The tipping point: On the use of signs from American Sign Language in International Sign

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Abstract

This paper approaches International Sign (IS) as both a translingual practice and a contact language which is subject to language contact with American Sign Language (ASL). The perceived overuse of ASL in IS is often judged as counterproductive for IS to flourish independently from ASL. The desire for IS and ASL to be sufficiently different leads to a desire for setting and maintaining linguistic boundaries between both. Therefore, discourses about the maintenance and vitality of IS as a collaborative translingual practice can take the form of linguistic prescriptivism aiming to curtail ASL use in IS.

1. Introduction

I know this is impossible, but if we were to try, perfect International Sign would be about a group of people who meet every day and sign languages from different countries would be used between them. If there is a sign used by one of them that others find really perfect, because it’s so clear, then it can be adopted. Other signs can be taken from elsewhere and putting all of them together then becomes International Sign. That would be perfect. But when we meet people [in international gatherings], there’s not a lot of time, or people don’t have enough experience to make themselves understood, so instead we take signs from ASL [American Sign Language]. (focus group participant in academic setting)

Signing in ASL means that it is valued more highly than other languages. It can take over all languages. We should not allow that to happen. We need to cherish them all and that is why we need to think of how to sign IS [International Sign] to be more equal. It is okay to use some ASL signs, as much as it is to use other sign languages' signs. (teacher of "Frontrunners", a higher education course where IS is the language of instruction)

Discourses about the nature of IS are often entangled with discourses about international uses of ASL; firstly, about the use of ASL versus IS as global deaf lingua franca (Kusters, 2020), and secondly, about the use of ASL features in IS. The first quote above suggests that doing IS means signing in ways that are deemed to be iconic and transparent (Rosenstock, 2008), and that it typically incorporates signs and structures from different national sign languages, including from American Sign Language (ASL). The second quote suggests that people often associate ASL with linguistic imperialism (Parks, 2014), which feeds into the ideology that it is problematic to use a lot of it in IS. “There is a lot of ASL in IS”, and “That does not look like IS to me, but rather ASL”, are some commonly and frequently uttered complaints in international deaf gatherings such as higher education courses and conferences which constitute the context of the two quotes above.

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International Sign is an ephemeral and variable linguistic phenomenon of which the nature is difficult to pin down. For one, we could say that deaf people who engage in IS are translanguaging. The term “translanguaging” has increasingly been used to describe language practices of deaf signers (De Meulder, Kusters, Moriarty and Murray, 2019). It was coined to frame “the complex language practices of plurilingual individuals and communities”; i.e., the intermingled use of diverse linguistic resources (Garcia and Wei, 2014: 20). The status of IS as a language has been contested, partially because of its variability (Hansen, 2015). At the same time, there are a set of strategies and rules specific to IS (Mckee and Napier, 2002; Moody, 2002), and some conventionalized varieties exist, which are sometimes seen as (contact) language(s) (Supalla and Webb, 1995; Adam, 2012).

Although scholars disagree on whether IS is a (contact) language or not (see, e.g., Hansen, 2015), in this paper IS is approached as a contact language which is subject to language contact (with ASL). Indeed, when the use of ASL in IS is discussed, people often treat IS as a conventional language and spontaneously estimate (and disagree on) percentages of ASL in IS; e.g., “half of it”, 30%, 60%, 40%, 70%, 80%. They also offer terms to describe forms of IS that have a lot of ASL in them, or language use that is not recognized as IS, but neither as the “American way of ASL”. Such terms or descriptions include “International ASL (IASL)”, “strong ASL [in IS]”, “IS with ASL flavor”, “ASL light”, “ASL with neutral/unmarked handshapes”, “world ASL”, “global ASL”, “European ASL”, “ASL-IS”, “ASLish”, “foreigner ASL”, “contact ASL” and “bad ASL”. (Note that these labels do not necessarily refer to the same usages.)

Criticism of the use of ASL in IS can be linked to the themes of language maintenance and sustainability which are key themes in the study of linguistic vitality (Engman and King, 2017). Participants in the study I describe below discussed what kind of IS usages should be encouraged in order for IS to exist and flourish. These include using non-ASL lexicon, and investing in what is called “visual”, “iconic” or “transparent” language use. While some comments about the use of ASL features in IS were descriptive and neutral, people also explicitly stated that ASL use in IS should be curtailed (see, e.g., second quote above) and that ASL and IS should exist and develop as separate entities with limited overlap. These ideologies about linguistic separation took the form of linguistic prescriptivism.

The desire for IS and ASL to be sufficiently different requires the maintenance of linguistic boundaries between both, even though the linguistic status of IS is contested. However, participants recognized that it is practically impossible to fully remove ASL from IS, and that the use of ASL features in IS can be useful. Thus, participants imagined there is a tipping point between an acceptable amount of ASL in IS, and too much ASL in IS. The difficulty though lies in pinpointing this tipping point, partly because people disagreed on what exactly constitutes the use of ASL in IS.

I start with outlining the nature and global use of American Sign Language and International Sign, as well as reviewing literature on language contact and linguistic prescriptivism. I then explain the context and the methodology of the research on which this article is based. Against this background, I identify and unpack what participants saw as “using ASL in IS”, and why participants thought (too much) ASL use in IS is destructive or inadvisable. The next section explores what strategies people employed in order to curtail the use of ASL features in IS by maintaining boundaries between IS and ASL, and thus invest in the flourishing of IS. It is important to note that the discussed ideologies are not generalizable beyond the context of the study; i.e., (academic) contexts of presenting and learning, mostly located in Europe.

2. ASL and IS: what is the relationship?

2.1. American Sign Language

American Sign Language (ASL) is a national sign language that emerged in the US in the 19th century when a deaf teacher from the Institut National de Jeunes Sourds de Paris, Laurent Clerc, co-founded the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut, bringing with him LSF (French Sign Language) and methodological signs that influenced the language varieties that came to be called ASL over time (Supalla and Clark, 2014). It has since been dispersed all over the world, in different contexts and through different means. First, it has been introduced by missionaries, educators and development workers in a significant number of regions and countries in Africa, Asia and the Americas, reportedly from the 1950s onwards. Some sign languages include a high proportion of ASL-based lexicon because of the introduction of ASL lexicon in emergent educational systems in Asia, South America and Africa (Moriarty, 2020; Runnels, 2017; Woodward, 1996).

