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To cite this article: Emily Fekete (2017) Embodiment, linguistics, space: American Sign Language meets geography, Journal of Cultural Geography, 34:2, 131-148, DOI: 10.1080/08873631.2017.1305544

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/08873631.2017.1305544

Published online: 28 Mar 2017.

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Embodiment, linguistics, space: American Sign Language meets geography

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ABSTRACT
The relational turn in geography has led to an understanding of space and place as actively produced agents in people’s everyday lives. Geographers have also long recognized the importance of language in understanding the social and relational nature of space. The study of American Sign Language (ASL) presents a unique opportunity to examine how language use and language creation influence the production of linguistic space. For users of ASL, space is incredibly significant. Because of the visual and spatial nature of ASL, the space surrounding a signer’s body is important not only for the signer to communicate, but also for others involved in the conversation to participate. Environments created during conversations in ASL reflect the cultural and linguistic perception of the American Deaf community. By taking a critical perspective on the production of space, it will be shown that those who use ASL, through the medium of bodily performance, create linguistic, and communication spaces that are dynamic and visual. The embodied language of ASL and the Deaf community is a perspective geographers have yet to address.

KEYWORDS American Sign Language; performativity; relational space; linguistic geographies; Deaf culture

The realization that language is not a passive medium through which meaning flows, but an active agent in its construction, arguably constituted one of the central problematics of twentieth century philosophy. Saussure stressed that to understand language it is important to have a grasp on the structure of language and the relationships between the various elements that produce it such as syntax, dialect, and a person’s culture (Murdoch 2006). This line of reasoning, which eventually became the basis for structuralist thought, has led more recent scholars to problematize language as key to understanding all aspects of human consciousness. More recently in postmodern, post-structural, and feminist philosophies, language has become the focus of a body of scholarship concerned with its perceptual, cognitive, and social dimensions (Belsey 2002; Murdoch 2006).
Language is at the forefront of geographic scholarship that seeks to understand the production of space. Soja (1989), concerned about the constrictive nature of language, understands the world as constructed by society through the medium of language, which in turn is also a social construction. Adams (2009, p. 214) agrees to a point with other theorists of the cultural turn that “the world,” articulated in verbal and visual languages, is bounded by language and by the limits of representation, that many worlds are defined and created by the capacities inherent in language. However, he argues that geographers have a desire to not only deconstruct the meanings of language that describe representations of the world, but also accept that there is a real world to describe. He continues (Adams 2009, p. 218), “we can critique communications as boundaries imposed on the world and on the people in it, but at the same time accept communications as means of tracing the outlines, boundaries, limits, and constraints of the world and its inhabitants.” Therefore, while there may be some elements of language that shape cultural norms or values and need to be considered, people are not controlled by it. Though difference in language structures exists, these variances and our expressive capacity allow for a large variety of lived experiences.

Discussions regarding linguistic spaces within the geographic discipline raise many provocative questions, especially with regard to a fairly unexplored subgroup of languages: sign languages. The omission of sign languages in geographic discussions is striking given the emphasis on embodiment that underpins post-structuralist thought (Rose 1993; Duncan 1996). Sign languages are particularly noteworthy in that they utilize the body and personal space, what Adrienne Rich calls “the geography closest in”, as a means of constructing and sharing meaning (Valentine 1999, p. 349). Although body movements are necessary components in speech languages as forms of nonverbal communication, they are fundamental to how sign languages convey meaning. While geographers accept the production of space, and that language plays a role in this construction, linguistic spaces of signed languages have gone relatively unexplored.

American Sign Language (ASL) is only one of a global body of inherently spatial languages. While it is extremely difficult to definitively say how many people in the United States use ASL because of the exclusion of this issue from census questionnaires, estimates range from 100,000 to 500,000 individuals regardless of hearing capabilities (Mitchell et al. 2006). This includes not just those people who are medically deaf and choose to use ASL to communicate, but also people whose first language is ASL such as hearing children of Deaf adults. Besides the United States, ASL is also used by Deaf communities in English-speaking parts of Canada and by smaller missionary groups to the Deaf in places like Belize. While ASL has a rich history dating back to the early nineteenth century (Van Cleve and Crouch 1989), it was not studied academically until Stokoe (1960) effectively proved that
ASL was a natural language in 1960. A vibrant Deaf cultural community exists, in the US and abroad, that is based on the collective use of ASL. Preferring to call themselves a linguistic minority group, the Deaf community distinguishes itself from the Hearing world by its use of ASL as a primary communication method (Bienvenu and Colonomos 1988, 1987).

