

Taboos and Euphemisms in Signs of Sexual Behaviour in Hong Kong Sign Language: Preliminary observations

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About this study

- This presentation reports on an ongoing research project that documents and analyzes the signs of sexual behaviour in Hong Kong Sign Language. One of the goals of this project is to collect signing variants for the production of materials that can facilitate sex education for the local deaf community and training of sign language interpreters.
- This presentation focuses on the lexical variations of neutral and euphemistic expressions of sex-related concepts, and whether gender plays a role in the choice of the lexical variants.

Acknowledgement

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Outline

1. Literature Review

- Socio-linguistic variations in sign languages
- Sex-related taboos and euphemisms in spoken languages
- Previous studies on sexual signs in sign languages

2. Research issues

3. Methodology

4. Preliminary observations

Literature Review: Socio-linguistic variations in sign languages

- Linguistic variations are pervasive in all languages, and they are characterized by orderly or structured heterogeneity rather than being random (Weinreich et al. 1968:99-100).
- Factors underlying linguistic variations include gender, age, socio-economic conditions, ethnicity, etc.
- Linguistic variations have been studied in a handful of sign languages, most of which are in western communities (e.g. Woodward & Erting 1975, Lucas et al. 2001, 2003, Schermer 2004, Chen & Tai 2009, Schembri et al. 2010, McKee & McKee 2011).

Literature Review: Socio-linguistic variations in sign languages

- Not much has been done on the linguistic variations in Asian sign languages.
- Some previous studies suggest that linguistic variations do exist in Hong Kong Sign Language, Jakarta Sign Language and Japanese Sign Language, and phonological processes have been an important factor that lead to synchronic variations and diachronic changes (Isobe et al. 2012, Sze et al. 2012a, 2012b).

Literature review: taboos and euphemisms in spoken languages

- Across cultures, people avoid saying words and expressions that sound impolite, embarrassing or vulgar to themselves or to other people.
- Such **linguistic taboos** exist in all languages and they usually consist of expressions regarding religion, disease and death, sex, and bodily excretions (Allan & Burridge, 2006; Andersson & Trudgill, 1990).

Literature review: taboos and euphemisms in spoken languages

- When situations require the mention of taboo concepts, language users resort to **indirect/euphemistic expressions** to mitigate the undesirable feeling or vulgarity associated with the taboo.
- Euphemistic expressions in English:
 - “**He passed away**” vs “He died”
 - “**They went to bed together**” vs “They had sex”

Literature review: taboos and euphemisms in spoken languages

- Among the several major areas of taboos, the subject of sex is the most fertile breeding ground for euphemistic expression in spoken languages:
 - Sex is a pervasive aspect of human life
 - Sex is likely to induce embarrassment(Linfoot-Ham, 2005; Rawson 1981; Allan and Burridge, 1991).
- Sex-related taboos: **sexual acts**, the associated **body parts** or even **clothes** that are in direct contact with these body parts (Nash, 1995).

Literature review: taboos and euphemisms in spoken languages

- Previous studies on spoken language euphemisms suggest that how prevalent the euphemisms for sex-related concepts are in a language depends on at least four factors: **culture**, **age**, **gender**, and **context**.
 - Culture: how open they allow overt mention of sexual concepts
 - Age: generation differences
 - Gender: women tend to have more polite linguistic forms
 - Context: same-sex/mixed-sex situations
- Among these four, **gender** and **age** are also well-known factors in sociolinguistic variations.

Literature review: taboos and euphemisms in spoken languages

- Regarding the **lexical strategies** for euphemisms, Warren (1992) proposes a model which captures most types of sex-related euphemistic expressions in spoken languages (Linfoot-Ham, 2005). Some examples are listed below:
 1. **Compounding** (e.g., 'hand job' [masturbation])
 2. **Derivation** (e.g., 'fellatio' [oral sex] was derived from a Latin term ('fellare', to suck))
 3. **back slang** (e.g., 'epar' [rape])

Literature review: taboos and euphemisms in spoken languages

4. **Onomatopoeia** (e.g., 'bonk' [sexual intercourse], which refers to the sounds of two bodies hitting together)
5. **Rhyming slang** (e.g., 'Bristols' [breasts])
6. **phonemic replacement** (e.g., 'boob' [breasts])
7. **Abbreviation** (e.g., 'f-ing' [fucking])
8. **Loan words** (e.g., 'anus' [ass-hole] from Latin)

Literature review: taboos and euphemisms in spoken languages

9. **Particularization** (e.g., using a general term such as 'satisfaction' to refer to [orgasm])
 10. **Implication** (e.g., using 'loose' to imply [sexually easy])
 11. **Reversal/irony** (e.g., 'enviable disease' [syphilis])
- What about sign languages?

