

# A HEARER'S INSIGHT INTO DEAF SIGN LANGUAGE FOLKLORE

*Liina Paales*

## **Abstract**

The article discusses Estonian deaf lore, which comprises all folklore genres including specific language creation or sign lore characteristic of the deaf. Estonian sign language lore contains material of local as well as of international origin. The latter group includes several humorous tales that have spread mostly through the cultural contacts of the younger generation of the deaf. Hearers' lore has also exerted its influence on deaf lore. Local deaf lore includes memories of school years and family lore of members of the Estonian deaf community, sign lore based on Estonian sign language, etc. The main features of Estonian deaf lore are (i) the specific communicative form, i.e. sign language performance; (ii) the minority group of lore transmitters, i.e. the Estonian deaf community; (iii) group-centred interpretation of hearing loss.

**Keywords:** deaf lore, Estonian deaf community, Estonian deaf signs, Porkuni School for Deaf

By now, when the discourse on the origin of human speech has led to the gesture theory of language origin and the ethnic deaf<sup>1</sup> sign languages have been a major linguistic research object for the past forty years, the issue of deafness has also entered the focus of other disciplines. In addition to studying sign languages, more attention has been paid to other cultural idiosyncrasies of the deaf, such as their visually perceived folklore mediated through gestures. A closer study of group lore reveals how people conceptualise and understand the world around them, how they identify themselves, and affiliate with one group or another.

In a retrospective look to my research so far I will introduce my findings on the Estonian Sign Language folklore. I will briefly touch upon the attitudes of different nations to hearing and speech impairment and related folklore. I will also take a brief look at the role of music, singing and literature in the context of sign language.

The example texts that have been included here and in my previous articles are borrowed from the material<sup>2</sup> recorded during 1995–2000. I collected deaflore with questionnaires and through observa-

tion in different situations: at school, at club events, at family events and festivities, in summer camps, etc. The interviews were conducted in the Estonian Sign Language. Videos recorded at the events of the Estonian deaf community were also at my disposal. As materials do not abound, it is impossible to draw any valid conclusions on the regional differences or changes in time in the Estonian Sign Language lore.

Like other scholars who study deaflore I have to concede that written sign language texts have lost their visual attraction and linguistic idiosyncrasies – their mimic, pantomimic and kinaesthetic aspect. I have included figures, drawn by deaf illustrator Jüri Laumets, in order to facilitate the understanding of typical sign language examples. Single signs or phrases have been transcribed in upper case letters, according to the established international system (e.g. TREE).<sup>3</sup>

## **GENERAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS DEAFNESS AND SPEECH IMPAIRMENT**

In different societies the social status of people with hearing impairment depends on various factors – the dominant religion, mores, generally accepted social norms, etc. The topic discussed below – namely, how hearers perceive themselves as hearers and how they perceive the deaf – does not belong to deaflore, but it is folklore about the deaf, reflecting the perceptions of the hearers' community, and deserving further detailed and comparative study.

It has been said that the ancient Greek and Romans worshipped everything beautiful and strong. This resulted in the execution of all the lame and weak children before the age of three. Some deaf children might have survived, in case the disability was discovered later. The Roman law distinguished between *the mute* and *the deaf*, i.e. the profound congenital mute deaf and the late deaf (those who developed hearing loss after speech acquisition), respectively, – the latter were given all the rights stipulated in law (Günther 1993: 167). The Greek historian Herodotus noted that Croesus, the last king of Lydia 560–547 BC, had two sons – one hearer and one deaf. Reportedly he would not recognise his deaf son (see Carver 1995).

In Egypt, however, a deaf or a person with impaired hearing may have been given important positions. Egyptian priests took young deaf men under their protection and, using a secret method, taught them to read and write. The deaf were good at keeping secrets. The attitude of the Egyptians was based on ancient legends about a divine deaf messenger (see Kotsar & Kotsar 1997, I: 7).

In Judaist society the deaf were attributed a lower social status than the hearers; they were not allowed to have any possessions (further on the topic see Abrams 1999). The attitude of the Israelites was guided by the Law of Moses: *Thou shalt not curse the deaf, nor put a stumblingblock before the blind, but shalt fear thy God: I am the Lord* (3. Mo 19:14).<sup>4</sup> The deaf who had harmed a fellow-man or his wealth was not punished. A rhetorical question from the Old Testament comes to mind: *And the Lord said unto him, Who hath made man's mouth? Or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? Have not I the Lord?* (2. Mo 4:11). In some passages the spiritual condition of a person in great trouble is compared to the deaf or the dumb (Ps 38:14); deafness is perceived as insensitivity to God (Is 6: 10). More recent prophetic texts express the hope that the surrounding environment and the political situation would change, and then the lameness, blindness and deafness would be healed (Is 29: 17–24; 35: 1–6). Deafness is something that should not exist. Analogous thoughts can be found in the New Testament (Mt 11: 5–6). In the story of healing the dead “*with the impediment in speech*” (Mk 7: 31–37) Jesus acts as a miracle worker, like in analogous stories. Only when the healing is done, people say *He hath done all things well: he maketh both the deaf to hear, and the dumb to speak!* (Mk 7: 37, see also Mk 9:25). And the general aim was to eliminate deafness (further on the topic see Gewalt 1991: 19).

Lois Bragg, professor of English at the Gallaudet University (an international university for the deaf and the hard of hearing) in the United States, has studied the attitudes towards deafness and speech impairment in Iceland, Ireland and England in the Early Middle Ages (8th–12th century). Bragg claims that the Pagans perceived the deaf and mute quite differently from the Christians, who associated disabilities with the Devil, the miraculous healings with Jesus and the disabled with the poor and helpless (Bragg 1994: 27–28).

The Pagans, on the other hand, believed that the disabled were under the protection of gods – or that they were divine. According to L. Bragg, in southern Europe the idea is personified by the *blind* wiseman or the divinely inspired poet, while the North-European mythology tell us of *deaf* poets, gods and mythological creatures. According to the Pagan philosophy, deviations from normality, including deafness, were not viewed as an obstacle to normal life, enabling marriage and economic independence. The Christian idea of charity became widespread only after people began to consider these deviations as disabilities, later also as medical problems.

L. Bragg mentions some deaf and mute characters of the Irish legends (e.g. Moen Labraid<sup>5</sup> and Amairgen<sup>6</sup>) and also the Norse god Heimdal,<sup>7</sup> who exchanged his hearing ability or ear for wisdom and the ability to hear things that can not be heard. The collection of medieval Welsh tales, *Mabinogion*, contains several mythic episodes (e.g. a person turned deaf when entering a miracle land). Icelandic sagas tell of two deaf and mute female creatures – Melkorka and Oddny. L. Bragg also mentions some male creatures with speech impairment, indicating to Anglo-Saxon treatment methods and protective measures against deafness, and refers to the early documented attempts of the so called contemporary speech therapy in the works of the Venerable Bede.<sup>8</sup> These are all interesting and valuable sources in introducing or conceptualising deafness in ancient times.

In Nepal, where people believe in reincarnation, deafness, according to the principles of *karma*, is perceived as a punishment for foul conduct in previous life (N. Sharma, B.D. Kafle). The deaf are referred to by derogatory nicknames like *Latto* or *Latta*, meaning ‘mute’. The name is often used together with a contemptuous grimace referring to the behaviour or speech of an imbecile; sometimes the deaf person is compared to a watchdog who cannot bark. Nepalese also believe that the deaf lied or gossiped too much in their previous lives. If a child is suspected of having a hearing disability, he or she is taken to the local *Jhankri* ‘healer or priest’, who performs a ritual to exorcise the evil spirits. If the ritual fails, the deaf will remain marginal in their family: they will be seen as a burden and given less food, medical care or education.