Through the use of ASL, ideas, words, and sentences are all conveyed using space as opposed to the use of auditory signals familiar to speakers of speech-based languages. Instead of auditory signals, ASL uses facial expressions, handshapes, body positioning, location, and movement to express thoughts and concepts (Stokoe 1960; Crystal 1987). Linguistically, ASL incorporates an element of space within every aspect of language production, changing the way that users of ASL view and utilize space. Personal space takes on meaning for a signer that is different than for a speaker and becomes significant for communication. The incorporation of space with language allows for a different perception of space based on the grammatical structure of ASL.

Geographers who have previously studied Deaf groups have either done so within political minority studies or identity politics. Both Valentine and Skelton (2003a, 2003b, 2007a, 2007b) and Mathews (2008) discuss the importance of place-making for the Deaf as a way to create territory and feel at home in a world designed for Hearing people. Recent technological changes such as the Internet and cochlear implants have threatened traditional Deaf place-making, posing a challenge to older generations and a more traditional Deaf community life once based around more or less fixed audiologies and regular physical face-to-face gatherings (Valentine and Skelton 2008). While this research is informative with regard to different ways of understanding identity and being, it does not focus on linguistic spaces as produced through sign language usage, but rather on the Deaf as a minority group. The only instance of exploring linguistic spaces of signed languages comes from linguistic research on sign language poetry and cinema. Probably the best known example, Rachel Sutton-Spence’s (2005) work explores space as an integral component of poetry in signed languages, but does not discuss spaces as produced, an instance where geographers might contribute to an ongoing conversation (Sutton-Spence 2005; see also Pollitt’s 2014 dissertation for a more recent approach including the notion of meta-poetic “cinematographic” uses of space in signed performance).

Since ASL is a visual and spatial language, it is inherently geographical. Geography provides a unique perspective on the use of linguistic spaces within ASL. A study of ASL can also inform future research that engages with performativity and the production of space. The use of space in ASL is actively produced and embedded with meaning by signers. Looking at space from a relational perspective, ASL provides new avenues to consider the production of space on a micro-scale level. This paper serves as a descriptive stepping off point for future study of linguistic spaces using the case study
of ASL. While it mostly focuses on the linguistic aspects of ASL, it aims to encourage future research on Deaf geographies in order to further advance understandings of how linguistic space is commonly used in everyday life. To reiterate the earlier quotes from Adams (2009), language should be considered in geographical research, both in its use of terminology and its application to describing the real world. However, geography should also consider how languages produce and use space.

This paper presents an explanation of how the US Deaf community uses space within linguistic structures and how space is created for users of ASL. Exploring notions of performativity and the body provide the perfect vehicle in which to discuss linguistic space. The use of sign language is an embodied performance just as the production of space is embodied and performed. ASL linguistic space is actively constructed, produced, and performed through communication. There is no written form of ASL, meaning that it is nearly impossible to separate the language from the body of the signer or from the space that the signer is inhabiting while communicating. Linguistic spaces are tied into the daily lived experiences of those using ASL. Incorporating a critical geographic perspective informed by performativity is necessary for grasping the myriad elements that go into the creation of linguistic space: language, the body, performance, identity, and space.

This article begins with a short summary of literature outlining how geographers have looked at language as well as geographic perspectives on space, the body, and performativity. It continues by explaining two instances in ASL linguistics where space is a central component in language formation. The first of which, the sign space (sometimes referred to as the signer’s box), is the area surrounding a person’s body where language is formed and demonstrates the necessity of personal space for communicating in ASL. The second example of the use of space in ASL is the embodied spaces of directional verbs. Certain types of verbs require movement in their composition. The space where the movement occurs is necessary to understanding the verb itself. Lastly, the conclusion outlines how spaces are actively produced through performance of ASL for people who use the language as a primary communication method. This article’s challenge is to raise as many questions as it answers and serve as a starting point for further explorations of linguistic spaces.

