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CHAPTER 2

In your face

Im/politeness in signed languages, with examples from Swiss German Sign Language (DSGS)

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This chapter begins by describing impolite forms of signing reported for many sign languages that seem to be based on the visual modality of this form of communication. Other im/polite conventions are influenced by the setting, register, type of speech act, or the perceived signing ability of the addressee. Some signs are perceived as impolite by signers of other cultures because their handshape or location components have impolite connotations in their culture; others reflect historically changing norms of the society. A cultural aversion to what is perceived as bragging seems to be shared by hearing German/Swiss German speakers and deaf signers of Swiss German Sign Language (DSGS).

Keywords: Swiss German Sign Language, DSGS, politeness, eye gaze, bragging, deaf culture, swiss culture

1. Introduction

There are several ways to be im/polite in situations in which persons communicate with each other in a signed language. In this chapter, we will give a brief overview of some commonly reported conventions for im/politeness, grouping them according to whether they seem to be primarily motivated by the visual modality of signed languages, or whether the type of setting, register, speech act, addressee or shared cultural conventions are also important factors. We will then present some examples from a first consideration of politeness in Swiss German Sign Language (Deutschschweizerische Gebärdensprache, DSGS). These discussions are prefaced with a short description of the major findings from the field of signed language linguistics, with additional information about DSGS.

The linguistic research of signed languages is a relatively new academic field. The first linguistic studies were done on American Sign Language (ASL) in the 1960's and 1970's (Stokoe 1960; Klima and Bellugi 1979), followed in the 1980's by studies of several other sign languages, including Swiss German Sign Language (DSGS) used in the German-speaking Swiss cantons. (For an international review of the history of signed language linguistics, cf. McBurney 2012.)

DSGS is one of three sign languages used in Switzerland, the other two being the *Langue des Signes Suisse Romande* (LSF-SR) used by signers in the French-speaking cantons and the *Lingua dei Segni Italiana* (LIS-Ticino) used in the Swiss Italian regions. These sign languages are not only clearly different from each other, they are also different from the languages spoken in their respective geographical regions. There are no official census numbers for users of these sign languages in Switzerland, but DSGS has been estimated to be the primary language of approximately 5,500 Deaf users and a second language to approximately 13,000 hearing persons (Boyes Braem et al. 2012). The community of practice of DSGS signers is very complex, as it involves many diverse subcommunities, some of which overlap (Appendix A gives an overview of the different kinds of sign language bilingual/bimodal users). Unlike in many other countries, none of these sign languages has been recognized as an official language in Switzerland.¹

The basic linguistic structures of DSGS are like those that have been reported for other signed languages. At the phonological level, these linguistic structures and processes involve not only manual components of the arms and hands (the hand's shape and orientation, location, and movement) but also linguistically important non-manual components of the face (mouth, cheeks, eyes, nose, eyebrows, eye gaze) and positions and movements of the head and upper torso (Boyes Braem 1995). The non-manual components are used linguistically to mark, for example, different kinds of sentences (interrogative, negative, topicalized,

1. A legal recognition of sign languages has been a concern of the Swiss Federation of the Deaf (SGB-FSS) for over 40 years. However, these languages are still not recognized as "official" languages, on the ground that their users do not reside in a definable geographical area, as is the case of the speakers of the four official Swiss spoken national languages of Rhaeto-Romance, Italian, French and German/Swiss German (Boyes Braem et al. 2012). In 1994, the Swiss Parliament did adopt a postulate which requests the use of sign language for the integration of deaf and hearing-impaired persons by promoting it alongside spoken language in education, training, research and conveyance of information. However, a recent request for official recognition of these sign languages was again rejected in 2021, although in the same year the Swiss German schools for the deaf and the Swiss Deaf Association (SGB-FSS) published an official statement apologizing for the years of suppression of signed language in schools (<https://www.sgb-fss.ch/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Faltblatt-Unterschrift-Zusammenarbeit-SGB-FSS-Sonos-d.pdf>).

etc.), as well to indicate agent, patient, and other semantic roles. A small sample of the extensive literature on the linguistic functions of non-manual behaviors includes Wilbur (2000); Lepic and Occhino (2018) and Perniss (2018) for ASL; Aristodemo and Geraci (2017) for Italian Sign Language; Dotter (2018) for Austrian Sign Language; Sandler (2018) for Israeli Sign Language, as well as Boyes Braem and Sutton-Spence (2001) for mouth movements in several sign languages. Non-manual components are also important indicators of im/politeness in signed languages (cf. e.g., for ASL, Roush 2007 and Hoza 2007a, for Catalan Sign Language, Moya-Avilés 2020 and Chapter 3 in this volume).

A special aspect of signed languages is that the visual/corporal modality of their production and perception makes possible the *simultaneous* production and perception of many linguistically important components at the phonological, morphosyntactic and discourse levels. (For an overview of different forms of simultaneity in signed languages, see Vermeerbergen et al. 2007). The use of the two hands, for example, allows the production of two different lexical units simultaneously. This is often the case in what have been termed “productive” structures. For example, in locative constructions, one hand can refer to a ‘table’ and the other to a small animal previously identified as a cat sitting on, under or beside it, depending upon the relative position of the two hands. An example of this is the final sign in Figure 1.

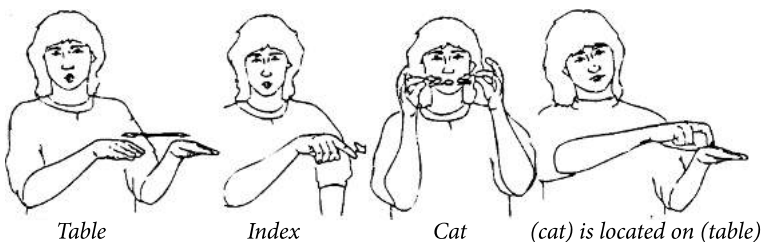


Figure 1. DSGS sentence meaning ‘The cat is on the table’

Another linguistically special feature of signed languages is their use of the 3-dimensional “signing space” in front and to the sides of the signer’s upper body as locations for articulating signs (Figure 2a). The normal signing space can be enlarged – for example, to sign on a stage or to sign to someone in the distance. It can also be made smaller if one does not want to attract attention, as in whispering. For signing in digital social media (Skype, Zoom, etc.), the signing space is usually more restricted than usual to fit the size of the computer screen.

The location of lexical signs can be in this signing space around the body or on the signer’s upper body. The grammar also utilizes this 3-dimensional space. For example, grammatical referents can be tracked by indicating directions or

locations (or “spatial loci”) in the signing space that the signer has linked to these referents previously in the discourse (Figure 2b). Once a locus has been defined and identified, one can establish a spatial reference later in the discourse by directing a point, the movement of a sign, or only the eye gaze to this locus. Signing space is also used for a variety of “timelines” (Figure 2c), on which signs are placed or moved to indicate tense and temporal relations (e.g., before, after, from, until). (For more information on timelines, see e.g., Engberg-Pedersen 1993).

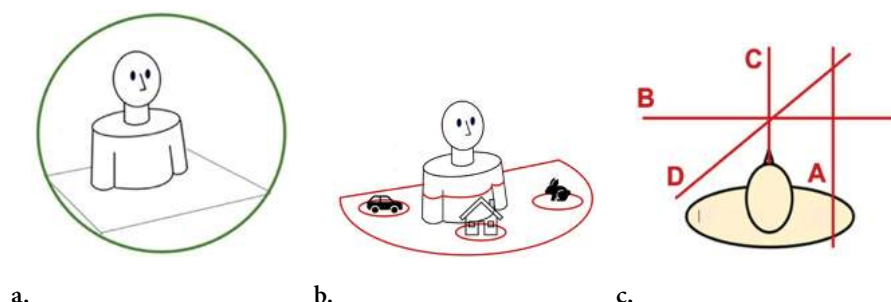


Figure 2. (a) The ‘signing space’; (b) Spatial loci for reference tracking; (c) Spatial timelines for marking tense and temporal relations

The linguistic use of simultaneous components and of the 3-dimensional signing space results in many aspects of the grammars of signed languages looking quite different from grammars of spoken languages for which the sequence of the components is a more prominent factor in their linguistic structuring.² These modality-linked factors have also made the written documentation of signed languages especially challenging, although recent computer technologies that allow the linking of tiers of annotations to videos of the raw data have been of great help (cf. the overview of written methods of documenting signed languages in Boyes Braem 2012).

