CHAPTER 50

EXPRESSIVITY IN SIGN LANGUAGES

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50.1 Introduction

The essential premise behind expressives is summarized in the old saying "It's not what you say, it's how you say it." Expressives do not contribute to the truth conditions of the utterance but rather add subjective information and in doing so create a context of a more colourful, emotive, and engaging form of language.

While non-signers often remark on the expressivity of signing (and not always positively, for example, Okrent 2012), sign languages are argued by many linguists to be quite like spoken languages, both functionally and structurally (Goldin-Meadow & Brentari 2017). Their articulation in the manual modality—using the hands (especially for lexical items) and the eyes, face, head, and body above the waist (especially for grammatical and affective information)—makes them appear to be more animated. However, as we consider the specific characteristics of expressives as they have been described in spoken languages, we can see parallels in sign languages, and learn more about expressives generally by seeing how they operate in sign languages.

The strongly embodied nature of sign languages, using the same bodily articulators as those that may also express the emotional state of speakers in spoken languages, suggests that the phrase *expressive sign language* may appear pleonastic. Is sign language ever not expressive? The visual nature of sign languages means that speaker attitude is conveyed by facial and body expression. The face and body are always present as potential expressive markers in sign languages, so if they are expressively neutral, the signer has essentially elected to show neutral expressivity. Because so much of the speaker's attitude in spoken languages has been relegated to tone of voice, it is less reflected in facial and bodily expression (although it is clearly there, sometimes reduced and sometimes simply unobserved). Thus, the fact that sign languages are noticeably visually expressive may lead a casual observer to think that expressives are less structured linguistically than in spoken languages. Our explorations here will show that this is not the case.

Potts (2007d: 168), listing the characteristics of expressives, claims that they are marked by their independence and that "Expressive content contributes a dimension of meaning that is separate from the regular descriptive content". When we change or even remove expressive content, the descriptive content doesn't change. Instead, when we do this, we alter the context in which the utterance is interpreted and understood. We will argue here that highly visual signing, through production of highly iconic structures (Cuxac & Sallandre 2007), expresses descriptive content similar to that given by conventionalized vocabulary signs (or in conjunction with them), but that such a manner of signing is in no sense gratuitous nor completely stylistic. Rather, it is greatly valued in deaf communities as a way of increasing the clarity of the utterance, reducing the cognitive load on the receiving audience and making the form of language more attractive and appealing. After all, in discussion of expressives in any language, there is an underlying assumption that there is pleasure and satisfaction to be had from them.

Because expressives are tied to the speaker (by which we mean the utterer, as expressives occur in speech, writing, signing, and written signs) and their context, they are subjective, showing the speaker's perspective. This perspective is frequently expressed in relation to the speaker's emotional state, which is often heightened, although the strength of that emotional state varies, as does at whom or at what the utterance is directed (a person, an object, a specific or general situation view, for example). This variation implicit in expressives implies that they are also non-discrete and non-categorial, so that they vary continuously or analogically, being more or less forceful or intense. Linguistic understanding of spoken languages is generally that non-discrete, gradient elements are paralinguistic, relegated to pro-speech emblems or co-speech bodily gestures and pitch, volume, and speed of production. Sign language research has long recognized that while some elements of the language appear to be discrete and categorial, many are gradient and analogous. This applies to expressives and the non-manual language elements, but also to the more fundamental parameters of sign language structure that make up the signs that express descriptive content such as handshape, location, orientation, and movement path, direction, speed, and duration. The speaker is thus usually understood to be the contextual judge when uttering expressives, and Potts (2007d: 165) observes that expressives have "an immediate and powerful impact on the context" in which they are uttered.

In this chapter exploring expressive language in sign languages, we provide a brief overview of what may or may not be encompassed within an understanding of "a sign language" and some fundamentals about sign languages that will help the reader to follow our discussion of the nature of expressives in sign languages. We then describe some elements of politeness expressives and blurt interjections, followed by pejoratives/taboo/expletive signs, and their intensifications, Finally, we consider aesthetic expressions designed to increase the emotional impact of an utterance in sign language poetry, storytelling, and verbal play.

50.2 What is—and isn't—sign language?

To study the structure and function of expressives in language discourse, we need to know what is and is not part of a given language. This is not a simple matter. Spoken languages

marshal sound-based words and verbal paralinguistics (pitch, speed, intensity, duration of the sounds) as well as non-verbal articulations (facial, manual, or other bodily gestures) to communicate (see Ebert & Walter 2025: Chapter 35 of this volume). Sign languages marshal visual linguistic signs and paralinguistic features of those signs (size, speed, dynamics of movement as well as their location in space) with non-manual articulations (facial and other bodily movements, where usually those articulations are not part of the lexical signs) to communicate.

Adopting a view of discourse phenomena as including broad semiotic repertoires (as in Kusters, Spotti, Swanwick, & Tapio 2017), we observe that deaf people also use tactile expression via manual articulation as part of a sign language discourse. Such tactile contact is strongly indicative of the context and the signer's emotion, attitude, and intentions. This includes tapping another person to get their attention, and where and how the tapping is done carries a range of expressive meaning from a polite equivalent to *excuse me*, requesting a person to look at the signer, a polite request to move, or equivalents to English *hey!* or *oi!* Tapping and banging on a table to create vibrations can be modulated to deliver information as in English *Hey, pay attention!* or *Please may I have your attention* or express attitudes such as delight, frustration, or excitement. The more intense the tapping or banging, the more intense the speaker's (in this case, the banger's) expression. Thus, we can see that the banging to create vibrations fulfills the criteria for expressive communication within a sign language discourse.

Discourse that involves deaf–blind signers uses tactile communication in a range of expressive strategies, blending visual and tactile forms of sign language depending on the context and the visual abilities of the discourse participants (Mesch 2013). Expressive information that is conveyed visually for sighted signers, particularly through facial expression and body movement, can be expressed by using hands-on signing, in which the deaf–blind signer lightly holds or touches the body of their interlocutor. Strategies include signing the equivalent descriptive content (such as using a sign that means 'happy' instead of using a 'happy' facial expression), altering the movement of manual signs, or specific expressive markers made by tapping with varying force on the signer's back or arm.

We should also note that sign languages can be represented in a written form. In some deaf communities, including the Brazilian deaf community, written forms are used increasingly, and signers can choose how much expressive information they wish to include in the "text". Just as the expressivity in spoken language discourse alters when it is removed from the vocal medium and transferred to a written medium, so does expressivity in written representations of sign language.