**Language, performance, and the body**

The concepts of language and culture have infiltrated the geographic tradition most frequently through the study of place by early humanistic geographers such as Tuan (1977, 1980, 1991), Relph (1981), Lowenthal (1961), and more recently by Cosgrove (1989, 1998), Massey (1994), and Adams (2005, 2009). For different groups of people, “words have great power in creating
place … gestures, either alone or in association with speech and the making of things, create place” (Tuan 1980, p. 4). Tuan (1991, p. 3) comments on the structure of language by noting: “the grammar of a language can tell us something about what aspects of an object (or place) is emphasized”. Language serves as a way of not only demarcating places, but also determining how a place is perceived. With the relational turn in geography, place and space are understood as being produced through the actions of people and things (Murdoch 2006). Spaces are not passive locations, but instead are actively created through relationships between various actors. Places are also created and reflect the sensations, perceptions, symbolic meanings, emotions, and actions of everyday life (Cresswell 2004; Murton 2010). Addressing the use of space in ASL can bring this literature a step further in understanding linguistic spaces.

In addition to an interest in language, space, and place, geography has also recently focused on the body and the production of space. Describing “bodies as objects placed in space among other objects”, Rose (1993, p. 146) argues for a reinterpretation of geography as a discipline that looks at the effect space has on bodies other than that of the able-bodied, white, heterosexual male. Taking this approach not only enables us to realize that these different bodies create new spaces, it also draws attention to the importance of relational space. This focus on gender and difference is very clearly visually expressed through the physical medium of the body. As such, the body has become a further site for geographic analysis. Spatial philosophers such as Deleuze, Massey, and others argue that rather than passive objects, peoples’ bodies are a product of social relations. They are sites of flows and processes that allow a person to know the world “for what a body can do will depend upon its relations with ‘the world’” (Fraser and Greco 2005, p. 45; Massey 2005). Therefore different types of human bodies have different connections with the world around them, leading each to produce its own space. As can be implied, those who use ASL as a primary means of communication are manipulating their bodies in such a fashion as to reorder their world differently than those who use an aural/verbal language. Deaf bodies will create spaces differently and therefore know the world differently than Hearing bodies will.

Discussions of the production of space, difference, and the body have further led to the notions of performativity and embodiment. Performativity refers to the everyday coded activities various individuals practice to express their identity from the perspective of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or nationality, among others (Nash 2000). In participating in the daily act of performance, different types of spaces are produced to accommodate a variety of lived experiences. Additionally, knowledge is embodied, meaning it is situated in not only a certain time and space context, but also in a specific bodily perspective that is based on everyday performances (Fraser and Greco 2005). The knowledges of white gay men in one space-time likely vary from those of black
heterosexual women in the same frame. Ultimately then experiences of space are situated and thoroughly linked to our bodily performances.

The concept of performativity brings considerations of the body back to those of relational space. Originally drawing from dance studies, performativity suggests that social identities are constantly being recreated and expressed through our everyday actions (Nash 2000). Because “performance denotes every embodied action that is shown in front of someone, the notion of performance also alters the notion of space as, from a performativ viewpoint, neither identity nor space preexist its performance” (Sprunk 2010, p. 290). Gregson and Rose (2000, p. 434) further illustrate this point by arguing that geographers need to be more aware of “taken-for-granted social practices” and that “space too needs to be thought of as brought into being through performances”. For Gregson and Rose (2000, p. 441) “performances do not take place in already existing locations … specific performances bring these spaces into being”. The way human bodies relate to each other and the objects around them create new spaces.

ASL is performed through space and therefore helps to create new linguistic spaces through bodily actions that are outside of both the spoken and written word and the artistic expressions of dance. People who use ASL as their primary means of communication actively produce different types of spaces. These linguistic spaces – the spaces of visual language production – and how these spaces should be looked at from a geographical perspective are the focus of this paper.

Meanings of space in the sign space

Studies of the structure and syntax of ASL have become more common since Stokoe’s (1960) influential book Sign language structure. Effectively proving that ASL was a full and natural language, not simply a series of gestures representing English words, Stokoe’s work paved the way for more research not just on ASL, but also on the American Deaf community as a cultural and linguistic minority group in its own right (Graybill 1993; Neidle 2000; McNaughton 2004). Since Stokoe’s work, other signed languages have been studied, such as Nakamura’s (2006) extensive work on Japanese Sign Language. While I will only focus on research done with ASL, some of the same principles can be applied to other sign languages.

