

# ON THE SYSTEM OF PLACE NAME SIGNS IN ESTONIAN SIGN LANGUAGE

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## ABSTRACT

A place name sign is a linguistic-cultural marker that includes both memory and landscape. The author regards toponymic signs in Estonian Sign Language as representations of images held by the Estonian Deaf community: they reflect the geographical place, the period, the relationships of the Deaf community with hearing community, and the common and distinguishing features of the two cultures perceived by community's members.

Name signs represent an element of signlore, which includes various types of creative linguistic play. There are stories hidden behind the place name signs that reveal the etymological origin of place name signs and reflect the community's memory.

The purpose of this article\* is twofold. Firstly, it aims to introduce Estonian place name signs as Deaf signlore forms, analyse their structure and specify the main formation methods. Secondly, it interprets place-denoting signs in the light of understanding the foundations of Estonian Sign Language, Estonian Deaf education and education history, the traditions of local Deaf communities, and also of the cultural and local traditions of the dominant hearing communities. Both perspectives – linguistic and folkloristic – are represented in the current article.

**KEYWORDS:** Estonian Deaf community • Estonian Sign Language • signlore, name signs • Estonian place name signs

## ABOUT ESTONIAN SIGN LANGUAGE

Estonian Sign Language belongs to the group of visual-motor languages. The main body of users of Estonian Sign Language is a linguistic-cultural community consisting of approximately 1,500 people (Hollman 2010: 28).

The formation of this language, as well as the establishment of the Estonian Deaf<sup>1</sup> community, dates back at least to the second half of the 19th century, when the Lutheran

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pastor Ernst Sokolovski established the first school in Estonia for deaf children in Vändra in 1866. However, according to some references, deaf people were already being taught in Estonia as early as the 17th century (Kotsar, Kotsar 1996: 8).

When communicating, a Deaf person makes hand, body and facial signals, perceived and interpreted by the addressee through the visual senses. The phonological system of sign languages is constituted by handshape, movement and the place of sign formation. Additionally, the orientation of fingers and palm may be used to distinguish between different meanings. Body posture, facial image, head movement, body and eye movement, which are referred to as non-manual components, are also important during signing. The meaning of the sign will change upon modification of any of the abovementioned parameters.

Estonian Sign Language was officially acknowledged on 1st March 2007, after the introduction of an Amendment to the Language Act. The amendment is intended to create better conditions for Deaf people to study, communicate and work. A new tradition is already gaining popularity in Estonian Deaf community – celebration of the Sign Language Day on 1st March.

#### SOURCES OF RESEARCH

The approach taken in this paper is based on material from two sources. The first source is a video recording produced for educational purposes titled *Temaatilised viipemärgid eesti viipekeele algõpetuses* (Thematic Signs in the Basic Teaching of Estonian Sign Language) (Tartu, 1999). Fluent Deaf and hearing signers from several regions in Estonia contributed to the material, which contains dialogues by native Estonian Deaf signers on subjects such as home and family, clothing, colours, food, and nature. The sign language material is subtitled and includes, among other thematic signs, 30 Estonian place name signs (signed by Deaf native Alfons Kuusk, born in 1932). Although these place name signs are signed by one person, they are still representative of the common heritage of Estonian Deaf place names.

Another source consists of written notes made by the author on the basis of information collected from Estonian Deaf people since 1995, recording toponyms in Estonian Sign Language and providing written descriptions of how they are signed. Where possible, the name signs are supplemented with an explanation provided by Deaf informants along with the reason for using these particular signs. These written notes remain in the possession of the author. The author has selected five examples from these notes, three of which characterise the category of toponymic signs not present in the video material. In all, 35 place names in Estonian Sign Language are analysed in this paper.

#### RESEARCH METHODS FOR TOPONYMIC SIGNS

The name category is universal in linguistic terms, including Estonian Sign Language. In a similar way to proper names in spoken languages, different types of name signs include culturally historically meaningful signs that denote persons and places.

The classification of toponyms depends on the research objective. Based on the name itself, it can be classified by: a) the language of the name (the language system to which

the name belongs); b) the structure of the name (simple and compound names); c) the attribution level of the name (primary or secondary names); d) the origin of the name; e) the age of the name; f) the status and use of the name (official/unofficial names, popular/literary names, frequent/rare names). The classification of place names according to the features above provides a distribution into the following groups: a) place names (cities, villages, farms, etc.); b) the names of water bodies (rivers, lakes, seas, etc.); c) the names of mountains; d) the names of administrative units (provinces, counties, etc.); and e) the names of roads (roads, streets, squares) (Päll 2002: 227–229). This article focuses on the analysis of place names in Estonian Sign Language.<sup>2</sup>

#### TOPONYMY DEFINITIONS. TOPONYMIC SIGNS IN ONOMASTIC RESEARCH

In terms of onomastics, toponymy deals with the study of place names. Place name, or toponym, signifies a location on the ground that stands for a natural or manmade geographical object. Place names help people to define the surrounding landscape (Päll 2002: 227).

In the context of sign language, the term ‘personal name sign’ (in Estonian *isikumärk* or *isikuviipenimi*) is used for signs denoting people, and ‘place name sign’ (in Estonian *kohamärk* or *kohaviipenimi*) (Paales 2002: 155) is used for place names.<sup>3</sup> When speaking of toponymy, it is important to know the terms ‘name’ (marker) and ‘denotation’ (named feature or place as a physical phenomenon). In onomastics, names can mainly be classified according to these two terms.

For different sign languages personal name signs have been more frequently studied (for example, French (Delaporte 2002), Greek (Kourbetis, Hoffmeister 2002), American (Supalla 1992), British (Day, Sutton-Spence 2010), German (Uhlig 2009), New Zealand (McKee, McKee 2000), Palestinian (Strauss-Samaneh 2001), Finnish (Rainò 2000; 2004), Swedish (Hedberg 1994), Swiss German (Tissi 1993), Chinese (Yau, He 1990)), while toponyms in sign languages have been less frequently examined (for example, Sutton-Spence, Woll 1999; Rutherford 1993, et al.). Dictionaries of various national sign languages also contain place names (Sternberg 1994; Johnston 1998; Malm 1998).

In the context of Deaf folklore, name signs have been considered to be a minor form of so-called signlore (Carmel 1996: 198). For example, American Deaf signlore contains (according to Simon J. Carmel) manual alphabet and number stories, sign poetry, catch sign riddles, sign puns and other forms.

Susan D. Rutherford, who studied the folklore of American Deaf people, refers to place name signs in American Sign Language as the object of linguistic play. She argues, particularly with regard to personal name signs, that giving name signs is a tradition fully attributable to Deaf people (Rutherford 1993: 128). British Sign Language researchers Rachel Sutton-Spence and Bencie Woll, however, have described the use of toponymic signs, including metonymic place names, in British Sign Language (1999: 233).

