

# Turns and turn-taking in sign language interaction: A study of turn-final holds

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## Abstract

This article examines a recurrent phenomenon in sign language interaction: the freezing of a sign, called a 'hold', in turn-final position. This phenomenon is traditionally described as a prosodic feature that contributes to the rhythm of signed talk and to the marking of syntactic boundaries, hence not adding any propositional content on its own. A detailed observation of these holds in naturally occurring conversational data, however, raises the following questions: What is the relevance of such holds in the management of turn-taking? What meaningful social action do they accomplish? Based on 90 min of video-recordings of Swiss German Sign Language (DSGS) interaction within an institutional setting, we undertake micro-sequential and multimodal analyses yielding the following findings (1) turn-final holds occur recurrently in turns that set a strong action projection (e.g. questions), (2) they embody the current speaker's expectations regarding next actions; and therefore (3) their release is finely tuned to the recognizability of the relevant and expected next action in progress.

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## 1. Introduction

Turns-at-talk – and their alternation between speakers – are the building blocks of social interaction. How they are organized and how turn-taking is managed by participants has been a central object of investigation within Conversation Analysis (CA). The pioneering paper by [Sacks et al. \(1974\)](#) has described participants' precise coordination when moving from one speaker to another. Such coordination has been shown to rely on the co-participant's on-line analysis of the current speaker's turn-in-progress and the identification of its possible completion, on the basis of syntactic, pragmatic and prosodic cues (see also [Ford and Thompson, 1996](#); [Selting, 2000](#)). Furthermore, non-verbal resources (e.g. gaze, gestures, posture, etc.) of both speakers and recipients have also been shown to play a central role in managing turn-taking in spoken interaction. Such resources are found for example in pre-turn-beginning positions where they project the imminent launching of a turn (e.g. [Mondada, 2007](#); [Streeck and Hartge, 1992](#)), as well as in the environment of turn-endings where they organize transition to another speaker or activity (e.g. [Mondada, 2006](#); [Streeck, 2007](#)). The relevance of such non-verbal conducts for participants as well as their relation to the verbal talk is precisely the topic of the present special issue.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In this article 'verbal' and 'linguistic' are used interchangeably and refer to lexico-grammatical and prosodic features (see [Ford et al., 2012](#)) independently of their production in spoken language (vocal) or sign language (spatio-visual).

In sign language studies (henceforward: SL studies), the study of verbal conducts has largely been prioritized to date. Since the late 1970s, research has shown how sign language grounds in a proper linguistic system through the description of its conventionalized linguistic signs and grammatical rules. To this end, linguists differentiate between verbal and non-verbal features of sign language, separating for example non-linguistic gestures from linguistic signs. This separation is commonly implemented on the basis of the possibility for morphological variation of a handshape or native signers' judgments of grammaticality. Nevertheless, the merging of verbal and non-verbal conducts within one modality makes it difficult for the analyst to make a clear-cut differentiation between these entities in sign languages. In a similar vein, a specific concern for sign language studies is to determine where in the flow of continuous signed talk a verbal sign starts and ends (e.g. McCleary and Leite, 2013). In fact, the embedding of signs within the spatio-visual unfolding of hands in motion implies that they are preceded by a preparation movement of the hands and followed by either a transition movement to a next sign or a retraction movement back to rest position. These movements are usually regarded as not having any linguistic status and are accordingly treated as non-verbal conducts. Likewise, the temporary freezing of the end position of a sign (i.e. handshape, location and orientation are held steady) called a 'hold' is a further feature of SL talk that constitutes a challenge for the differentiation between verbal and non-verbal components.

Fig. 1 provides an illustration of a hold of the lexical sign for 'sentence' in Swiss German Sign Language. The sign is referred to with a gloss, i.e. a German word that functions as an approximate translation (glosses are conventionally written in capitalized letters).

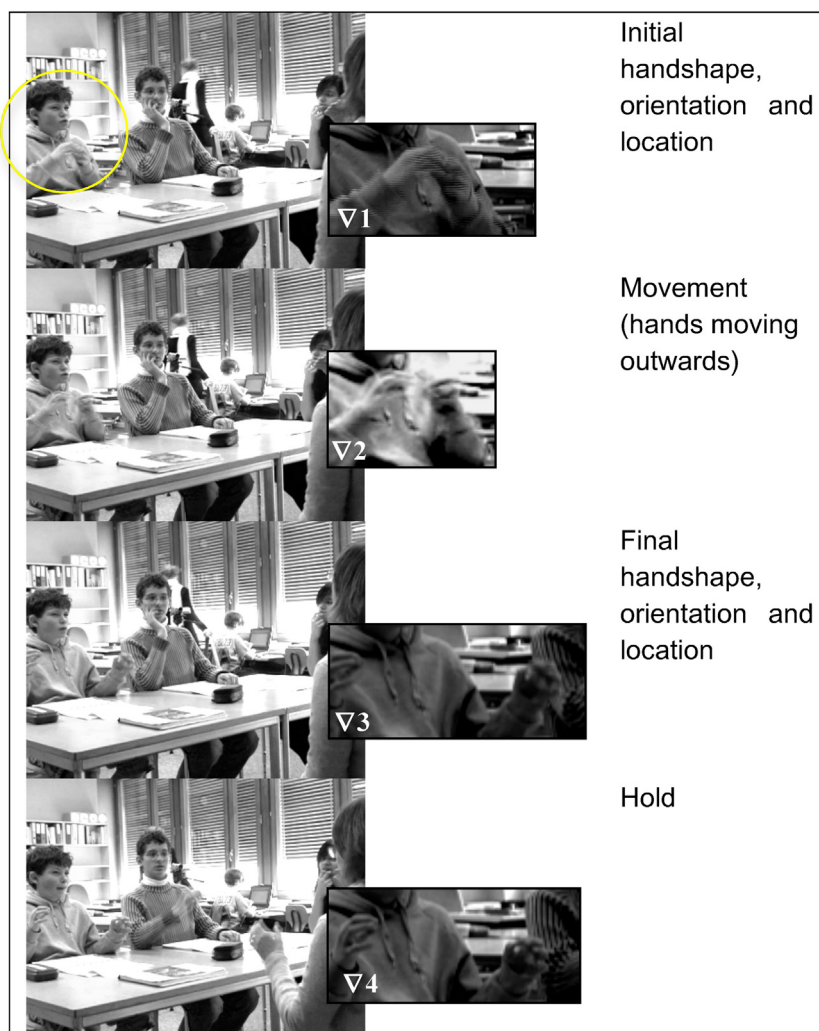


Fig. 1. Lexical sign SATZ 'sentence'.

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