In ASL structure, attention is paid to a focal area known as the “sign space”; all signs are essentially completed within this area, a specified amount of space surrounding the signer’s body like a “bubble” (Kegl 2004). The sign space extends forward from the signer’s chest, incorporating the space from mid-torso to top of the head and the width of the shoulders. It is within this area that signers move their hands to converse. Signers are constantly aware of the need to keep this space clear and not to block it from those
with whom they are conversing. The sign space essentially is an extension of
the signer’s body. The space around a person’s body is actively produced as a
part of their body and their language. As ASL is performed throughout the
sign space, an everyday space of communication is created. The establishment
of the sign space alone calls attention to the fact that space is a necessary com-
ponent for communicating in ASL.

The sign space can change size depending on the situation in which a
person is located. For example, the equivalent of becoming “louder” in ASL
is to sign larger (Emmorey et al. 2009). In instances where a person is
“screaming” his or her sign space will cover a much larger area in order to
accommodate the increased size of the sign movements. In contrast, when
a signer wishes to “whisper” the size of his or her sign space will decrease
and often be displaced to keep the signs hidden from view. No matter the
size of the sign space, the space used is an important extension of the
signer’s body, a necessity for communication. The performance of
“volume” within ASL necessitates the creation of larger or smaller communi-
cation spaces. The signing space produced increases or decreases in size
depending on the amount of attention the signer desires.

The space within the sign space is also important. The location of a sign in
the sign space makes a remarkable difference in the meaning of the sign
(Figure 1). Specific locations near the body become associated with particular
types of words. For example, the sign for “boy” is made near the forehead to
represent the brim of a baseball cap. Other signs enacted near this location
include the signs for “male”, “brother”, “nephew”, “uncle”, “father”, “grand-
father”, and “son”. This area of the sign space is understood to contain all
these terms that stem from the concept of masculinity, almost like a “root
word”. Similarly, the area near the cheek is associated with femininity as
words such as “girl”, “aunt”, “niece”, “sister”, and “daughter” are performed
in this location. While it seems these examples indicate that ASL is a deeply
gendered language, there are a variety of words that are not performed near

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1.** Sign location. In this figure, the handshape and movement are the same;
however the location is different for each word. The three signs for summer, ugly, and
dry are all performed using the same action. The different locations with respect to
the body convey different meanings. (Figure reprinted courtesy of ©MIT 1996 from
Emmorey (1999), Figure 5.1, p. 172.)
either the masculine or feminine areas of the body such as “friend”, “colleague”, “roommate”, “citizen”, and “person”, suggesting that gender is not a fundamental component of these roles. Location is used to distinguish similar handshapes and movements, such as those found in the words “niece” and “nephew” from one another and to derive different definitions. Location matters just as much as movement and handshape when trying to convey meaning. While outside the scope of this paper, it is likely that these gendered positions on the body affect a signer’s worldview and merit further investigation.

ASL requires an adequate amount of space because the language is expressed with the hands, with movement, and within an area defined by the current type of conversation. As such, the space surrounding a Deaf person is an extension of his or her body. The need to recreate and produce the space of the sign in various locations and situations is telling. The sign space helps to explain ways of utilizing space associated with the grammatical structure of ASL. Signers will not move too close to one another or other objects as doing so would have an adverse impact on communication. The Deafspace project currently underway at Gallaudet University is one project that seeks to explore how the use of signed languages interacts with the built environment. In the instance of the sign space, the grammar of ASL shapes how signers see one another’s personal space. Personal space belongs to the signer. This space would not exist except for the act of signing taking place within it. Reflecting on Nash (2000) and Gregson and Rose (2000), it is clear that ASL works to actively create spaces, as opposed to passively existing in prefabricated spaces.

Embodied space: linguistic connections between location and person

The use of space in ASL grammar allows for pronouns to be represented within space and verbs carried out through space to show relationships (Liddell 1995). Therefore, ASL permits spaces near the signer’s body to represent persons, places, or objects (pronouns). From these spaces other verbal relationships between pronouns and the signer are established. These spaces, once the representation is made, are also used for an ASL version of direct quoting.

