1 %)
- initialized names	66 (55.4 %)	41 (34.5 %)	107 (89.9 %)
Total	71 (59.7 %)	48 (40.3 %)	119 (100 %)

We have collected 119 descriptive names, of which 66 represent a physical feature, 20 represent a character trait and 33 represent a related characteristic.

4.1.1 Names representing physical features

Of the 7 name signs that we have identified in this category, 5 are iconic. An example of an iconic initialized descriptive name sign is the name of one of our associates: /L/ + CURLY-HAIR.

As an example of an initialized descriptive name sign which is not iconic, we will cite the names of deaf twins: JUMELLE (twin) + N (for Nicole) and JUMELLE (twin) + M (for Michèle). Although these name signs are still based on a physical feature, they are not like “having curly hair” or “being big”, but rather like “resemble each other”. Consequently, they are not iconic. The initial, instead of being represented by a handshake while producing the sign, is a continuation of the first part of the loan sign borrowed from everyday language: JUMELLE (twin).

In the category of non-initialized names representing physical features, we have identified 59 name signs of which 54 are iconic.

An example of an iconic descriptive name sign which is not initialized is: BROSE (crew cut).

In the same category, one finds the name signs of Adolph Hitler, Clark Gable and General de Gaulle.

A descriptive name sign representing a physical feature can also be non-initialized and non-iconic. We will cite here the name which is signed as AFRIQUE (Africa), given to a person who has black skin.

4.1.2 Names representing a character trait

These names may be either initialized or not. Of the 20 name signs that we have collected, only 3 are initialized.

As an example of initialized descriptive name signs representing a character trait, we will cite those of two persons having the forenames Julie and Colette, indicating someone who smiles often.

To illustrate the category of non-initialized descriptive names representing a character trait, we will cite LUNE (moon): this is derived from a French expression “dans la lune” (in the moon), meaning “day-dreaming”.

Another example is a name sign which corresponds to PLEURER (cry), which is attributed to many people because when they were children they cried a lot. (It is possible that several people belonging to different social groups may have the same name sign, but as Mindess [1990] notes it is very rare that such a situation arises within the same group and, if it were to happen, there are ways that confusion could be avoided.)

4.1.3 Names representing a related characteristic

Certain name signs are given as the result of a related characteristic frequently observed in a person. These name signs can be either initialized or uninitialized. 33 name signs in this category were identified, of which only 3 are initialized.

Among the initialized names representing a personal characteristic, we draw a distinction between those which have been attributed according to the person’s place of origin and those which are a caricature of some personal trait or habit.

In the first category, a person’s place of origin, we will cite the name of one of our students, Laurence, who came from Belgium, whose sign is an initialisation with “L” of the sign BELGIUM (which is made with an outward movement of the /Y/ hand from the cheek).

In the second category, that of a caricature, we will cite the name of a professor whose surname began with a P: it was signed with a /P/-handshape above his watch, because he demanded, and rigidly enforced, strict punctuality on the part of his pupils.

Among the non-initialized names representing a related characteristic, we draw a distinction between those that have been attributed according to a person’s origins, a personal habit, an identity number, a profession, and those which are caricatures of a personal trait.

As an illustration of a non-initialized name sign corresponding to a person’s origins, we can cite the name Joliette. This name was given to a person who spent his childhood and adolescence in the town of JOLIETTE and then lived the rest of his life in Montréal. His name sign, nevertheless, did not change.

A name sign which reflects a habit is PIPE. This name was given to a person who smoked a pipe.

As examples of name signs based on identity numbers, we have found 3, 18, 75, 99 and 111 (This name is signed by an /L/-handshape effecting a rightward movement.) With the exception of 99, all these name signs were the numbers marked on the person’s clothing at school. The number 99 comes from the shirt number of Wayne Gretzky a famous hockey player.

Certain names are given according to a person’s profession. As an example, we can give BARBIER (barber), because this person had worked for a long time as a barber.

Other names represent a caricature or were given in order to tease the recipient. We have identified many examples of this type. A professor who habitually used a projector when giving his courses was given the sign name *PROJECTEUR* (*overhead-projector*). A hearing person received the name sign *PAS-CAPABLE* (*can't*) because when learning LSQ she always confused this sign with the sign *COMIQUE* (*funny*). Finally, Jerry Lewis' name is signed with an /A_x/-hanshape pinching and tugging at the ear, representing one of his trademark gestures.

