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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

An Empirical Analysis of Name Signs in English Sign Languages based on Supalla's Categorisation System

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Tutora: Izaskun Elorza Amorós

Signature

Abstract

This Bachelor's dissertation focuses on name signs in English sign languages. The aim of the study is to determine the nature of name signs created nowadays by applying Samuel Supalla's categorization system, given that arbitrary name signs are preferred. The analysis performed distinguishes each name sign based on its arbitrariness or descriptiveness. Therefore, this study concentrates on whether the tendency of name signs is to be arbitrary or descriptive.

Key words

Name signs, descriptive name signs, arbitrary name signs, American Sign Language, New Zealand Sign Language, Australian Sign Language, Irish Sign Language, sign language.

Resumen

El foco de estudio de este Trabajo de Fin de Grado son los signos personales de las lenguas de signos inglesas. El objetivo de este estudio es determinar la naturaleza de los signos personales creados hoy en día aplicando el sistema de categorización de Samuel Supalla, considerando que los signos personales arbitrarios son preferidos. El análisis realizado distingue cada signo personal basándose en su arbitrariedad o descriptividad. Por ello, este estudio se centra en si la tendencia de los signos personales es ser arbitrarios o descriptivos.

Palabras clave

Signos personales, signos personales descriptivos, signos personales arbitrarios, Lengua de Signos Americana, Lengua de Signos Neozelandesa, Lengua de Signos Australiana, Lengua de Signos Irlandesa, lengua de signos.

Acknowledgements

To my family and friends for their constant unconditional support and love. And to my tutor, Izaskun, thank you for your guidance and help.

Thank you to the people who participated in the questionnaire, for sharing their name signs with me.

Table of contents

1. Introduction

How does a person refer to another when using a sign language? The answer is by their English/written names fingerspelled or by their name signs. A name sign is a personal sign used to identify a person in the Deaf community. Samuel Supalla is a pioneer researcher in the field of name signs in American Sign Language (ASL henceforth) and the American Deaf community. In his work, he distinguishes two main categories of name signs: arbitrary name signs (ANS henceforth) and descriptive name signs (DNS henceforth). Applying his categorisation system to Kathryn Meadow study's interpretation, Supalla identifies 19% of those name signs to be DNS because, as Meadow mentions, they reflect "some aspect of the individual's personal appearance or behavior" (241). Supalla then indicates that ANS are "dominant" and that the ANS system is "standardized" (*The Book of Name Signs* 8). Considering Supalla's assessment on ANS, this study aims to determine the tendency that current name signs follow in English sign languages by applying Supalla's categorisation system, establishing whether their nature is more arbitrary or descriptive. In order to do so, empirical research has been done, where name signs were collected for analysis. The purpose of this study is to help people who are not part of the Deaf community to better understand how identity signs are created, with the hope to improve communication between the people outside and inside the Deaf community.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. What are name signs?

A person inside the Deaf community, apart from their written name, may also have a *name sign*. A name sign is to be considered as a proper name, in Samuel Supalla's words, name signs are "the proper names of persons in a community using a visual-gestural language" ("Arbitrary Name Sign System" 99). However, name signs being recognised as proper names is not exclusive of ASL. In fact, name signs also appear in other sign languages, this being the case in Irish Sign Language (ISL henceforth), New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL henceforth), Australian Sign Language (Auslan henceforth), among others. Name signs are defined as proper names and are, in words of Meadow, "a key symbol and summary of personal identity", as well as "the first identifying marker used for specifying an individual" (37). According to Liina Paales, name signs are described to be proper names because they are used to refer to a person (typically when the person is not present in the conversation). In some cases, Paales also indicates that name signs can become the only source of identification, knowing a person by their name sign and not by their *hearing names*[1] ("Estonian Personal Name Signs" 326).

2.2. Who has a name sign?

It is safe to assume that if a person belongs to the Deaf community, they are prone to have a name sign. Rachel Sutton-Spence and Bencie Woll discuss in their work the idea that a membership to the (British) Deaf community is not entirely defined by the person's hearing but by their ability to identify with "the deaf way of life" (168). In other words, regardless of whether the person is deaf, hard of hearing or a hearing person who uses sign language, they might be a member of the Deaf community and, therefore, be eligible to have a name sign. That being said, given that not every person in the Deaf community has a name sign, Anna Mindess argues that a person may not have one if the person's hearing is short and can be promptly *fingerspelled*[2] in conversation (11), hence, creating a situation where a name sign is not necessary.