Euphemistic expressions in sign languages

- Most sign languages employ visual, iconic means to denote body movements or body parts, and yet representing sexual acts or organs iconically can be very offensive, e.g. representing 'walk' by two downward pointing fingers wiggling or using a C-handshape placed near the ear to denote 'big ear'



- How do deaf signers strike a balance between the iconic nature of sign language and the need to be polite?

Literature review: previous studies on sexual signs in sign languages

- Only a few previous studies on taboos, euphemisms and sexual signs in sign languages.
- Mirus et al. (2012): word formational processes and usage of the taboo expressions (i.e. signs such as FUCK, SHIT, BASTARD) in American Sign Language.
- Napoli et al. (2013): morphological and syntactic properties of 'bleached taboo terms' in American Sign Language (BULL-SHIT, HARSH-AS-HELL, FUCK-IT).

Literature review: previous studies on sexual signs in sign languages

Sutton-Spence and Woll (1999):

- Mention a few taboos, insults and euphemistic signs in British Sign Language
- Euphemisms are much less visually explicit, e.g.
 - sign which is not visually motivated
 - changing the location of a sign
 - smaller and less pronounced movements
 - Neutral facial expressions
- no photos given in their book

Literature review: previous studies on sexual signs in sign languages

- Dictionary-like publications on sexual signs:
 - Woodward (1979, American Sign Language)
 - Colville & Stewart (1998, British Sign Language)
- Both publications suggest that sociolinguistic and regional variations in signs of sexual behaviour exists, and that certain signs are more polite than others.
- Tang (1999): reports some sex-related signs in HKSL in a presentation but less than a handful of them are included in her HKSL Dictionary (Tang, 2007).

Research questions

1. How are sex-related signs expressed in Hong Kong Sign Language?
2. Are there variations within the Deaf Community?
3. Are there forms that are considered more euphemistic than others?



Does gender play a role in the signers' choice of these variants?

Methodology

	Below 30	30-45	Above 45
Male (9)	2	3	4
Female (10)	2	6	2



- 19 Deaf signers (6 are native users) from the same Deaf school: Hong Kong School for the Deaf (1935-2004).
- Picture elicitation based on the sex-related signs listed out by Woodward (1999) + some additional signs (altogether 128 target concepts)
- Elicitation done by a Deaf signer

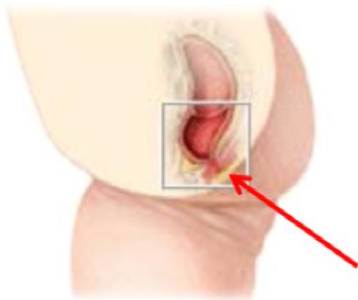
Methodology



Male masturbation
手淫(男)



Virgin
處女/處男



1. Anus
肛門

Picture elicitation done by a Deaf signer, with discussion using probing questions like:

- How do you express these concepts in HKSL?
- Are these signs direct or indirect/polite to your eyes?
- Do you have any indirect forms for these concepts?

Data reported in this presentation

- No. of lexical targets: 21

adultery, AIDS, anus, anal intercourse, breasts, climax, clitoris, clitoral masturbation, condom, fellatio, intercourse, loss of virginity, male masturbation, penis, prostitute, go-look-for prostitute, rape, testicles, vagina, virgin, menstruation

- No. of sign tokens: 1266
- No. of lexical variants identified: 788

Findings:

How are sex-related signs expressed in HKSL?

- Signs related to sexual acts or bodyparts are usually by classifier predicates which are lexicalized to a varying degree.

SEXUAL-INTERCOURSE - Lexicalized classifier predicate: two Y-handshapes representing two human bodies



Findings:

How are sex-related signs expressed in HKSL?

VAGINA - the triangle-like classifier that stands for a female vulva; the tube-like classifier stands for a vagina



Findings:

How are sex-related signs expressed in HKSL?

- Concepts other than sexual acts and bodyparts can be expressed by non-iconic lexical signs.
- PROSTITUTE



- **AIDS** (A-I-D-S, fingerselling, loan from English)



- **AIDS** (signed Chinese, LOVE SICKNESS 愛滋病 – love breed sickness)



Findings:

How are sex-related signs expressed in HKSL?