4.2 Loan translation

We have identified 64 name signs which are loan translations. They were not, however, all borrowed in the same way. Consequently, we divide them into four categories: those which are in a one-to-one correspondence with a sign in everyday language, those which are an approximation of a sign in everyday language, those which can be attributed to "folk etymologies" and those which are based upon pragmatic association. None of the 4 categories either involve or imply an individual's personal characteristics. It is simply a question of a total or partial correspondence between the surname or first name in French and a sign in LSQ.

4.2.1 One-to-one correspondence

The French surnames Boucher, Boulanger, Drapeau, and Couture all correspond to everyday French words: "butcher", "baker", "flag", "sewing", respectively LSQ *BOUCHER*/butcher, *BOULANGER*/baker, *DRAPEAU*/flag and *COUTURE*/sewing. Similarly, a girl named Aimée (*beloved*) has the name sign *AIMER* (*to love*).

4.2.2 Cross-linguistic approximations

Some name signs derived from everyday LSQ are given because their commonly accepted French gloss approximates the written or (visible) oral form of the person's French name or surname. A girl named Blanche has the name sign *BLANC* (*white*), and a boy named Jean-Guy has the name sign *QUI* (*who*) (confusion between voiced and voiceless segments is a frequent occurrence, as the distinction cannot be made through lip-reading). A person with the surname Lévesque has the name sign *évêQUE* (*bishop*), a person named Lajoie has the name sign *JOIE* (*joy*), a person named Ladouceur ("la douceur" translates literally as "softness") has the sign *DOUX* (*soft*) and a person with the surname Chalifoux has the name sign *FOU* (*mad*), etc.

In certain cases, although a sign in the language may correspond to a French name, it will be modified or even completely changed in the creation of the name sign. For example, a person named Leboeuf has a name sign *BOEUF* (*bull*), but the orientation of the palm is reversed. An individual with the surname Gariépy has a

name sign which is iconic in form but based initially on an approximation of the oral form of the surname. Gariépy, when lipread, closely resembles the word Gaspésie, the name of a region covering the Gaspé peninsula in eastern Québec. A name sign was invented (a /C/ hanshape on the dominant hand and a /I/ hanshape on the non-dominant hand, pointing toward the inside of the /C/), which is a relatively accurate reproduction of the shape of this peninsula on a map. However, the everyday LSQ sign *GASPÉ* has no connection with the invented name sign.

4.2.3 "Folk etymology"

Certain longer names are broken into two signs. Thus, a person with the surname Bellefeuille has a name sign *BELLE* + *FEUILLE* (*beautiful* + *leaf*), the surname Laverdure is signed *LAVER* + *DUR* (*wash* + *hard*) and Rioux is signed *RIRE* + *OÙ* (*laugh* + *where*).

4.2.4 Pragmatic association

Some names are created as the result of an association made between a French word and an LSQ sign. Thus, a person whose family name is *Pilote* (*pilot*) has a name signed *AVION* (*airplane*) and someone else named *Pépin* (*pip/seed*) has the name sign *GRAINE* (*seed*). On occasion, the association is less direct. A person with the surname Saint-Pierre (*Saint Peter*) has the name sign *CLÉS* (*keys*) by association with the keys of Saint Peter, a person with the surname *Sainte-Croix* (*holy cross*) has the name sign *ROUGE* (*red*), through word association with the Red Cross, and a person with the surname *Guillemette* has the name sign *RASOIR* (*razor*), by association with Gillette the razor manufacturers. Finally, we should also mention *Saint John* the Baptist, whose name is signed *MOUTON* (*sheep*), by association with the sheepskin he is always depicted as wearing.

4.3 Initialized names

Initialized name signs are used in Deaf families to refer to a family member. The initial used is always that of the individual's first name.

When the Deaf give a name to hearing people, in the vast majority of cases, they begin by initializing the name and surname, together with oralization if there is a risk of confusion with some other person. In a small, close-knit group, only the first name will be initialized. Initialization is generally produced by the dominant hand, in neutral space.

5 ARBITRARINESS

In our corpus, there remain 22 name signs for which we have been unable to find an explanation. Their origin has probably been lost, although they all conceivably

7 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we have shown that the creation of name signs in LSQ follows the same process as the creation of certain new signs in everyday LSQ. Originally, these signs were iconic, in the sense that they were based on a characteristic of the object or the person being named. Later, as the situation changes, the iconic association between the sign and the object (or person) begins to fade away and the original association gradually falls into oblivion. We have no reason then, to believe that the names we have classified as "arbitrary" would have been arbitrarily attributed when first used.

We have also shown that initialization fulfils several roles. Firstly, within the framework of a Deaf family, it allows the use of a French given name. In addition, when it is used in a name sign based upon a physical, intellectual or behavioural characteristic, it often serves as strategy of disambiguation, if several people have the same characteristic.

