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GESTURE, FOLKLORE, AND RELIGIOUS MEMORY IN THE "OLD WOMAN'S DAYS" TALE

GESTO, FOLCLORE E MEMÓRIA RELIGIOSA NO CONTO "OS DIAS DA VELHA"

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary literacy recognizes meaning-making as a multimodal process involving written, visual, oral, gestural, and embodied forms. Cultural narratives, rituals, and traditional gestures are important literacy resources for transmitting knowledge, identity, and cultural memory, yet embodied practices remain underrepresented in literacy curricula. This study examines the Greek folk tale *The Old Woman's Days* as a multimodal narrative connecting gesture, folklore, and cultural memory. Using a comparative, cross-modal design, it analyzes versions of the tale, lexical data from five signed languages, and historical Cistercian sign systems, focusing on the Greek elbow gesture ***prits***. Findings reveal correspondences with elbow-articulated signs, suggesting a semiotic continuum that carries cultural and religious memory across modalities and time. The study supports embodied heritage practices in bilingual, deaf, and inclusive literacy education.
Keywords: Folklore, traditional gesture, religious memory, multimodal literacy.

RESUMO

A alfabetização e letramento contemporâneos reconhecem a produção de sentidos como um processo multimodal que envolve formas escritas, visuais, orais, gestuais e corporificadas. Narrativas culturais, rituais e gestos tradicionais constituem importantes recursos de alfabetização e letramento para a transmissão de conhecimentos, identidades e memória cultural, embora as práticas corporificadas ainda sejam pouco representadas nos currículos de alfabetização e letramento. Este estudo examina o conto popular grego *Os Dias da Velha* como uma narrativa multimodal que articula gesto, folclore e memória cultural. Com uma abordagem comparativa e intermodal, analisa versões do conto, dados lexicais de cinco línguas de sinais e sistemas históricos de sinais cistercienses, com foco no gesto grego de cotovelo ***prits***. Os resultados revelam correspondências com sinais articulados no cotovelo, sugerindo um continuum semiótico que transmite memória cultural e religiosa entre modalidades e ao longo do tempo. O estudo defende a inclusão de práticas patrimoniais corporificadas na educação bilíngue de surdos e na educação inclusiva para a alfabetização e o letramento.
Palavras-chave: Folclore, gestos tradicionais, memória religiosa, letramento multimodal.

Introduction

Contemporary literacy curricula emphasize multimodality, cultural diversity, and inclusion, recognizing meaning-making across written, oral, visual, and embodied modes. Since the early 2000s, international frameworks have promoted multiliteracies and linguistic inclusion (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000; UNESCO, 2002; 2003), reinforced by later UNESCO (2016; 2017) policies on equity and cultural responsiveness. Yet practice often remains text-centered (understood primarily as written texts of spoken languages), with limited integration of embodied forms such as gesture, ritual, and folklore. Greek traditional tales, supported by national policy, play a key role in early childhood education and cultural transmission (Mertzani, 2023a; 2023b; 2023c), where storytelling includes inherited gestures functioning as an embodied narrative language, though their deeper symbolic origins are largely unrecognized. While signed languages like Greek Sign Language (GSL) are increasingly integrated into inclusive education, little research connects folklore gestures with their lexicalization in signed languages or their curricular potential. Addressing this gap, the present study examines correspondences between the Greek folklore gesture ***prits*** and signed languages, highlighting their implications for multimodal literacy and curriculum design. In addition, by examining this folktale and its connections to contemporary signed languages, the study demonstrates how religious memory, particularly pagan traditions, has persisted from ancient antiquity into the present.

In doing so, the paper is organized as follows. First, the theoretical framework situates the study within ritual theory, gesture studies, sign linguistics, and multimodal literacy. Next, the methodology outlines the qualitative, comparative design and data sources. This is followed by an analysis of ***The old woman's days*** tale and the prits gesture in its narrative and cultural context. Subsequent sections examine historical meanings of the elbow and their correspondences with signs across five signed languages. The discussion then considers the implications for multimodal literacy and curriculum, before the paper concludes with key contributions and future directions.

Theoretical framework

Anthropological and ritual theory shows that bodily practices act as stable carriers of cultural knowledge transmitted through socially regulated action rather than explicit instruction. Mauss's (1973) concept of ***Techniques of the Body*** frames movement as culturally learned, while Bell's (1997) theory of ritualization demonstrates how patterned action enacts cosmological order, moral values, and collective memory. Cultural memory studies further emphasize habitual and commemorative practices as mechanisms of intergenerational continuity (Connerton, 1989; Assmann, 2011). From this perspective, meaning emerges through embodied participation, positioning folklore gestures as practices that encode ritual, calendrical, and moral knowledge rather than incidental features of spoken or written language. Gesture and discourse studies reinforce this view by situating gesture within an integrated semiotic system central to narrative meaning-making. McNeill (1992, 2005) shows that gesture and speech arise from shared cognitive processes, while Kendon's (2004) continuum highlights the conventionalization of gesture. In storytelling, such gestures structure narratives, convey evaluation, and function as culturally codified communicative acts.

This semiotic view of gesture aligns with research in sign linguistics and semiotic anthropology, which places gesture and sign along a continuum of increasing conventionality and grammatical integration (Kendon, 2004; Enfield, 2009). Within this framework, lexical signs may arise from recurrent,

culturally shared gestures grounded in iconicity and articulatory motivation (Cuxac, 2000), while cross-linguistic similarities often reflect shared gestural or institutional origins followed by phonological and semantic diversification (Cagle, 2010; Shaw; Delaporte, 2015). Thus, formal correspondences between folklore gesture and lexical sign can be understood as processes of semiotic refunctionalization or historical continuity.

At the same time, theories of cultural transmission argue that continuity is maintained through recontextualization across changing social domains, with cultural memory sustained via repeated enactment and reorganization of symbolic forms (Connerton, 1989; Assmann, 2011). Sociolinguistic processes such as enregisterment (Agha, 2007) and pragmatic reindexicalization (Silverstein, 2003) further explain how communicative forms gain recognizable functions and persist across contexts, suggesting that shared gesture–sign features reflect enduring cultural schemas circulating across folklore, ritual, and language, rather than simple genealogical transmission.

This semiotic perspective aligns with literacy research that reconceptualizes meaning-making as multimodal and socially situated, with ***New Literacy Studies*** defining literacy as social practices involving culturally valued communicative resources beyond print (Street, 1984, 2003; Gee, 1990; Ong, 1982) and the multiliteracies framework emphasizing the integration of visual, spatial, gestural, and oral modes (Cope; Kalantzis, 2000, 2009). From this view, narrative performance constitutes a multimodal literacy practice combining embodied action, visual representation, and language, a position reinforced by signed language literacies where communication remains fundamentally visual–gestural despite limited writing systems (Mertzani, 2022; Holcomb, 2025), thereby recognizing gesture and sign as legitimate literacy resources within broader semiotic ecologies rather than as auxiliary to text.

The study

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative, and cross-modal design at the intersection of folklore studies and sign language linguistics, treating folklore narratives and signed languages as interconnected semiotic systems of cultural transmission. It aims to trace continuities between a conventionalized gesture in Greek folklore and elbow-articulated lexical items across signed languages, in order to examine how embodied cultural practices are re-articulated within linguistic systems relevant to inclusive, multimodal literacy curricula.

Greek has preserved a number of historical gestures in everyday communication, many of which have also been incorporated into modern signed languages (Mertzani, 2018; 2017; 2015). A particularly rare example is the prits gesture, which, to the best of the author's knowledge, is not documented in comparable form in other spoken-language gesture repertoires (see for example, Barakat, 1975; Morris; Collett; Marsh et al., 1979). The particular gesture is used during the narration of the tale "Οι μέρες της γριάς" (The old woman's days).

