

Taboos and Euphemisms in Signs of Sexual Behavior in Asian Sign Languages



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Introduction:

- This poster discusses the euphemistic strategies used by deaf signers for sexual signs in four Asian sign languages - Hong Kong Sign Language (HKSL), Jakarta Sign Language (JakSL), Sri Lankan Sign Language (SLSL) and Japanese Sign Language (JSL).
- 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.
- When situations require the mention of taboo concepts, language users resort to euphemistic expressions to mitigate the undesirable feeling or vulgarity associated with the taboo words. Among the several areas of taboos, sex is the most fertile breeding ground for euphemistic expressions in spoken languages.
- There is a sizable literature on taboos and euphemisms in spoken languages. However, very few have been done in sign languages:
 - Taboo expressions in ASL (Mirus et al. 2012; Napoli et al. 2013)
 - Sexual signs in ASL (Woodward 1979); sexual signs in BSL (Colville & Stewart 1998).

Euphemistic strategies in spoken languages (Warren 1992):

1. Formal Innovations:

(a) Formation of new words

- Compounding** (e.g., ‘hand job’ [masturbation], Linfoot-ham (2005))
- Derivation** (e.g., ‘fellatio’ [oral sex] was derived from a Latin term (‘fellare’, to suck))
- Acronyms** (e.g., AIDS [Acquired Immune-Deficiency Syndrome])
- Onomatopoeia** (e.g., ‘bonk’ [sexual intercourse], which refers to the sounds of two bodies hitting together)

(b) Phonemic modifications

- back slang** (e.g., ‘epar’ [rape])
- Rhyming slang** (e.g., ‘Bristols’ [breasts])
- phonemic replacement** (e.g., ‘boob’ [breasts])
- Abbreviation** (e.g., ‘f-ing’ [fucking])

(c) Loan words (e.g., ‘anus’ [ass-hole] from Latin)

2. Semantic innovations: a “novel sense of some established word or word combination is created” (Warren, 1992:133)

(a) Particularization (using a general term such as ‘satisfaction’ to refer to [orgasm])

(b) Implication (the contextual, euphemistic referent and established referent of an expression are invariably or frequently concomitant, which “causes a more or less probable antecedent-consequent relationship between them”, e.g., ‘sleeping with someone’ → ‘have sex with someone’)

(c) Metaphor (e.g., ‘globes’, ‘brown eyes’, ‘melons’ to stand for [breasts]).

(d) Metonymy (the novel referent and the established referent are connected in some ways, e.g., whole-part relation (e.g. *dress for sale* ‘prostitutes’ - somebody who has a dress and is for sale), locative relation (e.g., *red lamp* ‘brothel’ - the place which has a red lamp)).

(e) Reversal/irony (e.g., ‘enviable disease’ [syphilis])

(f) Understatement (e.g., ‘deed’ [rape])

(g) Overstatement (e.g., ‘visual engineer’ [window cleaner])

3. Others (Linfoot-Ham 2005):

(a) Naming (e.g., ‘French letter’ [condom]) (Rawson, 1981)

(b) Deletion (e.g., ‘Did you -’ [Did you have sexual intercourse?])

Research questions:

- Are there sex-related euphemisms in sign languages?
- How would Asian Deaf signers euphemize sexual taboos? Are their strategies similar to those in spoken languages?

Methodology:

