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# PERSONAL EXPERIENCE NARRATIVES IN ADAMOROBE SIGN LANGUAGE

Narrativas de experiência pessoal na língua de sinal de Adamorobe

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**ABSTRACT**

Personal experience narratives are produced spontaneously by deaf people in informal conversations. Even when the content is not explicitly about being deaf, the fact of being told in sign language makes it an authentic part of sign language literature. Complete narratives have a tripartite structure, divided in introduction, development and conclusion. Typically, the action follows a curve, with its peak on a climax. Besides initial reference to time and space, characters are presented and participate in the plot. Sign languages often use constructed action to materialize characters. In African sign languages, few personal experience narratives have been studied in relation to their content, except for references to topics, mainly in the village sign language of Adamorobe, in Gha-

**RESUMO**

In this article, we present a qualitative analysis of four theatrical performances interpreted by SLIs. The main objective of this paper is to discuss the place not only physical, but ideological that sign language interpreters (SLI) occupy in theatrical performances. Based on the dialogue proposed by Bakhtin and the Circle, we discuss that a set of interrelated texts forms the performance. In the analysis of four theater presentations, we observe issues related to the enunciative and, therefore, the ideological position of sign language interpreters in the theater. We discussed

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na. In the current work, an analysis of narratives about snake attacks, produced in Adamorobe Sign Language by two deaf signers, illustrate how these stories are internally structured and recur to constructed action.

**KEYWORDS**
Sign language literature; Personal experience narrative; Constructed action; Village sign language; Adamorobe Sign Language.

these questions in both the extraverbal and verbal portions of the utterances. It was more evident mainly in three elements: in the information material and the disclosure of the shows, in the responses to the questionnaire of the SLI who participated in the research, and in the translational/interpretative choices that relate to positioning on the scene.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE**
Literatura em língua de sinais; Narrativa de experiência pessoal; Incorporação; Língua de sinais de aldeia; Língua de sinais de Adamorobe.

## Introduction

The following article begins with an overview of the personal experience narratives within sign language literature. It establishes that what makes an informal story, usually about a past event, to be looked at as a literary object is its content, in terms of the topic covered, its contextualisation (when, where and who), and an internal tripartite structure (introduction, development and conclusion). In addition, it points out discourse strategies typical of sign languages, such as constructed action. The main focus of this work will then turn to studies about this kind of narrative in African sign languages and, in particular, in the village sign language of Adamorobe in Ghana.

In the second part of this article, two narratives of personal experiences with snake attacks produced by two different deaf signers of Adamorobe are analysed to illustrate how they are internally structured and how the characters are activated through constructed action.

## 1. An overview on personal experience narratives

Narratives have an informational function and can express personal or past events, real or imaginary. There are different types of narrative, personal experience narratives being one of them. They are important because they reflect everyday life and contain aspects of one's identity, culture and customs (Lesley 2017).

Labov and Waletzky (1967) describe narratives of personal experience as rich instruments for linguistic studies because they are not planned in advance and those who tell the narratives are informal storytellers. Moreover, as naturalistic as they might be, the authors also argue that this type of narratives have a coherent internal structure, i.e. a beginning, a middle, an end and, of course, the event(s), character(s) and scenario(s).

All kinds of narrative are found to have fundamental elements such as plot, characters, time, space and narrator. The narrative's plot is basically structured as a pyramid, or arc, that begins with an **introduction** where, usually, characters, time and space are presented. The middle part of the action, the **development**, includes a conflict, on the rise of the curve, which has, as its greatest tension moment, or peak, the **climax**. After, the action decreases or falls, until it reaches the **conclusion**, where there is a solution to the conflict (e.g. Freytag 1908).

### *1.1 Personal experience narratives in sign languages*

Sign language literature is spontaneously developed by deaf people from all over the world, especially in privileged meeting spaces, as schools (Morgado 2011). In the old days, usually in boarding schools, deaf people would share mime stories, imitations and so on, hidden from the oralist supervisors. The fact that sign language was banned, made the deaf feel a greater need for their own language. Therefore, stories told secretly became stronger and more structured (Morgado 2011). For instance, Deaf people who had some means could watch movies and pass them on to their fellow boarding school colleagues (Morgado 2011), sharing, in this way, their own personal experience of the outside world.