Liddell (1990) names the type of spaces used to represent pronouns “loci”. A locus can be used for either topographical space or surrogate space (often referred to as “role-shifting”). If a sentence is topographical, it uses the space immediately in front of the signer’s body to explain an event. The “use of space to directly represent spatial relations” is a unique feature to any type of visual language, especially ASL (Emmorey 1999, p. 171). Topographical sentences can range from the description of a room’s contents to the
locations of people around a park. When describing a room, for example, the signer generally positions him or herself at what would be the doorway, and then uses the space in front of him or her to show where everything is located within the room. By using ASL to create a visual diagram of the room in the space in front of them, signers can show the specific locations of objects within an area in relation to other objects. This leaves little confusion as to the visual appearance of an area and can lend much detail to a story or discussion. The act of creating a visual diagram showing relations of objects produces a type of 3-D imagery space quite different from descriptions in non-signing languages.

In addition, topographical space is used to show how an action occurred, such as a moving car. The car can be described using a one-handed handshape, commonly known in ASL as a classifier, and then moved through the space in front of a person. If the road was winding, the classifier handshape is shown swerving back and forth, or if the road was hilly, the handshape is shown going up and down. All of this information is shown using the classifier, representing the car, through the topographical space in front of the signer. The structure of ASL allows for space to become part of the language itself. The performance of the sign through the topographical space not only creates the language, but also produces linguistic spaces. Signers get a sense of physical attributes such as location and terrain from the actions of the signer. The space becomes the setting onto which the scenes of actions occur, situating not only the conversation, but also the signer in the world around them (Sutton-Spence 2005; Pollitt 2014).

Communication through movement in space leads people to see the world around them through visuals instead of auditory sounds. Visual details are often remembered more easily (Bahan 2008). Peripheral vision among the Deaf is believed to be more astute than among Hearing people, which helps reconstruct the scene where an event occurred (Bahan 2008). Similar to other aspects of (dis)ability, Deaf people see themselves as differently abled (Hansen and Philo 2007; Crooks 2008). Deafness is not defined by a lack of ability to hear the environment, but rather as being able to see one’s surroundings more fully.

A locus can also be a designated area around the front of the signer’s body used to represent a person, place, or object (Liddell 1990). Areas used for representation are outlined in Figure 2. The signer identifies him or herself with the first person point of view. The person(s) with whom the signer is communicating are identified with the second person point of view. Other references in space are given the third person perspective. Typically the first instance of a third person reference being used is established to the immediate right of the signer. Each additional reference is then put in various locations around the edges of the sign space. After these loci are established, the richness of how personal space is used in ASL begins to unfold. If one of these spaces is
being used to represent a person, that person does not need to be physically present in order for both the signer and the addressee to talk about them. All that needs to be done is to point to one area around the body and sign the name for that person. Though the person is not physically there for the conversation, they are included in the space surrounding the people who are signing (Emmorey and Reilly 1995; Neidle 2000; Valli et al. 2005). The space will also remain designated as being that of the said person for the remainder of the conversation. In this way, both the signer and the addressee can refer to the third person simply by pointing to the space. The signer produces parts of their signing space to represent a person or object they are discussing in their conversation.

After a space is designated to represent a person, other structural components can be utilized. What Liddell refers to as surrogate space is also commonly known as “role-shifting” (Padden 1990; Liddell 1995). This linguistic idea is similar to a direct quote or reported speech in a spoken or written language, but takes on not only the actual words which the person used, but his or her emotions and actions, and indeed the physical positioning of

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**Figure 2.** Loci of pronoun references. Outline of one common configuration for the designation of loci for pronouns. There is not a specific order in which spaces are used for referencing. If the signer is left handed, for example, the order in which he or she designates the loci/pronouns may be reversed. (Diagram by the author.)
that person as well. The third person reference space is understood not only as representing that person, but to be the actual physical entity of the person. In order to perform a “role-shift” the signer physically shifts his or her body so as to move the shoulders toward the space that he or she designated as a person. Once they have done this, the signer essentially has “become” the person the space represents. Whatever is signed while the signer is in this position indicates something signed or performed by the third person reference. Because of the grammatical nature of the face as well as the hands, a signer can show not only what a person has communicated in the past, but also how he or she communicated it through his or her emotions, actions, and spatial relationships to other people or objects. The addressee understands what the third person is conveying or doing through the medium of the original signer. If several third person referents have been established, entire accounts of conversations can occur between a number of “people” who are not physically present. A simple exercise used in ASL classrooms involves a student acting out a scenario where they are trying to convince their parents to let them buy a car. The student can shift back and forth to represent both parents as well as themselves as they argue over whether or not the student should purchase the car (Figure 3). Depending on how many people are involved in the story, it can get confusing to the amateur to remember where and when to shift!

