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2014

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The Nature of Signs:
Nepal's Deaf Society, Local Sign, and the Production of Communicative Sociality

By

Elizabeth Mara Green

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Anthropology

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor William F. Hanks, Chair

Professor Lawrence Cohen

Professor Eve Sweetser

Fall 2014

The Nature of Signs:

Nepal's Deaf Society, Local Sign, and the Production of Communicative Sociality

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By Elizabeth Mara Green

Abstract

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This dissertation centers on two sites in deaf Nepal to examine how the relationship between communication and sociality is constituted, negotiated, and discussed in circumstances when language cannot be taken for granted.

The decades following the founding of Nepal's first deaf school in 1966 have witnessed the simultaneous emergence and dissemination of "deaf society" and the communicative practices now known as Nepali Sign Language (NSL). Despite growing numbers of deaf-run organizations and educational facilities for the deaf, NSL signers still constitute a very small percentage of all deaf Nepalis. This dissertation is based on extensive fieldwork with both NSL signers and with deaf people who communicate using what NSL signers call "natural sign," a limited repertoire of signs shared by deaf and hearing people.

The first part of the dissertation focuses on NSL signers in Kathmandu. Drawing on participant-observation and video-recorded speeches, interviews, and conversations, I show that older NSL signers remember – and take credit for – the emergence of NSL as an historical event, that younger NSL signers recall acquiring it in childhood or even adulthood, and that NSL signers of all ages also regularly use natural sign to communicate with hearing people and deaf people who do not know NSL. Shaped by this particular sociolinguistic field, I argue, NSL signers both value NSL and recognize that communication is possible in its absence. Yet the latter, deaf discourses reveal, is characterized by interactional vulnerability, as hearing people in particular may treat deaf people as unintelligible.

The second part of the dissertation concentrates on my research in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe Village Development Committees (eastern Nepal) with participants in an NSL class for adults. Through participant-observation and video-recordings of interactions, I analyze signers' extant everyday communicative practices with each other, with hearing family members and neighbors, and with the deaf NSL teacher. I show that interactions in "local sign," as Nepali speakers in the area say, are characterized by a high degree of conventionality, as well as by a patchwork of understanding and not-understanding. In the final chapter I track how hearing participants in signed conversations display and enact shifting orientations that both reflect and affect the possibilities and limitations of unfolding interactions. Echoing NSL signers' own critique of

deaf-hearing relationships, I demonstrate that the production of deaf people as intelligible signers requires willing addressees.

The dissertation makes five inter-related contributions to research at the intersection of linguistic anthropology, cultural anthropology, sign language linguistics, and Deaf Studies. First, it offers detailed ethnographic descriptions of deaf society in Kathmandu and of deaf villagers in eastern Nepal. Second, it provides fine-grained analyses of interactional practices among deaf and hearing local signers and between deaf local signers and an NSL signer. Third, it demonstrates that natural and local signing practices exceed scholarly categories of signed communication. Fourth, it reveals how communication, particularly when the linguistic system is lean and unevenly shared, is fundamentally ethical in nature. Finally, it brings together academic and deaf NSL signers' own theories to analyze the ethics of communication.

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Acknowledgements

My debts are innumerable and span several continents.

In academia

I am deeply grateful to my dissertation committee. My adviser William (Bill) Hanks has had abiding confidence in me and in this project since he first invited me to work with him. He has long seen in my project possibilities that I am only now beginning to sense, and I am humbled by his vision. The language of linguistic anthropology that I speak is his, and for this I am immensely grateful. Lawrence Cohen is a generous, brilliant, and intellectually promiscuous interlocutor (I mean that in the most admiring way). I am especially thankful for his ability and willingness to engage, wholeheartedly and knowledgably, with absolutely any topic. Eve Sweetser is my “outside” member, but not at all an outsider to the project or to my education. Her enthusiastic embrace of iconicity has been inspirational. I am also deeply appreciative of her leadership in the Gesture Group community, her potluck dinners, and the spirit of collegial interdisciplinary enquiry she has fostered. Thank you also to Saba Mahmood for her close engagement with post-colonial theory and questions of difference and for being a central member of my orals committee. Each of these scholars has shaped my thinking and writing in ways that will continue to reverberate long after I leave Berkeley.

