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Showing Where You Stand

The Depictive Potential of the Lexical Sign LS in LSFB Conversations about Language

Attitudes

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Enactment is a frequent depictive strategy used to denote referents. Its referential functions are increasingly well-documented cross-linguistically, notably in sign languages. Another, less-known function of enactment is that of stance expression. By enacting a referent, language users can also convey their own perspective and comment on the enacted individual. In this article, it is argued that the depictive manipulation of the French Belgian Sign Language (LSFB) lexical sign LS, which refers to the action of signing, is a fruitful area of investigation for the study of social meanings conveyed by means of enactment. The observation of elicited dyadic conversations about language attitudes shows that LSFB signers can mold several formational aspects of the sign LS in a variety of ways by means of enactment, providing a near first-hand experience of – and commenting on – diverse signers and their signing styles.

Keywords: iconicity; enactment; stance; sign language; sociolinguistics

1. Introducing enactment

When asked by a moderator to have a conversation about their reactions to different signing styles, LSFB (French Belgian Sign Language or *Langue des Signes de Belgique francophone*)

signers who participated in the LSFb Corpus project (Meurant 2015), mentioned several criteria influencing their attitudes, such as speed, size of signing space, or (facial) expressivity. While discussing these attributes, they not only used the LSFb lexical signs, such as the signs glossed in the LSFb Corpus as FAST or CLUMSY, they also often made these characteristics directly perceivable.¹ Let us compare the two tokens of the sign glossed LS (which can here be translated as the English verb ‘to sign’, i.e., ‘to do languaging, to communicate using a signed language’) in utterance (1):

(1)



Figure 1. LSFb Corpus, Signer 097, Task 5 (02:18 - 02:29): There are some deaf people I look at and go ‘wow!’ [...] Other deaf people I look at [...] sign clumsily.

¹The glosses used in this chapter are designed to identify signs produced by the signers with their hands. These glosses are based on French (and are here translated in English) but are not necessarily translation equivalents of the LSFb signs that are shown. Translations in English are provided in the captions.

In (1), the LSF signer contrasts two styles of signing. The first is positively evaluated and the signer constructs themselves reacting with WOW upon witnessing it. The second part of the utterance predicates clumsiness (CLUMSY) to the second signing style. Focusing on the tokens of LS, the form of its two occurrences is what enables to understand which signing styles are being compared. By shaping the same lexical item in different ways, the signer provides a visual picture of two signing styles. These visible portrayals of the two signing styles instantiate the use of a method of communication that has been increasingly studied by linguists and gesture. This method, depiction, is described by Dingemanse (2015):

[Acts of depiction are] typically iconic, representing what they stand for in terms of structural resemblances between form and meaning. They use material gradiently so that certain changes in form imply analogical differences in meaning. [...] To interpret depictions, we imagine what it is like to see the thing depicted. (Dingemanse 2015, 950)²

Recent research on language use across diverse communities has shown that alongside conventional meaning making (labeled *description* in recent Neo-Peircean approaches, see Clark 2016; Ferrara and Hodge 2018), depiction is a crucial method of signers' and speakers' semiotic repertoires. Different depictive strategies used by language users have been documented. One such 'sub-kind' of depiction has been coined *enactment* or *constructed action*, among other labels. When enacting a referent, signers use "one or more bodily articulators (including the head, face, eye gaze, arms, and torso) [...] to represent the utterances,

² By extension, this also applies to other senses such as touch or sound.

thoughts, feelings and/or actions of one or more referents” (Cormier, Smith, and Sevcikova-Sehr 2015, 1). While depiction is not only used to enact referents in signed discourse, enactment and depiction are used interchangeably in the remainder of this chapter because other depictive strategies are not discussed here. In the segment of (1) under which the glosses THERE-IS, APPEAR and WOW are featured, the signer discusses their sense of pleasant surprise when faced with what they consider proficient signing.

The signer’s use of enactment largely contributes to their communicative intent. Here, the signer shows themselves feeling surprised by adopting a different facial expression and averting their gaze from the addressee as though they were looking at the signer whose signing style they admire. Finally, the signer also enacts their utterance or thought when faced with signing of this kind: ‘WOW’. Utterance reporting of this kind, often labeled *constructed dialogue* (Tannen 1986; Metzger 1995), has been analysed as a sub-kind of enactment. Indeed, the reported utterance can be seen as depicted or (re-)enacted by the reporting utterer (Clark and Gerrig 1990; Hodge and Cormier 2019).

2. On the functions of enactment: looking beyond reference

The functions of enactment are diverse. A frequently mentioned one is its use as a referential strategy conveying key meaning aspects in signed language discourse, sometimes single-handedly (Quinto-Pozos 2007; Hodge and Johnston 2014; Jantunen 2017; Slonimska, Özyürek, and Capirci 2021). But studying depiction as a method of communication also raises questions about other functions fulfilled by the strategy in parallel to the referential ones. Hodge and Ferrara (2022, 15) argue: “[W]hat is the social role of iconicity, and what power does it afford? As with all other aspects of language and communication, it is necessary to consider the broader socio-functional dimensions of iconicity in addition to the semantico-referential ones”. Because

the enacted referent's internal viewpoint plays a central role in this specific kind of depiction (McNeill 1992; Janzen 2004, 2019; Dancygier and Vandelanotte 2017), the near direct experience of seeing, touching or hearing referents can be seen as a powerful device relying on embodied simulation (Tannen 2007; Hodge and Ferrara 2014; Mesch, Raanes, and Ferrara 2015). This experiential potential is one reason why enactment is used to generate engrossment, notably in storytelling. These elements feed into a function sometimes fulfilled by enactment that also bears important interactional relevance, that of stance-taking. Du Bois (2007, 163) attempts a definition aimed at gathering key features of the phenomenon to operationalise *stance*: "Stance is a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field". In (1), the signer, though shown alone in the figure, is sitting opposite a conversational partner. The signer takes a stance by evaluating different signing styles and displaying this evaluation to their conversational partner. The expressed stance is influenced by and contributes to discourse in the LSFb community. The stance objects here are the two enacted individuals and their signing styles. Therefore, the stance that is taken is directly connected to the corpus participants' language attitudes and the sociolinguistics of the LSFb community.