Turning now to the elements expressed exclusively visually in sign languages, the question of what is and is not a part of the language is still not clear cut—and, accordingly, this will have implications for describing expressives. It is broadly accepted among sign language researchers that sign languages contain conventionalized lexical items (core vocabulary) that may be native to the language or borrowed from surrounding spoken languages, other sign languages, or conventional visually perceived gestures used in wider hearing society (see, e.g., Johnston & Schembri 2007). Signs are frequently visually motivated, drawing on some aspect of the visual appearance of the signified entity or something associated with that entity.

Additionally, ambient spoken languages can influence conventionalized signs. Signs can consist of letters that spell out the corresponding word from the ambient spoken language

using the manual alphabet. For example, one, now old-fashioned, sign meaning 'dog' in BSL (British Sign Language) is articulated as the three manual letters D-O-G (as was the sign in older ASL—American Sign Language).

Thus far, we see clear parallels with spoken languages, in which lexical items can signify entities, albeit in signs this happens via devices that express the visual relationship between sign and entity. However, in many conventionalized signs the iconic link between the sign and its signified entity becomes degraded over time, so that most signers do not use conventionalized signs with visual intent (Klima & Bellugi 1979, Cuxac & Sallandre 2007).

Beside conventionalized signs, there are signs that we may consider productive in that their meaning is expressed by the signer's deliberate attempt to produce a visual illustration of the object or action in a specific context (Brennan 1990), and this tendency to increase the depictive strength of visual imagery is where we begin to see greater possibilities for expressives in sign languages. Cuxac & Sallandre (2007) term these signs Highly Iconic Structures. In the group of signs widely termed classifiers (although see Schembri 2003 for a critique of the term), the signer's hand frequently becomes the referent; that is, the signer selects a conventionalized iconic handshape that stands for the referent then moves that handshape through signing space or positions it within signing space in a depictive representation of where and how the referent moves. If a person moves from left to right while a car comes toward them and swerves, then one hand (representing the person) moves from left to right while the other (representing the car) approaches and swerves. The signer narrating an occurrence can also express their own emotional reaction to what is being uttered using non-manual articulations. Thus, when the car swerves around the person walking, the signer's facial expression may reveal the attitude of the walker (perhaps surprise), or of the narrator (perhaps annoyance), or of the driver (perhaps horror). Schlenker, Lamberton, & Lamberton (2023) have observed how the handshape selected for a classifier reference can also influence the expressivity, a point to which we return in Section 50.4.

In a third option, instead of naming or identifying the signified entity (as in conventionalized signs) or showing the referent (via classifiers), the signer becomes the referent, using what has been variously termed embodiment, role-shift, or constructed action (among others, see Perniss, Thompson, & Vigliocco 2010, Cormier, Smith, & Sevcikova-Sehyr 2015, and Aristodemo et al. 2021). The signer maps their own body onto the body of the referent (human or not) as far as possible, so that, for example, when embodying a dog, the signer's head and face are presented as the dog's head and face, while the arms and hands are presented as the dog's legs and paws. Importantly for expressivity, signers can use constructed action with classifiers, so that we can show the dog's translocation movement via the hands while embodying the dog, including the facial expression and body movements that frequently show the subjective view of the (in this case canine) character.

Having summarized fundamentals of sign languages helpful in understanding our following discussion, we turn to the question of which expressions in discourse are to be considered truly part of sign language and which are to be given some other (peripheral) status. We raise this question because expressives in spoken languages are often swept

aside as non-linguistic, especially manual gestures. When modern linguistics began to describe sign languages in the mid-twentieth century, there was an awareness among those researchers that sign languages and spoken languages shared the same essential characteristics of human languages. But that awareness was not common to researchers of spoken languages. Because of the (political) need to increase the (social) status of sign languages to have them accepted as a legitimate object of study within linguistics, their similarities to the spoken languages of the researchers were frequently emphasized, sometimes at the expense of pointing out differences due to their visual modality, particularly differences that created challenges for linguistic theories. One of the major such challenges stems from the many connections between signs and gesture. Research on spoken languages has distinguished between sound-based language (perceived aurally) and manual and other bodily gestures (perceived visually), with sound-based gestures (including interjections like Italian *bo* or English *bah*, as well as onomatopoeia) hovering in a difficult-to-classify intermediate zone (which is gradually coming to be recognized as an intrinsic part of spoken language; see the recent blossoming of literature on mimetics in speech, such as Monaghan, Shillcock, Christiansen, & Kirby 2014, Dingemanse et al. 2015, and much ongoing work). Research on sign languages, however, has finally come of age: Goldin-Meadow & Brentari (2017: 1), for example, remark that sign linguists currently accept that "sign is gestural, or at least has gestural components" and that:

> . . . signers gesture just as speakers do. Both produce imagistic gestures along with more categorical signs or words. Because at present it is difficult to tell where sign stops and gesture begins, we suggest that sign should not be compared with speech alone but should be compared with speech-plus-gesture. (Goldin-Meadow & Brentari 2017: 1)

Goldin-Meadow and Brentari carefully refer to "more categorical signs" because it is well-established that many signs are less categorical. Kendon (2004, 2014), aware that the term *gesture* is often taken to refer to non-verbal utterances, suggests the phrase *visible action as utterance* instead. Puupponen (2019) offers an analysis of the expressive meaning of non-manual articulations in sign languages that adopts a predominantly semiotic perspective, which perspective can be extended to manual articulations, as well.

It is arguable that the question of which manual articulations among all these count as language *per se* and which do not is often answered on the basis of ideology and political/-social power rather than on the basis of linguistic science. Perhaps more importantly, it may not matter to signers at all, where daily practice is paramount (Kusters & Sarasrabudhe 2018, Kusters, Green, Moriarty, & Snoddon 2020), particularly since an articulation that originates as a (co-speech) gesture can become grammaticalized over time (Tomaszewski 2006, Wilcox 2009, Pfau & Steinbach 2011, 2014, Sandler 2012, van Loon, Nyst 2016).

Most deaf signers are bilingual to some extent in the spoken language of their wider hearing community and may mix words from the ambient spoken language with their signing, engaging in translanguaging as they select from their available communicative repertoire (via mouthing, fingerspelling, or writing) or in signing influenced by the structure and meanings of the ambient spoken language (Bienvenu 2001: 322).

