

# Types and trends of name signs in the Swedish Sign Language community

Carl Börstell  
Stockholm University

## Abstract

This paper investigates the domain of name signs (i.e., signs used as personal names) in the Swedish Sign Language (SSL) community. The data are based on responses from an online questionnaire, in which Deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing participants answered questions about the nature of their name signs. The collected questionnaire data comprise 737 name signs, distributed across five main types and 24 subtypes of name signs, following the categorization of previous work on SSL. Signs are grouped according to sociolinguistic variables such as age, gender, and identity (e.g., Deaf or hearing), as well as the relationship between name giver and named (e.g., family or friends). The results show that name signs are assigned at different ages between the groups, such that children of Deaf parents are named earlier than other groups, and that Deaf and hard of hearing individuals are normally named during their school years. It is found that the distribution of name sign types is significantly different between females and males, with females more often having signs denoting physical appearance, whereas males have signs related to personality/behavior. Furthermore, it is shown that the distribution of sign types has changed over time, with appearance signs losing ground to personality/behavior signs – most clearly for Deaf females. Finally, there is a marginally significant difference in the distribution of sign types based on whether or not the name giver was Deaf. The study is the first to investigate name signs and naming customs in the SSL community statistically – synchronically and diachronically – and one of the few to do so for any sign language.

**Keywords:** name sign, onomastics, anthroponyms, variation, sign language, Swedish Sign Language, naming customs

## 1 Introduction

One phenomenon reported from many sign language communities around the world is the use of so-called *name signs* (or, alternatively, *sign names*). A name sign is a sign that is used with reference to an individual<sup>1</sup> and is normally used alongside a spoken language community name. Name signs are important as identity markers in the community because it is often a symbol of inclusion, that is, individuals with name signs are mostly those that are members of the community, although name signs are also given to individuals often talked about within the community without themselves being members, such as famous people or others with some relevance to the community (McKee 2016: 805).<sup>2</sup> Name signs are not merely nicknames/bynames or hypocorisms, but the default way of denoting an individual in the community. However, name signs are not used vocatively, since calling somebody's attention is done by physical contact, unless one is already visible to the addressee (Deaf Studies 1997: Chap. 4).

The formation of name signs is based on different types of motivations. Many name signs are descriptive in some way, such that they iconically portray the visual appearance or physical mannerisms of an individual. Other name signs are motivated by the individual's spoken name (Supalla 1990). Figures 1 and 2 show Swedish Sign Language (SSL) name signs of famous people that are motivated based on the physical appearance of their referents: in Figure 1, Donald Trump's hair moving in the wind is depicted; in Figure 2, Elvis's sideburns are depicted.

---

<sup>1</sup>A name sign is, in a wider definition, any sign used as a proper noun, such as toponyms (see Nonaka 2015; Nyström 2002), company names, etc. In this paper, the term *name sign* is used specifically to mean signs that denote individuals – i.e., anthroponyms.

<sup>2</sup>Ingela Holmström (personal communication) notes that also non-humans, such as pets, receive name signs of their own, at least in the SSL community.



**Figure 1.** The SSL sign for Donald Trump depicting hair blowing up and down in the wind (Svenskt teckenspråkslexikon 2017 sign #16543)



**Figure 2.** The SSL sign for Elvis Presley depicting thick sideburns (Svenskt teckenspråkslexikon 2017 sign #07430)

As for name signs motivated by a person's behavior/mannerisms or dynamic appearance, we have the SSL sign for Charlie Chaplin depicting his characteristic twirling of a cane, as shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** The SSL sign for Charlie Chaplin depicting the twirling of a cane (Svenskt teckenspråkslexikon 2017 sign #14983)

Some name signs may be a combination of these types of depiction motivations, such as the SSL sign for Adolf Hitler, sequentially showing his mustache (i.e., static) followed by a reduced depiction of a Nazi salute (i.e., dynamic) – see Figure 4.



**Figure 4.** The SSL sign for Adolf Hitler depicting a mustache and a Nazi salute (Svenskt teckenspråkslexikon 2017 sign #10086)

Previous research on name signs in SSL has shown that physical appearance motivated signs are common (Hedberg 1989; 1994). However, the exact distribution of name signs across types and subtypes of motivations has not been systematically investigated for SSL, nor the possibly change in distribution over time, and whether or not social and group identification factors have an influence on the distribution. Thus, the main aim of this study is to investigate sociolinguistic properties of the assignment of name signs in the SSL community (e.g., identity of name bearer/giver, naming customs changing over time), in order to evaluate whether the findings from the previous study have changed over time, and add to the results by including more variables (see §3).

## 2 Background

Name signs have been documented in many of the world's sign language communities. However, a systematic investigation of the types and distribution of name signs of these communities is quite limited, one exception being Rainò's (2004) dissertation on name signs in Finnish Sign Language. Descriptions of name sign customs are found for American Sign Language (Meadow 1977; Mindess 1990; Supalla 1990), British Sign Language (Day & Sutton-Spence 2010), Chinese Sign Language (Yau & He 1989), Estonian Sign Language (Paaes 2010; 2011), Finnish Sign

Language (Rainò 2004), French Sign Language (Delaporte 1998), Greek Sign Language (Kourbetis & Hoffmeister 2002), Japanese Sign Language (Nonaka et al 2015), New Zealand Sign Language (McKee & McKee 2000), Quebec Sign Language (Dubuisson & Desrosiers 1994), Russian Sign Language (Esipova 2013), Swedish Sign Language (Hedberg 1989; 1994; 2009), and the sign languages of Uganda, Mali, The Netherlands, and the Adamorobe village (Nyst & Baker 2003).

Although some Deaf<sup>3</sup> children receive their name signs early, a trend found in several sign language communities seems to be that a name sign is often acquired during school years (Hedberg 1989: 8; Yau & He 1989: 306; McKee & McKee 2000: 22–23). This means that unlike spoken language community names, name signs are often assigned to individuals by their own peers rather than the parents/family (McKee & McKee 2000: 23). However, if the name sign is given by Deaf parents to their child, the naming may take place immediately after birth in some communities (Esipova 2013: 2). Also, it is known in several Deaf communities that an individual may be bestowed with more than one name sign during one's lifetime, and one's name sign may also change (Hedberg 1989: 46; Day & Sutton-Spence 2010: 47; McKee 2016: 805), although some sign language communities seem to use a single sign for an individual throughout that person's life (Kourbetis & Hoffmeister 2002: 42).

Among the sign languages for which name signs have been studied, American Sign Language (ASL) and Japanese Sign Language (JSL) stand out in that non-descriptive name signs are very common. In ASL, many name signs are simply initialized (i.e., using the manual alphabet handshape of the name's initial letter), and these arbitrary names are argued to form the native naming system, as this is what Deaf parents tend to use when naming their children (Supalla 1990: 121). Interestingly, in the British Sign Language (BSL) community it also seems as though Deaf parents are more likely to resort to fingerspelling when naming their children, as compared to hearing parents (Day & Sutton-Spence 2010: 46–47). However, in Greek Sign Language, initialized signs tend to be used mostly as a result of hearing people entering the Deaf community (Kourbetis & Hoffmeister 2002: 35). In JSL, the biggest category of name signs is translating the Japanese name – that is, the meaning of the individual morphemes of a name, if corresponding to regular words – into a

---

<sup>3</sup> Capital D “Deaf” is used to refer to the cultural and linguistic community identity centered around deaf individuals, distinguishing it from a clinical label (Schembri & Lucas 2015).

sign-by-sign corresponding form in JSL (Nonaka et al 2015: 78). Apart from these languages, other sign languages studied seem to prefer descriptive name signs (McKee 2016: 807). More specifically, name signs depicting the appearance (e.g., body shape, facial features, hair, clothes) constitute the biggest group in New Zealand Sign Language (McKee & McKee 2000: 13), Finnish Sign Language (Rainò 2004: 102), and Greek Sign Language (Kourbetis & Hoffmeister 2002), and it is one of the biggest in BSL (Day & Sutton-Spence 2010: 48) and Swedish Sign Language (Hedberg 1994: 419).