3. Stancetaking and enactment

How is stance expressed? One first answer can be found in the opening line of Du Bois (2007, 139): "One of the most important things we do with words is take a stance". Several works have described how conventional form-meaning pairings can be used to communicate stance (see Gray and Biber 2014, for an overview of work using corpus methods to approach these

phenomena). Utterance (1) also exhibits lexical items that are used by the signer to express stance. The first signing style is described with the LSFBS lexical sign ‘WOW’ (a descriptive item used within an instance of constructed dialogue, here) whereas the second one is described with the lexical sign ‘CLUMSY’. However, in addition to the use of lexis and/or morphosyntactic structures for the expression of stance, an important body of work has addressed how multimodality is relevant to the phenomenon (e.g., Goodwin 2007; Janzen 2022). Looking at multimodal displays of stance, researchers have shed light on how spoken and sign language users resort to prosody (Brown and Prieto 2021) and several strategies such as gestural mimicry (Shaw 2019), head nods (e.g., Stivers 2008), head tilts and shoulder shrugs (e.g., Debras and Cienki 2012; Jehoul, Brône, and Feyaerts 2017), or manual actions such as palm-up and pointing actions (e.g., Ferrara 2020; Lepeut and Shaw 2022), among others. Coming back to (1), in addition to the lexical items WOW and CLUMSY, the LSFBS signer uses visible depiction to tailor the form of the lexical sign LS. These portrayals not only denote the different styles as taking different amounts of space, exhibiting slightly different movements, and being performed at different speeds, but they also come as comments on behalf of the signer: the first token of LS (the one followed by WOW) paints a positive picture of the enacted signer and their signing style as confident, effortless, and fluid. With the second token of LS, in contrast, the signer shows the activity of signing as more challenging for the enacted referent.

Stancetaking plays a key role in the meaning expressed in utterance (1). In this article, I aim to show that the lexical sign LS can be molded by LSFBS signers to enact different signers and their diverse signing styles. I draw on several works that have shown how enactment can sometimes be used by language users to express stance. More specifically, research that has shown how enactment is used to portray social groups is addressed, ultimately focusing on the performance of linguistic othering by means of depiction, whereby social identities are constructed and imitated based on linguistic and stylistic differences. I then proceed to

emphasise the relevance of LS and its variation in the discourse of LSFBS signers for research on the semiotic diversity of stancetaking. The depictive potential of LS in LSFBS (and of possibly similar forms in other signed languages), it is argued, constitutes a fruitful avenue for stance research that still needs to be described. Taking a first step in this direction, I provide several examples drawn from the LSFBS Corpus in which signers manipulate the form of LS to enact and take a stance on diverse signers and their signing styles. While stance is pervasive in several aspects of signed discourse, this discussion will only briefly address descriptive methods of stance expression and rather focus on the less described use of enactment.

3.1. Enacting and evaluating individual utterances

How can one use enactment to express stance? Because the delivery of enactment entails a creation or construction process by the enacting language user (Tannen 1986), enactment can be seen as a selective depiction (Clark and Gerrig 1990), a form of “metonymy [... that reduces] a whole [i.e., the enacted referent] to some of its parts” (Hall, Goldstein, and Ingram 2016, 81). In Palfreyman’s (2020, 99) words, this process leaves room for “variation in their construction”, whereby language users choose to portray a referent in a specific way, thereby providing addressees with a glimpse of their stance. A rich body of literature has addressed how enactment can express stance and prompt involvement as well as invite to evaluate the enacted referent’s actions or attitudes (Tannen 2007). This is because the enacting language user’s perspective is also conveyed in tokens of enactment. One particularly well-documented locus of stance-taking by means of enactment is constructed dialogue, i.e., when language users enact referents producing utterances.

In addition to providing evidential meaning for the enacted utterance (Shaffer 2016), constructed dialogue also fulfills other functions, such as positioning and evaluating. There are

many examples of constructed dialogue being used to express stance, ranging from political discourse (e.g., Kuo 2001) to interactions between friends, course mates and relatives (e.g., Günthner 1999; Holt 2000; Mohammad and Vásquez 2015). How do language users express their perspective on the referents they construct? Günthner (2007) provides an example where a student explains her experience during an interview for a scholarship. On reporting an interviewer's utterances, the participant uses a direct report but also modulates her voice to make the reported speaker sound "exaggerated, inappropriate, and arrogant" (Günthner 2007, 423). Günthner's (2007, 423) analysis is that the reporting speaker's stance is thereby made apparent: "[S]everal voices are superimposed on one utterance: The reported speech of the character blends with the narrator's negative evaluation." In addition to enacting the quoted referent's voice, another option is that of enacting their visible bodily action. Debras (2015) shows how British English speakers can use constructed action and dialogue to express (dis)affiliation with stances in discourse, notably those attributed to individuals absent from the conversational setting. Whereas affiliation can be expressed by not altering one's gesturing style while doing constructed dialogue, Debras proposes that using enacting gestures characterised by a higher amplitude and speed may trigger a disaffiliating reading of the reported utterance by means of caricature. A well-known example of such a use of enactment in the public sphere is that of former U.S. President Donald Trump's caricatures aimed at mocking and casting discredit over political opponents and critics (Hall, Goldstein, and Ingram 2016). Hence, selective depictions can rely on language users' local choices and characteristics specific to the enacted individual, using *distorted imitation* (D'Errico and Poggi 2016). However, enactment forms are often also grounded in a community's social field and the representations of social identities that inhabit it.

