

## An Analysis of Sign Language Features Used by Makkari's Character in *Eternals* Movie (2021)

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### Abstract:

This article presents an analysis of the sign language features used by the character Makkari in the *Eternals* movie. As the first deaf superhero in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Makkari's portrayal offers a significant representation of the deaf community. The film showcases a blend of American Sign Language (ASL) and unique gestures that reflect her personality and abilities. This study focuses on the features of sign language used by Makkari to communicate with people in the film. The approach used in this article is the qualitative approach and content analysis design. Through her use of sign language, the movie emphasizes the importance of representation and the richness of diverse forms of communication, ultimately enriching the narrative and fostering a deeper connection with audiences. This article can also make people get more understand sign language and how to use sign language, moreover this research could bring awareness to communicating with deaf people.

**Keywords:** Sign language; Features of sign language; *Eternals* Movie

### Abstrak:

Artikel ini menyajikan analisis fitur bahasa isyarat yang digunakan oleh karakter Makkari dalam film *Eternals*. Sebagai superhero tunarungu pertama di Marvel Cinematic Universe, penggambaran Makkari menawarkan representasi signifikan dari komunitas tunarungu. Film ini menampilkan perpaduan Bahasa Isyarat Amerika (ASL) dan gerak tubuh unik yang mencerminkan kepribadian dan kemampuannya. Penelitian ini berfokus pada ciri-ciri bahasa isyarat yang digunakan Makkari untuk berkomunikasi dengan orang-orang dalam film tersebut. Pendekatan yang digunakan dalam artikel ini adalah pendekatan kualitatif dan desain analisis isi. Melalui penggunaan bahasa isyaratnya, film ini menekankan pentingnya representasi dan kekayaan beragam bentuk komunikasi, yang pada akhirnya memperkaya narasi dan membina hubungan yang lebih dalam dengan penonton. Artikel ini juga dapat membuat masyarakat lebih memahami bahasa isyarat dan cara menggunakan bahasa isyarat, bahkan penelitian ini dapat menyadarkan masyarakat dalam berkomunikasi dengan penyandang tunarungu.

**Kata kunci:** Bahasa isyarat; Ciri – ciri bahasa isyarat; Film *Eternals*

## INTRODUCTION

Language is an important tool used by human in their daily life as a means to convey information and to express what they want and what they feel. The use of language can

be through verbal and non-verbal, such as using sounds, movements and signals that have patterns and meanings.

Sharofiddinov states that “Language and its function play the role of communication, cognition, development of thinking, and so on. The role of language is very important both for the individual and for society as a whole in science” (Yashnar & Ogli, 2020). From the quotation we can conclude that language has an important role in human life, with language humans can interact with each other through communicating with language and can express what they want and feel.

Language delivery encompasses two primary types of communication. First is verbal communication, refers to the spoken and written means of expressing thoughts, ideas, emotions, and information. Verbal communication refers to the expression of thoughts, ideas, emotions, and information through spoken and written language (Surahman et al., 2023). In contrast, nonverbal communication includes gestures and body language that convey meaning through uniform actions or specific language codes. Sign language, a subset of nonverbal communication, is primarily used by deaf or mute individuals to engage with their social surroundings.

Sign language is a naturally evolving language that emerged from the necessity for communication within deaf communities. It operates in a visual-gesture modality, primarily utilizing the hands, facial expressions, and upper body. Similar to other languages, sign language has experienced numerous changes throughout its history (Roseph Nendauni & Nendauni, 2021). There are various sign languages that differ from one country to another, and one specific type is American Sign Language (ASL). Sign language not only found in people directly in real life, it is also can be found in movie. This article will investigate the features of sign language in *Eternals* movie.