Since the Greek National Curriculum recognises GSL as the first language of deaf education (Mertzani, 2023a; 2023b), and given the frequent use of translation practices in this context, this study investigates potential continuity between prits and lexically marked elbow-based signs in GSL. The analysis also draws on sign language historical linguistics examining relationships between GSL and older signed languages such as French Sign Language (LSF) and American Sign Language (ASL), which have documented historical links to Cistercian monastic sign systems dating back to the 4th century AD (Cagle, 2010).

Three main data sources were used in the analysis. First, multiple versions of the Greek folklore tale were collected from the Greek National Aggregator of Digital Cultural Content portal, which provides access to digitized folklore archives, regional collections, and ethnographic records. These versions are documented as being told in regional Greek dialects, whereas the publications consulted include both nineteenth-century versions written in ***Katharévousa***[1] and versions in standard modern Greek.

Second, lexical data were collected from standardized dictionaries and digital corpora of five modern signed languages: ASL, LSF, Australian Sign Language (Auslan), British Sign Language (BSL), and GSL. For each language, authoritative lexicographic sources and institutional databases were consulted to identify signs articulated at or involving the elbow. In addition, historical sign language materials were examined, including early ASL dictionaries (e.g., Long, 1918; Higgins, 1923; Michaels, 1923) and nineteenth-century LSF dictionaries (e.g., Pelissier, 1856; Lambert, 1865), accessed through the Historical Sign Language Database. Signs were included if they met two criteria: (a) the primary articulation point involved the elbow or elbow region; and (b) the sign was lexically established rather than idiosyncratic or classifier-based. This resulted in the identification of thirty three elbow-articulated signs in ASL, eleven in LSF, eight in Auslan, five in BSL, and one only in GSL. Signs were grouped by semantic domain and phonological features (e.g., handshape, location, movement) to allow for cross-linguistic comparison. Semantic categories emerged from the data, and polysemous signs were allowed to belong to multiple domains, reflecting natural semantic extension.

Third, descriptions of Cistercian monastic sign systems were included as comparative gestural material, in order to explore possible gestural antecedents predating modern national signed languages. This analysis followed methodological principles outlined in comparative sign linguistics (Cagle, 2010; Shaw; Delaporte, 2015). Similarities were evaluated based on documented articulation, and semantic equivalence alone.

All materials were drawn from publicly accessible archives and published linguistic resources. To enhance analytic rigor, triangulation was achieved through the use of multiple data sources (e.g., contemporary sign dictionaries, historical sign records, publications).

The old woman's days tale

The Greek Early Childhood curriculum is organized thematically around the seasons, beginning with autumn and progressing through winter and spring to summer at the end of the school year. Within this framework, the tale examined in this study is typically taught in early spring, focusing on the month of March and drawing on stories and expressions associated with the transition from winter to spring.

In Greek folk tradition, the month March is closely associated with unstable and often harsh weather, a perception reflected in many popular proverbs that personify the month as unpredictable and even dangerous. Many express the idea that March can suddenly turn cold after signs of warmth, posing risks to people and livestock. For example, the proverb "Μάρτης, γδάρτης και κακός παλουκοκαύτης" ("March, the flayer and a bad fence-post burner") suggests that the cold can be so severe that it 'skins' people and forces them to burn even fence posts for warmth. The proverb "Μάρτης είναι νάζια κάνει, πότε κλαίει, πότε γελάει" ("March is capricious; sometimes it cries, sometimes it laughs") highlights the rapid alternation between bad and good weather, while the proverb "Αν δώσει ο Μάρτης και κακιώσει, μες στα χιόνια θα μας χώσει" ("If March turns mean, it will bury us in the snow")

1 Katharévousa was an artificial, classicizing variety designed to bridge Ancient Greek and the spoken vernacular, and it was widely used in administration, education, and academic writing, including folklore collections, even when the material itself derived from oral popular tradition.

warns of sudden late snowfalls. There is even a proverb that links the tale with the unstable weather of March: “Ο Μάρτης ἔβαλε τὴ γριὰ μέσ’ στὸ καζάνι” (“March put the old woman into the cauldron”), meaning that the old woman was forced by the weather conditions to hide in a cauldron (Politis, 1980, p. 391). Altogether, the cultural image of March is a volatile transitional month between winter and spring, which is reflected on the tale of the old woman and her livestock.

Versions of the tale are attested across Greece and along the western coast of present-day Turkey, a distribution that suggests wide circulation within the broader Greek cultural sphere of the Eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, the tale is also known in other parts of the Mediterranean (Kaplanoglou; Katrinaki, 2023; Pedrosa, 1995), including France (Politis, 1980, p. 391), which is of particular relevance to the present study.

The most popular version tells of an old woman, a shepherdess, who believes she has safely passed the winter with her goats and lambs, and mocks March for not harming her livestock: “Πρίτσι, Μάρτη μου! Τα ξεχείμασα τα κατσικάκια μου!” (“Pritsi, March, overwintered my little goats!”) (Politis, 1904, n 298), thereby provoking the month’s anger. In response, March borrows days from February in order to extend the cold and punish her hubris. The sudden snow storm freezes the old woman and her animals, turning them ultimately to stone, and these final days of March become known as “the old woman’s days,” (Politis, 1904, n. 301, 306). Other versions of the tale note that most goats did not give birth because of March’s extreme cold weather, while only the goat of one old woman gave birth as an exception, a detail that becomes the basis for her subsequent boasting in the story, calling March: “Για τ· πομπή σου, γέρο-Μάρτη, έβγαλα κι εγώ κατσίκια!” (“To your humiliation, old March, I too brought forth little goats!”). In other versions, the old woman hides under a cauldron.

In some versions (e.g., from the Dodecanese and southeastern Aegean), the offended month is February rather than March. It borrows a day from March and returns two, while the old woman shelters beneath a cauldron. This time, all her sheep die except one, and when the weather calms she speaks with respect, noting that a kind February “smells” like summer but, when angered, brings snow. Unlike more tragic versions, this narrative ends with restoration, as the surviving sheep miraculously produces enough milk for a whole flock, softening the moral with a reward after repentance (Kaplanoglou; Katrinaki, 2023).

In some local traditions, the narrative is sustained through ritualized practices. As the story ends with the petrification of the old woman and her animals, it serves as a form of geological etiology, with rock formations interpreted as their transformed bodies. Specific sites are identified as places where she hid or died, and people visit them bringing firewood to symbolically warm her, reenacting compassion (Kaplanoglou; Katrinaki, 2023). In earlier village practices, each of these last days was also personified as an elderly woman from the community, with good weather attributed to her kindness and bad weather to her spite (Politis, 1904, n. 301).

A different role

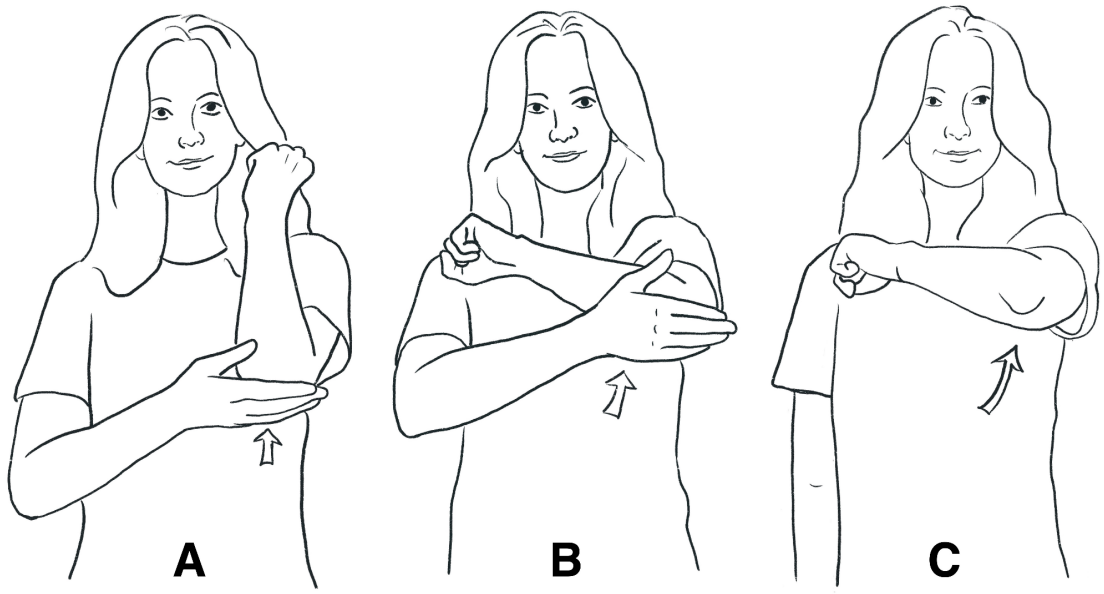
In the above versions, the old woman is presented as a poor one, whereas in the variants from Thasos and Crete, the old woman is no longer a poor and vulnerable shepherdess but a rich and powerful figure who commands an enormous flock. After surviving a harsh March, she boasts to the month, provoking March to borrow days from February and unleash renewed cold that kills most of her animals, though she manages to save thousands of goats by hiding them under her cauldron. Her transgression, however, does not end with offending nature. Standing atop a great heap of cheeses,

