

Exploring Gender Honorifics in Tanzanian Sign Language: Cultural and Linguistic Perspectives

Ildephonce Mkama

Archbishop Mihayo University College of Tabora

mkamaijmc@yahoo.com

Hyasinta Izumba

St Augustine University of Tanzania

hyacinth.hi63@gmail.com

Abstract

Sign Language is the primary mode of communication among members of the deaf community. Sign language is not only influenced by sex distinctions but also reflects the general concern about language and gender equality. That is, analysing sign language can unveil rich insights on how social identities are constructed and communicated within a deaf community. Sign language, as a tool for the transmission of deaf culture, bears cultural influence in both the formation of signs and their use. However, most sociolinguistic studies have been conducted on spoken languages, rather than sign languages. Studies in Tanzania, for instance, have focused on power and participation, as well as gender-responsive language use among students and teachers, leaving sign language discourse largely unexplored. It is against this backdrop that this study examines the influence of cultural-linguistic attributes on the formation of signs in Tanzanian Sign Language (TSL). The study focuses on the extent to which honorifics are represented in these signs. The study analysed the sign language lexicon to identify signs that denote gender, where 10 signs were identified from the Tanzanian Sign Language Dictionary to represent the male and female genders. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis was adopted as the main analysis tool, complemented with Critical Discourse Analysis to highlight language and gender in their respective contexts of use. Thematic and ethnographic analyses were the main methods employed in the study. The analysis shows that cultural-linguistic attributes have contributed to the formation of gender-based signs. Language attributes, such as dominance and diversity, have underscored the choice and use of such gender-based signs.

Keywords: Honorifics, Sign Language, Gendered Honorifics, Language and gender, Sexist Language

1 Introduction

Language, as a tool for communication in society, is used to convey cultural values, social norms, and identity. Honorifics are important aspects of both spoken and sign language. This is due to their crucial role in shaping interpersonal interactions. Honorifics are categorised as addressee honorifics,

which show respect or social distance, referent honorifics, which are used when talking respectfully to someone not so important, bystanders' honorifics used in hierarchical settings, performative honorifics commonly used in rituals or religious contexts and relational honorifics which are based on the relationship between the interlocutors (Agha, 2007). Gendered honorifics are well-documented in spoken language worldwide, as evidenced by studies by Tanaka (2009), Afful (2010), Brown (2015), and William et al. (2025). However, little attention has been given to gendered honorifics in sign language, particularly in the African context. As the primary means of communication for most deaf individuals in Tanzania, TSL provides a unique socio-cultural and linguistic foundation for research, including the study of gendered honorifics in sign language.

Sign language is a form of communication that utilises visual-spatial modality, employing hands, face, body, and the space in front of the signer. Like spoken languages in the hearing communities, sign language is the main tool for both human communication and cultural transmission among the deaf community. In this regard, it portrays signs and experiences of human beings, including those related to gendering. Thus, sign language is viewed as a process and product of social interaction, given that it plays a pivotal role in influencing society, literature, and philosophy, due to its dynamism, which enables humans to establish themselves as gendered subjects. (Yaghoubi-Notash, Mohamed, & Mahmoud, 2019). Language and gender have been long-standing areas of research interest. Most researchers (e.g. Hirsch, 2002; Mhewa, 2020; Gu, 2013) have focused on the difference between the language of males and females in various areas like Power and Participation, Gender Responsive Language use among students and teachers, and Language and Gender: Similarities and Differences, respectively and arrived at different conclusions. Male and female, as omnipresent and universal linguistic labels, appear to be distinct enough in the way humans perceive themselves and others in the world. (Yaghoubi-Notash, Mohamed, & Mahmoud, 2019). Despite several studies on language and gender, including the studies mentioned above, the variability in language use between men and women in Tanzanian Sign Language has remained unexplored. The fact that Tanzanian Sign Language is a less-researched language compelled this study to investigate the use of honorifics in sign language, while also contributing to the field of sign language research.