Many sign languages that have incorporated ASL varieties have been given a national name (e.g., Ghanaian Sign Language, Thai Sign Language, Filipino Sign Language) by sign linguists and/or deaf organisations, following the ideology of ‘one state – one language’. Others may recognize (and name) them as ASL instead (Eleweke et al., 2015). There can thus be a tension between recognizing a national sign language’s roots in ASL varieties versus the urge to foreground how it diverges from ASL and to invest in the further development and vitality of national sign languages. The imported use of ASL or ASL-influenced sign languages is often in tension with a diminished use, prestige and status of other national or local sign languages, impacting on their institutionalization and/or maintenance. In other words, ASL use is associated with a negative impact on the vitality of other sign languages, e.g., in Africa (Nyst, 2012). This has resulted in resistance against the use of signs associated with ASL in the vocabulary of many national sign languages. Parks (2014) summarises different responses towards imported ASL in South America and the Caribbean:

- adoption and acceptance; typically in countries where ASL was the first institutionalised sign language;
• adoption and distinction: where ASL is adopted in certain domains but distinguished from the country's own sign language which is used in other domains (ie, diglossia);
• mixing and rejection: where ASL use has become increasingly integrated in the local sign language, became mixed up with it, and inspires purification projects, removing ASL influence from the own sign language by reclaiming old signs or developing new signs.

Apart from countries in Asia, Africa and South America where ASL varieties seem to have formed or impacted the foundation of national(ised) sign languages, there are also recent situations all over the world where ASL is in contact with other sign languages, and not primarily in the context of deaf schools. For example, students from outside the USA and Canada study at US universities/colleges with large deaf student body populations such as Gallaudet University (a bilingual ASL-English university), where they become fluent in ASL. When they return to their country, they may take up influential leadership positions and may be seen as (linguistic) role models (Parks, 2014). People also pick up ASL through interactions with ASL-using visitors to their own country or intentionally acquire (some) ASL before engaging in international encounters, such as by studying online videos.

Worldwide, deaf people - who know about (or imagine) deaf lives in the US - often assign high vitality scores to ASL, associating ASL with deaf rights, charisma, progress, and cooperation and development. The US is pictured as a place with good accessibility in the form of ASL interpreting services, and as a place with a rich tradition of deaf storytelling, theatre, poetry, movies, TV series, vlogs and signed songs in ASL, many of which can be accessed online and are popular abroad. Many ASL resources and learning materials are freely available online, such as English-ASL dictionaries, videos with ASL lexicon, and corpora. The availability of this broad range of resources in ASL and related exposure to ASL have resulted in borrowing of ASL signs in national sign languages and in IS, sometimes to fill identified or experienced lexical gaps. Such contact-induced language change has led to concerns about the vitality of these sign languages. All these developments also resulted in the global use of ASL as a lingua franca, often alongside International Sign (Kusters, 2020).

2.2. International Sign

International Sign (IS) takes place when (often European) signers of different linguistic backgrounds come together. It emerged during international encounters since the 19th century in Europe, or before, such as in elite banquets, conferences and deaf sports (Moody, 2002). Contexts where IS currently is used include conferences, sports events, arts events, camps, leadership programmes, academic courses, development initiatives, NGOs, research, and religious missions. IS incorporates signs from national sign languages (including ASL) and often includes mouthings from spoken languages (mostly English). Researchers (eg. Rosenstock, 2004; Whynot, 2016) have tried to quantify the number of ASL signs used in IS, which is questionable because some signs that are identified as ASL are used in multiple sign languages and not just in ASL (see below).

A dominant ideology in relation to IS posits that IS is (or should be) “more visual/iconic” than national sign languages. When people do IS, they intend to expand the use of iconicity that is already natural to sign languages, to refer to common experiences and common interests, to break down the message to the essentials, and to go to the heart of the message. On the lexical level, people may unmark signs (ie. de-initialising and/or simplifying handshapes), use signs from national sign languages that they find transparent and may use periphrasis (a description apart from the flow of discourse) to set up a lexical sign that is used from then onwards (Moody, 2002). Often, more than one sign for a concept is offered (eg. two or more IS or national signs are offered). Mouthing in English can either help or obscure the process of making oneself understood. It is important though to point out that phrases such as “iconic signing”, “acting out” or “visual signing” (in relation to IS) are ideological in themselves, since iconicity is culture-based and depicting signs are often misunderstood (for a comprehension study of IS, see Whynot, 2016).

The use of IS is variable and dependent on the geographical, political, social, cultural and linguistic contexts in which it occurs and the backgrounds and intentions of the people who use it. There are conventionalised and less conventionalised usages of IS (Byun et al., 2018; Whynot, 2016; Zeshan, 2015), which typically co-occur in the same gatherings. The size of the conventionalized lexicon in IS is limited though (Whynot, 2016). The (more) unconventionalised versions of IS when two deaf people with very different linguistic repertoires meet each other for the first time are also called cross-signing (Zeshan, 2015).

Thus far there has not been a satisfying single label to explain what International Sign actually is. In the context of this paper I approach IS with three labels: as a translingual practice, a contact language, and a lingua franca. ASL as a “translingual practice” refers to it being a process of translinguaging (Kusters, 2020). Willingness of the interlocutor to communicate flexibly is an important element in translinguial practices. Canagarajah (2013: 179) uses the term “cooperative dispositions” to talk about this ethical dimension. They are dispositions but also strategies that people may bring to contact zone interactions, for example treating language norms as open to negotiation, treating language as a constellation of multimodal resources that can be mixed and meshed, and having a strong ethic of collaboration. In the same vein, Green (2014: 445) writes about IS as a relational phenomenon, arguing that “communicating in IS relies on and produces mutual moral orientation among signers”, and that many people value the labour involved in doing IS. Communicating in IS is experienced as right: communicating directly with people from different sign language backgrounds entails a moral obligation (Green, 2014).

Scholars of linguistic vitality have pointed out that translinguaging practices can be a factor in the endangerment of minority languages, including sign languages. De Meulder et al. (2019) argued that we need to be careful not to treat
“translanguaging” in prescriptive ways in the context of deaf signers: translanguaging is not to be preferred over the use of national sign languages especially in contexts of deaf education, which are crucial settings for the learning and transmission of sign languages. However, in the context of IS, it seems that translanguaging is seen as the norm, and that the maintenance of this specific translanguing practice is at issue. The theme “vitality of translanguaging practices” seems to be unusual in the literature on linguistic vitality, although we do see similar issues coming up in the literature of translanguaging, where it is framed differently. For example, some scholars argue that translanguaging needs to be allowed, legitimized and maybe even promoted in schools in order to support learning of minority languages by multilingual children (Guzula et al., 2016).

