

# Taboo terms in German Sign Language: Exploring the influence of iconicity

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## Background

### Why look at taboo?

- Across languages, taboo vocabulary is drawn from common topics: bodily effluents, disease, death, religion, and sex.
- Whether a taboo term causes offense depends on its context of use (Pilotti et al. 2012).
- Taboo expressions are linguistically promiscuous: (a) complete utterances, Hungarian: *A rosseb egye meg!* 'may you be eaten by a festering wound'; (b) primary predicate, Mandarin *Cào nǐ nǎinai* 'fuck your paternal grandmother'; (c) secondary predicate *I am scared shitless*; (d) objects *They beat the shit out of her*; (e) modifiers, Polish *mały gówniany kraik* 'a shitty little country'; (f) NPIs, Dutch *Ik kan geen zak zien* 'I can no scrotum see'
- Allows insights into grammatical phenomena such as *wh*-questions, VP ellipsis, NPI licensing, language variation and change
- Previous work on SLs focuses on sex-related taboo (Rudner & Butowsky 1981; Kleinfeld & Warner 1996; Sze et al. 2017) and suggests that **metonymic anchor** and **degree of iconicity** affect offensiveness of a sign

### Goal

Examine the **linguistic sources of offense** in DGS taboo vocabulary, focusing on **metonymic anchoring** and **degree of iconicity**. Examine potential **constraints on the semantics** of taboo terms.

### Method

Think Aloud Protocol (Van Someren et al. 1994)

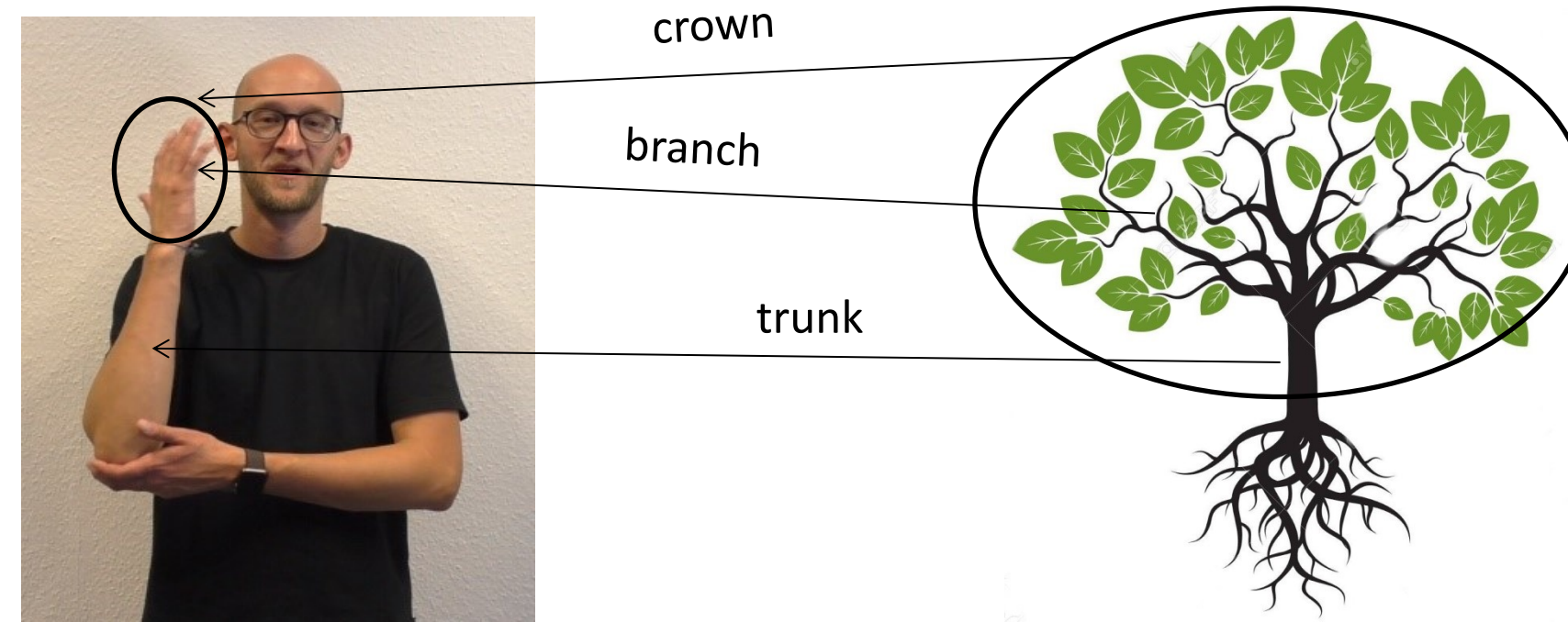
- 9 deaf DGS signers presented with illustrations (Schinmeyer 2009) and open-ended questions, e.g. *Can you think of signs you or others might find offensive? What does this sign show? Is one of these signs more offensive than the others?*

### Metonymy

- Referring to one concept (target) with the help of an associated one (vehicle) (Radden and Kövecses 1999).
- Part-for-whole mappings render the profiled part more salient to the interlocutor (Lakoff & Johnson 1980)

- (1) a. I need some fresh **eyes** on this text.  
b. **The New York Times** interviewed me!

