Taboo terms in German Sign Language: Exploring the influence of iconicity
Cornelia Loos, Jens-Michael Cramer & Donna Jo Napoli

**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 (Piotti et al. 2012).
- Taboo expressions are linguistically promiscuous: (a) complete utterances, e.g. A rosseb eyeg meg! ‘may you be eaten by a festering wound’; (b) primary predicate, Mandarin Cao ni nǎn nai ‘fuck your paternal grandmother’; (c) secondary predicate I am scared shitless; (d) objects They beat the shit out of her; (e) modifiers, Polish mally gościmy kralj ‘a shitty little country’; (f) NPs, Dutch ik kan geen zak zien ‘I can no scrutum 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; Klinkei & Warner 1996; Sae 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?

**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
     - head-term
     - <offense
     - spread-one’s-legs
     - handshape change:
       - e.g. substituting for in denigrating variant of (tho) invites viewer to interpret handshape not only in terms of shape but also size

3. **Lexical blends**
   - Consist of non-morphemic phonological subcomponents of existing words (Loos 2013).
     - 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. LESCHN(ous), CRV vs. CRV(NA)"

**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.

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

**Background**

**Metonymy**
- Referring to one concept [target] with the help of an associated one [vehicle] (Radden and Koevecses 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!

**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
     - head-term
     - <offense
     - spread-one’s-legs
     - handshape change:
       - e.g. substituting for in denigrating variant of (tho) invites viewer to interpret handshape not only in terms of shape but also size

3. **Lexical blends**
   - Consist of non-morphemic phonological subcomponents of existing words (Loos 2013).
     - 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. LESCHN(ous), CRV vs. CRV(NA)"

**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.