In the book *A journey into the Deaf World* (Lane et al. 1996), the importance of boarding schools and associations in enriching the stories is highlighted. Stories, poems and other signed visual vernacular productions

about accessibility, deaf identity or pride are based on personal experiences (Sutton-Spence and Kaneko 2017). Lodenir and Klein (2016) detail it further, by describing that deaf people produce stories about their lives, their trajectories as individuals and as members of a community, their deaf way or life events. The analysis of the narratives in Libras by those authors demonstrates that life experiences of deaf people seem to be the starting point of both creative and formal literary objects. The content of literature in sign languages (hereafter SLs) seems to be marked by deafness, even when the stories are not about deafness, the fact of telling them in SL is already part of it (Sutton-Spence and Kaneko 2017).

**Personal experience narratives** are typically about real events in one's life, experienced or witnessed, in the past, contrasting, in this way, with fictional narratives such as the ones in (fairy or folk) tales, fables or myths. In sign languages are considered to be a central part of sign language literature (Sutton-Spence and Kaneko 2017). Mullrooney (2009) wrote a book on personal experience narratives in ASL by deaf people. She followed Labov and Waletzky's theory and analysed several narratives that are not related to deaf identity or deaf culture, but rather to their everyday life experience.

In SLs, the narrator can easily be part of the story, through constructed dialogues, also known as role shift, by playing each participant of a conversation, and **constructed action** (CA), involving character embodiment. In constructed action, the signer uses the whole body or part of it, such as the face or the hands, as a discourse strategy to represent actions, thoughts or feelings of a character (Cormier et al. 2013). One common CA device in sign language literature is **anthropomorphism**, the physical embodiment of animals or objects – a literary resource favoured by many signers. For example, anthropomorphism is very common in children's animal stories, where signers embody wild and domestic animals, as well as sea animals and birds. Here the arms can play paws, claws, wings or fins. In the case of crawling animals such as snails and snakes, the depiction is almost entirely personified by the human (Sutton-Spence and Kaneko 2017).

Besides the existing scientific studies, one can find online a wide variety of stories, poems, narratives, jokes and productions in visual vernacular in different SLs, including several from Africa.

*1.2 Personal experience narratives in African sign languages*

Since it is known that deaf people gathered in boarding schools are likely to produce spontaneous narratives systematically, one might predict that deaf people by nature, wherever they are, if they are together, develop the ability to tell narratives. Sutton-Spence and Kaneko (2017) describe that SL literature can change hearing people's attitude towards the deaf community. Several African cultures still believe that deaf people are born deaf as a result of witchcraft and, as a result, they are looked as inferior (Tano 2016, Kusters 2015b). For that reason, it is crucial, at this point, to value SL literature in Africa.

Sign language literature emerges in the late 20th century (Dirksen and Bauman 1997). In the African continent, South Africa seems to be the only country where several works have been developed about literature in South African Sign Language (SASL) (Kaneko and Morgan 2019, Morgan and Kaneko 2017, Asmal and Kaneko 2020 and Baker 2017). In Kenyan Sign Language there is a study on the structure of unplanned discourses produced by a deaf leader (Mweri 2015). Baker (2017) describes that studies of literary expressions in SLs are still limited in general and much focused on only a few SLs, like American Sign Language (ASL) or British Sign Language (BSL). Besides these, SLs like Brazilian Sign Language (Libras), Lingua Italiana dei Segni (LIS) and Nederlandse Gebarentaal (NGT), have a reasonable number of studies. She adds that, in the wider panorama of SL literature, SASL is becoming more prominent. To my knowledge, no studies have been published so far that look at literature in village SLs.

Several researchers have analysed personal experience narratives related to deaf identity and culture in SLs such as ASL, BSL, SASL and International Sign (Morgan and Kaneko 2020). However, there are very few studies on personal experience narratives about other topics than community, identity or culture.

In what concerns African SLs, there are already a few corpora, such as the sign languages of Mali (Langue des Signes du Mali, Dogon SL and Bamako SL, Nyst et al. 2012), Ugandan Sign Language (Lutalo Kiingi 2014), Langue des Signes de Bouakako (LaSiBo), in Côte d´Ivoire (Tano 2014) and Adamorobe Sign Language. These corpora, which were collected mainly for the purpose of linguistic documentation and analysis, include some personal experience

narratives among other types of language production (sign elicitation, interviews, conversations, etc.).