- Some signs are description-like or compound-like expressions that may or may not be fully lexicalized or conventionalized. Some of these expressions may contain the same component signs but differ in how they are ordered.
- Example: ADULTERY

SECRET ANOTHER CL-two-persons-falling-onto-bed
ANOTHER SECRET CL-two-persons-falling-onto-bed

Findings:

Are there variations within the Deaf Community?

- Lexical variations of sex-related signs do exist among the Deaf informants in the current study.
- No. of variants: **788**
 - We have adopted a relatively conservative approach in differentiating the variants in the first round of coding to avoid missing out potentially important differences.
 - Certain variants are phonologically related, differing in the use of non-manuals (e.g. mouthing vs mouth gesture), number of movements (e.g. single movement vs repeated movement), location (e.g. bodily anchored vs neutral space), handshapes, etc.

- Variants differing in non-manuals:
CLIMAX: (a) with mouth gesture, (b) with mouthing
- Variants differing in the number of movement:
PENIS: (a) single mov, (b) multiple mov, (c) no mov
- Variants differing in location: **PENIS**
 (a) bodily anchored
 (b) neutral space



- Variants differing in handshape
PENIS: (a) 1-handshape
 (b) F-handshape



- Some of the variants are separate variants: **AIDS**

(a) LOVE SICKNESS



(b) a triangular shape

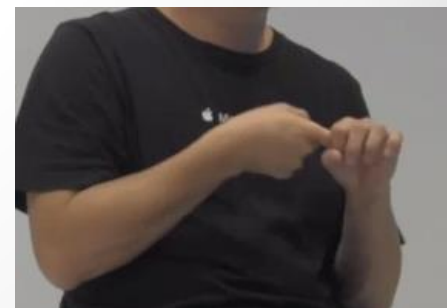


- INTERCOURSE:**

(a) CL-two persons-falling-onto-bed

(b) CL-two-bodies-hitting-together

(c) CL-penis-penetrating-vagina



Findings: Role of gender in the lexical variations

- Gender appears to play at least three roles in the lexical variations in our current data.
 - 1) Certain concepts have gender/role specific forms.
 - 2) Female and male signers may have different lexical choices for the same concept.
 - 3) Male signers tend to have more expressions regarding to sex-related concepts.

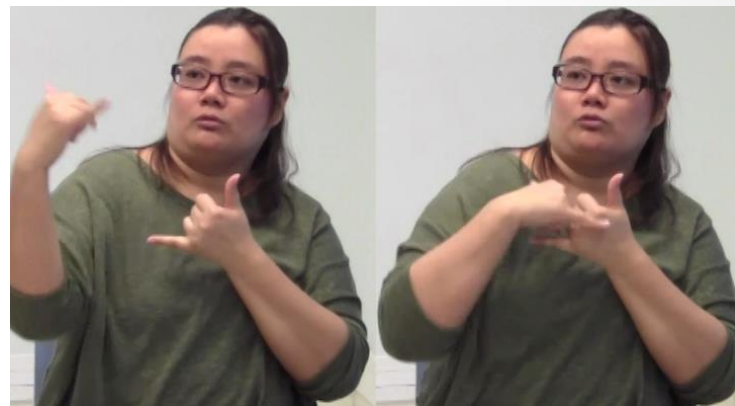
Findings: Role of gender in the lexical variations

(1) There are gender/role-specific forms for **RAPE**, **VIRGIN** and **CLIMAX**.

RAPE: gender/role neutral form



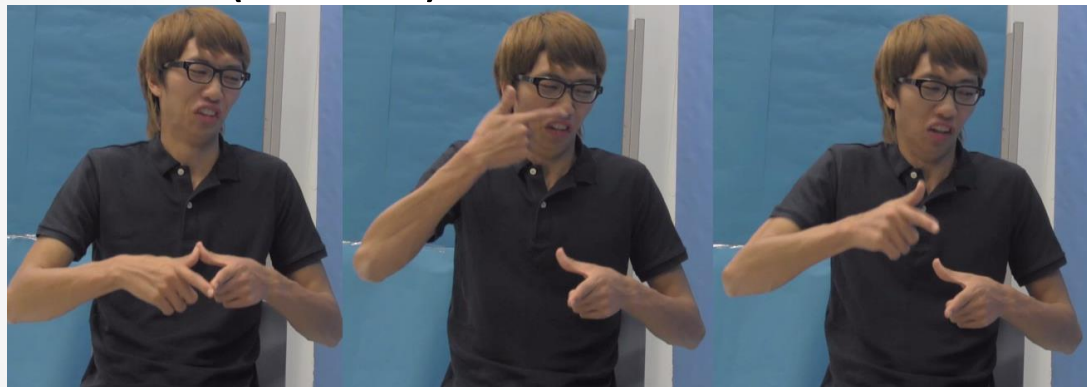
RAPE: form that marks a patient/female role