2.3. How are name signs given?

It is important to note that name signs and hearing names tend not to be interchangeable, considering that not every person in the Deaf community has a name sign. It is common practice in the Deaf community for a person to be given a name sign as a welcoming rite of passage (Meadow 239). In his work, Supalla explains how it is custom for members of the Deaf community to receive a name sign that is given by another member in the group (99). Mindess coincides with this idea, as she finds in her research that it is indeed the group who decides upon a name sign for a new member, a name sign that the group agrees with and identifies the new member (6). In addition, Paales suggests that "Deaf people have no authority to name themselves or to alter the name given to them, the initiative has to come from the member of the [Deaf] community" ("Estonian Personal Name Signs" 330). Typically, Deaf children are given name signs by their peers, children who also attend Deaf school. More broadly, Meadow points out that name signs are given to people by three different types of social actors: parents, teachers or counsellors and peers (240). Generally speaking, a person is given a name sign once they become a member of the Deaf community, thus, a person may receive their name sign at any point in life. In this case, Yau and He contend that Deaf children whose parents are also part of the Deaf community tend to have a name sign since birth; in fact, if the person has a hearing family, they may receive their name signs only after joining the Deaf community (243).

2.4. How are name signs created?

According to Supalla's research in *The Book of Name Signs*, there are two main types of name signs: arbitrary and descriptive. Supalla states that ANS are part of Deaf culture's tradition, with most name signs being of arbitrary nature. ANS are formed with the manual alphabet, taken from the person's initials (from their first, middle or last name). An ANS sign is placed in three different locations: neutral space, a single location on the body or a dual location on the body (see Fig. 1 for Supalla's examples of these locations).
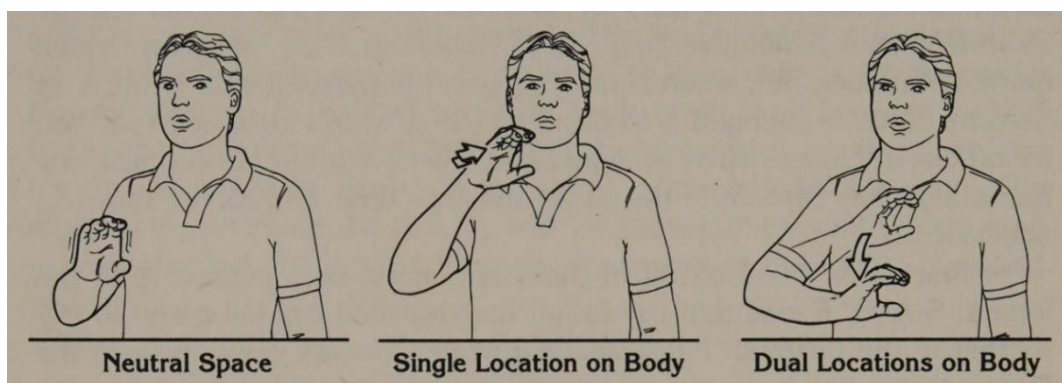

Figure 1. Supalla's locations for an arbitrary name sign in The Book of Name Signs *(10)*

Essentially, the main distinction between ANS and DNS is their meaning. ANS have no meaning behind them, while DNS make reference to a person's behaviour or personal characteristics. To create a DNS the handshapes that are used are those of classifier signs, signs that refer to sizes, shapes, objects and people. For this reason, DNS can be neutral, positive or negative in meaning (see Fig. 2 for Supalla's example of a classifier sign and a DNS negative example[3]).
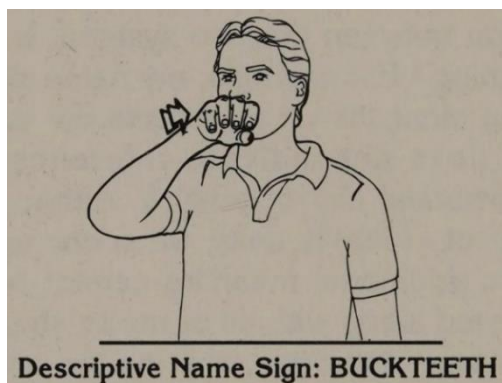
Descriptive Name Sign: BUCKTEETH

Figure 2. Supalla's example of a classifier sign and a negative descriptive name sign (The Book of Name Signs 8)