There are a few shortcomings to the approach of IS as a translingual practice: “translanguaging” is a catch-all concept, which does not account for the fact that IS is named as an entity by many different stakeholders, including sign linguists, deaf organisations, conference organisers and interpreters (Kusters, 2020). Naming International Sign implies that it is seen as a specific, distinguishable and recognizable linguistic phenomenon. However, even though IS is named, the word “language” is not in its name, whilst this is commonplace when naming sign languages. Indeed, whether IS should be called “International Sign” or “International Sign Language” has been the focus of much debate. In 2007, its status as a language was officially rejected by the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) (Mesch, 2010) who promote the term “International Sign”. The WFD’s concern is that national sign language development or services would be seen as redundant where International Sign provision is present, and that using the name “International Sign Language” would further feed this process. In other words, the concern is that national sign languages’ vitality could be negatively impacted would IS be labeled as a language. At the same time, the WFD and the allied organization WASLI (World Association of Sign Language Interpreters) have used IS as one of their main conference languages and have established a system of accrediting IS interpreters. Other arguments for not calling IS a language relate to its nature: that the name “International Sign” is used to cover a variety of divergent practices (such as cross-signing in one-on-one encounters and IS interpreting at UN meetings), and that IS is too variable and context-dependent to call it a language.

International Sign has also been called a contact language (see Hansen, 2015), such as a pidgin (Supalla and Webb, 1995; McKee and Napier, 2002) or a situational pidgin (Adam, 2012). Approaching IS as a contact language, a notion that indicates more fixedness than “translanguaging”, is useful in the context of this paper, because as I will show below, people talk about IS as if it is a conventional and bounded language which can have influences from outside. While spoken language pidgins are usually seen as languages (Thomason, 2001), scholars who called IS a pidgin typically corroborated the “IS is not a language” trope. Spoken contact languages are often young languages with low status; are often seen as broken languages, as not real languages, as simplistic, or as inauthentic; and they seldom have high status (Lee, 2020). Partially because of this, the literature on linguistic vitality has not paid much attention to contact languages even though many contact languages are endangered (Garrett, 2006; Lee, 2020).

The literature on contact languages usually focuses on languages on the local or national level such as eg. Afrikaans, Chinese Pidgin English and Singlish (Lee, 2020). In contrast, International Sign is used in global conferences and as language of instruction in academic higher education. There is a tension between not labeling IS as a language and seeing it as lacking depth and complexity (see below); and its being used in elite and high-stake international contexts such as the WFD and the UN. This brings me to the final label for IS: IS as international lingua franca. A lingua franca may put pressure on minoritised languages and thus be the root of endangerment (O’Shannessy, 2011). However this article is about the vitality of the lingua franca itself. As Mufwene (2017: 217) points out, “lingua francas have their own arena of competition, which is different from that of vernaculars” (p e217): the use of one lingua franca can be diminished in the face of another one.

2.3. Language contact and responses

Contact languages may emerge where a lingua franca is absent – and then become the lingua franca themselves (O’Shannessy, 2011). This seems to be the case for IS. In addition, it seems that some uses of IS and ASL as lingua francas are converging. Currently both IS and ASL are used in an increasing number of overlapping contexts (eg, online and at conferences). Language change is inevitable when a critical number of speakers of the language also increasingly know or learn another language (O’Shannessy, 2011). Many IS users now also know ASL, and the other way around, leading to language contact between both, which inevitably impacts on IS as well as ASL use. Since people draw from their semiotic repertoires in IS, and since ASL is an increasingly widely used language with a high instrumental value in a wide range of contexts, it is not surprising people who know ASL draw upon ASL when they sign in IS. Also, if the languages involved in language contact situations “are more typologically similar, then more material can be transferred with less intense contact” (O’Shannessy, 2011: 80). Since both ASL and IS have shared roots in Europe (Moody, 2002); ASL lexicon has long been included in IS; and English mouthings are used in both (though it depends of the signer); IS and ASL could be experienced as typologically close, which opens the door for borrowing. In addition, as I show below, the widespread status of IS as “not a language” renders it porous for dominant inferences. This has resulted in usages of IS in which a lot of ASL signs are in use.

In language maintenance situations resulting from language contact, “the language continues to be spoken, but there is often some influence of one language on the other, in both structure and words” (O’Shannessy, 2011: 79). The degree of contact-induced change is linked to consciousness of language use and of language separation processes: to halt a change in process, language users need to diverge from the incoming code (here, ASL), and converge towards each other in this orientation (here, the avoidance of ASL) (O’Shannessy, 2011). This particularly happens in dedicated IS contexts, such as the conferences of
So, in what contexts do people make use of ASL signs in IS? Firstly, they might incline towards trying to eliminate their national signs from their IS and therefore turn to ASL. Mark (New Zealand), one of the Fronrunners teachers, gives an example of this (see Fig. 1):

I remember one person in a [Fronrunners] group. (…) They signed GOVERNMENT [1]. I told them that it was not an IS sign. GOVERNMENT [2] is. They responded that GOVERNMENT [2] is the same as their national sign. That is right. IS is a mix of visual national signs. It is not about turning to ASL whenever picking a sign.

Having lived in the US for one year, Mark knows ASL and is therefore able to recognize ASL signs in IS. For Mark and other non-Americans who know both ASL and IS, this forms part of the backdrop to their IS policy and practice.
Secondly, people also may feel it is acceptable, appropriate or even preferable to use ASL lexicon in IS because they connect it to higher level discourse. This may be partially related to the US being seen as a country that has good access and deaf rights, and a long-standing tradition of Deaf Studies and sign language research. Additionally, ASL is seen as a sign language with a strong vitality rate when compared with most other sign languages, due to its use in a wide number of domains and its perceived wide lexicon. Signing IS with a lot of ASL signs is seen by some deaf people as “clever/smart” while others (see below) would label it as “showing off”, as embracing ASL uncritically, wholesale or indiscriminately.

Thirdly, people may find ASL signs beautiful. Outi, a Frontrunners teacher from Finland narrates (see Fig. 2):

Sometimes I approach students because they sign in ASL. For example, \texttt{WHO[1]} (...) People tell me \texttt{WHO[2]} is a more beautiful sign than \texttt{WHO[1]} which they detest. I believe that \texttt{WHO[1]} is more simple and better suited for IS.
Similarly, Lenka, a Czech Frontrunners student, said:

I know ASL. It is good, but sometimes I feel signs can be stupid, and not linked to anything. There are signs from other countries that could be used instead. However, including a portion or up to half of it of ASL is fine. Here is an example: HAVE [2]. This is better than the sign HAVE [1], this one is stupid. Why is it signed like this? I cannot see the logic. For HAVE [2], I see that logic.

Outi and Lenka see WHO [1] and HAVE [2] (Fig. 3) as more logical and transparent, and therefore more pragmatic than ASL equivalents. However, fourthly, pragmatism is also an argument used in support of using ASL signs rather than against it: people feel it allows them to easily insert specific political, technical or academic terms. This does not mean that is impossible to be specific in IS, but it is often experienced as more time-consuming. As mentioned above, the conventionalized lexicon in IS is limited, and in IS people may “show rather than tell”, paraphrase concepts, and give examples to replace (or complement) the use of specific terminology.

