

## **An Analysis of Sign Language Features Used by Eliza in *the Shape of Water* Film**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to understand the features of sign language used by Eliza in *The Shape of Water* film. The researchers analyzed the use of sign language by a mute adult woman named Eliza based on the film *The Shape of Water*. This study focuses on the features of sign language used by Eliza to communicate with people in the film. The approach used in this research is the qualitative approach and content analysis design. In conducting this research, the main theory is Sign Language features by Gallaudet. This study found several sign language features used by Eliza to help her communicate, such as hand shape, palm orientation, placement, non-manual features, and hand movement. This research will make people get more understand sign language and how to use sign language, moreover this research could bring awareness to communicating with deaf and mute people.

**Keywords:** Sign language, features of sign language, *The Shape of Water* film.

### **Abstrak**

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami ciri-ciri bahasa isyarat yang digunakan Eliza dalam film *The Shape of Water*. Para peneliti menganalisis penggunaan bahasa isyarat yang digunakan oleh seorang wanita dewasa bisu bernama Elisa berdasarkan film *The Shape of Water*. Penelitian ini berfokus pada ciri-ciri bahasa isyarat yang digunakan Eliza untuk berkomunikasi dengan orang-orang dalam film tersebut. Pendekatan yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah pendekatan kualitatif dan desain analisis isi. Dalam melakukan penelitian ini, teori utamanya adalah fitur Bahasa Isyarat oleh Gallaudet. Penelitian ini menemukan beberapa fitur bahasa isyarat yang digunakan oleh Eliza untuk membantunya berkomunikasi, seperti bentuk tangan, orientasi telapak tangan, penempatan, fitur non-manual, dan gerakan tangan. Penelitian ini akan membuat masyarakat lebih memahami bahasa isyarat dan bagaimana menggunakan bahasa isyarat, selain itu penelitian ini dapat membawa kesadaran untuk berkomunikasi dengan orang tuli dan bisu..

**Kata Kunci:** bahasa isyarat, fitur bahasa isyarat, film *The Shape of Water*.

## **A. INTRODUCTION**

Language is a communication tool used by everyone in their daily life as a means to convey information and arguments to others, language also is one of the media to express what human beings feel, to communicate and interact with other people. According to Lyons

(1981:4) language are the principal communication systems used by particular groups of human beings within the specific society of which they are members.

As a means of communication tools, language have an important role in social life. Without language, people will be difficult to convey ideas to each other's both orally and in writing. Therefore, it is not surprising that there is a relation between language and communication. In delivery of language there are two types of communication, first is verbal and second is nonverbal.

Verbal communication is a form of communication that can be spoken and written in terms of conveying thoughts, ideas, emotions, data, information inn spoken and written language. Nonverbal communication is all gesture or body language that is conveyed in a uniform manner or with language codes, these types of communication also called sign language. Sign language is part of nonverbal language that deaf or mute persons exclusively count on to connect with their social environment.

Sign language is a language that employs signs made with the hands and other movements, including facial expressions and postures of the body, used primarily by people who are deaf or mute. There are many different sign languages depends on countries where is the languages is used, one of the types of sign language is American sign language (ASL). Sign language not only found in people directly in real life, it is also can be found in film. This research will investigate the features of sign language in *The Shape of Water* film.

Many famous films talked about sign language that the researcher ever watched, but the researcher chooses *The Shape of Water* film as the resource of data because this film has not been touched by other researchers to analyze the sign language and the main character of this film uses sign language at the beginning of the film starts. There are some previous studies that motivated the researcher to analyze sign language in the film, those are Diana (2014) as an undergraduate student of State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta that focus on patient delegation by Angel in *Ayah, Mengapa Aku Berbeda?* Movie. She analyzed the scene that has the patient message by Angle. She also used semiotic with two steps of significance by Ronald Barthes to find "penanda" dan "petanda" and "denotation" and "connotation" in the patient form that is described by Angel that reflected the individual patient to fight for her life.

Based on this background explanation, the researcher chooses to analysis of sign language in this study through the features of American sign language used by Eliza in *The Shape of Water* Film whereas the aims are to describe and interpret the sign language contained in this film itself.