As sign language linguistics is a relatively new field, it is not too surprising that the first goals of researchers have usually been to describe the lexica and gram-

2. Examples of different kinds of sign language components can be seen in videos of signed examples of DSGS grammar in a pilot online *Handbook of DSGS* (www.dsgs-handbuch.ch). The description of this grammar was originally conceived and documented in videotaped DSGS, for which written German translations were made (translations into English forthcoming). Online examples in a descriptive grammar of the Sign Language of the Netherlands have also been posted at <https://www.lotpublications.nl/a-descriptive-grammar-of-sign-language-of-the-netherlands>.

mars of these previously undocumented languages. Consequently, the pragmatics of these languages has been largely neglected in the past and has only recently come into the research focus of some signed language linguists. The attention given to pragmatic factors, however, has often been limited to conversational regulators such as opening, turn-taking, and turn-keeping techniques (e.g., Baker 1977 and Baker et al. 2016: 76–78) or text linguistics (cf. for example Hansen 2012). An overview of studies of pragmatics in signed languages, is given in Section IV of the Pfau et al. (2012) handbook on sign language research.

Although often not included in formal linguistic descriptions of various signed languages around the world, tips abound concerning what is considered “rude” and “polite” by deaf signers in books for teaching signed languages (cf. e.g., examples given in Cokely and Baker 1980; Chambers 1998), as well as in descriptions of deaf culture (e.g., Hall 1989; Moore and Levitan 1993) and in books for sign language interpreters (e.g., Mindess 1999). Some more recent linguistic studies have focused on topics that are especially taboo in specific deaf communities, especially signs related to sex or body parts (cf. e.g., Fisher et al. 2019, Mirus et al. 2012, and Napoli et al. 2013 for taboos in American Sign Language; Loos et al. 2020 in German Sign language; Sze et al. 2017 in Hong Kong, Jakarta, Sri Lanka and Japanese Sign Languages, as well as euphemisms used in Italian Sign Language in Volterra et al. 2019 and 2022, and in British Sign Language in Sutton-Spence and Woll 1999; and signs indicating body parts by Pyers 2006 for ASL). Other studies have looked at more general issues of impoliteness in specific signed languages (e.g., for ASL see Hall 1989; Mindess 1999; Hoza 2007a and Roush 2011; for British Sign Language, see Mapson 2013, 2014, 2015; for Brazilian Sign Language, see Ferreira Brito 1995; and for Irish Sign Language, see Mohr and Renkowitz 2020).

Like for spoken languages, there are often differences in politeness forms for signed languages in different cultures. Hoza (2007a) looks at the difference in politeness forms used by speakers and signers as being rooted in different kinds of culture-bases. ASL signers are rooted in a Deaf community that highly values showing ‘involvement’ with the community members, whereas the culture that most English speakers in America share is one which allows or even highly values showing an individualistic desire to ‘impress’.

It is interesting that the more extensive comments on im/politeness and the pioneering larger studies of this topic have often been made by persons who have worked in the field of signed language interpreting. In her early 1999 book entitled *Reading between the signs. Intercultural communication for sign language interpreters*, the ASL interpreter Mindess has an entire section on “Rude behaviors”. Also, Hoza, who has written extensively about im/politeness in ASL requests (2001, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2011) and Daniel Roush (1999, 2007, 2011), who has

written early studies about im/politeness in ASL, are professional sign language interpreters. Mapson, a professional British Sign Language interpreter, has written explicitly about the sensitivity of interpreters to im/politeness in her 2020 article “Intercultural (im)politeness: Influences on the way professional British Sign Language/English interpreters mediate im/polite language” as well as addressing this in several of her other publications on politeness (Mapson 2013, 2014, 2015, 2019, 2020, 2021).

Cultural differences in conversational rules have been characterized as often being “generally unquestioned and out of awareness” (Holtgraves and Dulin 1994: 282). It is perhaps partly due to this, that interpreters have been at the forefront of the issue of im/politeness in signing. Interpreters are constantly working in inter-linguistic, inter-cultural situations in which breaking a politeness norm can be immediately evident to themselves and at least one set of their addressees. Radanovic Felberg (2016: 15) reports in her article “Impoliteness: A challenge to interpreters’ professionalism” that she found that spoken language interpreters’ awareness of impoliteness is more common than expected, as it involves “the interpreter’s self-esteem being under attack, a sense of humiliation, loss of credibility and trust issues”.

This awareness would especially affect sign language interpreters for whom not only their faces but their whole bodies are always visible to – in the faces of – their clients. This contrasts with the situation of most spoken language interpreters, who often sit unseen in booths or with their backs to an audience and primarily present only their voices to their addressees. The second principle of the Code of Ethics of the American Registry of the Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) requires that the interpreter convey both the factual content of a speaker’s message and the attitudes of the speaker. As Caccamise et al. (1980) point out,

The skillful use of facial expression, pauses, and natural body movements are all important to the interpreter in serving as a model of the speaker. In brief, the interpreter has a responsibility to use these in a manner that reflects the speaker, neither adding to nor deleting behavioural characteristics of the speaker that would change either the factual information or attitudes the speaker her/himself is conveying. (Caccamise et al. 1980: 14)

Signed language interpreters therefore operate in settings that especially sensitize them not only to the inter-cultural problems involving im/politeness, but also to the physical signals beyond the words or manual signs themselves which can make an utterance im/polite. Sign language linguists, on the other hand, have historically been slower to recognize and devote research to the pragmatic features of signed languages.

In Section 2, several politeness norms are identified that are motivated by the face-to face modality of signing, which makes the factor of visibility a fundamental factor of im/polite signing behavior. All of these “visibility-based” im/politeness norms have been reported by users of many signed languages. In Section 3, examples of politeness norms will be described, which seem to be influenced by other overlapping factors of interaction, setting, register, type of speech act, and hearing or signing status of addressee/s as well as cultural and historical factors. In Section 4, examples of how signs from their own as well as other signed languages are perceived as “bragging” by the DSGS signers consulted in this preliminary study. The discussion in this section then widens to include the perception of bragging as being impolite in the larger, hearing Swiss society. Section 5 presents a summary of the main points presented in this chapter and suggests ideas for further research on im/politeness in signed languages.

2. The factor of visibility in im/polite signing

2.1 Always face-to-face

Many of the most widely reported norms for im/politeness in signed languages stem from the visual nature of these languages. The current concept in pragmatics that “politeness is perceived, not produced” used for spoken languages has a double meaning when used for signed languages. The original meaning of this phrase is that im/politeness is how something being communicated is perceived as opposed to a specific form of the communication being somehow innately “im/polite”. The implications of this phrase, for both spoken and signed languages, is that the perception of what is im/polite can differ between persons, settings, and cultures (Mills 2003; Locher and Watts 2005).

For signed languages, however, the notion of “perceived” has the additional meaning of ‘being visually perceptible.’ A form of communication that is always “face-to-face” has the potential for being “in your face”. Basically, a visible form of communication needs to be seen to be perceived and must be looked at to be understood.³ Something that impedes the visibility of linguistically important

3. Making communication as visible as possible often involves considering the physical setting of the communication. For example, both authors of this chapter have observed the following: Avoiding signing when there is no light on oneself; avoiding standing in front of a bright background (such as a sunny window) which backlights one, putting one in shadow; not placing a huge flower bouquet in the middle of a dining table as it would inconsiderately block persons from seeing what persons across the table are signing; designing ones living spaces to make

features can be perceived as a form of impoliteness as it violates a requirement for clarity. This might be due to the signer being ignorant of this factor (for example, a beginning signer), or the signer knows this, but for some reason is disregarding it. The following issues will be addressed in this section on the importance of visibility: Getting the addressee/s attention, the addressee/s eye gaze and backchannelling behaviors, the eye gaze of the signer and that of any onlookers.