Alan Pate has published an article on the use of masks of evil in ritual dances of Sri Lanka (Pate 1998). He refers to the study by P. Wirz *Exorcism and the Art of Healing in Ceylon* (1954), which introduces a list of demons and illnesses they cause. Among the 18 described demons, Wirz also mentions **Golu-sanniya**, who is believed to be responsible for causing muteness, and **Biri-sanniya**, who causes deafness.

The attitudes towards the deaf and deafness in Estonia have not been a very popular subject of study, although the issue of collecting material on the subject has entered public focus. In 1986, for instance, the call for collecting surdological material (pertaining to hearing disorders and deafness) was made in an Estonian television program (Kotsar & Kotsar 1992: 78). In addition to hearing disorders, the issue of visual impairment and blindness attracted interest as well.

The material sent in response to the collection competition in 1986 and the following years abounded. In addition to the earlier archival material of the Estonian Folklore Archives at the Estonian Literary Museum, the newly sent material included popular beliefs and explanations on becoming deaf, descriptions of treatment methods for curing deafness, true experience stories about the deaf, stories where a deaf or a blind person turns out to be cleverer than others, anecdotes and absurd expressions about people with hearing disability (e.g. a suitor will outsmart a hard-hearing old maid, or a deaf man mistakes a clap of thunder for a knock on the door). Modern expressions of absurdity in the line of *Tumm helistas kurdile, et pime ostis värviteleviisori* 'A mute called a deaf man, saying that a blind man bought a TV-set'<sup>9</sup> are constructed according to the principle that a person does something that s/he is actually incapable of due to his disability. Other analogous expressions are

*"I see, said the blind man talking to his sister over a disconnected telephone. I see, said the blind man to his deaf daughter as she turned off the television set."* (Taylor 1996.)

Popular treatments for curing deafness are known in Estonia as well. The supplementary material to the questionnaire for collecting surdological folklore refers to the treatment of hearing disability with honey, witches' broom, vodka, fish bile, saliva and other

substances. It was believed that a person may become deaf as a result of curse, conjuration or envy.<sup>10</sup> As to muteness, people believed that the person who destroyed bird nests “*will become deaf in old age*” (Mäger 1994: 13).

Estonian oral lore also includes **proverbs** about deafness: *Raha teeb pimedaks, kurdiks, keeletuks* ‘Money makes you blind, deaf and speechless’; *Ega õpetaja kaht korda kurdi pärast jutlust ei pea* ‘No minister will preach twice to a deaf man’; *Kurti tuntakse kõrvadest* ‘The deaf man is known by his ears’ (Estonian phrases. Proverbs), as well as **phrases and idioms** about deafness and muteness: *kurt kui nunn* ‘deaf like a nun’, *kurt nurgas kui mumm* ‘deaf in the corner like a mum’; *tumm nagu kala* ‘mute like a fish’; *vait/vaikib/seisab nagu tummahammas* ‘silent/standing like a mute’; *vehib/vehkleb nagu tumm leilis* ‘gesticulates like a mute in heat’ (Estonian phrases. Phrases and phraseologisms).

Estonian folklore also contains numerous stories ridiculing those hard of hearing. In the following texts the pun lies in the communicative failure due to the loss of hearing. Similar humorous tales can be found in the folklore of other countries (see Baldwin 1982: 9).

*“Two friends, one deaf-mute and the other blind, went to pinch peas from the neighbour’s garden, and the deaf-mute said to the blind: “You cannot see, but you can hear, and you will tell me, though I cannot hear you, I can see and tell you what is happening. So they started picking pea pods. The blind touched the pods and told the deaf-mute: “What huge pods!” The deaf-mute misinterpreted him and asked, aghast: “Where are the huge dogs?” and ran away, with the blind man behind him, who stumbled and fell and hit his nose.” < Kurttummade sõber [Friends of the Deaf-Mute], Dec. 22, 1935, no. 8 (9), p. 126.*

*“A violin player is in desert. A pack of lions approaches. The man is certain that he will be eaten soon and decides to play his violin for the last time. So he plays, and plays so beautifully that the lions start to cry and roll about in desert sand. Finally they let the man go. The man deceives 12 packs of lions in the similar manner. The next, thirteenth pack is the same than the previous ones: the lions roll about in the sand and cry until an old lion*

*comes from behind and devours the man. Other lions scold him: "What did you do that for? He was playing so beautifully." The old lion raises its hand to its ear: "What?"*[suggesting that the lion was had of hearing] < Tea Põldoja, 1998.

To sum up the previous discussion we may agree that in popular thought deafness and muteness have been closely related, and both have been regarded as a misfortune, a punishment of fate or divine premonition. The lack of aural sense has long been explained from a religious or mystical viewpoint. Popularly, deafness was treated by witches, a home remedy against it was fraenotomy – even though the ears were “tied” and not the tongue. Such popular remedies were, for instance, widely criticised in the late 19th century written press in Estonia.

## **DEAF COMMUNITY AS A LORE GROUP**

In Estonia the term ‘deaf community’ (Est. *kurtide kogukond*; Germ. *Gehörlosengemeinschaft*, Fin. *kuurojen yhetisö*) became more widely used in the 1980s. In previous decades the community used to be defined in general medical terms, such as *hearing invalids* or *people with a hearing disability, hearing disorders, or hearing impairment*. In folklore studies the concept of community is associated with *folk group*, whereas the formation of a particular group is based on various (ethnic, religious, occupational, etc.) criteria. The deaf community shares a specific folklore like other communities (such as soldiers, doctors, schoolchildren, family, etc.), whose lore has been recently studied in Estonia (see Hiiemäe 1996; Jaago 1996).

Deaf communities all over the world have been compared to “islets in the sea of hearers”. At closer look these “islets” or ethnic communities consist of several smaller groups. Hearing impairment is not the sole precondition for their formation. Not all people with hearing disability identify themselves with the deaf community. Other criteria required for the formation of the groups are, for example, national identity, gender and age, on the basis of which smaller groups are established: e.g. deaf schoolchildren, Russian deaf signers, deaf with physical disabilities (see Paales 1999: 65, 69).

The characteristic features of a deaf community group are the following: the use of sign language, community traditions, in-group marriages, the network of public organisations and specific appliances (doorbells and alarm clocks with light signalling, vibrating alarm clocks, and other specific installed alarms). A feature that is characteristic specifically to the deaf group is that many of its members do not acquire sign language from their parents, but from children of their own kind (90% of deaf children were born to hearing families, and are the potential members of a cultural group different than their parents'). According to K. Meadow and J. E. Nash, the acculturation of these children starts only at schools specialising to the deaf (Rutherford 1988: 136).<sup>11</sup>

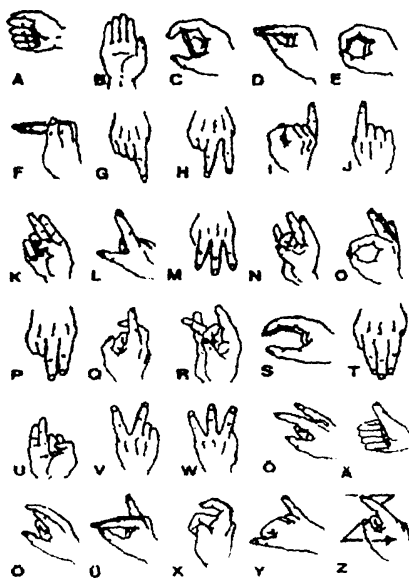
Research into deaf culture in America has reached the conclusion that the sign for DEAF is central in identifying oneself and others. The sign for HEARING IMPAIRED (Est.: VAEGKUULJA/NÜRMIK) is associated with a different story, experience and identity, compared to the sign for DEAF (Est.: KURT) (Humphries 1990: 219). The deaf in Estonia also draw a distinction between the deaf and the hearing impaired, marking the difference with the use of signs POOL/POOLKUULJA ('HALF'/HALF-HEARER'), etc., and KURT ('DEAF'). I have noticed that the younger generation of the deaf tend to accompany the gesture KURT ('DEAF') with articulating the word *kurt* 'deaf', whereas the older generation tends to gesture KURT 'DEAF' and accompany with articulating *kurtumm* 'mute'. The Estonian gesture sign KURT 'DEAF' refers to the "closed" ear and mouth. In other sign languages the sign marking the deaf is analogous.