she arrogantly threatens God, who curses her and turns both her and the cheeses into stone. In Cretan traditions, the old woman is of extraordinary stature and status, a *σαραντάπηχος* (sarandápihos), forty cubits tall, punished for refusing alms of milk or cheese (Kaplanoglou; Katrinaki, 2023, p. 136). This numerical detail, including the explicit reference to the cubit is not arbitrary, but is instead closely linked to the prits gesture and to ancient female celebrations, as convincingly suggested by Kaplanoglou and Katrinaki (2023).

The tale's calendrical associations

The tale is closely tied to seasonal pastoral practices, particularly transhumance, which structured rural life around weather patterns and the agricultural calendar, making the winter–spring transition a critical and uncertain period for shepherds. It reflects concerns about late winter storms and risks to flocks, embedding pastoral experience into folklore and explaining climatic instability through storytelling. It also encodes a calendrical dimension: some versions suggest March once preceded February, while more commonly March is said to have had twenty eight days and borrowed two from February, left "lame," hence *κουτσοφλέβαρος* (koutsoflévaros), fixing the month to end on March thirty first.

Figure 1: The prits gesture and its variations



Source: Elaborated by the author.

These narratives relate to older versions of the Julian calendar, used in Greece until 1923[2], when the Gregorian reform led 16 February 1924 to be followed by 1 March 1924. The change provoked schismatic tensions within the Greek Orthodox Church, giving rise to the Old Calendarist movement, which rejected it as a break with liturgical continuity (Ware, 1964), highlighting calendar time as a deeply religious and cultural issue and supporting the persistence of older temporal imaginaries in folklore. This dimension also appears in symbolic numbers within the tale: thirty (days of the month), three hundred (approximation of the lunar or solar year), or thousands linked to stone heaps or tumuli (Politis, 1904, n. 303), suggesting the narrative encodes cyclical time and seasonal reckoning rather than merely recounting pastoral events.

2 The early 19th and 20th publications used in the study belong to the old calendrical uses in Greece (e.g., the Politis's 1904 folklore collections).

The last days of March to about 18 April are traditionally seen as a dangerous, cold, and unstable period. This belief reflects practical pastoral experience rather than purely religious or mythical ideas, as evidenced in numerous weather proverbs. For instance, March is preferred rainy rather than frozen, since March and April rains benefit agriculture (Politis, 1980, p. 389): "Μάρτης βρέχει, ποτέ μὴ πάγῃ" (If March rains, it will never freeze); "Μάρτης ἔβρεχε, θεριστὴς ἐχαιρόταν" (If March brings rain, the harvester rejoices); "Ἂν κάμῃ ὁ Μάρτης δυὸ νερὰ κι ὁ Ἀπρίλης ἄλλο ἕνα, χαρὰ σ' ἐκεῖνο τὸ γεωργὸ ποὺ 'χει πολλὰ σπαρμένα" (If March gives two rains and April one more, happy is the farmer who has many fields sown). In fact, the popular proverbs advise for a wait until the 18th of April, acknowledging that severe weather could persist into late April, therefore caution is advised: "Ἀπριλίου δεκαοχτὼ νὰ 'χῃς τὸ μάτι σου ἀνοιχτό. Πέρασαν οἱ δεκαοχτὼ; ἄραξε εἰς ἐν' αὐγό" (On the eighteenth of April, keep your eye open. Have the eighteen passed? Then rest in an egg[3]). As in other Mediterranean countries, late March to mid-April is popularly seen as the time when winter is "cut off" and agricultural cycles begin, symbolizing renewed fertility and animal survival (Pedrosa, 1995). In Christian calendars, this period coincides with major Marian celebrations, followed by Easter and Palm Sunday in April, the latter functioning as more reliable climatic markers.

The tale and the gesture prits

Across the different versions of the tale, the old woman's act of mocking is commonly expressed through a fixed scatological and insulting formula with the words ***πομπή***, ***μπομπή***, ***πριτς/πρίτσι***, either in combination or interchangeably. For example, the simultaneous use of the words is met as following: "Πρίτσι Μάρτη μου, στην πομπή σου. Μπήκες, βγήκες τίποτα δε μου έκανες. Τα αρνάκια και τα κατσικάκια μου τα ξεχείμασα" (Pritsi, March, shame! You came and went and did me no harm. I overwintered my little lambs and my little goats). Regarding the latter, Papazafeiropoulos (1887) preserves the woman saying: "Σ' την μπομπή σου, Μάρτη μου, τ' αρνοκάτσικά μου τα ξεχείμασα!" (Begone, March, I overwintered my lambs and goats!). She is also found to say ***Πουρτ*** as in "Πουρτ, Μάρτ'! Μπήκες, βρήκες, τα κατσίκια μ' δεν τα πάγωσες!" (Begone, March! You came, you found (them), but you didn't freeze my goats!) (Politis, 1904, n 303).

The modern Greek words ***πομπή*** and ***μπομπή*** are linked to notions of public humiliation and disgrace, deriving from expressions associated with public shaming and morally blameworthy behavior. These words derive from the ancient ***πομπή*** that meant a ceremonial or religious procession, official accompaniment, or display, as well as ritual processions. Though they also preserve these meanings in modern Greek, in the specific tale the words carry the negative meaning. This is better understood when the verb ***πομπεύομαι*** appears in proverbs associated with an old woman: "Ὄντας ἡ γριά πομπεύθη, ὕστερα ἐμανταλώθη" (When the old woman was publicly shamed, afterward she was locked up) (Politis, 1980, p. 149). Elsewhere, this public humiliation refers to the sexual act since πομπεύομαι is replaced by the verb ***γαμήθηκε*** (was taken sexually): "Ὅταν ἡ γριά γαμήθηκε, κλειδαμπαρώθηκε" (Once the old woman was taken, she shut and barred herself in) (Politis, 1980, p. 151).

When the variant ***πριτς*** (prits) is used, an onomatopoeia that represents the sound of flatulence, it is accompanied by the elbow gestures shown in Figure 1, intensifying further the insulting intent. Whether produced on its own or in combination with πομπή/μπομπή, the gesture consistently conveys the same derogatory meanings described above.

3 The metaphorical phrase "rest in an egg" means to anchor in a sheltered, safe place.

Nevertheless, the prits gesture extends beyond this tale and is not limited to the meanings identified above. In everyday Greek interaction, the elbow gesture also conveys firm refusal. For instance, when someone asks for a valued object, the owner may perform the gesture and say, "Να, από εδώ που θα στο δώσω!" (No way, I will not give it to you!), implying the object is being treasured in the corner of the elbow. Similarly, when a child misbehaves and asks for a toy, a mother may make the gesture and refuse, "Να, από εδώ που θα στο αγοράσω!" (I refuse to buy it from here!). In both cases, the gesture reinforces verbal denial as a culturally recognizable sign of refusal. The word "να," produced with a tap on the elbow, functions as a deictic marker emphasizing the place from which the item will not be given, whether concrete or abstract (Antoniou-Kritikou, 2009).