British researchers have used a generalised approach to toponymic signs, drawing attention to the fact that the place name sign is often followed by indication of its location. If the place in question is nearby, the signer points towards that location. When signing about a distant location, the signer uses the vertical level of the signing space as

an imaginary map pinned on to a wall such that the northern places are higher up than the southern places (ibid.).

## PLACE NAME SIGNS AND THEIR FORMATION IN ESTONIAN SIGN LANGUAGE

When analysing the structure and formation methods of place names in Estonian Sign Language, I have used a slightly modified version of the system that was used for analysing personal name signs (Paaes 2004; 2010). The system was created on the basis of an international approach to personal name signs (Supalla 1992; Hedberg 1994; Delaporte 2002 et al.). The following summary provides an overview of basic categories and types of toponymic signs in Estonian Sign Language (see Table 1 on p. 49). Throughout the article, signed examples are presented in upper case.

### *Arbitrary or Initialised Name Signs*

According to Deaf researcher Samuel J. Supalla, the pioneer of name sign studies, the main system used for the creation of person-denoting signs in America was the arbitrary name sign system (ANS). He defined arbitrary<sup>4</sup> name signs as signs having no direct connection with the denotation. Such name signs do not refer to physical peculiarities or personal qualities of the denotation (Supalla 1992: 7). Therefore equivalent toponymic signs do not have a direct meaningful relationship with the relevant geographical location.

In his research, Supalla emphasises that initialised and arbitrary name signs do not necessarily coincide. He claims that despite the fact that they both use alphabetic handshapes, an initialised sign allows identification of its initial form, a form that has been changed during the initialisation process. Supalla provides an example from American Sign Language. The initial sign WATER was obviously similar to the sign DRINK, which was performed by the classifier (American handshape C).<sup>5</sup> This sign referred to the shape of the mug or the manner in which the mug was held. During initialisation, the classifier handshape was replaced by the initial W, which is the first letter of the word water. The modified form of the sign DRINK was turned into the sign WATER. In view of the modification process, WATER is deemed to be an initialised sign. Thus, according to Supalla, the name sign that contains the initial, but is not based on any existing sign, cannot be classified as an initialised name sign (1992: 32–33).

The same issue has been examined by French ethnologist Yves Delaporte, who, contrary to Supalla, classifies all person-denoting signs containing alphabetic handshapes as initialised name signs. At the same time, Delaporte does not use the concept of arbitrariness (2002: 212–214). Tomas Hedberg, Deaf researcher of Swedish personal name signs, also refers to name signs derived by abbreviation of the given name and surname and containing the initials as initialised name signs (1994: 422). In my work, arbitrary and initialised name signs are considered under a single category. They have alphabetic handshapes and are not related to the physical, historical, etc., characteristics of the denotation.

The basis for formation of initialised name signs is the phonological written name of the denotation. The name sign contains the initials of the denotation. An example of such formation is the toponymic sign of Elva – a small town in south Estonia – which is performed by circular movement of the handshape for E, or finger-spelling of the letter E (see Figure 1) in the signing space in front of the signer. In Estonian Sign Language some signs containing initials are also found among personal name signs and other signs.

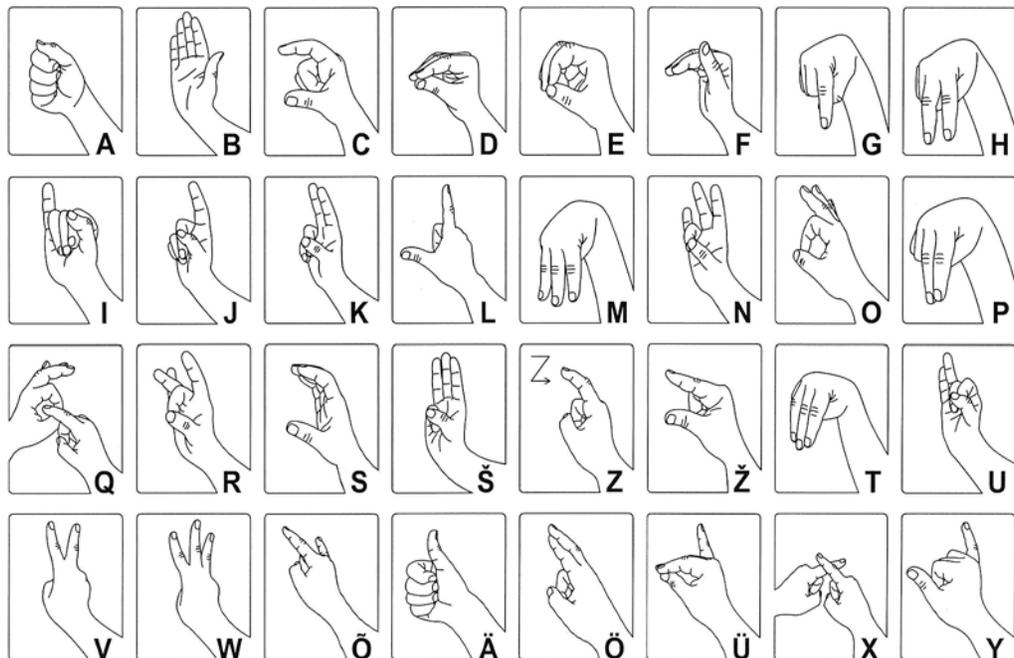


Figure 1. Estonian finger alphabet.

Based on research written on personal name signs, it has been concluded that personal name signs with initials are not prevalent in European Sign Languages (Hedberg 1994: 422). Such name signs are also outnumbered in the case of toponymic signs: for instance, the source material for this present article contained only three arbitrary/initialised name signs. Arbitrary methods of formation are dominant in (personal) name signs used in American Sign Language. American Deaf people use initials or finger-spelling to mark longer place names (for example, K-C – Kansas City, L-A – Los Angeles); in the case of shorter place names, the entire name is finger-spelt (for example, O-H-I-O, I-O-W-A). According to Susan D. Rutherford this is the reason why American toponymic signs are seemingly not as intimate and identity-oriented as personal name signs (1993: 129). Estonian Deaf people also use finger-spelling for place names without a particular name sign or with short phonological name (for example, N-Ö-O, A-L-A, etc.).

Place names in British Sign Language have been said to be finger-spelt even if the signer is aware of a particular toponymic sign. There are several reasons for preferring finger-spelling: if the place name remains unclear for the co-signer; if it is mentioned for the first time during the conversation; or if it is not a local name. It has been brought to our attention that place names in British Sign Language vary regionally. Some topo-

nymic signs are known only on local level and Deaf people living elsewhere may use different place name signs to denote them (Sutton-Spence, Woll 1999: 233).