Research in sign language studies has expanded significantly over the past few decades, encompassing various aspects of this unique form of communication. One key area of study focuses on the linguistic status of sign languages, with researchers like Sandler & Lillo-Martin (2006) demonstrating that sign languages possess complex grammatical structures comparable to spoken languages. The acquisition of sign language by deaf children has also been a subject of intense investigation, with studies by Mayberry & Kluender (2018) revealing that early exposure to sign language is crucial for optimal

language development. Neuroscientific research, such as that conducted by Emmorey (2002), has shown that the processing of sign language activates similar brain regions to those used in spoken language processing, supporting the idea that the human brain is adaptable to different modalities of language. Sociolinguistic aspects of sign language use have been explored by researchers like Lucas & Valli (1992), who have examined how factors such as age, region, and social class influence sign language variation. Finally, the use of sign language in media and entertainment has gained attention, with studies like those by Schuchman (1989) analyzing the representation of deaf characters and sign language in film and television.

The theoretical framework of sign language has been extensively developed over the past few decades. Stokoe's groundbreaking work in the 1960s established that sign languages, like spoken languages, have phonological, morphological, and syntactic structures (Stokoe, 2005). This led to the recognition of sign languages as full-fledged natural languages. More recent research has focused on the unique aspects of sign language linguistics, such as the use of space for grammatical purposes and the simultaneous use of manual and non-manual features to convey meaning (Sandler & Lillo-Martin, 2006). These studies have not only advanced our understanding of sign languages but have also provided insights into the nature of human language as a whole. For instance, Meier (2002) has explored how the visual-gestural modality of sign languages influences their structure and acquisition, offering new perspectives on language universals and the cognitive foundations of language.

Based on this background explanation, the researcher chooses to analysis of sign language in this article through the features of American sign language used by Makkari as the one and only deaf character in *Eternals* movie whereas the aims to describe and interpret the sign language contained in this movie itself.

### **Research Problem**

1. What sign of language features does the character Makkari use in the film *Eternals*, and how do these features reflect the characters' identity and abilities?
2. Why is the representation of Makkari's sign language significant for the deaf community, and how does it contribute to broader awareness and understanding of diverse forms of communication in media?

## **Problem Significance**

This research has important significance because Makkari, as the first deaf superhero character in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, provides crucial representation for the deaf community. By analyzing the features of sign language used, this research not only reveals the effectiveness of sign language as a communication tool, but also how it enriches film narratives and creates an emotional connection with the audience. In addition, this research contributes to a broader understanding of the importance of inclusive representation in the media, challenging stereotypes, and increasing awareness of features such as hand shape, palm orientation, movement, and non-manual awareness of the diversity of ways of communication. Analysis of sign languages also strengthens the argument that sign language is a complex and valid language, equivalent to spoken language. These findings can serve as a basis for film developers to pay more attention to aspects of representation, encouraging the integration of diverse cultural elements in film narratives in the future.

## **Research Gap**

Although research on sign language and the representation of the deaf community in media has grown, there is still a lack of in-depth analysis of the use of sign language in the context of superhero films, particularly in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Most previous studies have focused more on linguistic aspects of sign languages in general or on representation of the deaf in other forms of media, such as television and theater. There has been no research that especially explores the features of sign language used by superhero characters, which have a significant impact on narrative and character development. In addition, this research has not fully examined how Makkari's representation in *Eternals* influences audience perceptions of sign language and the deaf community. Thus, this research aims to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of the sign language features used by Makkari and their implications for representation and communication in films.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Sign Language**

Sign language serves as a unique means of communication that addresses specific psychological needs, using the hands, arms, and facial expressions for expression, while

comprehension relies on visual perception. Sign languages are fully developed languages with their own grammar and syntax. Researchers like Stokoe were pioneers in establishing that American Sign Language (ASL) is a legitimate language. Stokoe's work demonstrated that sign languages have distinct phonological, morphological, and syntactic structures (Stokoe, 2005)

All sign languages possess a lexicon, grammatical structures, derivational morphology, phonology, syntax, and semantics. There are numerous types of sign language, each influenced by the country of origin. One example is American Sign Language (ASL).