All literary studies thus far have focused on large deaf community SLs. This stirs the curiosity about what these narratives are like in village SLs, like the one of Adamorobe.

### *1.3 Personal experience narratives in Adamorobe Sign Language*

Adamorobe Sign Language (AdaSL) is about 200 years old and is used by deaf people in the village of Adamorobe, Ghana, located about 40 kilometers from the capital Accra. The village of Adamorobe had thirty-three deaf inhabitants at the time of my fieldwork. The older deaf people use AdaSL as their primary language, although they attend weekly church services in Ghanaian Sign Language (GSL). The younger deaf people are schooled are fluent in both AdaSL and GSL, learnt in school.

The only parts of personal experience narratives in AdaSL that have been mentioned in terms of their content are found in the work of Nyst (2007) and Kusters (2015a, 2015b) on the deaf community of Adamorobe, in Ghana. Edward (2015) also collected several videos as indirect elicitation of signers telling short stories about Adamorobe's life for her Master thesis, but she doesn't mention their content. For her thesis, documenting AdaSL, Nyst recorded 30 hours of videos, including personal experience narratives, stories of myths and of the bible. In relation to the latter type, Nyst filmed deaf people translating bible stories to AdaSL from the church services given in Ghanaian Sign Language, as illustrated in Figure 1a. In Ghana, deaf people are accustomed to church services in SL because this was the first African country where the deaf American missionary Andrew Foster founded a school for the deaf, in 1957, where he taught ASL and religion. Indeed, Sutton-Spence and Kaneko (2017) stress that signed religious literature is very important for many signers.

When documenting a SL, Nyst (2015) explains that interviews facilitate the collection of linguistic data. Topics familiar to the interviewees, like food, family or animals, are likely to encourage the production of personal experience narratives. This kind of spontaneous data is very useful for linguistic analysis.

The personal experience narratives in the existing corpora cover such topics as work, daily life, food, family, animals, death, deafness and school. Older

deaf people in Adamorobe had school for only a short time and some of them retell the incident that forced the school to close involving a deaf girl. The protagonist herself tells her version in one of the videos archived in the AdaSL corpus: *We had school for the deaf here in Adamorobe. I was sick, I had spots on my skin. I wanted to go to school because they give food at the end of the lessons. So, I went there and took a small knife. The teacher saw me, he got angry with me and broke a branch from the tree and hit me on my head and I cried* (Figure 1b) *and all the deaf people hit the teacher. Because of that, the village chief decided to close the school.*

**Figure 1** – Fragments of a bible story translated to AdaSL (a) and of a personal experience narrative referring to the moment when the teacher hit her, which led to the school closure (b) (Nyst 2015).

a b

In the different narratives filmed by Nyst for the purpose of language documentation and description, some topics were initiated by her while others were spontaneously told in the group, as illustrated in Figures 2a and 2b.

**Figure 2 –** Fragments of a personal experience narrative referring to the moment when a big tree fell during a storm (a) and to the preparation of *kenkey*, a traditional dish (b) (Nyst 2015).

a b

Working in an ethnographic tradition, Kusters also spent some time with the deaf people of Adamorobe. In her book, she published parts of interviews that include stories (Kusters 2015), collected both on video and in notes and field documents. In addition to most of the subjects mentioned above, she adds gossip, traditional beliefs and the *deaf-same* topic. The topic of *deaf-same* is well illustrated by recurrent expressions like *We were all friends, we were all the same!* When asked why they enjoyed talking so much with each other, deaf people would answer *deaf-same*. In the old days, deaf and hearing people used to gather more often, but now it occurs more and more rarely. One deaf man said that, when he was little, he did not know other deaf people in the village. When he first saw them signing, one of them called him. He was embarrassed, but the deaf man said that he was deaf too, that he was just like him. He continued explaining that they were deaf because a god chose them to be so. Afterwards he was welcomed and everyone went on chatting with him (Kusters 2015, p. 93). They believe that a god made them deaf, naturally stronger, better farmers and better guards. It is in these interviews that personal experience narratives emerge.

## 2. An analysis of personal experience narratives in Adamorobe Sign Language

This second part focuses on how data on personal experience narratives were collected, what methods were used to analyse the content and what evidence the analysis bring to light about these informal stories told in AdaSL. The analysis illustrates the content of the narratives, mainly on its internal structure and discourse strategies, such as constructed action (i.e. the representation of dialogues and action by the signer).