2.2 Getting the addressee/s' attention

Signers use several techniques for getting their deaf addressee/s' attention that are based on the necessity of being seen. These techniques have not only been reported by Tissi to be used by DSGS signers, but also by users of other signed languages (cf., for example, Mindess 1999 and Baker 1977 for ASL, or Fischer and Jürgensen 2000 for German Sign Language). Before beginning to sign, it is considered polite to be assured of the addressee/s' visual attention. In some group situations (for example in a classroom), it is appropriate to blink the overhead room lights to get the attention of everyone; however, this light blinking is not considered polite when used only for one person. Creating vibrations by patting a table near the addressee/s, or even stomping on the floor is also acceptable in some informal situations but would be seen as inappropriate in more formal situations (for example, in a church or large public lecture), especially if many hearing persons are also present. The signer often signals a readiness to begin by raising the hands into the signing space, sometimes holding the first sign while scanning the room to be sure all eyes are on oneself. This is sometimes accompanied by a nodding of the head or a slight flapping of the hand across the audience to get attention.

The signer can also lightly tap the intended addressee at the edge of the shoulder (or ask someone closer to that person to do that for them). However, if the tap is heavier, or goes beyond the edge of the shoulder, it could be considered inappropriate and hence impolite. Table 1 shows, in the opinion of the co-author Tissi, the changes in different types of physical contact used by signers to get the attention of an addressee, which vary on a scale of increasing impoliteness.

communication visibility more possible – for example, by putting a mirror on the wall behind the sink so that one can follow the conversation in the room behind, even when washing the dishes. In a classroom with participation of several signers, chairs are arranged so that people do not have their backs to others. The importance of visibility for communication has been incorporated into entire building projects (cf., for example, Edwards and Harold 2014).

Table 1. Four gestures that could be used by a signer to get the attention of an addressee, with increasing degrees of im/politeness. (The more impolite components are in bold print.)

	(Gesture a) Polite	(Gesture b) Slightly rude	(Gesture c) More rude	(Gesture d) Taboo
	↓	↓	↓	↓
Handshape	Fully outstretched hand	Outstretched index finger	Fully outstretched hand	Cupped grasping hand
Location	At top of outer side of addressee's shoulder	At top of addressee's arm	At top of addressee's shoulder near neck	On addressee's face/chin
Movement	Making a couple of small light taps	Making one sharp poke	Resting one's hand on the addressee's shoulder	Moving the addressee's head toward oneself

2.3 The addressee's eye gaze

The addressees of signed discourse are expected to maintain uninterrupted gaze on the person signing. Closing one's eyes, looking down or turning away from the person signing is considered very impolite. This would seem quite logical to hearing speakers, who could easily imagine the analogous rudeness of their addressees plugging their ears or walking out of hearing distance when one is speaking to them. Tissi has observed a variation of this form of impoliteness when, for example, hearing L2 learners of a sign language tend to look at the hands of the signer rather than towards the signer's face. This is somewhat acceptable if the addressees are rank beginners, who are primarily trying to capture what the hands are communicating and perhaps are not yet aware of (or don't yet have processing time for) the linguistically important non-manual behaviors occurring on the face. However, if looking at the hands rather than the face is done by more advanced learners, who have been explicitly told not to track the hands, this is seen as especially annoying to the point of being perceived as impolite.

Relevant here is a very early study by Siple (1978), who looked at where deaf addressees normally focus when watching a signer. She reports that eye movements of these addressees (which can occur as often as every 200 milliseconds) probably occur between two fixation points – one at the level of the signer's eyes and the other at a point slightly below the chin, as shown in Figure 3.

As research in human vision has reported that accuracy is best near the point fixated upon and becomes less distinct in areas further away from this spot, the zones of acuity for viewing signing encompasses the face, neck, and upper body.

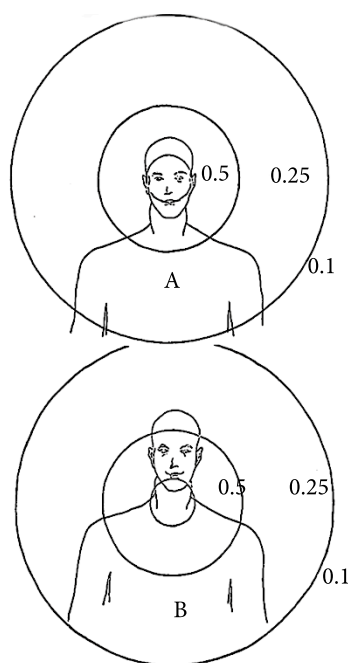


Figure 3. Zones of visual relative acuity around two different fixation points: (A) between the eyes of the signer, including direct eye contact and (B) a slightly downward cast of the viewer's eyes. Numbers in the zones are reductions in acuity from that of the focal point (i.e., 50% > 25% > 10%) [Figure from Siple 1978: 99]

Based on this, Siple made the following prediction: “We should expect the limits of the visual system for perception of fine detail to affect the degree to which these aspects of signs themselves are finely or grossly different” (Siple 1978: 96). In other words, the closer to the focal point, the smaller the differences could be in the handshapes, movements, and locations of the signs and still be accurately perceived. Minimal pairs of signs have been found to differ in meaning by locations two centimeters apart on the cheek, whereas locations differing over several centimeters on the upper arm, a zone of minimal acuity, result in no differences in meaning. Siple confirmed her predictions that the form components of signs differ in amount of detail or complexity (linguistic “markedness”) according to the zone of acuity of its location, through an examination of the complexity of signs made in different locations as documented in a dictionary of American Sign Language (Stokoe et al. 1976).

These fixation points of the addressee are significant because, as pointed out earlier, a great deal of semantic, syntactic and discourse information is conveyed by facial expressions and the postures and movements of the mouth and head.

These focal points also seem to be important for some im/politeness aspects of signing. For example, Tissi reports that if DSGS signs that are normally made in a more central location of high acuity, are made in the outer zones of lower acuity but have more marked handshapes or complex movements, they are perceived as impolite, as they place additional work for comprehension of the message on the addressee.⁴

If an addressee wishes to look away from the signer to briefly sign something to a person outside the conversation, the signs of both hands and the changing non-manual behaviors of the face, head and eye gaze are highly synchronized. Table 2 shows an annotation of how, as modelled by Tissi, such a small aside is politely done in a DSGS conversation. She first interrupts the current Signer 1 with signs that mean “You – wait, stop, I’m sorry I must quickly pay a little attention to that person”. Then, to the outside Signer-2, she signs “Good...stop...good”. Her attention then returns to Signer-1 when her hands go down, out of the signing space, indicating a relinquishing of the floor back to Signer-1. Throughout this example, the direction of eye gaze and head indicate whom is being addressed. When addressing Signer-2, the holding of the *WAIT* sign in the nondominant hand is directed to Signer-1. This is a way of indicating one intends to return attention to that person after a moment. The two-handed sign *APOLOGIZE* is accompanied by a “polite grimace”. Throughout the entire apologetic explanation, the eyebrows are furrowed, and the eye shape is squinty, behaviors which cease when she begins the aside to Signer-2. The signs to the Signer-2 (*GOOD*, *STOP!*, *GOOD*) are forms of backchannels with *STOP* additionally being accompanied by tight lips.

2.4 The addressee’s backchannelling behaviors

Addressees signal that they are paying attention, are understanding or want to interrupt by using backchanneling forms of signs or gestures. These are normally at a lower height in the signing space (Mesch 2016). This also includes regularly making smaller than normal versions of single signs, such as those meaning ‘right’, ‘wow’, or ‘true’, sometimes accompanied by nodding or shaking the head or making small differences in facial expressions. The failure of the addressee to provide manual and non-manual backchanneling at fairly regular intervals can be perceived by signers to be a display of impoliteness. These behaviors noted by

4. The signing space and zones of acuity discussed here are very similar to the use of space by orchestral conductors for gestures intended to convey information beyond that of temporal beating to the players seated in front of them, who are only able to glance intermittently at the conductor (cf. Boyes Braem & Bräm 2000, “A pilot study of the expressive gestures used by classical orchestra conductors”).