I also want to thank Deborah Gewertz, my undergraduate adviser at Amherst College, whose anthropology courses hooked me forever. Her intellectual and emotional guidance and her kindness are always with me.

To the staff of the anthropology department, my sincere thank you for your assistance in this lengthy journey. In particular, I want to thank Ned Garrett, Tom Bottomley, Linda Eason, Kathleen Gallagher, Bettina Lewis, and A-Niesha Sapp.

For funding of coursework and writing, I am grateful to the UC Berkeley Department of Anthropology, the A. Richard Diebold, Jr., Fellowship in Linguistic Anthropology, the National Science Foundation, and the George A. De Vos Memorial Award. For funding of pre-dissertation language learning and preliminary research, I thank the Foreign Language and Area Studies program administered by UC Berkeley. For dissertation support, my sincere gratitude goes to the Fulbright-Hays program, the Social Science Research Council, and the Wenner-Gren Foundation.

For their support and love, thank you to all the members of my cohort, especially Andy Hao, Larisa Kurtovic, Marcus Moore, Yancey Orr, Alysoun Quinby, Amal Sachedina, and Jade Sasser. Thank you to Nathaniel Dumas for his encouragement and for hosting inspiring data-sharing sessions. Xochitl Marsilli-Vargas, thank you for the camaraderie and the knowledge that we faced similar challenges. Peter Graif, I am grateful for our friendship and our conversations. Bharat Venkat, thank you for teaching me to pick up the phone. Most especially I am grateful to Michele Friedner and Terra Edwards. I am so fortunate that you are not only intellectual comrades but also dear friends. Thank you for believing in me so fully.

Members of the Word Liberators, thank you for these last few months of support. I am so glad to have been part of this amazing community. Particular thanks to Driver8 for her honesty and reassurance and to Jake for reminding me that today is a good day.

Text, transcripts, maps, videos, photos

Big thanks to Jake Cumberland, Liz Kelley, Xochitl Marsilli-Vargas, Katherine Martineau, and Bruno Reinhardt for reading and commenting on drafts of chapters, bigger thanks

to Bharat Venkat for reading and commenting on the entire penultimate draft, and biggest thanks to Michele Friedner for reading and commenting on not only that draft but also earlier drafts of several chapters. I am so grateful for your encouragement and engagement.

I also want to thank Shristi Ghimire for her enthusiastic and painstaking assistance with transcribing multiple interactions. Thank you to Abinash Pradhan as well for careful transcription of a key speech. And thank you to Himali Dixit, Bicram Rijal, and Mark Turin for listening to and giving me input on several key lines of speech.

A heartfelt thank you to Karen Minkowski for her generous help with all the maps and the social contact table, and to Steven Green for meticulous copy-editing.

To Michael W Morgan for assisting with my transcription key, and to him, Upendra Khanal, and Peter Graif for sharing ideas about the linguistics of Nepali Sign Language (NSL), my sincere thanks.

Thank you also to Bhola Thapa and Mindi Sue Spike Shepherd, who took many photographs and filmed many videos. Since we often shared a camera, I do not know who took which photographs, so I have not been able to give them the credit they deserve on individual photos.

I feel lucky to have had assistance and input from all these people, and of course I take full responsibility for any errors.

Fieldwork

I am humbled by and grateful for the hospitality and help provided to me by so many people in Nepal, some of whom I met only once and others of whom are dear friends or *banaeko* ‘made’ family.

