

**Unraveling language-specific features:
The case of Gay Sign Variant (GSV) in Israeli Sign Language**

Unlike hearing adults, deaf signers use their body both to communicate through a conventionalised manual system as well as to interact with the real world. In other words, language, gestures, and action converge in the same channel of expression. Therefore, while both hearing people (i.e., 'gesturers') and deaf people commonly use gestures, the distinction between gestures and language-specific signs is blurred for signers.

Our study explores the motions produced by signers of Gay Sign Variant (GSV), a sign language variety used by gay male signers (Blau, 2015; Rudner, 1981; Kleinfeld & Warner, 1996). We investigate a particular characteristic of GSV, known as distalisation (Blau, 2015) - the production of signs using joints further from the body (e.g., wrist movements rather than movements at the shoulder). In a preliminary study we compared the motions produced by two gay Israeli Sign Language (ISL) users and two straight ISL users. Tracking their motions using Microsoft Kinect motion-tracking technology, we measured joint distalisation in comparable signed sequences. Preliminary findings indicate that signs produced by gay individuals were more distal than signs produced by straight signers.

In our current study we investigate whether distalisation is language-specific or whether it is also observable in the gestures of the wider gay community. We elicit comparable sign/gesture sequences from four groups: deaf gay signers, deaf straight signers, hearing gay gesturers, and hearing straight gesturers. We hypothesise that if the feature is not considered to be language-specific, then the gestures produced by hearing gay gesturers will also differ from hearing straight gesturers similar to our preliminary findings. By drawing on the deaf gay community, as a sign language dialect, we are able to better understand the distinctions between language and gesture.

References:

- Blau, S. (2016). Indexing a Deaf queer identity in the San Francisco Bay Area. Unpublished work.
- Kleinfeld, M.S. & Warner, N. (1996). Lexical variation in the Deaf Community relating to Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual signs. In Livia, A., & Hall, K. (eds.). *Queerly phrased: Language, Gender & Sexuality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 58-84.
- Rudner, W.A. (1981). Signs used in the Deaf Gay Community. *Sign Language Studies*. 30, 36-48.