Table 2. Polite behaviors of the addressee to sign a wish to look away to a person signing outside the conversation, with annotations of the signs made on both the dominant and non-dominant hand and the synchronized signals from the direction of eye gaze and head, as well as the shape of the eyebrows, eyes, and mouth actions

	dom. Hd		POINT (to Signer-1)	STOP!		QUICKLY	ALITTLE	I	POINT (to Signer-2)	GOOD	STOP!	GOOD	
MANUAL	both Hds	(hands down)			APOLOGIZE								(hands down)
	nondom Hd		WAIT! (to Signer-1)	→					WAIT! (to Signer-1)	→			
	Mouth	Slightly open			polite grimace	Mouthing: 'quickly'					tight lips		
NON-MANUAL	Gaze	to Signer-1	→						to Signer-2	→	to Signer-1	→	
	Head	to Signer-1	→						to Signer-2	→	to Signer-1	→	
	Eyebrows	Furrowed	→										
	Eyeshape	Squinty	→										

Tissi for DSGS signers have also been documented for several other signed languages, including e.g., by Cokely and Baker (1980) for ASL, by George (2010, 2011) for Japanese Sign Language, by Mapson (2014) for British Sign Language, and by Mesch (2016) for Swedish Sign Language.

2.5 The signer’s eye gaze

The use of direction of eye gaze by the signer is complicated and is influenced by many different factors. These include the use of gaze as a regulator of the conversation, in which gaze is usually not directed towards the addressee when beginning to sign, but turns to the addressee when asking a question, or to signal willingness to yield a turn, which is often accompanied by a decrease in the speed of signing or moving the hands to the resting position (Baker 1977; Van Herreweghe 2002). At the same time, gaze also has several important functions in the grammar of the language (for example, to establish and indicate referents that have been established in the signing space, or when using a “constructed action” style, to identify the referent whose role one has taken on). Nevertheless, although the signer does not usually look uninterruptedly at the addressee/s, frequent glances in their direction are usually made. The purpose of these glances is to see if the addressee is continuing to pay attention and/or giving backchanneling signals or wants to interrupt. In triad conversations, the signer is expected to switch eye gaze between both addressees.

It is generally considered impolite in informal conversations to continue to sign for long periods of time. Constantly signing beyond the length of time expected in that situation for a conversational turn can be an indication that one is arguing, being pedantic, or indicating higher status or more power than the addressee. The polite signer usually checks often for feedback/back-channeling

for permission to continue. However, the signer can hold the floor by simply looking away, sometimes accompanied by a slight finger-wiggling gesture that is analogous to “um” in spoken conversations (Johnston and Schembri 2007). If the signer fails to check at regular intervals for feedback indicating understanding and permission to continue signing, or simply doesn’t yield the floor, this can be viewed as not only being annoyingly pedantic but also impolite. For descriptions of several other kinds of eye gaze used by the signer and addressee during DSGS conversations, see, Groeber and Pochon-Berger (2014) and Girard-Groeber (2015).

2.6 The onlooker’s eye gaze

Many signers find it impolite when persons outside a signed conversation – for example passersby in a public place – stare at their signed conversation. A quick glance is acceptable, but it would be felt to be impolite if the onlooker stared for a longer period, especially if the signers do not know whether or not the onlooker can understand sign language. These perceptions of impoliteness have been reported not only by Tissi for DSGS but also by users of other signed languages (cf. e.g., the discussion of onlookers in Moore and Levitan 1993 for ASL).

3. Other factors affecting im/politeness in signing

3.1 Setting and register

Studies have been done on the differences between more formal/distancing and more informal/proximal styles of signing. For example, in distancing language styles, there is a tendency to make the production of signs larger and slower, to switch more often between using the dominant and non-dominant hand, and to indicate the intensity or importance of something with lexical items rather than non-manual components (Roy 1989; Zimmer 1989). In Italian Sign Language, the more formal register has been reported to be characterized by less use of highly iconic structures (such as productive signs and constructed speech or action), a more frequent use of sequential units (i.e., more like spoken language), and a more consistent use of “mouthings” (mouth movements like those of spoken language words). “Mouth gestures” (mouth movements unrelated to spoken language) are often modified to be less noticeable, and facial expressions are used that are considered to be more polite in hearing society (Volterra et al. 2022). Tissi reports that strong facial and bodily behaviors are not used for signing DSGS to large audiences, although they would be acceptable in informal settings, such as with small groups of friends.

Of the features reported in formal and more informal types of signing, inappropriate forms of facial expression and bodily behaviors are probably the ones that are the most likely candidates for making some signed productions to be perceived as less polite. This will be further discussed in Section 4 on impolite “bragging”, for which the location and size of the manual signs also come into play.

3.2 Speech act and the addressee’s hearing or signing status

In smaller groups or one-on-one situations, the im/polite modifications of signing can depend more on the kind of speech act involved. Roush (2007) has documented several indirectness strategies used in ASL requests and refusals. In a study of the types of behavior modifications in requests made by ASL signers, Hoza (2007a) found that the use or strength of these signals seem to depend on the type of request. A “light” request (for example, asking the boss to please pass over a pencil) could be accompanied only by a simple single submissive facial expression. A more “difficult” request (such as asking for a week’s vacation) requires adding more signed phrases prefacing the request, together with more and repeated submissive facial expressions. Hoza also reported that another factor influencing these markers is whether the addressee is hearing or deaf. A hearing addressee usually requires more politeness markers, but with deaf addressees who are members of the American deaf community, there seems to be less need for suppression of strong facial expressions, unless perhaps the addressee is a higher-ranking member of that community (Moore and Levitan 1993: 271).

In contrast, Tissi reports that in German Switzerland, signing deaf persons do not feel such a need for showing politeness to “higher classes” in their small signing communities. There are not such clear or sharp social distinctions between “average” and “elite” signers analogous to the situation in the much larger ASL communities. Nevertheless, she reports that there are some common polite requesting behaviors within her Deaf community. One is the adding of a kind of “coda gesture” at the end of a very polite signed request. This gesture is produced with one or both hands with upturned palms, which are held for a moment outward toward the person receiving the request, sometimes accompanied by raised eyebrows and a slight tilting of head and body to one side (see Figure 4a). If this “coda gesture” were to be omitted – for example, if the signer simply abruptly drops the hands after making the request (as in Figure 4b) – this would be perceived by DSGS signers as indicating that the signer is not expecting a response, and is therefore demeaning, and impolite. A similar palms-up, full hand or index finger gesture is also used for pointing in more formal or polite situations, replacing the normal pointing with the index finger with palm facing down. This is the

only manual modification of a pronoun for politeness in DSGS (i.e., there is no distinction comparable to *du* and *Sie* in German).



a.

b.

Figure 4. (a) Polite added gesture vs (b) impolite lack of this gesture following a request

3.3 Cultural factors in im/polite signing

3.3.1 *Differing connotations of a sign in other cultures or historical periods*

Some signs which are acceptable in some signed languages are considered impolite in others. Name signs for countries are a treasure trove for such forms. Often name signs are based on some stereotype associated with the country, such as an image from the national flag or national emblem. Name signs for the same country may be based on different images. For example, the ASL sign for Germany is an allusion to the wings of an eagle, whereas the DSGS sign depicts the pointy emblem on an old German military helmet. A name sign can also depict a behavior associated with that country (e.g., making the motions of playing a guitar in the ASL sign for Argentina). However, some of the older signs for another country can over time come to be perceived as being impolite. For example, the older ASL signs for China involved indications of slanting eye shapes, but this has been replaced in modern ASL by a sign borrowed from Chinese Sign Language which involves an L-shaped movement on the upper body. Such adoption of the nation's own sign for itself is an attempt to show respect for that country.