13 Deaf informants:

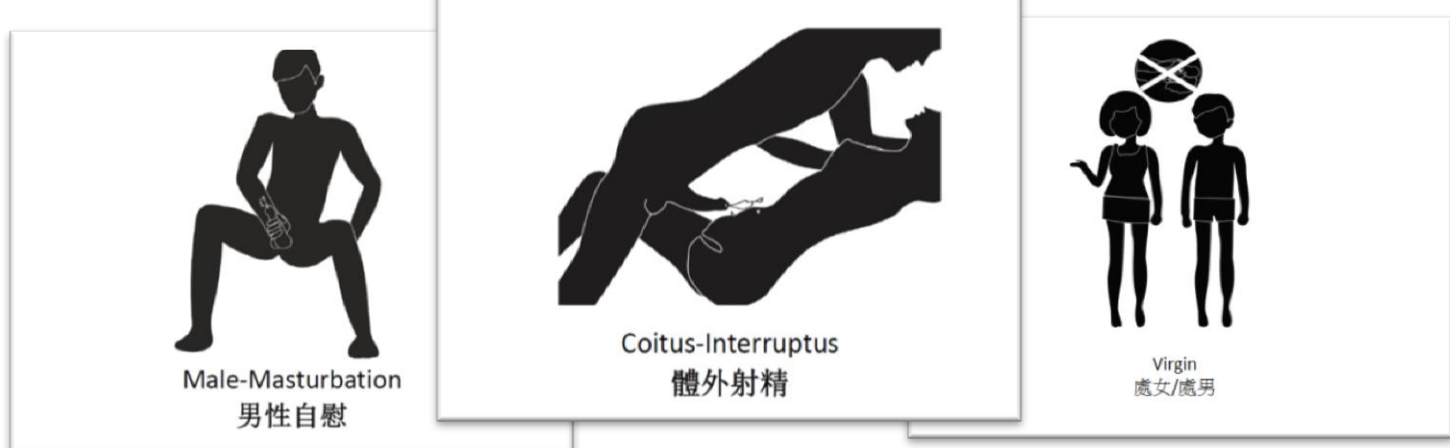
Table 1. Background information of the signing informants of this study

Sign Language	Female	Male
Jakarta Sign Language	1 (age: 20s)	1 (age: 40s)
Sri Lankan Sign Language	2 (age: 20s, 20s)	2 (age:20s, 40s)
Japanese Sign Language	1 (age: 50s)	1 (age: 50s)
Hong Kong Sign Language	2 (age: 30s, 40s)	3 (age: 30s, 20s, 20s)

Target concepts:

- 90 targets from Woodward (1979) + 36 additional concepts.

Elicitation with pictures/drawings:



Examples of euphemistic strategies by Deaf signers

(1) Formal Innovations

(a) Formation of new words

- Blend:** MENSTRUATION-CRAMP (JSL)
(neutral) (euphemistic)



BLOOD^PAIN



Blending of
FEMALE&SICKNESS
^PAIN

- Creation of a new arbitrary sign:** GAY (SLSL)
(neutral) (euphemistic)



Brushing the back
of one's ear with an
index finger

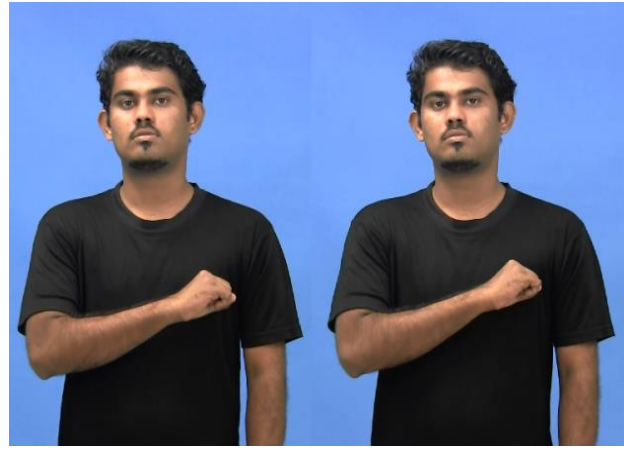
(b) Phonemic modifications:

- Handshape change:** CLITORIS (SLSL)
(neutral) (euphemistic)



The iconic ‘R’
handshape (vulva)
replaced by a flat
‘B’ handshape.