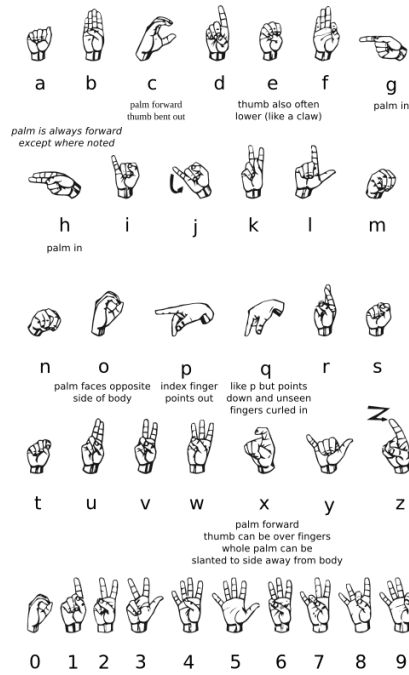
### **Fundamental Aspects of Sign Language Research**

Research has proven that sign language is a complete natural language with complex linguistic structures, where Sandler & Lillo-Martin (2006) demonstrated that sign language has phonological, morphological, and syntactic components comparable to spoken language. Regarding its acquisition, Mayberry & Kluender (2018) found that early exposure to sign language is essential for optimal language development in deaf children. In terms of neural translation, Emmorey (2002) revealed that language transcription activates areas of the brain similar to those used in spoken language translation. Sociolinguistic aspects have also been studied by Lucas & Valli (1992) who examined how factors such as age, region, and social class affect sign language variations. Meanwhile, in the context of media and entertainment, Schuchman (1989) analyzed the depiction of deaf individuals and the use of sign language in films and television, which is important for understanding the impact of media representation on public perceptions of deaf culture and sign language.

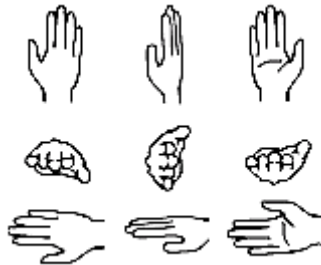
### **The Features of American Sign Language**

American Sign Language (ASL) has distinct features, particularly its components. These were first studied by Mr. William Stokoe in 1960. Stokoe, an American linguist and a longtime professor at Gallaudet University, was instrumental in recognizing ASL as a legitimate language. Gallaudet University is the first institution dedicated to sign language studies for individuals who are deaf or have hearing and speech disabilities.

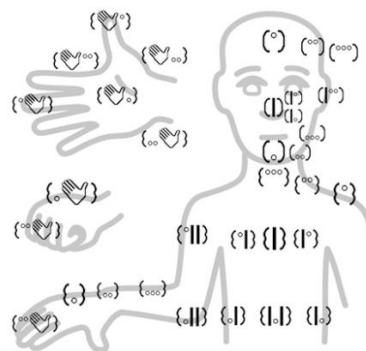
## Hand shape



## Palm orientation



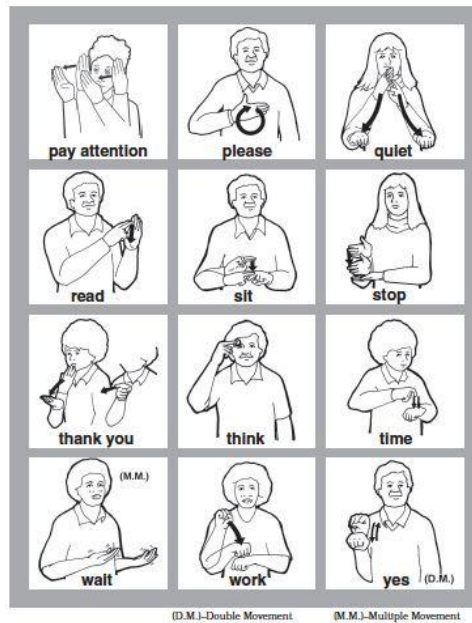
## Location



### *Non-manual features*

These features involve using various parts of the body, including the hands, eyes, mouth, cheeks, face, and head to convey meaning.