The study examines the use of honorifics in gender marking in TSL, focusing on how its users demonstrate respect for gender when producing signs related to femininity and masculinity. This comes against the backdrop of gender inequalities rooted in long-established societal norms and attitudes that prioritise masculinity. In this paper, the discussion is based on the harmonised TSL that came into effect on 23rd September 2020, when Tanzania officially launched its first digital dictionary of harmonised signs across the country as the standard lexicon of TSL. The harmonised signs were chosen because Tanzania has over 120 ethnic groups, making it challenging to focus on a single ethnic group. The use of harmonised signs is a proper way to reduce levels of bias. The choice was informed by the understanding that every language has different ways of observing politeness and respect for others, such as adults and superiors.

The study uses the term "honorifics" to refer to language forms that typically express esteem toward an entity worthy of respect. Otherwise defined, honorifics refer to politeness markers in language pragmatics – the way people use language to show respect. (Sachiko, 2005). John (2010) reports that Kiswahili users employ different honorifics to convey social class and respect. In Kiswahili, words like *Bwana* 'Lord' and *Bibi* 'Maiden' are predominantly used to convey superiority in the language. This is underscored by Matthews (2007), who demonstrates that words such as nouns, verbs, and pronouns serve as honorific devices used to express respect to someone. TSL, as an

independent language for the deaf community, responds to pragmatic use of language, despite being bound by cultural ties. It is in this light that the present study explored the underlying interpretations behind the formation of signs with gender connotations among TSL users. The study explored the cultural influences surrounding the formation of signs that have gender motivations to investigate gendering in TSL use between the two sexes. The two questions that guided the study were: What cultural factors are most relevant to the formation of gender-based signs? Moreover, how does gender influence honorific forms in Tanzanian Sign Language?

2 Literature review

In the recent decade, much of the scholarship on language, gender, and honorifics has centred on spoken languages. Notable contributions have been made by researchers such as Tanaka (2009), Afful (2010), Brown (2015), and William et al. (2025), who have extensively documented gendered honorifics in languages across various cultural contexts. These studies consistently highlight how gender is linguistically constructed and reinforced through both explicit markers, such as pronouns and titles, and more subtle pragmatic features, including conversational strategies and forms of address. For instance, in spoken Kiswahili, terms like "*Bwana*" (Mr.), "*Bi*" (Ms.), and "*Mzee*" (elder) play a crucial role in indexing social hierarchy and respect, reflecting broader social structures and gender dynamics (Matthews, 2007; John, 2010).

Similarly, research grounded in the Dominance Model (Fishman, 1980) is conducted by scholars such as Hirsch (2002), Mhewa (2020), and Gu (2013). These have examined how power relations and societal norms influence language use and determine gendered communication. The studies demonstrate that linguistic behaviours, such as turn-taking, interruptions, and the use of polite or deferential forms, are shaped by cultural expectations and often mirror broader patterns of gender inequality. Mhewa (2020), for example, reveals how educational discourse in African contexts and exclusive language produce biases favouring boys.

As shown, studies of spoken language have dissected the socio-pragmatic functions of honorifics and their role in shaping gender identities. However, sign languages have been largely excluded from such studies, particularly in the African context. A handful of studies, such as those by Ceong and Saxon (2020), on honorifics in non-spoken modalities have primarily focused on East Asian signed languages rather than those in Africa. This gap is pronounced in Tanzanian Sign Language, a language that, despite its centrality to deaf culture and identity in Tanzania, remains under-researched in many of its aspects. The unique cultural and linguistic attributes of TSL, influenced by the country's diverse ethnic makeup and social norms, offer a fertile ground for examining how honorifics and gender are negotiated in a visual-spatial modality. Furthermore, the recent harmonisation of TSL and the launch of a digital dictionary in 2020 provide an unprecedented opportunity to systematically analyse the language's lexicon and its embedded social meanings.