Additionally, there is a third type of name signs, one that combines ANS and DNS features. This could be the case of a name signs that uses the manual alphabet (a typical ANS feature) accompanied with another sign referencing the person's physical characteristics, such as long hair, or personality. Examples of such name signs can be found in Table 3. Supalla first refers to these name signs as *non-traditional signs* that occur as a result of more hearing people learning ASL as a foreign or secondary language without knowledge of Deaf culture (*The Book of Name Signs* 12). Mindess also brings attention to this kind of name sign while studying name signs and how they affect Deaf culture. Through interviewing subjects and asking for their name signs, Mindess found that this kind of name sign is said to be a *hearing name sign*. Ultimately, Mindess explains these name signs as a mere confusion in new students of sign language who are new to the Deaf community and the naming customs (15).

3. Methodology

For this study I created an experimental test in order to collect real life name signs, their descriptions and the meaning behind them. The aim is to answer what the current tendency of name signs is. That is to say, how name signs are formed nowadays and what kind of name sign is preferred. To achieve this, an on-line anonymous questionnaire was divulged via social media (see Appendix 1 for a blank example of the questionnaire), obtaining 12 name signs from ASL, ISL, Auslan and NZSL. Also included in the results are Marvel Entertainment *Eternals*' name signs. With the release of the film, the characters (Eternals, Ajak, Sersi, Phastos, Sprite, Ikaris, Thena, Druig, Gilgamesh, Kingo and Makkari) and their ASL name signs were introduced as well. This group of name signs is added to the results as the name signs seem to have been recently created and, although fictional, can be expected to follow current tendencies.

In regards to the criteria required for the name signs collected, there were no restrictions as to from which sign language the name sign belonged to. The reason for this is that the English sign language variety was not considered to be an influential factor in the results. Nevertheless, from the results obtained (including those from *Eternals*) 87% was in ASL, with only 4,3% from each of the remaining sign languages (ISL, Auslan and NZSL).

4. Results

4.1. *Name signs obtained via social media*

Firstly, the results shown are those obtained through the on-line questionnaire. Here are those ASL name signs that are descriptive in nature, two of the responses received. There is a column dedicated to "Reference" to point out the meaning behind each name sign. Immediately to the right of the name sign description is the column titled "Video" with a link to a video representation of the sign. For those name signs that include signs of words, such as "glasses" (see Table 1), or the use of the manual alphabet, there are online resources available (see Appendix 2).

	Name sign	Video	Reference
1	Little finger extended while the rest are closed in a fist. With the little finger pointing towards the eyes and hand moving back and forth		Ability to move eyes rapidly back and forth
2	The sign for "glasses"		Physical reference, this person uses eyeglasses with coloured pointed frames

Table 1. Descriptive name signs in ASL

This second table has those two responses with ANS of ASL. It is important to note that the third person showed a dislike towards these name signs and wishes their name sign was more descriptive. The fourth person also mentions disliking their name sign and expresses wanting to receive another in the future that is more personal.

	Name sign	Video
3	"L" handshape in neutral space moving left to right	
4	"M" handshape (palm facing forward) moving in a circle	

Table 2. Arbitrary name signs in ASL

Lastly, this third table contains those name signs catalogued as non-traditional signs. There are five responses in total that share arbitrary and descriptive features.

	Name sign	Video	Reference
5	"V" handshape combined with the sign for "smile"		Physical reference, smile
6	"T" or "F" handshape tapped on the cheek twice		Physical reference, smile
7	"E" handshape near the earlobe		Physical reference, earrings attached to hearing aids
8	"S" handshape contacting the side of the mouth and moving in a swiping motion backwards two times		Physical reference, smile
9	"B" handshape and a smile		Personal characteristic

Table 3. Non-traditional name signs in ASL

The following table is of those responses that were not of ASL. Notice this table includes a new column named "Type", where each name sign is categorised based on their characteristics.