Among the different signs for Switzerland, Tissi reports there is one from another sign language that is not liked by Swiss signers. The DSGS name sign for Switzerland is made by tracing the form of a cross (as on the Swiss flag) on the side of the chest with a small-cupped L-handshape (Figure 5a). However, in the sign language of Germany (DGS), although the sign for Switzerland also depicts the form of the Swiss cross, it is traced in neutral space in front of the signer with a bent two-finger V-handshape (Figure 5b). Swiss German signers find this

sign for their country impolite, as for them the handshape used evokes several other DSGS signs which have negative connotations, such as the signs meaning ‘vampire’, ‘argue’ or ‘cochlear implantation’ (Figure 6). (Cochlear implantation is troublesome as some members of the DSGS deaf community view this medical procedure negatively, seeing it as an attempt to make deaf people more like hearing people.)

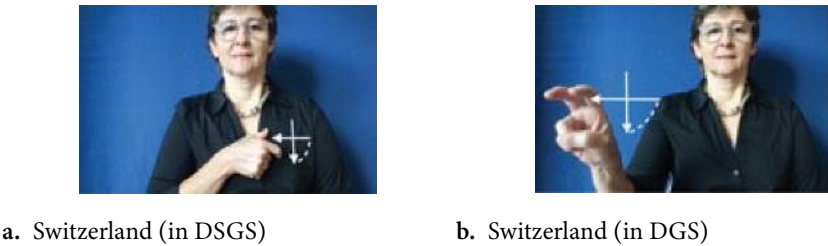


Figure 5. Name signs for Switzerland in (a) Swiss German (DSGS) and (b) German (DGS)



Figure 6. DSGS Sign for cochlear implantation

Different connotations clinging to signs in different cultures are not limited to names of countries. In Japanese Sign Language, a sign involving tapping the side of the fist to the nose means ‘good’. However, for Swiss and American deaf persons, the nose is generally associated with more negative concepts, so the Japanese sign can be perceived as somewhat puzzlingly impolite by these signers.

Opinions within the community about their own signs can also change over time. An older DSGS sign for ‘woman’ indicates the shape of a breast. As this became increasingly perceived as a form of sexism and hence impolite, it has been replaced by a new, more politeness-neutral DSGS sign for ‘woman’ in which the forefinger and thumb lightly pinch the earlobe, evoking an earring. A recent example of changing a sign to conform to evolving cultural norms is a new ASL sign for ‘parent’. The older sign involves a handshape with all digits fully extended, and the tip of the thumb touching the forehead (which is the location for many

ASL signs connected with males, such as ‘father’ or ‘husband’) and moving down to touch the chin (the location for several signs connected with females, such as ‘wife’ or ‘woman’). The newer form of the sign avoids these gender connotations by simply touching the cheek, midway between the older locations, and which is also used by the ASL sign for ‘home’. (For other examples of signs being “polite in yours – but not/or no longer in my sign language”, see Mirus et al. 2012; Mapson, 2014; Mirus et al. 2019; Fisher et al. 2019.)

3.3.2 *Deaf signers living in both a deaf-signing and a hearing-speaking culture*

Many deaf persons, especially those living in societies where formal education has been available to them, are not only bimodal-bilingual in their local signed and spoken languages, but also bi-cultural in the majority hearing and minority deaf communities.

Historically, deaf signing persons in many countries have tended to form local communities in which they can share information and activities by using the visible form of language most accessible to them for expressing themselves and understanding others. Even signers with varying degrees of measurable residual hearing often choose, when allowed, to spend their private time with other persons using a language that is more accessible, efficient, and expressive for them. There is a long history of these deaf signing cultural communities, documented in several books on Deaf Culture (a small sample of which are Mottez 1981 for French signers, Lane et al. 1996; Brag 2001; Padden and Humphries 2005 for ASL signers, and Hesse et al. 2020 for DSGS signers).

Deaf signers in most countries also have daily encounters and needs for communicating effectively with hearing speakers. This includes hearing members of their own families, their neighbors, their teachers, their co-workers, doctors, as well as officials in political and governmental settings.

Living simultaneously in both cultures, deaf signers are exposed to pressures to conform to expected norms of each culture in order to “fit in”. For over 100 years, most of the education in schools for the deaf in both the US and Europe has focused on enabling deaf persons to “fit in” to the majority hearing culture by prioritizing the teaching of speaking, lipreading and writing the spoken language, often to the exclusion of other subjects taught in schools for hearing children. Signing was thus generally discouraged and often banned in the classrooms of these schools.

“Fitting in” also involves learning proscriptive norms to avoid behaviors which makes one “stick out”. Most signing deaf persons have almost always had to overcome negative attitudes of the majority hearing culture to their use of visual bodily language, not only in schools. (cf. the documentations in Baynton’s 1996 book, *Forbidden Signs. American Culture and the Campaign against Sign Language*.)

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the first schools for the deaf were being established, many educators initially assumed that sign languages were more primitive languages, but being earlier languages, also closer to God. However, at a decisive conference of hearing educators of the deaf in 1880 in Milan, these assumptions changed. In the opening talk for this conference, the Italian host stated: "...remember that living speech is the privilege of man, the sole and certain vehicle of thought, the gift of God, of which it has been truly said: 'Speech is the expression of the soul/ As the soul is the expression of divine thought'" (quoted in Lane 1992: 114). After this conference, "fitting in" meant learning the spoken/written language as well as possible, and "not sticking out" meant using signed language as little as possible not only in the schools but also in public. (See Appendix B for a historical example of this suppression of signing in favor of speaking in the life of Alexander Graham Bell.)

This widespread low opinion of signing was countered in later decades by the "Deaf Pride" movement, which began in the US in the 1980s, following the examples of the 1960s civil rights movements of African-Americans in the US (Rittenhouse et al. 1991). This movement, which had at its core an expression of pride in one's own sign language, spread in the following years through European countries. A strong identity with the deaf community can be seen in the examples of proficient signers who, although they may also have good skills in communicating with the spoken language – which often wins them a higher regard by speakers – nevertheless continue to consider themselves to have a dominant bicultural-deaf identity. Goldblat and Most (2018), for example, found that many Israeli deaf who have had a cochlear implant that increased their spoken language skills, but have also had opportunities to develop their signing skills, maintained a dominant deaf (or, for some, bicultural-hearing) identity.

In the past few decades, hearing persons in many countries have become more aware of signed languages though their increased presence in public places. Especially influential has been sign language interpreting on television, from which it is evident that even complex subject matters can somehow be expressed in this form of communication. Although these experiences have increased many speakers' curiosity about this language (reflected in an increasing number of hearing persons signing up for courses to learn a signed language), there is little documentation as to what extent it has raised the general public's previous low opinion of this form of communication to the point of recognizing it as a true language. To make matters of acceptance more complicated, there is some evidence that it is not always easy for hearing L2 learners to be accepted as members of signing communities. The authors of the Loos et al. (2020) study of taboo signs make an explicit link between this and the issue of im/politeness. Their conclusions contain the observation that it is difficult, (or perhaps inappropriate?) for outsiders to

study such delicate matters as taboos in signing and recommend that there should be guidelines for how outsiders can study impoliteness in different languages/cultures such as those of signing communities.

4. Examples of im/politeness perceived especially by DSGS signers

4.1 Methods of collecting these DSGS examples

The examples reported in this section are from a small pilot study of im/politeness in the signing of DSGS. As this study was conducted during a period in 2020 when the Covid epidemic had imposed a lockdown on the Swiss, it would have been difficult if not impossible to employ a traditional methodological approach with controlled variables and a large group of participants. A qualitative research method was chosen as being appropriate for this situation, but also for being a first step into researching this topic in DSGS. In this collection (as in some observations by Tissi in earlier sections on norms of im/politeness found in several sign languages), we used an autoethnography approach. This allows a researcher to draw upon one's own experiences as a tool to begin to understand a new phenomenon (Marshall and Rossman 2016). The specific kind of autoethnography used here is what Anderson (2006) has termed "analytic" (as opposed to "evocative") and in which "the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in published texts, and (3) committed to developing theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena" (Anderson 2006: 373).