Therefore, the present study is justified on several grounds. First, it seeks to redress the imbalance in sociolinguistic research by bringing sign languages, and specifically, TSL, into the conversation about gender and honorifics. Second, it aims to uncover the cultural-linguistic processes underlying the formation and use of gender-based signs, thus contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of how social identities are constructed within the deaf community in Tanzania. Lastly, documenting and interpreting the honorific forms in TSL is vital not only for enriching the academic literature but also for informing policy and educational practices, ensuring that language planning and instruction in TSL reflect the community's cultural realities and values.

3 Theoretical framework

This study employs the Dominance Model, as proposed by Pamela Fishman in 1980. The model accounts for the reasons behind language use variability between the two genders. The model examines language as a tool for social dominance and control. The framework makes a significant contribution to the variability in language use between men and women. In the context of gender honorifics, the Dominance Model examines how power relations are reflected and reproduced in everyday social interactions, conversational styles, and nonverbal behaviours. For example, men are often reported to interrupt more frequently, adopt an instrumental communication style, and have a larger personal space compared to women. These differences are evident in all areas, including asking questions, attention beginnings, minimal responses, making statements, and tonic initiations. In most societies, women are inferior to men because they lack societal power (Pamela, 1980). Given this argument, women's use of language lies in their attempt to acquire conversational power to equalise their social positions. Whether dominance influences the formation of gender-based signs requires further examination. The model suggests that such behaviours emanate from power dynamics rather than inherent gender differences (Oxford Reference, 2024).

This model is particularly helpful for this study due to its ability to demonstrate social dominance as an attribute of language use. Additionally, the study employed Critical Discourse Analysis to analyse data on gender honorifics in TSL. The data were analysed within the analytical framework of Faircloughian (1995:59) Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis: discourse as text (that is analysis of texts and discourse practices), discourse as discursive practices (analysis of relationships of discourse processes of production and interpretation of texts) and discourse as social practice (analysis of discursive practices and social practices). The gendered honorifics in TSL were analysed as a discourse. The theory was deemed particularly significant to this study, as it provides a robust framework for analysing gender honorifics as both textual and social practices, while unveiling the hidden discursive practices embedded within their uses.

4 Methodology

Qualitative research methods, incorporating participatory approaches, were employed in data collection, including group discussions, interviews, participant observation, and documentary reviews. The data collection was in two phases. The first phase involved exploring the respective signs from the Tanzanian Sign Language Dictionary (Muzale, 2004). The second phase involved verification of signs from 12 elders [five males and seven females] from four regions, namely, Tabora to represent the western zone, Mara for the lake zone, Morogoro for the Eastern zone and Mtwara for the Southern zone. Three deaf elders [one male and two females], one from each region, were selected randomly from among the twelve elders. The main selection criteria were firstly being deaf and secondly being over 50 years of age. The study was conducted over six months, from February to August 2024, within the deaf community. An auto-ethnographic approach was employed to facilitate data interpretation, allowing researchers to utilise self-reflection and language experience to align the interpretations from the deaf elders with those of Wayne, Colomb, and Joseph (2003). By integrating personal awareness of culture and its analysis, autoethnography provides a unique lens through which to understand complex social phenomena. It bridges the gap between the personal and the cultural, offering a rich and nuanced perspective that traditional methods may overlook. Since both researchers are linguists, we employed auto-ethnography as a baseline approach to the linguistic interpretation of signs based on gender. However, researchers remained

neutral on interpretations given by deaf elders to reduce biases. As emphasised by Mizzi (2010, p. 12), “Through reflecting inward and then reflecting outward, the presence of the researcher's life experience is acknowledged with all his vulnerabilities”. Therefore, data were collected from among the harmonised signs of TSL, which are generally considered official signs for public use. For a better understanding of the socio-cultural attributes that contribute to the formation of signs, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, combined with Critical Discourse Analysis, were adopted as a qualitative research approach that focuses on exploring how individuals make sense of their personal and social experiences. In this regard, when some signs for gender-specific needs require sociocultural semantic clarifications, twelve deaf elders from multicultural societies were purposively sampled and consulted to bring their lived experiences and cultural knowledge to the interpretation process, ensuring that the communication is authentic and culturally relevant. Similarly, they could provide a nuanced understanding and representation of deaf culture.