Widely used in IS is the sign IMPORTANT [1], which is often juxtaposed or replaced with others that are less widely known, such as the DGS (German Sign Language) sign IMPORTANT [2]. (Fig. 4) A Belgian participant in the focus group at HWU opined that trying to replace widely known ASL signs is a waste of energy and comes across as forced sometimes:

We have this sign IMPORTANT [1] and we all understand it. Another sign, we would need to explain and expand on it. It feels more pragmatic. (...) I think is more political, the effort to get rid of this sign.

This was echoed by a Danish participant during one of the workshops at the Deaf Academics 2017 conference:

It is interesting to me that we allow many different languages to be included in IS, but the one sign language that we really try to block from becoming part of IS is ASL. When someone signs in IS and uses the sign MOTHER (Fig. 5), people pounce on it and say oh no don’t, that’s ASL, that’s ASL! - I would think, this is just one sign, MOTHER. We need to let everything become part of IS.
Specificity also could be achieved by including lexical signs from other sign languages than ASL, however, as the opening quote of this article suggested, people argue that it is time-consuming to exchange, learn and circulate signs that are not yet widely known. International Sign is frequently used during gatherings that last only a few days, in which people have only limited time to share and present their ideas. The transience of IS contexts thus impacts its use. Summarized, reasons given in support of using ASL signs are: trying to eliminate national signs and therefore turning to ASL; associating ASL to high level discourse; seeing it as beautiful; and pragmatism.

4.2. The relation between ASL and English

Often, when participants discuss the use of ASL-heavy IS, they refer to the perceived relation between ASL and English. Firstly, some participants saw ASL signs and English words as having one-on-one relationships, often connected to the use of English mouthings, and believed that there were more English words with ASL equivalents than English words with IS equivalents. One of the Frontrunners students, Margot from the Netherlands, said in September 2017:

With ASL signs I can learn [English] words quickly because they are connected. When I see IS with closed mouth I need to search for meaning. In ASL there are [specific] signs and they make clear meaning of words. I can learn faster.

(Note: in May 2018, Margot had changed her opinion: she explained that she had learned that the relationship between English and ASL does not simply exist in terms of one-on-one equivalents for signs and words.)

Secondly, ASL signs are sometimes initialized based on fingerspelling (such as WATER, a W-handshape tapped on the chin, Fig. 5), which some participants argue makes ASL harder to understand because the initializations look complex or arbitrary to people who don’t know English. A few participants who know (some) English felt initialization of signs (particularly the ASL weekday signs) makes them easier to understand or remember because of the links with English words that were in frequent use in international spaces.

Thirdly, ASL signs were used in IS clauses with English-based structures. Frontrunners teacher Mark criticized English-based signing in which each word in an English sentence would be signed, for example

I NO LIKE. It can be signed I DON’T-LIKE. Rather than I DON’T-WANT, they sign I NO WANT. Why do you need a finger showing NO if you can simply show it with head movement? I tell the students off for that. It makes me cringe. (Figs. 6 and 7)

Frontrunners teacher Outi gave another example, regarding the use of an ASL sign meaning THAT (Fig. 8): I NOT WANT THAT YOU COME TODAY. These uses of the signs NO and THAT may not be typical to ASL, but people saw that the insertion of these ASL signs in IS utterances leads to the use of more English-based structures.

Fourthly, English writing also is thought to influence the use of ASL in IS, such as during presentations. A Norwegian woman at one of the Deaf Academics workshops commented: “It is also about text on PPTs written in English. It is influencing us. From reading English text, we turn to ASL, and then back to English. Without [PPTs] we would be more free to use gestures and sign visually.”

The use of ASL and English together means the use of two global languages in parallel. A South–American man at the SIGN8 workshop in Brazil commented: “The dominance comes from using both ASL and English together. That needs to be stopped and resisted - it’s not a positive thing.”
4.3. Modified ASL in IS as ‘bad ASL’

Some participants felt that non-Americans’ use of ASL can be incorrect. Frontrunners teacher Mark gave an example (see Fig. 9):

The English word “like” has two meanings: LIKE (“appreciate”) and LIKE (“same as”). I saw someone signing “I LIKE (same as) ICE CREAM”. They are unconsciously copying ASL signs that do not express the correct meaning.
Essentially, this is another example of mapping English and ASL on each other, even though in ASL \textit{LIKE} ("same as") and \textit{LIKE} ("appreciate") are signs with different forms. Mark and Outi stated that this incorrect mapping of English on ASL makes English and ASL-influenced IS not only disagreeable to watch, but also harder to understand. The young age and varying language and educational backgrounds of the Frontrunners participants may be a complicating factor in how they sign: not all of them have deep metalinguistic awareness of sign languages to draw upon.

Some European participants called the language use in IS videos (eg. vlogs on Youtube/Facebook) by other Europeans “bad ASL”, seeing this usage as not International Sign because of the amount of ASL used in it, but not as fluent and correct ASL either. An example is when signers swap the two different ASL signs \textit{USE} and \textit{USED-TO}. Outi notified the Frontrunners of this (see Fig. 10):

\begin{itemize}
\item I think it started with Frontrunners 5. They were mixing up the sign \textit{USE} with the sign \textit{USED-TO}. All of them learned how to use those signs incorrectly. I asked them to stop mixing them up because it is not correct. It happened in the same way with Frontrunners 6. I was surprised and asked them to use other signs. I explained that if you would not use national signs incorrectly, you should not do it in IS either. (…) It is fascinating, how this use of the signs \textit{USE} and \textit{USED-TO} transferred incorrectly all the way from Frontrunners 5 to 6, to 7 etc.
\end{itemize}

The abovementioned adding \textit{NO} to \textit{NO WANT} and \textit{NO UNDERSTAND} were also seen as instances of “bad ASL”.

Not only the meaning but also the form of ASL signs can change by use in International Sign, and some participants evaluated this change negatively. For example, the ASL signs \textit{IMPORTANT} and \textit{WHY} are generally signed larger (a larger movement) in IS than in the US. Danny, a Belgian participant at SIGN8 discussed this during the IS workshop I organized at that conference (see Fig. 11):

\begin{itemize}
\item You can see ASL used smoothly by Americans, but if people use it in an IS conversation, it would be a different thing. (…) Something wouldn’t be completely right about the way I’m signing it - it’s become a bit distorted, it changes bit by bit. It’s a phenomenon that happens when non-native ASL signers start using ASL signs and adopt them over time. How do you sign \textit{WHY}? [Points to Julie, a deaf American sitting in the audience. Julie shows how she signs \textit{WHY}]. Yes, that’s a perfect example. The ASL way is like this: \textit{WHY} [1] (smaller movement, signing it away from head), but I’m doing it like this- \textit{WHY} [2] (touching side of forehead)
\end{itemize}
There is a parallel with the conviction that “British English” and/or “American English” is/are the best English(es) (Saraceni, 2015), and that “wrong” or “bad” uses of English threaten its purity. Alternatively, these kinds of alterations could be seen as a features of European IS rather than as errors, for when does a frequent “mistake” become a “feature” of a variant (Saraceni, 2015)? Still, a feature based on a “mistake” is “something that is constantly on the verge of trespassing into the unknown territory of ‘incomprehensibility’”; thus, mistakes becoming features is often resisted by speakers of English (Saraceni, 2015: 88).