Beyond these situational facts that work to defy attempts to distinguish signs from gestures, we note that signs and gestures have many technical properties in common anyway.

Indeed, co-speech gesture strategies can be complex in many of the ways that signs are complex (Stec 2012), including that the body can be partitioned to show multiple actions simultaneously (Parrill 2009, compare to Dudis 2004 for sign languages).

Further, some scholars are questioning whether restrictions/conditions/constraints posed for sign languages might, in fact, follow from cognitive or even biomechanical facts rather than holding specifically of language. For example, Kita, van Gijn, & van der Hulst (2014) argue that the much-revered Symmetry Condition originally posed by Battison (1978) is not linguistic, but rather more generally cognitive. **Muller (2018)** outlines the need for more research comparing sign and gesture. In the meantime, however, it's not clear which diagnostics one might rely on with assurance (if any) in determining whether a manual articulation is, truly, a sign.

For these reasons, not only do we not delve into the issue of whether an expressive in a sign stream is a sign or not, we fear that delving into it would only mire us in matters that hinder presenting the marvellous range of expressivity types that occur in sign language discourse, which is our real focus. Hence, we now turn to that task.

50.2.1 Interjections

Being unrelated to truth values, expressives are not easily defined using paraphrase or structural analysis but are better explained in relation to their function—the information they carry is determined by the context in which they are used and why they are used. In this section, we will describe some examples of the ways that sign language interjections provide expressive content in backchannel responses, politeness interjections, and blurts (see Stange-Hundsdörfer 2025a: Chapter 24 of this volume).

50.2.2 Backchannel responses

Backchannel responses to ensure conversation flow and understanding have been described in various sign languages (e.g., Coates & Sutton-Spence 2001 for BSL, McCleary & Leite 2013 for Libras [Brazilian Sign Language], Mesch 2016 for Swedish Sign Language). Signers who do not have the floor in the conversation and are not attempting to take it, may produce both manual and non-manual backchannel utterances during conversations.

Some manual responses are conventional signs, such as YES, RIGHT, and TRUE, or supportive repetitions of a sign articulated by the person who has the floor. Mesch (2016) notes the "weak manual activity" of some manual backchannel signs, in which the seated signer's hands were in their lap with greatly reduced movement, rather than in the normal signing space. Signers also produce what Mesch terms "PU – Palms up", the meaning of which is not always clear but serves as a marker that signals attention to the topic. Non-manual backchannel responses, including raising or lowering eyebrows, directing gaze and/or movement, and angle of the head, also carry expressive function as interrupters, encouragement, or the like. Mesch (2013: 240) notes that in interview situations, the interviewer may use facial expression (such as wrinkling the nose) as reactions, and that:

A mouth movement with "lips repeatedly pursed" is used occasionally to signal that the receiver "agrees with what the signer is talking about or what is being said," while nodding is used more as an encouraging continuation signal: "Go on, tell me more, I am listening with interest".

50.2.3 Polite interjections and expressives

Politeness expressives are sociopragmatically and pragmalinguistically different in different sign languages, as they are in different spoken languages.

Hoza (2007, 2008, 2011) has identified manual lexical politeness signs in ASL, which function as alerters, expressions of surprise, preparatory statements, and hedges. One of the lexical ASL politeness signs is glossed as HANDWAVE (Hoza 2007) or HEY (Hoza 2011). This has a similar alerting function of using a person's name, often considered polite in English, but which does not occur in most sign languages. The marker that Hoza glosses as WELL is used to mitigate requests when asking a favor or when making a rejection (Hoza 2007, 2011).

Mapson (2015) provides a helpful summary of non-manual politeness markers and their use in ASL, which we reproduce here as Table 50.1.

Table 50.1 Non-manual politeness markers in ASL

Marker	Description	Use
Polite pucker	Pursed lips	An involvement strategy used for minor face threats where cooperation is expected
Tight lips	Lips tightened together with tension	Used for involvement and independence strategies, the default non-manual marker for moderate face threats
Polite grimace	A tight smile with lips either open or lightly closed	Used for involvement and independence in more difficult imposition contexts
Polite grimace frown	As above but with the addition of a frown	Used for involvement and independence strategies involving severe face threat and a high degree of imposition
Body/head teeter	A movement of the head and/or upper body from side to side	Used alone or in conjunction with other features for extreme face threats and high imposition contexts

Mapson (2014, 2015) further identifies six explicitly articulated non-manual key politeness features in the BSL community related to requests, apologies, and gratitude: raised brows, tight lips, squint, polite grimace, side tilt, polite duck of the head and shoulders. These markers can be used alone or with the manual politeness markers that she identified in discussion with deaf informants. Table 50.2, reproduced from Mapson (2015), details the markers using English glosses to attempt to create the equivalent uses in English (the asterisks indicate signs that were used only once in her data set).

Table 50.2 Non-manual politeness markers in BSL (from Mapson 2015: 96, Table 3D)

requests	*apologies*	*gratitude*
EXCUSE-ME	EXCUSE-ME	THANK-YOU
PLEASE	SORRY	CHEERS
DON'T MIND (version 1)	ACCIDENT	VALUE*
DON'T MIND (version 2)*	OK?	
UM	AFRAID*	
CHEERS	UM	
PRAY*	LITTLE*	

The sign glossed as CHEERS is a one-handed or two-handed 'thumbs-up' sign that was preferred by most of the deaf informants to the more English-influenced sign glossed as THANK-YOU. Mapson also notes that the deaf informants did not frequently use the sign glossed as PLEASE, preferring to add non-manual politeness markers to the request. Hoza (2007) reports that the spoken English word *please* was used more than twice as often as the ASL PLEASE.

Each of these markers shows speaker attitude and creates the politeness context in which the utterance takes place.

50.2.4 Blurts

Many expressives are articulated in a direct and spontaneous way, falling into the class of what we call blurt interjections. Some of them are in response to something just witnessed or uttered—such as *Huh?* after seeing or being told something hard to believe or *Ah!* after realizing something. The counterpart of *Huh?* across languages is monosyllabic, with question prosody, and oral articulators in near-neutral position (Dingemanse, Torreira, & Enfield 2013). Given that, one might conclude that *Huh?* is nothing more than a questioning grunt—similar in communication status to, perhaps, a shrug. But Dingemanse (2017) argues that interjections in this group play a significant role in maintaining the flow of mutual understanding in conversations. Further, he proposes that the articulatory form

of interjections as a class may very well depend on their interactional properties, thus accounting for the fact that a given type of interjection might have similarities across unrelated languages.