In accordance with this autoethnographic method, the examples of DSGS signing reported here were gathered from the user's perspective of the co-author, Tissi, who is a L1 deaf signer of DSGS. In addition to being a member of the DSGS deaf community, Tissi has also had many contacts with several other sign languages, including the two other Swiss signed languages, as well as the sign languages of the USA, France, and Germany. Because of these experiences in several communities of signing practice, she brings first-hand observations of what she, as a DSGS signer, views as im/politeness in some of these other signed languages that she knows. As an experienced DSGS researcher and trainer of hearing DSGS interpreters, she has also become especially aware of forms of signing used by hearing L2 learners that she finds to be of varying degrees of "impoliteness". The other co-author, Boyes Braem, is a hearing L2 learner of ASL and DSGS. Her first linguistic research was on American Sign Language (ASL), but for over the past 40 years she has focused primarily on DSGS.

The two co-authors began looking at politeness in DSGS together through several lengthy discussions conducted via Zoom. Some of the guiding questions

that were addressed in these discussion were similar to those used by Roush (2011) – for example, the following: “What are the characteristics of a rude person; Do you know someone who seems rude or unpleasant and if so, what makes this person unpleasant?”; “What are rude ways in DSGS to open, break away from or close a conversation?”; “Are there different ways to pose questions or make requests that are appropriate for different partners?”; “In what situations do you feel you need to sign extra politely and how do you do that?”; “Do you ever find signers of other signed languages rude?”; “What are the DSGS signs for that indicate ‘rudeness’?”. These discussions were conducted in DSGS for which Boyes Braem made notes. Tissi recorded videotapes of herself signing examples of im/polite signing behaviors that had been discussed in these conversations. The screenshots in this chapter showing DSGS examples are from these videos. Tissi followed up these discussions with the co-author by a consultation with a large Facebook group of DSGS signers who are professional teachers of this language. More details of how this was done are described in Section 4.2.4.

4.2 Examples of signing perceived as impolite “bragging”

Several of the DSGS examples of im/politeness collected in this pilot study evoke for the DSGS signer a perception that the signer is somehow bragging. This section will therefore focus on what seems to be a special sensitivity to boasting being seen as a form of impoliteness. DSGS has several colorful signs relevant to “bragging behavior”, including those shown in Figure 7 which could be translated as ‘bragging’, ‘snotty/snob’, and two different signs for ‘boastful’.



Figure 7. DSGS signs used for describing bragging behavior: (a) BRAG (with German word “bluff” as mouthing), (b) SNOB (“nose in the air”, (c) BOASTFUL₁, (d) BOASTFUL₂

4.2.1 *Bragging and the use of “mouthings”*

In the past, DSGS signers have not typically used fingerspelling with their signing. This is different from signers of some other languages, such as American Sign Language (ASL), who have long been very fluent practitioners of incorporating fingerspelled English words into their signed sentences. The fingerspelled words mixed into the signing stream are often used for referents for which there are no established signs, such as names of persons, places, technical terms or new objects and devices. The fact that DSGS signers have never used much fingerspelling could be an artifact of the decades of “oral schooling” in the Swiss schools for the deaf, where the curriculum focused on learning to speak and lipread and the use of any form of manual communication was banned (Caramore 1998; Hesse et al. 2020). If there is no existing sign for a concept, rather than using fingerspelling, DSGS signers use a “mouthing”, which are mouth movements that are not identical with but visually closely related to pronunciations of a spoken language word for the concept. Mouthings usually are not accompanied by any voicing. They can be produced alone or simultaneously with one or more manual signs, in which case they are an instance of “simultaneous language-mixing”.

Although the function of mouthings as a factor in im/politeness has not been extensively studied, Tissi has observed that in her Deaf community, it is viewed as polite to adapt the amount and kind of mouthing one produces to the addressee. For example, producing a mouthing much slower and more precisely than normal (as one often does to talk to someone who one thinks doesn't know the language very well) is deemed to be very unpleasant. Also, the use of a great deal of mouthing of German technical terms for which there is no DSGS sign is not considered polite if one is aware that the addressee probably does not know those terms. In this situation, the addition of a fingerspelled version of the term, or simply giving a short description of the meaning of the term is more acceptable. If modifications like these are not done, particularly the addition of fingerspelled versions of mouthed technical terms, the mouthings would be perceived in this community of signers as a kind of arrogant and impolite “bragging”.

There was a brief period in the 1980s, during which many deaf communities in different countries were going through their own version of the international “Deaf pride” movement when some DSGS signers tried to reduce the amount of mouthing in their signing. This was a time when the deaf were no longer embarrassed to use signing in public. It was a time of coming out, of communicating with this non-vocal language brazenly “in your face” with the majority hearing population. Some signers thought that showing pride in the independence of their sign language from the spoken language could be expressed by dropping all links to the spoken language, which meant omitting all mouthings. Although DSGS

signers continued throughout this period to use their normal mouthings in their signing, some signers of other languages, for example German Sign Language, did argue for signing with no mouthings. However, as years went by and signing received more public attention through newspaper articles and more sign language interpreters and deaf signers on television, the advocacy for omitting all mouthings with sign languages lessened.

At the same time, linguists were beginning to recognize and write about the many linguistic functions which these oral components can have, even if they might have their origins in spoken language words. It was becoming clearer that signed language production profits from the efficiency of simultaneously using for linguistic purposes signals from the different visible channels available. Mouthings produced simultaneously with manual signs can, for example, not only be lexically important (to communicate the meaning of uncommon or new signs more clearly) but are also very efficient for adding stress to a lexical item. The holding (or “stretching”) of the mouthing through the production of several manual signs can function as a prosodic binder of a succession of signs into phrases or clauses (cf. e.g., Boyes Braem 2001). Today, Tissi reports that in her DSGS deaf community it is considered impolite if someone switches from their normal signing which is accompanied by mouthings to a style of signing with absolutely no mouthings at all. This, she reports, is perceived as bragging in the DSGS community, as it gives the impression that “I’m sooo good at this sign language!”

4.2.2 *Bragging by volunteering too much personal information*

Swiss German signers are much less likely than, for example, many signers in the larger ASL communities to volunteer personal information, unless expressly asked. Giving information about one’s level of education can be tricky in this Swiss minority community where historically – and still today – very few deaf persons have access to higher education, resulting in few deaf persons having BAs or other higher degrees when compared to deaf persons in other countries. This educational factor has no doubt contributed to the feeling within the DSGS community that overtly showing one has had a lot of higher education is considered impolite, unless one is specifically asked about it. For example, spontaneously coming out with the information “I have an M.A.” is impolite. Some persons in the community who have higher degrees are known to have actively tried to hide this information when conversing with other DSGS signers. However, if specifically asked, “do you have an MA. degree?”, the polite response is given with a neutral facial expression, avoiding an assertive or proud facial expression, and with no more information added (such as “and I also have a PhD”).

4.2.3 *Bragging by modifying phonological components*

There are some ways of signing the names of signed languages that are seen as bragging by the DSGS signers consulted for this study. This was particularly true for a variant of the ASL name sign for itself, as shown in Figure 8a. Unlike the normal form which resembles the fingerspelling letters A, S and L, the modified form is produced with an enlarged, fast, sharply whipped movement (Figure 8b). Tissi felt that a similar kind of change to the movement that some signers of German Sign Language /Deutsche Gebärdensprache add to the name of their language (DGS) would also be perceived by DSGS signers as a form of bragging.



a. ASL ('normal' production as A-S-L)

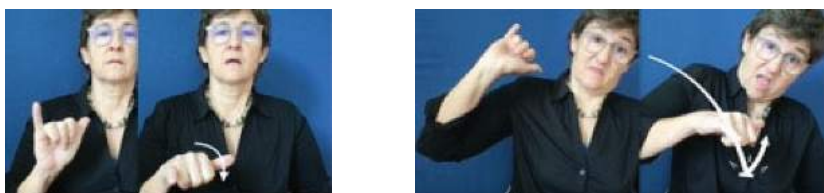


b. ASL (with 'bragging' movement)

Figure 8. Variants of the name sign for ASL: (a) normal form and (b) form with a movement variation that makes it seen by DSGS signers to be boasting

Tissi perceived this movement modification as a form of bragging. She had the same opinion of another ASL name sign for an American deaf signing Facebook group, “ASL-THAT”. In this sign, the THAT component of the name is formed with a palm-down Y-handshape together with a large, swiftly slammed down, forward movement (Figure 9b), in contrast to the normal production of THAT shown in Figure 9a.