In ASL, there are some name signs that are associated with gender by being articulated high (male) or low (female) on the face, following a general gender-based high–low distinction in the lexicon, and similar cases of location or handshapes have also been found for Asian sign languages, but not for BSL (Day & Sutton-Spence 2010: 27; McKee 2016: 808). There are no obvious indications that descriptive name signs in SSL are overtly gendered by default, seeing as there are several name sign forms used to denote both men and women.<sup>4</sup>

For SSL, the use of name signs is documented already in the first dictionary of the language, written by Deaf Swede Oskar Österberg (1916), in which they are referred to as “characterization signs” or “sign language names”. Österberg writes that such signs are assigned to students when entering the Deaf schools, and gives examples such as ‘upturned nose’, ‘gray coat’, ‘round eye’, ‘red behind ear’, and ‘striped pants’ (Österberg 1916: 17). However, the most – and in reality only – systematic study of name signs in SSL was conducted by Hedberg (1989; 1994), following a documentation project of the history of and experiences within the Deaf community conducted in the late 1980s (Hedberg 2009). Hedberg collected 3,114 name signs, of which he had etymological descriptions – mostly provided by the name bearers themselves – for just over a third ( $n = 1,108$ ). When documenting these signs and their etymology, Hedberg describes that he could discern a number of different types and subtypes of name signs. These types have formed the basis of this study. The categories that Hedberg (1994) lists are as follows: *appearance*, based on the (static) visual attributes of the referent (e.g., body shape, hairstyle, or clothes); *mannerisms*, denoting behavior (e.g., signs, gestures, or movements used often); *social group*, referring to an individual by their occupation or place

---

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to Bernhard Wälchli for raising the question of overt vs. covert gender in name signs.

of origin (e.g., the sign DANMARK<sup>5</sup> ‘Denmark’ for a Danish person); *name*, using the spoken language community name as the basis of the name sign (e.g., a sign that translates into the same or a similar word, or a initialized sign); and finally *numbers*, for name signs that are based on an identification number given to the individual in the Deaf school.<sup>6</sup> Concerning the *name* type category, there is an interesting group of signs in SSL that consists of fixed name signs, that is, for some spoken language community names, there is a fixed sign that can be used to refer to a specific name (although not all bearers of that name need to have the fixed form). For instance, the name *Anders* has a fixed sign in SSL identical to the sign for ‘prankish, playful’ (Swe. *busig*) (see Svenskt teckenspråkslexikon 2017 sign #02337).<sup>7</sup>

The types of name signs investigated in this study are mainly those described by Hedberg (1994), although with a slightly altered categorization. The categories are presented in §3 below.

### 3 Data and methodology

Since previous studies of name signs in the SSL community are becoming outdated, the purpose of this study was to update the research in terms of which types of signs are currently found in the community, having present-day community members answer questions about their name signs rather than also documenting signs from previous – possibly no longer living – generations. Also, previous research has not presented quantitative data on the distribution of name signs across the different sign types, or how the preferences for certain categories may be influenced by the identity of the name giver/bearer or change over time, specifically taking into account the time of naming. Thus, these points were addressed in the current study. In

---

<sup>5</sup> The convention in sign language research is to refer to signs by the use of word labels in small caps.

<sup>6</sup> The category *number* is not included in the current study, as it was very marginal and archaic already in Hedberg’s (1994) data, and is not productive in forming name signs today.

<sup>7</sup> The specific case of *Anders* is, according to several consulted Deaf signers, based on a specific individual named Anders who, during his years in the Deaf school, often came up with pranks and (harmless) mischiefs, hence receiving this name sign himself. Later, this association has been made a fixed one between the written name and the sign, rather than between the individual and the sign.

the end, three main research questions were formulated, which were stated as follows.

1. When and by whom is a name sign given, and does it differ between identity groups?<sup>8</sup>
2. What is the distribution of types of name signs, and does it differ based on the identity and gender of the name giver and bearer of the name sign?
3. Has the distribution of types of name signs changed over time?

In order to investigate these questions quantitatively, a large sample of name signs was needed. An online questionnaire was set up and distributed via Deaf groups on social media (mainly Facebook). Anyone could access and answer the questionnaire, and multiple responses from a single individual were allowed since one person may have (had) more than one name sign. The questionnaire consisted of four steps and a total of twelve questions: four concerning the type/subtype/origin/rating of the name sign and eight concerning the participant/name giver and the circumstances of the naming. In the first step, the study and the questionnaire were described. In the second step, the participant was asked to categorize their name sign as belonging to one of five main types in order to specify the sign language from which the sign was taken (SSL or other)<sup>9</sup> and to rate their perception of their own name sign from 1 to 5 (negative to positive). In the third step, the participant was asked for the subtype of the name sign, dependent on the main type chosen earlier (i.e., the specific categories to choose from in the third step was conditioned by the choice made in the second step). Finally, in the fourth and last step, the participant was asked to fill out information about their own and the name giver's identity – i.e., if they identify as Deaf, hard of hearing, hearing, or so-called “Coda” (*Child of Deaf Adult*, referring to a hearing person with a Deaf parent(s)) – in addition to the time and place of naming, and the present age of the name bearer and their age at the time of naming. No personal information that could identify a participant was requested by the questionnaire, leaving the participants anonymous.

---

<sup>8</sup> The term ‘identity group’ is used in this paper to refer to an individual’s membership with regard to the groups Coda, Deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing, i.e., what the individual identifies as (as opposed to a clinical definition of hearing).

<sup>9</sup> The vast majority of signs collected come from SSL (683 vs. 44). In the following, all name signs are considered regardless of origin, since they are all found in the language community.



The main types and subtypes of name signs included in the questionnaire are described in the following.

**Appearance:** Signs denoting the visual appearance of the name bearer. This category contains five subtypes: *hair* (e.g., ‘curl’, ‘bangs’); *physical feature* (e.g., ‘dimple’, ‘blue-eyed’); *clothes* (e.g., ‘striped shirt’, ‘glasses’, ‘ribbon’); *metaphor* (e.g., ‘lighthouse’ to refer to being tall); and *other* (if none of the above applied).

**Person:** Signs denoting the character or doings of the bearer’s person. This contains seven subtypes: *personality* (e.g., ‘laugh’, ‘happy’); *hobby* (e.g., ‘ice-skates’ for liking to skate); *profession* (e.g., ‘carpenter’); *gesture* (a characteristic movement, e.g., scratching one’s chin); *metaphor* (e.g., ‘monkey’ for being good at climbing trees); *sign* (a sign associated with the individual because of frequent use, e.g., often using a sign with the meaning ‘oh really?’ in conversation); and *other* (if none of the above applied).

**Name:** Signs relating to the spoken language community name of the bearer. This category consists of eight subtypes: *fixed* (using one of the fixed name signs, see §1); *whole name*, using a sign corresponding to the exact form of the name (e.g., BJÖRN ‘bear’ for *Björn* – name meaning ‘bear’); *partial name*, using a sign corresponding to the form of a part of the name (e.g., BJÖRK ‘birch’ for *Björkstrand* – literally ‘birch beach’); *(partial) homonym*, a sign for a word that sounds/looks like the name (e.g., KATT ‘cat’ for *Katarina*); *extension*, a sign for a related concept (e.g., BLOMMA ‘flower’ for *Florén*); *initialized*, the first letter of the name using the handshape from the manual alphabet; *fingerspelled*, fingerspelling the name using the manual alphabet; and *other*, if none of the above applied.

**Background:** Signs denoting some aspect of the referent’s background. This consists of three subtypes: *country* (the sign for the native country of the bearer); *city* (the sign for the hometown of the bearer); *inherited* (if the name sign is inherited from a relative).