We review here some examples of blurts used in ASL, BSL, and Libras, being the three sign languages with which we are most familiar, but we are confident that the structure, form, and function of the blurts will have equivalents in other sign languages. Blurt signs are frequently what may be termed "socially unacceptable" signs, inasmuch as they are often what lay people might refer to as "swear words". This can hamper sign language research, where deaf people are not always willing to share these more intimate utterances with hearing linguists who are social and cultural outsiders, especially in the light of historical power relations between deaf and hearing people.

Sutton-Spence & Woll (1999) describe a range of expletives used in BSL from the milder to the more forceful, noting that signers use different manual signs that can be translated as *shame*, *drat*, *damn*, and *fuck*.

Blurts are like conventionalized signs, in their form, in that, for example, handshape can change in a blurt interjection, just as it can in conventionalized signs. And, so far as we have observed, handshape changes in blurt interjections involve only the selected fingers, while the unselected fingers are either fully open or fully closed—consistent with restrictions on handshape changes in signs (Brentari 2011). Figure 50.1 offers an example.

FIGURE **50.1** ASL FUCK! (Cut.com 2017 [1:04])

One hand can interact with the other in blurt interjections, just as in conventionalized signs. We see this in one of the ASL signs for ASSHOLE where the index finger of one hand traces a circle inside the loop created by the other hand (Figure 50.2):

FIGURE **50.2** ASL ASSHOLE! (Cut.com 2017 [3:12])

Interjections of surprise or disapproval in sign languages may be non-manual. Frequently, a facial expression and head and body movement widely recognized as a non-linguistic gesture of surprise or disapproval among non-signers constitute the sign language interjection. This should be unremarkable as the non-manual articulators have done their job (as we saw above in the discussion of politeness markers)—so why add more? The non-manual expressive markers can then be used in conjunction with other manual descriptive content signs.

Manuals can also interact with non-manuals to form interjections. In Libras, a sign expressing surprise, shock, or admiration draws on the mouth pattern of the Portuguese word *vixi* (used to express similar meaning and a corruption of *Virgem Maria*) that emphasizes the mouth configuration of the second spoken syllable with the head tilted far back before it nods, and with firmly crossed arms. See Figure 50.3.

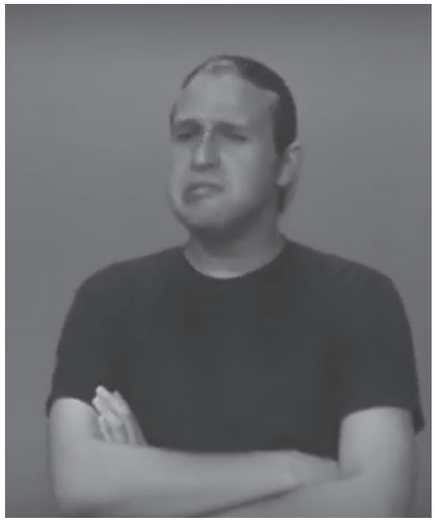

FIGURE **50.3** Surprise interjection in Libras (Silva 2015)

Another such Libras expressive is used roughly when in English one might say *Gee!*, *Good heavens!*, *My goodness!*, or *Oh dear!* The index and middle fingers on one hand close their fingertips against the thumb at the chest, while the face makes a variety of expressions, depending on the reason for the interjection—such as surprise, astonishment, disapproval, regret, or sympathy—a bit like *Jesus!* for a similar range of meanings in English. See Figure 50.4. One can augment the intensity of the emotion by having two hands moving in symmetry.

FIGURE **50.4** Interjection in Libras which can be used for surprise, exasperation, etc (Dicionário Libras 2023) [0:23–0:37]

The non-manual factor of interjections in sign languages is significant. Most non-manual articulations in sign language discourse (other than the whole face gestures that accompany spoken language, as well) do not occur in conversation or narrative on their own (that is, without manual articulation). Dively (1996: Chap. 9 & 10) discusses seven signs of ASL that do not involve manual articulation; she calls them nonhand signs. Three of them, all

functioning as conjunctions or adverbials, cannot appear alone in an utterance (they must accompany manuals). But the remaining four nonhand ASL signs that we can categorize as expressives can occur alone as a full utterance or can co-occur with manuals. We have gathered these four together in Table 50.3.

Table 50.3 Dively's non-hand signs of ASL, attitudinal

	articulatory form	Location
NO	head shakes side-to-side (more signing space than with OR)	first and last sign of an utterance
OH-I-SEE	thrust head up then move it down (more slowly than with YES)	first or last sign of an utterance
PRO-1-WRONG	head moves to side then back to neutral Alternative: shake head briefly and use a negative facial expression	immediately after sign or utterance that it corrects
YES	repeated head nod	first and last sign of an utterance

These four non-hand signs function as predicates expressing the attitude of the signer. NO and YES give the signer's denial or affirmation of an utterance—either the utterance that precedes in the discourse or the utterance these signs surround. OH-I-SEE confirms that the signer understands that the utterance it is attached to (either preceding or following, but not both) is correct. PRO-1-WRONG is a repair sign; it follows an utterance that the signer now says is wrong. Further, any of these can be blurted out in response to an external stimulus. We argue, then, that these four non-hand signs are blurt-interjections when they stand alone.

Regarding handshapes, many candidates for blurt-interjections in sign languages use the most frequently occurring handshapes in sign, including those in which all five fingers are extended (spread or not, curled/bent or not). These have been dubbed open-palm handshapes (see Ferré 2012, in the gesture literature). We see examples of interjections using open-palm handshapes in Figure 50.5, three of BSL signers in the top row, and three of Libras signers in the bottom row, where we have given our translations (considering context and non-manual articulations) below each.

