

Age-related Variation in Signs of Sexual Behaviors in Hong Kong Sign Language (HKSL)



Aaron Wong, Wei Xiao, Felix Sze
Centre for Sign Linguistics and Deaf Studies
The Chinese University of Hong Kong



香港中文大學
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Introduction

- Sociolinguistic variations are pervasive in all languages.
- Age, as a crucial factor underlying sociolinguistic variations, is widely studied in spoken and signed languages. The reason why it is hard to pass on the signs from older signers to the next generation is probably because Deaf children are usually born to hearing parents (Schembri et.al 2010).
- Previous studies in sign Languages suggest that older signers tend to be opposed to the introduction of new signs (Schembri and Johnston 2007) or the sign language itself (Schembri et.al 2010), while younger signers prefer more non-citation forms (Lucas et al. 2001; Lucas et al. 2002).
- Peer groups play important roles in a signer’s communication way for the whole life. Moreover, different social organizations also have “important language maintenance functions” (Lucas and Schatz 2003: 142).
- Across cultures, people avoid saying words and expressions that sound impolite, embarrassing or vulgar to themselves or to other people. These words are referred to as taboos and exist in all languages. Sex is among one of the taboos that often requires the replacement of euphemistic expressions (Linfoot-Ham 2005).
- Some researches have been done on the gender differences regarding euphemisms and taboos related to sexual expressions (Walsh & Leonard 1974, Gordon 1993). However, age-based variation in this field is less studied.

Purpose of this Study

- The aim of this study is to provide a preliminary description of the variation reflecting age difference in signs of sexual behavior in Hong Kong Sign Language. We would like to address the following issues in particular:
 - Are there any age-based variation in sexual sign data in Hong Kong Sign Language?
 - If so, what are the properties of the variants and what are the possible reasons?

Methodology

- Informants
In total 18 fluent signers, all graduated from the Hong Kong School for the Deaf (HKSD) (oral approach)
 - 3 elder signers aged above 50 (1 Female, 2 Male)
 - 6 mid-aged signers aged 36 – 49 (4 Female, 2 Male)
 - 9 younger signers aged below 35 (5 Female, 4 Male)
- Elicitation
 - 132 lexical words related to sex were chosen (mostly based on the list of Woodward (1979), some extra words added)
 - Pictures were used for elicitation
 - Preliminarily, 820 signs from 16 crucial words from the 18 signers were studied upon within this research

Observation 1: Spoken Language Influence

Younger signers are found to be largely affected by spoken languages in our sexual sign data, whereas elder signers do not show this trend. Examples are seen from full mouthing and loan words from English or Chinese (whole characters or fingerspell letters).

Example 1. ANUS

Younger form:
CL + Cantonese mouthing (si2 fat1)