#### *Movements*



### **Movie**

A movie is a form of visual communication that combines moving images and sound to tell stories, allowing students to both see and hear the narrative directly (Kadek et al., 2022). From the explanation, communication is an important element in a movie because it brings the story to life and helps the audience connect with the narrative. Communication can also evolve depending on the plot or progression of the story. Therefore, communication is one of the elements most frequently studied by researchers.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Research Design**

The researchers used a qualitative content analysis design. Qualitative content analysis is defined as a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through a systematic classification process involving coding and identifying themes or patterns. This method focuses on understanding the characteristics of language as a communication, paying attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This study aimed to examine the specific features of sign language used by Makkari in the movie. The researchers employed a qualitative content

analysis design, as this approach was suitable for describing and interpreting Makkari's process of acquiring and engaging with the language in *Eternals movie*.

## **Research Instruments**

### ***Data and data sources***

The data is provided in the form of scripts and scenes featuring sign language. The source of this data is the *Eternals* movie. The film as directed by Chloé Zhao, release date to February 12, 2021.

## **Research Procedure**

### ***Data collection***

As qualitative research, the researchers followed several steps to collect the data. First, the researchers carefully watched the film. Next, the researchers engaged in a process of observation to gather and document the data related to the features of sign language. Then, the researchers identified the different type of sign language features used by Makkari. Finally, the researchers analyzed how Makkari utilized these sign language features to communicate with other characters in the movie.

### ***Data Analysis***

The data analysis process is outlined in several steps. First, the researchers identified the selected data. Once the researchers had gathered all relevant information from the film, the researchers began to pinpoint the features of sign language used by Makkari to convey her intended meanings, such as hand shape, movement, location, palm orientation, and non-manual features. Second, the researchers established coding categories. In this phase, the researchers chose the identified data and organized it into various categories of sign language utilized by Makkari, along with the meanings of those signs. This classification took the form of a paragraph that included the sign language features, screen captures, dialogue from conversations, and specific scenes from the film. Third, the researchers coded the content. After collecting and organizing the data, the researchers analyzed how Makkari used sign language. The researchers code based on timestamps from the film and the types of sign language features to be examined. Fourth, the researchers checked for validity and reliability. This step involved verifying the data to ensure its accuracy, correlating the inferences with the collected data to arrive at valid conclusions and detailed explanations. Fifth, the researchers analyzed and presented the results. His steps involved using a manual of sign language features to classify the data according to these features

and to explain how each piece of data fit into the classification. The results were presented in a narrative format that described how the data was categorized within the sign language features, without excessive definitions from external sources.

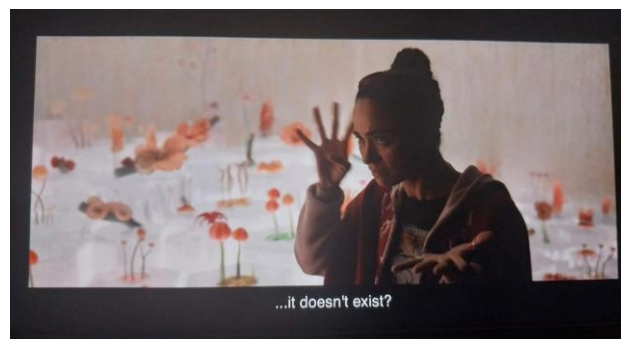
## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This part presents the researchers findings and discusses the results of the analysis. It focuses on the features of American Sign Language used by Makkari and the representation of Makkari's sign language is highly significant for the deaf community and for understanding various forms of communication in media, highlighting the importance of inclusivity and diversity in the film *Eternals*.

### Result

#### *Hand Shape*

Hand shape it's literally the shape of your hand.



#### Scene (1: 03: 30)

- Sprite : Is that the Albony Blade?  
Thena : Excalibur  
Sprite : Arthur always did have a crush on you.  
Makkari : So you mean I've been waiting for centuries to go back to Olympia, and now you're telling me it doesn't exist? (IN SIGN LANGUAGE)

This scene the conversation between Sprite, Thena, and Makkari focuses on two legendary weapons the Albony Blade and Excalibur. Sprite refers to the Albony Blade, which is a famous weapon in Marvel comics. Thena responds by mentioning Excalibur, the legendary sword from the story of King Arthur, which hints at a past connection between her and Arthur. Makkari used sign language with hand shape features to express her disappointment, indicating that she had waited a long time to return to Olympia, but had now been told that the place did not exist. The implementation of hand shape in this

conversation scene is when Makkari raises her hand to spell the words using her fingers. Makkari also uses her left hand is the dominant hand.