In Figure 50.5, the two hands articulate in a reflexively symmetrical way across the mid-sagittal plane. But we also see an open-palm handshape used in a one-handed articulation in Figure 50.6. In Figure 50.6A from BSL, the signer starts in a pose of resting her chin on her fist with her non-dominant hand linked into her dominant elbow crease, then does the one-handed articulation, showing a challenge to an imagined interlocutor who has limited sign language skills, something like *Come on, can't you do better?* In Figure 50.6B in ASL, the signer interrupts a quick narrative stream with an interjection showing the attitude of the narrator (not any character in the story): the whole dominant manual (here, the left one), with a flat palm, swipes across the signing space to dismiss what has just been said, meaning something like *Forget that.*

FIGURE **50.5** Open-palm handshapes in interjections; BSL (top, Pabon et al. 2017, [0:45], [3:16], [3:12]) and Libras (bottom, Haswell 2019, [6:26], [2:09], [2:11])

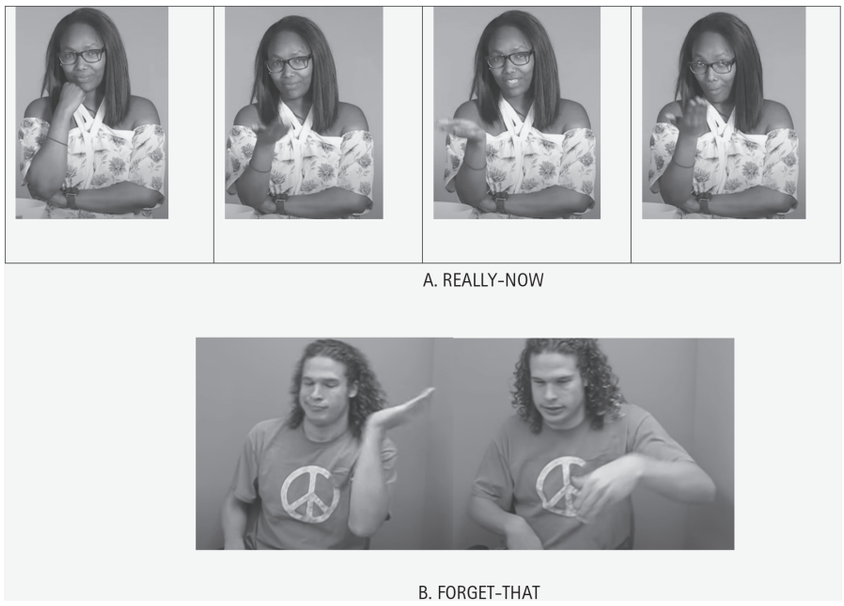

FIGURE **50.6** Open-palm handshape in a one-handed interjection in BSL (A) (Pabon et al. 2017, [0-37-0:39]) and ASL (B) (Virnig 2012 [0:32])

These same articulations occur in many other sign languages, showing speaker attitude. Common meanings for articulations that use these very unmarked handshapes include WOW, THIS-IS-IT (THE TRUTH), THERE-YOU-HAVE IT, so much so that internet sites teaching ASL, for example, include them, as in Figure 50.7. Open-palm handshapes occur also in gestures accompanying speech with the same attitudinal force (essentially modality indicators, as argued in Ferré 2012).

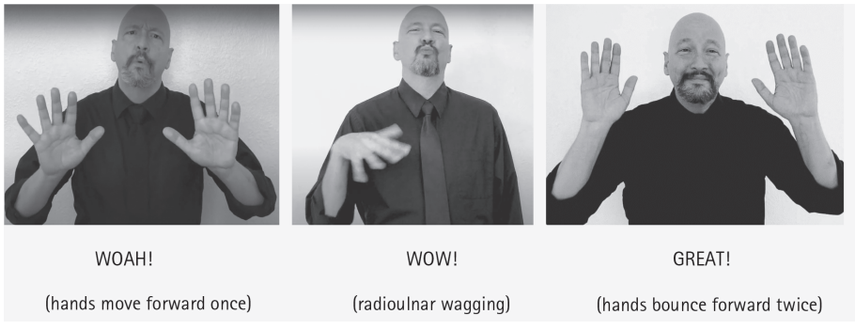

FIGURE 50.7 Open-palm handshape attitudinal interjections in site teaching ASL (Vicars, nd, https://lifeprint.com/asl101/pages-signs/w/whoa.htm)

Kaplan (1999/2004) suggests that pejorative expressions can be analyzed as having a descriptive part and an expressive part, where the expressive part reveals speaker attitude (and see Gutzmann 2019, among many). Blurt-interjections reveal signer/speaker attitude (or, in the case of constructed action, of a character in a narrative), and many of them are taboo: a speaker might emit such an interjection and then immediately clap their hand over their mouth and a signer might look at their hands as though to ask if the hands have really just said that, where both speaker and signer are reacting in dismay at having articulated that particular word or sign in public or even in private. That is, while blurt-interjections are produced in syntactic isolation, they can also be the sort of thing we might utter regardless of whether there is someone else there to receive the message—such as *Ouch!* or *Fuck!* after stubbing a toe.

Deaf people live among hearing people, even if they have formed local deaf communities. Accordingly, deaf people see the manual gestures that hearing people make, some independent of speech (often pro-speech emblems) and some co-speech. In particular, the taboo gestures used by hearing people tend to be absorbed by the deaf community. In a humorous theatrical sketch by Brazilian signers in Haswell (2019), a signer tells the two signers on either side of her who have been bothering her to stop, using a gesture recognized by hearing people in many cultures as *Time out!* (this is not the Libras sign meaning STOP nor another sign meaning STOP-IT). Then she gestures 'up yours', first to one, then to the other. We see this in Figure 50.8.

FIGURE **50.8** Gestures in a sketch by Brazilian signers (Haswell 2019 [5:46–5:48])

Other blurt-interjections that are common among signers as well as speakers include the victory V-handshape, the finger, the profane putting-two-fingers-up at someone or something, the thumbs-up, and even the so-called ILY meaning I-LOVE-YOU (appropriated from sign languages, Fisher, Napoli, & Mirus 2021).

Interjections from spoken languages can be borrowed into sign languages. Although the expletive *Fuck!* in English has very little to do with the verb *fuck* meaning to have sexual intercourse, one BSL expletive uses the verb sign as a loan translation of the spoken expletive. However, it carries with it the qualities of an expressive, in that it can be intensified by using a larger movement in a way that would not be meaningful in the verb morphology.

A mild Libras expletive roughly equivalent to *Bother!* or *Blast!* comes from the Portuguese expletive *Aff!* (a corruption of *Ave Maria*). It is fingerspelled as a-f-f- with the accompanying mouthing 'aff', although a facial articulation showing discontent such as an eyeroll usually accompanies it.

We also find fingerspelling in taboo blurt-interjections. That is, people spell out the taboo word in the ambient spoken language using the manual alphabet. This may seem unlikely as a blurt articulation, but fingerspelling can be fast. In Figure 50.9, we see a fingerspelled taboo blurt-interjection in ASL.