**Other:** Signs that do not fall into any of the above categories. This category did not contain any subtypes.

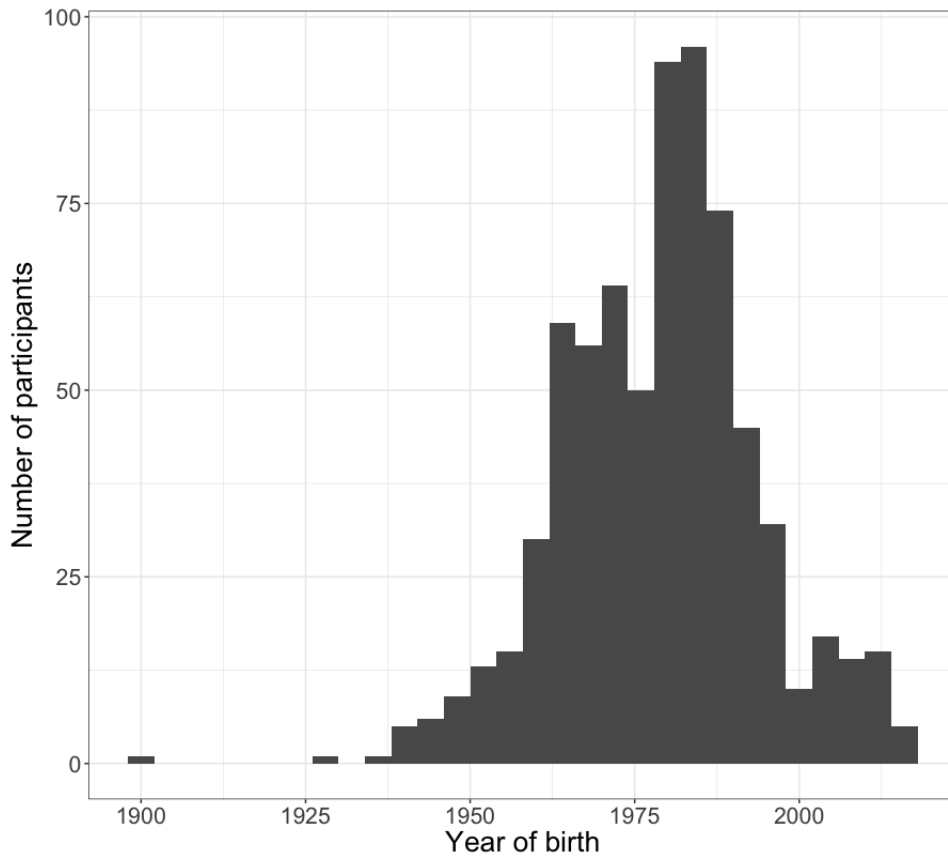
The main types are motivated by the bearer’s being (*Appearance*), doing (*Person*), or history (*Background*), with the type *Name* being motivated simply on the form or meaning of the written name.<sup>10</sup> This is a distinction different from the simple distinction of descriptive vs. arbitrary

---

<sup>10</sup> As noted by an anonymous reviewer, some *Person* name signs are also visually salient (i.e., related to appearance). The distinction made here is based on static vs. dynamic properties.

that has been used in some previous studies (e.g., Supalla 1990), but also more informative by following a more detailed categorization based on previous work on SSL (i.e., Hedberg 1989). Since Hedberg's work had provided a detailed description of the possible name sign types found in SSL, this study aimed to let participants match their name signs to these established categories, rather than document the exact form of the name signs. The reason for this is twofold: first, this avoids the problem of not being able to classify a poorly described name sign motivation into categories; second, it allows for swift and anonymous collection of distributional data. Thus, whereas Hedberg's aim was to document forms and types, this study aims to describe the distribution of Hedberg's types.

The questionnaire was open January 5–28, 2017. After the responses were collected, the data were exported and compiled using a custom Python script, and then analyzed using the statistical programming language R and plotted with the R package ggplot2 (Wickham 2009). In total, 737 name signs were collected, distributed across a range of ages (median birth year: 1980; see Figure 5), and gender and identity groups (Table 1). As can be seen in Figure 5, the majority of the name signs in the data come from participants born in 1960–2000.



**Figure 5.** Distribution of birth years among participants<sup>11</sup>

Table 1 shows that the distribution across genders is not balanced, with the female group being in clear majority across all identity groups (especially skewed for the hearing group). Also, the Deaf and hearing groups are by far the biggest, with the hard of hearing and Coda groups falling behind.

**Table 1.** Distribution of name signs across genders and identity groups

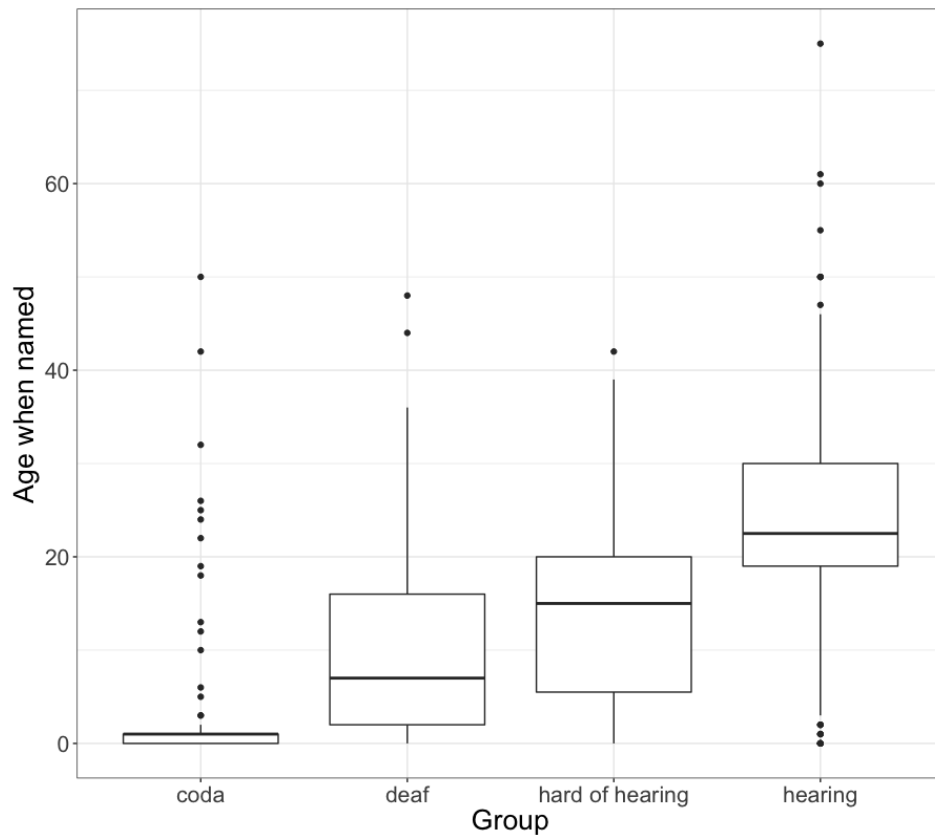
	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Total</b>
Deaf	194	108	3	305 (41%)
Hard of hearing	55	17	3	75 (10%)
Coda	60	25	0	85 (12%)
Hearing	221	48	3	272 (40%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>530 (72%)</b>	<b>198 (27%)</b>	<b>9 (1%)</b>	<b>737</b>

<sup>11</sup> It is possible that the single data point at 1900 as the year of birth is erroneous. This should not, however, affect the data to any significant extent. Some participants explained that they filled out the questionnaire for their children, which is why there are data from names given as late as 2016.