### *2.1 Data collection*

During my fieldwork, the data that I needed to collect for my research only required around four days in total. Still, I stayed with the deaf on a daily basis for two and a half months. In order to get integrated in the community, it was important know them, to learn AdaSL and their customs. On Thursday they did not work, as it was a traditional religious day to honor Nyame, a local god. They would gather in a bigger group under a large tree with a wide shade (Fig. 3a). I came to understand that they only did it during the time I was there.

On Sunday, almost all the deaf people in the village went to church, where the mass was given in GSL by a deaf priest from the city. After church, most of them would stay for a chat before going home. On the other days, some of the deaf people went farming outside the village. Those who remained in the village, I went to greet them at their houses, especially the younger ones who didn't work. I was careful to vary the groups with whom I spent my time, chatting with three or four at a time. The houses consisted of one room, for each person or couple. Around the rooms there was an outdoor space where they made fire and cooked. These living places, shared by smaller groups of mostly family members, functioned almost as private compound. In each of these compounds, deaf people would gather in small groups (Figure 3b) and chat when they were not doing their chores or working on the farm.

**Figure 3** – Groups of deaf villagers gathering in their usual places, under the tree (a) or within the housing compound (b).

a b

Before going to Adamorobe, I learnt from Nyst's (2007) and Kusters' (2015) work what were the topics that were most talked about. It made it easier for me to start the conversation, by asking them about things they were familiar about. I did not film them in those moments, it was all as natural as possible. Besides such topics, snake attacks came up often, like the one time when I asked why every housing compound had at least one cat to which they answered: *We have cats to protect us from snakes, they are not afraid, they know how to attack and kill them without getting hurt, so it is protecting us from dangers. It only happens during the night. Many times, first thing in the morning, we found dead dogs and chickens attacked by the snakes and snakes killed by the cats that leave them all scratched. That is why we have cats.*[2]

[2] Notes from fieldwork, taken on 19/09/2018.

Another time, because I wanted to drink coconut water and there were none for sale in the village, I asked them why there were no coconuts, since they had plenty of coconut trees. This was their explanation: *We like coconut, but it is very dangerous to pick them. There, up in the trees, where the coconuts are, is one of the places where snakes hide during the day. They are dangerous, they are hiding, they have the same color as the coconuts. They stay hidden there. There have been people who climb the coconut trees and are bitten or get scared, fall and die because of the snakes. We don't go there. It is very dangerous. At night, they come down and crawl into the village.*[3]

In one other occasion, one of the deaf joined our group under the tree and said that a hearing man had just arrived from the farm and had killed a large snake the size of his leg. This led to a moment of sharing experiences about having had snakes inside their rooms, like the one that told: *I was asleep, I'm deaf and I didn't hear anything. When I woke up, I opened my eyes and saw something long and shiny hanging from the ceiling. I thought it was my belt, but then I saw that it was moving. I got scared, I got up, I took my big cutlass and cut the snake's head off and it fell. Then I went to investigate and I realized that the snake got through the zinc roof into the hole and stayed there hiding for many days and then it wanted to come out to attack me, it got stuck by the tail and hung. I am deaf and I didn't hear anything. It is normal for them to come in, but the hearing people hear it and go straight away to look for it to kill it, but we always need to look around and search for something odd.*[4]

There are several snake stories that were told to me during the meetings and were not recorded on video, but one of the tasks I had to film during the fieldwork was precisely about animal attacks and from this I had access to their personal experiences with animals on video.

### *2.2 Methodology*

For my PhD project, there were five different tasks to record on video, specifically to analyse size and shape depictions. Two of the tasks involve spontaneous narratives, one about animal attacks and another one about their experience in farming. When planning the research, our team decided to

[3] Notes from fieldwork, taken on 18/10/2018.
[4] Notes from fieldwork, taken on 01/11/2018.

suggest animal attacks involving snakes to the signers because we assumed most people living in the village would have experienced such encounters. Moreover, snakes could easily be mapped on a signer's arm, which was the main focus of the research project.

