

## By Hook or by Crook

Iconic Expressions of a Hook-like Shape in Poetry and Japan Sign Language

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*The beauty of nature re-forms in the mind, and not  
for barren contemplation, but for new creation.*

— Ralph Waldo Emerson —

### 1. Introduction

In the present paper (the first portion of which is a continuation of an earlier analysis in Herlofsky, 2002), I will attempt to illustrate how a variety of iconic expressions can be derived from one simple mental image, that of a hook-like shape, although, as we shall see, there may be some complications along the way. For example, one complication is that if someone wanted to iconically express the shape of a hook in spoken English, there would be problems, because there is no simple conventionalized way to express the shape of a hook iconically in spoken English.<sup>1</sup> In the written forms of poetry, or in manual gestures, however, the iconic expression of the shape of a hook is more possible. The present paper will illustrate these possibilities by first, in section 2, using examples from James Wright's poem *Hook*, and then, in section 3, through numerous examples from the manual language of the Deaf in Japan, Japan Sign Language (JSL). It is hoped, that in this way, the essence of the following discussion will be shown to illustrate the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson above, in that we will understand how an object in the real world, a hook, is re-formed in the mind and then expressed as the *new creations* of iconic expressions.

### 2. Hook in an English poem

In Herlofsky (2002), an analysis of iconicity in the syntax and lines of English poetry, one of the poems analyzed was the poem *Hook*, by James Wright. There were a number of aspects of iconicity analyzed in that paper, but for the purposes of the present paper, we will focus only on possible iconic representations of a hook. First let us consider the poem:

*Hook*

I was only a young man then  
In those days. On that evening  
The cold was so God damned  
Bitter there was nothing  
Nothing. I was in trouble  
With a woman, and there was nothing  
There but me and dead snow.

I stood on the street corner  
In Minneapolis, lashed  
This way and that.  
Wind rose from some pit,  
Hunting me.  
Another bus to Saint Paul  
Would arrive in three hours,  
If I was lucky

Then the young Sioux  
Loomed beside me, his scars  
Were just my age.

Ain't got no bus here  
A long time, he said.  
You got enough money  
To get home on?

What did they do  
To your hand? I answered.  
He raised up his hook into the terrible starlight  
And slashed the wind.

Oh, that? he said.  
I had a bad time with a woman. Here,  
You take this.

Did you ever feel a man hold  
Sixty-five cents  
In a hook,  
And place it  
Gently  
In your freezing hand?

I took it.  
It wasn't the money I needed.  
But I took it.

In Herlofsky (2002) I argued that much of the impact of the poem was related to iconicity, and, for example, following Hirsch (1999), discussed the zooming-in-like effect of the *be* verb in the first stanza, and the semantic weight of the information and the slow pace of the poem in the second stanza, which then contrasts with the sudden appearance of the young Sioux in the third stanza. After that, the poem moves along swiftly to the climax in the final stanza, with the hook assuming considerable importance in the narrative. In the earlier analysis, I suggested that even though the first appearance of the word *hook* (except for the title) was in the third line in the fifth stanza, an iconic image of the hook appeared in the line above that line with the question mark (?). I went on to suggest that not only were the question marks iconic images of the hook, appearing adjacent to references to the hook, but the shape of the whole seventh (second to the last) stanza may have been intended to represent a hook.

Although that analysis was based on speculation, the analysis suggested that James Wright, in his poetry-creating process, may have consciously or unconsciously, tended to make the poem more iconic using the iconic images of questions marks and stanza shape. At least we could assume that if this line of reasoning is on the right track, that Wright would not have made *less* use of question marks and iconic stanza shapes in his poem-revision process. And so, since I was interested in whether this iconic utilization of question marks and stanza shape was a real possibility or not (and because the James Wright papers were stored in my alma mater, the University of Minnesota), I went to the Andersen Library at the University of Minnesota, and examined the file for the *Hook* poem, and discovered the following pre-final version of the lines and stanzas in question:

And then the young Sioux appeared.  
Ain't got no bus here a long time,  
He said. You got enough money to get home on?  
What did they do to your hand? I answered.  
Oh, that, I had a bad time with a woman, he said, Here,

You take this.

Did you ever feel a man hold sixty-five cents  
In a hook, and place it in your freezing hand  
Gently?

I took it. It wasn't the money I needed.  
I took what I needed.  
By God how I needed it.  
And I took it.

Let us look specifically at the pre-final version of the stanza and the final version of the stanza that I claim provides an iconic diagram of a hook:

Pre-final Version

Did you ever feel a man hold sixty-five cents  
In a hook, and place it in your freezing hand  
Gently?

Final Version

Did you ever feel a man hold  
Sixty-five cents  
In a hook,  
And place it  
Gently  
In your freezing hand?