3.2. Enacting and evaluating social types

Indeed, the form of enactment can also be driven by the choice to portray the enacted referent as belonging to a social group emphasizing features typically associated with this group. Recent developments in sociolinguistics shed light on these practices. Eckert (2012) identifies three phases of sociolinguistics: early research in the field mainly concentrated on the links between linguistic and social variation, looking at how linguistic variables correlate with macro-social categories such as age, sex, or region of origin. These studies first established that variables of language use can pattern in systematic ways with the social structure of a linguistic community. Over time, the use of ethnographic methods led to a recognition of more local factors of language variation, such as identity construction in relation to dynamics of group membership. Finally, in third wave sociolinguistics, language users are seen as active social agents who exploit an array of resources (stylistic practice) within dynamic social spaces to create social meaning and position themselves in such spaces. In this recent approach, variation is seen as the action by which “speakers place themselves in the social landscape through stylistic practice” (Eckert 2012, 193-194). If enacted referents can be constructed relying on forms associated with specific forms contextually associated with social groups, how do features become associated with (sub-)communities in the first place? Eckert (2012, 94; see also Agha’s 2005 concept of *enregisterment*) proposes the following: “At some initial stage, a population may become salient, and a distinguishing feature of that population’s speech may attract attention. Once recognized, that feature can be extracted from its linguistic surroundings and come, on its own, to index membership in that population.” Palfreyman (2020, 90) stresses two research goals related to language variation on the agenda of third wave sociolinguists: “Two questions are central to this enquiry: which forms or features are used to construct or express identities, and what kind of social meanings can these create?”. One such form, as Palfreyman

shows, is that of enactment. Since this strategy is used to depict referents, exploring the use of stylistic variation in their portrayals contributes to understanding how and why social identities manifest in discourse, notably using enactment (see also Hodge and Ferrara 2022).

What are the social meanings transmitted by means of enactment? According to Günthner, language users use constructed dialogue, i.e., the enactment of language events “to contextualize social types and do identity work”, and, in some cases, they may “construct their own identities by [...] positioning themselves in opposition to characters animated in their narratives” (Günthner 2007, 419). Among those characters, Günthner exemplifies “social types or [...] representatives of social groups, such as ‘foreigners’, ‘innocent children’, ‘snobs’, ‘machos’, etc.” (Günthner 2007, 419). Eckert (2012) proposes that features associated with specific communities are exploited to perform this identity work. Once recognised as marking a group identity, a feature “can then be called up in ideological moves [...], invoking ways of belonging to, or characteristics or stances associated with, that population [and] can be used by outsiders to call up stereotypes associated with the population” (Eckert 2012, 94). As an example of how enregistered social types or *personae* and associated forms can be exploited using constructed dialogue, Agha discusses novels: “accent is used to portray fictional characters; here social types are formulated through contrastive depictions of accent in reported speech frames, often with little or no independent description of personality characteristics” (Agha 2005, 52). In real-life interactions too, representations of social roles can be exploited in enactment. Fine’s (2019) study on constructed dialogue shows that Kodiak Alutiiq speakers use several acoustic parameters to ascribe social roles (e.g., young woman) and an interactional stance or attitude (e.g., inquisitive) to constructed speakers. Hence, more than simply enacting individuals, language users can use enactment in a way that invokes *personae* based on social roles, attitudes or a combination of both. For instance, Fine (2019, 11) notes that a similar bundle of prosodic features – “an increase in average F0, an increase in F0 range, rising-falling

intonation, and modal voice” – are used across speakers to enact “young women expressing epistemically weak stances [e.g., uncertainty].” It is striking that many works on the social meanings of enactment focus on constructed dialogue, the enactment of language events. As supported by sociolinguistic research on how language users navigate interaction by articulating their identities around languaging practices, part of the explanation lies in the tight connection between language and identity construction.

One specific identity marker used in enactment that this chapter aims at exploring is precisely that of linguistic identity. Fine’s (2019) study shows that constructed dialogue may exhibit language hybridity whereby different linguistic varieties, such as languages or accents, can merge in the enactment of a language event. For instance, in Altutiiq Kodiak classes, a teacher makes use of *American Valley girl* accent for comical effect. Such a use of constructed dialogue to depict linguistic otherness has been the object of several studies and points to the importance of language as performing identity work (e.g., Johnstone 2011; Zuckerman 2021).

In signed languages too, constructed dialogue is used to enact different languaging styles and express stance, in the form of language attitudes. Fischer and Kollien (2016) show that in DGS (German Sign Language), deaf signers’ depictive portrayals of hearing people interacting in DGS can sometimes be used to pejorative ends (constructed dialogue depicting deaf individuals speaking is also discussed in the paper), in particular when these tokens of constructed dialogue feature code-switching or hybridity: “instances of CDs [constructed dialogue] manifesting code-switching have as their primary function to show one feature or another of the process of articulating speech” or more broadly communication construed as that of hearing people who do not sign (proficiently) (Fischer and Kollien 2016, 336). For instance, DGS signers enact referents using gesture (“gestural CD”), using both speech and signed German (“explicitly spoken CD plus signed German”), or mouth actions that caricature speech (“condensed CD for spoken language/mouth-gesture”) (Fischer and Kollien 2016, 338).

Informed by linguistic ethnography, Palfreyman (2020) takes an inductive approach to the use of constructed dialogue by BISINDO (Indonesian Sign Language) signers in conversations. Palfreyman argues that constructed dialogue enables BISINDO signers to express social identities, notably by selecting lexical or grammatical variants for specific enacted referents. For instance, the hearing status of a constructed referent in constructed dialogue may impact which of two grammatical variants (TIDAK or TIDAK-BISA) is used to negate a predicate. Hearing referents are more likely to be enacted as using TIDAK, which has gestural origins, whereas deaf referents are more likely to be enacted using TIDAK-BISA, which has language-internal origins (a BISINDO lexical sign). According to Palfreyman, the different origins of these two signs may be exploited to construct social roles related to the hearing status of enacted referents: TIDAK “is more ‘hearing’ because of its gestural associations”. By opposition, TIDAK-BISA is “‘more ‘deaf’” (Palfreyman 2020, 104). While remaining cautious as to whether these patterns can be generalised, Palfreyman (2020, 106) suggests that “the differentiated deaf and hearing roles [...] could tentatively be regarded as personae: ‘the young deaf signer’ and ‘the hearing gesturer’”. Another potential persona that Palfreyman (2020, 106) identifies is that of “‘the oral deaf person’ – using mouthings”.