My first experiences in Nepal in 2002 were indelibly shaped by my participation in Pitzer College’s Pitzer in Nepal program, and I am grateful to all my teachers (formal and informal). Special thanks to my Nepali language teachers BB-ji, Sadhana-ji, and Prabha-ji. In later years, Laxminath Shrestha and Sadhana Shrestha both provided rigorous and gentle tutelage in Nepali. To my NSL teacher, Kiran Acharya, thank you for welcoming me into your class without hesitation.

To my families in Arubari and Lazimpat: who would I be without you? The Thapas – Ama, Ba, Shyam Dai, Tara Bhauju, Apsara Didi, Mansara Bahini, Suman Bhai, and my sweet boys Bipin, Sudip, and Sujal – thank you for being my first and forever home in Nepal. The Shresthas – Deepak-ji, Rita-ji, and my beloved *bahini* Dristi – you opened your house to me sight unseen, and our hearts are now joined. The Pandit Chhetris just down the lane in Arubari – Hajurama, Hajurba, Ama, Ba, Didi, and Kamal Bhai – thank you for countless cups of tea and conversations in the sun. And the Shresthas in Kuleshwar – Laxmi-ji and the late Bilayti-ji – thank you for treating me not as a student but as a member of the family.

The first half of my dissertation fieldwork was conducted under the auspices of the Fulbright Nepal Commission. My thanks to the entire staff, especially Laurie Vasily and Basu Manandhar, for their support. To fellow Fulbrighters Emma Condon, Bryan Bushley, Anne Mocko, and especially Miranda Weinberg, thank you for friendship and good times.

Without the extraordinarily welcoming attitude of a variety of deaf organizations, my research would never have been possible. Over the years I have had the pleasure of getting to know many people who have generously helped orient me to the world of deaf society. I am especially indebted to the National Federation of the Deaf Nepal, the Kathmandu Association of the Deaf, the Old Deaf Project, and the Skill Training Institute for the Deaf, and to these

organizations' board members, office staff, interpreters, and members/participants. Particular and heartfelt thanks to Kiran Acharya, Laxmi Acharya, KP Adhikari, Sunil Ale, Kalpana Bajracharya, Bikash Dangol, Parita Dangol, Laxmi Devkota, Tsering Ghale, Anju Ghimire, Bidhya Ghimire, Manju Ghimire, Nagendra Gurung, Ranju Hamal, Raghav Bir Joshi, Dinesh KC, Prasamsa Khanal, Upendra Khanal, Sanu Khimbaja, Shyam Lama, Sunita Lama, Anita Maharjan, Dhan Maharjan, Manisha Maharjan, Suresh Shahi, Pratigya Shakya, Deepak Shakya, Surjan Shakya, Dipawali Sharma, Rajendra Sharma, Chheeri Sherpa, Tsering Sherpa, Chaya Shrestha, Ramesh Shrestha, Tulasi Das Shrestha, Sachin Shrestha, Shreejana Singh, Manish Subba, Thulobhai Timilsina, Satyadevi Wagle, and Bishnu, Pramila, Shambhu, and Sushil, whose last names I never recorded. Many of you not only tolerated my presence and assisted me in learning NSL, conducting research, and so much more, you also became my friends.

Thank you as well to the students in my English class, for teaching me more than I taught you: Suman Aryal, Kamal Basnet, Anju Gurung, Siddhartha KC, Rashan Labh, Sangay Lama, Mahendra Limbu, Laxmi Magar, Rajkumar Phuyal, Vivek Rai, Archana Sainju, Suraj Shrestha, Dipendra Thapa, Punam Thapa Shrestha, Roshan, Karun, Sabita, and Uday.

To Uttam Maharjan, my *bhāi*, and Rasila Tamang, my *bahini*, thank you for becoming my family and for taking such good care of me, especially when I was sick. To Sunita Sherpa, my *buhāri*, thank you for accepting me with wide-open arms. To Uttam and Sunita's twin baby girls: I can't wait to meet you.