Connection to γλυκὺς ἀγκών

There is substantial evidence from ancient Greek sources that meanings associated with the modern prits gesture resonate with earlier symbolic uses of the elbow. These are reflected in the proverb ***γλυκὺς ἀγκών***, attested in Greek literature at least as early as the fifth century BCE, indicating that the elbow already carried metaphorical and affective significance in antiquity. The corner of the elbow carried a twofold meaning; either a moral, affective sense (e.g., sweetness, gentleness of character), or a geographical one, referring to an arduous place in Nile and Memphis, where the word "sweet" is ironic (an antiphrasis), denoting something bitter, harsh, unpleasant, or dangerous. For example, in ***Phaedrus*** (257e), Plato has Socrates associate it to the Nile, using the expression euphemistically to denote difficulty and effort. Furthermore, both in ***Scholia in Platonem ad Phaedrum***, and in Zenobius (Prov. 1.92) the commentaries explicitly identify γλυκὺς ἀγκών as referring to both to hardship and to cheerful endurance (Adler, 2001; Gaisford, 1836). In particular, in Scholia in Platonem ad Phaedrum 257d–e, the raise of elbow is expressed among the cheerful ("ἔνιοι δὲ τάττουσιν αὐτὴν ἐπὶ τῶν εὐθυμούντων, παρ' ὅσον τὸν ἀγκῶνα οἱ εὐφραινόμενοι τιθέασιν").

The word ***ἀγκών*** apart from denoting elbow, also expressed the meanings: angle, bend, type of vessel, and, in relation to music, the horns of the lyre. In his commentary on Zenobius, Gaisford (1836, p. 277) records manuscript variants of ἀγκών, notably ***ἀγγών*** and ***ἀγών***. Hesychius glosses ***ἀγών*** as "the place where contestants gather" ("ὁ τόπος, ἔνθα ἀθροίζονται οἱ ἀγωνισταί"), as well as stadium (στάδιον), assembly (ἄθροισμα), and the Hekatombaean festival at Argos ("τὰ ἐν Ἄργει Ἑκατόμβαια"). On this basis, the word ἀγκών (elbow) became associated with public gathering and ritual assembly, aligning with the prits and πομπή meanings of ceremonial procession, a connection explored further below in relation to the expression ***γλυκύς πῆχυς***.

In Athenaus ***Deipnosophistae*** (Book XII, 416f-417b), ***ἀγκών*** is met as ***ἀγνεών*** and it is explained as a place associated with violent sexual abuse, a significance already established earlier in the tale. The site where elite women were forcibly exposed later came to be euphemistically known as the ***Sweet Assembly***, a designation that simultaneously softens and memorializes the brutality of the crime, preserving it as an enduring reminder of collective wrongdoing (Appendix A). Erasmus (***Dulcis cubitus,*** Adagium 1038) commenting on the specific passage, agreed with the interpretation of ἀγκών as denoting such a place, noting that both ἀγνεών and ἀγκών refer to anything in the bent form like an elbow (Appendix B). Interestingly, this connection to the elbow is also discussed in the synonymous ***γλυκύς πῆχυς***, since ἀγκών is also ***πῆχυς***.

Connections to γλυκύς πῆχυς

Ancient sources further indicate that the expression "ὦ γλυκύς πῆχυς" ("oh sweet elbow") was synonymous to γλυκὺς ἀγκών, conveying a similar meaning of kindness, gentleness, or favorable disposition (Adler, 2001), although there is no indication of the opposite negative meaning met in γλυκὺς ἀγκών. Moreover, the word πῆχυς (Greek Aeolic ***πᾶχυς***) was highly polysemous, denoting not only elbow, but also the cubit (gnomon), arm, forearm, shoulder, the bow of a ship, the bow as a weapon, the horns of the lyre (as in ἀγκών), and the yoke. Among these meanings, the notion of cubit is particularly significant, as it associates the word, and by extension the elbow gesture, with ritualistic processions.

Since antiquity, the cubit[4] was used for measuring the annual path of the sun around the year. This solar circuit structured the calendar, defined the seasons, and acquired strong ritual significance. The ancient Greeks divided the year into four quarters (ὧροι), spring, summer, autumn, and winter, each corresponding to a segment of the sun's motion as expressed through counted days[5]. Using the cubit, these intervals indicated that the year was structured around the right angle (90°). This was done relying also on the risings and settings of prominent stars, particularly of the Pleiades and Arcturus as follows: (i) spring from the equinox to the heliacal rising of the Pleiades; (ii) summer from the heliacal rising of the Pleiades to the heliacal rising of Arcturus; (iii) autumn from the heliacal rising of Arcturus to the next setting of the Pleiades; and (iv) winter from the setting of the Pleiades to the spring equinox. These quarters also mirrored the quadripartition of the celestial sky, or else of the Milky Way, the ***γαλαξίας*** (galaxy) in Greek.

Within this scheme, the heliacal setting of the Pleiades in mid-November defined the eastern celestial cardinal point and marked a decisive agricultural terminus, by which the sowing season, especially for wheat, was expected to be complete. In contrast, their heliacal rising in early June signaled the transition into the harvest phase of the agrarian cycle. It is only in the early spring processions of Apollo ***Γαλάξιος*** (Galáxios) (Boutsikas, 2020) that the sun was celebrated as a generative force, essential to seed germination and the maturation of wheat.

Additionally, the eastern celestial point signaled the beginning of the year, which was linked to goddess Athena and her Panathenaic celebrations that took place in the month Hecatombaion (Boutsikas, 2020). This alignment further suggests that the word ἀγκών, beyond its primary meaning of angle, had strong semantic overlap with Hesychius' reference to the Hekatombaean festival. Moreover, Athena's epithet ***Tritogeneia*** (Τριτογένεια) evokes her association with the equilateral triangle[6], thereby reinforcing an underlying association between angular measure, the cubit, and a female divinity.

It is this specific understanding of the cubit that links the tale to spring, along with its associated calendrical celebrations and precessional markers, which this study argues are preserved in the prits gesture. The analysis therefore sought to determine whether these semantic values of ἀγκών and πῆχυς/πᾶχυς have likewise been retained in the signed languages under investigation.

4 The cubit was measured from the elbow to the tip of the thumb (also called the "forearm"). It was divided into 6 palms (handbreadths), each palm equal to 4 fingers. The thumb counted as 1⅓ fingers, so a full handbreadth (four fingers plus the thumb) equaled 5⅓ fingers, or 1⅓ handbreadths. The distance from the elbow to the wrist was 4 handbreadths, which is ⅔ of a cubit. The royal cubit ("πῆχυς βασιλικός) was measured from the elbow to the tip of the middle finger and was longer than the small cubit by one handbreadth (4 fingers), making it 7 handbreadths in total (Iversen, 1971, p. 57).