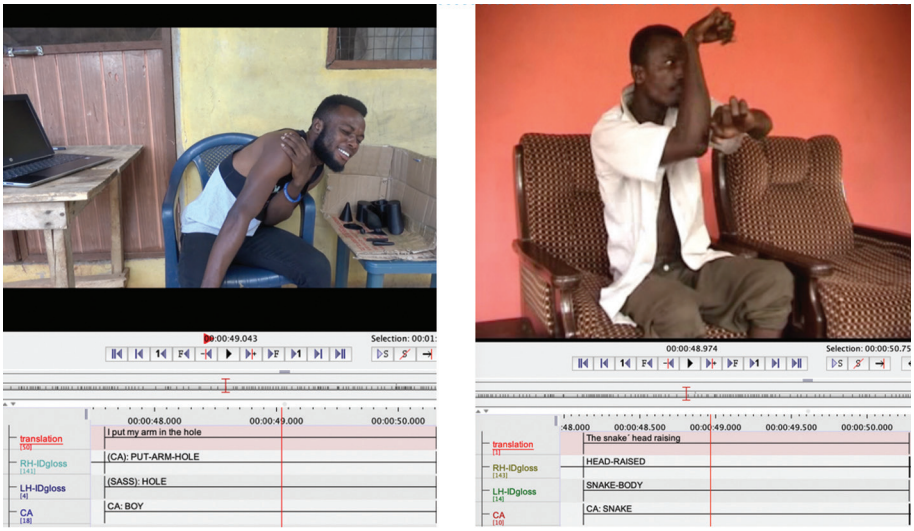
I filmed 28 different narratives about snakes in my fieldwork. Later, I found another snake story in the AdaSL corpus, where Nyst (2012) archived the records from her fieldwork in 2000. The signer reporting this experience was one of the deaf people that I filmed in 2018. After watching all the videos, I was really captivated by the enthusiasm in which they told their narratives in what seemed to be a well-structured way.

For this particular analysis I selected two different videos, corresponding to the two longer ones out of the 29 videos. One of them corresponds to the one found in the AdaSL corpus filmed in 2000 by Nyst (2012) and the other to one collected in my fieldwork in 2018. The snake story filmed in 2018 is narrated by a young deaf person, schooled and fluent in both AdaSL and GSL. From now on I will refer to it as 'Narrative 1'. The deaf man filmed in 2000 belongs to the older generation, having AdaSL as his primary language. This one will be identified here as 'Narrative 2'.

To understand how the stories were being structured, I analysed the translations in relation to their internal fundamental parts: introduction, development, including the climax, and conclusion. At the same time, I looked for references to time, place and who the characters were. Focusing on the characters depicted, I analysed the use of constructed action, including anthropomorphism, for each character using Johnston's guidelines (2016). All videos were glossed and translated in ELAN[5] (Figure 4), being all translations my own.

[5] ELAN (Version 5.9) [Computer software]. (2020). Nijmegen: Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, The Language Archive. Retrieved from https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/elan.

**Figure 4** – Fragments of CA annotated in ELAN in Narrative 1 (a) and Narrative 2 (b).




a b

In the next section the analysis of the two longest narratives about snake attacks, found in the data, will be presented and discussed, focusing on the aspects mentioned above.

### *2.3 Content analysis*

In this section, the two selected narratives are analysed in relation to their tripartite structure and to the use of constructed action: first Narrative 1, produced by a young signer (fluent in both AdaSL, GSL) and then Narrative 2, produced by an older signer of AdaSL.

Narrative 1, as shown below, is clearly divided in three main parts, as well as it has a well-defined action curve with a peak on the climax.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Introduction | | *A long time ago, when I was a small boy, there, on the farm, I went with my father. I walked there and stayed there. My father went farming until he finished his work.* |
| Development | | *I sat there waiting, thinking and I saw a hole. Something moved. I thought, "What could that be?". I put my hand in the hole. I was very small and I didn't know. I put my arm in the hole. "What is it?", I thought. With the cutlass, I dug the hole to make it bigger, my hand, I put it in the hole.* |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Development | Climax | *I didn't hear anything, but my father heard and came to me. I had my arm in the hole and my father said, "Get out of there!". My father cut off the snake's head with the cutlass. The snake's head opened. The mouth was broken. I was scared and frightened. My father pulled the snake out of the hole. It was a big and very long snake.* |
| | | *He pulled it out and put it on a branch of a tree. I calmed down and my father said with gestures, "Don't put your arm in the hole! Do you hear? No, you don't hear so you can't put your arm in the hole. You have to see, don't touch. If the snake bites you, you die.". I was troubled, I should not have put my arm in the hole. I began to tremble with fear. My father kept asking me, "Do you understand?".* |
| Conclusion | | *My father lit a fire, grabbed the snake on the branch and put it in the fire. He buried it and covered it. And that was it!* |

In the very beginning of Narrative 1, the signer describes when he had the experience (*A long time ago, when I was a small boy*), where it happened (*There on the farm*) and who the characters are (*I went with my father*). When he is acting as the narrator, he usually looks to the camera (Figure 5).