Implications of bodily image while communicating in surrogate space are considerable. If the third person reference has been described (or is mutually known), the signer taking on that position is seen, not as herself, but as the third person. The mental image produced is not one of the original signer, but of the reference, almost as if the addressee was with the reference instead of the signer. Physical traits are important for establishing loci so as to understand who or what each locus represents. The result of loci creation

![Diagram of Mother and Father spaces with arrows indicating role-shifting.](image)

**Figure 3.** Role-shifting. A signer can position their shoulders between multiple spaces to represent the various people involved in a conversation. In this case, when the signer is repeating something their mother said, they would move their body to the left into the space previously designated for her. (Diagram by the author.)
is a set of spaces that are produced to reflect people who are not present. The performance of loci establishment changes the nature of the space surrounding a signer. It is no longer the signer’s personal space, but rather an amorphous representation of people, animals, or objects that are not physically present but involved in the conversation.

Directional verbs, sometimes referred to as spatial verbs, are also utilized after establishing third person referents. Unlike some verbs such as “eat”, “work”, or “do”, directional verbs have some sort of relationship. Examples of directional verbs include “to ask”, “to go to”, “to give to”, or “fly-on-an-airplane”. These verbs imply that the signer is involved with another person, object, or place in order to carry out the specific action. For example, imagine the signer is a teacher and the signer established a locus to represent one of their students (Figure 4). If the signer gave a paper back to the student, the meaning “to give the paper from one person to another” would be signed in a direction coming from the signer and moving toward the space for the student. In this case, the movement shows who is giving to whom: the teacher gave to the student. If the student gave to the teacher, the sign would be performed in the opposite direction. Directional verbs can also be performed between several third person references. If the signer is another student in the class, they could designate one space to represent their teacher and another space to represent their classmate. When explaining how the teacher returned the paper to the signer’s classmate, the meaning “to give the paper from one person to another” would move between the two loci, from the teacher space to the classmate space.

Since referents are thought of as being physically present, and not as an empty space, the location of a sign as well as eye gaze again matters. If the reference is in actuality taller than the signer, the directional verb and eye gaze will be directed upwards from the signer to where the referent would be if they were physically present. The opposite would be true if the third person were shorter. Location of the third person within their respective surrogate space is also important. If the third person reference is indicating a cat, but the cat is in a tree, all directional verbs and eye movement are directed from the signer upwards to the cat, as if the tree with the cat is physically present. The same applies if the referent is in the bottom of a hole. Verbs and eye gaze are directed downward, as if the hole is next to the signer. Directional verbs reiterate the fact that space and movement are fundamental parts of ASL and visual communication. Eye gaze and movement are further examples of how the performance of ASL produces linguistic spaces unique to the conversation and the language.

Loci, topographical space, and surrogate space are unique elements of ASL that separate it from spoken languages. They allow Deaf people to convey complex spatial relationships fairly easily and with minimal confusion. They also make it possible to directly quote other people who are not
present by signing the conversation as well as conveying emotions and actions. In this way, the audience can visualize the third person and understand what they were communicating. Events happen through action and vision in the world, and through ASL this is also how they are communicated.

Again, space is a necessary grammatical element for the production of language as it helps to convey relationships between people and objects. Space is not inactive, rather linguistic spaces are produced by the signer and are dependent on the actions of the signer and the type of conversation occurring. Spaces can be produced to signify object relationships, the way

**Figure 4.** Directional verbs. Directional verb signs are performed in the direction in which the action occurred. The arrows above indicate direction of verb movement. If the teacher “gave” to the student, “give” would be performed from the teacher toward the student. If the student “gave” to the teacher, “give” is performed from the student toward the teacher. Likewise, if neither student nor teacher is present, the verb is performed in the proper direction between two loci. (Diagram by the author.)
that actions occurred, or as visual representations of significant people. Through everyday language use, those who communicate in ASL are able to shape their own spaces to fit the needs of their language. Signers’ bodily performances produce the linguistic spaces that surround them.