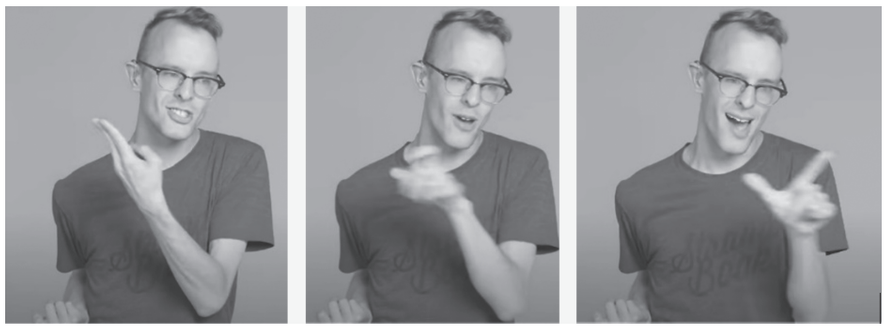

FIGURE **50.9** ASL H-E-L-L! (cut.com 2017 [1:58–2:00])

Another BSL expressive sign FUCK uses the four fingerspelled letters of the English word and can be intensified by increasing the size of the movement between the letters F and C, and between the letters C and K (the letter U is minimized or deleted) and changing the speed of movement.

Likewise, the process known as initialization can occur in taboo blurt-interjections. In initialization, the handshape in a given sign is the manual alphabet handshape that represents a letter in the corresponding word of the ambient spoken language (most often the first letter, but sometimes others; see Brentari & Padden 2001, Hendriks & Dufoe 2014). In Figure 50.10, we see initialization with a different version of the interjection HELL! (Mirus, Fisher, & Napoli 2012: illustration 1) and we see an example of a handshape change corresponding to the manual letters P and O for the interjection PISS-OFF! (Mirus, Fisher, & Napoli 2012: illustration 5).

FIGURE **50.10** ASL HELL! and PISS-OFF! (Mirus, Fisher, & Napoli 2020: Figure 1)

Further, taboo blurt-interjections can exhibit incorporation and blends, just as conventionalized signs can (Woodward & Desantis 1977, Ktejik 2013, Lepic 2016). Figure 50.11 (which is Illustration 8 of Mirus, Fisher, & Napoli 2012) shows how the sign MOTHER can change handshape to the finger gesture, yielding the interjection MOTHERFUCKER!

FIGURE **50.11** MOTHER and MOTHERFUCKER from ASL (Mirus, Fisher, & Napoli 2012: Figure 8)

We see an emphatic version with two hands in Figure 50.12.

FIGURE **50.12** Emphatic MOTHERFUCKER (cut.com, 2017, [1:02])

Many of these taboo signs have a humorous, playful underpinning, in which the creativity behind them increases their expressivity. Accordingly, we will now turn to expressivity and creative signing.

50.3 Slurs

What constitutes a slur in the deaf community is not always clear because social attitudes toward what constitutes an insult differ through time and across social groups (see Turgay 2025: Chapter 23 of this volume). The fundamental visual aspect of sign languages and the iconic motivation of many signs, based on metonymy and synecdoche, may mean that some signs perceived by outsiders as slurs are not considered slurs by signers.

Deaf people commonly use signs that refer to people's physical characteristics to describe and identify them. Within deaf communities, this is rarely considered insulting. If someone has an identifying scar, physical deformity, protruding teeth, is not within normal parameters of height or weight or shows some other physically visible characteristic that in modern American or European societies is considered rude to mention, it is not insulting to refer to that characteristic in a sign language. Just as there is a difference in English between *tall and thin* and *beanpole* or *wears glasses* and *specky four-eyes*, so signers can choose to exaggerate

and caricature or not (for example, by making movement larger or facial expression more intense), but the unmarked reference to physical features does not carry expressive weight. Schlenker, Lamberton, & Lamberton (2023) have remarked that negative slurs created by non-manuals, however, do not behave in the same way as manual slurs.

Old BSL signs JEW, CHINA, DISABLED, and HOMOSEXUAL referred to stereotypical physical characteristics such as the shape of the nose or eyes or stereotypical movements. These signs, which might appear to be slurs to modern signers, were not used with any negative meaning by older signers within the deaf community (Sutton-Spence & Woll 1999, and see Schlenker, Lamberton, & Lamberton 2023 for similar observations about older ASL signs). Social pressure from hearing signers (and non-signers) who consider these signs to be slurs have led to many of these older signs being replaced by less iconic signs to avoid the risk of inadvertent offence.

Some signs also change if the sign is seen as insulting for being inaccurate. For example, old Libras signs for a Brazilian Indian referred to the stereotypical whoop of a war-dance with two feathers in the hair (an already inaccurate stereotype from North America). These are not practices associated with Brazilian Indians and the sign is now widely replaced by one requested by deaf indigenous community leaders. In fact, phonological changes in signs are often corrections, meant to align the sign with newer community sensibilities or habits (Mirus, Fisher, & Napoli 2020).

Slurs may be borrowed from the wider hearing society. For example, the BSL signs BASTARD and BITCH are directly borrowed from English slur words (as evidenced by their handshape form—the English manual letter B—and their mouth pattern) but only with the expressive slur meaning and not the neutrally descriptive content meanings of child born out of wedlock or female dog.

Specific slurs within a deaf community focus on cultural matters different from those in the surrounding hearing world. For example, sign slurs may be related to the fact that a deaf person is orally educated and speaks but does not know sign language, or they may simply be signs designed to be offensive to hearing people. The British deaf comedian John Smith adapted the handshape of the sign to refer to hearing people to create a slur (and see Sutton-Spence & Napoli 2009: Chapter 5). In the BSL sign HEARING-PERSON, the hand moves from the ear to the mouth and usually uses a handshape with just the index finger extended, although older signs used the thumb instead of the index finger. The extended thumb in BSL carries positive connotative meaning (it is seen in the signs HEALTHY, BEST, and PRAISE, for example) and the extended little finger carries negative connotative meaning (occurring in ILL/SICK, LIE, WORST, and CRITICIZE, for example). John Smith's slur, playing on the older sign that implied it was good to be a hearing person, altered the handshape to the little finger extended, thus creating a slur with the expressive meaning of a bad hearing person. The language play to create slurs is also extended to the sign INTERPRETER. The sign made with the altered handshape to the little finger is a slur meaning 'a bad interpreter'. Schlenker, Lamberton, & Lamberton (2023) described a similar process in signs for a country name whose handshape was altered to the obscene extended middle finger and argue that these slurs behave semantically and grammatically as expressives.