### *Phonetic Place Name Signs*

Phonetic place name signs have been introduced into Estonian Sign Language by an oral method used in teaching articulation of the Estonian language to Deaf children. These phonetic signs in Estonian Sign Language are formed with methodical handshapes, which were cued according to a relevant sound or phone (Laipea 2006: 57).

In-depth analysis of the research on name signs published in different countries reveals that this formation method is relatively rare. Such a method has been reported in the formation of personal name signs in Swiss-German Sign Language. According to Tanja Tissi, younger generations in Switzerland have discontinued using this formation method, because it represents a painful reminder of the times when Deaf people were forced to study using strictly oral methods (1993: 22–23). In their deepest sense, such name signs are imbued with hearing people’s negative and discriminatory attitude towards Deaf people and sign language (also referred to as audism – see Harrington 2002).

There are only a few such toponymic signs found in my source materials. Phonological signs include toponymic signs denoting the small Estonian town Haapsalu, the north-east Estonian industrial city Kohtla-Järve and Hiiumaa, the second largest island in Estonia. These three name signs were developed from the method used in teaching the H sound to deaf children. Namely, the students check the air flow resulting from generating an H sound by using their palm turned towards themselves. Phonetic H signs are also found in other signs (for example, MAHL [JUICE], SUHKUR [SUGAR] and KOHUPIIM [CURD]).

The sign for Haapsalu is formed by the handshape used for checking the H sound. In this toponymic sign the H handshape is directed away from the mouth (see Figure 2). The name sign for Kohtla-Järve – H+JÄRV [H+LAKE] is a compound sign (see Figure 3). Its first part contains the sign denoting the sound H in the middle of toponym’s first part Kohtla, and the second part consists in the sign JÄRV [LAKE]. Thus the toponymic sign for Kohtla-Järve combines both phonology and translation.

There are two name forms used for Hiiumaa in Estonian Sign Language. The first one is a compound sign, which consists of the handshape denoting the phoneme and



Figure 2. HAAPSALU (H).



Figure 3. KOHTLA-JÄRVE.

translation equivalent of the word *maa* (land): H+MAA [H+LAND] (Figure 4a), again combining phonology and loan (translation). The video material contains another name form, which does not contain a handshake used to denote the phoneme – or checking H sound (Figure 4b). This parallel toponymic sign is probably related to issues with the distinction of phonemic signs.<sup>6</sup>

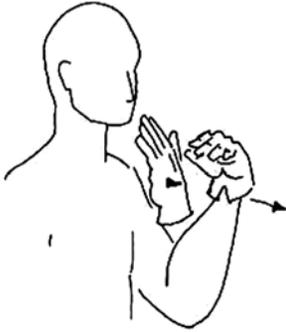


Figure 4a. HIIUMAA (H).

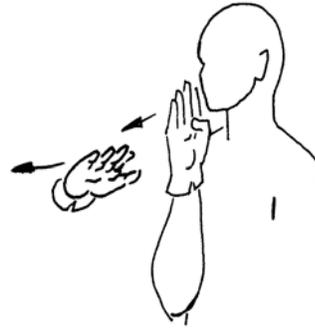


Figure 4b. HIIUMAA.

There are also phonetic N signs like JUUNI [JUNE] and a place name sign NÕMME which use the index finger to point at the nose, used to feel the nasal vibration (Hollman 2010: 39–40).

*Metonymic and Metaphoric or Descriptive Place Name Signs –  
Hidden Stories in Estonian Toponymic Signs*

A name does not usually describe the named object (Päll 2002: 227). Descriptive nature constitutes an organic part of certain name signs. In his research Supalla points out another basic formation method for American personal name signs, namely, the system of descriptive name signs (DNS) (1992: 8). Delaporte further divides descriptive name signs into metonymic and metaphoric name signs (2002: 204–207). The formation of a metonymic place name sign is based on a certain local peculiarity, attribute, feature, etc., of the denotate (i.e. the place that the name sign refers to). The source of creation of toponymic signs may be the history, tradition, buildings, institutions, natural objects, etc., of a particular location. Metonymic name signs apply both the principle characteristic to metonymy – the whole substituted by part of the whole – as well as the comparison underlying the metaphor.

I will begin the analysis of descriptive place names with the toponymic sign for Porkuni village, which is central in Estonian Deaf culture because it is important for Deaf people to mention their school when introducing themselves.<sup>7</sup> In Estonia there are two educational institutions that have provided Deaf children with education for a long time are Porkuni School for the Deaf and Tartu Hiie School. In Estonian deaf culture, Porkuni School stands for community identity of signing deaf people, whereas Tartu School is associated with those deaf or hard of hearing members of Deaf community who focus on spoken language and hearing society. Mention of either Porkuni School or Hiie School may not be significant for a hearing person, in which case, the hearing

person needs a description of the educational institution. Such an explanation is unnecessary for a Deaf person.

There is a difference between the toponymic sign for Porkuni used by younger people and that used by the older generation of Deaf people. For young Deaf people, the toponymic sign for Porkuni is the same as the sign *ÕPILANE* [STUDENT], which is performed near the signer's ear. In the context of the education history of Estonian Deaf people, such a sign is well understood because Porkuni was the location of the School for the Deaf for many decades.<sup>8</sup> The sign used by the older generation is performed using the J handshape near the signer's ear, which is the same (in terms of form, not meaning) as the sign for *HULL* [MAD]. According to the information gained from older Deaf people, and mediated by Estonian Sign Language interpreter Liivi Hollman, this toponymic sign has changed over time. In earlier times, the sign was performed on the top of the head, and consisted of a circular motion of the J handshape above the head (referring to the school uniform cap). Over time both the place of formation and handshape have changed; a new sign has been introduced, although the semantic connection with the school and learning has been preserved.

The toponymic sign for Tallinn, the Estonian capital city, refers to the Viru Gates,<sup>9</sup> and therefore the sign Tallinn is identical with the sign *UKS* [DOOR] or *VÄRAVAD* [GATES] (see Figure 5). The name sign for the university city of Tartu (Figure 6b) refers to the crossed sword and key represented on the coat of arms of the city (Figure 6a).



Figure 5. TALLINN.



Figure 6a. Tartu city coat of arms.



Figure 6b. TARTU.

According to one of the interpretations of the toponymic sign for the seaside resort Pärnu, the splitting movement at the middle of the lips signifies two ancient cities – Old Pärnu and New Pärnu. Another explanation claims that the name sign refers to the narrow shape of Pärnu Bay. I have also come across a third interpretation, in which the toponymic sign is said to indicate the peaceful and calm nature of Pärnu city (Figure 7).