VIRGIN (gender-neutral form): CL-Y (whole body) NEW



VIRGIN (female): CL-vulva NEW



VIRGIN (male): CL-penis SPARKLE



CLIMAX – gender neutral form



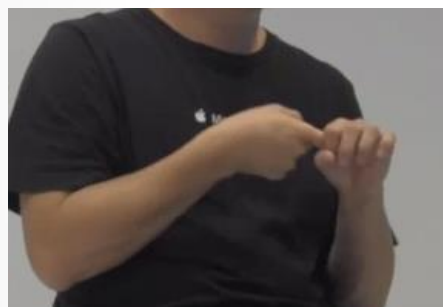
CLIMAX – specific form for female

(→ literally referring to the uncontrolled shaking of the female's legs during orgasm)



(2) Female and male signers may have different lexical choices in their signing.

- Some expressions are used mainly by males or females in our data. e.g. **INTERCOURSE**
- A form that is used only by male signers: (direct depiction of the sexual organs)



- A form that is cited only by female signers

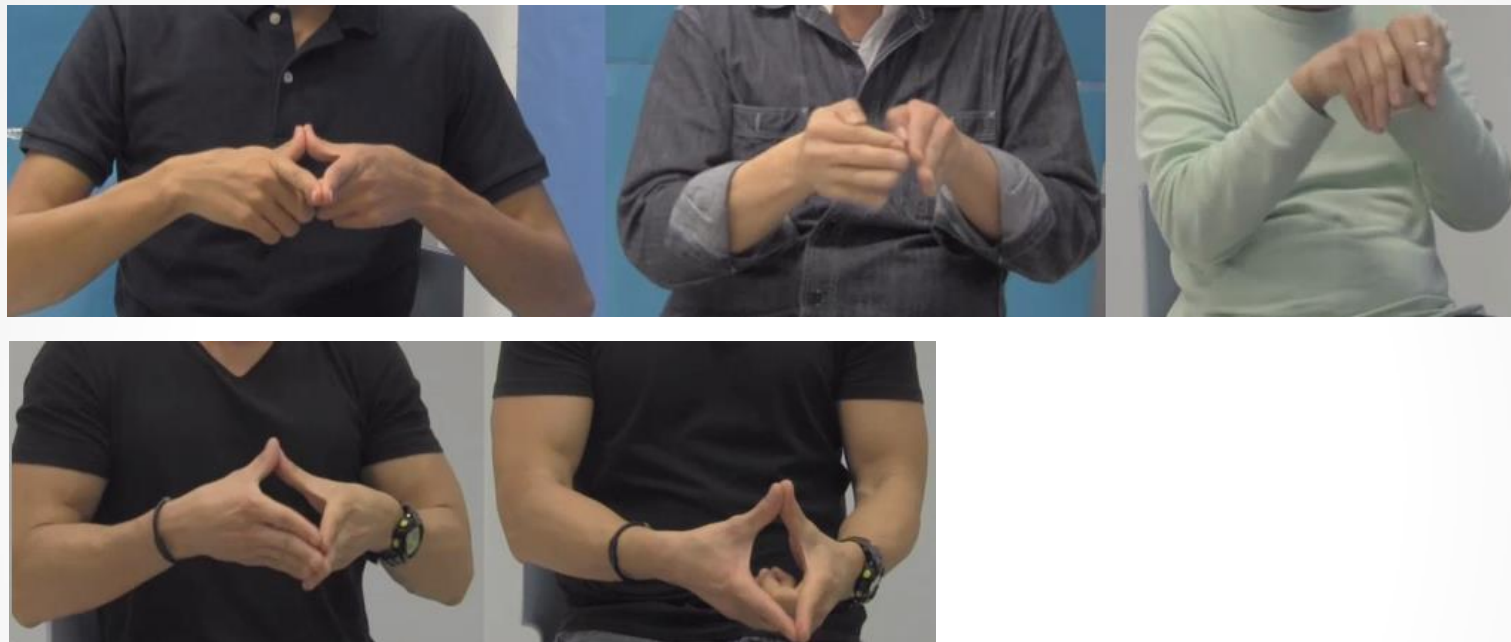


Findings: Role of gender in the lexical variations

- For some signs, males may have a wider range of handshapes that reflect a male-oriented perception of the target concepts. e.g. CLITORIS
- Female signers in this study only cited this handshape to stand for VULVA when naming CLITORIS:



- Male signers have employed the following handshapes for VULVA/LABIA when naming CLITORIS:



- → all these handshapes are visually iconic, and some actually mimic the engorged labia during sexual arousal.
- Why female signers use only 1 handshape - probably because females seldom have a direct view of their own and other women's vulva/labia.