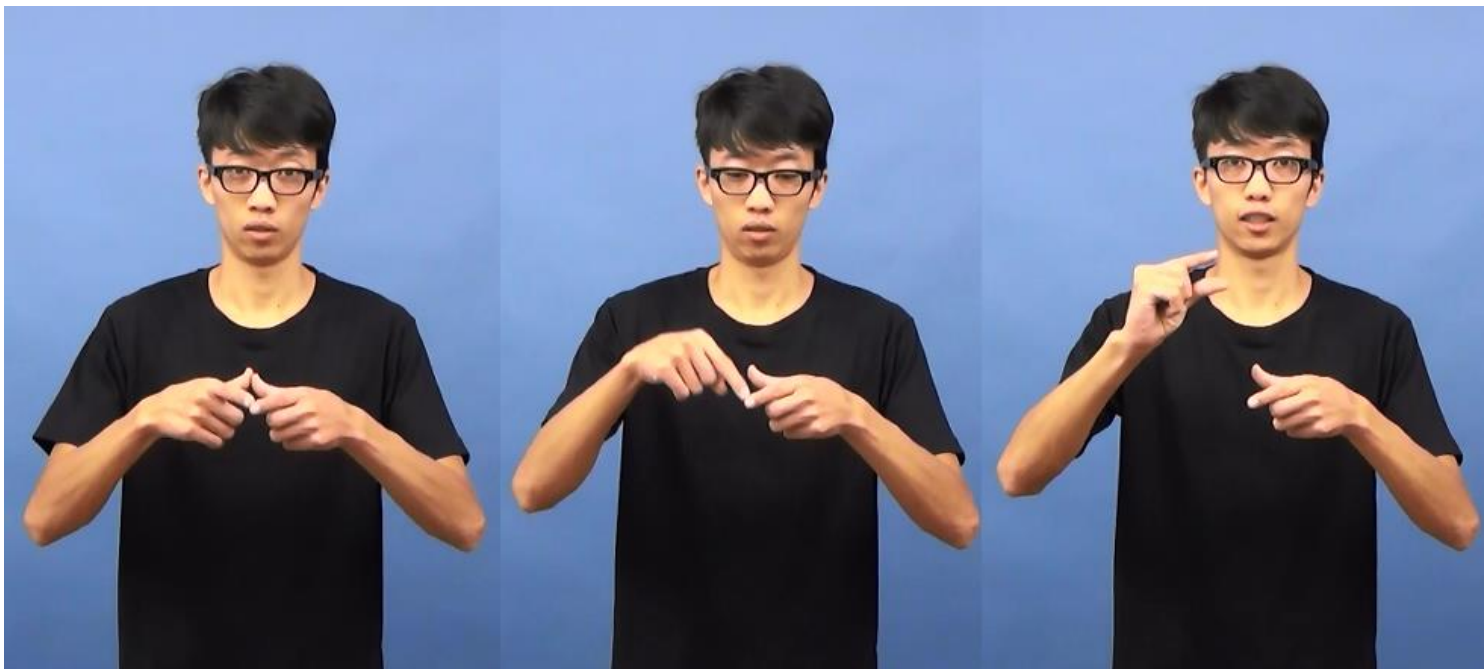


Common form (seen in all three groups): EXCRETE^CL-small hole

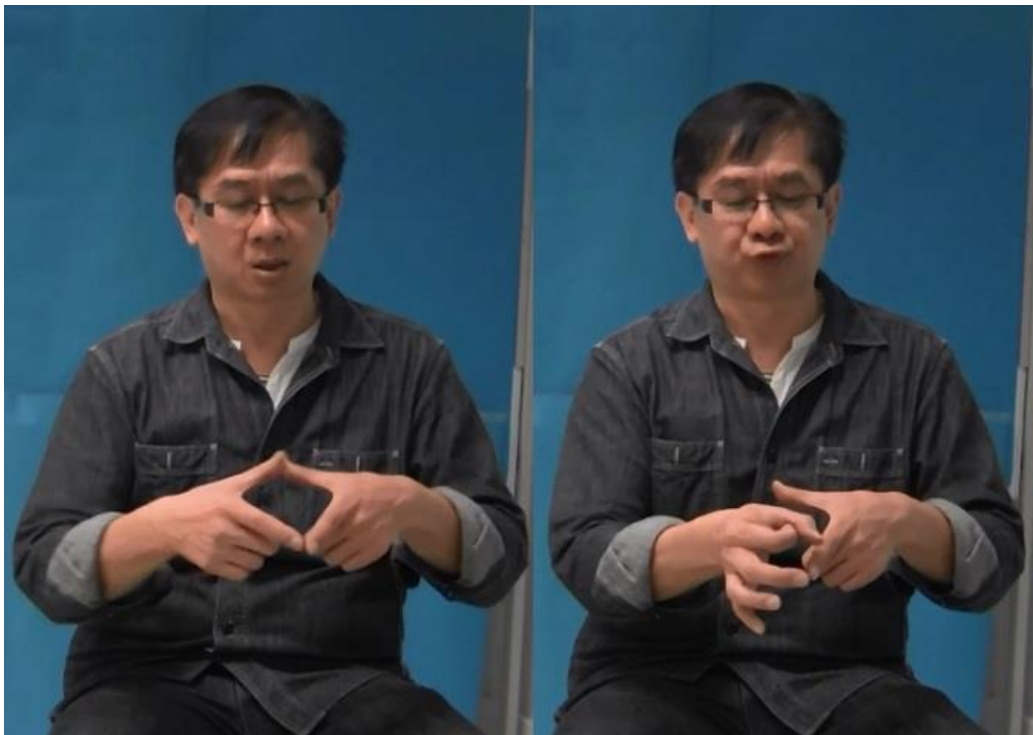


Example 2. CLITORIS

Younger form: CL-vulva^IX-point^G



Elder form: CL-vulva^CL-small hole



Observation 2: Different Handshape Choices

Signers from different age groups are found to be preferring different handshapes for the same lexical item.

Example 1. PENIS

Younger form: F handshape



Elder form: 1 handshape



Example 2. NIPPLES

Signer aged above 48



Signer aged below 48



Example 3. FELLATIO

Mid-aged signers (S)



Young and some elder (O)