The toponymic sign for Rakvere has an interesting etymology, which is directly related to the heritage of the city. According to the explanation provided by one informant, the name sign imitates a kick from a foot (Figure 8). The Deaf informant added that the toponymic sign is associated with the legend about an ancient Estonian mythological hero, Kalevipoeg. After searching for additional information that would confirm the informant's story, I found the text of the legend about how Rakvere got its name.



Figure 7. PÄRNU.

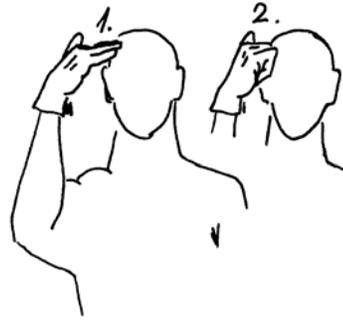


Figure 8. RAKVERE.

Here is the story of how Rakvere town got its name:

In days of yore, Kalevipoeg came home from a battle in Russia, carrying a big sack of gold on his shoulder. By nightfall he reached the location of present-day Rakvere, which was an empty place back then. He put the sack of gold under his head and fell asleep, right in the place where a church stands now. His hair dripped sweat and that created the spring in the current churchyard. Near Torma village close to Rakvere was a hill called Hiidumägi. In ancient times a fiend lived on that hill. He was always a tough opponent and arch enemy of Kalevipoeg. That night he spotted that Kalevipoeg had fallen asleep near his home. But he did not dare to attack Kalevipoeg due to his own weakness, so instead he set his small dog Raki to bark at the hero. Kalevipoeg kicked the puppy, and Raki fell down dead. The body of the dog was left to rot in the place where the fairgrounds are today. That is how Rakvere got its name, i.e. the place where Raki's [similar to first part of toponym Rakvere] blood [in Estonian *veri*, Rakvere] was spilt. (Laugaste, Normann 1999)

The explanation for the toponymic sign for Tamsalu remains unclear (see Figure 9). That place has been important for Estonian Deaf people because it is situated about six kilometres from Porkuni, the former location of the School for the Deaf. The railway station in Tamsalu was considered a milestone by many Deaf students, who returned to their “home away from home” – Porkuni School for Deaf – after days off or school holidays. It is known that earlier the same sign stood for other places as well (for example, Tapa and Viljandi) and it is obviously a descriptive name sign in terms of its form. Apparently this is caused by the lack of distinctive toponymic signs at that time. During the heyday of the oral method, there was little development of signs in Estonian Sign Language and mouthings predominated. In the case of toponymic signs, this means that the same generic sign was used to denote different places, accompanied by a different mouth picture upon articulation of the place name.

There is an amusing story behind the place name sign for Põltsamaa, a small town in central Estonia. The toponymic sign for Põltsamaa is a compound sign (see Figure 10), in which the first, descriptive part refers to a tube, or sucking from a tube (TUUB [TUBE]); and second part (MAA [LAND]) is a translation. Thus Põltsamaa is signed as TUUB+MAA [TUBE+LAND]. This toponymic sign refers to popular and well-known products (Põltsamaa marmalade, drink concentrate, etc.) packaged in tubes for cosmonauts in the agricultural processing plant in Põltsamaa during the Soviet period.

The toponymic sign for Valga incorporates the geographical peculiarity of that place – Valga is situated next to Valka, the city of Estonian neighbour Latvia (Figure 11). Deaf people have also said that the sign refers to the church towers of both cities.



Figure 9. TAMSALU.

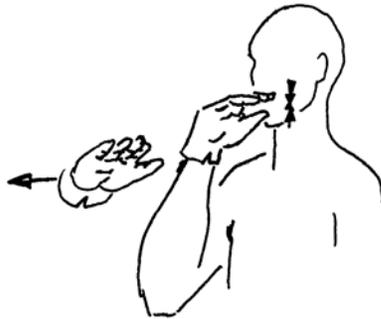


Figure 10. PÕLTSAMAA.

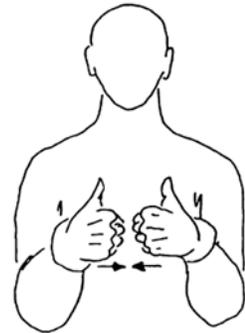


Figure 11. VALGA/VALKA.

The name sign for the picturesque city of Viljandi refers on one hand to a recreation and holiday location: the toponymic sign is the same as the sign LOGELEMA [DAWDLE]. According to another explanation, the toponymic sign resembles the sign PART [DUCK] and refers to Viljandi Lake, where these water fowl can be spotted (Figure 12).

The name sign for Jõhvi – an industrial city in north-east Estonia – refers to the spoil heaps formed as a result of oil-shale mining. The sign is performed by drawing the contour of a spoil heap in the air (see Figure 13).

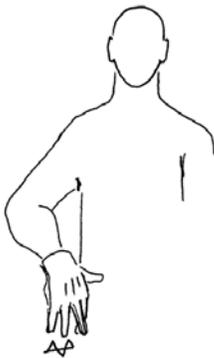


Figure 12. VILJANDI.



Figure 13. JÕHVI.

The background of the toponymic sign for the fishing town Kallaste comes from its location on the shore of Lake Peipsi and from local fishermen. The name sign represents typical fisherman's headwear – a hat with an upturned brim (Figure 14).

The toponymic sign for Pechory/Petseri city situated in Russia near the Estonian border refers to the location of a Russian Orthodox monastery (The Holy Dormition Pskov-Pechory Monastery).<sup>10</sup> This toponymic sign is to make the sign of a cross in the chest area (see Figure 15).

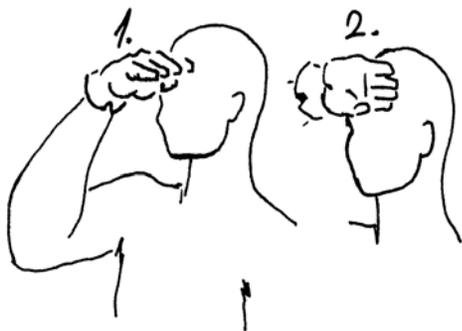


Figure 14. KALLASTE.

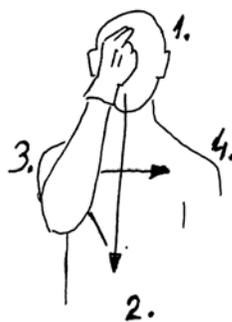


Figure 15. PETSERI.

Based on one explanation, the toponymic sign for Maardu, a town in the vicinity of the Estonian capital city Tallinn, refers to the tall ever-smoking chimneys found in this industrial area (Figure 16). According to another explanation the toponymic sign for Maardu refers to a phosphorite quarry and, more specifically, to the glimmer of phosphorite in the dark.