### Degree of iconicity:



Number of structured correspondences between a schematized mental image of a referent and its phonological form (Taub 2001; Emmorey 2014)

### The Double Mapping Constraint (Meir 2010)

Metaphorical mappings have to preserve structural correspondences of the iconic mapping.

	Iconic mapping	Metaphorical mapping	
	ARTICULATORS	SOURCE	TARGET
	-	Objects	Ideas
	Forehead	Head	Mind
	Initial handshape	Holding an object	Considering an idea
	Hand touches forehead	Object located in head	Sender understands idea
	Hand moves towards addressee and opens	Tossing someone an object	Sender communicates idea to someone

## The linguistic sources of offense

### 1. Metonymic anchor

- bodies colliding for sex



SEX-N      FUCK-O

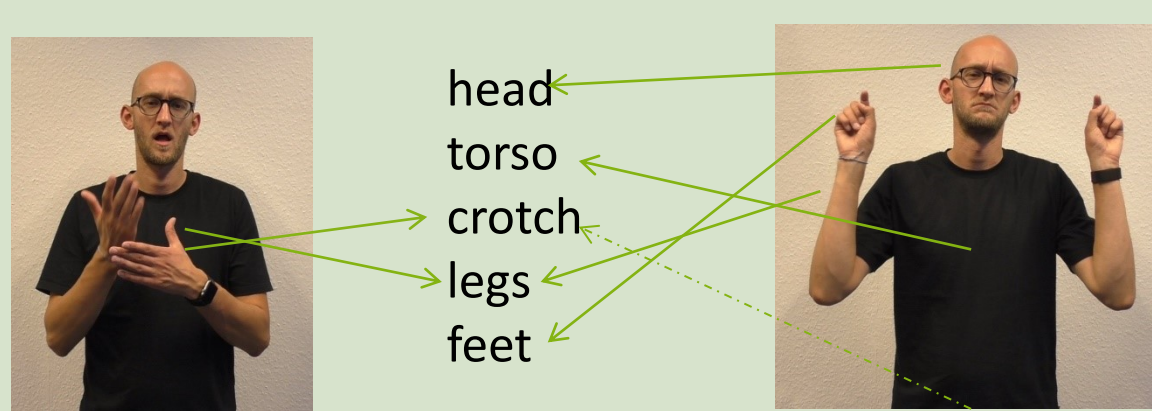
- sexual act for sexual identity



LESBIAN-N      LESBIAN-O

### 2. Degree of iconicity

- phonologically unrelated signs:  
metonymic anchor: women's spread legs for sex



SLUT      <offense      SPREAD-ONE'S-LEGS

- handshape change:

e.g. substituting for in denigrating variant of PENIS invites viewer to interpret handshape not only in terms of shape but also size

- location change:

In one variant of DGS GAY, the curled ulnar fingers form a canal into which the dominant hand can be inserted, adding a structural correspondence to the anal canal:



GAY-1      <offense      GAY-2

Location changes can result in adding parts of the signer's body to the structural correspondences of the iconic sign: e.g. moving the following signs closer to the crotch makes WIMP more crass and turns MERKEL into the expletive FUCK-MERKEL



WIMP      MERKEL

### 3. Lexical blends

Consist of non-morphemic phonological subcomponents of existing words (Lepic 2015).

- middle finger handshape of ASSHOLE:

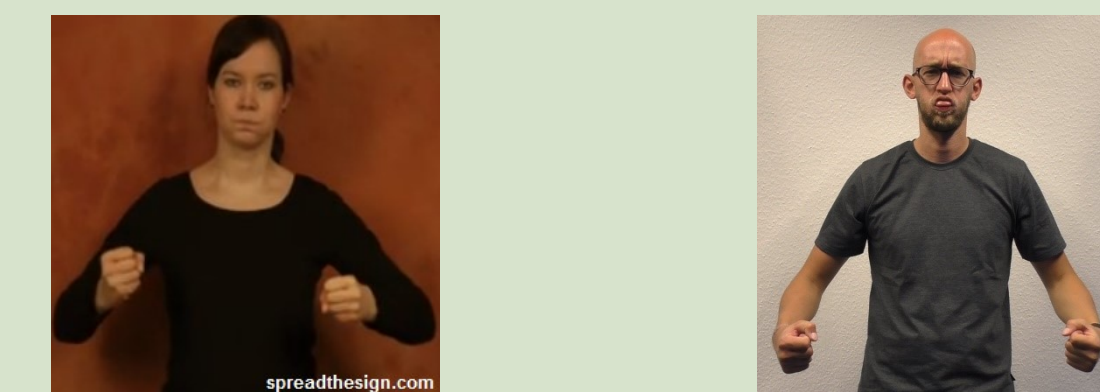


HARD-OF-HEARING

- hs/orient./move. of WIMP + location of GERMANY = 'Germany is a loser' (soccer context)