I spent many lovely hours at the Old Deaf Project (ODP), and I am grateful to each and every participant for their generous embrace and for teaching me so much about communication beyond conventional language. Many asked me to maintain their anonymity, so I will only list those who agreed to let me use their names: Samundra Nepal, Mohanidevi Shrestha, Prasuram Shrestha, and Krishna Shrestha.

Thank you to several cohorts of participants at the Skill Training Institute for the Deaf for welcoming me into your classes and onto your rooftop terrace with open arms. Special thanks to Gita, Joti, and Shanti from the 2010 cohort.

To Coco Roschaert, thanks for being a great roommate and for much laughter.

For her assistance with arranging for me to go to Maunabudhuk, my thanks to Bidhya Ghimire, and for meeting me in Dharan and guiding me to Maunabudhuk, my thanks to Shrawan Lal Rai.

I am grateful to Maunabudhuk Village Development Committee (VDC) for free medical care and extraordinary hospitality. In the bazaar where I lived, my daily life was made pleasurable by the company of Sobha and Indra Khatri, their son Aryan, and their extended families, especially Dimpal, and by that of Durga Chemjong, Purna Maya "Mal Didi" Basnet, Achyut and Anita Dahal and their daughter Ayusha, Matrika Didi and her husband and children, Jenisa "Maili" Limbu, Tatu Limbu, Tatu's mom, Bindi Pariyar and her two sons, and many others.

I am profoundly indebted to each and every participant in the NSL class, for letting me join you every day and for challenging my vision of what language looks like. Dewi Basnet, Hira Basnet, Laxman Bishwakarma, Om Ghimire, Trilochan Giri, Bhim Limbu, Dhan Limbu, Kanchi Maya Limbu, Maili Limbu, Man Kumari Limbu, Nil Limbu, Amrita Pariyar, Chandra Tamang, and Kamal Yakkha: your communicative skills continue to awe me. To you and to the members of your families, my sincere thank you for welcoming me into your homes, video camera and all, for feeding me, for talking to me, for teaching me.

And to Bhola Thapa, NSL teacher, whose linguistic, social, and geographical expertise made my work in Maunabudhuk feasible, and whose friendship made it a joy.

To all who put their trust in me as a researcher, I hope that this document does not fail you.

Back in the US

From the time I was born, my parents, Steven Green and Karen Minkowski, have modeled profound curiosity about and respect for places and people across the globe. They taught me to travel from a young age, and encouraged my love of learning and of languages. I am incredibly grateful to be their daughter. Thank you for the unwavering support and for having such faith in me and my endeavors. Thank you as well to my grandparents William and Lillian Minkowski, my sister Rebecca Green, my aunt Sherry Minkowski, and my cousins Leah Emkin and Nina Emkin, for their love and support.

My roommate of the past six months, Jennifer Smith, bravely decided to live with a stranger in the final throes of dissertation writing. She has been nothing but encouraging and supportive.

It would be remiss of me (not to mention out of character) if I did not thank my animal companions. Donner, Turtle, and Chow Puppy live on forever in my heart. Zoey, Phoebe, and Jelly brighten my days and remind me of the importance of simple pleasures: walking in the redwoods, swimming in the creek, and snuggling on the couch.

Finally, my love and gratitude to Mindi Sue Spike Shepherd. From the first overwhelming semester of grad school through the ups and downs of fieldwork writing and into the struggle of dissertation writing, she offered steadfast love, support, and faith in my goodness and my capacities. Her desire and ability to communicate with deaf Nepalis – both NSL and natural signers – not only made me happy, it also helped to shape my understanding of communicative ethics. I cannot imagine having made this journey without you.

Notes I

1. On names

In this dissertation I use real names for all places and organizations because those people to whom the difference between a pseudonym and a real name would matter are part of the social worlds in which the real names are already known or easily ascertainable. For people I use both real names and pseudonyms. In some cases, my interlocutors clearly approved the use of their own names; in other cases, they clearly wanted not to be named.¹ In still other cases, in an example of the communicative difficulties that are one of the central themes of this dissertation, we were unable to understand each other: they did not understand my question about the use of real names and/or I did not understand their answer and/or one or both of us did not understand that we understood/were understood. In such cases I have used my best judgment, informed primarily by conversations with informants' consociates. Finally, I have given pseudonyms in several instances because of the specific material discussed. I provide further explanation of such instances in footnotes.