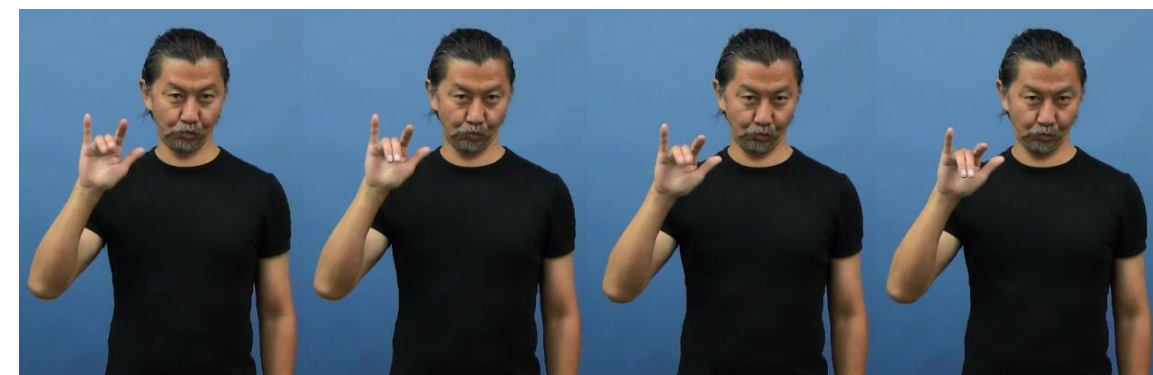
- Location change:** MASTURBATION (SLSL)
(neutral) (euphemistic)



- Deletion:** INTERCOURSE (JSL)

(neutral: two-legs-between-two-thighs under-blanket)

(euphemistic: ‘blanket’ is deleted)



(c) Loans from other languages

- From spoken languages:** PORNOGRAPHIC-PUBLICATION (HKSL)
(neutral: SEXUAL-DESIRE^BOOK) (euphemistic: YELLOW^BOOK)

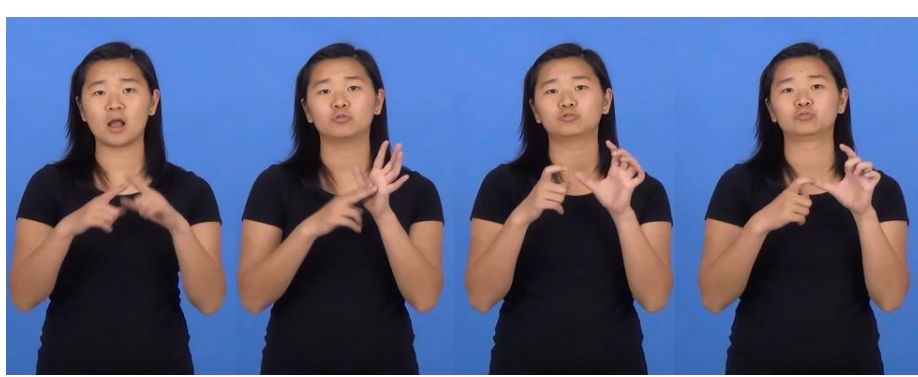
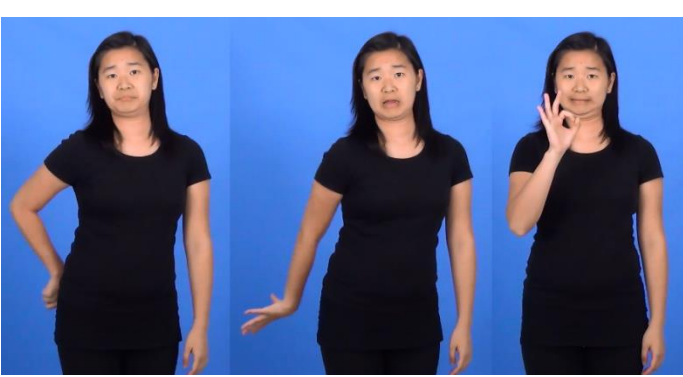


‘Yellow’ is an
euphemistic term
in Cantonese for
‘pornography’.