A hearer who is good at sign language is well accepted by the deaf community. The Estonian deaf express it as follows: VIIPLEB HÄSTI / VABALT 'GESTURES WELL/FLUENTLY'; (ise) PUHAS KUULJA ('(him/herself) A FULL HEARER' or VIIPLEB HÄSTI, SAMA (nagu) KURT 'GESTURES WELL, SAME (than) A DEAF'. Attitudes towards hearers who are fluent in sign language still lead to the acknowledgement that they are not *deaf*, i.e. the ability to use sign language as if includes them into the deaf community, whereas the empirical aspect (living life as a hearer) inevitably excludes them.

Among the Estonian deaf the attitudes towards sign language are fairly ambivalent. The deaf of the older generation tend to accom-



pany their signs with articulations and encourage the younger deaf to “work with their mouth”. This indicates that they perceive gesturing as an inferior means of communication, which is not equal to the spoken language. The Estonian deaf of more advanced age (born during 1930s–1950s) are often unskilled in fingerspelling, i.e. the Estonian dactylogological alphabet (see Fig. 1).<sup>12</sup> They remain loyal to their contemporary sign vocabulary and refuse to acknowledge or adopt new signs. The attitudes of hearers and specialists working with the deaf (who claimed sign language a primitive, inadequate, unaesthetic means of communication) instilled into the community and the deaf neglected their language.<sup>13</sup> The younger deaf (born in the 1960s–1980s) are skilled in fingerspelling and are more prone to develop sign language and introduce new signs. Ambiguous attitudes have emerged also as a result of the hearers' community's long disparaging view towards sign language, and the monocacy of instructional methods oriented on oral speech in the education of the deaf.



*Figure 1. Estonian dactylogological alphabet.*

The application of the linguistic-cultural model in folklore studies forms a good foundation for the study of deaflore. This has brought on several shifts in narrative research and folkloric processes. First, the concept of *text* has expanded for a researcher, being no longer limited to aural words, and has become to comprise also videorecordings of sign language text. Second, the external interest will instil consciousness of their tradition to the members of in-group, who will hopefully value and eventually study it more.

Modern interaction and the field of communication between hearers and the deaf have expanded through new technological means, such as faxes, computers and mobile phones. In direct communication with a hearer who is incompetent in sign language, pointing, writing or lip-reading is used. It is quite common for the deaf to use fax, e-mail, or SMS solutions in communicating with each other. All this has had an impact on the spread of deaflore. The jokes of the deaf in America, for example, are available in English for the deaf and the hearers (Paales 2001: 143–145). Videoclips in sign language (of the Americans, the French, etc.) are available also in the WWW.

## CONCEPTUALISING DEAFLORE. ON RESEARCH INTO SIGNLORE

Deaf community folklore was first studied in the United States. According to S. J. Carmel the term ‘deaf folklore’ was first adopted in 1970 to mark the subculture of people with hearing disability, shared by this special linguistic and cultural community. S. J. Carmel notes that in the deaf community – or the deaf world – folklore is intricately interrelated with the traditional oral transmitting, or “by sign of hands” (Carmel 1996: 197–198). In American folklore studies the folklore of the deaf is also referred to by the term *deaflore* (e.g. Baldwin 1982: 10).

The largest number of studies are about the lore of the deaf in the United States, some are also concerned with the lore of the deaf in the UK and France. In German folkloristics deaflore is a relatively new field of study. U. Möbius has used the German term *Gehörlosen-Folklore* alternately with the English term *Deaf Folklore* in his study into the terminology and methods of the *deaf history* (Möbius 1992: 398). In the Estonian language, several synonyms referring to the

group and linguistic idiosyncrasies are used as equivalents for the English term *Deaf Folklore* – *deaflore* (further on the subject see Paales 2001: 131–132).

In Estonia, folklore in sign language entered the folkloric sphere of interest in the late 1990s. This period had seen the publication of several linguistic-cultural approaches to the deaf communities and sign languages (including the Estonian deaf community and the Estonian Sign Language). Folklorists and linguists have studied non-verbal elements in spoken Estonian (see Hiimäe 1993; Kimmel-Tenjes 1993, Tenjes 2001). Studies and treatments of folklore in sign language and sign language terminology have been published by the author (Paales 1999, 2001, 2001a, 2002).

## **NARRATIVE TOPICS OF THE DEAF**

Good storytellers are highly valued among the deaf community. I have noticed that skilled signers stand at the centre of attention at social gatherings, have a rich repertoire and an individual narrative style. According to an informant, children at the Porkuni School for Deaf organised public story-telling competitions. A performer was free to choose the topic and style of narrative: s/he could tell a true story, or a fabrication, but had to tell it standing in front of the audience. The narrators were judged by the audience, who either commended the performance or dispraised it. One narrator may have been commended for an intriguing story and a gripping performance, while another was laughed at because of a boring topic or performance, etc. The storytellers were eagerly listened to and sympathised with. Each successive narrator tried to outmatch the previous performer. In the following I will provide a selection of the narrative topics of the deaf in more detail.

**Deaf characters. Deafness.** One of the topics of sign language narratives is hearing disability and incidents related to deafness. The following two true stories describe the employment rate and situation of the deaf in Tartu in the 1930s. The example texts were provided by Frits Helstein,<sup>14</sup> whom I interviewed in summer 1997. It is evident that the deaf are inventive and smart and the hearers need their help: the hearers value their vision and keen sense of

observation very highly. The hearers' intervention into the life of the deaf will often result in a misfortune.

*“Two older deaf – Hendrikson and Kont – were working as decorators. Kont was a mute and could not speak. In his free time he used to help the police. Once a man had drowned in the river Emajõgi and could not be found. Finally, nobody could think of anything else to do – and they asked Kont to help out. And he managed to find the dead body. He was, of course, paid for that. Kont helped the police on several occasions.”* (EFA I 47, 95).

*“Two deaf were working as shoemakers at the Tartu Shoe Factory (in the 1930s). Irene Suigu’s elder sister was working as a tanner. Isberg was also a mute, he could not speak. He worked as the operator at the cinema “Illusioon” in Tartu. At that time they showed the silents. And although he was good at his job, his life was tragic. Isberg never married, lived alone for years. His father would not let him marry a deaf woman, and forced him to marry a hearer. Isberg hanged himself.”* (EFA I 47, 95/96).

Estonian deaflore includes anecdotes of wide international spread and numerous variants, where a deaf character appears as a **human being**, a **tree** or some **animal**. Such anecdotes have entered the repertoire of the Estonian deaf (usually that of younger generation) through other deaf communities (in Sweden, Russia, United States, etc.). Before the period of independence the Estonian deaf had closer contacts with the non-hearers of the former Soviet republics, since the independence the contacts are much more varied.

The Estonian deaf narrate the heard stories at family or social gatherings; more able narrators perform them at major events within the deaf community. The spread of the narrative from one community to another is favoured by common international events and personal contacts, but also by the smaller communication barrier conditioned by the use of sign language. Narrative situations are recorded and re-performed through the means of video: recording and passing video tapes from person to person is very common among the deaf.

The following anecdote, which the researchers of deaflore in the United States have categorised under the tale type *The Lumberjack and Deaf Tree*, is rich in variants among the deaf. The text that I will hereby quote recognises sign language as a suitable form of communication for the deaf (in a different variant the use of fingerspelling will do), while the attention is drawn to the fact that people with hearing impairment respond to sounds with the help of the hearing aid.