	Sign language	Name sign	Type	Video	Reference
10	NZSL	Left hand in a fist, held static at chest height and right hand open with fluttering fingers that move from the left towards the body. It imitates the motions of playing a harp	Internally motivated name sign, semantic translation		Personal reference, surname

	Sign language	Name sign	Type	Video	Reference
11	Auslan	Lightly touch the ear	Descriptive		Physical reference, the person has a protruding ear
12	ISL	The sign for "tattoos" tapped twice on inner part of the arm	Descriptive		Physical reference, the person has many tattoos

Table 4. Non-American name signs from English linguistic and cultural areas

4.2. Name signs from Eternals

In this second part of the results there are name signs that were created specifically for *Eternals*. As disclosed by the actor Lauren Ridloff in an interview with *TechRadar*, these name signs below were made for the film, to represent each character in Marvel Entertainment's *Eternals*. Meaning behind the name signs is inferred from the film and characters and included in the "Reference" column (see Table 5). Video reference for the name signs of every character can be found in the video introduction to the characters in ASL (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IitHGM6LDSQ) and the name of the group, Eternals. The "Description" column includes the adjectives used to describe the characters in the video reference and some additional information.

Character	Description	Power	Name sign	Reference
Eternals	Protectors of humanity on Earth to eliminate Deviants	(See the characters' individual powers)	Right hand in a fist with the index extended and touching the top right side of the forehead with the index. Move the hand away from the face as if drawing a zigzag motion, ending away from the face.	Unknown meaning (the meaning is not deducible from visible features)
Ajak	Leader, prime Eternal	Healer	Right hand in a fist in front of the left shoulder, the closed finger facing away from the body. Rotate hand on itself, twisting it, while moving it towards the body until the side of the fist where the little finger touches the shoulder on the front.	Unknown meaning (the meaning is not deducible from visible features)

Character	Description	Power	Name sign	Reference
Sersi	Selfless	Manipulates matter	Right hand open with fingers extended and apart. Start movement next to the right cheek and move to touch it with the fingers in a light bouncing (fanning) motion, repeat the movement twice/thrice. After touching the cheek the first time, while doing the motions described, (with the fingers extended and apart) slowly wiggle the fingers	Unknown meaning (the meaning is not deducible from visible features)
Phastos	Innovator	Creates technology	Left hand in front of the body (almost at chest height), opened and with palm facing upwars. Righ hands moves on top of the left, without touching it, in a circling motion and with finger extended and apart, except for the index and thumb, which touch each other creating a circle	Movement of the hands resembles how the character uses his powers
Sprite	Youthful	Creates illusions	Right hand in front of the right side of the body in neutral space and in a fist, move it towards the left side. Once on the left, open the hand with the palm facing away from the body and fingers extended and apart. Then, move the hand towards the right side to the starting position	Unknown meaning (the meaning is not deducible from visible features)
Ikaris	Powerful	Flying, power emanates from the eyes as destructive lasers	Right hand touching the side of the shoulder in a claw shape. Move the hand, still in a claw, away from the shoulder in a lifting motion	Unknown meaning (the meaning is not deducible from visible features)
Thena	Fierce, warrior	Creates weapons of energy	Right hand at chest height with the fingers closed in a pinch, fingers touching each other. Move hand slightly upwards while opening the hand, fingers extended and apart	Movement of the hand could imitate the motion of creating an object

Character	Description	Power	Name sign	Reference
Druig	Independent	Telepathy and mind control	Move right hand towards the right side of the face with the fingers pinched together and pointing away from the body. In that position, open the fingers until extended and apart	Movement of the hand could indicate a physical representation of telepathic abilities
Gilgamesh	Strong	Powerful, hand in hand combat	Left hand below chest height with the palm facing upwards and steady. With the right hand in a fist, push the fist firmly into the palm of the left hand	Name sign resembles the character's use of his power
Kingo	Influential	Power emanates from his fingers (hands imitating a pistol shape)	Right hand next to the right side of the face with fingers in a fist, except for the thumb, index and middle finger which are extended and apart. The hand moves sideways twice with the palm of the hand facing forward, in a waving motion	Name sign resembles the character's use of his power
Makkari	Daring	Velocity	Right hand positioned next to the right ear with only the thumb and index extended and apart. Move the hand downwards while making the index and thumb touch at the fingertips	Unknown meaning (the meaning is not deducible from visible features)