Along with the change in word order involving *gently* (which includes positioning of the question mark right after (and adjacent to) the word *hand* rather than *gently*) the shape of this final-version stanza has been changed considerably. Of course, there could be many reasons for these changes, especially reasons related to pauses and rhythm when reading the poem, but I think, in addition to these other possible reasons, how the stanza looks on the page was also a factor. At least that was what I suggested in Herlofsky (2002), and that suggestion predicted that there may have been revisions in the writing/editing process that would make the stanza more iconic. And in fact, this is what we find when we compare the final version with the pre-final version. This difference between the pre-final and final versions, which appears to increase the impression of iconic imagery in the final-version stanza, of course does not *prove* that James Wright was trying to iconically use visual patterning in his poem to help the reader *see* and *experience* the hook, but it does not disprove the hypothesis either, and fulfills the prediction made by the hypothesis. The next section examines how the notion of a hook can be expressed iconically in the manual medium of JSL.

### 3. Hook in Japan Sign Language

This section will attempt to illustrate how the mental image of a hook-like shape takes form in the external language of JSL, and then how this mental image and the image-generated JSL hook-like handshapes appear to trigger numerous iconic/semantic network-like associations that are then important in the formation of various hooked-shaped form/meaning relationships. These different JSL expressions, with different meanings, are also influenced by metonymy and metaphor, which can make the iconicity in the JSL signs somewhat less transparent, but it is an understanding of this type of metonymy and metaphor that is “vital to the analysis of iconicity in sign languages in that they allow for the scope of iconic signs to be extended beyond the concrete to abstract concepts” (Herlofsky 2003: 42). It is this extension into the abstract concepts and *new creations* that will be the endpoint of this section on the hook-like handshapes in JSL.

The mental image of a hook can be seen in JSL in many different manifestations, but the basic hook-like handshape used in JSL is the bent forefinger as in the shape below.



Figure 1.

This hooked handshape can be employed to form various shape-related JSL signs. For example, the following JSL sign is fairly transparent, and since it is a relatively rare *actual size* sign, it should be easy to interpret.



Figure 2.

This is of course the JSL sign for a HEARING AID, and this particular meaning is probably expressed in a similar manner in other sign languages as well, since it is an integral part of the deaf experience. The following sign also represents something concrete, but since the scale is not on an *actual-size* scale, and since it is also culturally grounded, it is less transparent than the previous sign.

This is the JSL sign for SITTING CROSSED-LEGGED. In Japan, in formal situations, it is customary



Figure 3.

for a person to sit in a rather compact heel-sitting fashion, where the heels are directly under the buttocks (This sitting position can be achieved by first kneeling with knees together, and then sitting back on the heels.). Though this sitting style is compact, it is also rather bad for the circulation, and soon becomes painful for those unaccustomed to this style. And so, even though at the beginning of a formal meeting participants might assume this heel-sitting style, soon, the person in charge would probably suggest that everyone sit in the more comfortable cross-legged style, and this is when the above sign would be used, to invite someone to sit in this more comfortable fashion.

The next series of signs is related to place names, and though the signs are partially iconic, they also involve metonymy, and so are even less transparent than the sign above. The sign below is the sign for the city of NAGOYA, and an obvious question is in what way can this sign be considered iconic?



Figure 4.

The reason why this sign can be said to iconically represent Nagoya is that Nagoya Castle is one of the most famous places in Nagoya, and famous places or noted products of an area often become representative of that area, and then when signs are first created for place names, it is often the sign for the metonymically representative site or product that becomes the sign for the place or entire area. And so the sign for CASTLE has become the sign for NAGOYA. But why is the sign for CASTLE two



Illustration 1.

hooked fingers? This is because Nagoya castle is known for two large golden fish sculptures on its roof (see above), and these two huge upended fish have become representative of Nagoya castle, and indeed Nagoya itself, and they also have become what is imitated in the JSL sign for NAGOYA.

The sign in Figure 4. is then used in various signs related to the city of Nagoya. The signs below, for example, are the JSL expression for the ward in Nagoya in which I live. The two signs are NAGOYA and EAST, where the second sign is a somewhat iconic sign that represents the rising sun, and therefore EAST.

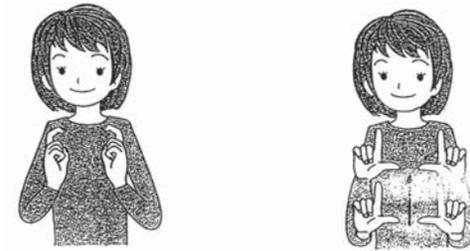


Figure 5.