In this regard, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed to interpret the findings, emphasising an understanding of lived experiences from the individual's perspective. Researchers aim to capture the essence of what it feels like to experience a particular phenomenon. Similarly, IPA incorporated hermeneutic principles, recognising that understanding experience involves a process of interpretation. This creates a double hermeneutic, where researchers interpret participants who are themselves interpreting their experiences. On the other hand, IPA has an idiographic focus, meaning it aims to offer insights into how a particular person, in a specific context, makes sense of a particular situation. This approach is not about generalising findings but understanding individual experiences.

Thus, interpretations from elders were tape-recorded, transcribed, and coded into their respective thematic groupings, enabling the researcher to establish categories of honorifics based on cultural affiliations. Lastly, CDA was applied to interpret the meaning of the coded interpretations.

5 Findings and discussion

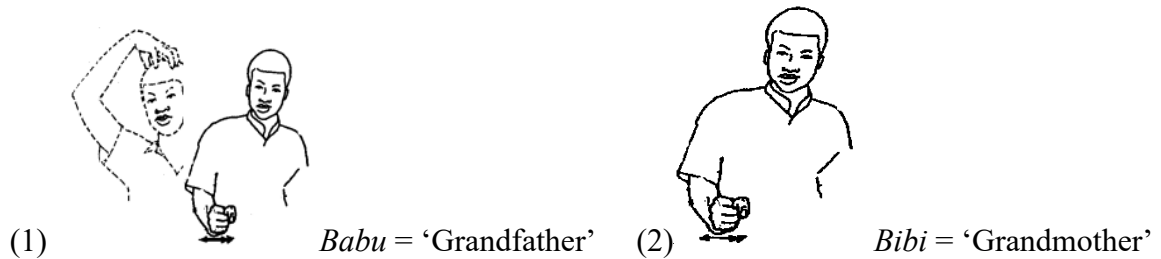
Tanzanian Sign Language was examined to identify 12 gender-specific signs, which were later confirmed through interviews with deaf elders from four regions. After analysis, the signs for “aunt” and “uncle” were excluded as they semantically overlap with “mother” and “father.” Findings were presented according to research themes.

5.1 Signs with gender connotations

Linguistic features, such as nouns, pronouns, and titles/honorifics, play a crucial role in gender marking. Tanzanian Sign Language does have signs for different genders, such as ‘man,’ ‘woman,’ ‘boy,’ and ‘girl’ to reflect and reinforce gender distinctions. This concept can be observed in various factors and aspects of both verbal and nonverbal communication and is limited to sociocultural variabilities.

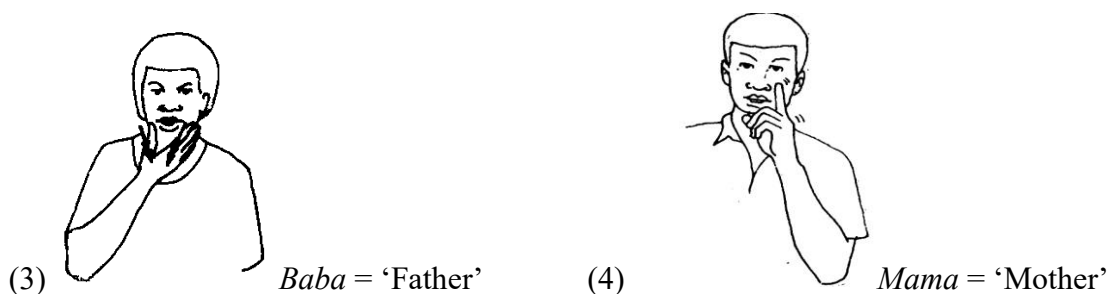
Lucas (2002) has clearly documented that language use between a man and a woman is influenced by several factors, one of which is gender. According to Gu (2013), gender variability extends beyond the way males and females use language. It also reflects their distinct living styles and attitudes. Several studies support this idea. For example, Gu (2013) and Posse & Melgosa (2011) have, at different times, indicated that language use between the two genders is closely related to psycho-social behaviours; hence, men's use of language is plain and rude compared to females' use