*“A lumberjack yells to the tree: “Fall Down!” The tree falls down. But the next one will not fall down. The man yells some more, but the tree would not fall. Then the man calls for a doctor. The doctor auscultates the tree with a stethoscope and tells the man to attach a hearing aid to the tree. The tree is given the hearing aid and the man yells to the tree: “Fall down!”, and the tree falls down. The same happens with the third tree: the man yells at the tree, but the tree would not fall. He again summons the doctor. The doctor auscultates the tree with his stethoscope and says that the tree is deaf. The man has to gesture to this tree. The lumberjack will then make the sign FALL DOWN and the tree falls.” (EFA I 47, 100).*

This tale type has been analysed by K. Baldwin, who has studied deaflore in America. She has argued that the tale under discussion is one of the tales where deafness functions as protection against death or destruction. The hearer lumberjack is a deviant, who is not only incapable of fingerspelling or signing, but who cannot even discern hearing disability. Deafness remains invisible until there is no communication. Like the deaf tree, deaf people are tall and strong, healthy and beautiful, and they would not fall, i.e. they will not turn upon yelling (Baldwin 1986: 7).

Another tale related to deafness and rich in variants, which is also often told in the Estonian deaf community, is *The Motel Joke*. A deaf behaves in a critical situation according to the rules of the hearer world (i.e. makes a sound). The solution lies in the opposite, though expected, response of the companion with hearing impairment, who disregards the noise.

*“Deaf newlyweds are on their honeymoon. Evening is approaching. They need to find lodging for the night. They stop at a motel.*

*The newlyweds are given a room. They go to their room and settle themselves. The young man leaves the room to get some food and coffee. The woman is left alone in the room. The man goes downstairs, buys some food and coffee. He returns upstairs but can no longer remember the number of their room. So he doesn't know what to do. He comes up with an idea. The man steps outside and shouts loudly. The lights in all the windows, except one, will be lit. The man realises that his deaf wife must be there and thus finds his room.” (EFA I 47, 99).*

C. Padden and T. Humphries, who have studied deaflore in America, argue that in this anecdote the joke is not on the deaf man, who forgot his room number, but on the hearers who could not help him to find the room. The deaf character knows that hearers respond easily to noise and use it to his benefit (Padden & Humphries 1992: 288).

A characteristic feature of various anecdotes is the questioning formula, used to address the audience. While signing the tale, the narrator provides no conclusion, and instead asks WHY?, HOW? or WHAT FOR? The narrator thus opens a dialogue, which will reveal the audience's attentiveness or – the opposite – their ignorance. If the correct answer is provided, the narrator commends the audience, if not, he or she will tell the audience the correct answer and explicates it further. Pantomime and role play have an important role in narrative performance. <sup>15</sup>The following example demonstrates characteristic folkloric variation.

*Two groups of hunters went to the forest; one group was formed of three deaf and the other one of three hearers. The hearers went to the left; the deaf went to the right. The hunters split and went after wild animals. After a little while the hunters joined again: the three deaf hunters and the three hearing hunters. The deaf had caught three moose, the hearers had caught none. The hearers were surprised. So they decided to switch sides: the hearers went to the right, the deaf to the left. The hearers thought that the deaf must have had a better hunting ground. And then they joined others again – the deaf had caught five moose, while the hearers had none.*

*The question: How could the deaf catch so many animals?*

*A. Answer: The hearers kept on chatting to each other, the moose heard and took off. The deaf signed to each other, making no noise, and managed to catch several moose.*

*B. The moose had never seen signing hunters; they curiously came towards the deaf. The deaf hunters could then easily put a bullet through the moose's brain.*

Many stories spread in the deaf community reveal the attitudes of hearers towards the non-hearers. Often a deaf person proves cleverer than the hearers, but the hearers control the situation and take advantage of the deaf. In some stories the hearers treat the deaf very unfairly, in other stories, the situation is vice versa, the hearers are extremely caring and attentive towards the deaf.

*“In a village hearers went on a hunt and asked a deaf man from the same village to come along. In a forest they saw a nice hare. The hearers immediately started to fire their guns, but did not hit the target. Fired randomly. The hare is escaping deep into the forest. The deaf man carefully aims and shoots – and hits the hare. Afterwards, while dividing the kill, the deaf was given only half the hare. The hearers told him that it was their dog, which helped to track the hare. The deaf man had no dog and was thus given less. What injustice!” (EFA I 47, 107).*

*“This happened in Hungary. A hearer man was arrested. A deaf man helped him to escape from prison. Years later, the hearer man became successful in his career and was elected president. As president he remembered how the deaf man had helped him out of the prison. He ordered that the deaf would be given proper state benefits and allocated various aids and appliances. The man had not forgotten the good deed of the deaf man.” (EFA I 47, 108).*

*“In Italy the deaf are tolerated, revered and cared for better than here. Two deaf from Finland travelled to Italy and signed to each other. Suddenly one of them sprained his ankle on a gobble street. At once an Italian came along, tried to communicate with them and was very helpful, and escorted the injured deaf to the hospital. If you say in Italy that you cannot hear, then people there are very attentive and caring towards the deaf.” (EFA I 47, 108).*

Many disabled people dream of finding a medical solution to their disability, an aid or a remedy. P. Ladd, the deaf professor of the University of Bristol claims that for most people who have grown up as deaf, this dream is inconceivable. Ladd believes that this sense of identity is conditioned by a specific way of perceiving the world, formed by their language and culture (Ladd 1993: 191).

In modern times deafness can be cured or mitigated with surgery (see also Paales 2001a: 157). For that a cochlear implant is surgically implanted to a deaf person, and people with previous speaking experience (the post-speech deaf) are generally preferred. The implant will not, however, turn a deaf into a hearer: the operation is followed by extensive training in listening, lip-reading, speech acquisition, etc. Many deaf perceive the attempts of hearers to eliminate deafness as interference into the system and traditions of the deaf community. Legends about the possible risks of cochlear implants have already begun to spread, indicating that it is not deafness but the implant that will interfere with normal life.

*“I have heard from the deaf living abroad that the cochlear implant is not safe at all. If you have this operation done, you cannot, for example, go to sauna, take a swim or sunbathe. I am not exactly sure whether it is true or not. I was told a story that a deaf who had this operation done became paralysed at old age, on the side of face where this implant was placed in his head.”* (EFA I 47, 108).

Contrary to the aforementioned stories, some speak about the preservation and transmittance of deafness. Research has shown that nearly 90% of the deaf are married to the deaf. In-group marriages, which have been restricted in some countries at certain periods in order to suppress congenital deafness (by A. G. Bell in the 19th century United States, for example <sup>16</sup>), are viewed as good form among the deaf themselves. Compared to other disability groups the deaf are unique in that they prefer their children to be deaf as well. This is reflected in the narratives, but also other folkloric genres.

*“A team of deaf astronauts travels to space. After a while they return to the Earth. In the meantime there has been a major catastrophe on Earth – an apocalypse. Oh well, the deaf will get*



*married and have their families. Children are born. The Earth is filled with the deaf. And then a hearer child is born into one family. The deaf council is summoned to discuss what to do about it. And, well, it cannot sign, so it has to be paid disability benefits!"* (EFA I 47, 98).

**The deaf and other disability groups.** People with disabilities form an altogether separate topic in folklore, as I have indicated above. The following tales, where the attitude towards the special demands of people with disability is friendly and humorous, tell about people who have visual, physical or hearing impairment:

*"A blind man dies. At the funeral the white cane is placed in the coffin. Then a man with physical disability, who had spent his life in a wheelchair, dies. He is buried with the wheelchair. Then dies a man with hearing impairment, who has used a hearing aid. He is buried with the hearing aid. And then a deaf man dies. What do you think the deaf man is buried with? A sign language interpreter."* (EFA I 47, 99).