Summarised, the Frontrunners teachers and other participants’ own perceived knowledge of ASL seems to inform both a prescriptive protection of ASL usage norms (since ASL is a national sign language with its own linguistic traditions and norms), as well as a prescriptive preference against its use in IS.

4.4. ASL and limits to understanding

A key argument against ASL use in IS is related to comprehensibility. The ASL signs WHY, MOTHER and IMPORTANT are widely known and understood. However, also ASL signs that are not widely known are used in IS, often in so-called English-based structures. Using specific signs from ASL is also associated with a faster pace, in signing and in the construction of an argument or presentation. Many participants found this difficult to accept because increased speed and compactness of IS can negatively impact comprehension. Many people have either experienced not understanding IS that is heavily influenced by ASL (and/or English), or have observed that it is not accessible for others. For example, Roy (Ireland) stated in the beginning of the Frontrunners course in September 2017:

I’ve seen people saying not to use ASL and to let IS to develop on its own - to leave ASL out of it. I have tried but I still include ASL signs. If there is no other sign that I know, I use the ASL sign. A few people have criticised me because of that (...) I’m still unsure if I should use it or not.

Towards the end of the course though, in May 2018, he put strong emphasis on IS use, having observed that ASL use (in IS) means people are left out.

I loved ASL before, but now I am not interested in it anymore. (...) I don’t want to label it as bad. I only see that ASL is being promoted too much so I am not interested. (...) Sometimes I see [guest] teachers coming and signing strong ASL. Many students raise their hands because they do not understand. That really makes me realise that ASL isn’t good for this occasion. (...) It is important to be understandable. ASL doesn’t serve the purpose. IS is visual and that’s what
Many guest teachers would come and say how they went to Gallaudet. They would try to sign ASL in their IS, to show off that they had been to Gallaudet.

So for Roy, the promotion of ASL, its link to Gallaudet and arrogance, and its negative impact on comprehension, are main reasons for curtailing ASL use in IS. During the course, he intensively engaged in brokering (informal interpreting) for students who struggled to understand ASL-heavy usages of IS.

4.5. Attitude of adapting

Deeply rooted in the practice of IS is the expectation that all participants in the interaction make an effort, cf. Green’s (2014) “moral orientation” and Canagarajah’s (2013) “cooperative disposition”. Many participants experienced that IS can act as equalizer, and its use as leading to a level playing field. Kang-Suk (South-Korea) a participant and presenter at SIGN8 in Brazil, and researcher of cross-signing (Byun et al., 2018), explained:

There is an attitude in IS, related to ASL. If people sign ASL or in their own national sign languages and someone does not understand it and asks the other to explain, they might not be willing to. But in IS, people who ask each other to explain, they openly welcome it and will adjust and adapt their language to the other. (…) That’s a big difference, in attitude, specific to IS.

He further explained:

If you have the same language as another signer, you will get the full picture, but if you use IS, you are going to lose something along the way. That’s an issue of contention, but you’ll get there in the end, and there is strong support for it. You have the cross-signing of the world to help you get there. Whereas ASL is in its own bubble, excluding other languages.

At one of the Deaf Academics workshops, a participant from Canada who uses LSQ (Quebec Sign Language) explained that they felt more free and more equal when IS is used as lingua franca rather than ASL:

There was one gathering [in Canada] where IS was used and ASL-using people were a bit nervous about using IS. But they rolled up their sleeves and tried, and I found that communication was equal. When I changed to use ASL, then they would tell me that this sign or that sign was not right and that would drain my confidence; but when I signed IS, they would do the same and then everything was more equal. (…) In ASL, people just fingerspell in your face and it overwhelms me. This is impossible for me. I think IS suits more people.

For this participant, the choice for IS signals adherence to the highly valued ideal of linguistic cooperation. During the workshop at HWU, a Norwegian woman explained that she would use ASL if her interlocutor also knows ASL: “When we feel each other out we can quickly go ahead at once, throwing away [the iconic way of signing IS]. But I always have a twinge, a bit of a twinge. (…) Something is lost then.” She felt that when signing ASL, this creativity and cooperation that is specific to International Sign is put aside.

Connecting an identity with a language can be a factor in language maintenance (Austin and Sallabank, 2014; Dorian, 1994). The choice for ASL versus IS indexes a way of orienting towards people, and IS is ideologically connected to a deaf cosmopolitan ideal. What participants want to maintain is International Sign as a symbol of transnational deaf being (Murray, 2018), foregrounding the value of direct communication (Green, 2014), by using deaf skills of adapting linguistically, including “strongly visual” ways of signing.

The above quotes actually discuss the use of ASL versus IS as lingua franca (Kusters, 2020) rather than ASL in IS, but they are related. The use of more ASL in IS is seen as less accommodating than the use of what are called “more visual” ways of signing in IS and the practice of adopting signs from other national sign languages in IS.

Importantly, while “adapting” is often seen as central to IS as a practice, a few people pointed out that adapting does not necessarily mean the use of ASL. Adapting in international deaf encounters may mean gesturing, signing IS, ASL, or using another national sign language. For example, as a Swedish woman explained during the workshop at Deaf Academics:

In America, I used ASL, but when I went to Russia, I understood nothing, they don’t use ASL but I learned their signs. I went to Asia, I used IS, but they didn’t understand it - they preferred to use ASL, so I changed my signing. Like people here [at the workshop] have said, it is important to change your internal dial.

This contrasts with the approach of other participants who reported to have refused to sign in ASL when eg. visiting Asian countries and use IS instead, seeing ASL use as a sign of colonization/imperialism, even though (simplified) ASL may be more accessible to use for deaf people in these regions because many deaf people and sign languages in Asia have been in contact with ASL.