of language, which is polite and soft. Even though most researched languages are spoken ones, the question 'Where does semantic interpretation rely on?' remains fundamental in this regard. For an analysis of gender connotations in Tanzanian Sign Language, the current study selected 10 signs with gender connotations to capture the honorific use of language as identified by Mkama (2024). Interviews with deaf elders also contributed to the analysis and interpretation of such signs, aligning with how they convey honorific distinctions between masculine and feminine genders. According to Muzale (2004), the signs for "grandfather" and "grandmother" bear preconceptions of the cultural meanings embedded in the roles of grandparents. Consider examples (1) and (2) below.



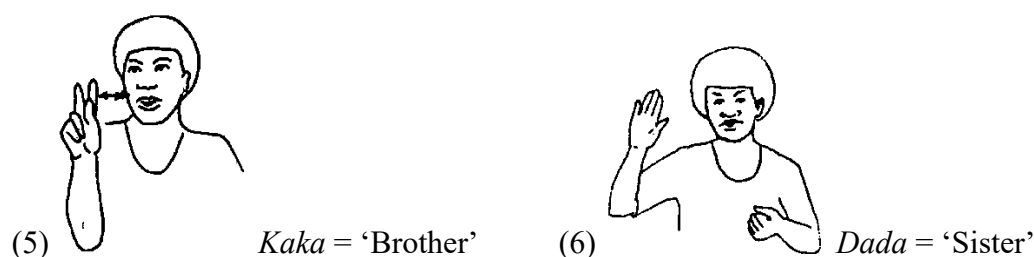
In his discussion, Mkama (2024) highlighted semantic principles as underlying the linguistic principles that govern the formation of signs, regardless of their categories. In gender studies, the same applies. Responses from interviews with elders showed that the formation of the sign in (1) relies on the concession that the grandfather wears a hat and holds a stick as a walking support. This has been the general conception of the traditions across the four regions, representing respective zones as elaborated in the methodology section. Despite this, wearing a *kofia* (hat) is a common honorific dress for Islamic elders; it has been adopted in TSL as an honorific indicator for male elders, as opposed to women, whose common dress is *hijab* and *khanga* in Swahili-speaking areas. Thus, the signs in (1) and (2) convey a similar meaning of 'elderly', but their formation reflects different social perceptions regarding the position of men and women in society. For man, the formation of the sign begins with configuring the palm to denote the shape of a *hat* on top of the head, then moving it down to form a denotative image of holding a stick. Interviews with elders have revealed that it is a regular tradition for male elders to wear hats on their heads and carry walking sticks in their hands, while female elders typically carry only a walking stick. The formation of signs for these two groups denotes the aforementioned traditions. Unwritten stories and cultures show that hats worn on the head entail certain social respect and status. This is exemplary among the societies of the coastal regions, and among pastoralists, where "when a man has acquired some social status and respect, it is usual to wear a hat and hold a black stick" (a response from one participant). This means a hat signifies authority, an authority that men have in society compared to women.

Another gender-distinguishing set is that of parents, father and mother, which are captured in (3) and (4), respectively.