*"A deaf man travels through the desert. Everything around him is hot and arid. The deaf sees a lake. He rushes into the water, comes out and – lo and behold! – can hear again! The deaf man calls out loudly: a blind man arrives. The blind man gropes around and disappears into the lake. After a while he appears again and - lo and behold! – the blind man can see. The blind man calls out and tells a man in a wheelchair to come to the lake. The man comes and splashes into the water with his wheelchair. In a while he appears – lo and behold! – with a brand new wheelchair.*

*Explanation: Had he gone into the water without his wheelchair, his legs would have been cured."* (EFA I 47, 101).

**Communication problems. Communicating with hearers.** Regardless of the fact that the deaf have learned to talk and write at school, tragicomical situations with both these forms of communication happen. The following text indicates that problems arise in operating in bilingual field of influence. The deaf person mixes up homonyms and in writing follows the rules of sign language. The hearer is confused when reading what the deaf has written, and may consider an erroneously used word offensive. Here, the

conflict is solved by the hearing wife of the deaf, though only in the semantic sphere – in real life situation the deaf would be in trouble.

*“I once happened to exceed the speed limit while driving. I was summoned to the traffic police headquarters, where I was supposed to meet an inspector Sulu. On the right day and at the right time I’m there, but I didn’t know this Sulu person. There was a policeman, and I decided to ask him and wrote on a piece of paper: “you are sulii?” [‘crook’ in Estonian]. I couldn’t remember the name exactly. And the policeman got angry – and I lost my licence. To get my licence back I had to take the driving test again. And I couldn’t understand what I did wrong that he got so mad.*

*I went home. And I took the note, which I thought I had written correctly. My wife is a hearer, so I showed her the note. She started hysterically laughing and said that no wonder that the policeman was mad at you, when you told him right in his face that he is a crook. I didn’t know his name exactly.” (EFA I 47, 96).*

The narrative repertoire of the deaf also displays relatively hostile attitudes towards the hearer society. The following anecdote, which appears in numerous variants both in hearer and deaflore, reveals that the deaf wish to have more signers around them in order to be able to communicate freely and lead a full life. The following text suggests that many hearers do not understand or respect the deaf (see Carmel 1996: 199–200).

*“A deaf and a hearer sit across each other in a train carriage. The hearer drinks Coca-Cola. Can’t drink the whole bottle and tosses the half-full bottle out the window. The deaf man shouts: “What are you doing, you dimwit! Don’t throw it away, this is good stuff!” “Oh, I have tons of it,” the hearer replies. The train stops, and a new passenger sits across the deaf man. The man puffs on a very expensive cigar. Gets enough of the cigar and wants to toss half of it out the carriage window. The deaf man says: “Don’t throw it away! Such an expensive brand!” “Oh, I have cartons of it,” the hearer replies. At the next stop yet another new passenger sits across the deaf. And at the following stop a host of new passengers enter the train – the train is overcrowded. All passengers are cramped and uncomfortable. The deaf man opens the carriage window and starts tossing out the hearers one after an-*

*other. People shout at him: "What are you doing, you madman!" "Oh, there are plenty of hearers as it is," the deaf man replies.*" (EFA I 47, 101).

**Local ghost stories and narrative history in the deaf community.** Graduates of the Porkuni School for Deaf tell stories which reflect legend motifs characteristic of this region.<sup>17</sup> These tales suggest that the deaf children belong to the same historical narrative space than the hearers of the region. Narrative information has reached the deaf from Estonian language and literature classes at school. The following texts are set in the boarding building of the school (Porkuni manor complex) and the surroundings; the predominant motif in the narratives is the apparitions or the haunting of the Porkuni manor mistress.

*"The deaf have told that this happened when Anneli Ojastu and Lilli Pärn were studying at Porkuni. One night Lilli and Anneli were asleep in their room. Lilli woke up and saw a white figure sitting at Anneli's bedside, looking at Anneli. Lilli was terribly frightened. She couldn't look at it, kept her eyes closed as tightly as she could, pulled the blanket over her head and tried to fall asleep. People believed that it was the spirit of the Porkuni manor's mistress, who had drowned in the lake. I had heard from the older deaf that this room was always haunted. The room had been closed and out of use for a long time. The windows had shutters and the room was empty. People believed that the Porkuni mistress appeared in this room. Later, when the number of pupils grew and the school couldn't board them, the room was renovated and turned into a boarding room, too."* (EFA I 47, 97).

*"This is what happened with our night-watch lady (who kept watch at the boarding school), Leili, I think she was called. She was asleep in her room and suddenly heard steps. She thought that some boarder wanted something and waited. Suddenly she sees that the door opens slightly and a white hand appears, holding on to the door. Then a white face appears. The night-watch was spooked out. The next morning the night-watch told about it to the teacher (Riitmuru-Pikkar was her last name), and the teacher told the deaf."* (EFA I 47, 98).

*“A younger boy told me that one summer a teacher organised a one-day camping trip to the park near the school building. They went in daylight and returned in the dusk. And they played this game where some players hid themselves in the park and others were supposed to find them. They all had flashlights. The searchers went to look for the others all together in a group. And they see someone standing further away, waving at them. The searchers are happy that they have found another player. They move towards the waver – and can no longer find him. Wondering, they move forward and see another player waving. They walk towards him, but the player is, again, gone. The searchers feel quite spooky. And they see someone waving again. But they thought that it was getting darker, and they would stop the search and go back. Later they asked each other, who the waver was, they saw him well enough, but when they went after him, they couldn’t find anybody. So they told this to their teacher and the teacher said that yes, this park was indeed haunted. The teacher, of course, knew it before, but didn’t tell the children. According to the teacher a girl was tied to the tree for punishment and had died there. And now she is haunting the place. That’s all I know about it.” (EFA I 47, 98).*

Some narratives relate to the battle of Porkuni held on Sept. 21, 1944 during the World War II. The informants have heard the stories from senior members of the deaf community. In 1944 the school was closed in the Porkuni manor, and during the war the building was used as a military hospital for German soldiers.<sup>18</sup>

*“Porkuni was widely known for its limestone deposits. After the battle of Porkuni the woods and fields were covered with Russian and German weapons. The deaf gathered much of them together, including many anti-tank landmines. The deaf thought of constructing a bomb of their own. So they piled about nine mines on top of each other in a secret place in the park near the boarding school and set the fuse. One night the deaf boys waited anxiously to blow them up. So they went to the park and detonated the mines. And there was this huge bang. People were frightened: the teachers, other boarders, etc. Everyone thought that the war was on again, and the teacher gathered all the schoolchildren and took cover. The boarding school’s roof fell off and the walls*

*were ruined. The explosion uncovered a limestone deposit. The schoolchildren boarded in the school suffered: there were problems with accommodation, roof leaked and beds were taken down-stairs. Later the rooms were renovated and the building got a new roof.” (EFA I 47, 95).*

## **RIDDLES ABOUT DEAFNESS**

Several texts test a group member's competence in deafness, though cleverness is put to test also by riddles on other topics. Presenting riddles, a signer draws a comparison, which typically has a concentrated plot and is accompanied with a mimic expression.

*Question: A deaf couple turns to the doctor and asks for advice: how to make sure that their baby would be born deaf. The doctor says that this is impossible to determine – the child will be born as it is, it can't be helped. The deaf couple leaves. After a while they will return and tell the doctor that they had a deaf baby. How is it possible?*

*Answer: After intercourse you have to yell towards the sperm cells moving in fallopian tube. There hearer cells hear and turn back, while the deaf cells will rush forward and the deaf child is fertilised!*

*But how to get a hearer child?*

*Answer: After intercourse you have to send a lamp signal (with a flashlight, etc.) towards the sperm cells. The deaf cells look back, but the hearer cells do not notice the light and rush ahead – and a hearing child will be born. (EFA I 47, 113).*

*Question: Why is a hearer's forehead smooth, but a deaf person's forehead wrinkled?*

*Answer: A hearer doesn't use much mimic during talking, while a deaf person does, makes faces – that's why his or her forehead is wrinkled. (EFA I 47, 110).*

*Question: Why the arms of a hearer are of the same length, but a deaf has a shorter arm?*

*Answer: Because in order to catch somebody's attention a deaf has to slap another deaf to the shoulder or wave a hand up and down. (EFA I 47, 110).*

*Question: Two birds are flying in the sky. One is heavily tilted. Why?*

*Answer: The bird is deaf. Its hearing aid weighs it down.* (EFA I 47, 111).