4.6. Americans and adapting

Related to the above theme of adapting, people often judge the perceived attitude of Americans (with “Americans” meaning people from the USA). There exists a stereotype about deaf Americans among deaf people in Europe, ie. that they are
egotistical, arrogant and narrowminded. A Finnish participant said that “Americans tend to be nice and kind, but not very aware, they are oblivious. Their cultural knowledge-awareness of other countries is not strong.” Indeed, an often uttered complaint by participants in my study is that “Americans don’t adapt”, expect that everyone will understand them if they sign in ASL, insist that they have the right to use their own sign language, and thus resist or refuse to adapt by signing in IS. This parallels monolingual English speakers abroad (for tourist, business, academic purposes), who generally expect to (and do) find that people in other countries will accommodate them by speaking English, because it is a global language. There thus appears to be a parallel between the English monolingual ideology and ASL-related attitudes of some deaf Americans.

Many Americans who give presentations at conferences where International Sign is the conference language make efforts to adapt their ASL such as by signing slowly, making larger movements, using less fingerspelling, and not using ASL number signs. In that way, they make ASL more accessible for an international audience. These adaptations of ASL however also fueled the complaint that “Americans think that IS is slow ASL”. Also, Americans often use ASL determiners and sentence tags (such as SO, AND) in IS, which are not typically borrowed into IS by non-Americans. In other words, IS signed by Americans has often a distinctive American flavor or ASL accent.

The abovementioned Finnish woman therefore added: “We are more sensitive regarding ASL used by Americans. We don’t see non-Americans as bigheaded. With Americans it is different. It is their language.” In some cases (such as the Deaf Academics conferences), people are less tolerant of Americans who produce IS that contains a lot of ASL, than of Europeans who do the same. Americans’ signing may not only be deemed harder to understand, but audience members (especially Europeans) may feel resistant towards it in terms of not wanting to see it, even if they understand it.

Another frequently mentioned observation by participants is that Americans often have a negative or reluctant attitude towards IS because they feel that in ASL one can go more “in-depth” and be more specific. This experience that national sign languages can be more specific than International Sign is also shared by many non-Americans, for whom this does not necessarily discount the potential of IS as an equalizer, as Kang-Suk argued above.

Several American participants in the study have pointed out that as Americans, they have less opportunities to use and practice IS: they are typically not part of the bustling international deaf networks in Europe, where national and linguistic border-crossing frequently happens. Also, being users of the global languages ASL and English, they may feel less need to use IS. If Americans travel around the world, they often meet people who know ASL; sometimes these people are eager to practice ASL with Americans, so this further reduces opportunities for Americans to use and practice IS. Several American research participants struggled with their language being seen as a poisonous or evil thing. They also felt stigmatised if they tried to do IS but included ASL, while deaf Europeans for example might be judged less harshly for slipping into ASL or for slipping in their national sign language (because their national sign language is not seen as a “killer language”). For example, Julie has experienced animosity towards Americans and ASL at international conferences. At SIGN8 in Brazil, the workshop I organized about International Sign was a difficult experience for her, because of the negative ways people talked about ASL. She narrated:

People perceive me as if I might think America and the English language are superior, and ASL is better. But that’s not true! (…) I show that I am humble and willing to include myself internationally and that I am sorry that I use ASL. If I didn’t do that, they would think I was being arrogant. I want them to see me try. (…) I feel that people don’t see me as Julie - they see other labels - American, PhD, etc - but they don’t take the time to uncover the person I really am. (…) Of course there is going to be some language brought by a person and used in communication - and of course I take with me some ASL. I do think people look at me and think, “She’s American” and I have to keep apologising for that. I feel that burden.

ASL use was flagged up, warned for, and apologised for, otherwise someone’s “attitude” would be doubted. “Sorry for my ASL” is a frequently uttered phrase in international deaf gatherings.

5. Linguistic prescriptivism: how is it done?

5.1. The possibility and difficulty of avoiding ASL

Having described participants’ arguments for and against ASL use in IS, I now move to the practice of linguistic prescriptivism regarding ASL use in IS. Importantly, opinions differ on whether it is possible at all to curtail the use of ASL in IS. Central in this debate is the conviction that ASL will “take over” IS as it has “taken over” the world. Kang-Suk, the South-Korean participant and presenter at the SIGN8 conference, commented:

My opinion is that IS naturally includes ASL. It’s a natural evolution of languages influencing each other. This changes over time and is impossible to control, but the issue is one of power. That’s a political issue. ASL has been a dominant and imperialist language globally, and that’s a different concern, but language evolution is impossible to control.

Yet portraying ASL as the doer, as having agency in itself and evolving on itself, obscures people’s agency: describing ASL as a “killer language” presupposes that ASL in itself is deadly, rather than the ways in which it is used. Many participants therefore believe that while difficult, ASL use in International Sign is possible to control if people agree it needs to be controlled, and the belief or the hope that it is possible has bolstered practices of linguistic prescriptivism. Most participants also agreed though that it was impossible and undesirable to fully remove ASL from IS, simply because some signs have
become so entrenched. In short, participants indicated that there is a tipping point. For example, in a class discussion about IS videos (e.g. vlogs, opinions) on Facebook, Mark signed to the Frontrunners students:

If people use more and more ASL signs, use ASL numbers, fingerspell a lot of words, it can shift to more and more ASL in IS, the balance can tip over. We do not need to aim for removing every single ASL sign but we cannot just give in.

Avoiding ASL is seen as needing conscious effort and slipping into ASL is seen as something that happens easily, as “giving in”. In an interview, Mark clarified that people often adapt towards people who sign in ASL:

I feel if I sign more ASL, people change their signing style in order to match mine. I don’t want that to happen - I don’t think we all have to be the same. That is why I try to sign less ASL to allow others to sign in their way.

Here, signing in ASL or slipping into ASL is seen as habitual or contagious. Doing IS, and avoiding ASL in that process, needs time, mental energy and determination. Because ASL use is connected with ease, and its avoidance with effort, Danny (Belgium, participant at SIGN8) thought that use of ASL signs in IS

may be laziness, inactivity and unproductiveness by adopting the signs and adopting them too easily. It is an easy way out. We need to encourage people not to take this approach and instead to think and create their own way.

Danny and other participants who expressed this idea thus opine that deaf people have a collective responsibility to limit or reduce the use of ASL in IS, to invest in the maintenance of IS as a translingual practice, and that using too much ASL in IS can be a marker of laziness.

5.2. The problem of separating ASL and IS

Conjoining idealism and pragmatism in the pursuit to maintain IS, participants are thus foregrounding the need for a compromise rather than a strict separation between IS and ASL. Allowing features into a language can be a successful strategy for maintenance of this language (O’Shannessy, 2011). However; opinions vary strongly about what constitutes too much use of ASL in IS, and even about what constitutes ASL use in IS. It often happens that people evaluate their own signing or another person’s signing as IS, while others evaluate the same utterance(s) as ASL (“full ASL” or “strong ASL [in IS]”). Even when people move away from ASL, towards IS, this adaptation may not be apparent to others (Green, 2014). If people cannot agree on what is IS versus ASL, how can they agree on how much ASL in IS is too much? Is it possible at all to agree on what constitutes the tipping point?