Findings: Role of gender in the lexical variations

(3) Male signers have slightly more expressions regarding to sex-related concepts.

Types of Forms	Cited by female signers only	Cited by male signers only	Cited by female and male signers	Total
Direct forms	207	256	98	561
Direct/Indirect forms	2	1	15	18
Indirect forms	96	101	12	209
Grand Total	305 (30.5/person)	359 (39.9/person)	125	788

Findings:

Are there forms that are indirect/ euphemistic?

- Yes. Certain expressions are considered indirect/euphemistic expression than the others.
- Examples of euphemistic strategies in our data:

Bodypart substitution: using another bodypart to represent the target concept indirectly. e.g. **VAGINA**

Direct form



Indirect form: Using the folded arm to stand for a female vulva when indicating vagina.



Findings:

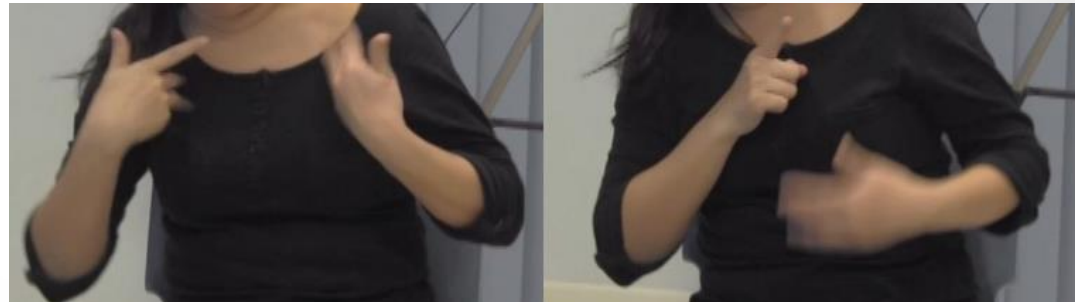
Are there forms that are indirect/ euphemistic?

Particularization: The targeted concept is named by a semantically broader term. The expression needs to be 'particularized' within context in order to make sense (Warren, 1992). e.g. **MALE MASTURBATION**

Direct form



Indirect form:
PLAY ONE-SELF



Findings:

Are there forms that are indirect/ euphemistic?

Metonymy: “...using one entity to refer to another that is related to it” (Lakoff & Johnson 1987:35):

- Some significant aspect or associated detail of an experience or object is used to represent the whole experience or object. Examples:
- **Container** for **content**.
e.g. Dave drank the glasses. (= the liquid in the glasses)
- **Part** for the **whole**.
e.g. We don't hire longhairs. (=people with long hairs)
- **The place** for **the event**
e.g. Pearl Harbor still has an effect on our foreign policy today. (=what happened at Pearl Harbor)

Findings:

Are there forms that are indirect/ euphemistic?

e.g. LOOKING-FOR-PROSTITUTE

Direct form



Indirect form:
GO-TO MAINLAND-
CHINA

Findings:

Are there forms that are indirect/ euphemistic?

- Metaphors: a figure of speech that makes a comparison between two things that are basically different but share certain similarities. e.g. **TESTES**

Direct form



Indirect form: IX-down EGG



Findings:

Are there forms that are indirect/ euphemistic?

- Loan word from spoken language
- INTERCOURSE:

Direct form



Indirect form
MAKE LOVE
Chinese: 'zou oi'
English: 'make
love'



Findings:

Are there forms that are indirect/ euphemistic?

- Implications: the targeted entity or action is not overtly named, but is implied through the euphemistic expressions.
- e.g. implication through naming an action that is usually performed alongside with the target behaviour occurred.
- LOOK-FOR-PROSTITUTE
- Indirect form: PRESS-DOORBELL



Findings:

Are there forms that are indirect/ euphemistic?

- e.g. implication through another thing or event that can be seen as the targeted action is performed.