While keeping Palfreyman’s caution in mind, studies on sign language ideologies may provide support for the existence of these categories in the social fields and discourses of deaf communities. Kusters et al. (2020, 15) discuss attitudes towards variation in these communities and note the following:

[T]here is often a spectrum of signing practices, and signing that appears to be based on a spoken language is often both denigrated and considered better by diverse interlocutors. In some cases, resistance to such practices [is] about a symbolic disavowal of the

power-laden influences of a dominant language, taking the form of language policing and language purism. However, we wonder whether more general resistance to spoken-language-based signing (or signing that appears to reference spoken languages) may be because *it is (or can be) difficult to understand for many signers*. In other words, what may be expressed as dislike of a kind of signing used by other deaf people because of its perceived origins in speech may instead or also be a profound discomfort with seeing (or touching) a modality that is “accessible” but a grammatical structure that is not. (Kusters et al. 2020, 15)

All above-mentioned works have painted a picture of enactment as a powerful tool in interaction. Variability in the depictive, stylistic choices made by language users makes the phenomenon a relevant area of exploration for researchers interested in the communication of social meanings. In addition to denoting referents, their attitudes, actions and utterances, enactment works as a tool that enables language users to mold these referents in socially meaningful ways. The ultimate forms used to enact result from the language user’s stance and, at least sometimes, from their reliance on stereotypical representations of social roles. As we have seen, one example is the use of enactment to engage in linguistic othering by identifying referents as different because of the ways they speak or sign. In the remainder of this paper, I attempt to discuss a similar phenomenon in LSF, more specifically instances where LSF signers use enactment to talk about other people’s signing without necessarily enacting the content of the utterances themselves.

4. Signing about signing in the LSFb Corpus: using enactment to express language attitudes

In (1), the two tokens of the lexical sign LS looked different. This is most striking in the space that separates the signer's arms and hands. In the first token, the signer's hands and arms are far apart, showing that the person they are talking about is using a large signing space. This differs from the second token of LS where the signer's arms are closer to their body and their hands are much closer to one another. The difference between the two tokens can be explained as follows: in addition to the conventional, descriptive meaning of LS referring to the action of signing common to both instances, the signer also manipulates the form of LS to contrast two different signing styles by means of enactment.

4.1. Depicting with iconic lexical signs: the case of LS

The joint use of different methods of signaling like in LS has been well-documented in the sign language literature (Cormier et al. 2012; Dudis 2011; Fuks 2014)). Ferrara and Halvorsen (2017) discuss several uses of lexical iconic signs in NTS (Norwegian Sign Language) such as SWIM or SLEEP, noting that these signs look like depictions of the actions they denote. Therefore, they propose, tokens of these signs “will always provide the potential to be elaborated into a depiction” (Ferrara and Halvorsen 2017, 383). In the case of signs like SWIM or SLEEP, the depiction denotes an action on a real-life scale using the signer's body as a vantage point. Therefore, the kind of the depiction involved here classifies as enactment. When these signs are manipulated to depictive ends, different tokens can be interpreted as exhibiting enactment to different degrees. Several factors may drive a depictive interpretation. First, signers may use an iconic sign while simultaneously enacting a referent's behaviour with their gaze, facial

expression, head, and torso: “non-manual actions may [...] prompt an interlocutor to interpret the hands (i.e., the sign) as part of the ongoing enactment” (Ferrara and Halvorsen 2017, 383). Second, aspects of the manual action itself may induce a depictive interpretation. For instance, a token of an iconic sign with a stronger depictive profile may last longer than one with a more descriptive interpretation (Ferrara and Halvorsen 2017). Finally, some visible properties of an iconic sign may also be altered to enact manual actions. For instance, Fuks (2014, 221) shows how Israeli Sign Language (ISL) “signers [...] apply] gradient modifications to the formational structure of handshapes, to represent changes in size or shape in a set of scenarios.” To talk about a scenario in which individuals tried drinking with different numbers of straws, participants in Fuks’ study manipulated handling forms. For instance, they resorted to different degrees of aperture, i.e., the “distance between thumb tip and the fingertips” (Fuks 2014, 212) according to the number of straws: the more straws, the greater the aperture.

Like the SWIM and SLEEP in NTS, the LSFB sign LS in (1) is also iconic: it is a manual sign that refers to signing, a languaging activity in which the hands play a prominent role. It is also bimanual, which also corresponds to the overwhelming use of both hands for signing in contexts where both hands are free to move. The sign also involves movement, like the activity of signing. Like for the signs discussed in Ferrara and Halvorsen (2017), different tokens of LS can also exhibit variation in form that is associated with the ways of signing that are discussed.³ Hence, the LSFB sign LS constitutes another example of how tokens of a lexical sign can receive varying degrees of descriptive and depictive interpretation. This variability is striking in examples like (1) where several tokens of the sign are sequentially uttered so as to exploit differences in their respective forms and depict contrasts in signing styles. Like for the uses of constructed action and dialogue discussed in the first part of this paper, it seems that the

³ This is reminiscent of Fischer and Kollien’s (2016, 339) observation that, to enact a wolf signing, “[t]he narrator [modifies...] the 5-hand form of the GSL lexeme “SIGN” with paw-like bending of the fingers”.

enactment potential of the LSFb iconic sign LS can be used to express social meaning and take a stance. Therefore, a better understanding of its variation is relevant to questions recently asked in sociolinguistics.

My primary goal is to contribute to answering Palfreyman's first question, which asks what forms or features of variation are exploited to create social meaning, such as identity construction. I aim at doing this by drawing attention to enacting uses of LS and emphasizing their relevance for sociolinguistic research. What I do not intend to do is provide a comprehensive answer to the second question Palfreyman formulates, which asks what kinds of social meanings are created when language users use these forms.

As a hearing linguist having been socialised within the LSFb community since birth but having only developed a strong command of LSFb in young adulthood, this would require a deeper experience of the community and its discourses as well as a specific methodological expertise. The potential avenues for future research, which may hopefully build on the observations presented in this article, are laid out further in the discussion section. Before delving into a more detailed observation of how depictive properties of LS are exploited by LSFb signers in task 5, a word on what is meant by LS is in order.

4.2. LS in the LSFb in the data: tokens of the same type?

So far, the illustrations in my discussion have been limited to utterance (1). One could ask to what extent the variation in the tokens I observe may simply be due to these instances being tokens of different types, i.e., different lexical items or constructions. All instances of LS in the observed data were either annotated and glossed as LS on annotated ELAN files by annotators working on the LSFb Corpus or identified by the author in videos that had not been annotated yet. It remains an open question to what extent the different instances that I subsume as tokens

of the LS type really are manifestations of the same representation in the LSFb community. Indeed, because of its qualitative nature, the present analysis does not enable to establish whether observed differences in the tokens of LS are all driven by the choice to depict or whether some degree of conventionalisation may be observed. Nevertheless, this second hypothesis is supported by the LSFb Corpus lexicon.⁴ The sign glossed LS (see Figure 2 for its form in the LSFb Corpus lexicon entry) is a very frequent one in the part of the LSFb Corpus that has been annotated so far (4,982 tokens in 27 hours 05 minutes of annotated video interactions).