## SIGNLORE: CREATIVE LANGUAGE OF THE DEAF

Signlore is a part of deaf folklore, which scholars have often regarded as most characteristic of the deaf community. Signlore relies on the grammatical idiosyncrasies of the visual-motoric language

**Sign play.** Sign plays are entertaining, but also help to develop linguistic competence. Sign play follows certain rules for manipulating full signs or components of signs, it is often carefully developed and a brilliant example of folk humour (Klima & Bellugi 1979: 338).

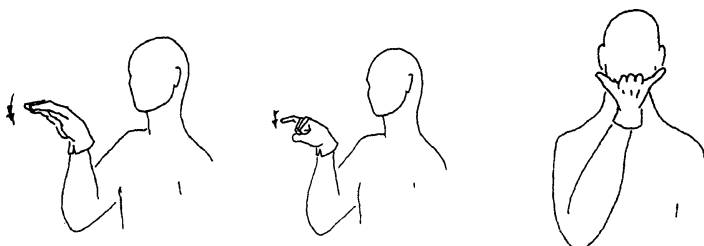
American Sign Language, for example, favours alphabet stories (or ABC stories, A-to-Z stories) and 1-2-3 stories (Frishberg 1988: 158). ABC story is a short narrative, which follows an extremely compact structure. It consists of 26 signs, each of which is gestured with one hand, using fingerspelling in alphabetic order. In 1-2-3 stories signs are created by hand shapes forming numbers, following restrictive linguistic principles. The most popular topics include sex, horror tales, car racing, etc. ABC and 1-2-3 stories are stereotypical and static, but productive narrative forms for skilled signers. I have not encountered similar stories in the Estonian signlore.

Another popular form of sign play in the American deaf community is fingerspelling with mimetic, where the meaning of the word is simultaneously revealed on two levels: fingerspelling and mimetic. For example, the word 'butterfly' is fingerspelt (b-u-t-t-e-r-f-l-y), while the hand movements imitate a flying butterfly (Klima & Bellugi 1979: 338). Similarly, I have not encountered mimetic-fingerspelling among the Estonian deaf signers.

Before addressing the topic of Estonian signlore, I will elaborate on components of signs (Laiapea has used the term *kereemid* in the Estonian language, see Laiapea 1992: 2101–2103). The phonologi-

cal system of the Estonian Sign Language consists of a handshape, movement and location of the sign with non-manual components (facial impression, posture, movement of head, body and eyes). Alteration of any of these components will alter the meaning of the sign.

In the following example (see Figures 1 and 2) changing one parameter (handshape) creates a new sign, which is semantically related to the old one, but has been attributed a humorous undertone. In essence it resembles a slang word or a pun, where the joke lies in the playfulness of gesturing. The user manipulates the components of a sign, analogously to replacing, for example, a phonological sound in a spoken word. The following sign imitates a facial impression of an open smile (see Figure 3).



**Figure 2** (left). *GOOD-BYE!*

**Figure 3** (centre). *(A LITTLE, ALMOST) GOOD-BYE!*

**Figure 4** (right). *BIG SMILE*  
(EFA I 47, 114).

**Name signs.** Deaf people all over the world attribute name signs to their peers and places (further on the topic see Paales 2002). Name signs may also be attributed to people who may not necessarily belong to the deaf community (such as politicians and other public figures (EFA I 47, 116), teachers of the deaf, sign language interpreters, etc.). The practical creation and usage of name signs varies in the deaf communities of different nations. To my knowledge name sign systems have been studied in deaf populations in America (Meadow 1977; Mindess 1990; Supalla 1990, 1992), France (see *La langue de signes. Votre Prénom*), China (Yau & Shunchiu & Jinxian He 1990), among the Palestinians (Strauss-Samaneh 2001), in New-Zealand (McKee & McKee 2000) and Sweden (Hedberg 1994).

There are two basic types of name sign systems: *arbitrary* and *descriptive* (see Supalla 1990). The only function of arbitrary name signs is designating a person, whereas descriptive name signs also describe the designated person. It appears that the Estonian deaf tend to prefer descriptive name signs, which is similar to the practices of other deaf communities in Europe. In America, however, name signs are predominantly arbitrary. The Estonian deaf form name signs of the Estonian sign language lexicon, fingerspelling, mimetics and articulation.

The analysis of Estonian name signs reveals two main sources (see Laiapea 1993):

1. *The formation of a name sign is based on the Estonian language.* Name signs based on the Estonian language fall into three main groups: (1) fingerspelled signs; (2) phonetic signs, (3) lexemic signs.

**Fingerspelled signs** include the initials of a referent person or object (see Figure 5). The initials are sometimes associated with a characteristic of the referent person or object, a hairdo, for example (see Figure 6). **Phonetic signs** derive from methodology applied in teaching the Estonian language articulation to the deaf children. Verbal language equivalents of certain signs include a sound, which is practised (adopted) by using this particular method (see Laiapea 1993: 57–58). The number of such signs is small; these are mostly used in name signs. **Lexemic signs** are name signs derived from the Estonian meaning of the referent person or object (see Figures 7, 8). The name sign may be derived from the meaning of the word resembling a person's or place name (see Figure 9).

2. *The formation of a name sign is based on the referent person or object* (i.e. what the name sign designates). In this case the name sign formation relies on the characteristic features (appearance, behaviour, etc.) of the referent person or object. Name creation is subject to the metonymic *pars pro toto* principle as well as metaphoric comparison. Metonymic name signs are based on the appearance, behaviour, location or other characteristic of the referent person or object. Sign name OLIVER (see Figure 10), for example, is derived from a person's characteristic behaviour: *While studying at Porkuni Oliver liked to stand behind other children and fillip on their earlobes*. Name sign KAIDO (see Figure 11) is based on the





**Figure 5. RAIVO K.**



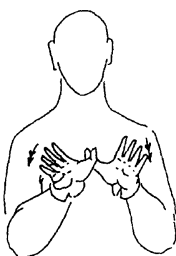
**Figure 6. KATRIN**



**Figure 7. A. KUUSK/  
KUUSK [FIR-TREE]**



**Figure 8. VÖRU/  
(KÄE)VÖRU [BRACELET]**



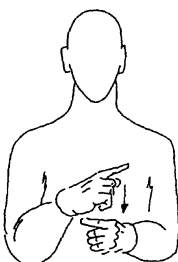
**Figure 9. LINDA/  
LIND [BIRD]**



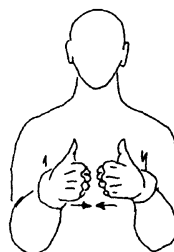
**Figure 10. OLIVER**



**Figure 11. KAIDO/  
(LOKID) [CURLS]**



**Figure 12. TARTU**



**Figure 13. VALGA-  
VALKA**

referent's appearance ('curly hair'). In metaphoric name signs the analogy occurs outside the person (e.g. cat's eyes – cat-eyed Heli).

Toponymic signs are less intimate and less associated with identity. An etymologic explanation of the sign designating the Estonian university town Tartu alludes to the sword and key depicted on the city's coat of arms (see Figure 12). The name sign for Valga demonstrates the geographical adjacency of two boarder towns (Valga-Valka) (see Figure 13).

## GAMES

The deaf organise games in camps, at weddings, at birthday parties and at other events (see Paales 1999: 80–81; 2001: 137). I have noticed the friendly humour of these events, where participants emphasise being together and the unity of the deaf community, and where nobody is intentionally ridiculed or derided. Regardless of the competitiveness of some games, their purpose is not to inspire negative emotions or tense rivalry. Designated game leaders have a small prize or a souvenir for each player. The following games may be known also among the hearers.