## **4 Results**

### **4.1 When and by whom a name sign is given**

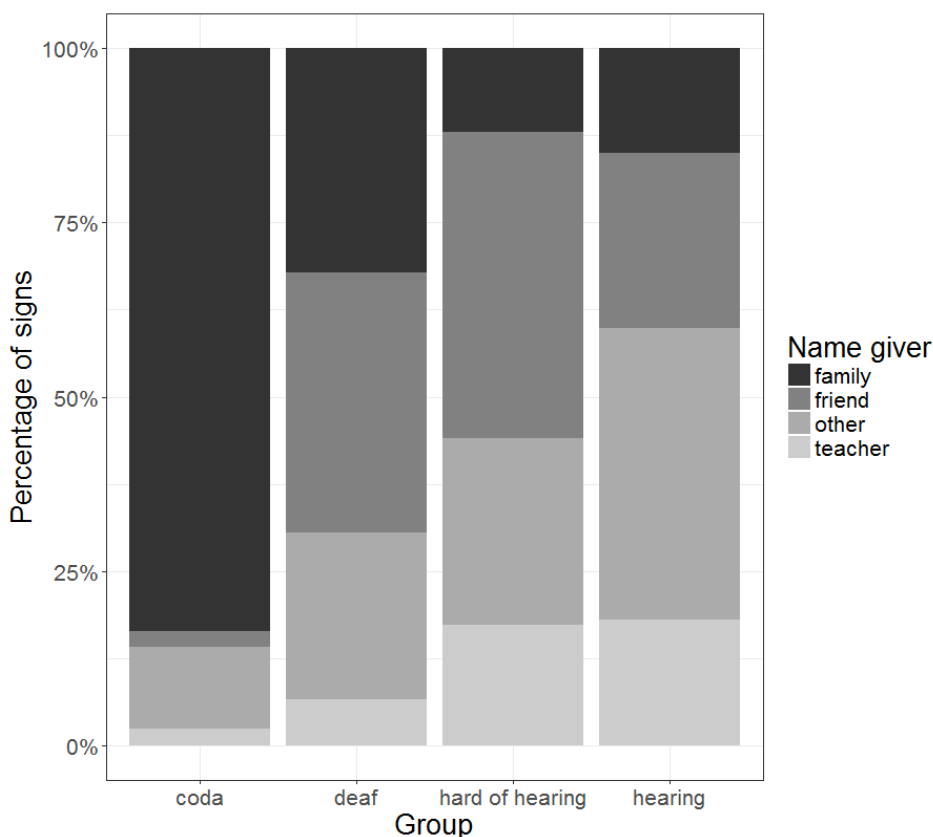
A first thing to look at in the data is when the name signs were given, to see if there are differences across the identity groups. Figure 6 shows the distribution of ages at which a name sign was given, across the four identity groups. As can be seen from this figure, there is a clear but unsurprising pattern for the different groups. Whereas the Coda group generally receive their name signs early (median 1 year old), the Deaf group participants often receive their name signs when they start school (median = 7), and the hard of hearing group towards the end of the school years (median = 15). While some in the Deaf and hard of hearing groups may have Deaf parents themselves, most individuals in these groups have hearing parents (McKee & McKee 2000: 23), which accounts for the later age of naming in these groups – that is, only Coda group individuals are assured to have early contact with the Deaf community. Turning to the hearing group, they are the only group mostly getting their name signs in adulthood (median = 22.5). This is unsurprising, seeing as hearing individuals who are not born into a Deaf/signing family would normally not encounter sign language or the Deaf community until after graduating from high school and, for instance, taking a sign language class.



**Figure 6.** Age when given a name sign across the four identity groups

Looking at the identity of the name giver, rather than the name bearer, we also see some clear patterns across the groups. Figures 7 and 8 show the identity of the name giver across the identity groups of the bearer. First, in Figure 7 we see the distribution of name givers based on their relationship with the name bearer. We here see what we anticipated from Figure 6, namely that the Coda group is mostly named by their family – unsurprising as they are born into a Deaf family – whereas all other groups have a minority of family given name signs. The most common name giver for both the Deaf and hard of hearing groups is a friend, which is a pattern also found among Deaf individuals in, for instance, the British Sign Language (McNamara 2003 cited in Day & Sutton-Spence 2010: 44) and American Sign Language (Mindess 1990: 5) communities. Although the school years constitute the time of naming for the majority of participants in the Deaf and hard of hearing groups, the number of name signs given by teachers is fairly low, especially for the Deaf group, showing that the peer assignment

of names is stronger than the intergenerational assignment of names for the participants of this study.<sup>12</sup>



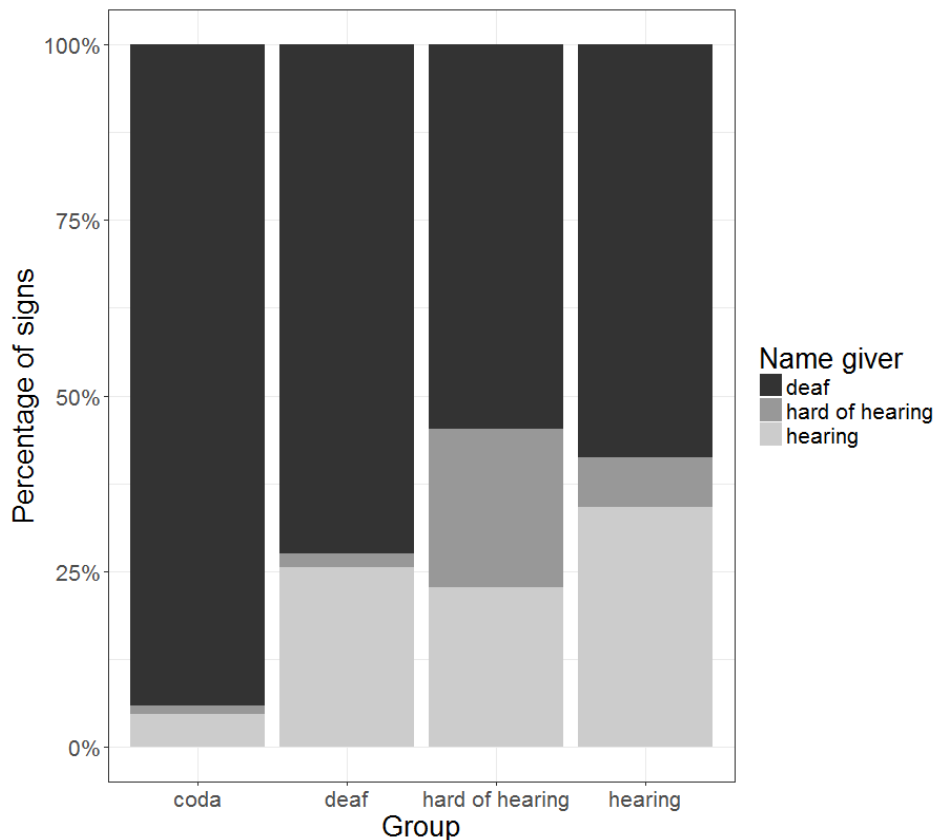
**Figure 7.** Relationship to name giver across identity groups

The quite high proportion of *other* categorized name givers is possibly due to the name bearer not knowing exactly who assigned the name sign. This is especially reasonable considering that the *other* group is the largest among the hearing participants, for which it is likely that the name bearers are not full-fledged members of the community and might therefore have been named in their absence.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, it is possible that there will be noticeable changes in these patterns with the advent of cochlear implants (CI) and the growing number of children born deaf/hard of hearing who do not attend Deaf schools (Holmström & Schönström 2017). By not going to a Deaf school with signing peers, it is possible that name sign assignment will take place under different circumstances. However, due to the limited data for those born since the year 2000, and a lack of detailed metadata about each participant, I leave this issue to future research.

<sup>13</sup> I thank Östen Dahl for raising the issue of known name givers. However, according to Johanna Mesch (personal communication), most Deaf people can identify the exact individual who gave them their name sign.

Turning to Figure 8, we see again that the most common name giver for the Coda group is Deaf, indicating that the parents are the default name givers, although it is also possible that, for instance, these individuals also have Deaf siblings.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, the name giver is most often Deaf across all identity groups of the bearers. For the Deaf bearers, they have received their name sign from a Deaf individual in about three quarters of the cases. For the hearing group, this is a little less common, and for the hard of hearing group, the name giver is Deaf in just over half of the cases. The interesting thing here is that the second most common name giver identity group is the same as the bearer’s identity group for the hearing and hard of hearing groups, suggesting patterns of in-group interaction.