**Figure 5** – Fragment from the introduction where the signer, acting as narrator, looks at the camera.

THERE FATHER TOGETHER FARM GO

There on the farm, I went with my father.

In the development of the action, the young signer describes the conflict by embodying the different characters (the son, the father and the snake), using constructed action. He explains that he sees something moving, goes to see the hole in the ground and puts his arm inside without thinking of the danger. He tries to dig the hole to make it bigger and puts his arm in it again, without hearing anything. In this part, the signer looks at the camera, acting as narrator, just before

embodying a character which is, in this case, the boy. As narrator, he says to the camera what he is going to use in the act that follows, either the cutlass or the hand (Figures 6a1 and 6b1), and then he embodies the character either digging the hole with the cutlass or putting the hand in the hole (Figures 6a2 and 6b2).

**Figure 6** – Fragment from the rise of the action, where the signer indicates to the camera what will be used in the act (a1 and b1) before embodying the boy acting with it (a2 and b2).

a1. CUTLASS narrator | a2. DIG CA: boy | b1. HAND narrator | b2. ARM-IN-HOLE CA: boy

*With the cutlass, I dug the hole (...), my hand, I put it in the hole.*

In the climax, the father appears in time to save him and kills the snake. Here, it is possible to observe character's modifications without him mentioning who is who. For example, the father cuts the snake's head more than once. When the signer embodies the father, he looks down and his hand is the cutlass cutting the snake (Figs. 7a and 7c). When he personifies the snake, he tilts his head as if he is lying down, with eyes and mouth open, acting as a dying snake. Moreover, he uses his hands to depict an open head (Figure 7b).

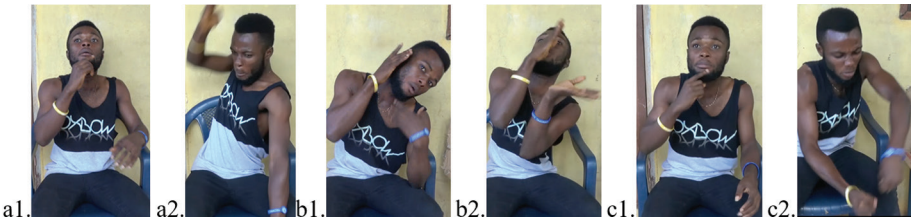
**Figure 7** – Fragment from the climax where the signer embodies both the father cutting the snake (a and c) and the dying snake (b).

a. CUTLASS-CUT CA: father | b. HEAD-OPEN CA: snake | c. CUTLASS-CUT CA: father

*My father cut off the snake's head with the cutlass.*

Before embodying the father cutting the snake (Figs. 8a2 and 8b2), the signer looks again at the camera, but this time to indicate who is acting next (Figures 8a1 and 8b1).

**Figure 8** – Fragment from the climax, where the signer indicates to the camera who is being embodied, the father (a1 and c1) and the snake('s head) (b1) before actually embodying either the father (a2 and c2) and the snake (b2).




| PAI | MATAR | CABEÇA | ABRIR | PAI | PUXAR |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| narrador | CA: pai | narrador | CA: cobra | narrador | CA: pai |

*My father cut off the snake's head with the cutlass. The snake's head opened. (...) My father pulled the snake out of the hole.*

Following the climax, the narrator tells how the father takes the snake out of the hole and puts it on a tree branch. Next, the father reproaches his son using gestures. The signer begins again by naming the father before embodying the gestural reprimand (Fig. 9).