*“The game is called “Motorbike” and requires the participation of three people. One is the sc. Game Leader, who knows the game. The second Player is not supposed to be familiar with the game. And the third participant is the Assistant. The Game Leader and Player stand face-to-face, with chairs behind them. The Game Leader explains that the Player must do exactly what he does: he must imitate his movements, mimic, when the Game Leader sits on the chair, the Player must sit, too, etc. The Game Leader impersonates a motorcyclist. He starts the engine, sits on the bike and starts driving. Then he accelerates, descends down a slope [sits on the chair], then up the hill again [stands up] – repeating the routine several times. Finally the Assistant sneaks behind he Player and slips a wet sponge on the Player's chair. So when the Game Leader sits down, and the Player too, he will wet through his pants.” (EFA I 47, 116/117).*

*“A man and a woman form a couple. The Game Leader finds them a seat. Then enters the Player. The Game Leader tells him,*

*look now – here's a couple in love, how do you think they should sit? The Player goes over to the couple and changes their position – lifts the man's hand to hold the woman, moves their faces closer, tells the woman to sit in the man's lap, etc. Depending on the gender of the Player, he or she has to take the place of the man or a woman in the couple, and take the same position that (s)he created. The Game Leader invites the next player and gives him or her same instructions. It is fun to see, what the final outcome will look like.” (EFA I 47, 117).*

*“This game is played in a larger group of the deaf. Those who wish to play form a circle. Two deaf players choose a team. One team includes, say, 10 players, and another team, too, and they stand in a line, facing each other. The idea of the game is that both teams have to make a rope by tying together all their clothes: the team whose rope is longer, will be the winner. Someone calls out “Start!” and the game begins. The players are allowed to use their clothing and accessories, such as shoestrings, watches, etc. Those who are less shy tie their pants, underwear, etc. to the rope, though those who are shy will not be forced to do that. What matters is the length of the rope. The winner receives a box of chocolate, etc.” (EFA I 47, 118).*

*An eating or drinking contest is organised. Two teams are formed. Each team is given, say, 10 sandwiches, and members of each team must eat them as quickly as they can. The audience laughs at the funny facial impressions the players make while devouring the sandwiches. The team who have eaten up their sandwiches first, will win: the food has to be swallowed. (Similarly, the players may be given water to drink, onions to eat, etc.)” (EFA I 47, 118).*

*“The players group into two teams. The game requires a blanket, etc. which is held by its corners by two players. The blanket is supposed to separate the two teams, so that they would not see each other when they squat down. Before beginning the game, members of both groups introduce their sign names and try to remember the names of members of the other team. Then the teams will be separated by the blanket. Members of both groups are allowed to change their position behind the blanket. The members of either group take turns in standing up facing the player of*

*the opposite team. Those who hold the blanket will count to three and then drop the blanket. Now, the member of both teams must sign the name of the person (s)he is facing as fast as (s)he can. Who is too slow or makes a wrong sign, will have to join the opposite team. If both players make the correct sign simultaneously, the blanket will be raised and other players line up. The quickest team, who signs the names correctly and gathers the members of the opposite team, will win.” (EFA I 47, 117).*

## **HOLIDAY TRADITIONS AND CUSTOMS**

Almost all holidays celebrated by the deaf community originate in Estonian folk calendar (St. Catherine’s Day, Martinmas, Midsummer Day, Shrove Tuesday, Christmas, etc.) and are analogous to the traditions and customs of the hearing community (EFA I 47, 119).<sup>19</sup> The only exception is the International Day of Deaf People (analogous to the White Cane Day for the blind and visually impaired), celebrated on the last Sunday of September, and some other dates significant for the community, such as the anniversaries of the Estonian Association of the Deaf and local societies.

How the deaf perceive and interpret the wedding and funeral tradition of their group requires further study. Without interpretation into sign language, the deaf will probably fail to follow the auditory context (songs, speeches, etc.) of the event. In-group observation and interviews with the deaf should provide some explication of the issue. The study of families of inherited deaf, which should reveal the performance and attitudes of the deaf to these traditions, would be extremely intriguing.

## **BELIEFS ABOUT THE DEAF**

The beliefs of the deaf about their hearing loss definitely require further study, but here are my personal observations on the topic. In the following example, the disability is thought to have been caused by the derisive attitude of a hearer towards the deaf:

*“The deaf have told me that when a hearer laughs at them or mocks their signing, they will tell to themselves: let’s see what will happen when s/he/they will have a deaf child. I heard that*

*once a similar presage came true. A deaf called Vainamäe had once said this to a hearer, and the hearer gave birth to a deaf child.” (EFA I 47, 119).*

The deaf hold on to a wide-spread principle that they should marry a member of the non-hearing community (nationality is of secondary importance). This, in essence, is a way to regulate the community and preserve one's identity.

*“My deaf grandmother advised me against marrying a hearer. The deaf believe that they would be less compatible with a hearing spouse, and that the hearing partner may cheat on them.” (EFA I 47, 119).*

## **THE DEAF, SINGING AND POETRY IN SIGN LANGUAGE**

Singing has entered the deaf culture by the influence of the hearers' self expression. Even though singing is now very common in the deaf communities, it was not originally a part of the non-hearer culture. Sign language is still a part of the visible world while singing and music belong to the aural world (Paales 2001: 138–139). In Estonia the deaf practise singing either in sign language church ceremonies or with the hearers with the help of a sign language interpreter. Videos recorded on the events of the deaf community in Russia suggest that the interpretation and performance of hearer's songs is much more popular in Russia. A sign language interpretation is often accompanied on the drum, so that the deaf will discern the vibration of drum beat (Paales 2001a: 169).

Some deaf create sign language poetry, based on the principles of visual language. Although sign language poetry has little to do with folklore, I will briefly comment on it. In her study N. Frishberg points out three artistic-communicative types of American Sign Language: public presentation, folklore and performance art. Frishberg claims that these three types may be considered the original artistic-communicative form of the deaf, and assumes that it applies to most sign language systems that she knows, referring to the sign languages in Western Europe, Asia and the territory of the former Soviet Union (Frishberg 1988: 156).

Frishberg sees sign language poetry as a part of performance arts, the literary creation of the deaf. In her article she refers to J. Cohn, who accuses the deaf of borrowing the auditive rhyme, characteristic of the hearer language, and the metre of spoken language in their poetry. Moving away from translated literature towards sign language narration, poetry and theatre is a relatively recent phenomenon even in the American deaf community (Frishberg 1988: 153–154).

The most famous American deaf people are playwrights Bernard Bragg and Eugene Bergman, sign language poets Dorothy Miles, Clayton Valli, Ella Mae Lenz, etc. whose works are translated from ASL into English or are published on videotapes. To my knowledge there are only single sign language poets in the Estonian deaf community (e.g. Elina Kalberg in Tartu). Hopefully there will be more Estonian sign language authors, who will find inspiration in the visual world perception and their own language, and whose work will be reviewed by our literary critics in the future. But that is an altogether different topic.

## IN CONCLUSION

Hearers perceive a person who has hearing loss, who speaks in a strange voice, who fails to respond to sounds and “gesticulates” with hands, as *different*, as someone to compare oneself against. By analysing the attitudes of different people towards deafness, we will learn how this relationship has functioned in different times and in different cultures (has either mystified or rejected it, etc.). In order to understand the attitudes of non-hearers towards life and other people, we need to take a look at sign language folklore. The metaphor of silence or voicelessness proves to be fallible in describing the world of non-hearers, and the self-image of a deaf person is by no means limited to self-pity.