50.4 Aesthetic expressions designed to increase the emotional impact of the statement

In signing that reveals the aesthetic sense or artistry of the signer—what we call aesthetic signing—we return to the idea that "it's not what you say, it's how you say it". In aesthetic signing, signers play with the way they produce a sign, so that, while the descriptive content may be the same, the specific form of expression increases the emotional impact of the statement. The underlying assumption is that the signer judges the creative sign to be a better and more visually pleasing way of expressing content. In sign language poetry and creative storytelling, novel uses of classifiers, exaggeration, and intensification, unusual perspectives, and new ways of visually presenting an idea/scene all fall within the remit of expressive utterances and strengthen the audience's satisfaction and enjoyment of the language.

Deaf communities have their own folkloric traditions of language art including poetry, storytelling, jokes, and theatre sketches. They often play with conversational language elements, creating signs that are visual in a novel way via constructed action, novel classifiers, repetition of signs, precise and deliberately planned placement of signs within signing space, use of both hands to create symmetrical signing, changes of speed, and size of signs (Ryan 1993, Sutton-Spence & Kaneko 2016).

Klima & Bellugi (1979) propose a distinction between internal and external structure in sign language poetry which we can see as parallel with expressive and descriptive content. Internal poetic structure considers the signs selected to create poetic impact, such as those with distinctive handshapes or movements that present particularly strong visual images. Aesthetic expressivity is increased by manipulating the rhythm and speed of signs—emphasizing timing of movement. External poetic structure considers how the chosen signs are presented. Considerations include whether signs are made with one or two hands, how they are placed in signing space (especially with regard to balancing the left- and right-hand sides of the signing space), whether two signs (or even three) are presented simultaneously, the flow of movement between signs, and the use of cohesive devices—such as altering a part of the sign to retain a chosen pattern, or selected uses of gaze to direct the viewer to important parts of signing space.

Trio, a poem by the pioneering BSL and ASL poet Dorothy Miles (2021), shows how creation of new, highly visual signs can lead to aesthetic expressivity. The final sign of the first verse produces a single image of someone seeing a tree reflected in calm water. Conventional signs meaning SEE, POOL, TREE, REFLECTION, and WATER exist, but Miles uses one novel and poetic blended sign to express all of it, in Figure 50.13A. At the end of the second verse, the poet, her dog, and a bird all doze. Again, Miles presents all three characters (the dog on the right-hand classifier, the bird on the left-hand classifier, and herself embodied in her head and torso) in a single moment, having both hands and mouth articulate as though asleep with an open mouth, in Figure 50.13B.

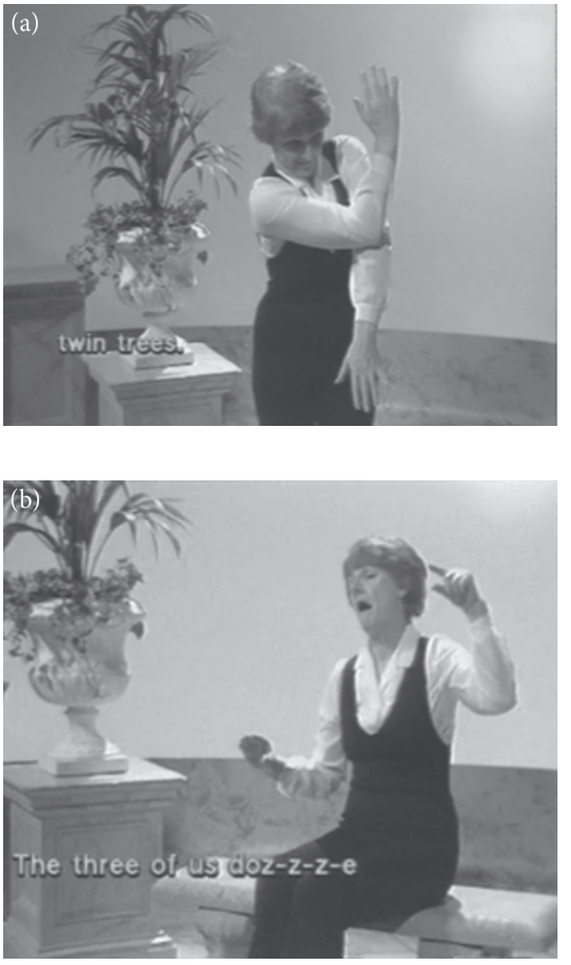

FIGURE **50.13** Multiple senses blended into a single sign (Sutton-Spence 2021, *Trio* by Dorothy Miles, [0:33] and [1:11])

Recall from Section 50.2 that sign languages use classifier handshapes, usually chosen from a set of conventional handshapes, and locate and move them through space to show how characters and objects move and relate to each other. Expressive language can create new classifier handshapes to make even more striking iconic images. Paul Scott's original BSL poem *Tree* (P. Scott 2015) shows novel classifiers for a cat, and a dog, and a blind man walking with his cane (Sutton-Spence & Napoli 2010). There already exist conventionalized signs and classifier handshapes that could express the idea of a cat jumping into a tree, a dog cocking its leg against the tree or a blind person walking, but Paul Scott's highly iconic creativity renders the same ideas with different, expressive signs.

Metaphorical positioning of signs in different locations increases the expressivity too (see Foolen 2025: Chapter 31 of this volume). In *Where Food Comes From*, the Libras poet Fernanda Machado places signs to her left and right sides alternately to contrast the separate worlds of the poor rural agricultural producer and the wealthy city consumer who does not appreciate where food comes from. The hand representing the rural worker is always lower than the hand representing the city dweller, as a metaphor for the inferior social status of poorer workers and the superior social status of richer consumers. The differences are reinforced by the different handshapes in the poem. All the signs referring to the poor agricultural worker use clawed or bent handshapes, reflecting the hardship of the rural life, while the signs referring to the carefree city-dweller use straight, extended, or relaxed fingers, a contrast seen in Figure 50.14. This creative use of the parameters of location and handshape reflects the signer's attitude toward each class, and thus constitutes an expressive.