### ***Palm Orientation***

Palm orientation is the direction that your palm is facing. It could be facing out, in, down, up, left, and right.



#### **Scene (2: 09: 46)**

Druig : Beautiful Makkari, you're late

Makkari : I needed to get enough to make a good trade. (IN SIGN LANGUAGE)

This scene the conversation between Druig and Makkari. Druig greets Makkari, Makkari explains that she needs to collect enough goods to make a good trade. This shows that Makkari was involved in activities involving exchange or negotiation, to obtain something that was actually stolen by her. In this scene Makkari shows sign language using palm orientation to talk with Druig by indicating the direction of the palm upwards.

### ***Location***

Location is where your hands are in proximity to your body. They might be anchored onto your body maybe on your chest or on your head.



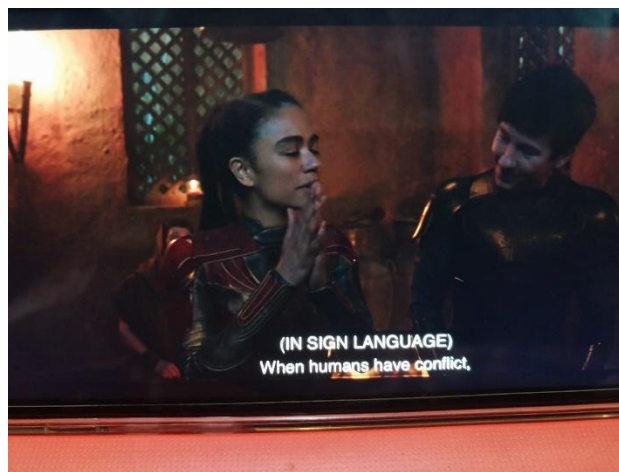
#### **Scene (17: 52)**

- Phastos : You gotta always use your brain, hmm?  
 Thena : Like you did fighting on the beach?  
 Phastos : Your dad spoke calmly and firmly to the bad guy and he had No. choice but listen to me, so no violence.  
 Makkari : The kid is ten..not stupid! (IN SIGN LANGUAGE)

This scene Phastos as a father reminds his son to avoid violence but at that moment Makkari reminds him that the child is 10 years old and is not stupid, which means he already understands that. In this scene Makkari shows sign language using location which means using gestures indicating direction or position to make one's meaning clear, especially when referring to a situation. Makkari put her right hand to her head and moves her right hand to in front of her head to say "Stupid".

### ***Movement***

Movement can come in a variety of forms. We could have enjoy which can making a circular motion.



**Scene (2: 08: 57)**

- Makkari : When humans have a conflict, Ajak tells us not to interfere.  
 (IN SIGN LANGUAGE)  
 Druig : Well, she also says that stealing is very bad.

This scene Makkari reminds Druig that Ajak instructed them not to intervene in human conflicts. This shows the attitude of the Eternals who try not to interfere with human development even though they have the ability to do so. In this scene Makkari shows sign language using movement features, which is shown by Makkari using his palms together to say the word "conflict".

### *Non-manual features*

Non-manual features include your facial expressions or your body language, such as eyebrows, mouth, eye, cheeks, face, shoulders, and head.



#### **Scene (2: 08: 39)**

Makkari : If you don't tell, I won't tell. (IN SIGN LANGUAGE)  
Druig : Deal  
Makkari : Deal (IN SIGN LANGUAGE)

This scene Makkari and Druig agree to keep each other's secrets. In this scene we can see Makkari shows sign language movement features, you can see the direction in which the eyes are moving to look at Druig, which indicates that Makkari agrees with their conversation.