**Figure 9** – Fragment from the decrease of the action, where the signer names the father to the camera before embodying him giving a reprimand to his son using gestures.

| FATHER | YOU | HOLE | NO | HEAR |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| narrator | CA: father | | | |

*The father said, "Don't put your arm in the hole! Do you hear? (...)*

SNAKE BIT DIE SEE NO
CA: father

*If the snake bites you, you die. You have to see, don't touch.*

In the conclusion, the signer, acting as narrator, explains what happens to the snake before embodying the father picking up the snake and burning it. Finally, he ends his story with the sign FINISH, leaning back and looking at the camera.

Narrative 2, below, even though a bit shorter, distinguishes, similarly, between introduction, development, including the climax, and conclusion.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Introduction | | *I was in the forest, near the water and there were lots of fish. There were also many snails and I was catching them and putting them in the bag. I was surprised. There were really many snails and I was surprised. I, alone, caught a lot of snails up to this size. Snails were crawling.* |
| Development | | *I was catching snails by myself everywhere. That's when I saw a snake and I was surprised. It was a big snake with spots on the body. The snake's head stood up and poke its tongue out moving sideways. The snake was big, had spots on its body and was curled up.* |
| | Climax | *The head rose, I was surprised and I screamed. The snake was strong. I was blessing myself and praying to god. I said, 'Thank you, Jesus Christ, thank you God and Jesus Christ. "I pray to God and Jesus Christ". "Please bless me with life". "Thank you, god, and I will pray, Jesus Christ". I prepared myself by grabbing the cutlass and killed it.* |
| | | *I was looking at the dead snake.* |
| Conclusion | | *I took one part of the snake and threw it away. The other part I buried and covered it.* |

In the introduction, the signer does not say when it happened, but he does indicate the location: *I was in the forest, near the water.* He also identifies the snails in the beginning of the story and the snake in the development. Besides himself, i.e. the main character, he personifies these two animals, in the narrative. He can be either the man catching the snails, with one hand holding the bag and the other grabbing the snails and putting them in the bag, or the snail itself. Before incorporating the snail, he touches his eyes and with a V ( ) handshape he represents the snail's eyes, as a classifier (Figure 10). While embodying the snail, he leans forward, his head moves, his mouth tightens, his eyes bulge and, at the same time, his V hand moves in the same directions as his eye gaze.

**Figure 10** – Fragment from the introduction, where the signer embodies the snail.

EYES
CA: SNAIL

CL: EYES

*Snails were crawling.*

In the development of the action, the signer explains what he was doing before the conflict arises: *I was catching snails by myself everywhere.* Then he says he saw a snake and describes it. When the conflict arises, i.e. during climax, the snake becomes a threat and he has to deal with it, first by praying and then by killing it. Here, the signer plays the two characters, the man (himself) and the snake. He personifies the snake twice (Figures 11 and 12). The first time, he points to his tongue and uses the U ( ) handshape as a representation of the snake's tongue (Fig. 11). The head goes forward, the neck and the tongue move simultaneously with the hand acting as the tongue of the snake.

**Figure 11** – Fragment from the rise of the action, where the signer embodies the snake's tongue.

TONGUE
CA: snake-1

CL: TONGUE

*The snake's head stood up and poke its tongue out moving sideways.*

Before the second embodiment of the snake, he acts as the surprised man, while he refers to spots on the snake's body with the closed claw handshape (  ) and, immediately afterwards, his facial expression changes to embody the snake. With the same claw handshape used for the spots, the arms become the curled body of the snake. When the arm raises, representing the snake's head, as a classifier, the signer's head, that was hidden, rises up at the same time (Figure 12).

**Figure 12** – Fragment from the rise of the action, where the signer embodies the snake raising its head.

CHEST-SPOTS

SNAKE-CURLED
CA: snake-2

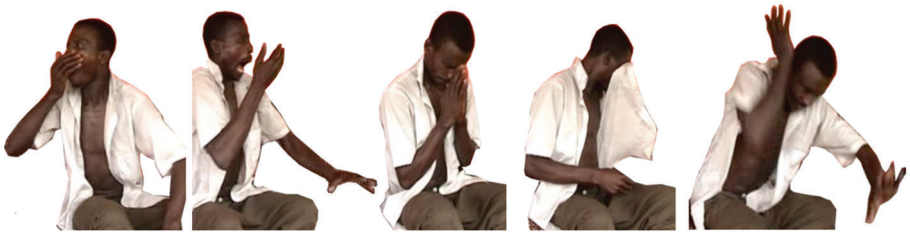
*The snake (...) had spots on its body and was curled up.*

CL: HEAD-UP
CA: snake-2

*The snake's head stood up.*

In the climax, he alternates between the personification of the snake and of the man. When the signer plays the man, he is very clear in expressing his emotional distress, in seeking protection through praying (curiously, all in GSL) and, finally, in deciding to act on it, by wiping his face with his shirt and killing the snake (Figure 13).