## **B. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **1. Sign Language**

Sign language is a special medium to meet certain needs related to psychology, where the form of the language is expressed with the hands, arms, and face and understood through the eyes. According to Mayberry and Squires (2006:1), sign language is expressed with the hands, arms, and face and is understood through the eyes. Sign language has evolved within communities of individuals who are deaf, and the children of these communities acquire sign as a first language. Like all languages, sign languages also have linguistic rules for how words, sentences, and discourse are structured.

All sign language has a lexicon, grammatical and derivational morphology, phonology, syntax, and semantics. There are so many types of sign language depending on the origin of the country, one of the sign language types is American Sign Language (ASL).

The origin of American Sign Language started in 1814 with Dr. Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet. Gallaudet was a Hartford, Connecticut. It started when Gallaudet saw his neighbor's daughter Mason Fitch Cogswell named Alice who was a nine-year-old girl who had inability to speak and hear, and he wanted to teach her how to communicate. Gallaudet had some success teaching when teaching Alice reading and spelling, but he had little experience with the most effective methods of deaf education.

## 2. The Features of American Sign Language

There are some features, especially for components of American sign language. The features of American sign language founded in 1960 by Mr. William Stokoe, he was an American Linguist and a long-time professor at Gallaudet University, the first school that focuses on sign language studies for people who have disability in hearing or speaking or we known as deaf and mute people.

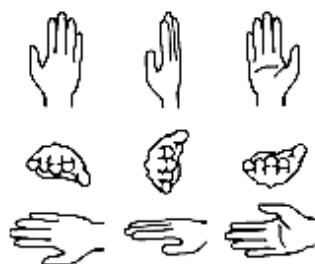
1. Hand Shape is referring to the distinctive configuration of that the hands take as they are used to form words, (Stokoe 1960)



*Figure 1. Handshape, William Stokoe "A Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles" (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet College Press, 1960)*

2. Palm Orientation

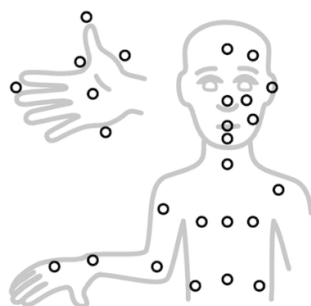
This refers to the direction in which the hand is turned to produce a sign. Palm direction which may include palm up, palm down, palm right, palm left, palm outward (away from you), palm inward (palm facing you), (Stokoe 1960)



*Figure 2. Palm Orientation, William Stokoe "A Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles" (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet College Press, 1960)*

### 3. Location

This refers to the physical parameters or bodily location where the sign is produced. The general physical parameters (signing space) for sign language production are approximately four inches above the head, elbow room as with hands on waist, and about four inches below the belly button or belt buckle, (Stokoe 1960)



*Figure 3. Location, William Stokoe "A Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles" (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet College Press, 1960)*

### 4. Non-manual features

These features are used to produce the action with part of the body with hands such as eyes, mouth, cheeks, face, and head, (Stokoe 1960)

### 5. Movement

Movement in American sign language is how your hand move upward, downward, backward, forward or diagonally, wave, zigzag, etc, (Stokoe 1960)



*Figure 4. Movement, William Stokoe "A Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles" (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet College Press, 1960)*

## 3. Film

According to Pickering and Hopper (1962: 24), character applies to any individual in the movie. For the purpose of analysis, a character in fiction is customarily described by their relationship to the plot, by the degree of development they are given by the author, and by whether they undergo significant character change.

From the explanation, character is an important element in the movie because character can make a movie come alive and make the audience connect with the story being told, character

can also change depending on the plot or the course of the story. Therefore, the character is one of the elements most often studied by researchers.

## **C. METHOD**

### **1. Research Design**

The researchers used a qualitative content analysis design. Qualitative content analysis is one of the several qualitative methods currently available for analyzing data and interpreting its meaning (Schreier, 2012). As Schreier said, the researchers focused on organizing information by describing and interpreting the data. This study aimed to observe what features of sign language were used by Eliza based on the movie. Then, qualitative content analysis design was the right research technique because the researchers needed to describe and interpret the process of Eliza in acquiring and exploring the language from *The Shape of Water* Film.

### **2. Data and Data Sources**

The data are presented in script and scenes of the sign language. Meanwhile, the data source is a film entitled *The Shape of Water* Film by Guillermo del Toro, published in 2018.