The different names that we have collected also give us an insight concerning the absence of taboos in LSQ: any name can be given to an individual, even if it carries a negative connotation.

Footnotes

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1. Data on family background was not available for eleven individuals.

2. However, our corpus includes the names of two persons from an English-speaking background. These two name signs are initialized and both are signed at specific body locations which do not seem to bring any particular meaning to the sign. It seems that these are probably the arbitrary name signs in the sense of Supalla [1990, 1992].

must have belonged to one of the categories of descriptive names. Some of these names are initialized. We have listed them in the category labeled "arbitrary", not because of a belief that they were attributed on an arbitrary basis, but rather because we were unable to find a satisfactory explanation for their origin².

For example, we were unable to explain why a person named Gauthier has his name signed in a /G/-handshape with the dominant hand, at the level of the navel, moving slightly inwards and downwards.

6 DIFFUSION OF SIGN NAMES

6.1 Inheritance

Within the same family, if the father has a descriptive name, it can be passed on to his son, or sons, and even to the whole of his immediate family; eventually, it will also be passed on to the extended family. For example, all Fortin's now have the name sign CHAT (cat); it was originally given to a boarding school teacher, who was sharp and alert like a cat, and always caught unawares any misbehaving pupils.

6.2 Enrichment of the everyday language

The process that borrows name signs from the everyday lexical stock of LSQ may also be reversed so that newly created name signs can enter LSQ as signs for everyday referents.

We have identified three examples of this type. A person named Champagne born around the turn of the century who was reputed to have smelly feet and was given a name sign produced by the dominant hand in a /B/-handshape making a leftward movement, in contact with the tip of the nose (i.e. fanning one's nose). Nowadays, not only does everyone bearing the name Champagne have this name sign, but the sign has also come to refer to champagne, the wine. Another example comes from the name sign of Duplessis, a former prime minister of Québec, who had the habit of putting his hands in his waistcoat pockets. He was given a two-handed name sign, both hands in a /K/-handshape oriented downwards, at the level of the hips. Later, this sign entered the language with the meaning of DÉPUTÉ (member of Parliament). The third example that we identified is that of a school principal named Cadieux. He was given a name sign produced by a /C/-handshape, the palm oriented towards the chest, making a slight downward movement with the fingertips brushing against the chest. We have not found an explanation for this name sign, which we have listed in the category "arbitrary", but we do know that it is currently used in everyday language with the senses "Montreal Deaf Community Centre" or COLLEGE, when a small downward movement is added.

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Language contact phenomena in Deaf communities

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Sociolinguistic research on contact phenomena in Deaf communities has, to date, been shaped by at least four interrelated considerations: 1) the relationship between the spoken language of the majority of the community and the sign language of the community, particularly in educational settings, 2) limited knowledge of the linguistic structure of the sign language, 3) doubts as to the status of the sign language as a “real language”, and 4) application of spoken language sociolinguistic models to sign language situations. In terms of the first consideration, the traditional insistence in deaf educational settings on the use of the spoken language of the community or the use of some combined form of signing and speaking, to the exclusion of sign language has contributed to the focus in sociolinguistic research on the interaction between spoken language and sign language. In American Sign Language, for example, while there are some studies on sociolinguistic variation within ASL, there are an equal number of studies on the diglossic nature of the Deaf community, on the so-called continuum of varieties between English and ASL and the outcome of contact between English and ASL traditionally labelled PSE (Pidgin Sign English). (See for example, Woodward, 1973; Woodward and Markowicz, 1975). There are very few studies, if any, that describe the result of contact between two sign languages. Part of this has been due to the second and third considerations—limited knowledge of the structure of the sign language and doubts as to its status as a “real language”. In terms of the second consideration, it is difficult to describe sociolinguistic variation within a sign language or to see what the effects of contact are until we have a clear idea of the basic structure of the language. In fact, some early studies of variation in ASL described as variable structural features, such as negative incorporation and verb agreement features, which are not variable in a native signer’s production. The third consideration—doubts as to status—is one that has hindered all areas of linguistic research on sign languages, not just sociolinguistic research. The fourth consideration—the application of spoken language sociolinguistic models to sign language situations—is one that often has had the effect of assigning labels to situations that, upon re-examination, do not exactly fit the label assigned. Such is the case with the use of the terms *diglossia*, *code-switching*, *bilingualism*, and *pidgin*, among others.

Based on these four considerations, it would seem that language contact phenomena in Deaf communities deserve some re-examination. In this paper, I will