Figure 13 – Fragment from the climax, where the signer embodies the man deciding on what to do with the snake.



SURPRISE
CA: homem

SCREAM

PRAY

FACE-CLEAN

KILL

*I was surprised and I screamed (...) I was (...) praying to god. (...) I prepared myself (...) and killed it.*

All throughout the narrative, the signer never looks at the camera or at anyone else for that matter, except for one moment, when he shows the size of the snails he caught (Fig. 14a). The conclusion is very short and the man is the only character, which he embodies until the very end, when he says he covered everything up after burying the snake. It is only then that he looks at the camera and concludes his story by holding the sign COVER (Figure 14b).

**Figure 14** – Fragments of the only two moments when the signer looks at the camera, one to mark the size of the bag with the snails (a) and the other at the very end, when he holds his last sign, cover (b).


This analysis of two narratives involving encounters with snakes from AdaSL signers finds that both are well-structured internally and make abundant use of constructed action. Eye gaze, size and shape depictions and classifier signs are also used by the signers, but not reported on in this article.

*2.4 Discussion*

The two narratives analysed here are internally structured; that is, with introduction, development, including climax, and conclusion. The stories also depict a particular time, space and characters, typically at the beginning, and they develop the plot by telling an event that rises, reaches a climax and decreases.

In Narrative 1, the signer refers to his experience as a deaf person, i.e. how he deals with a threat that is usually sound-related – the snake's hissing, while in Narrative 2, it is not mentioned. Sutton-Spence and Kaneko (2017) argue that contents of SL literature are usually marked by deafness even when deaf identity or culture are not pointed out explicitly, since it is always in SL. In this line of thought, because both narratives were naturally produced in SL they can be looked at as literary objects. Both narratives include CA, although anthropomorphism appears more prominently only in the second story.

In the first story, the narrator, as indicated by the moments when he looks at the camera, is often present to introduce characters, or instruments, during the events. He indicates who he is going to act next, usually the son or the father in this story. In only one moment does he become a snake – to show how dead it was. In the second story, the signer roleplays many of the actions anthropomorphically. Without naming what character he is going to embody, he manages to be clear about who he is representing, either a snail or the snake

or when he changes back to the man, that is himself in the past. He is rarely a narrator addressing the camera.

Both stories are rich in showing emotions. There is even one moment, in Narrative 2, when the distress of the man is expressed at the same time it is shown what is scaring him – the snake, he shows distress through his facial expression while he articulates with his hands the snake's spots on his own body, an example of double-perspective, in which the signer includes two characters in a simultaneous utterance (Perniss 2007). Narrative 1 has dialogues with human characters, father and son, acting distinctly, whereas the Narrative 2 has only a monologue, corresponding to the man praying in GSL. In fact, here, the older signer, primarily speaker of AdaSL, uses GSL for praying, reflecting his experience of receiving religious services in GSL by a deaf priest. Also, the younger signer, fluent in both SLs, uses only one sign in GSL, SMALL, at the beginning of the story when he says: *When I was small*.

**Conclusion**

The two narratives, which were told informally in Adamorobe Sign Language, have a solid internal structure and reference to space and characters. One of them also includes how the event was experienced as a deaf person. The fact that one signer is schooled and fluent in both SLs and the other is unschooled and primarily speaker of AdaSL did not distinguish in any way their ability to narrate a personal experience with the intended content. The older signer added anthropomorphism, but nothing tells us that the younger signer wouldn't be able to produce it in a similar way.

This analysis illustrates how signers of a village sign language, in west Africa, belonging to different generations, produce spontaneously narratives that can be easily looked at as literary objects. Of course, much has still to be studied in relation to both its form and content, not only in existing corpora of African sign languages, but also through more ethnographic fieldwork. In addition, it would be important to look into this type of narratives, particularly related to animal attacks, told by hearing people living in the same region, as this might be a common experience.

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