### **3. Data Collection**

As a qualitative research, the researchers collected the data with several steps. Start from watches carefully the film. Second, the researchers enter to process of observing to collect and write down the data in the movie that revealed features sign of language. Third, identify the types of features of sign language that are used by Eliza. And the last, analyze the features of sign language that are used by Eliza to communicate with other characters in the movie.

### **4. Data Analysis**

The processes of data analysis are presented in the following process. First, identify the selected data. After all the data were selected from the film, the researchers started to identify the features of sign language that were used by Eliza to express the meaning that she wanted to tell such as Hand shape, movement, location, palm orientation, and non-manual features. Second, determine coding categories. In this step, the researchers selected the data that had already been identified and reduced into some categories of sign language that were used by Eliza and also the meaning of sign language itself. The classification was in the form of a paragraph which consist of the feature of sign language and data of screen capture. And also the dialogue of conservation and scene of the film. Third, code the content. After the data has been collected and arranged well. Then, the process of Eliza using sign language will be analyzed. Before analyzing the researchers put some code which are the minutes in the film scene and also the types of sign language features that will be analyzed after that. Fourth, check validity and reliability. This step aims to infer data to validate the data. Then, the inferences of the data were related to the data which had been collected. Thus, the conclusion was valid and detailed explanation. Last, analyze and present results. These steps analyze the data by using a manual of sign language features to classify the data based on the features in sign language and describe how the data is classified as one of the features in sign language. The result is presented in narrative form which consists of describing how the data is classified in sign language features, without adding to much definition from other material.

## D. Results and Discussion

This chapter explains the findings data of the research and the discussion concerning the result of analysis. It deals with the features of American sign language that are used by Eliza in *The Shape of Water* film.

### 1. Result

#### a. Hand Shape

Hand Shape refers to the distinctive configuration that the hands take as they are used to form words, (Stokoe 1960).



Scene (1.15:40-1.16:00)

Mr Strickland : What am I doing, interviewing the fucking help? The shit cleaners, the piss wipers. You two go ahead, leaves.

Eliza : do the handshape (FUCK YOU).

This scene is located in Mr. Strickland office, Eliza and Zelda are getting interviewed because the amphibian man is missing from the laboratory, and Mr. Strickland does the investigation by asking several people including the cleaners who worked in night shift. When Mr. Strickland says something that is really rude to Eliza and Zelda, Eliza takes revenge by swearing at Mr. Strickland by using handshape since Mr. Strickland does not know anything about sign language. The implementation of hand shape in this conversation scene is when Eliza raises her hand to spell the taboo words “FUCK YOU” using her fingers. Eliza also uses her right hand to say the word because her right hand is the dominant hand.

#### b. Palm Orientation

This refers to the direction in which the hand is turned to produce a sign. Palm direction which may include palm up, palm down, palm right, palm left, palm outward (away from you), palm inward (palm facing you), (Stokoe ,1960)



Scene (27.51-27.52)

Zelda : I answer mostly on account of she can't talk.

Mr. Strickland : She can't? she deaf?

Eliza : Sign Language (Mute,sir)

—This scene is in Mr. Strickland office, this scene shows the first time Mr. Strickland talked with Elisa and Zelda and this is also the first time that Mr. Strickland knows that Elisa is mute. In this scene Elisa shows sign language using palm orientation to say that she is “Mute” she closes her hand and puts her palm to her mouth to identify that she is “Mute” and she also uses her right hand to say the word, and Zelda became her translator because Mr. Strickland do not understand sign language. The use of palm orientation does not only happen in this scene, the explanation shown below



Scene (1.18.26-1.18.31)

Elisa : Using Sign language (palm orientation)

Dr. Hoffstelter : What did she say?

Zelda : She said you're a good man Dr. Hoffstelter. (Translate what Elisa said)

This scene is located in a woman's locker room when Elisa and Zelda rush to come back home, Dr. Hoffstetler shows up from behind the door and scares both of them, Dr. Hoffstetler gives salt to Elisa for the Amphibian man. In picture number 1 Elisa points Dr, Hoffstetler to show that the word is for Dr. Hoffstetler, this picture shows that her palm is away from the utterance that makes a statement the word is for Dr. Hoffstetler. In picture number 2 and 3 Elisa move her palm close to her chin and move away from her chin with a hand full open to say “Good” word to Dr. Hoffstetler. In picture 4 and 5 Elisa move her hand from her forehead and down to her chest, this move is for “Man” a word that also refers to Dr. Hoffstetler, and Zelda translated all this move that become “You're a good man Dr. Hoffstetler”.