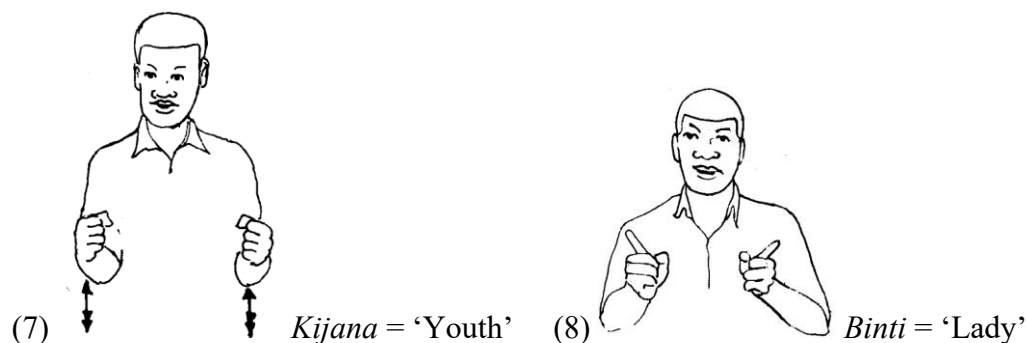


It was noted that the formation of a sign for the father involves the signer holding the chin with the five fingers while rolling the fingers down, whereas in (4), a sign for the mother involves the signer placing an index finger near his/her mouth. The formation of sign (4) is done under cued-speech principles. In most unwritten African traditions, holding the chin is a sign of respect, while placing an index finger near the mouth may not carry specific connotations. Interviews with elders revealed that, for example, a child cannot hold their chin when talking to elders, as it is perceived as a sign of disrespect.

Similarly, brother and sister were another set of gender markers that were identified. Consider examples (5) and (6) below.



In (5), the formation of a sign for 'brother', the signer forms a 'V' shape with the index and middle fingers, with the thumb lying between them, and moves them forth and back near the mouth. This has been common in cued speech. In similar contexts, the formation of the sign for 'sister' in (6) involves the signer folding a palm and placing it at the breast while the thumb protrudes – technically forming the shape of the breast and a nipple. These findings provide a semantic connotation for 'brother' to have no definite honorific interpretation as distinguished from the sign for 'sister', which shows the stiffness of the breasts.



The formation of signs for 'youth' and 'lady' forms another set of gender-making in Tanzanian Sign Language. It was learnt that the sign for youth in (7) requires the signer to fold both palms and hold them near the chest, stiffly indicating health or strength. On the contrary, the formation of a sign for

'lady' needs the signer to hold both hands in front of the chest at the position of the breasts while folding the palms, leaving both index fingers upright (see 8) to indicate stiff nipples. As in sets 5 and 6, the set for youth and lady maintains the use of a woman's breast as the location for sign production as opposed to the man's sign, and they consistently apply in the formation of signs for 'man' and 'woman' as exemplified in (9) and (10) below.



As of (9), the formation of indicating 'man' involves holding the chin with five fingers while sliding them down, whereas the formation of a sign indicating 'woman' compels a signer to curve a palm, directing it inward and moving it from the upper part of the breast downwards (see 10).

5.2 Cultural implications of gender-related signs

Honorifics are titles or terms of respect used to address or refer to someone, often reflecting their social status, profession, or relationship to the speaker. The use of honorifics carries significant cultural connotations and implications that vary widely across different societies. The following subthemes were identified.

5.2.1 Social hierarchy, respect, and social dynamics

In spoken languages, including many Bantu languages, the use of honorifics is crucial in maintaining social harmony and showing respect to elders and superiors. Zubair (2019, p. 201) has demonstrated that one's perceptions and self-conception significantly influence language use. The theory of linguistic gender marking unveils that language users bring different dispositions towards language and their social positioning. In connection with this, women often bear secondary roles in many African societies, leaving men to hold the primary roles and receive the respect. Thus, the use of titles bears similar conceptions. Mhewa (2020, p. 31) mentioned that gender inequalities in various social contexts are rooted in the long-established masculinity and femininity societal norms and attitudes, which in most cases affect chances for the feminine gender. An analysis of the findings has shown that TSL has the same ways it signifies masculinity and femininity, which is reflected in power dynamics. The previous section has presented 10 gender-based signs of TSL. For example, signs (9), (7), and (3) for "man", "youth (male)", and "father", respectively, convey power associated with the male gender and its transition from youth to adulthood.