People who perceive the world differently – either by seeing or both seeing and hearing – tend to view deafness differently as well: for the former deafness is a way of being, for the latter deafness is incomprehensible, mysterious, but also irritating and deplorable. Analogously to hearer lore, where different nationalities are opposed to each other (e.g. an Estonian, a German, a Russian, with

the Estonian being the smartest, cleverest, craftiest, etc.), in deaflore the deaf are compared to the hearers. Deaf folklore therefore comprises the concept of **themselves as deaf** and **others as hearers**. The opposition described is generic in folklore. In folklore attitudes are reflected in a certain way, where the realm of fantasy and real life intertwine. In deaf folklore the hearers are judged by the speakers' criteria, the habits and customs of the hearers are acceptable or unacceptable to the extent of how they comply with the speakers' tradition.

Deaflore is a part of folklore, including the same widely-known genres (folk narratives, riddles, traditions), but also linguistic creation or signlore characteristic of the deaf. Estonian signlore includes local and international material. Several anecdotes of international spread have reached the local lore through live cultural contacts of the younger generation of the deaf. Hearer folklore has also influenced deaflore. The local deaflore comprises personal experience stories of the Estonian deaf, school and family narratives, signlore based on the Estonian Sign Language, etc. Further collection and study of Estonian sign language folklore is definitely needed for a better overview of the material.

The different spheres of life of the deaf are reflected in signlore. Signlore texts mediate the knowledge about the hearing and the deaf world. The wisdom of how to cope in the hearing world, while being a member of the non-hearers, is transmitted from one generation to another. For the deaf community, folklore is entertaining, educational as well as a way to preserve one's identity or, to put it differently – it has the functions of folklore in general.

The characteristic features of Estonian deaf folklore are: 1) communicative function, i.e. sign language performance; 2) the subgroup of mediators of lore, or the Estonian deaf community; 3) the group-oriented interpretation of hearing loss – deaflore reflects the attitudes of the deaf towards their disability and hearers. Signlore manifests the non-hearer's sense of belonging, enabling to relieve the stressful experiences of communicating with the hearers, to value the deaf traditions, to creatively use sign language and strengthen the deaf identity.

## Acknowledgements

I am most grateful to all my deaf informants for their friendly cooperation, and would personally like to thank folklorists Mall Hiimäe and Tiitu Jaago, whose valuable tips and comments have contributed to this article.

## Comments

<sup>1</sup> In the article the deaf will be viewed as a cultural subgroup, sharing a language, traditions, norms and moral values.

<sup>2</sup> The text materials presented in the article are preserved in the Estonian Folklore Archives of the Estonian Literary Museum (EFA I 47, 93/120).

<sup>3</sup> The translation of Estonian sign language texts to the Estonian language by the author.

<sup>4</sup> All biblical references from the King James Version of the Bible. [Translator's comment]

<sup>5</sup> Moen Labraid (Labhraíonn, Labraidh Moen < 'Moen (mute) spoke'). Ugainy Mór became the ruler of Ireland and Gallia in 631 BC. He had two sons, Laery and Covac. When Ugainy died, Laery assumed to the throne. Covac became envious of his brother and killed Laery and Laery's son Ailill, who was the king of the part of Ireland that later became to be known as Leinster. Covac made the younger son of Aillill to eat his father's and his grandfather Laery's heart. The boy suffered from the traumatic experience so that he became deaf, and became to be called Moen 'mute'. Covac had decided to kill the boy, too, to stop him from becoming a king. But the king had to be physically sound. Realising that the boy was mute, Covac let him live. Friends of family took Moen to Munster, where he grew up. He met Moriath, daughter of the king of Munster, and they fell in love. Moriath wrote Moen a love song. When Moen heard the song, he shouted: "What a beautiful song!" And someone said: *Labhraíonn Moen* 'Moen spoke'. This is how he was healed.

<sup>6</sup> Amairgen (Amergin), the son of Mil, was an ancient Celtic priest and poet.

<sup>7</sup> Heimdal was the guardian of the gods. He was also known as the "bright god" for his exceptionally white skin. He was living near the entrance to Asgard (home of the Norse gods) and guarded the rainbow bridge connecting it with the earth. Heimdal had very keen hearing, he was carrying a horn, which enabled him to hear through heaven and earth.

<sup>8</sup> Beda Venerabilis (the Venerable Bede) was an Anglo-Saxon monk and chronicler. He was born in 672 (673) and died in 735. His main work *Historia*



*Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* is the most important source of the early history of England. Bede Venerabilis is also the author of several theological, natural historical and linguistic treatises, including *De Loquelâ per gestum digitorum*, describing a dactylological alphabet.

<sup>9</sup> In his works, Archer Taylor calls this type of tales wellerisms.

<sup>10</sup> See *SURDO. Kuulmise nõrgenemise, kurtuse, halva nägemise ja pimedaksjäämise rahvapärased põhjendused* [SURDO. Popular reasons for hearing disorders, deafness, loss of sight and blindness]. Compiled by M. Hiimäe.

<sup>11</sup> The first Estonian school for deaf children was founded in 1866 by a Lutheran minister Ernst Sokolovski and under the name of Vändra School for the Mute. Tens of years later schools specialising to deaf children were established elsewhere (in South Estonia, for example, and on the island of Saaremaa), but these were active only for a short period of time. In 1924 the school of Vändra was relocated to Porkuni and continued under the name of the State School for the Mute. The establishment of specialised educational institutions brought the deaf dispersed over the country together and enabled the formation of the deaf community and the development of the Estonian sign language. The deaf are now educated in the Tallinn School for Deaf Children and the Tartu Hiie School.

<sup>12</sup> The adoption of dactylological alphabet in teaching phonetic speech to the deaf in Estonia was proposed to the Department of Education by O. Suits at the First National Conference of the Mute in 1933. The alphabet established on the example of the alphabets of other nations was introduced at the next national conference (1934), which analysis was postponed due to the lack of time (Kotsar & Kotsar 1997, I: 132–133, 161). In speech acquisition dactylology facilitates the understanding of words, which visually look the same but have a different morphological composition: e.g. *vara-vana* in Estonian (see also Saarep 1978: 3–5). Among themselves the deaf use fingerspelling in the absence of a sign (personal names and toponyms are first fingerspelled and name signs will be formed later). Further on the dactylological alphabets of different countries see Zaitseva 1991: 13–24.

<sup>13</sup> The term 'sign language' (Est. *viipekeel*) came into wider use at the second half of the 20th century. The communication of the deaf was previously popularly referred to as *käekõne* 'hand speech', *sõrmede-* or *kätekeel* 'finger or hand language', *näputamine* 'fingering', *tembutamine* 'buffoonery', etc. (Kotsar & Kotsar 1997, I: 54, 138, 172; II: 72).

<sup>14</sup> Frits Helstein (1914–2000) was actively involved in promoting the deaf community in Tartu and participated in the founding of the Tartu Society of

the Mute, the school specialising in the deaf and the enterprise for the deaf. F. Helstein has worked, among other occupations, as a compositor in a print shop, as a lamplighter in Tartu, as a glazier and as a steward at the school for the deaf. In 1939 he participated in the Stockholm world games for the deaf.

<sup>15</sup> Role play or the change of perspective is treated as a grammatical category (see Laiapea 2001: 2618). In narration it enables to caricature specific characters (e.g. in a mother-child dialogue impersonate the mother and the child, respectively).

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Graham Bell (1847–1922) was an American inventor of Scottish descent, who invented the telephone. Since 1873 he worked as the professor of sound-physiology (phonetics) at the University of Boston. A. G. Bell was a fervent supporter of the oral method and fought against sign language and ingroup marriages between the deaf. To inhibit congenital deafness he demanded the mandatory sterilisation of deaf girls. Interestingly, though, his own mother and wife were deaf, too (see Woolley 2000: 24; Carver R. J.).

<sup>17</sup> See also Ruubel 1997.

<sup>18</sup> Further on the Battle of Porkuni, see Leppik 1996.

<sup>19</sup> The deaf in America celebrate e.g. Halloween, St. Patrick's Day, etc.

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