### c. Location

This refers to the physical parameters or bodily location where the sign is produced. (Stokoe, 1960)



Scene (07.05-07.09)

Cinema Owner : Elisa, next time you come to bring the rent, I want you to stay and see the Bible movie, huh. I have two free tickets here; you bring your neighbor Giles. He's a good boy. Elisa: Answer with sign language (Thank You).

The scene is outside Elisa's apartment, there is a dialogue between Elisa and apartment owner. He asks Elisa to watch in his movie theater and gives two tickets to Elisa and her friend Giles who lives on the same floor as Elisa. This scene shows Elisa using location features to say "Thank You" for the tickets in this picture Elisa puts her right hand to her chin and moves her right hand forward from her chin to say "Thank you".

The location when Elisa puts her hand to say some words is important because if she puts her hand in another location it can be another meaning of the word. The use of the location feature does not only happen in this scene, the explanation is shown below.



Scene (27.54-27.57)

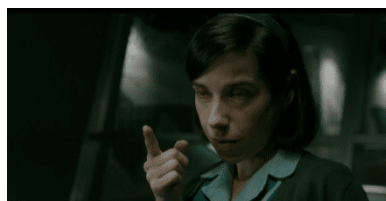
Elisa : Answer with sign language.

Zelda : She said, she can hear you (Translating Elisa sign)

This scene is in Mr. Strickland's office, Elisa and Zelda are calling because Elisa found his finger when an accident happened in the laboratory when the Amphibian men attacked Mr. Strickland which made his finger get cut off. In picture number one, Elisa's right-hand location is in her chest and she points herself to indicate that the word refers to herself, in picture number she moves her right hand located in her ears and points he ears to indicate that she can hear the word from other, and in picture number three she located her right hand away from his body and pointing Mr. Strickland to indicate that she can hear him.

#### d. Non-Manual Features

These features are used to produce the action with part of the body with hands such as eyes, mouth, cheeks, face, head, shoulders, and torso. Or we can say as the expression that came when the utterance said some word in sign language. (Stokoe,1960)



Scene (1.15.46-1.16.00)

Mr Strickland : What am I doing, interviewing the fucking help?. The shit cleaners, the piss wipers. You two go ahead, leaves.

Eliza : do the handshape (FUCK YOU).

This scene is in Mr. Strickland office, the scene is about Elisa and Zelda doing an interrogation about the missing Amphibian man, and when the interrogation finished Mr. Strickland who got pissed because he did not get any information from both of them, he said



the word “The shit cleaners and the piss wipers” an insulting word to both of them, because this word is humiliated their job, and not only because of these words Elisa got angry with Mr. Strickland, but she also got angry because he torture Amphibian man and make him hurt.

As a mute person, Elisa uses a lot of non-manual features to communicate with other people in the film, and the using of non-manual features does not only happen in this scene, it also happens in the scene below.



Amphibian Man : do sign language (you and me, together)

Elisa : do sign language (No, without me)

This scene is located on dockside where the Elisa will release the Amphibian men, this is a very emotional scene because the Amphibian man is asking Elisa to stay together with him, but it is possible for Elisa to live with him because he is a different creature. Elisa is very emotional; she is very sad to know the fact that they will be separated. This picture explains how sad Elisa is after knowing that this is the last time, she can be together with the Amphibian man because she wants to release him or he will become the science project and get killed by the American scientist.

## **e. Movement**

Movement in American sign language is how your hand moves upward, downward, backward, forward or diagonally, wave, zigzag, etc. (Stokoe, 1960)



**Scene (06.05-06.06)**

Giles : it's Bojangles, the stair dance. Oh, that's so hard, Cagney did it. Different but beautiful.

Elisa : do sign language (it's beautiful)

This scene is located in Giles apartment room, it is when she's going to work, and she comes to his room to bring some food for Giles, this scene shows Elisa watching a television that shows some men dancing on stairs. Elisa uses movement features to say the word “It's beautiful”. first, she covers her face with her right hand makes a round movement in her face,

and then close her hand as we can see in picture number two, the rotating movement in her face is the interpretation of beauty.