Tissi showed this sign, as well as the “bragging” versions of the signs for ASL shown in Figure 8 as well as the similar DGS name sign, to a large private Facebook group of professional DSGS teachers who meet regularly online to propose and evaluate new DSGS signs and suggest revisions of existing signs. Approximately 25 members of this Facebook group (both male and female) were active



a. ASL-THAT (normal form)

b. ASL-THAT! (bragging form)

Figure 9. The ASL sign THAT in (a) normal form and (b) as modified in the name sign of an American Facebook group

participants in this session. As a part of their normal procedure for evaluating signs, these participants afterwards wrote their evaluations of the signs that were discussed. For the two signs from other sign languages which Tissi showed them, all the participants said that, although some found the modified name signs for other languages amusing (often including the ‘strong laughing’ emoji), they would reject a proposal for modifying their existing sign for DSGS in the same way. Many commented that these were modifications that a DSGS signer simply would not use for the name of their language. As one DSGS commentator put it, “We Swiss are modest, we don’t need to brag”.

Clearly, further research with a larger group and other examples needs to be done to determine whether it is not only the larger and faster movements of these signs which helps trigger the perceptions of im/politeness, but perhaps also the resulting extended forward movement towards the addressee, moving beyond the forward boundary of the normal signing space.

Bragging is not only perceived in larger versions of a sign. As mentioned earlier, if signs normally produced in the areas of high visual acuity (as shown in Figure 3) are instead produced with smaller than normal movements in the periphery of the signing space, this can also be perceived as being an impolite style of signing. According to Tissi, this conveys the message that “It’s up to you to catch what I’m intending to communicate here, I’m not going to bother to make it optimally perceptible.”

4.2.4 *Bragging by using too many “pedagogical” signs*

An overuse of a DSGS phrase meaning ‘you know’ made with special facial and body behaviors is reported by Tissi to be commonly interpreted as meaning ‘I need to explain to you because I know more than you do’ (Figure 10a). This connotation is reinforced if the phrase is combined with the upright “pedagogical finger” gesture, a gesture which signers report having often seen their teachers using in their school classrooms (Figure 10b).



a. YOU-KNOW?



b. “Pedagogical-finger” gestures

Figure 10. The sign YOU KNOW perceived as bragging if used repeatedly: (a) YOU-KNOW and (b) various forms of the “pedagogical-finger” gesture

Tissi furthermore reports that in situations in which someone constantly produces this pedagogical forefinger, some DSGS signers, in order to express the extent to which this has gotten on their nerves, turn aside and sign privately to another person a sign meaning ‘cut-off-finger’ (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Sign construction meaning ‘cut-off-finger’ used as a private comment on someone else’s excessive use of YOU-KNOW? or the pedagogical-finger gesture

4.3 Discussion: Self praise perceived as a form of im/polite bragging

4.3.1 *Self-praise perceived as bragging in different cultures*

As several perceptions by DSGS signers of im/politeness reported here involve a perception of bragging, it is helpful to see how this topic has been dealt with in different cultures. Boasting is a form of self-praise, which Dayter (2021:1) describes as “a speech act that gives credit to the speaker for some attribute or possession that is positively valued by the speaker and the potential audience”. (Related to the point made earlier of the prominence of interpreters as early identifiers of much im/polite behavior, the title of Dayter’s 2021 article is “Dealing with interactionally risky speech acts in simultaneous interpreting”.) In the special case of bragging, however, although self-praise might be viewed positively by the speaker, it is perceived by the addressee as annoying or more strongly as face-threatening. Leech (1983), in describing his six “maxims of politeness”, notes that “...the first submaxim of Modesty [maxim] is not to commit the social transgression of boasting” (Leech 1993:136).

How boasting or bragging is perceived can vary according to factors such as gender (Miller et al. 1992) and, most relevant here, culture. Holtgraves and Dulin (1994), for example, looked at to what extent the same written passages from three different types of persons (identified as truthful, non-truthful or neutral persons) were interpreted negatively as bragging by members of two different sub-cultures: African American students and European American students. The latter negatively evaluated all sorts of positive self-pride statements, or boasting, by both truthful and untruthful boasters, which the authors interpreted as violating Leech’s Modesty maxim. The African Americans, on the other hand, were more accepting of the boasting if it was perceived as coming from a truthful bragger. The authors mention that this is reflected in the example of African Americans generally accepting positively the boxer Muhammad Ali’s many boastful statements. They make the following conclusions:

Overall, our results demonstrate how people’s perceptions are filtered through the (often unacknowledged) rules for conversational interaction. Different rules can result in the same behavior having very different meanings, and hence produce cross-cultural misunderstandings... Thus, a behavior that appears to some to be natural, spontaneous, and a cause for good feelings, might be viewed by others as conceited and insensitive. (Holtgraves and Dulin 1994:283)

4.3.2 *Swiss modesty and a heightened aversion to bragging*

At the time of writing, the topic of Swiss Germans’ modesty and related sensitivity to bragging does not seem to have been the specific topic of any published academic research. There has been some socio-psychological research on social and

personal values that might be relevant to the topic of bragging. Bennett (2005), for example, looked at the dimension of “collectivism” versus “individualism” in data from 1,000 hearing Swiss citizens aged 20 and older for which he reported that the older generations of Swiss Germans tended more frequently to favor collectivistic and rightist values (stressing national security, conformity and tradition). Bennett (in personal communication) suggests that this dimension of collectivism would explain to a certain extent a reluctance to bragging by these Swiss speakers.

In other kinds of non-academic publications, comments on this Swiss aversion to bragging are bountiful. The following are typical examples (all in translations to English from German by the authors):

Swiss modesty is legendary. In this country, people like to hide their light under a bushel, acknowledge praise and thanks with a bashful “that’s right” – but are then offended when no one notices how good they are. And that’s what we Swiss really are. (Editorial by Heinrich, 2015 in *Werbewoche* (Advertising Week))

Switzerland wants to shine above all with modesty. That starts at school...Swiss students don’t want to be overachievers. After all, anyone who is one is excluded. (Schreier and Zanni, 2017, in the *boulevard* newspaper 20 min)

The modesty that was Switzerland’s trademark for a long time did not come about by chance. Small countries usually have no airs of great power, or they are quickly exorcised. Moreover, Switzerland was a poor country for a long time, without ores, oil or colonies. Thus, arrogance could never really develop. Modest prosperity was possible but had to be worked hard for. “Being” was therefore more important to the Swiss than “appearances” for a long time. The display of wealth was frowned upon.

(Schwarz, 2015, in the blog of *Avenir Suisse*, a Swiss think tank for economic and social issues)

This characterization of the Swiss as being modest and sensitive to high self-praise is also found in historical writing. For example, Hofe (1943), reports that Gottfried Keller (one of the most famous Swiss authors of the 19th century), viewed Switzerland as being characterized by “complete reliance upon the desirability of democracy for Switzerland, censure of attempts at conversion abroad, and reprobation of vain display” (Hofe 1943: 80).

A modest person is one who doesn’t show off, who “doesn’t stick out too much”. An effective way of insulting someone in a Swiss German dialect is to say they “have a big mouth” (*hän e grossi Schnuure*). The comment of Brown and Levinson (1987: 39) that the raising of the self can be seen as implying a lowering of the other seems especially relevant for a country where there has never been an aristocracy, and where the head of the federal government is not a single political leader, such as a president or prime minister, but a committee of seven

persons. Furthermore, as Switzerland is composed of three distinct geographical regions each with its own spoken language (French, Italian, German) or a combination of languages (such as German, Italian and Rhaeto-Romance in the canton of Grisons), the federal government has been found to run most efficiently by consensus and compromise.

At the present time, the situation concerning bragging in Switzerland could be summed up as follows. Although there still seems to be no published academic studies on the specific topic of a Swiss cultural aversion to what is perceived as “bragging”, the recognition of a sensitivity to bragging can nevertheless be attested in numerous older and recent non-academic publications, of which the examples presented here are only a small sample.