Figure 2. LS in the LSFb Corpus Lexicon (to sign)

In addition to the LS gloss, other lexical entries denoting the act of signing feature forms that look similar to LS. They are illustrated here based on the different French meanings they were associated with in the lexicon:

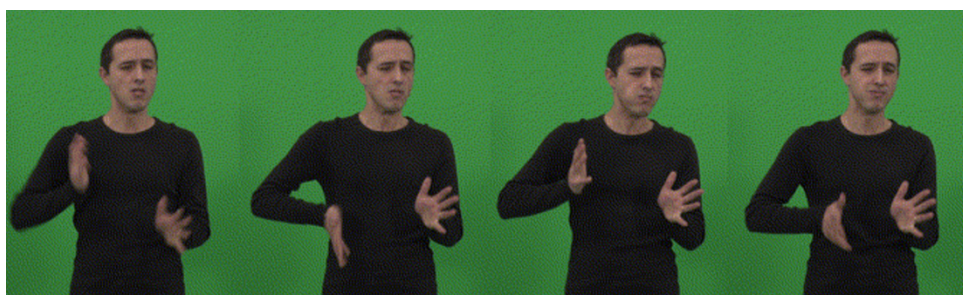


Figure 3. LS.PUISSANCE in the LSFb corpus lexicon (to sign fastly, to chat)

⁴ <https://www.corpus-lsfb.be/lexique.php>



Figure 4. LS.PAS in the LSFb Corpus Lexicon (to sign clumsily, badly)



Figure 5. FRANÇAIS.LS-ORAL in the LSFb Corpus Lexicon ([to communicate using] signed French)

As noticeable in Figures 2 to 5, the forms of LS, LS.PUISSANCE, LS.PAS, and FRANÇAIS.LS-ORAL overlap partly. What formational characteristics do these four forms have in common? All are two-handed signs in which the hands are held open and involve the extension of all five fingers, which can be characterised as spread (i.e., held apart from each other). Without going into a comprehensive phonological description of these signs, one can also underline some differences between LS and the other citation forms listed in the LSFb Corpus lexicon. One difference lies in the path of the movements executed by the hands and arms. Movement in LS and LS.PUISSANCE mostly involves a rotation of the forearms whereas FRANÇAIS.LS-ORAL combines an extension of the hands away from the signer's body together with a back-and-forth vertical movement of the upper arms. Another difference has to do with the non-manual component of

the signs: whereas no specific non-manual is used in LS, specific facial actions seem to be featured in the other forms of the corpus lexicon: squinted eyes and puffed cheek for LS.PUISSANCE, protruded tongue for LS.PAS, and mouth actions for FRANÇAIS.LS-ORAL. The listing of these signs in the corpus lexicon indicates that the corpus annotators felt that the variation between them exhibits a high enough degree of entrenchment with respect to other, potentially depictive, variations. One potential account for this phenomenon is proposed by Lepic and Occhino (2018, 155): “Language users may also gradually stop categorizing frequently-used variants of “the same sign” as instances of the same sign. [...] This divergence in usage patterns can result in the gradual formation of a new set of exemplars and a corresponding constructional schema that may overlap only partially with the original schema.” Future corpus analyses may further inform the entrenchment status of these forms by checking how systematic some variants are by looking at frequency measures. If attested, the different signs, though felt to express different (yet overlapping) meanings can be thought of as part of the same constructional family. The potential link connecting these signs is again explained by Lepic and Occhino (2018):

While individual sign constructions [...] can be thought of as highly specified morphological schemas, representing quite fixed pairings of form and meaning, sign schemas can in turn be analyzed as instantiations of more abstract morphological schemas, which exhibit only partially-fixed structure. Such morphological schemas are referred to descriptively as sign families in the literature on sign language morphology [...]: sign families are groups of signs with recurring aspects of form and meaning shared among them. (Lepic and Occhino 2018, 155)

Hence, the similarities in the form-meaning pairing of the different lexical entries presented above points to a common constructional core, thereby hinting at a potential ‘LS’ family. While this issue awaits further quantitative investigation, it can be stressed that this does not make the different members of the LS family any less relevant to the discussion of language attitudes in LSFb. The high entrenchment of these forms can be seen as a reflection of their high frequency in discourse (Bybee 2010; Lepic, 2019), indicating that the meanings they denote bear special importance in the discourse of LSFb signers. Therefore, these entrenched forms can inform our understanding of what signing styles are most frequently being talked about in LSFb. However, my following discussion revolves around the use of depiction, enactment more specifically, and of the LS construction family rather than one specific LS construction (partly due to the impossibility to distinguish them with certainty, at this stage). It is likely that these entrenched signs result from forms motivated at least partly by enactment that have become frequently used. This is a common assumption for this kind of iconic lexical signs, i.e., that they “appear to be formed from abstracted demonstrations of actions and referents” (Ferrara and Halvorsen 2017, 380). As all of these signs can be described as iconic, this also means that tokens of these different constructions can potentially exhibit both descriptive and depictive properties in context, making their interpretation both holistic and analysable in terms of internal structure (Cormier et al. 2012; Lepic and Occhino 2018; Lepic 2019). In light of the preceding discussion, I will refer to different tokens of the LS construction family simply as tokens of LS. Our focus now shifts to how deaf signers use enactment in tokens of LS in the LSFb Corpus. These tokens, it will be shown, illustrate well how enactment can be used to express stance on signing style diversity.

4.3. Enacting and evaluating diverse signers with LS

(2)



Figure 6. LSFBS Corpus, Signer 059, Task 05 (00:45 - 00:50): Their signing is a bit bad because they sign clumsily. I don't say anything because they'll improve with time.

Figure 6 shows utterance (2) in which the signer refers to a child who has not been exposed to LSFBS early on. The signer uses LS to refer to the child's signing style. The first occurrence of LS looks like the first example drawn from the LSFBS Corpus lexicon (LS), without any salient depictive intent. This token is followed by a second one, slightly different in several aspects: less movement is involved, referring to the child's lesser dexterity as well as their use of a smaller signing space on the vertical plane. Another difference lies in the handshape that is used: the signer's fingers are more bent than they are in the first occurrence.