Geographies of visual language

ASL is a profoundly spatial language, far more so than spoken ones. Its linguistics allow for elements of conversations to be carried out and performed through space. As such, space is produced as an essential element of ASL structure. The personal space surrounding a signer is a fundamental part of their ability to communicate. The extension of space in front of a signer, the sign space, can be seen as an addition to the person themself, an integral part of their body. All signs are conducted within this space. Abstract concepts are relayed on a spatial plane. People, places, and objects are represented in sign space using surrogate space. Concepts, expressed through signs, show the physical traits of others as well as the actions, emotions, and spatial relations between them. Signers can embody another person, animal, or object to explain conversations from the intimate and omniscient viewpoint of the person, animal, or object that the signer is embodying. By taking on the traits of the person, animal, or object in discussion, the signer can portray emotions, thoughts, and actions as if they were that person, animal, or object. The signer takes on characteristics that are not their own to provide rich linguistic detail for whatever he or she is discussing.

People who use ASL to communicate bring a uniquely visual interpretation of events and topics to their conversations. ASL users know the world visually in the sense that language is portrayed in a visual instead of auditory form. When communication is conducted through the linguistic system of ASL, people see communication as well. In order to use ASL, one must use space. To people who use ASL, space becomes the visual medium through which thoughts, actions, and emotions are expressed. Linguistic space is produced as a necessary feature of ASL’s grammar and linguistic structure.

By looking at how space takes on characteristics that are important in Deaf culture and ASL, geographers can expand on the notion of space as produced, relational, and tied to understandings of language, culture, the body, and performativity. This preliminary discussion of ASL provides insight into how personal space becomes an extension of the self. Bodies exist beyond the borders of skin and bones to inhabit, utilize, and produce spaces of meaning not completely in conjunction with their own physical state. Linguistic space is produced through the everyday action of communication in ASL. Reiterating the argument that “performances bring these spaces into being” from Gregson and Rose (2000, p. 441), without the body or the language, these linguistic spaces would not be in existence.
Discussions of the production of space and performativity can be broadened with inclusion of ASL linguistic space. As Adams (2009, p. 214) states, “communications fill the world” but “the world fills communications”. Communication spaces have often been previously discussed by geographers who have conducted research addressing auditory signals or the mediums of art, dance, and the written word (Nash 2000). ASL provides a new way to understand communication space, linguistically through visual language reliant on sight, performance, and the body. This article has opened the door for more questions to be answered by future research: do linguistic spaces outline the limits to performativity in real space? What are the effects of these linguistic spaces on worldview and the understanding of difference? How has the creation of linguistic spaces had an impact on the built environment? In what ways is the real world altered through the creation of linguistic spaces for explaining events and actions? Further exploration of ASL can expand conversations in performance studies and relational geographies to negotiate how perceptions of reality change through the bodily production of linguistic spaces.

Notes
1. The capitalization of Deaf and Hearing refers to the cultural groups that make up the Deaf world vs. the Hearing world as opposed to the medical terminology deaf and hearing that refers to physical abilities. Membership in the Deaf community is self-identifying, but largely refers to those who use ASL as their predominant or first language. This could include people who are born deaf and learn ASL from a young age, children who are born hearing to Deaf parents and use ASL as a first language (often referred to as CODAs – children of Deaf adults), people who become deaf later in life and seek out ASL and the Deaf community, or children born deaf that do not learn ASL until their teens or early twenties. There are many individuals who are deaf that do not choose to become a member of the Deaf community for a variety of reasons, some of which have to do with personal choices on the part of the individual or their parent(s), or a lack of knowledge of or desire to learn ASL. For the purposes of this paper, Deaf is used to refer to this cultural linguistic group that relies on ASL.

2. For more information on Gallaudet’s Deafspace project see http://www.gallaudet.edu/campus-design/deafspace.html.

Acknowledgments
The author would like to thank the many people who have given guidance and support over the past six years to transition this paper from master’s thesis to manuscript namely Dave Kaplan, Barney Warf, Alyson Greiner, Mike Gulliver, Mary Beth Kitzel, and several anonymous reviewers.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.
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