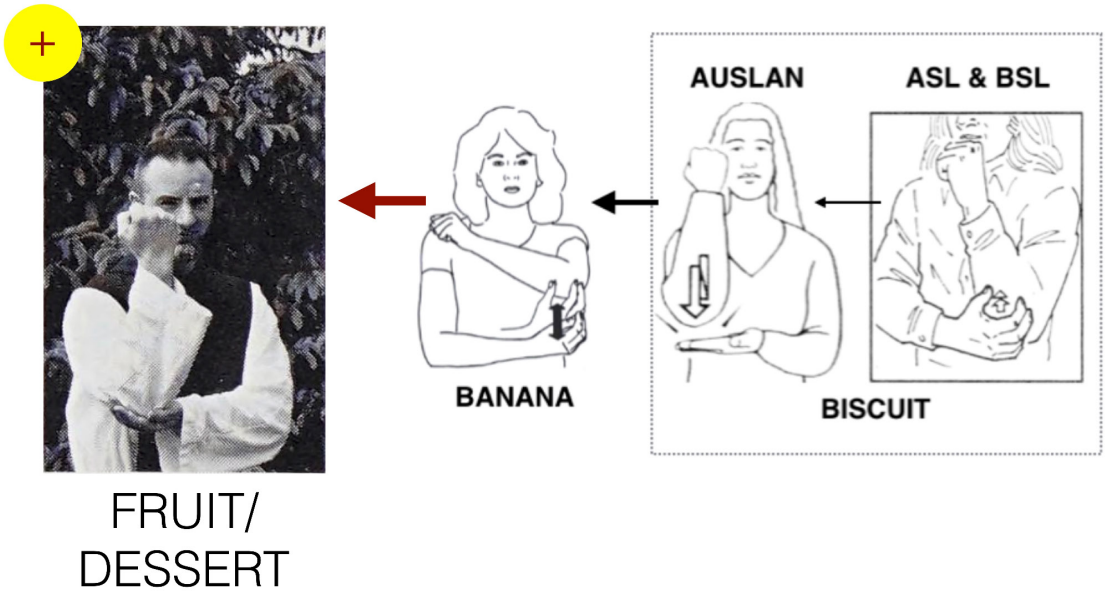
5 From the setting of the Pleiades to the winter solstice, 44 days elapsed (~44°); from the evening rising of Arcturus (c. 16 February) to the spring equinox, 83 days (~83°); from the equinox to the morning rising of the Pleiades (c. 7 May), 48 days (~48°); from the summer solstice to the rising of Arcturus and onward to the autumn equinox, 93 days (~93°); and from the equinox to the setting of the Pleiades, 48 days, and again 44 days from that setting to the solstice.

6 Based on Pythagoras, the icosqeles triangle is tritogeneia.

The use of elbow in signed languages

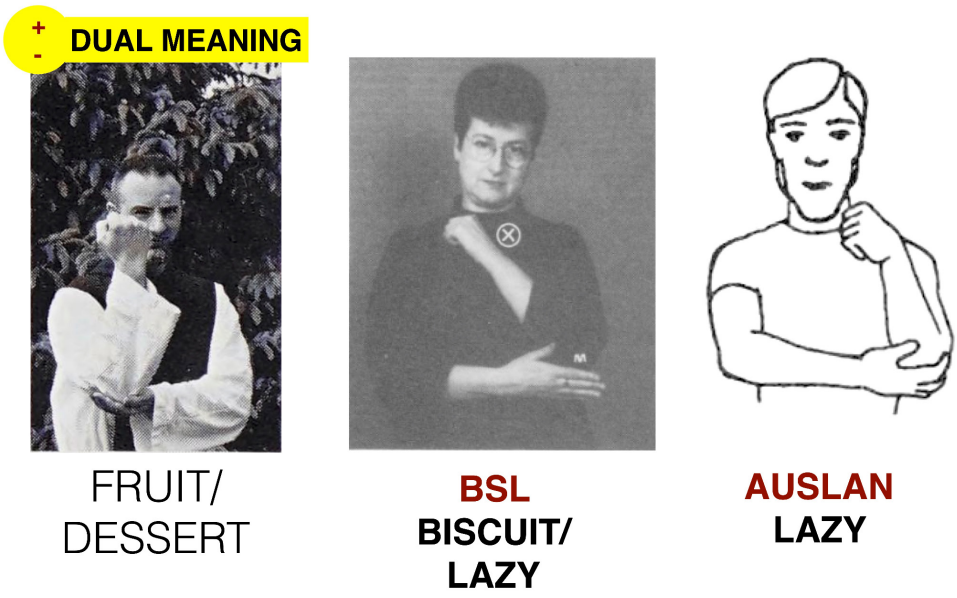
Based on the above, the elbow gesture is clearly demonstrated to be associated with ancient Greek ritualistic procedures. The study aimed at examining whether these meanings appear in the signed languages, in their specific marked elbow-based signs. Firstly, the examination of the Cistercian signs, which go back to the 4th century CE (Cagle, 2010), revealed that there is a duality in positive and negative meanings, as in the ancient proverb *γλυκὺς ἀγκών*. In fact, the meaning "sweet" is found in signs meaning "dessert" and "fruit" (Figure 2).

Figure 2: The Cistercian sign "fruit/dessert" and its cognates signs



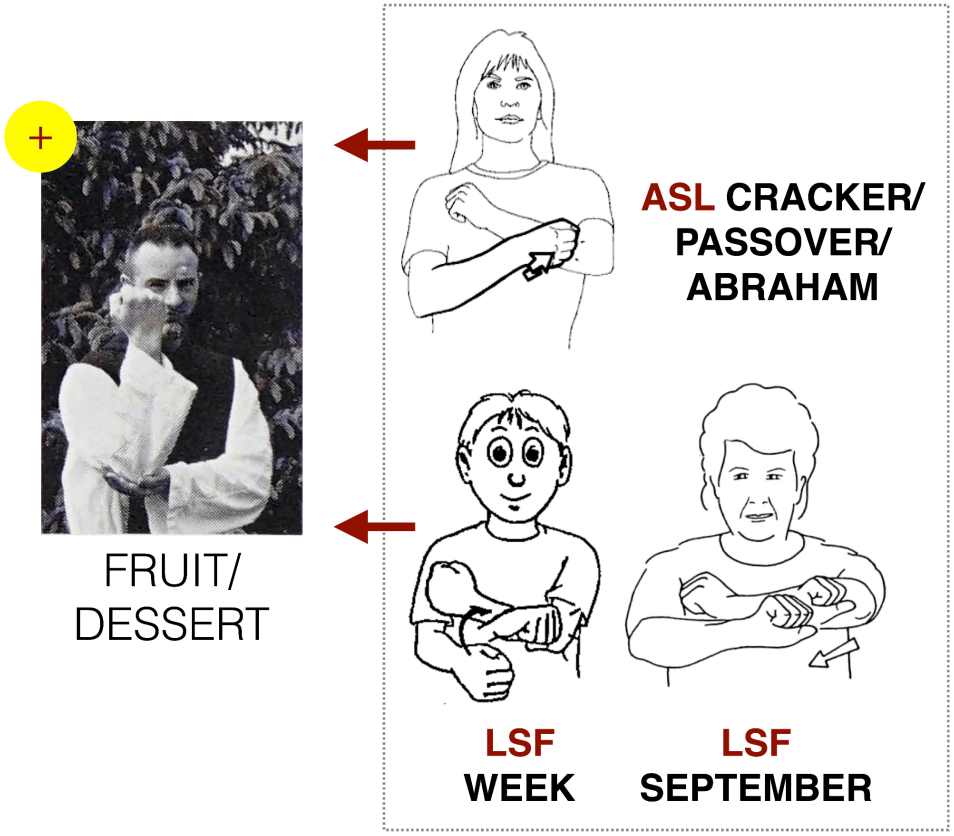
Source: Barakat (1975); Shaw; Delaporte (2015); Shroyer; Shroyer (1984); Smith (1999). Elaborated by the author.

Figure 3: The dual inherited meanings of the Cistercian sign "fruit/dessert"



Obs.: This duality is shared in the BSL sign meanings "biscuit" and "lazy." Source: Barakat (1975); Brien (1992); Johnston (1998). Elaborated by the author.