Table 5. Name signs from Eternals

5. Discussion

The results have shown that descriptiveness and meaning in name signs is preferred over arbitrariness. Overall, in the name signs obtained via social media, there are equal amounts of name signs in ASL that are arbitrary and descriptive. That being said, five of the responses correspond to the non-traditional signs. The non-traditional signs gathered in this study follow the same pattern, the initial of the person's name (first, middle or last) and a physical or personal reference that is part of the individual. These non-traditional name signs (with these characteristics) are better explained not through Supalla's categorisation system, but rather through Locker McKee and Mckee's interpretation of NZSL name signs. The authors categorise the non-traditional name signs as internally motivated name signs, those that use initials (Locker McKee and McKee 15). Locker McKee and McKee describe the internally motivated name signs that use initials as a "ASL one-handed fingerspelling handshape [that] is

combined with a NZSL descriptive morpheme to form a descriptive name sign" (15), which coincides with how the ASL internally motivated name signs in this study are formed. On the other side, the non-American name signs from English linguistic and cultural areas show two of the name signs to be descriptive. The remaining name sign, name sign 10 from NZSL, was interesting for its descriptive nature and direct connection to the person's name through meaning. With Locker McKee and McKee's categorisation this last name sign can be catalogued as an internally motivated name sign, in "semantic translation", "name signs [that] translate a meaning extrapolated from a spoken language" (16).

The *Eternals'* name signs seem to be DNS, however, without having knowledge of whether there is meaning behind them (aside from the one inferred) results are inconclusive. Nevertheless, taking into consideration Supalla's definition of ANS, the name signs created for the *Eternals* do not show arbitrary qualities and can be categorised as non-arbitrary. It is possible that the name signs of Phastos, Thena, Druig, Gilgamesh and Kingo have descriptive characteristics, because of the characters backgrounds on the film and their supernatural abilities, which seem to be the reference for these name signs. However, a more thorough study of these name signs would be required in order to be able to classify them accordingly, as the lacking information about their connections to some referent prevents us from being able to be more conclusive about their classification than labelling them as non-arbitrary.

Supalla's categorisation system points out how the ANS system is favoured. The aim of this study was to determine the nature of name signs by using the categorisation system that Supalla created. After classifying the name signs and considering the results, it is safe to assume that the current tendency follows descriptiveness and avoids the ANS system. Contrary to Supalla's research, this study proves that the ANS system is not currently being favoured over other options. More importantly, alternatives to ANS do not only point to DNS but also to other hybrid means, such as the internally motivated name signs with initials found and described in this study. In the end, Supalla's categorisation system alone proves to be insufficient and a larger categorisation system is needed (in this case, that of Locker McKee and McKee).

6. Conclusion

This Bachelor's dissertation has focused in the study of name signs in English linguistic and cultural areas. Name signs are an important part of a sign language, because, as sources of identification for and by members of the Deaf community, they embody crucial aspects of deaf people's identities. For this reason, Samuel Supalla's effort categorising name signs is detrimental in this field of study. To understand name signs in ASL Supalla's work is essential, as it explains how they are formed according to the American Deaf community. However, it has also been assumed that Supalla's name sign classification is applicable to name signs in other varieties of sign languages in English areas, and probably in other areas culturally and linguistically different. Supalla's study declares ANS and DNS to be the two main kinds of name signs in ASL, with the ANS system being the preferred one. For that reason, Supalla's categorisation system has been applied to the name signs compiled in this dissertation (regardless of their sign language), in order to study them, aiming to determine if the nature of the name signs is now arbitrary or descriptive. The compilation of name signs gathered through social media and taken from the characters of Marvel Entertainment's *Eternals*, has resulted in a variety of name signs that have a tendency to follow descriptiveness. Through the name signs collected, this study shows few ANS and DNS, with more responses being the internally motivated name signs with initials (which combine qualities from ANS and DNS) and the Eternal's non-arbitrary name signs. Ultimately, despite Supalla's initial research demonstrating

ANS to be the majority in ASL, this study presents descriptiveness to be the norm as ANS are avoided. Supalla's categorisation system is a main reference in the study, analysis and categorisation of name signs. Yet, Supalla's categorisation system is not enough, as seen in the results obtained, whereas larger categorisation systems that consider more types of name signs show better insight as to how the name signs are formed. In summation, this dissertation aspires to have given a new perspective on what the reality of name signs in English sign languages is today. Further study in this field would require a broader sample of name signs that includes a greater variety of English sign languages, aside from the use of different categorisation systems that can be applied to every variety.

Notes

1.	Hearing names. Also referred to as a written or legal name, the proper name of a person in their hearing language (in this case, English).

2.	Fingerspelled. To use the manual alphabet in a sign language in order to spell a word. In this case, when a name is fingerspelled each letter of the name is signed to do so.

3.	This example from The Book of Name Signs also includes further explanation:

"A person with visible duck teeth may possess a DNS based on his or her most salient physical characteristic. In this case, the handshape would be based on the shape of the individual's teeth. The location would be on the mouth, and the movement would be repeated to indicate that the sign is a noun."