**Figure 8.** Identity of name givers across identity groups

#### 4.2 Distribution of types of name signs

Moving on to the types and subtypes of name signs in the data, we find that all the possible types included in the questionnaire (based on the types in

<sup>14</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for this last point.

Hedberg 1994) are found, but they differ in terms of frequency. Table 2 shows the distribution of name signs in the data, across types and subtypes. As can be seen here, the majority of name signs are either based on the bearer's appearance or person. With almost 16% of the total number, name signs that relate to one's spoken language community name are also fairly common. On the other hand, the signs denoting one's background (geographical affiliation or inherited family sign) are very infrequent. Less than a tenth of the total number of signs could not be categorized into any of the four basic types. Among those *other* classified name signs, participants reported various motivations, such as a specific incident, for instance being named after a sign once used incorrectly by accident, or something the bearer dislikes (as opposed to liking – e.g., hobbies, etc.).<sup>15</sup>

Within the appearance type signs, we see that physical features and hair are the most common subtypes by far. Of the person type signs, the preference is less clear, but favors signs denoting the personality of the bearer, followed by signs depicting a characteristic gesture/movement or a hobby. Among the name-derived signs, most subtypes are based on the initial(s) of the bearer's name. One noteworthy thing here is that the number of fingerspelled name signs is very low ( $n = 4$ ). It is likely that this is to some extent a consequence of the terminology, since *persontecken* 'name sign' (lit. 'person sign') in Swedish is usually a term specifically to regular signs used with reference to a person, in opposition to fingerspelling that person's name. However, just as there are lexical signs that are always fingerspelled, some members of the SSL community (Deaf or not) only have a fingerspelled name sign. Possibly, such fingerspelled names are more common for shorter names as they fit the phonological template of signs better, just as shorter words are preferred as fingerspellings in general (Börstell et al 2016: 167–168), as has also been discussed for American Sign Language (Battison 1978; Supalla 1990: 101).

---

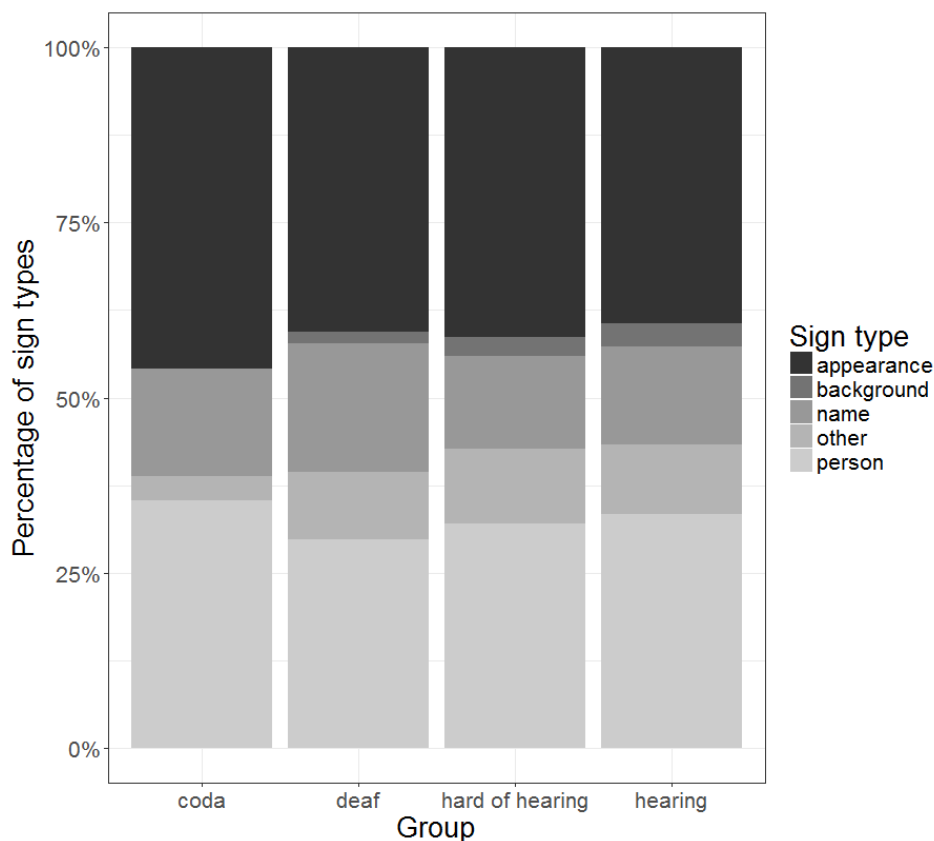
<sup>15</sup> For participants giving *other* as the type, they had the choice of writing the specific motivation. Most participants who answered this question did not provide a description detailed enough for these signs to be re-categorized into any of the existing types or clustered as a new type. Thus, the *other* responses were left without further analysis. This is also true for the subtypes *other*, used if the participant could attribute their name sign to a main type but were unable to match it to any of the listed subtypes – in these cases, participants did not describe their specific subtype further.



**Table 2.** Distribution of types and subtypes of name signs

Type	No. of signs	Subtype	No. of signs
Appearance	301 (40.8%)	hair	114
		physical	117
		clothes	47
		metaphor	3
		other	20
Person	236 (32.0%)	personality	85
		hobby	44
		profession	11
		gesture	43
		sign	9
		metaphor	10
		other	34
Name	117 (15.9%)	fixed	9
		whole name	10
		partial name	18
		homonym	6
		extension	2
		initialized	48
		fingerspelled	4
		other	20
Background	16 (2.1%)	country	8
		city	6
		inherited	2
Other	67 (9.1%)	–	67
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>737 (100%)</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>737</b>

Since we have data on the identity of both name giver and bearer, it is interesting to see whether this correlates with the distribution of name sign types – that is, if the distribution differs based on the identity of name giver or bearer. Figure 9 shows the distribution of the main types of name signs across the identity groups of the bearer. We can see here that the distributions are very similar across the groups, and in fact a chi-squared test – intended to evaluate possible non-random skewedness in distributions across groups – shows no significant difference in the distribution across all groups ( $\chi^2(12) = 11.046$ ,  $p = 0.525$ ) or between the largest and most distinct groups, Deaf vs. hearing ( $\chi^2(4) = 4.038$ ,  $p = 0.4009$ ).



**Figure 9.** The distribution of sign types by identity group

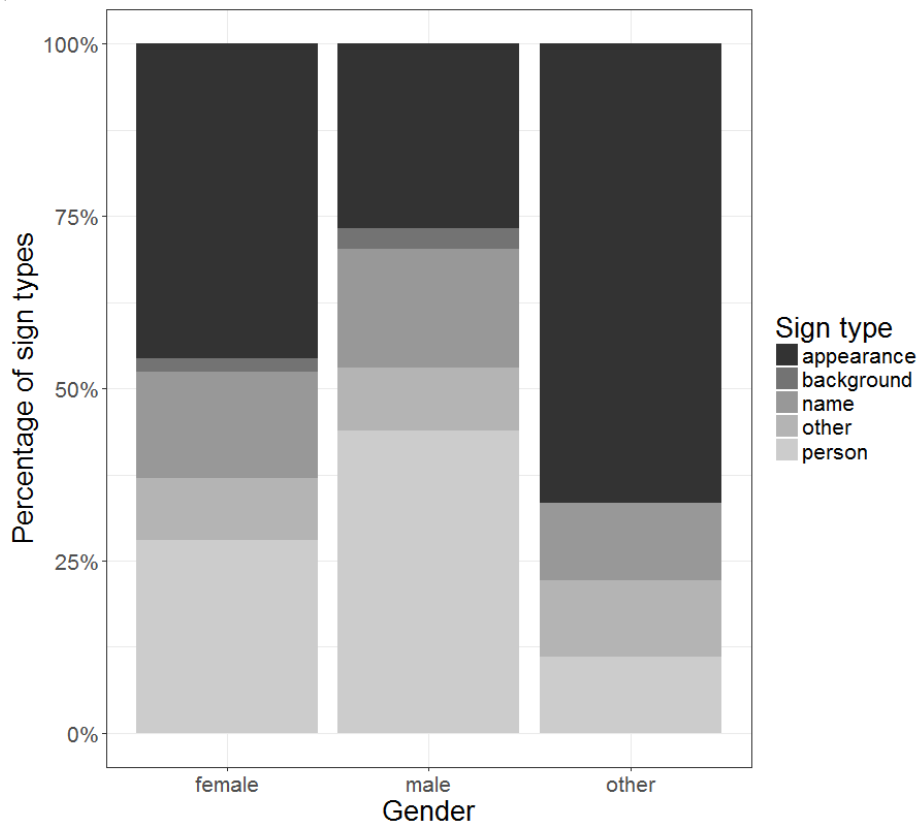
Because there are no differences in the identity of the bearer, the following will not make a distinction between the groups, but rather investigate all name signs as a sample from the same community. However, when looking at the identity group of the name giver, we see a marginally significant difference between name signs given by Deaf vs. not Deaf<sup>16</sup> ( $\chi^2(4) = 11.009$ ,  $p = 0.02647$ ). The main differences in the distribution are that appearance-based signs are more dominant when Deaf name givers give the name, whereas name-related signs are relatively more common with non-Deaf name givers. An interesting thing to speculate about here is, of course, whether the primary language of the name giver (spoken vs. signed) is the reason for name-related signs being more or less common, that is, whether one is more focused on the spoken language community name and its form if that language community is one's primary community.