The following expression is the series of signs for the name of a subway line, and can be translated as NAGOYA-CASTLE-SUBWAY (the subway line that goes around the castle). In this expression, to distinguish NAGOYA from CASTLE (signs which have the same handshapes), the sign for CASTLE is raised to a higher location than NAGOYA, since castles are often on mountains or other high ground. The sign for SUBWAY shows the train moving underground, where the handshapes for both the train and the surface of the ground are the minimalist flat-hand handshapes.



Figure 6.

The expression below, for a similar subway line, is interesting because this time it is not the location of the double-hook sign that changes, but the orientation. This expression refers to the NAGOYA-PORT-SUBWAY (the subway line that goes to Nagoya Port), and the middle sign for PORT is formed in this manner because ports and harbors in Japan often have wave-breaking constructions that have this hooked-like shape, as shown in illustration 2.

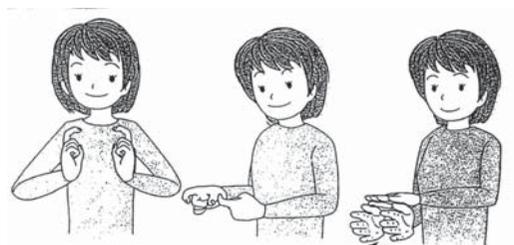


Figure 7.



Illustration 2.

The above expressions for subway lines are a series of signs that name the subway lines in Nagoya, but it is interesting to note that these JSL signs are somewhat direct translations of the Chinese characters (*kanji*) for these subway lines. Deaf people use these signs when signing with hard-of-hearing or hearing people, but among Deaf signers, the colors that signify these subway lines are used instead since they are simpler.

It is also possible to find signs that name other places in Nagoya in somewhat different and multimodal ways. For example, the following series of signs refer to a shopping area near Nagoya Port, which is called PORT-MESSE-NAGOYA. What is different and interesting about this expression is that in addition to containing the signs for PORT and NAGOYA, which we have seen before, the middle sign for MESSE is something a bit different. First, we should note that just as there are logograms (for example, the Chinese characters (*kanji*) used in written Japanese) and phonograms (the *kana* syllabary of written Japanese), we can also identify *logo-handshapes* and *phono-handshapes* in JSL.

These logo-handshapes are handshapes that represent words or other meaningful expressions. The phono-handshapes, on the other hand, represent a sound of the Japanese language. The middle sign in figure 8. below is such a phono-handshape, in that it represents only the sound ME. This sign is what is called an *initialized sign*, in that the handshape represents the first sound in the Japanese word with the desired meaning. In these types of initialized signs, it is often the location and/or the movement of the handshape that provides the semantic portion of the sign. This is also the case for the sign below. The handshape merely represents the sound ME, while the movement of the hand draws the dome-like shape of the roof of the building that is called *Port Messe Nagoya* in Japanese.

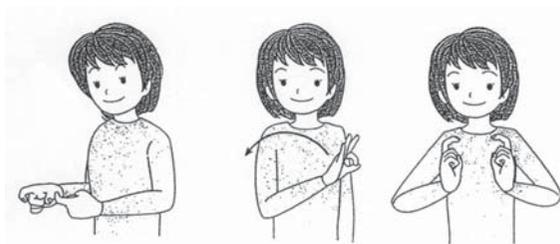


Figure 8.

A similar but different strategy is illustrated in the compound single sign below, where a logo-handshape of one hand is combined with an initialized sign of the other hand, and that portion of the sign contains both an initialized phono-handshape combined with semantic movement. In this sign the single hooked handshape represents NAGOYA, and the phono-handshape represents the sound TO, but in JSL, when a phono-handshape that represents a sound that contains a voiceless consonant is moved from the signer's center to the outside, the voiceless consonant becomes voiced.

And so, the moved phono-handshape is not TO but DO. This voicing movement should be a straight movement to the outside of the signer, but as can be seen below, the movement is rounded, again, like a dome. And, in fact, this sign is a relatively new sign, that represents the home of Nagoya's baseball team (the Chunichi Dragons), the NAGOYA DOME. In this way, then, in this compound sign, one hand is an logo-handshape representing NAGOYA, while the other is a phono-handshape that when moved to the outside represents the sound DO, but since the movement is rounded, the movement functions both to voice the consonant and to add the semantic meaning of the DOME.



Figure 9.

The next sign is of interest not only because it is a further extension of the hooked handshape network, but because it has its origin in comic or *manga*-like illustrations, and also because it is a metaphorical extension of the simple concrete hook meaning, where the gap between concrete and abstract is bridged. The sign (10b) is based on a figure like the one in (10a), which is often used in *manga*-like illustrations to indicate confusion or doubt. The sign consists of moving the hooked handshape around the head to replicate the question-mark shapes in figure 10a, and means DOUBT, CONFUSION, or even a QUIZ.