In Switzerland, the speaking culture and the signing culture certainly have many differences. However, the adoption by DSGS signers of the aversion of Swiss German hearing culture to bragging is an indication of how deeply rooted this politeness norm seems to be in both Swiss cultures. This could possibly be due to the value of ‘inclusiveness’ (Hoza 2007a) or ‘collectivism’ (Bennett 2005) shared by both cultures. (For a further discussion of other issues of politeness in languages in contact, see Mapson 2013.)

5. Summary and suggestions for further research

Several aspects of im/politeness have been described that have been reported in the literature for different signed languages. This includes im/polite behaviors of both the signer and the addressee/s which are based on the necessary visibility of the signer, as well as modifications of manual and non-manual behaviors based on the setting, register, type of speech act, and the signer’s judgement of the addressee/s’ sign language competencies. Also discussed were differences in politeness norms between users of different signed languages that are due to differing cultural experiences of the signers, sometimes during different historical periods.

Examples were presented of a sensitivity to bragging in pilot data from DSGS signers, who also regard some forms of signs that are acceptable in other signed languages as an impolite form of bragging. A dislike of bragging has been described here as a trait shared by members of both the dominant speaking and the minority signing Swiss German cultures, which have historically shared the same national governmental, political, and legal situations. We have proposed that this shared cultural setting is a factor that has nourished a general heightened sensitivity to and negative attitude toward boasting that involves an egalitarian wish

“not to put others down” combined with an individual tendency to try “not to stick out”.

Clearly, more research needs to be carried out on all facets of im/politeness in signed languages. Not only does more data need to be collected from different types of signing adults (cf. Appendix A), but also from signing children to see how they learn these politeness norms (such as reported by Baker and Bogaerde, 2020). Systematic studies of what is normally done in different settings and registers of signing (reviewed by Hansen 2012) could be complemented by studies of the perception of im/politeness when the normal conventions in these settings are violated by the signer or addressee.

Attention should also be made to im/politeness norms that might be undergoing change. This would especially apply to the norms of the younger generation of both speakers and signers, who through extensive new social media possibilities are exposed to im/politeness norms that are different from those of the cultures in which they grew up.

Finally, we hope that the information that has been presented here on im/politeness in signing can be a contribution toward addressing the broader research goal of identifying the significant similarities and the differences between languages in spoken and signed modalities.

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Appendix A. The complex sub-groups of signers according to modality of language and when it was learned

Researchers studying sign language acquisition or assessment are confronted with many different types of signers. Chen Pichler and Koulidobrova (2015) have pointed out that for some of these signers there might be effects of learning a language in a new modality in addition to the usual second language learning effects. A convention has therefore been developed to specify whether the language is not only learned as a first language (L1) or a second language (L2) but also whether the language is in the same or a different modality (first modality = M1, second modality = M2). For example, a L1 signer is one who has learned sign language as a first language, and this would also be a first modality. These signers are sometimes referred to as "native" signers. M2L2 refers to a person learning a second language in a second modality. This would designate a speaking person who has learned a sign language as a second language.

For some studies, it is further necessary to identify whether the signers involved are themselves deaf or hearing. A deaf person can be described as a 'deaf L1' signer, and a hearing person growing up in a deaf family could be identified as a 'hearing L1' or a 'CODA' (Child of Deaf Adults). A signer, hearing or deaf, could also learn another sign language. For example, in addition to having learned DSGS as a first language, one could then learn ASL, LSF-Suisse or DGS as a second sign language. The designation for the user of these other additional sign languages would be M1L2.

If the deaf person has grown up in a hearing family (as do 90% of persons who are born deaf or have been early deafened), there are a variety of different kinds of exposures to a sign language that they may have had. If their hearing parents used sign language early while the child was growing up, then the signer would be a M1L1 signer. Some studies further differentiate as to whether the hearing parents themselves were M1L1 or M2L2 signers). Some researchers

would use the designation of ‘later M1L1’ if the deaf child had learned a sign language in a school setting in early childhood. A deaf person who had had no exposure to signing either in the home or in early schooling but learned a sign language later in life would be designed a ‘Deaf M2L2’ signer.

In Figure 3, the different types of signers shown are grouped according to both when they learned the language (L1/L2) and the modality of the language (M1/M2) and whether they are themselves deaf or hearing. However, one must keep in mind that the issues of modality and when it was learned don’t alone predict good signers in adult life. Also, when one learned a language (as L1 or L2) does not always overlap with the language preferred by the adult signer. Not included in this figure are other possibly relevant factors such as the nature and amount of exposure to signing in the school setting (e.g., constant exposure to signing in the classroom or only a few hours a week), whether the deaf signer uses a cochlear implantation device or if the signer is atypical in some way (e.g., has any impairments due to aging factors, ASD, etc.).

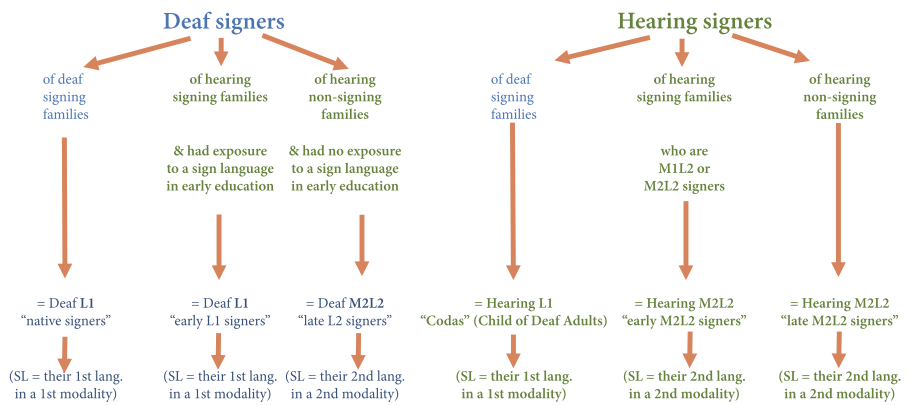


Figure 12. Designations for different types of signers

The most typical late learners of a sign language are hearing M2L2 learners. There are also many professions which require some level of competence in a sign language. For example, both deaf and hearing persons who are L1 and M2L2 signers are active in many countries in the professions of sign language research, interpretation, teaching, as well as a variety of social services.

Appendix B. A historical example of the low opinion about signing held by hearing persons

One example of the assumptions that seemed to nurture the low opinions of signing can be found in the life of Alexander Graham Bell (1847–1922), who is most widely known for his invention of the telephone. Bell had a Scottish mother and an American wife who both had become deaf as children. After immigrating to the US from Scotland, he made many contacts with deaf educators and leaders within the American deaf communities, from whom he also learned to communicate in American Sign Language. Booth’s (2021) biography of Bell, entitled “The Invention of Miracles”, has the subtitle: “Language Power, and Alexander Graham

Bell's Quest to End Deafness". The author describes how, despite his close contact with a great many deaf persons, Bell always saw the major aim of his life not as helping hearing persons to communicate long distance through a tele-device, but rather as helping deaf persons to fit into the majority culture of speakers. From his youth, he had been interested in research on speech sounds, an interest that ran in his family from his grandfather through to his father. His grandfather had stated, "Mere voice is common to the brutes as man; Articulation marks the nobler race..." (Booth 2021: 19).

Another influential factor for Bell was the necessity for him to learn how to fit into the quite young United States. At the time (the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), the nation was still striving to meld together a viable nation of the many immigrants coming from a diversity of nations. Especially pertinent for the topic of politeness is how, as Booth documents, Bell became over the years increasingly influenced by a dominant norm of the hearing culture of his era, the necessity of trimming one's behavior so as not to seem "different". This was considered the most likely path to succeed in this growing country. Many Americans (including the co-author Boyes Braem) remember stories of how their grandparents or great-grandparents never used their native language in the family after they immigrated to the US. Bell thought that not only for his deaf relatives and friends, but for all deaf Americans to succeed, one must prioritize improving their speech. As he grew older, this increasingly fervent endeavor made him into one of the public persons most despised by members of the American deaf community. This cultural attitude requiring "fitting in" was not unique to the United States at the time but was prevalent in many European countries where it has influenced generations of deaf signers to not stick out by signing in public.