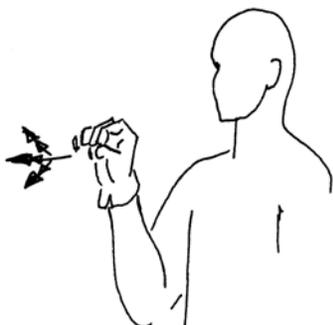


Figure 16. MAARDU.

As a comparison, it should be mentioned that descriptive toponymic signs are also used by American Deaf people. For example, California is signed in the same way as GOLD, referring obviously to the gold rush in the 19th century (Rutherford 1993: 129). British Deaf people also use descriptive toponymic signs. Name sign for Derby refers to a Ram (through association with the local football team, the Derby Rams), Sheffield is signed as KNIFE, referring to the local cutlery industry, Nottingham is signed as BOW/ARROW, which are known attributes of Robin Hood, the legendary outlaw who lived in that area in the past (Sutton-Spence, Woll 1999: 233).

According to Supalla there are name signs that combine both initials and descriptiveness. They are regarded as non-traditional in American Sign Language, because in earlier decades American Deaf people used either expressly arbitrary or descriptive methods of formation (Supalla 1992: 17). Supalla associates the emergence of non-traditional name signs with the interest of hearing people in American Sign Language. Namely, hearing people studying the sign language look for some meaning behind every sign. Deaf people started to denote hearing people with personal signs of such a type to differentiate them from their own community.

Anna Mindess, an experienced sign language interpreter and researcher of American Deaf culture, argues that the descriptive initialised name sign type, which refers to the hobby, haircut, behaviour or some other feature of that person, is more recent than the traditional name type that contained only the initial. Since the last decades of the 20th century there has been a tendency towards combining the arbitrary and descriptive systems: when describing someone, the name sign also incorporates the initial (Mindess 1990: 14–15).

Delaporte describes the hybrid name signs in French Sign Language, referring to them as initialised metonymic name signs (in French *noms métonymes initialisés*) (2002: 214). He also considers the mixed type as the outcome of cultural contact between hearing and Deaf people.

There are two such toponymic signs present in my material (for example, NARVA – handshape for N and the location of the city at the state border). The origin of the mixed name sign type in Estonian Sign Language is not clear. Possible sources of influence may include hearing society. After studying American name signs, Anna Mindess concluded that the creation of mixed name signs by local Deaf people occurred under the influence of hearing people (Mindess 1990: 15). The popularity of studying sign languages has increased among hearing people in Estonia as well. Hearing people wish to be granted their own personal name sign. The hearing people who are unfamiliar with Deaf culture and the rules of sign language approach the Deaf community with their own vision of sign language, presuming that every sign *depicts* or *imitates* something. This can lead to the creation of name signs that contain a descriptive component in addition to the initial letter handshape. Mindess has pointed out two reasons why Deaf Americans combine these types of name signs. Firstly, this hybrid personal name sign refers the hearing people as outsiders of the Deaf community and, secondly, it is believed that a descriptive name sign is easier to remember (Mindess 1990: 15).

In Estonian Sign Language there are few initialised descriptive toponymic signs in which the initial of the name is joined with a feature (such as location) of the denotate. Such hybrid signs are more frequently found among personal name signs. This type of descriptive name sign is performed by the relevant finger-spelling (handshape) or initial. For example, the toponymic sign for Narva city at the eastern border of Estonia is performed so that the handshape for N points to the location of the city at the Estonian-Russian border (Figure 17).

Name sign for Keila, a small town in North Estonia, can be considered a similar toponymic sign (Figure 18). According to one explanation this refers to a local enterprise Keila Kaabel. According to another opinion this toponymic sign is associated with

Keila health centre, or more specifically with the water slide pipe in the swimming pool. The place name contains initial K.

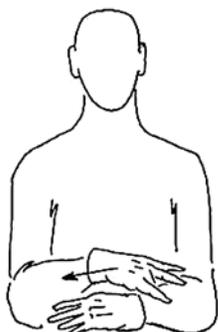


Figure 17. NARVA.



Figure 18. KEILA.

#### *Loan or Translated Place Name Signs*

There is a category of place name signs that are derived from the Estonian meaning of the denotate. Such toponymic signs are essentially either total or partial homonyms with regard to the Estonian (written) place name.

There are at least two explanations available for the name of Tapa, a town in north Estonia. One of them links the name sign with Estonian verb *tapma* (to kill). According to the other explanation the name sign is the same as the sign JAAM [STATION], which refers to Tapa town as a railway junction of national importance (Figure 19). In that case this sign should be classified as a descriptive, metonymic toponymic sign.

The toponymic sign for summer resort Aegviidu is conveyed by a sign that can be translated into Estonian as: AEG/PALJU AEGA OLEMA [TIME/TO HAVE LOTS OF TIME] (Figure 20). Obviously the signers have derived this toponymic sign from the Estonian written verb *aega viitma* (to spend time).

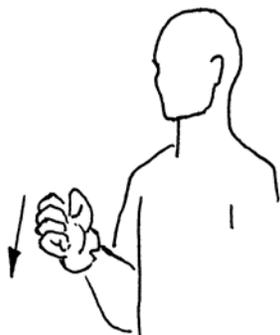


Figure 19. TAPA.



Figure 20. AEGVIIDU.

The creation of the toponymic sign for Paide is based on an association between the town name Paide and the Estonian word *pai* (caress). Place name sign PAI [CARESS] imitates caressing (Figure 21). Local Deaf people have associated the place name of Jõgeva – a town situated in East Estonia – with the word ‘river’ and in Estonian Sign Language this town is marked by a toponymic sign JÕGI [RIVER] (Figure 22).



Figure 21. PAIDE.



Figure 22. JÕGEVA.

The name sign for the south Estonian town of Võru is based on the assumed meaning of the Estonian place name. It has been translated into Estonian Sign Language and relevant toponymic sign is [KÄE] VÕRU [BRACELET] (Figure 23).

In the case of partial homonyms, a name sign is derived from the meaning of the word similar to the written place name. For instance, members of the Deaf community associate the town name of Põlva with the Estonian word *põlv* (knee). That is how this small town was given the name sign PÕLV [KNEE] (Figure 24).



Figure 23. VÕRU.



Figure 24. PÕLVA.

This is similar to the following example, where a Deaf person has combined the denotate, the place name Tõrva, and the word stem *tõrv* (tar). Thus, this small town is designated in Estonian Sign Language by the toponymic sign TÕRV[AMA] [TO TAR] (Figure 25).

According to one interpretation of the name sign for Kärddla, the toponymic sign for this central town in Hiiumaa – second largest island in Estonia – is derived from its written name in Estonian. Apparently it has been perceived as similar to the word *kärn* (scab), which lead to its toponymic sign KÄRN [SCAB] (Figure 26).