Figure 10a.



10b.

It is interesting that as we saw in the previous section, James Wright may have used question marks to represent a hook, while in the above JSL sign a hook-like shape is used to represent question marks.

And finally, let us consider a sign for which I know of no equivalent English word,<sup>2</sup> and therefore one which provides a counter example to the claim that sign languages have impoverished vocabularies. But first, we must understand that the hook-like handshape can also be used to mean TO STEAL in JSL. That is, this hooked handshape, extended to the side of the signer, and then pulled back toward the signer as if pulling something closer to the signer (11a), means TO STEAL in JSL.

This idea of using something hooked or crooked to take or steal something, and then to use this idea to represent *stealing* or being a *crook*, is a metonymy/metaphorical extension that seems to know few cultural or linguistic boundaries. For example, the connection between a hook and a crook mentioned in the title of this chapter, is a prominent metaphor in English-speaking cultures, the origin of which Crystal (2009: 11) explains below.

The most likely origin of *by hook or by crook* lies in a medieval countryside practice. The forests of medieval Britain belonged to the King, and trees could not be cut down without permission. The penalties were ferocious. So how would people get wood for their fires? They were allowed to use branches that had fallen on the ground. And they were also allowed to cut any dead wood from a tree if it could be reached with a shepherd's crook, or the hooked tool used by a reaper.

This custom of taking something with a hook or crook apparently resulted in the *by hook or by crook* expression in English, and even in JSL the hooked handshape is used to express the verb TO STEAL, and this concept of using a hook to steal something is then metaphorically extended in JSL to create a sign that means something like TO-TAKE(LEARN)-SOMEONE-ELSE'S-SIGNS(EXPRESSIONS), as shown below in (11b).



Figure 11a.



11b.

It must be remembered that Deaf people get most of their information through their eyes, and this expression illustrates this fact of Deaf life by showing how a person can steal information through the eyes. Taub (2001) and Wilcox (2000) have discussed how iconicity and metaphor are used in American Sign Language (ASL) to extend the meanings of signs from the concrete to the abstract,

with Wilcox describing how the metaphor IDEAS ARE OBJECT is used to form signs for MOVING ideas, HOLDING ideas, and SELECTING ideas. These same handling handshapes can be used in JSL with similar meanings, with the addition of the sign in (11b) above, that of something like STEALING someone else's signs or ideas.

In conclusion, we have seen how a single mental image of a hook-like shape can take iconic form in written and signed languages. James Wright may have used question marks and stanza shape to represent a hook in his poem. JSL utilizes the hooked forefinger handshape to form many hook-shape-related signs, and the scope of these iconic shape-related signs is extended to abstract concepts like confusion and stealing ideas through metonymy and metaphor. We have seen that it is not only the beauty of nature that is reflected in these new creations, but the beauty of the mind itself.

## Notes

- \* I would first like to express my deep gratitude to Anne Wright, the widow of James Wright, for permission to inspect James Wright's papers at the Manuscripts Division of the Elmer L. Andersen Library at the University of Minnesota, and her kind words of encouragement during my research on James Wright's poems. I would also like to thank Barbara Bezat, Assistant to the Curator at the Manuscripts Division, for her kind and helpful assistance when I was at the library. I would like to thank those at the *Aichi chokaku-shogai-sha-kyo-kai* (Aichi Deaf Association), and again, the *Kusa-no-ne* (Grassroots) JSL group, for their permission to use their JSL illustrations in this paper.
- 1. Though it is perhaps impossible to express the shape of a hook iconically in spoken English, metaphorical *hook*-expressions abound in both spoken and written English, and not just in the context of works of literature. For example, in May 2011 issue of *The Atlantic* magazine (page 52), Paul Simon, when describing how he writes a song, states that in order to get people interested in a song, sometimes it is not great lyrics, but a "hooky melody", something that attracts (or *hooks*) the ear, that is needed.
- 2. I know of no word in English that describes metaphorically *hooking* something *into* the eye, similar to the example above in note 1, where a "hooky melody" attracts the ear, although it is possible to use a *hook* metaphor for things that attract the eye. Kay Ryan (2010: 42) provides us with the following delightful little poem about things of the world that attract the eyes.

### *The Things of the World*

Wherever the eye lingers  
it finds a hunger.  
The things of the world  
want us for dinner.  
Inside each pebble or leaf  
or puddle is a hook.  
The appetites of the world

compete to catch a look.  
What does this mean  
and how does it work?  
Why aren't rocks complete?  
Why isn't green adequate  
to green? We aren't gods  
whose gaze could save,  
but that's how the things  
of the world behave.

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