In addition to these sign-internal manipulations, a depictive interpretation of this token is also supported by the signer's action of leaning forward to adopt the child's posture as well as the enactment of the child's facial expression, i.e., opening their mouth, to convey the

referent's disconcerted attitude. The second token of LS here follows the conjunction BECAUSE. Disregarding the depictive properties exhibited by LS (together with the non-manuals) strips the utterance of its meaning: enactment is precisely the way that the signer justifies and illustrates their using the sign CLUMSY to refer to the child's signing. As (2) shows, enactment can thus be a crucial meaning component in an utterance.

(3)

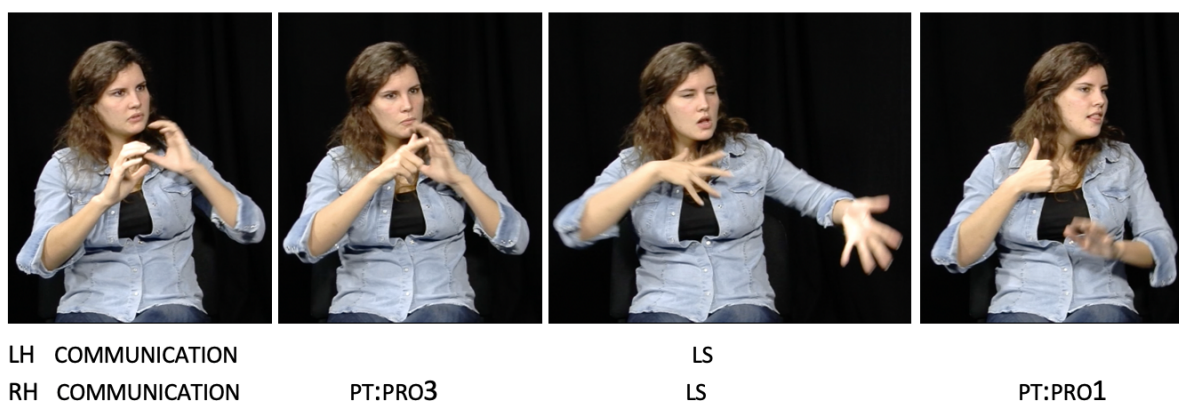


Figure 7. LSFb Corpus, Signer 028, Task 05 (01:49 - 01:51): I don't really like when people who show off by signing theatrically in everyday communication.

In (3) in Figure 7, the signer discusses signers who sign very vividly and in a way that the signer compares to song-signing in the co-text. Here too, the token resembles the first Corpus lexicon example (LS) but is strikingly different in some ways: the sign can be characterised by a larger movement amplitude that exceeds the neutral signing space. In addition, this token of LS is performed slowly with respect to surrounding lexical items. Here too, a depictive analysis of these aspects is supported by the signer's nonmanual articulators such as posture and facial expression. Eye closure and the signer's open mouth can be interpreted as imitating someone delivering a theatrical performance. In addition, the lengthiness of the token also contributes to

an interpretation of enactment. Like in (2), the meaning of (3) only emerges thanks to the enacting properties of LS.

(4)



Figure 8. LSFb Corpus, Signer 076, Task 05 (02:55 - 02:59): Some look like they're deaf when they sign. I look at their signing and think: 'That's good signing! That's clear!'. Others sign in a very small space and in a boring manner.

Figure 8 exemplifies yet another use of enactment with LS in utterance (4). Here, the signer contrasts two signing styles that they attribute to hearing sign language interpreters. One major difference between the two tokens of LS has to do with handshape: the first token is performed with extended fingers whereas the signer's fingers are bent in the second one. With respect to the first token, the second one also takes up a very limited space, involving next to no movement apart from that of the wiggling fingers. Here too, the signing referent is enacted nonmanually: the lowered gaze and relative lack of motion can be interpreted as depicting the denoted

interpreter's lack of vividness and engagement with their audience. Again, depiction is key to the interpretation of (4), as it provides the signer a way to highlight the contrast between the two signing styles that are compared.

(5)

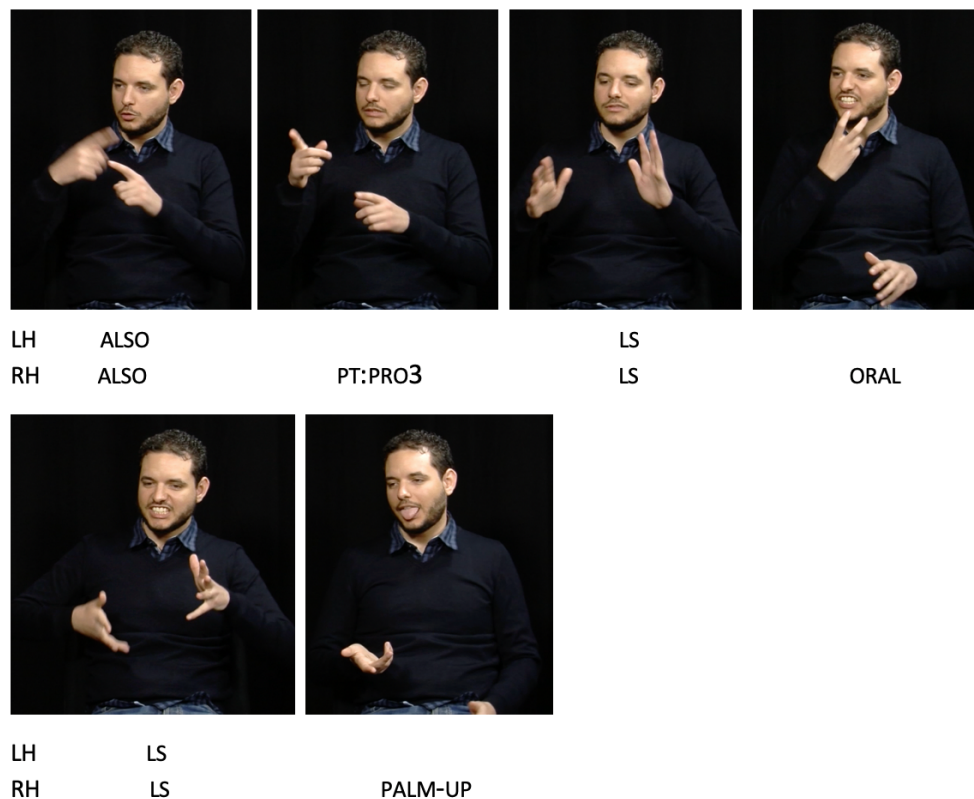


Figure 9. LSFBC Corpus, Signer 052, Task 05 (00:46 – 00:49): Also, it's not very pleasant when people use a lot of (French) mouthings when they sign. They look a bit robotic.