ANUS (JakSL)

(neutral)

(euphemistic: A-N-U-S)



(2) Semantic Innovations:

(a) Particularization: CLIMAX (JSL)

(neutral)

(euphemistic: PEAK)



PENIS (HKSL)

(neutral)

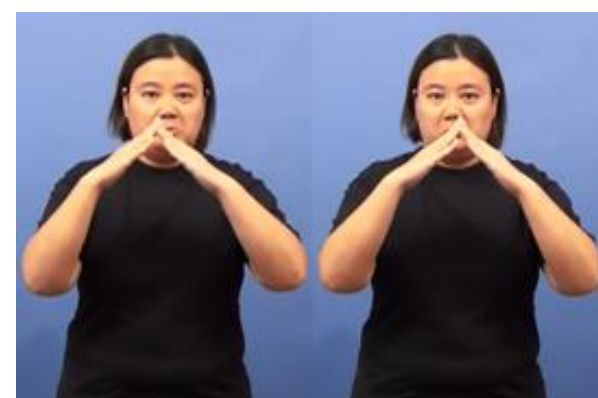
(euphemistic: down there)



(b) Implication: INTERCOURSE (HKSL)

(neutral)

(euphemistic: HOUSE-SHAKING)



INTERCOURSE (JSL)

(neutral)

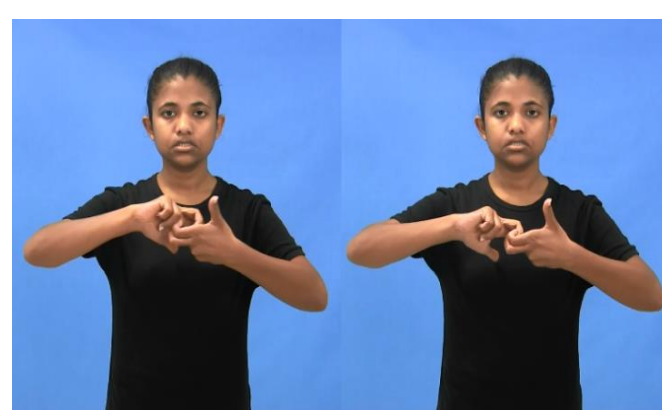
(euphemistic: LIGHT-OFF)



(c) Metonymy : FEMALE-BREASTS (SLSL)

(neutral)

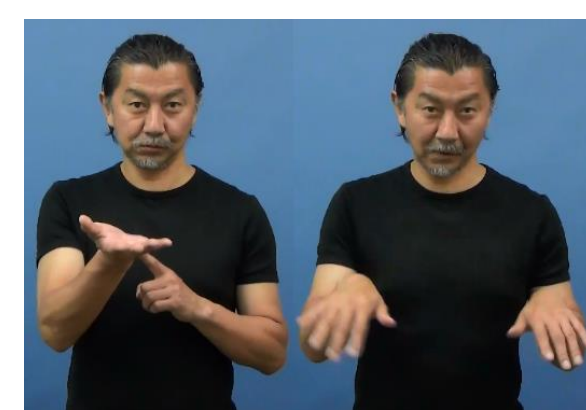
(euphemistic: HOOK-OF-BRAS)



(d) Metaphor: PREMATURE-EJACULATION (JSL)

(neutral)

(euphemistic: shoot-quickly)

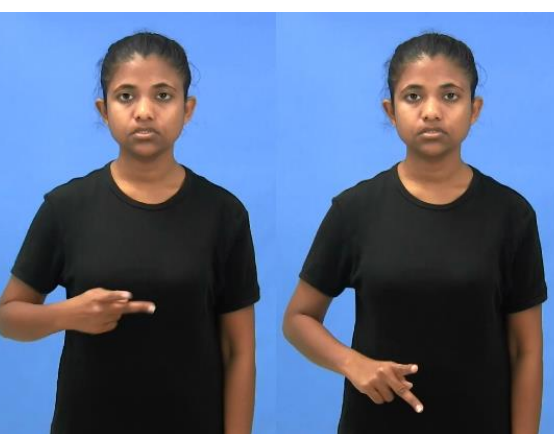


(3) Others: Non-manual signals only

MENSTRUATION (SLSL)

(neutral)

(euphemistic: lip-biting)



FEMALE BREASTS (HKSL)

(neutral)

(euphemistic: tongue movement)



Concluding remarks:

- Similarity across sign languages in the types of euphemistic strategies.
- Cross-modal similarities are observed; with a few strategies unique to sign languages.
- Materials are useful for not only linguistic research but also production of training materials for sex education and interpretation programmes.

Reference:

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