Controversy over the identity of a code, ie. whether the code is still “language X”, is typical for language contact situations (O’Shannessy, 2011). Contact languages are frequently depicted as lacking autonomy: there often exists “a continuum of intermediate lects” (Garrett, 2006: 180). Of course, scholars have argued, this is true for language in general and not just for contact languages, in that language boundaries and language names are social constructs (Makoni and Pennycook, 2005). In the case of contact languages though, this existence of clines and the issue of boundaries seems especially visible or salient to speakers and researchers.

In disputes over whether forms of signing are ASL or IS, people make assumptions about origins of signs. It often occurs that signs are mislabeled as ASL signs (Parks, 2014), for example when people do not recognize a sign, or think they recognize a sign as ASL. Alternatively, people may identify as ASL some signs that are indeed used in ASL but are also used in other national sign languages, such as when they are iconic or because of a shared sign language genealogy that can be traced back to France, such as the signs TECCH OF YEAR (Fig. 12). Other sign languages have absorbed ASL signs, such as New Zealand Sign Language (see McKee and McKee, 2020). There are also “false friends” between ASL and other sign languages, such as Kenyan Sign Language. “False friends” are signs with the same form but different meanings and are not necessarily mutually intelligible (Morgan et al., 2015). These “false friends” could on first sight be identified as ASL signs.

Another problem with separating ASL and IS is that many people do not know that they use ASL signs in IS until they are called out by others for their ASL use. Majdi from Jordan, when he arrived at the Frontrunners course, said:

I had learned some signs from my friend but later I was told they were ASL signs. For example, the difference between HAVE [1] and HAVE [1]. HAVE [2] is used in IS and the other one in ASL. I was not aware of that. So there is a bit of ASL in IS. People say it needs to be separate from IS.

Several other Frontrunners were not able to separate IS and ASL in the beginning of the course. A number of American participants in the research had the opposite problem: they said they could not distinguish ASL from IS because they see ASL signs used in IS all the time. American participants pointed out that it is hard for them to know which ASL signs are acceptable in IS and which aren’t, and this also differs from context to context, such as the use of the ASL signs HAVE [1] (Fig. 3) and IMPORTANT [1] (Fig. 4) which are both widely used and widely resisted in IS. Indeed, these signs have become symbolic for resistance against ASL in IS, while other ASL signs in IS may go unnoticed or undiscussed.

In short, many people struggle with the question which signs are acceptable in IS, either because they do know ASL and are not sure which are “accepted” ASL signs, or because they don’t know ASL and pick up whatever they see in IS contexts. This seems to suggest that one needs to know both ASL and IS rather well to be able to separate them, as evidenced by Frontrunners teachers (Mark’s and Outi’s) positionalities.
5.3. Strategies to reduce ASL use in IS

People adopt a number of different strategies to reduce ASL use in IS in their own signing and in other people’s signing. Within the student-teacher relationship, Outi and Mark felt it was their duty to engage in linguistic prescriptivism, in order to make sure that students understand each other and can make themselves understood. One of Outi’s strategies is downplaying her ASL knowledge, by pretending not to understand someone who uses ASL signs. She does this in order to make sure that other students understand; the not-understanding students then feel relieved they are not the ones who ask for clarification. Here, the aim of prescriptivism is to make the space more accessible for people who don’t know ASL by constraining or moderating other people’s language use.

In addition, since many students are not aware that they use ASL, Outi and Mark expressed the need for pointing out directly to students that particular signs are ASL. Outi and Mark would then offer the students shorter or longer semantic equivalents in IS. Mark gives an example (see Fig. 13):

The sign COLOR [1] can be signed differently: COLOR [2]. To express this to someone, I need to show it in ASL (COLOR [1]) then show the other sign. After that, I don’t use the ASL sign anymore because they know the other sign now.

However, this implicit approach is not always effective, Mark explained: “The problem is that students do not copy or incorporate some of the signs that they see me using while we are talking.” Indeed, for this strategy to be successful, it seems that people need: to be actively wanting to reduce ASL use; to remember which signs are ASL; to memorize semantic equivalents; and to use these equivalents.

Outi and Mark helped the students come up with equivalents themselves, especially when giving feedback on videos. The Frontrunners have a Facebook page where videos are regularly posted, summarizing what they have learnt or informing the public what they are up to. Outi explains:

I challenge them: how would you explain this to a person who doesn’t understand ASL? They say they would use more gestures. I then challenge their choice of ASL signs rather than gestures even though they don’t know ASL well. I sometimes tell them directly their ASL is not so good.

Dorian (1994) notes that resistance against borrowing often focuses on lexical elements rather than grammar or structures since they are more salient. Here, the instruction to avoid ASL and “use more gestures” instead is an example of giving feedback on structure in addition to lexicon, since the meaning of “using gestures” is related to “signing more visually” and “acting things out”, which implies structuring discourse differently.

Linguistic prescriptivism also happens in conferences and workshops, eg. people directly pointing out to a presenter that they sign “too ASL”. Following complaints of audience members, Danny, who was the chair of the sessions at the Deaf Academics conference in 2015, reminded the audience several times that IS, and not ASL is the conference language. ASL use was seen as disrespectful, oppressive and out of place in this context where people came with the expectation of IS use. Strategies used by presenters to reduce ASL use include watching IS videos in advance, asking for semantic equivalents of ASL signs (before or during the presentation), or practicing their presentations with IS experts. Another strategy to reduce ASL is to reduce the text on the PPT or the mouthings, said Danny: “I try to switch off my mouthing. The more mouthings I use, the more I link with ASL or BSL signs.”

5.4. Impact of linguistic prescriptivism

Frontrunners students reported that frequent feedback on their signing did have an impact: if they were not reminded all the time, they would use more ASL. In May, some students had undergone an ideological shift about ASL use in IS and had become more reflective about their signing than in the beginning of the course. Majdi from Jordan said that due to daily exposure to IS in combination with language prescriptivism by other students and the teachers, he had succeeded in reducing
the amount of ASL he is using in IS: “My signing is a mix of IS and ASL (…) more IS or less, it fluctuates. If people give me feedback, I will remember it more. If they don’t, I use less IS.”

Frontrunners ideologically supported this collective reduction of ASL in IS. Aline from Brazil emphasized that this was a gradual process: “I did not know ASL, that is why I could not see the difference. (…) In Module 1 [September–December] I started to notice ASL. I stopped using those bits and now I am signing IS, now it’s as good as gone.” Esther (Spain) said in May 2018 that she was ashamed when re-watching the interview I did with her in September 2017 because she signed more ASL in September. She said: “now we always have it in the back of our head, that we should not do too much ASL”. Thus, learning to identify ASL and to curtail ASL use went hand in hand for the Frontrunners.