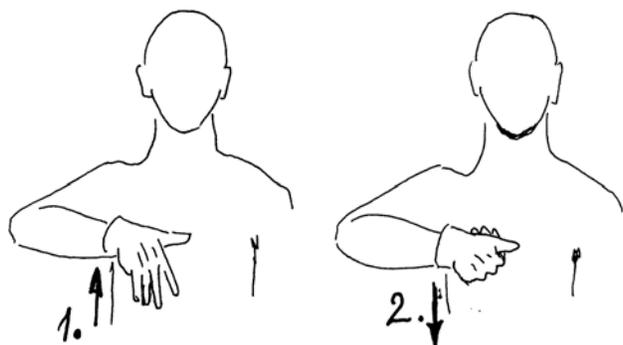


Figure 25. TÖRVA.

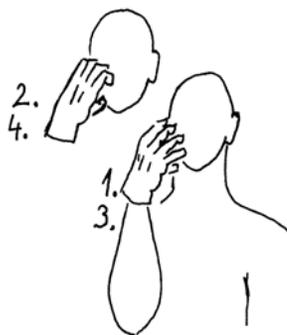


Figure 26. KÄRDLA.

For Deaf people, the written town name Rāpina seemed similar to written adjective *rāpane* (filthy). Hence Rāpina is signed in the same way as RĀPANE [FILTHY].

The toponymic sign for Saaremaa – largest island in Estonia – is formed in Estonian Sign Language as the translation equivalent of the compound place name Saaremaa. This toponymic sign consists of signs SAAR+MAA [ISLAND+LAND] (Figure 27). The central point in Saaremaa, the city of Kuressaare, derived its place name sign from the translation equivalent of its Estonian place name, i.e. from words *kurg/kure+saar* (crane+island). The toponymic sign consists of a compound sign KURG+SAAR [CRANE+ISLAND], whereas the sign KURG [CRANE] resembles the long beak of the bird (Figure 28).

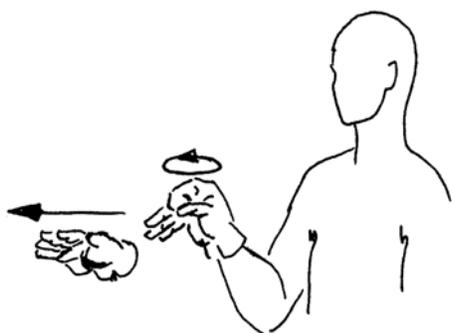


Figure 27. SAAREMAA.

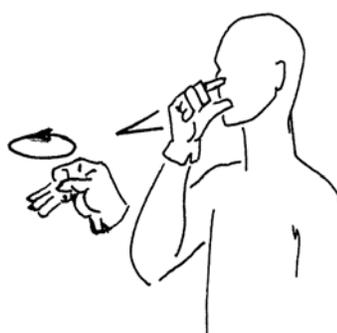


Figure 28. KURESSAARE.

The formation of the toponymic sign for the small island of Muhu – MUHK+SAAR [BUMP+ISLAND] is similar to the previous example. A name sign consisting of two

signs was created as a translation equivalent of the Estonian words *muhk* (bump) and *saar* (island) (Figure 29). The toponymic sign for Aegna islet is also signed as a translation equivalent to the Estonian name. The sign consists of two signs, the first sign is AEG [TIME], the second sign is SAAR [ISLAND], i.e. AEG+SAAR [TIME+ISLAND] (Figure 30). The same formation method was also used in the toponymic sign for Aegviidu (Figure 20). Apparently these two toponymic signs have preserved an older version of the sign AEG [TIME] as, currently, a different sign is used in Estonian Sign Language (a clockwise movement of the J handshape in front of the signer).

An identical method of formation is also used in names for other Estonian islands. For instance, Naissaar islet is denoted in Estonian Sign Language by a compound sign consisting of the parts of the Estonian compound name *naine* (woman) and *saar* (island), which are translated into Estonian Sign Language. Thus the toponymic sign is performed as NAINES+SAAR [WOMAN+ISLAND] (Figure 31).

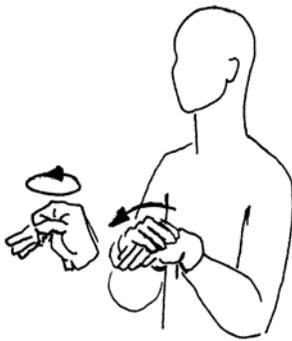


Figure 29. MUHU SAAR.



Figure 30. AEGNA SAAR.



Figure 31. NAISSAAR.

A similar method of name creation – replacement of the words in a spoken language with translation equivalents in a sign language – is also used in other European national sign languages, and also in Chinese Sign Language.

Analogous examples are found in the creation of person-denoting signs, where signs are derived from similar written words. For instance, a Deaf Swede with the surname Franklin was given the name sign FRANKRIKE, or France, in translation (Hedberg 1994: 422). A Deaf French person called Soler was given the name sign SOLEIL, or sun (Delaporte 2002: 216).

A Chinese Deaf student with surname Huang was given the name sign meaning yellow. A student with the given name Qin obtained the personal name sign piano (Yau, He 1990: 245).

Similar examples can also be found among Estonian personal name signs. A Deaf person with the surname Kuusk (spruce) was obviously given the name sign KUUSK [SPRUCE] based on spruce. A Deaf woman with the given name Linda received the name sign LIND [BIRD]. A Deaf person with the surname Konts, was given a name sign KONKS [HOOK], etc. (Paaes 2010: 324–325).

The summary below (Table 2 on p. 50) contains Estonian translations and the meanings of all 35 toponymic signs discussed in this article.

## SUMMARY

It is typical for Deaf people to settle in cities and other larger urban communities – although they reside in rural areas as well – where they join sign language communities. For that reason toponymic signs have been created for several cities in Estonia and also for places with which Deaf people have personal relationships (such as places of residence, work or school).

The creation of name signs is an authentic, Deaf-specific tradition, which is characteristic to Deaf communities of different nationalities. Place name signs are also part of Deaf signlore and represent minor forms of Deaf folklore. Toponymic signs also form a separate lexical group in sign languages, which can be studied and analysed in the framework of toponymy.

The form, formation methods and practical use of toponymic signs vary by community. The main methods of Estonian place name sign formation are the following: 1) initialised or arbitrary place name signs, 2) phonetic place name signs, 3) metonymic and metaphoric or descriptive place name signs, 4) initialised metonymic and metaphoric place name signs, 5) loan or translated place name signs.