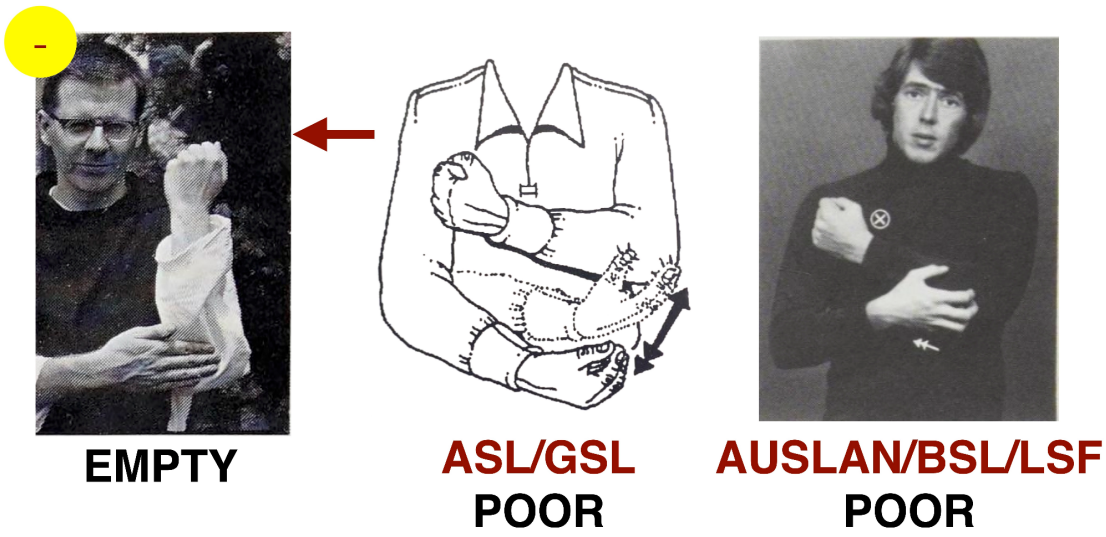
Figure 4: The Cistercian sign “fruit/dessert” and the ASL and LSF cognates



Source: Barakat (1975); Brien (1992); Companys; Tourmez (2011); Shaw; Delaporte (2015); Valli (2005). Elaborated by the author.

Interestingly, this particular sign appears to have been borrowed across several signed languages, LSF, ASL, Auslan, and BSL, giving rise to signs with related meanings. Notably, this exact same sign also carries a negative connotation in both BSL and Auslan, where it means “lazy” (Figure 3). Moreover, the ASL “cracker” is also used for the meanings “Passover” and “Abraham”, while in LSF means “week” and “September” (Figure 4). LSF includes two further signs articulated at the elbow, namely “July” and “May.” Additionally, the exact same sign in Auslan “cracker” is also used to mean “bullshit”, further illustrating the semantic duality and pragmatic use of this form across the signed languages.

Figure 5: Cognate signs to the Cistercian sign “empty”

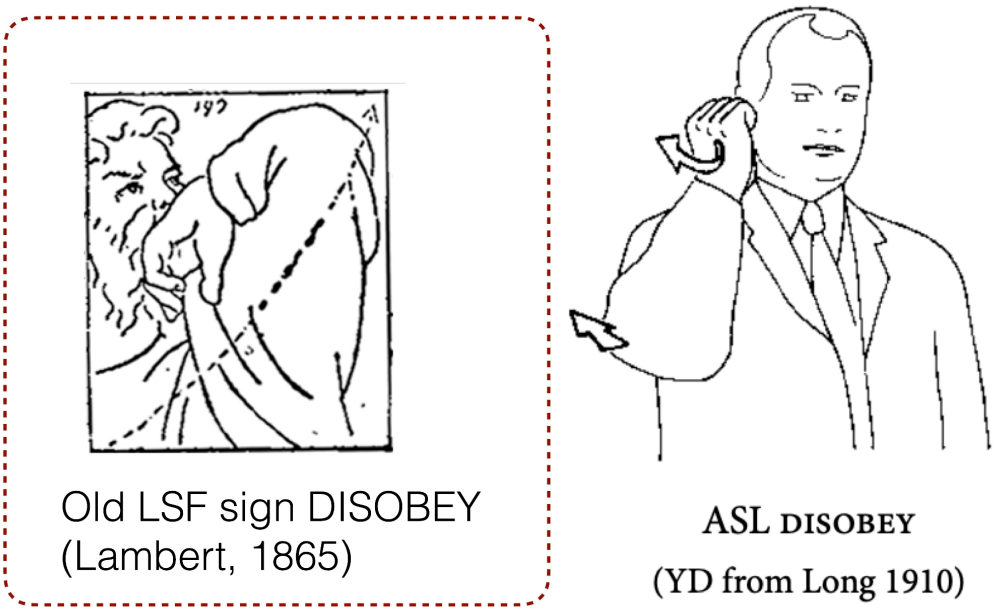


Source: Barakat (1975); Brien (1992); Butterworth; Flodin (1983); Magganaris (1998). Elaborated by the author.

The negative Cistercian meaning is reflected in the sign “empty”, which appears to have been borrowed across all the signed languages examined in this study in the formation of the sign “poor” (Figure 5). Interestingly, the ASL sign “country” (including its Y-handshape variants) and the LSF sign “campagne” are historically affiliated with the Cistercian “empty,” a relationship already documented in Long’s (1920) early ASL dictionary for the ASL sign “farmer.” In ASL, this lineage further extends to lexicalized signs meaning a foreign place with the sign “foreign” (with the F-handshape) and the sign “county” (with the C-handshape), indicating systematic morphological diversification from the same etymological source.

From this dual meaning of the Cistercian sign “fruit” also derive the ASL and LSF signs “tempt” and “devil,” attested in early LSF lexicographic sources (e.g., in the signs “tenter” and “punir”). From the same etymological network further developed the ASL signs “cheat,” “steal,” “refuse,” and “punish/condemn/penalize,” including their documented phonological variants.

Figure 6: The Old LSF “disobey” and the early ASL cognate



Obs.: Notably, in Lambert’s (1865) depiction, the raised elbow is oriented upward, toward the sky, possibly conveying the sense of defiance or disobedience directed toward God. In early ASL, this directional orientation is preserved, redirected toward the interlocutor. In both cases, the gesture aligns closely with the second variant of the prits gesture, in which the elbow tapping is absent. Source: Lambert (1865) and Long (1918) in the Historical Sign Language Database; Shaw; Delaporte (2015). Elaborated by the author.

The Old LSF sign “disobey” (Lambert, 1865) was also borrowed into ASL with the same meaning (Long, 1910) (Figure 6). In the French sign, the illustration clearly depicts the lifting of the elbow, an articulation that echoes the gesture described in the comments for γλυκὺς ἀγκών as discussed above.

In summary, beyond the tapping of the elbow, a defining feature of the prits gesture, certain meanings have been retained that continue to reflect the dual meaning embedded in the ancient proverb. Its calendrical dimension is also evident in both LSF and ASL signs. Moreover, the procedural, and thus cultural and religious memory is particularly preserved in the ASL sign “Passover,” which clearly encodes a significant springtime calendrical marker.

Discussion

The convergences between the ancient Greek proverb γλυκὺς ἀγκών, the tale of *The Old Woman's Days*, and meanings in signed languages reveal a shared semiotic core rooted in embodied cultural memory, with roots that also extend to ancient pagan traditions. In all three, the elbow (ἀγκών/πῆχυς) functions as a key articulatory and symbolic locus for ambivalent meanings. In ancient Greek, it encodes both sweetness and hardship, while in the tale the prits gesture conveys refusal, mockery, and moral transgression. This duality is structurally embedded: the gesture operates as a performative act that triggers cosmological retribution, mirroring the proverb's oscillation between positive and negative meanings. Likewise, in signed languages, elbow-based signs display similar semantic polarities, including "refuse,""punish," "lazy," as well as "fruit" or "sweet." These parallels suggest not coincidence, but enduring cultural schemas circulating across modalities.

Moreover, these parallels point to a deeper continuity between narrative, ritual, and linguistic systems, where embodied action operates as a carrier of cultural and even religious knowledge. In the tale, the prits gesture is embedded within a seasonal and cosmological framework tied to agricultural cycles, calendrical transitions, and moral order. The ancient proverb likewise reflects associations with collective practices, while in signed languages, related forms retain traces of these procedural and calendrical meanings (e.g., signs linked to Easter, months of the year). Such correspondences support the notion of a gesture–sign continuum, in which culturally conventionalized gestures become lexicalized while preserving their original performative and symbolic functions (Kendon, 2004).