<sup>16</sup> Because of the low numbers for hard of hearing name givers, these were collapsed with the hearing name givers.

**Table 3.** Distribution of name sign types based on name giver identity

Name giver	Appearance	Background	Name	Other	Person
Deaf	219 (44%)	14 (3%)	69 (14%)	43 (9%)	157 (31%)
Not Deaf	82 (35%)	2 (1%)	48 (20%)	24 (10%)	79 (34%)

Turning to the gender identity of the name bearers, we see some striking differences. Comparing the female and male groups in Figure 10, we see a clear difference in the preference for either appearance or person sign types.<sup>17</sup> Among female bearers, the most common type of sign denotes the appearance (e.g., hair, physical features, clothes), whereas the most common type among males is person-based signs (e.g., behavior, mannerisms, hobbies). This distribution even exhibits a significant difference between genders (female vs. male;  $\chi^2(4) = 25.269$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ).



**Figure 10.** The distribution of sign types by gender

We see a difference in the distribution of signs according to the gender of the name bearer, but this only takes into account the whole sample without

<sup>17</sup> The number of participants identifying as neither female nor male are so few ( $n = 9$ ) that this group cannot be used for statistical testing.

factoring in possible differences over time. As was shown in Figure 1, the sample consists of a diverse set of individuals in terms of their respective age. Thus, we want to see if the dominance of certain name sign types changes over time. In order to do this, we take the time of naming (i.e., the name bearer's birth year + age of naming) to find out if there are diachronic changes in the naming preferences within the language community.<sup>18</sup> The number of name signs per decade is not balanced, with most name signs in the data having been assigned in the decades 1980–2010, as seen in Table 4. This of course means that the confidence about the distribution of types is low for the decades 1950–1970.

**Table 4.** Distribution of name signs assigned per decade and gender

	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010
Female	6	11	37	138	144	93	82
Male	2	2	18	42	58	29	39
Total	8	13	55	180	202	122	121

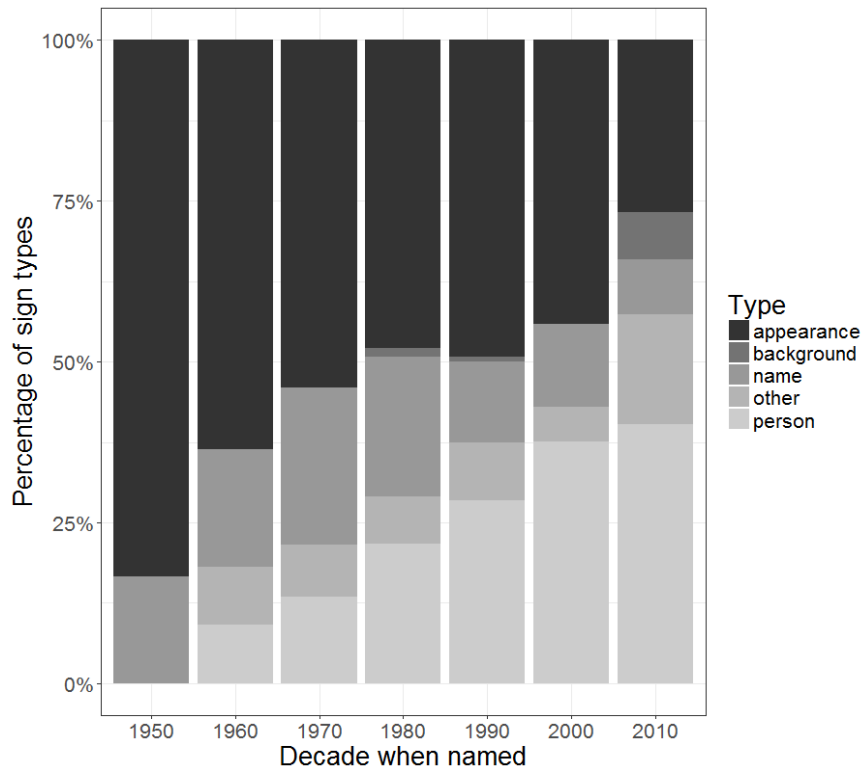
In Figures 11 and 12, we see the distribution of name sign types grouped by the decade of naming (1950–2010) for the female and the male participants, respectively.

In Figure 11, showing the changes in the distribution of name sign types for female bearers over time, we see a very clear pattern of appearance type signs moving from dominant to constituting about a quarter of the sign types today. Parallel to this, the person-based sign types are increasing, moving from marginal to the most common type of sign today.

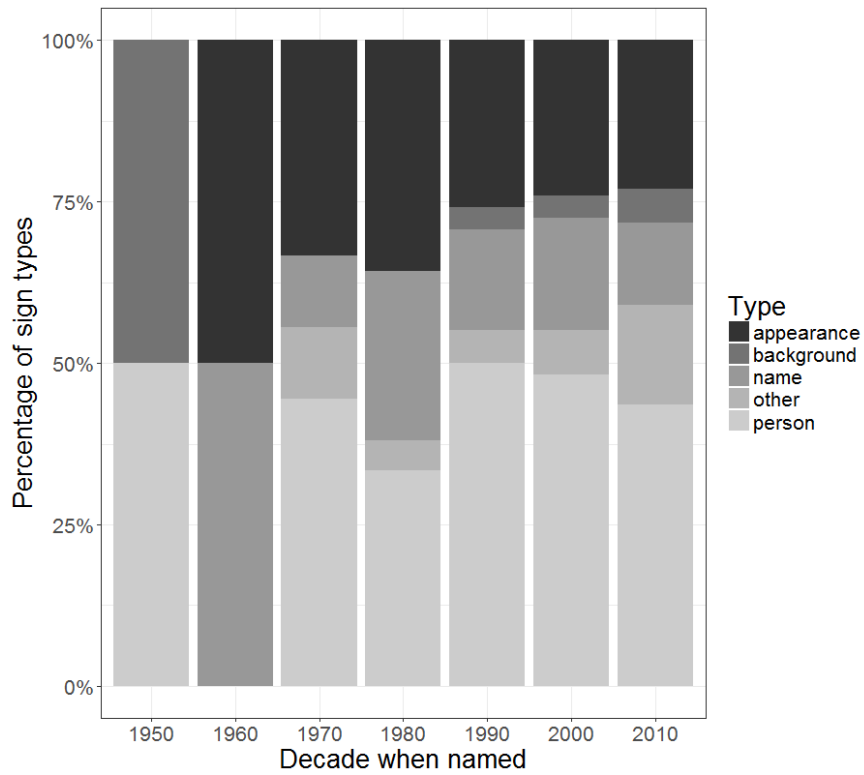
Looking at the same distribution over time for the male participants, we do not find as clear a pattern (see Figure 12). We find that appearance signs are becoming less common over time, though not as distinct as among the females, and also less clearly because of an increase in person-based sign types. However, since there are fewer males than females in the data, a possible pattern may be less visible because of variation in data size for the decades included (cf. Table 4).