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Appendix 1

Sign names

Hello, I'm Paula! I'm a HOH (Hard Of Hearing) student of English Studies from Spain currently doing research for my Bachelor's dissertation.

My research is on sign languages used in English speaking countries, focused on sign names. I'm looking for people who have sign names and are willing to share it with me plus answer questions about it. In the case that you do use sign language but don't have a sign name I'm also interested in how people refer to you (i.e.: finger spelling).

I have prepared an example with my own sign name (using Spanish sign language) in the video below and I will also answer all the questions for you to see the type of information I would need. If you are able to send a video of your sign name, there is a section for you to upload it. But if you don't want to (or can't) share a video, a description of your sign name would be perfect as well.

* Disclaimer

If you choose to share your video with me it would not be published nor shared with anyone. For research purposes I will be reproducing your sign name myself so that your image is not made public; this is so that it is available alongside the sign name's description (for further explanation and visual reference), in a private database.

*Required

My sign name (example)

Given that my name (my Spanish/written name) is Paula, my sign name is made with the sign for the letter "P" while miming that I'm flipping my hair (because it is a trait of mine to touch my hair at all times and people usually know me for that). To be more precise in my description, a "P" sign is done (with your dominant hand facing away from you face, almost at shoulder level) with your fingers extended, except for the thumb and the pinky finger which are to be folded and touching each other in the front. From then on, while making the "P" sign, the movement of the sign involves rotating your wrist in the direction of your face until flipping your hair or until you've made a 180º rotation.

I created my sign name with some of my friends, we all looked for different traits of mine and in the end collectively decided on it. I don't have another sing name and this is my first one, I've had it for a couple of years now.

My sign name (example)

http://youtube.com/watch?v=5JjKEFj3KuM

1.   Do you have a sign name? (If not, how do people refer to you?) *

If your answer is not "Yes" you can write what people normally use when they refer to you (finger spelling, for example) in the blank option below "Yes".

Mark only one oval.

⬭ Yes

⬭ Other: _____

2.   What is your sign language (ASL, BSL, ISL, Auslan, etc.)? *

_____

3.   What is your sign name? (video)

Here you will be able to upload a video (up to 100 MB), it could be any type of file but only in video format and just one. For more reference check out my own video! The video "My sign name" was made with my phone's camera (only 48 MB).

Files submitted:

4.   What is your sign name? (description)

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

5.   Was your sign name given to you or did you create it yourself?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

6.   Is your sign name different from your written/English name?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

7.   What is the reference of your sign name? A physical feature, hobby, profession, etc.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

8.   Has your sign name ever changed? Do you have more than one?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____
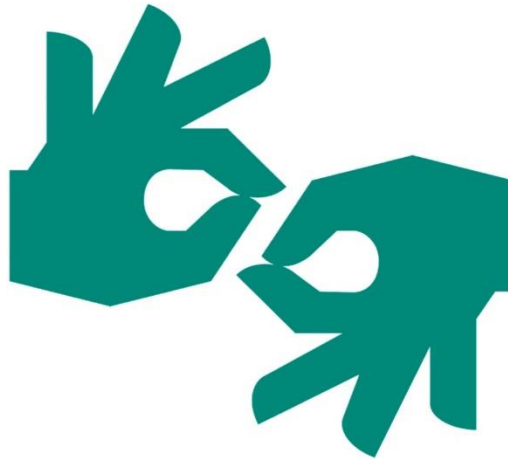
THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING!!! Thank you so much for helping me with my research and for taking the time to answer this form. My most heartfelt thanks, Paula.

9.   Would you be interested in receiving my research once it is finished? If so, enter your e-mail address in the space below.

_____

Google Forms

Appendix 2

These are additional resources for the sign languages mention in the study, dictionaries and representations of the manual alphabets.

American Sign Language (ASL):

- Dictionary: https://www.handspeak.com/word/
- Alphabet: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEB45Z6xlAg

Irish Sign Language (ISL):

- Alphabet: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNdlrKrWWPo

New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL):

- Dictionary: https://www.nzsl.nz/
- Alphabet: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SRuq8TH-MyI

Australian Sign Language (Auslan):

- Dictionary: https://auslan.org.au/about/dictionary/
- Alphabet: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WtcUja0wOOE&t=2s   and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIH7aBrOzFA