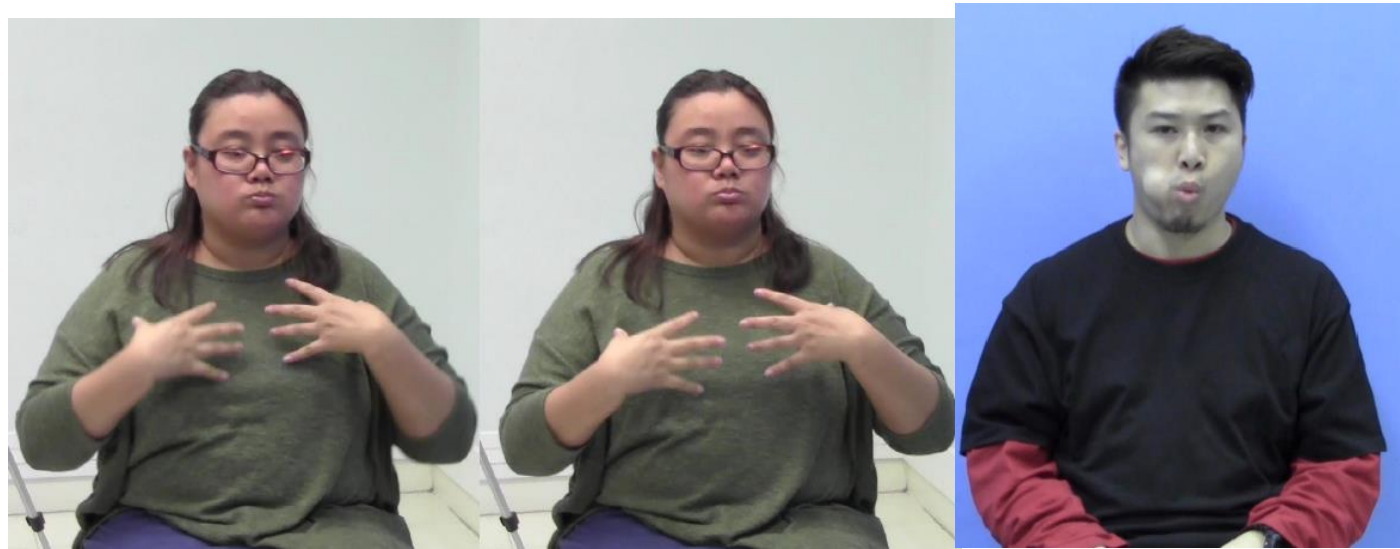


Observation 3: Difference and Similarity in Euphemistic Expressions

Signers would choose various euphemistic forms to represent a taboo topic.

Example 1. BREASTS (FEMALE)

The usual way of signing BREASTS, as seen in a lot of signers’ production regardless of age, is classifiers depicting the shape of breasts right in front of chest, which is quite obvious. To avoid the directness, signers produce an indirect form, which is the same across all the 18 signers.



Neutral sign

Euphemistic sign

Example 2. TESTICLES

The example shows different lexical choices. While elder and mid-aged signers use EGG to imply TESTICLES, younger signers choose TABLE-TENNIS. EGG is also observed in two younger signers’ data, but they are both native signers coming from Deaf signing families.



Neutral sign

Euphemistic sign

Discussion

- Age as a social factor of the variations does exist in signs of sexual behaviors in HKSL.
- When talking about sex-related topics, elder and younger signers would adopt different lexical or phonological variants. Mid-aged signers, although usually a transit group, show distinct signs for certain words. This proves the importance of peer group in signing variations.
- Some signs, contrasted with others, have a smaller and more uniform set of variants, which is a signal of “progressive standardization or lexical leveling” (McKee and McKee 2011: 516).
- By identifying the differences among age-linked groups, we are expecting a clearer focus when we are dealing with Deaf people in various issues related to sex from an education, interpretation and legal perspective.

Acknowledgement

- The Direct Grant from the Faculty of Arts, the Chinese University of Hong Kong
- The Deaf informants that participated in this study

Reference

- Gordon, M. Sexual slang and gender. (1993). Women and Language16 (2).16.
- Lucas, C., and S. Schatz. (2003). Sociolinguistic Dynamics in American Deaf Communities: Peer Groups versus Families. In Monaghan L. et al. (ed.), Many Ways to Be Deaf: International Variation in Deaf Communities. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press.
- Lucas, C., R. Bayley, and C. Valli. (2001). Sociolinguistic Variation in American Sign Language. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press.
- Lucas, C., R. Bayley, M. Rose and A. Wulf. (2002). Location Variation in American Sign Language. Sign Language Studies2(4).407-440.
- McKee, R., and D. McKee. (2011). Old Signs, New Signs, Whose Signs? Sociolinguistic Variation in the NZSL Lexicon. Sign Language Studies11(4).485–527.
- Schembri, A., & T. Johnston. (2007). Sociolinguistic Variation in the Use of Fingerspelling in Australian Sign Language: A Pilot Study. Sign Language Studies 7(3). 319-347.
- Schembri, A., K. Cormier, T. Johnston, D. McKee, R. McKee and B. Woll. (2010). Sociolinguistic variation in British, Australian and New Zealand Sign Languages. In Brentari D. (ed.), Sign Languages. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 476-498.
- Walsh, R. H. & Leonard W. M. (1974). Usage of terms for sexual intercourse by men and women. Archives of Sexual Behavior3(4).373-376.
- Woodward, J. (1979). Signs of sexual behavior: an introduction to some sex-related vocabulary in American Sign Language. T.J. Publishers.