The recurrence of semantic duality across domains is striking, and the continued use of the prits gesture in Greece suggests both inheritance and continuity through semiotic refunctionalization. Rather than simple lexical borrowing, also observed between LSF and ASL (Cagle, 2010; Shaw; Delaporte, 2015), these correspondences are better understood as refunctionalization processes, in which meanings are recontextualized and reindexed across cultures. Still, the relationships among these signs point to a form of direct, though non-linear, transmission. This aligns with the historical spread of LSF to the United States via educational elites especially in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Eriksson, 1993; Shaw; Delaporte, 2015; Supalla and Clark, 2015), with deeper roots in earlier monastic traditions (Cagle, 2010). It is plausible that the elbow gesture was preserved within elite educational and religious circles, particularly those linked to the Catholic Church and Benedictine orders, and later transmitted to the signed languages examined here. Although Greece encountered Benedictine traditions in the medieval period (Tsougarakis, 2008; Panagopoulos, 1979), the gesture appears to have persisted mainly in folklore and was not incorporated into GSL, a relatively recent language shaped since the 1970s by ASL influences. It is possible that Benedictine monastic traditions came into contact with the gesture γλυκὺς ἀγκών, perhaps through cultural continuities preserved from Ancient Greek colonization in regions corresponding to present-day France.

Within these monastic and scholarly circles, the study of Greek sources such as Zenobius was recurrent, and this knowledge likely intersected with early deaf education, as evidenced in the work of Abbé de l'Épée. Although Zenobius' collection dates to the second century AD and Cistercian monastic signs to the fourth century AD, this chronological distance does not preclude continuity. Rather, such expressions may have persisted within Greek traditions and been transmitted across linguistic and cultural boundaries into Europe. In this context, France, later a key center for the development and dissemination of signed languages, may have served as an important site for preserving and transforming elbow-based signs. Notably, while the tale is attested in France, the gesture itself does not appear in the narrative tradition, but instead survives in the lexical repertoire of LSF.

Another layer of convergence emerges in relation to time, ritual, and cosmology. The tale encodes seasonal and agricultural cycles, while ancient religious systems associate the elbow (as cubit) with solar measurement and the quadripartition of the year. Traces of these meanings are retained in signed languages through signs related to Easter, specific months (e.g., May, July, September), and temporal units such as the week. Together, these correspondences indicate convergence not only at the level of meaning but also in the shared cosmological structuring of time across modalities.

Pre-Christian elements, such as the veneration of older female divinities (here exemplified by Athena) and solar celebrations linked to Apollo, appear to have been reconfigured within the Christian liturgical calendar (see also Pedrosa, 1995). The preservation of these meanings in relation to Easter suggests continuity from antiquity into later Christian frameworks, with celestial cardinal points still subtly structuring these rituals. The sign for Passover encode such celestial and calendrical reference points, and, within this framework, the signs for May, July, and September likewise correspond to key seasonal transitions. Following the proposed quadripartite celestial structure, May aligns with the western sector, while July and September correspond to the northern. In this context, the formal similarity of the LSF sign for "week" may relate to the lunar cycle, particularly the new moon that marked the beginning of the year. This moment occurs around mid-February, coinciding with celebrations linked to Apollo (Boutsikas, 2020), and reflects a calendrical connection among the interchangeable months of February or March in the tale.

Moreover, the depiction of the woman as forty cubits tall may allude to the angular quadripartition of the Milky Way, with the number forty evoking the forty-day division (see also footnote 7). This reading is reinforced by her association with goats, sheep, milk, and cheese, motifs that symbolically echo the imagery of the galaxy's "milky path." Together, these elements suggest a convergence of cosmological structure and pastoral imagery. Significantly, her death may also reflect the ancient Greek view of the Milky Way as a pathway of souls, marking a transition aligned with seasonal and celestial cycles.

Future directions and contributions

This study makes an interdisciplinary contribution by showing that gesture, narrative, and sign language form an integrated semiotic system through which cultural and religious memory is transmitted and transformed. Empirically, it provides cross-linguistic evidence of formal and semantic correspondences between the folklore gesture prits and lexicalized elbow-articulated signs across multiple signed languages, supporting a gesture–sign continuum. Theoretically, it contributes to multiliteracies and New Literacy Studies by foregrounding embodiment as central to meaning-making, challenging text-centric views of literacy and legitimizing gesture as a curricular resource with stable semantic and cultural value. In this perspective, gesture becomes teachable knowledge, enabling the integration of embodied cultural practices into formal education and reframing literacy as a process of culturally situated, embodied transmission. Such knowledge is already present in Indigenous curricula, where cultural rituals and gestures are taught from kindergarten onward (Mertzani, 2022).

From a pedagogical perspective, the study highlights a key gap in contemporary curricula: the marginalization of embodied cultural knowledge. The absence of non-Christian religions from school curricula reflects broader educational priorities that tend to privilege dominant religious traditions and institutionalized belief systems over indigenous, animistic, or nature-based spiritual practices. This exclusion also reveals how curricula are shaped by historical, political, and cultural power relations that determine which forms of knowledge are considered legitimate for formal education. As a result,

students often encounter limited perspectives on religious and cultural diversity, particularly regarding embodied rituals, ecological worldviews, seasonal ceremonies, and traditions that characterize many non-Christian belief systems. Including such traditions in educational contexts could contribute to a more pluralistic understanding of spirituality, cultural heritage, and human relationships with nature, while also encouraging critical reflection on how knowledge and belief are socially constructed and transmitted across generations.

Furthermore, integrating gestures such as prits into literacy instruction can enhance narrative comprehension through embodied enactment, expand sign language repertoires with culturally grounded forms, strengthen cultural identity, and foster cross-modal links between gesture, sign, and writing, particularly benefiting deaf learners by bridging community-based semiotic resources and formal schooling. This approach situates literacy within cultural heritage, supporting inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogies, and advocating the integration of folklore, ritual practices, and calendrical knowledge into teaching. By showing that gestures and narratives encode cosmological, seasonal, and ritual meanings transmitted across generations, the study proposes a culturally anchored framework for language instruction, including signed languages, and reconceptualizes literacy as inherently multimodal, culturally embedded, and historically layered.

Building on these contributions, several avenues for future research emerge. First, empirical classroom-based studies are needed to investigate how the integration of culturally embedded gestures, such as prits, impacts learners' comprehension, vocabulary development, and narrative skills. Second, experimental and ethnographic research could examine how such gestures are interpreted, acquired, and recontextualized by learners across different age groups and cultural contexts. Third, expanding the scope beyond a single gesture and narrative to include a wider range of folklore traditions and embodied practices would allow for broader generalization and comparative analysis. Fourth, further cross-linguistic research is needed to map gesture–sign correspondences across additional signed languages and historical sign systems, refining our understanding of transmission pathways and semiotic refunctionalization. Finally, curriculum design studies should explore how multimodal, heritage-based pedagogies can be systematically implemented and assessed within educational frameworks, including alignment with national curricula and teacher training. Together, these directions would strengthen the empirical, pedagogical, and theoretical foundations of an embodied, multimodal approach to literacy.

Limitations of the study

The limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The study adopts a qualitative, comparative design based on selected folklore variants, lexicographic sources, and historical materials, which enables in-depth analysis but limits representativeness across regions and signed languages. The findings are also constrained by uneven documentation of elbow-articulated signs, with gaps that may reflect limited records rather than true absence. The study does not include ethnographic observation or experimental validation of how gestures such as prits are perceived or acquired, restricting conclusions about their current communicative and pedagogical impact. Although educational implications are outlined, classroom applications and learning outcomes are not empirically tested. Finally, the focus on a single gesture within a specific narrative limits generalizability, and future research should examine a wider range of gestures, narratives, and contexts to strengthen the proposed multimodal, heritage-based framework for literacy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study shows that gesture, narrative performance, and sign language are interconnected elements of a shared semiotic system through which cultural and religious memory is transmitted and transformed. By identifying formal and semantic continuities between the folklore gesture prits and elbow-articulated signs across signed languages, it provides empirical support for a gesture–sign continuum and highlights embodiment as a carrier of historically layered meaning. The findings call for a reconceptualization of literacy as a culturally embedded, multimodal practice integrating gesture, sign, and narrative. More broadly, the study proposes an interdisciplinary framework linking ritual theory, sign linguistics, and literacy studies, positioning language education as participation in dynamic semiotic traditions grounded in embodied cultural experience.