In (5), displayed in Figure 9, the participant discusses signers whose communication style features or resembles spoken language use. Looking at the second token of LS, one may notice that its form is close to that of FRANÇAIS-LS.ORAL. But the mouth actions imitating speech as well as the signer's hand and arm movements also prompt a strong depictive interpretation in this token: unlike in FRANÇAIS-LS.ORAL, the arms do not extend away from the body. Instead,

hand movements follow a more constrained vertical trajectory. In (5), the reference to the lesser fluidity of the discussed signing style is achieved through enactment only, again showing the importance of depictive semiotics for a felicitous interpretation of the utterance.

In all the examples provided so far, signers who participated in the LSFBC Corpus project used depiction, among other methods of communication, to express stance. Enacting other (types of) signers, they evaluated signers and signing styles in a variety of ways. In doing so, they also communicate the extent to which they affiliate with or distance themselves from their stance objects, indexing their positioning. However, one edge of Du Bois' triangle, *alignment*, has been overlooked so far in the discussion. Who could the participants align with? One first answer is what they perceive to be recurrent stances that circulate across members of the community. Another, more directly perceivable, subject is their conversational partner at the time of recording. A detailed description of the interactional mechanisms at play during these conversations is left for further research. However, it is worth pointing out that enactment can be used as a resource to show alignment. Utterance (6) in Figure 10 provides such an example.

(6)

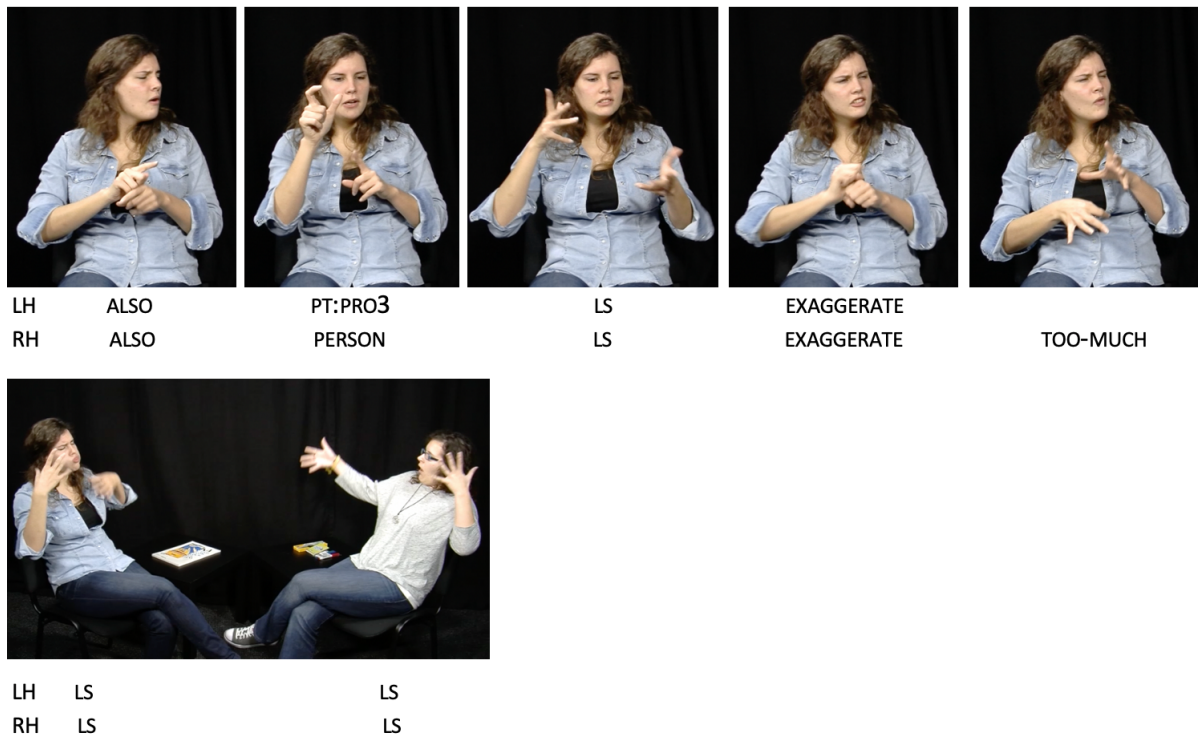


Figure 10. LSF B Corpus, Signer 028 (and 029), Task 05 (01:00 – 01:04): (What I also don't like is when) people exaggerate when they sign.

While a first signer, on the left of the still, starts enacting people who sign in ways that the signer considers as exaggerated (e.g., taking too much space) using wide movements to produce LS together with non-manual enactment, the second signer, seated on the right side of the still, aligns with the expressed stance. This alignment is made explicit when the second signer starts performing a similar looking, overlapping, token of enactment. Such a concurrent assessment, as Holt (2000, 448) proposes, leads to an interactional “sequence that appears highly collaborative and affiliative”. The example in Figure 10 supports the idea that enactment is used not only as a referential device but also as an intersubjective, social-interactional one that may explicitly communicate stance alignment.

5. Discussion

The different utterances discussed so far all have in common that the signers' enacting behaviour (including their hands) provides a key meaning contribution to their interpretation. All of them also express language-related stance. As discussed, one way to do so is by selecting a specific construction of the LS family. It is likely that specific constructions are used to denote signing styles that receive different positive (e.g., LS.PUISSANCE) or negative (e.g., LS.PAS) connotations. In addition, tokens of this family of signs can be productively tailored to the signers' depictive intent and commented upon: In (2), the lexical signs BAD and BETTER are used to describe the child's signing. In both (3) and (5), the token of LS is followed by the use of a protruded tongue by the signers, a nonmanual expression well-known to express negative attitudes (Lewin and Schembri 2011; Palfreyman 2020). Finally, in (4), the signer uses GOOD and CLEAR to comment on a signing style. On top of different LS constructions or the use of lexis to express stance, the tokens of enactment in and of themselves are also indicators of the stances adopted by the signers towards the referents they are enacting. In addition to *describing* signing styles, LSFb signers also enacted specific bodily behaviours to ascribe specific traits or attitudes to enacted referents. In all examples, manual features such as handshape or the amplitude and speed of hand movements are involved in this process. But facial expressions (e.g., opening one's mouth), posture changes (e.g., leaning backwards) and gaze behaviours also contribute to the meanings that emerge from these tokens of enactment. These articulators are used in varied ways to make enacted referents (and their signing styles) look boastful, indifferent, monotonous, confident, clumsy or less experienced.