In most African traditions, there are specific symbols that carry either *negative or positive* connotations. Considering signs (1), (3), and (9), which stand for 'grandfather', 'father', and 'man', respectively, these signify positive connotations as opposed to signs (2) and (10) which stand for 'grandmother' and 'woman', respectively, and which do not have any honorific implication.

It was further revealed that among the five signs that were identified in this study to signify female gender, three of them [(6), (8), and (10)], which is 60% of female signs used in this research have

used female breast to signify the difference between ‘sister’, ‘lady’, and ‘woman’, respectively. Interviews with deaf adults revealed that 75% of the use of female sexual parts for their gender or sex marking was a simple choice made to indicate gender for women as opposed to men, whose signs are not formed from their private parts. On the other hand, 25% of respondents indicated that they were not aware of the reasons. The findings are congruent with Morgan (1977, p. 89), who asserts that “the very semantics of the language reflects women’s condition” and the continued men’s dominance over women. This is also captured by Judith (1990), who writes, “social attitude towards females,” encompassing the social position of women. For instance, signs 9 and 10 for ‘man’ and ‘woman’, respectively, contain different connotations. Sign 9 implies respect, adulthood and dominance, whereas sign 10 portrays sagging breasts, implying subjugation on the woman’s side.

Penelope and Ginet (2013) argue that gender is performed, not possessed. They add that gender, defined as a social distinction between males and females (Penelope & Ginet, 2013, p. 1), contributes to the manifestation of gender-based signs. The concept of gender stems from assigning and naming social responsibilities for each gender, such as masculinity being linked with energy and femininity with beauty. It is therefore right to argue that males are more linguistically privileged than females. For example, in signs 7 and 8, the formation of sign 7 for male youth implies strength as opposed to sign 8 for a lady, which implicates the biological make-up of the lady’s upright breasts. The formation of signs 7 and 8 implies what males and females are expected to perform in their societies. Sign 7 suggests that young males are energetic and strong, which is precisely what society anticipates for young males. On the contrary, sign 8, referring to ‘a lady’, uses upright breasts to connote the age that has not breastfed and has a connection with a sexual impact on men. It is believed that upright breasts are sexually attractive, which means that the sign portrays how women are regarded as men’s sexual attractions. In addition, the idea of using upright breasts as a sign for a lady implies dependence, in which women rely on and are controlled by men. Thus, the formation of these signs is closely associated with dominance and power by one gender over the other (Ball, 2010). That is, females are often signified as being inferior to men, rather than vice versa. Posse & Melgosa (2011, p. 121) argue that the dominance of the male gender over the female is a result of cognitive development between the two genders. According to Posse & Melgosa, behaviours are nurtured; hence, labels of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ grow in association with different behaviours. Boys often imagine substituting their fathers and having their mothers, and vice versa, which has contributed to the development of attitudes towards genders, hence the formation of the biased gender-related signs presented in this study.

6 Conclusion

Findings show that language reflects and perpetuates gender biases and stereotypes even in the form of sign language. Language, including sign language, reinforces traditional gender roles and uses more derogatory and negative terms for women than for men. The analysis has shown that males tend to enjoy more positive social connotations compared to females, who are often less socially privileged and linguistically marginalised. As mentioned earlier, signs 3 of 5, for females, have used ‘breasts’ to indicate femininity, whilst none of the signs use males’ private parts for gender marking. As most spoken languages have favoured males, TSL has also been shown to favour males, hence making it sexist. The study has revealed that TSL exhibits similar linguistic behaviours to those of spoken languages. Therefore, this study calls for linguists, both locally and internationally, to focus their research on TSL to enrich it linguistically.

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Notes

¹ The term "Deaf" is used as a generic reference for Deaf, deaf, DeaF, and Hard-of-Hearing persons.

² Sign language is a visual communication system designed to help deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals understand spoken languages. It uses a combination of handshapes and placements near the mouth to represent consonants and vowels, respectively.