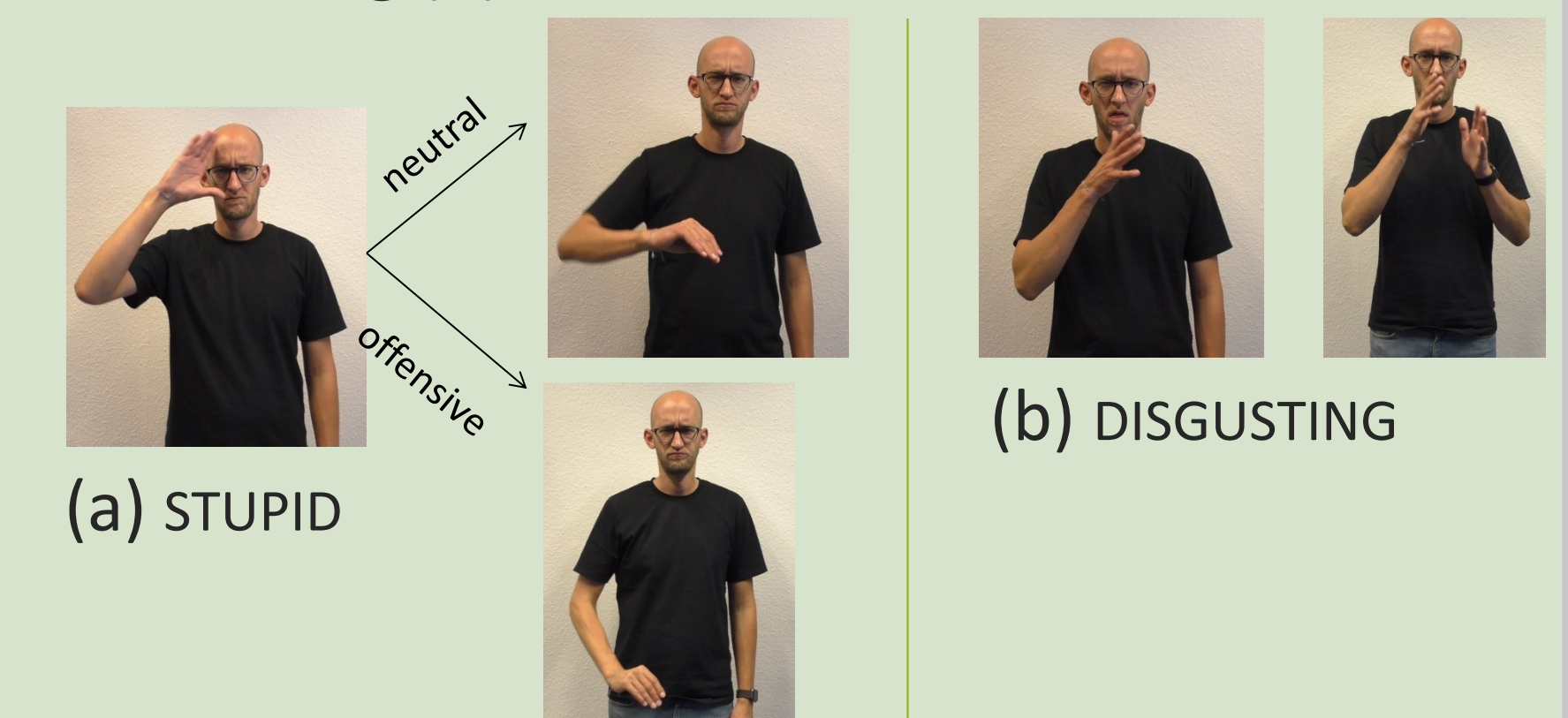
### 4. Enhancement

- affective nonmanuals can induce offense (e.g. SEX VS. LECHER(OUS), CRY VS. CRYBABY)



FAT-N      FAT-O

- enhanced path movement (a) or hand doubling (b) can offend:



### Constraints on the semantics of taboo terms

- DGS taboo signs obey Meir's DMC; e.g. WIMP refers to sexual or physical but not (metaphorical) moral weakness
- We propose a more general semantic constraint: The semantic extension of an iconic sign is blocked if its form highlights meaning components not shared by all referents of the expanded referent set.
- WIMP, SLUT, and SPREAD-ONE'S-LEGS can't generalize to both sexes as their form specifies gender-specific genitalia or sexual behavior