INTERCOURSE

Indirect form: BED-SHAKING



Findings:

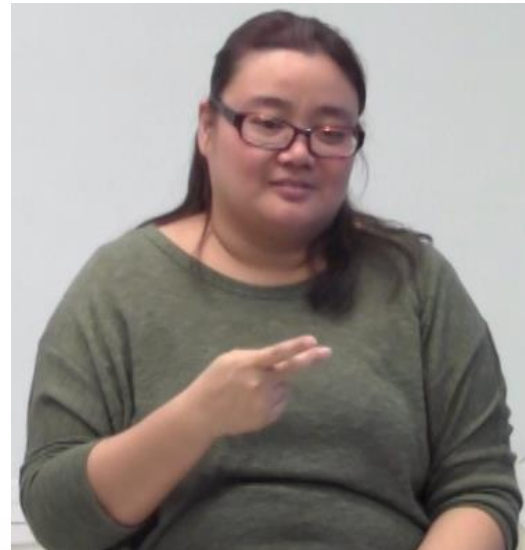
Are there forms that are indirect/ euphemistic?

- An entirely arbitrary sign. MENSURATION

Direct form



Indirect form:
CHOPSTICKS



Any gender effect on the use of indirect/ euphemistic expressions?

- Overall speaking, male and female signers have more or less the same no. of indirect/euphemistic expressions.
- No obvious gender effect on the types of euphemistic strategies, either.

Types of Forms	Cited by female signers only	Cited by male signers only	Cited by female and male signers	Total
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Grand Total	305	359	125	788

- However, the euphemistic expressions by male and female signers may cluster around different signs.
- Signs of which female signers have more euphemistic expressions than male signers:

Target	Cited by female signers only	Cited by male signers only	Cited by both	Total
menstruation	20			20
climax	2			2
clitoral masturbation	3			3
rape	3			3
vagina	7	2	1	10
adultery	8	6		14
anal intercourse	1		1	2
testicles	7	5		12
virgin (male)	3	2		5

These concepts tend to induce embarrassment to females when mentioned directly or in public.

- Signs of which male signers have more indirect/euphemistic expressions than female signers:

Target	Cited by female signers only	Cited by male signers only	Cited by both	Total
intercourse	8	15	0	23
looking for prostitute	7	16	0	23
virgin (female)	3	12	0	15
breasts (female)	1	8	0	9
condom	3	6	0	9
male masturbation	1	6	1	8
fellatio	6	7	1	14
loss of virginity (female)	3	5	0	8
loss of virginity (general)	1	3	0	4
clitoris	1	2	0	3
AIDS	0	1	0	1
loss of virginity (male)	0	1	0	1

Concepts that males tend to have a strong interest in talking about.

Any gender effect on the use of indirect/ euphemistic expressions?

- Hence, there is preliminary evidence that female and male signers create and use euphemistic expressions for different reasons.

Summary

- Our preliminary observations suggest that lexical variations do exist in sex-related signs in the Hong Kong Deaf community.
- Gender plays a role in the formation and choice of lexical variants.
 - Certain concepts have gender/role specific forms.
 - Certain signs are only cited by either female or male signers.
 - Male signers tend to have slightly more expressions for sex-related concepts.

Summary

- Female and male signers appear to create and use indirect and euphemistic signs due to different motivations.
- Other interesting observations for future research:
 - (a) Although 'age' is not a focus of this presentation, we do see variations due to age differences.
 - Older and younger signers may use different signs for the same concept. E.g. PENIS → 1-handshape by elder signers vs F-handshape by younger signers.
 - Stronger influence from Chinese in signs produced by younger signers, e.g. FEMALE-VIRGIN = FEMALE + mouthing 'cyu neoi, virgin woman'

Summary

(b) Certain signs received varied judgment in terms of directness. They are labeled as DIRECT/INDIRECT in our data:

Types of Forms	Cited by female signers only	Cited by male signers only	Cited by female and male signers	Total
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Summary

- We suspect that some of these ambiguous data reflect what Steven Pinker calls “the treadmill effect” of euphemistic expressions.
- Treadmill effect: euphemistic expressions may gradually take on the negative taboo meaning over time, and soon or later language users would feel the urge to look for a more polite form (Pinker, 2003).

Example: CONDOM – one of the direct form
PLASTIC CL-put-condom-on-penis



Cited mainly by older signers.

Commented by a younger native signer as a sign used only by “the elderly”.

Another form: literally means ‘put something tight on head.)



- Judged by 3 older signers (age 49 or above) as ‘indirect’.
- But judged as ‘direct’ by 5 younger signers.
- → an indirect sign becoming ‘blunt’ over time.

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