FIGURE **50.14** The poor farmer hoeing shown on the right hand and the rich city-dweller looking casually at the available food shown on the left hand (*Como veio alimentação 'Where Food Comes From'* by Fernanda Machado 2019: [0:13])

An expressive layer can also be added to existing lexical signs. In *Just another love poem*, the ASL poet Eric Epstein, makes the sign MUSIC (Figure 50.15). This sign ordinarily involves radioulnar movement of the dominant forearm to create a swinging dynamic of the dominant manual above the non-dominant forearm. In the poem, Epstein embellishes the sign with movements that swing through the signing space pulling his torso into a swing, as well, then carries that large swinging dynamic into the following ten seconds as he embodies a person walking around (with flat-B handshapes for feet) and looking around (with F-handshapes for eyes). This spreading of the exaggerated swinging dynamic of manuals and torso across the signing following MUSIC shows the way love can make ordinary experiences like walking and looking around feel like music and carry you away like music (bordering on dance here), and thus, constitutes an expressive.

FIGURE 50.15 Exaggerated swinging dynamic in music spreads over following signs (*Just another love poem* by Eric Epstein 2024: [0:06–0:17])

This blending of descriptive and expressive content in poetic pieces can be seen as analogous to Gutzmann's (2019) remarks about the use of *cur* when talking about a dog. He notes that the word *cur* encodes expressive meaning on top of the descriptive meaning. In this creative language, we are seeing that the signers' creative choices add expressive meaning to the descriptive meaning.

Expressivity via unusual perspective is also highly valued in sign language creativity. Anthropomorphism allows signers to show non-human referents from a human perspective (Sutton-Spence & Napoli 2010) and this is a valued form of sign language play, especially as we all find humor in seeing human traits in non-humans (Bergson 1911). This form of creative sign language play allows non-humans to express their attributed emotional state. Instead of talking about a tree, Paul Scott's *Tree*, mentioned above, shows a new perspective as the performer becomes the tree and reveals its thoughts, feelings, and wishes. Anna Luiza Maciel's short poem *Celular* 'Tinder' shows a woman looking at a dating website on her phone, alternating perspectives between the woman and the phone. As the woman presses keys and swipes on the screen, we see how the phone experiences the actions (Figure 50.16).

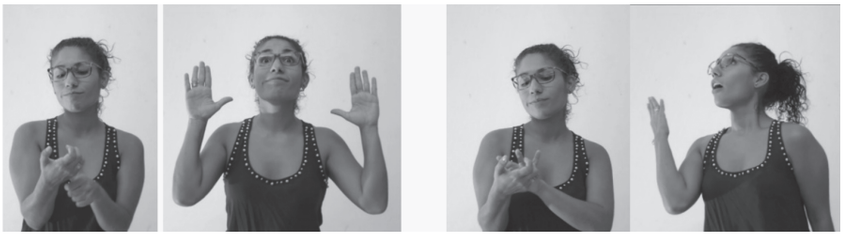

FIGURE 50.16 The woman using her phone shown alternately with the phone reacting (Haswell 2019, *Celular 'Tinder'* by Anna Luiza Maciel 2018: [0:12–0:14], [0:17–0:18])

In deliberately humorous signing, manipulating signs makes the audience smile at the wit behind the novel sign creation. Since Klima & Bellugi's (1979) pioneering work on American Sign Language humor, the importance of playing with the internal parameters of signs has been well recognized. Signers can alter the handshape of a sign to humorously intensify (or reduce) the expressivity. Sutton-Spence & Napoli (2009) give examples in ASL and BSL. Boldo & Sutton-Spence (2020) describe others in Libras. The conventional sign INTERESTING in Libras uses the index finger. Humorously substituting the little finger creates a sign meaning "only a little bit interesting" and substituting all four fingers creates "very interesting indeed". The handshape in the conventional sign PATIENCE in Libras uses two fingers. Humorously asking someone to be very patient can be done by doubling the number of fingers to four, as seen in Figure 50.17.

FIGURE **50.17** Doubling number of fingers for exaggeration in Libras (Boldo & Sutton-Spence 2020: 425)

Expressive signs articulated in one location can be moved to another location in signing space for humorous effect, often with intensification of movement dynamics for exaggeration. When this is blended with changes in handshape, it can be even more expressive. The deaf Brazilian poet and academic Cláudio Mourão (2016) described the great goosebumps he experienced the first time he saw sign language poetry. In a Libras sign meaning EMOTION, the fingers of one hand run along the forearm as though the hairs on the arm are standing on end. This sign can also mean grass growing. Mourão plays with the pun, by relocating the sign TREE (normally located in neutral space) repeatedly up his arm, indicating his arm hairs weren't so much mere blades of grass as whole trees of emotion.

Exaggeration in constructed action can also be used to intensify, particularly for humorous effect. Exaggerated facial expression and size of movement increase the depictive strength of the visual image and thus reveal the signer's view of the utterance as something to be treated humorously. Removing the exaggeration alters the expressivity but not the content. Exaggeration is also seen in the choice of creative signs for intensity (see Stange-Hundsdörfer 2025b: Chapter 28 of this volume). For example, the standard sign SURPRISED in BSL has a more informal intense form based on constructed action that shows a jaw dropping in astonishment. Playfully, to intensify further the astonishment, a signer can use a hand to close the jaw, implying that the surprise is so great that the jaw can't close itself. However, one of the authors witnessed in casual conversation a BSL signer show the jaw drop to the ground before signing wheeling in a crane to winch the jaw back into place. In each example, the fundamental semantic content of 'great surprise' remains, but the expressivity shows the speaker's attitude and does so in a highly visual way. These hyperbolic examples of exchanging a conventionalized sign for a more visual expressive creative sign are widespread, and there are many other comparable examples of this substitution of a sign to express intensity that use taboo signs (for ASL see Mirus, Fisher, & Napoli 2012, for DGS [German Sign Language] see Loos, Cramer, & Napoli 2020).

50.5 Conclusion

Our brief review of expressivity in sign languages has been limited principally to the few sign languages with which we are most familiar, but it highlights examples of types of expressivity that we are confident will be found in others. The fact that research on sign languages in Europe, North and South America, and Asia shows that these types of expressivity occur is evidence for their widespread occurrence. The indisputable status of sign languages as full human languages is reinforced rather than undermined by discussion of their relationship to gestures within the context of expressivity. In the blurt-interjections (taboo or otherwise), and other reduced-content expressions such as backchannels within the discourse of fluent signers presented here, we see the same repertoire of functions as have been described for speech. The visual modality of sign languages, however, comes to the fore especially in creative and artistic sign language and in humor. Thus, we have shown that the term *expressive sign language* is not a pleonasm.

Acknowledgments

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