Outi pointed out that prescriptivism regarding the reduction of ASL use mainly happens in the beginning of the Frontrunners year, referring to the importance of the students understanding each other:

When everyone arrives I want to make sure everyone has an equal start, an equal opportunity to understand, and I have a responsibility to support everyone by making comments. As they become more connected, I find my role is to be more passive. (…) If I would now still make comments about their language use at the very end, it would be like meddling with their group identity. If they are happy, I am fine with that, as long as they all understand each other.

The teachers retreating from linguistic prescriptivism could have resulted in students feeling freer to use ASL. Students admitted that even though they had become more aware of ASL, it often was just easier and quicker to use ASL lexicon rather than to sign in what they call “a more expansive, visual way”. They grew comfortable with using particular ASL signs, and they could produce and understand these signs because of their frequent use, ie. these signs became part of the shared Frontrunners lexicon. This is where the “laziness” argument comes up again. Esther (Spain) commented in May:

I got a lot of remarks so far that I am using ASL. I was changing it. I am using more and more of IS now, although still having ASL signs and still getting those remarks. (…) It is also because I am lazy. In IS I need to think of how to express myself visually, and I just want to deliver it quickly. It is good that they remind me if the world is seeing it, though. For example, in November I went to the UN in Switzerland to give a presentation. (…) I knew that the world was looking at me and I switched to IS. Here I am more flexible and relaxed about it.

Esther and the other Frontrunners students had learnt to identify and use different varieties of IS with different amounts of ASL and had learnt to adapt their signing to different contexts. Talking in the classroom and in leisure time with people who are familiar is different from creating online videos and presenting for international audiences outside of the Frontrunners’ classroom. Importantly, Frontrunners’ and their teachers’ stance towards ASL and IS has to be situated in relation to the Frontrunners course as an established (European) institution. Many previous students have moved on to leadership positions in European deaf organisations. So even though I am relaying individual teachers’ and students’ perspectives from the 13th iteration; these take place within this wider context where the choice for IS is symbolic and influential even if it is not always pragmatic.

6. Discussion and conclusion

People’s responses to the use of ASL in IS are in some ways similar to responses on ASL influences in national sign languages (as eg. in contexts in eg. Africa, Asia and South-America where local signs were replaced by ASL). There is a difference in scales, ie. international, national and local, with different issues and dynamics, but there are important parallels such as that both local/national sign languages and IS are often seen as less language-like than ASL, and in both cases, people have reacted against what they perceive as over-use of ASL.

Talking about IS in terms of linguistic vitality is somewhat controversial. International Sign is sometimes seen as lacking depth or complexity because of its simplicity, and a grassroots phenomenon, but also as elite because of its use in institutions such as the WFD and the UN. It is named and institutionalized, but also seen as “not a language” because of its variability and lack of a standard version. However, in literature on linguistic vitality, the concept of language maintenance is, like the concept of language endangerment, “predicated on the belief that languages can be delimited as discrete entities” (Austin and Sallabank, 2014: 11). Indeed, accounts of linguistic vitality usually discuss languages that are seen as languages and the linguistic status of translingual practices and even contact languages is often contested, which impacts negatively on their treatment by scholars of linguistic vitality (Lee, 2020).

In contemporary sociolinguistics though, we have moved from notions of bounded languages to registers, sets of resources or linguistic repertoires (Blommaert and Rampton, 2011), rejecting notions of linguistic stability and homogeneity and emphasising the context-sensitive use of linguistic resources. Sometimes, sets of resources coincide with what is called a language (such as English) – which is inevitably an ideological construct (Makoni and Pennycook, 2005). Valdés (2017) wonders if language maintenance and vitality as concepts marry well with anti-essentialist approaches to language (Valdés, 2017). Naming and delineating languages are essential practices in ideologies on language maintenance and thus linguistic vitality.

Therefore, the question whether IS is a language or not a language leads us to a paradox: by saying it is not a language, its translingual character is foregrounded, which gives people freedom to make suitable and flexible use of their linguistic repertoire. Not treating IS as language also renders it more vulnerable, if “anything goes”, and anything can get a place in IS, it can be “overtaken” by features from ASL. However, actually, translanguaging does not mean that “anything goes”: not only is
translanguaging practice restricted by the resources the interlocutors have or share; different values are connected to different languages or resources in the repertoire, which impact on how these are used (Jorgensen et al., 2011). Prescriptivism and translanguaging can thus go hand in hand. Participants want IS to thrive as an autonomous phenomenon (though not a standard language) apart from ASL, and to that end, they say, IS needs to be protected from ASL, which can be done by “not being lazy”. In the case of IS, the “laziness” associated with slipping into ASL is contrasted with the time- and energy-consuming practice of IS – which is in itself seen as a factor that can impact the vitality and maintenance of IS because the use of ASL can be more pragmatic.

In this protective move, people sometimes treat IS as a conventional language rather than as a translanguaging practice. They treat IS as a named phenomenon with boundaries, a conventional lexicon, and rules about what does or does not belong in it. Participants emphasise that International Sign is a flexible practice but by talking about ASL influence in IS, they construct both IS and ASL as discrete entities. This involves the “chopping up” of the linguistic continuum of ASL, ASL-influenced IS, and less ASL-influenced IS, in two bits (IS and ASL), as implied by the “tipping point” metaphor. In other words, it is not possible to talk about “influences” in translanguaging practices without ideologically fixing the translanguaging code to some extent. This is, I argue, a paradox that is a byproduct of the construction of IS as a non-language.

People want to preserve the use of IS as a translanguaging practice with a specific underlying moral orientation towards cooperation and equitable participation (Green, 2014), and the use of forms of signing that are seen as “more visual” than others is instrumental in practicing this orientation. The vitality of IS is thus tied up with the maintenance not just of a linguistic practice or a lexicon, but perhaps mostly and mainly the maintenance of the attitude of linguistic openness and collaboration inherent to IS translanguaging. It is therefore that participants state that the use of IS with less ASL is more “right” or “just”, i.e. their arguments are intrinsically moral (Green, 2014). However, being anti-ASL can also be oppressive towards people who feel unable to curtail ASL in IS. The very same people who struggle with understanding IS that is heavily ASL-influenced may be unaware that they use ASL in their own IS and yet are pressured to reduce it. These people may thus be doubly disadvantaged in the end, and linguistic prescriptivism may not be morally just in this context.

In summary, people want to protect IS by treating it as something fixed, which seems to contradict the ideology of flexibility that is underlying IS. Guarding the boundaries between IS and ASL and setting standards in the form of prescriptivism goes hand in hand with protecting and maintaining IS as a no-boundaried non-standardised phenomenon.

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