Research with the main emphasis on personal name signs has revealed that descriptive name signs predominate in European sign languages. This paper confirms that this statement is also true for Estonian Sign Language, because fifteen of the 35 analysed toponymic signs were descriptive. The etymology of one toponymic sign (Tamsalu) remained unclear. Two toponymic signs belonged to the mixed type, in which both descriptiveness and arbitrariness were intertwined. Three were phonetic toponymic signs; two of these phonetic signs were additionally also translations. Name formation by translation or loans is also fruitful: there were twelve such place name signs. Three toponymic signs were initialised, involving alphabetical handshapes.

The analysis of toponymic signs helps us to understand the derivation methods and sources of place names in sign language. The study of Estonian toponymic signs reveals the connections between Estonian Sign Language and Estonian spoken language. In an initialised toponymic sign, the initial letter of the toponym in Estonian is shown (for example, the toponymic sign for the town of Elva is performed by the handshape for E). Phonetic name signs are based on a specific sound in the spoken-language toponym. The signed toponym consists of a methodical handshape marking the specific sound or phoneme, and the mouth picture (for example, Haapsalu). Translation or loan toponymic signs are based on the written form of the Estonian place name (for example, Kuressaare – *kurg+saar* (crane+island) – KURG+SAAR).

In Deaf culture the visual resemblance is very important and therefore words that are similar in form, but different in meaning, can be associated in place name sign creation. In this way Deaf signers create translated toponymic signs in which the signed equivalent is a partial homonym of the written toponym (for example, Põlva – *põlv* (knee) – PÕLV, Tõrva – *tõrva(ma)* (tar) – TÕRV(AMA), Paide – *pai(tama)* (caress) – PAI, PAITAMA). Such language creation may seem funny to hearing people, but it is an efficient name creation method for the Deaf.

There are different explanations for the meanings of descriptive name signs circulating in Estonian Deaf community. Several metonymic and metaphoric place signs reflect the distinctive features of the landscape of the place in question (Jõhvi – spoil heaps

caused by oil shale mining), institutions related with culture and history (Pechory/Petseri – the monastery, Porkuni – the school for the Deaf), buildings (Tallinn – the Viru Gates), place lore (Rakvere – an explanatory legend about how the town got its name, from the national epic Kalevipoeg) or some attribute associated with the place (Põltsamaa – tube marmalade products named Põltsamaa marmelaad or Kosmos made for cosmonauts; Tartu – the coat of arms (the sword and key) of the city of Tartu). Such local features have been fixed in the memory of the Deaf community and they come to the fore in place name signs.

The analysis of place-denoting signs as creative linguistic forms of signlore reveals the connections between Deaf history and heritage, the culture of the Deaf and hearing people and the tradition and the identity of the Deaf community. Such examples of memory interlacing with the landscape are provided by descriptive toponymic signs, which offer different possibilities for interpretation. Thus, the toponymic sign of Porkuni highlights the importance of the place in the cultural and educational landscape of Estonian Deaf people. As for the phonetic toponymic signs (for example, Hiiumaa), we can interpret them as a reference to the oral method used for teaching speech in Deaf education. In this way the historical role of hearing people in arranging the lives of those using sign language, power relations and close contact between sign language and spoken language are always apparent in Deaf culture. Phonemic toponymic signs resemble significant metaphors for majority culture, such as voice, speaking and hearing.

The analysis of source materials shows that the descriptive method is the most preferred way of creating toponymic signs in the Estonian Deaf community, although other formation patterns are used as well. Considering that the source material for this article was of a limited amount, and covered only a part of the entire body of toponymic signs in Estonian Sign Language, the recording of toponymic signs should be continued. Estonian Sign Language is a developing language in which new toponymic signs emerge and need documenting.

In the context of Deaf folklore place name signs are valuable source with which to study the name-lore of Estonian Deaf people. In addition to their linguistic role, place name signs also represent an important cultural and social meaning in the community's memory.

#### *Acknowledgements*

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Table 1. Categories and sources of Estonian place name signs.

Categories	Types	Sources	
<b>arbitrary name sign (A)</b>	one initial A1	written place name	initial of written place name
	Finger-spelled A2	written place name	short place name (contains to 3 letters)
<b>phonological name sign (P)</b>	methodical handshape P1	sound in spoken place name	H sound
	methodical handshape + total homonym P2/L1	sound in spoken place name + written place name	H sound + written compound place name
	methodical handshape + partial homonym P3/L2	sound in spoken place name + written place name	H sound + written compound place name
<b>descriptive name sign (D)</b>	D	local peculiarity of place	geographical position
			milieu
			industry
			product
			institution
			building
			symbolic of place
			headwear
			place heritage
unclear source			
<b>initialised-descriptive name sign (AD)</b>	one initial + descriptive A1/D	written place name + local peculiarity of place	initial N of written place name + geographical position
			initial K of written place name + well known institution at location
<b>loan/borrowed name sign (L)</b>	total homonym L1	written place name	place name interpretation
	partial homonym L2	written place name	place name interpretation

Table 2. List of toponymic signs. Categories, translations and explanations.

Categories and types	Translation of Estonian toponymic signs into Estonian	Explanation
A1	initial E of written place name	E handshape (Elva)
A2	written place name	finger-spelled N-Õ-O; A-L-A (Nõo, Ala)
P1	H sound in place name	methodical handshape (Haapsalu)
P2/L1	H sound + JÄRV [LAKE] or MAA [LAND]	methodical handshape + translation into Estonian Sign Language (Kohtla-Järve, Hiiumaa)
P3/L1	H sound in place name + MAA [LAND]	modified methodical handshape + translation into Estonian Sign Language (Hiiumaa)
D	KOOLIMÜTS [SCHOOL CAP] → ÕPILANE [STUDENT]	Porkuni School for Deaf (Porkuni)
	UKS, VÄRAV [DOOR, GATE]	The Viru Gates (Tallinn)
	VÕTI+MÕÕK [KEY+SWORD]	coat of arms of Tartu city (Tartu)
	KITSAS LAHT [NARROW BAY], VAIKNE LINN [PEACEFUL CITY], JAGATUD LINN [DIVIDED CITY]	1. shape of Pärnu Bay, 2. milieu (peaceful city) (Pärnu), 3. city history (Old and New Pärnu)
	JALALÖÖK [FOOT KICK]	local tradition, legend of Kalevipoeg (Rakvere)
	meaning is unclear	(Tamsalu) in earlier times other places as well, such as Tapa, Viljandi, etc.
	TUUBITOIT [TUBE PRODUCTS]	cosmonaut packaged products Põltsamaa marmelaad, Kosmos (Põltsamaa)
	KÕRVUTIOLEVAD LINNAD [ADJACENT CITIES], KIRIKUTORNID [CHURCH TOWERS]	adjacent cities in neighbouring countries Estonia and Latvia, also the church towers of both cities (Valga/Valka)
	LOGELEMA [DAWDLE], JÄRV/PARDID [LAKE/DUCKS]	1. good place for holiday, 2. lake and ducks swimming on the lake (Viljandi)
	MÄGI [MOUNTAIN]	spoil heaps created due to mining (Jõhvi)
	KALURIMÜTS [FISHERMAN'S HAT]	headwear with upturned rim, characteristic of fishermen on the shore of Lake Peipsi (Kallaste)
	RISTIMÄRK [CROSS]	monastery (Petseri/Pechory)
	A1/D	initial N of written place name + PIIR [BORDER]
A1/D	initial K of written place name + VEELIUTORU/JUHTMED [WATER SLIDE PIPE/CABLES]	1. K handshape + health centre, 2. K handshape + enterprise Keila Kaabel (Keila)