Whether the enacted profiles in the above examples instantiate personae, in the senses discussed by Fine (2019) and Palfreyman (2020), in the discourse of the LSFb community

remains a question for future research. Previous work has suggested that enactment can be used to create social meanings related to the deaf-hearing status of enacted referents and the use and/or influence of spoken language while signing. This is notably the case in Fischer and Kollien (2016)'s and Palfreyman (2020)'s studies of constructed dialogue. However, several researchers have also stressed that, while the attention to deaf and hearing roles sheds light on some social meanings in deaf signing communities, using this binary variable as the only analytical lens falls short of capturing the diversity of signing communities' ontologies and discourses. More attention is starting to be given to "substantial differences between deaf people from different backgrounds... [including] nationality, ethnicity, class, mobility, educational levels, and of course, language..." (Kusters and Friedner 2015, 10; see also Palfreyman 2020). Focusing on the latter, De Meulder (2018) shows that there is growing variation in the hearing status and language acquisition path of people who sign. The LSFB community is a diverse one marked by a great deal of variation in when members acquire LSFB and/or other signed and spoken languages and the extent to which they use these languages in their daily lives (Ghesquière and Meurant 2018; Leidensdorf 2019). Hence, it would be interesting to investigate whether and how this diversity is represented and evaluated, notably using enactment. Several enacting uses of LS in the examples presented above constitute candidates that dovetail with this sociolinguistic picture: Utterance (2) refers to the signing of a child who is starting to be exposed to LSFB whereas (4) exemplifies the use of LS' depictive properties to portray a hearing sign language interpreter. In (5), the enacted signer is depicted as code-mixing as they use both signing and speech. It is likely that systematic attention to a large dataset would yield an exploitable number of utterances featuring the use of LS. Analysing its forms, which referents and signing styles it is used to depict, could provide insights into the identity work performed via enactment.

What is clear is that the iconic properties of the lexical sign LS are exploited by signers to depict different profiles of signers and comment on their signing styles. Qualitative observation of these tokens suggests that the use of depiction with the lexical item LS constitutes a particularly relevant locus to study the use of enactment to communicate stances related to languaging. Without taking into account the depictive use of LS in the examples, one runs into the trouble of comprehending their meaning and finding the *object of stance* as Du Bois (2007) calls it. The comment that is provided, whether it is only found in the caricatural nature of the enactment, or also in additional overtly produced material, shows how iconicity can be exploited to make social meaning.

As emphasised before, whether these depictions of languaging profiles consist in personae in LSFb discourse is out of this paper's scope. Performing a systematic analysis of LS constructions could help measure frequencies of LS forms and attempt to grasp varying degrees of entrenchment of form-meaning pairings. It could also provide a clearer picture of which aspects are most often depicted in the enactment of different signing styles. In addition, a better understanding of the stances associated with these styles could be obtained by collocation analysis, hence exploring lexical choices in the co-text of LS constructions. One major advantage for such a study is that LS happens to be the most frequent sign in the LSFb Corpus annotations carried out so far, making it an ideal focus of study for future corpus research. However, data collection for corpora such as the LSFb Corpus comes with limitations as they involve a less familiar setting for participants, the recording lab, as well as constraints such as there being only one conversational partner. Such issues mean that corpus approaches are biased in several ways and may not capture the multiplicity and fluidity of discourse on language attitudes as it happens during *in situ* interactions. Therefore, a better understanding of the social meanings of enactment and of the use of LS signs requires more than a detailed semiotic and formal analysis. Recent calls for cross-disciplinary work have been made to advance

sociolinguistic research with deaf communities by combining different approaches such as sign language (corpus) linguistics and linguistic ethnography (Kusters and Hou 2020; Palfreyman 2020; Hodge and Goico 2022; Kusters and Lucas 2022). A deeper appraisal of the contexts in which different social meanings emerge, using tools like participant observation or interviews, is key to avoiding essentialisations and simple answers. For a research phenomenon as deeply rooted in human interaction, cross-disciplinary work where diverse approaches complement each other is needed.

6. Conclusion

While enactment constitutes a polyfunctional device in the repertoire of diverse communities (Hodge and Ferrara 2022), the present work has attempted to describe some of its uses as instances where the phenomenon of stance-taking plays a key role. Studying the use of the lexical sign LS in a sub-section of the LSFBC Corpus eliciting discourse on language attitudes shows that LSFBC signers can skillfully tailor the form of this lexical sign to their depictive intents. These depictions, it is argued, are used by LSFBC signers to express stance. By enacting, LSFBC signers not only showed referents signing but also took a stance on the signing styles they were referring to, thereby indexing their position in the social space of the LSFBC community to their conversational partners. Traditional views of language use focus on arbitrary signaling and have long overlooked the use of depictive meaning-making in discourse.

The examples discussed throughout this paper challenge this view by emphasizing the importance of depictive semiotics. Both the referential (talking about specific signing styles) and social-interactive (commenting on specific signing styles) goals could arguably not have been reached in a similar way or as efficiently without the use of enactment. The implications of this are manifold. On the one hand, looking at the depictive semiotics of LS (the most

frequently annotated item in the LSFb Corpus) shows how crucial the strategy is in LSFb, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive view of language use. On the other hand, this work has aimed at pointing to a new fertile ground for the investigation of the social meanings in LSFb discourse. A promising avenue for future works lies in the use of a multi-faceted analytical lens where systematic, quantitative corpus work is paired with in-depth observation of more natural interaction contexts, enabling researchers to shed light on both broad patterns of language use and on the social-interactional ecologies in which these social meanings emerge.

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