Scene (25.47-25.52)

This scene is when Elisa first time get interact with the amphibian man, she encourages herself to meet with the amphibian man, first because she was curious about the creature, and second is because she felt something different when they meet each other. This scene shows Elisa told the amphibian men about egg that she brings, she also uses a movement feature to said “Egg” word. In picture number one she makes an “H” word with two hands and she cross the two hands, and in picture number two and three she moves her hand down repeatedly to make an egg word..

## 2. Discussion

People who are deaf or mute have a special way of communicating with other people. They use sign language features to communicate with other people. In this case, the researchers found Elisa a mute person who uses American sign language to communicate with the normal people around her environment. In that case, the researchers also consider conducting the research on the features is American sign language that Elisa uses in *The Shape of Water* film.

There are some differences between this research and other research. The researchers conducted to find the features of American sign language that are used by Elisa in the film, the features of American sign language that were founded in this movie are Hand Shape, Palm Orientation, Location, Non-Manual features, and Movement. This research also shows a picture of a scene that shows Elisa using one of the sign language features. Not only the picture presented in this research but also the description of the word and features that are portrayed in the picture.

In previous research which was already done with Diana she analyzed in *Ayah Mengapa Aku Berbeda* film, she analyzed the scene with semiotic theory to find the patient message by Angel. She uses semiotics by Ronald Bathers to find “denotation” and “connotation” in the patient from that described by Angel that reflected the individual patient to fight for her life. She found seven types of patients which are described by Angel such as patients to do religious things, patients to encounter words (mockery), patients to get requirements (encounter ordeal and disaster), patients to receive the rule of Allah, patients to wait the promise of Allah, patient from carnal lust and patient in the human relation. Besides the differences in the type of movie, this research is also different in types of sign language uses which are American sign language.

In this research, the researchers only focus on analyzing the features of sign language used by Elisa in *The Shape of Water* film, an American movie in which the main character who are deaf woman uses ASL (American sign language) to communicate with other characters in the movie. This research aims to find all five types of American sign language, and after doing

the research and analyzed the data the researchers found all five types of American sign language. Those types of sign language are hand shape, palm orientation, movement, location, and non-manual features, these five types are found in every scene when Elisa interacts with other characters. The dominant feature that researchers found in this film is hand shape, because Elisa wanted to produce some words she did the hand shape first, and then she put a movement or location to indicate what word she wanted to say.

After showing that, the researchers aim that this research can contribute to the linguistic students to explore their knowledge about sign language features and how to use the features to communicate with other people. The researchers expect this research can make people more aware of sign language and also of people who use sign language, so more people can interact with deaf or mute people in daily life.

The researchers expect this research not only to share and give information about this study to the readers who find the same case as Elisa but also gives the important thing to the people who have family or friend that have different ability that make them hard to speak or hear, to learn their language so those people not feel lonely and can be happier to live. And for us who are capable of speaking and hearing clearly can learn a new language that will make our knowledge more growth.

### **E. Conclusion**

In this research analysis, the researchers found some features of sign language used by Elisa in the film. The first is the hand shape that is found in several scenes, the researchers found the uses of handshapes by Elisa when she said a taboo word for Mr. Strickland and also when Elisa is getting interrogation by Mr. Strickland, she is spotted using handshapes to say the word. The second is palm orientation which is used by Elisa to indicate that she cannot use vocal language because she is mute, she said this in Mr. Strickland's office and she is also spotted using palm orientation when she interacts with Dr. Hoffstetler. The third is location, location is almost the same as palm orientation because the meaning of some words depends on where the utterance places the hand to say the word, but in this location, the point is more commonly used than palm orientation because it is not depending where the palm of the hand is located in utterance body parts, the example of this features is when Elisa said: "Thank you". The fourth is non-manual features which can be seen as facial expression, people who uses sign language cannot control their voice intonation to indicate that their happy or angry. So, they used a lot of facial expressions to express her feelings when she said some words in sign language. The fifth is movement, one of the most important features in sign language, cause movement is what makes sign language have meanings, this feature can be found when Elisa says "beautiful", and "Egg" in the film.

The researchers not only found the features of sign language in this research but also can categorize that sign language is part of non-verbal language to use as a communication tool. Because in non-verbal communication the utterance uses part of their body to said speak with other people. This body part includes hands, fingers, and facial expression.

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