L1	TAPMA [TO KILL]	1. verb <i>tapma</i> (to kill) (Tapa)
	(KÄE)VÕRU [BRACELET]	noun ( <i>käe</i> ) <i>võru</i> (bracelet) (Võru)
	SAAR+MAA [ISLAND+LAND]	nouns <i>saar</i> (island), <i>maa</i> (land) (Saaremaa island)
	KURG+SAAR [CRANE+ISLAND]	nouns <i>kurg</i> (crane), <i>saar</i> (island) (Kuressaare)
	MUHK+SAAR [BUMP+ISLAND]	nouns <i>muhk</i> (bump), <i>saar</i> (island) (Muhu islet)
	NAIN+SAAR [WOMAN+ISLAND]	nouns <i>naine</i> (woman), <i>saar</i> (island) (Naissaar islet)
L2	AEG [TIME]	noun <i>aeg</i> (time) (Aegviidu)
	PAI, PAITAMA [CARESS]	noun <i>pai</i> (caress)
	JÕGI [RIVER]	noun <i>jõgi</i> (river) (Jõgeva)
	PÕLV [KNEE]	noun <i>põlv</i> (knee) (Põlva)
	TÕRV(AMA) [(TO) TAR]	noun <i>tõrv</i> (tar) (Tõrva)
	AEG (PALJU AEGA)+SAAR [TIME (LOTS OF TIME)+ISLAND]	noun <i>aeg</i> (time) (Aegna islet)

## NOTES

1 The use of the uppercase Deaf in this article (as opposed to deaf) is a convention that refers to this community's cultural and linguistic identity, marking Deaf people as a minority (the Sign Language community).

2 The following does not concern the names of countries and cities around the world, but I would like to draw attention to the fact that certain toponymic signs for foreign countries and cities are loans from the sign language of the relevant country: for example, SOOME [FINLAND] is signed identically with the sign used by Finnish Deaf people, HAMBURG is signed identically with the sign used by German Deaf people, etc. (see also Sutton-Spence, Woll 1999: 233). This principle has also been followed on the CD issued by the European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters, which contains name signs for countries in Europe, their capitals and main cities. In the context of International Signs, the World Federation of the Deaf has issued a publication of worldwide name signs (see *Paises-Sinais*). Estonian place name signs have been published on a CD titled *E-viiped. Maailm ja Eesti*.

3 The relevant terms of name sign in other languages are *Namengebärde* in German, *le nom-signé* in French, *viittomanimi* and *henkilöviittoma* (personal name sign) in Finnish.

4 The iconic and arbitrary nature of the form of the sign has been studied by several linguists (see further Laipea 2006: 27–31; Hollman 2010: 37–40). There are signs (signifiers) that have formal resemblance to the signified (referent). These signs are called *iconic* signs. At the same time there are numerous signs that have no formal similarity to the signified or signs where the signified is difficult to detect. Such signs are called arbitrary. In classifications of name signs researchers have used the following terms: arbitrary, initialised, internally-motivated, descriptive, externally-motivated, metonymic (for example, Supalla 1992; McKee, McKee 2000; Delaporte 2002).

5 Classifier (or *proform*) is a morpheme that, in the context of a meaningful sign, conveys a visually perceived quality of the referent – such as general form, direction of movement, quantity or placement (Laipea 2006: 35).

6 When making phonemic signs, the sign is supplemented by a mouthing, which is crucial for understanding the meaning of the sign. However, a problem for the signs based on the H-phoneme is that the hand movement related to phonetics may hide the mouthing, which is crucial for understanding the sign – although the toponymic signs for Haapsalu, Hiiumaa and Kohtla-Järve (as well as other signs containing the H sound) are signed in the area below the lips. In order to provide better view of the mouth, a similar hand movement is used when signing these place names, which often makes the understanding of these signs even more difficult.

7 Mention of the school in self-introduction is a universal feature in Deaf culture. A comparison may be drawn with a school in Mikkeli, Finland. In the Finnish Deaf community this school is referred to as Mikkeli-School and a Deaf conversation partner is aware of the nature of this educational institution (it was also mentioned by Raija Roslöf, Finnish Sign Language interpreter and lector at Diaconia University of Applied Sciences (Diak) in her lecture held in the Faculty of Education of the University of Tartu on 26th September 2007). The name of the school is insignificant for hearing people, and they usually need further explanation about the background of the educational institution. In Deaf culture, mention of particular school provides the Deaf communication partner with background knowledge, creates an emotional bond, and contributes to orientation in the social network of the community. A similar situation in hearing culture is found in mentioning one's profession or workplace (see also Rutherford 1993: 130).

8 Deaf children studied in Porkuni between 1924 and 2001. The private school for deaf children, established in Vändra in 1866, became a state school during the early years of the Republic of Estonia. Its remote location and limited premises led to the point where it was impossible to continue education in Vändra and the school was transferred to Porkuni Manor in 1924. Due to the moving process, and repairs and reconstruction to the manor premises, the school was officially opened in 1925. Deaf children are also taught at Helen School in Tallinn and Hiie School in Tartu, which are special education institutions, and they may also attend mainstream schools. Russian Deaf pupils attend Paju Gymnasium in Narva.

9 The Viru Gates were built in the 14th century. Existing towers represent only part of the original structure. The Viru Gates are situated in the east section of the city wall and the main tower was built in its original form between 1345 and 1355. Today the Viru Gates represent one of the entrances to the Old Town, opening towards Viru Street, which features many shops and restaurants.

10 The Holy Dormition Pskov-Pechory monastery is located 50 kilometres to the west of the city of Pskov, near the border with Estonia. In 1920 the town of Pechory (in Estonian: *Petseri*), in accordance with the Tartu Agreement, was given to Estonia, and the monastery found itself outside Russia (The Holy Dormition Pskov-Caves Monastery). *Petseri* County (in Estonian: *Petserimaa*) was a former county of Estonia established in 1920. Since 1944, however, most of the county has been administered as part of Pskov Oblast, first by the Russian SFSR and then, from 1991, by Russian Federation.

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