---

<sup>18</sup> Out of the 737 name signs in the data, 712 had information about the birth year of the bearer. Thus, 25 signs in the data are excluded from the diachronic investigation concerning the time of naming.



**Figure 11.** Distribution of sign types by decade of naming (female)



**Figure 12.** Distribution of sign types by decade of naming (male)

Overall, looking at possible changes over time relative to previous studies of name signs in the SSL community, we can divide the data into signs being assigned before or after Hedberg's (1989) investigation, that is, we divide the names into those assigned before 1990 ( $n = 262$ ) vs. those assigned in 1990 or later ( $n = 450$ ). Comparing these groups, we see the distribution across name sign types as given in Table 5. Here, we see the general pattern of the appearance-based signs losing their dominance over time and becoming balanced with the person-based signs. There is a significant difference between the distribution of types based on the year of naming (before 1990 vs. from 1990;  $\chi^2(4) = 25.112$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ).

**Table 5.** Distribution of name sign types based on the year of naming (before vs. from 1990)

	<b>Appearance</b>	<b>Background</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Person</b>
Before 1990	123 (47%)	3 (1%)	56 (21%)	19 (7%)	61 (23%)
From 1990	168 (37%)	12 (3%)	57 (13%)	44 (10%)	169 (38%)

Looking at the data, it is visible that hearing participants are overrepresented in the later decades, which could possibly point to a skewing of the results. However, when extracting the distribution of name signs across the types for the Deaf and hearing groups, respectively, we still see that the Deaf group exhibits a significant difference between the types based on year of naming (before 1990 vs. from 1990), using here a Fisher's Exact Test due to the lower token counts for each cell ( $p < 0.01$ ).<sup>19</sup> Table 6 shows the distribution of types for the before vs. after 1990 groupings for the Deaf participants, and Table 7 shows the same for the hearing participants.

**Table 6.** Distribution of name sign types based on the year of naming (before vs. from 1990) – Deaf only

	<b>Appearance</b>	<b>Background</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Person</b>
Before 1990	79 (46%)	2 (1%)	38 (22%)	15 (9%)	36 (21%)
From 1990	42 (34%)	3 (2%)	17 (14%)	10 (8%)	51 (41%)

From Table 7, it is clear that the distribution of names across types is quite similar for the before vs. after 1990 groups among the hearing participants. However, there are very few tokens for the before 1990 group. Thus, again using a Fisher's Exact Test due to the low token counts, we find that there

---

<sup>19</sup> A Fisher's Exact Test also evaluates distributional skewedness, but is especially used for cases in which certain categories display low token counts. In such cases, a chi-squared test may be inaccurate, whereas a Fisher's Exact Test is less sensitive to fewer tokens. Thus, the Fisher's Exact Test is more reliable here.

is no significant difference between the before and after 1990 groups for the hearing participants ( $p = 0.7636$ ). Note that this comparison should be analyzed with caution, due to the low total amount of tokens in the before 1990 group. It is nonetheless noteworthy that it is the Deaf group that shows a change over time (or, specifically before vs. after Hedberg's previous studies) in terms of naming customs, based on these data.

**Table 7.** Distribution of name sign types based on the year of naming (before vs. from 1990) – hearing only

	<b>Appearance</b>	<b>Background</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Person</b>
Before 1990	15 (41%)	0 (0%)	7 (19%)	3 (8%)	12 (32%)
From 1990	85 (38%)	8 (4%)	29 (13%)	24 (11%)	78 (35%)

This basic categorization of naming before vs. after 1990 does not, of course, take into account the age of the bearer at the time of naming. One could speculate that this has an effect, that is, whether or not the name bearer is younger or older at the time of naming could be relevant. However, we see no significant difference between age of naming, using age 7 as the cut-off point, since it corresponds to the distinction of before or after school age (age of naming  $<7$  vs.  $\geq 7$ ;  $\chi^2(4) = 4.9031$ ,  $p = 0.2974$ ).

## 5 Conclusions

This paper set out to investigate the customs and trends of name signs in the Swedish Sign Language (SSL) community. Because this topic had been studied previously (Hedberg 1989; 1994), the purpose was to give an updated description of the name signs in the community, and also look at various aspects that had not been resolved previously. For instance, the previous research on name signs in the SSL community had not taken into account the distribution of signs across different identity groups, the influence of name giver on the types of names assigned, or the possible changes in the preferences for certain name sign types over time.

In this study, the aim was not to document types of name signs found, but rather look at the distribution of name signs according to the types identified in Hedberg's work. This, of course, makes the current study quite different from Hedberg's, in that it allows participants classify their own name signs according to pre-defined categories, rather than identify categories and patterns based on detailed documentation. In general, we have seen that the categories proposed by Hedberg (1989; 1994; 2009) are still relevant today. The types of name signs described by Hedberg are

found in the community (with the exception of the no longer productive number signs), and the general distributional preferences indicated in passing seem to still be relevant. Thus, this study complements Hedberg's work by confirming that the identified types are still found in the community, but adds detailed information about the distribution of the types, and whether the identity of and relationship between the name bearer and giver has an effect on naming. The current study is also diachronic in two respects: first, it generally evaluates changes over time concerning naming in the SSL community; second, it provides a specific second point of reference (to which Hedberg's work constitutes the first point of reference) in collecting name sign data from the community, which in itself is used to evaluate diachronic change.

Furthermore, we see that several aspects of the naming customs are mirrored in previous findings from other sign language communities, in that, for instance, name signs are often assigned by peers rather than family (Mindess 1990; McNamara 2003 cited in Day & Sutton-Spence 2010), and that entering the school years is often associated with receiving a name sign among Deaf children (Yau & He 1989; Day & Sutton-Spence 2010; Esipova 2013; McKee 2016). These naming customs point to differences between identity groups within the community (Deaf, Coda, hard of hearing, and hearing) and that social interaction and connection to the group community affect the circumstances of naming. Although similar results have previously been found in other sign language communities, and have been implied for the SSL community, this paper provides the first quantitatively based description of the specifics concerning naming customs within the SSL community. However, as noted above, possible changes in the community in terms of language and education (e.g., the introduction of cochlear implants, CI) may alter the patterns found in this study, seeing as the data mostly cover the pre-CI community. This would be an issue for future research.

What has also been implied for the SSL community, and also found in several other sign language communities (see McKee 2016), is that descriptive signs are the most common in the SSL community, specifically signs depicting the appearance of the name bearer, for instance hair, physical features, or clothes. One noteworthy finding of this study is that there has been within the SSL community an ongoing change in the preference trends for name sign types over time. The clearest example of this is the increase of person-based signs (personality, behavior, mannerisms) at the expense of the appearance-based signs. This trend is



particularly clear among the Deaf female participants in this study, but overall there is a statistically significant difference in the distribution of name sign types assigned before and after Hedberg's documentation of name signs (concluded in 1989). What the driving force of this change is cannot easily be resolved, but one could theorize that it has to do with social factors in society at large, as well as the interaction between the Deaf and hearing communities. For instance, it is sometimes said that a distinct feature of Deaf culture is a direct and honest way of speaking, which may entail commenting on visually salient physical traits (or changes of such, e.g., gaining weight) in people, and that this sometimes causes clashes in social interaction between Deaf and hearing (cf. Hoza 2007). Perhaps the Deaf community is moving towards naming customs that avoid reference to physical features as a consequence of influence and conforming to general social pressures in society. However, it should be noted that an overwhelming majority of participants, across all identity groups, saw their name sign as very positive (median for all groups being 4 or 5). For hearing individuals, receiving a name sign is often a symbol of being included in the sign language community, at least to some extent (Mindess 1990: 13–14; Paaes 2011).