The analysis of Makkari's sign language representation in the film *Eternals* reveals several key findings:

1. *Significance for the Deaf Community*: Makkari's use of sign language serves as a powerful representation of the deaf community, showcasing their culture and communication methods. This portrayal not only validates the experiences of deaf individuals but also promotes visibility and recognition in mainstream media.
2. *Diverse Forms of Communication*: The film illustrates the importance of diverse communication forms, emphasizing that sign language is a legitimate and effective means of interaction. This representation encourages audiences to appreciate the richness of different communication styles.
3. *Inclusivity in Media*: By integrating Makkari's sign language into the narrative, *Eternals* highlights the need for inclusivity in film. It demonstrates that diverse characters and their communication methods can enhance storytelling and resonate with a wider audience.

4. *Awareness and Understanding*: The portrayal of Makkari's sign language fosters greater awareness and understanding among viewers, breaking down stereotypes and misconceptions about deafness. It invites audiences to engage with and learn about the deaf community, promoting empathy and acceptance.
5. *Cultural Impact*: The representation contributes to broader discussions about representation in media, urging film makers to consider the importance of authentic portrayals of marginalized groups. It sets a precedent for future films to include characters with diverse communication methods, enriching the cinematic landscapes.

## Discussions

The analysis of sign language features used by Makkari in *Eternals* reveals significant insight into the representation of the deaf community in mainstream media. As the first deaf superhero in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Makkari bridges the gaps between deaf and hearing worlds, showcasing how sign language enhances storytelling and character development. Her use of hand shape emphasizes emotional expression, while palm orientation conveys openness and honesty. The location of her signs provides contextual clarity, and her gestures illustrate dynamic concepts like conflict. Non-manual features, including facial expressions and eye movements, add emotional depth, highlighting the relational aspect of communication. Makkari's portrayal not only promotes inclusivity and awareness of the deaf community but also enriches the narratives by validating sign language as a vital form of communication. Her authentic representation encourages empathy and understanding, paving the way for more diverse storytelling in the film industry.

The representation of Makkari's sign language in *Eternals* holds significant importance for the deaf community for several reasons. First, Makkari's portrayal as the first deaf superhero in the Marvel Cinematic Universe provides a visible and powerful representation of deaf individuals in mainstream media. This visibility is crucial, as it challenges long-standing stereotypes and misconceptions about deafness, illustrating that deaf individuals can be dynamic, capable, and heroic.

Makkari's use of American Sign Language (ASL) not only showcases the richness and complexity of sign language as a legitimate form of communication but also emphasizes its role in character development and storytelling. By integrating ASL into the film's narrative, *Eternals* highlights the importance of diverse communication methods,

fostering a greater understanding among audiences about the various ways people can interact and express themselves. This representation serves to educate viewers who may not be familiar with sign language, encouraging them to appreciate its nuances and the cultural context in which it exists.

Moreover, Makkari's character demonstrates how sign language can convey emotions, intentions, and personality traits, thereby enriching the viewers connection to her character. The film illustrates that communication is not solely reliant on spoken language; rather, it encompasses a variety of modes, including visual gestures and facial expressions, which are integral to understanding and engaging with the deaf experience. By bringing Makkari's sign language to the forefront, *Eternals* also contributes to broader societal awareness about the deaf community. It fosters empathy and understanding among audiences, prompting them to reflect on their perceptions of disability and communication. This representation not only benefits the deaf community but also encourages all viewers to recognize and celebrate the diversity of human expression, ultimately promoting inclusivity in storytelling.

## CONCLUSION(S)

In conclusion, Makkari's character in *Eternals* serves as a groundbreaking representation of the deaf community within the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Through the effective use of American Sign Language (ASL) and its unique features, such as hand shape, palm orientation, location, movement, and non-manual features. The film not only enriches Makkari's character but also emphasizes the importance of diverse forms of communication. This portrayal fosters greater understanding and awareness of the deaf experience, challenging stereotypes and promoting inclusivity. By integrating sign language into the narrative, *Eternals* validates sign language as a legitimate and expressive means of communication, paving the way for future films to embrace and celebrate diversity in storytelling. Makkari's role empowers deaf individuals and encourages all audience to appreciate the richness of different languages, ultimately enhancing the overall cinematic experience.

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