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Apendix A

In Athenaus ***Deipnosophistae*** (Book XII, 416f-417b) the ***Sweet Assembly***.

Λυδοί, φησί, διὰ τρυφὴν παραδείσους κατασκευασάμενοι, καὶ κηπαίους αὐτοὺς ποιήσαντες ἐσκιατροφοῦντο, τρυφερώτερον ἡγησάμενοι τὸ μηδ' αὐτοῖς ὅλως ἐπιπίπτειν τὰς τοῦ ἡλίου αὐγάς. καὶ τέλος πόῤῥω προάγοντες ὕβρεως, τὰς τῶν ἄλλων γυναῖκας καὶ παρθένους εἰς τὸν τόπον τὸν διὰ τὴν πρᾶξιν ***Ἀγνεῶνα*** [stress by the author] κληθέντα συνάγοντες, ὕβριζον. καὶ τέλος τὰς ψυχὰς ἀποθηλυθέντες, ἤλλαξαν τὸν τῶν γυναικῶν βίον. διόπερ καὶ γυναῖκα τύραννον ὁ βίος εὗρεν αὐτοῖς, μίαν τῶν ὑβρισθεισῶν, Ὀμφάλην· ἥτις πρώτη κατῆρξε μὲν τῆς εἰς Λυδοὺς πρεπούσης τιμωρίας. τὸ γὰρ ὑπὸ γυναικὸς ἄρχεσθαι ὑβριζομένους, σημεῖόν ἐστι βίας. οὖσα οὖν καὶ αὐτὴ ἀκόλαστος, καὶ ἀμυνομένη τὰς γενομένας αὐτῇ πρότερον ὕβρεις, τοῖς ἐν τῇ πόλει δούλοις τὰς τῶν δεσποτῶν παρθένους ἐξέδωκεν ἐν ᾧ τόπῳ πρὸς ἐκείνων ὑβρίσθη· εἰς τοῦτον οὖν συναθροίσασα μετ' ἀνάγκης συγκατέκλεισε τοῖς δούλοις τὰς δεσποίνας. ὅθεν οἱ Λυδοὶ τὸ πικρὸν τῆς πράξεως ὑποκορίζόμενοι, τὸν τόπον καλοῦσι ***Γυναικῶν ἀγῶνα, Γλυκὺν ἀγκῶνα*** [stress by the author]. Οὐ μόνον δὲ Λυδῶν γυναῖκες ἄφετοι οὖσαι τοῖς ἐντυχοῦσιν, ἀλλὰ καὶ Λοκρῶν τῶν Ἐπιζεφυρίων, ἔτι δὲ τῶν περὶ Κύπρον, καὶ πάντων ἁπλῶς τῶν ἑταιρισμῷ τὰς ἑαυτῶν κόρας ἀφοσιούντων, παλαιᾶς τινος ὕβρεως ἔοικεν εἶναι πρὸς ἀλήθειαν ὑπόμνημα καὶ τιμωρία.

Translation [by the author]: The Lydians, it is said, in their indulgent luxury constructed paradises (pleasure-grounds), and turning them into gardens, lived a shaded life, considering it more refined that the rays of the sun should not fall upon them at all. And finally, carrying their insolence ever further, they gathered the wives and maidens of others into a place called *Agneōn* because of this deed, and there they committed acts of outrage. In the end, having made their souls effeminate, they adopted the way of life of women. Therefore life found for them a woman as tyrant, one of those who had been violated, Omphale, who was the first to impose upon the Lydians the punishment fitting to them. For to be ruled by a woman while being dishonored is a sign of violence. She herself, being licentious and avenging the outrages formerly committed against her, handed over the daughters of the masters to the slaves in the city, in the very place where she herself had been outraged; gathering them there by force, she shut the mistresses in together with the slaves. From this the Lydians, softening the bitterness of the deed with a diminutive, call the place the *Women's Assembly, the Sweet Assembly*. And not only the women of Lydia, being given freely to whoever encountered them, but also those of the Epizephyrian Locrians, and further those around Cyprus, and in general all who dedicate their own daughters to prostitution, this seems in truth to be a reminder and a punishment for some ancient act of hubris.

Appendix B

In Erasmus (***Dulcis cubitus,*** Adagium 1038), the explanation of both ***ἀγνεών*** and ***ἀγκών.***

> Unde non absurde κατ' ἀντίφρασιν quis acceperit, sicuti placet Zenodoto. Nam alii putant per exclamationem dictum. Athenaeus libro Deipnosophistarum duodecimo ostendit Anconem locum quempian fuisse Sardis, voluptatum ministeriis paratum, in quo popinae, scorta atque aliae id genus deliciae; dulcis igitur Ancon ob blandimenta voluptatum, sed in eo complures naufragium faciebant. Idem indicat Polycratem apud Samios mulieres aliquot voluptatum architectrices instituisse ad exemplum Anconis dulcis Sardorum, eumque locum Laura dictum fuisse, sive Samiorum Flores. Idem addit Omphalen, ejus gentis reginam, per vim virgines dominorum cum eorum servis inclusisse ad stuprum, ne sola haberetur impudica; Lydos autem eum locum, in quo feminae constuprabantur, γλυχὺν ἀγκῶνα dixisse, sceleris atrocitatem verbo mitigantes. Vocem autem dictam putat ab eo, quod illic gerebatur. Etymologus indicat ἀγκῶνα dici locum ossibus durum, παρὰ τὸ ἐπάγεσθαι τὴν χεῖρα, id est ab adducenda manu, velut ἄγνυσθαι, id est frangendo; sive ab ἄγκειν, id est a praefocando. Hesychius adjicit et murorum flexus ἀγκῶνας vocari. Breviter, quicquid in cubiti speciem inflectitur, ἀγκών dicitur, quemadmodum sunt et citharae ancones.

Translation [by the author]: Hence it is not unreasonable to understand it by antiphrasis, as Zenodotus prefers. For some think it [author's explanation: "γλυκὺς ἀγκών"] was uttered as an exclamation. Athenaeus, in the twelfth book of the ***Deipnosophists***, shows that Ancon [in Greek, Αγκὼν] was once a place in Sardis, set up for the services of pleasure, where there were taverns, prostitutes, and other delights of that sort. Thus Ancon was "sweet" because of the allurements of pleasure, yet in it many were wrecked. He [Athenaeus] also reports that Polycrates among the Samians established several women as architects of pleasure, following the example of the sweet Ancon of the Sardians, and that this place was called Laura, or the Flowers of the Samians. He further adds that Omphale, the queen of that people, by force confined the virgins of the nobles together with their slaves for rapine, so that she herself would not be regarded as the only unchaste; and that the Lydians called that place, where women were violated, the sweet ancon (γλυκὺν ἀγκῶνα) [sweet elbow], softening the atrocity of the crime by the wording. He believes that this term was derived from what was done there. The Etymologicum indicates ἀγκῶνα to mean a place hard with bones, from ἐπάγεσθαι τὴν χεῖρα, that is, from bringing the hand, as from ἄγνυσθαι, that is, by breaking; or from ***ἄγκειν***, that is, from obstructing. Hesychius adds that bends of walls are also called ἀγκῶνας. In short, whatever is bent into the shape of an elbow is called ἀγκών, just as the lyres are also ancones [ἀγκῶνες].