In this study, we have seen statistics of the naming customs and distribution of name sign types in the SSL community. The findings show that several patterns corroborate the claims of previous studies based on the SSL community and other sign language communities. The changes over time suggest certain trends in the preferences of name sign assignment in the community, and it is thus important that future studies follow up on these results, in order to see how these trends develop in a longer time span, particularly considering current changes in the community.

### **Acknowledgments**

I wish to extend my gratitude towards all the individuals who participated in this study by filling out the online questionnaire. I also want to thank Ingela Holmström, Johanna Mesch, Krister Schönström, and two anonymous reviewers for comments and suggestions on an earlier version of this paper, as well as Natalia Perkova, Bernhard Wälchli, and other participants at the HY–SU text workshop in Saltsjöbaden in March 2017 for general comments on the project and the study. I am also grateful to Ezra Alexander for proofreading the text.

## References

- Battison, Robbin. 1978. *Lexical borrowing in American Sign Language*. Silver Spring, MD: Linstok Press.
- Börstell, Carl & Hörberg, Thomas & Östling, Robert. 2016. Distribution and duration of signs and parts of speech in Swedish Sign Language. *Sign Language & Linguistics* 19(2). 143–196. doi:10.1075/sll.19.2.01bor.
- Day, Linda & Sutton-Spence, Rachel. 2010. British sign name customs. *Sign Language Studies* 11(1). 22–54. doi:10.1353/sls.2010.0005.
- Deaf Studies. 1997. Deaf Studies. Centre for Deaf Studies, University of Bristol. (<http://www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/DeafStudiesTeaching/dhcwww/contents.htm>) (Accessed 2017-02-15.)
- Delaporte, Yves. 1998. Des noms silencieux. Le système anthroponymique des sourds français. [Silent names. The anthroponymic system of the French Deaf]. *L'Homme*. 7–45.
- Dubuisson, Colette & Desrosiers, Jules. 1994. Names in Quebec Sign Language and what they tell us about Quebec Deaf culture. In Ahlgren, Inger & Bergman, Brita & Brennan, Mary (eds.), *Perspectives on Sign Language Usage: Papers from the Fifth International Symposium on Sign Language Research*, vol. 2, 249–260. Durham: The International Sign Linguistics Association.
- Esipova, Maria. 2013. Proiskhozhdeniye i funktsionirovaniye zhestovogo imeni v lingvokul'ture glukhikh Rossii (Происхождение и функционирование жестового имени в лингвокультуре глухих России) [Sign names in the Russian Deaf culture: Origin and functioning]. *Moscow University Young Researchers' Journal* 1. 1–5. (<http://youngresearchersjournal.org/wpcontent/uploads/2013/02/esipova-sign-language.pdf>)
- Hedberg, Tomas. 1989. Persontecken: Deras härkomst, bildningssätt och användning [Name signs: Their origin, formation, and use]. *Forskning om teckenspråk (FoT)* XVI, Department of Linguistics, Stockholm University.
- 1994. Name signs in Swedish Sign Language: Their formation and use. In Erting, Carol J. & Johnson, Robert C. & Smith, Dorothy L. & Snider, Bruce D. (eds.), *The Deaf Way: Perspectives from the International Conference on Deaf Culture*, 416–424. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- 2009. Persontecken i teckenspråket [Name signs in sign language]. *Studia anthropologica Scandinavica* 27. 97–114.
- Holmström, Ingela. February 17, 2017. (Personal communication.)
- Holmström, Ingela & Schönström, Krister. 2017. Resources for deaf and hard-of-hearing students in mainstream schools in Sweden. A survey. *Deafness & Education International* 19(1). 1–11. doi:10.1080/14643154.2017.1292670.
- Hoza, Jack. 2007. *It's not what you sign, it's how you sign it: Politeness in American Sign Language*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Kourbetis, Vassilis & Hoffmeister, Robert J. 2002. Name signs in Greek Sign Language. *American Annals of the Deaf* 147(3). 35–43.

- McKee, Rachel Locker. 2016. Sign language: Name signs. In Gertz, Genie & Boudreault, Patrick (eds.), *The SAGE Deaf Studies Encyclopedia*, 805–808. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. doi:10.4135/9781483346489.n256.
- McKee, Rachel Locker & McKee, David. 2000. Name signs and identity in New Zealand sign language. In Metzger, Melanie (ed.), *Bilingualism and identity in Deaf communities*, 3–40. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- McNamara, Geraldine. 2003. What drives the allocation of name signs in British Sign Language? Centre for Deaf Studies, University of Bristol. (Undergraduate dissertation.)
- Meadow, Kathryn P. 1977. Name signs as identity symbols in the Deaf community. *Sign Language Studies* 16 (Fall). 237–246. doi:10.1353/sls.1977.0015.
- Mesch, Johanna. March 17, 2017. (Personal communication.)
- Mindess, Anna. 1990. What name signs can tell us about Deaf culture. *Sign Language Studies* 6(16). 1–24. doi:10.1353/sls.1990.0009.
- Nonaka, Angela. 2015. Toponyms in Ban Khor Sign Language. *Learning Communities: International Journal of Learning in Social Contexts* 16. 66–91.
- Nonaka, Angela & Mesh, Kate & Keiko Sagara. 2015. Signed names in Japanese Sign Language: Linguistic and cultural analyses. *Sign Language Studies* 16(1). 57–85.
- Nyst, Victoria & Baker, Anne. 2003. The phonology of name signs: A comparison between the Sign Languages of Uganda, Mali, Adamorobe and The Netherlands. In Baker, Anne & van den Bogaerde, Beppie & Crasborn, Onno (eds.), *Cross-linguistic perspectives in sign language research. Selected papers from TISLR 2000*, 71–80. Hamburg: Signum.
- Nyström, Staffan. 2002. Place-names in the Swedish Sign Language of the Deaf. In Boullón Agrelo Ana Isabel (ed.), *Actas do XX Congresso Internacional de Ciências Onomásticas. Santiago de Compostela, 20–25 de setembro de 1999*, 873–876. A Coruña: Biblioteca Filológica Galega. Instituto da Língua Galega.
- Paales, Liina. 2010. On the system of person-denoting signs in Estonian Sign Language: Estonian personal name signs. *Sign Language Studies* 10(3). 317–335. doi:10.1353/sls.0.0048.
- . 2011. Name signs for hearing people. *Folklore* 47. 43–76. doi:10.7592/FEJF2011.47.paales.
- Rainò, Päivi. 2004. *Henkilöviittomien synty ja kehitys suomalaisessa viittomakielyhteisössä* [The emergence and development of personal name signs among sign language users in Finland]. Helsinki: Kuurojen Liitto ry.
- Schembri, Adam & Lucas, Ceil (eds.). 2015. *Sociolinguistics and Deaf communities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Supalla, Samuel J. 1990. The arbitrary name sign system in American Sign Language. *Sign Language Studies* 67. 99–126. doi:10.1353/sls.1990.0006.
- Svenskt teckenspråkslexikon. 2017. Swedish Sign Language Dictionary online. Stockholm: Sign Language Section, Department of Linguistics, Stockholm University. (<http://teckensprakslexikon.su.se>)
- Wickham, Hadley. 2009. *ggplot2: Elegant Graphics for Data Analysis*. Springer-Verlag New York. (<http://ggplot2.org>)

Yau, Shun-chiu & He, Jingxian. 1989. How Deaf children in a Chinese school get their name signs. *Sign Language Studies* 18(65). 305–322. doi:10.1353/sls.1989.0020.

Österberg, Oskar. 1916. *Teckenspråket*. Uppsala: P. Alfr. Persons förlag.

Contact information:

Carl Börstell  
Department of Linguistics  
Stockholm University  
106 91 Stockholm  
Sweden  
e-mail: calle(at)ling(dot)su(dot)se