2. On sign

Throughout this dissertation I employ three terms to name deaf and hearing Nepalis' signing practices: *Nepali Sign Language*, *natural sign*, and *local sign*. All three are names used by Nepalis. More specifically, Nepali Sign Language and natural sign are translations from NSL; local sign is an English-language phrase used by Nepali speakers. I discuss each of these terms in more detail in Chapters 1 and 2, but it is helpful to note briefly the following.

Nepali Sign Language, which I abbreviate NSL, refers to the sign language that has emerged in Nepal in the decades following the founding of the first deaf school in 1966 and the first deaf-run organization in 1980. NSL is used in deaf schools, associations, and social networks across the country, and NSL signers understand themselves to share a single language.

NSL signers use the term *natural sign* to designate various modes of signing that are neither NSL nor a foreign sign language. These modes are characterized by the situations in which they are used: between foreign and Nepali deaf people, between deaf NSL signers and hearing Nepalis who do not sign NSL, and between deaf Nepalis who do not know NSL and either deaf NSL signers or hearing people. For the latter two, interlocutors draw on widely available, if limited, signed repertoires. These repertoires, according to both NSL signers' reports and my own observations, are somewhat conventional. I use the term natural sign to refer to these repertoires as well as to their objectification by NSL signers.

Nepali speakers in Maunabudhuk, a village in eastern Nepal where I conducted fieldwork, use the term *local sign* to refer to the signed communicative practices used by deaf and hearing residents in Maunabudhuk and the adjoining village of Bodhe. They said this phrase in English in otherwise Nepali utterances. In the contexts in which I heard this phrase, it was meant to distinguish between local signing practices and Nepali Sign Language. In addition to this meaning, I also use the term to distinguish the phenomenon in question from extant scholarly classifications such as home sign and village sign language. Indeed there is some tension between my uses of the term local sign as a way to refer to signed practices in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe and as a category. This tension is, I hope, productive in that it raises questions about what kinds of generalizations can be made about communicative practices that are so deeply tied to their context.

The referents of local sign and natural sign are overlapping but not equivalent. What Nepali speakers in Maunabudhuk – and I – call local sign, NSL signers call natural sign. What

NSL signers call natural sign, meanwhile, encompasses a broader set of practices and situations than local sign; natural sign includes, as mentioned above, improvised communication between signers of different languages. Moreover, the practices and settings of natural sign elsewhere in Nepal undoubtedly bear both similarities to and differences from local sign in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe.

3. On semiotic representations

3.1 *Signed*

When my goal is to represent the material form of a sign or signed utterance, I include an image or series of images. These images are photographs, freeze frames from videos taken during fieldwork, or copies of illustrations from the NSL dictionary published in 2003 by what was then known as the Nepal National Federation of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (NFDH).² Each image functions either to represent itself as a particular *token* of a sign or to represent the *type* of which it is a token (or in the case of an illustration, the type of which it is a representation).

I also use glosses, written in CAPITAL LETTERS in accordance with standard practice in sign language linguistics. Since many of my examples involve two or three different modes of communication, I use a slash to indicate the simultaneous articulation of sign and speech, as in GLOSS/word, and **BOLD CAPS** to distinguish NSL from local or natural sign. In examples that only involve NSL, however, I use regular caps. These and other conventions are listed in Appendix 1 for easy reference, while example-specific notations are explained in the text.

Like other methods of representing language, glossing involves principles of objectification and selection. While in the case of spoken languages, glosses accompany phonetic or phonological transcriptions, glosses of signed languages frequently stand alone, that is, without representation of the material form of the signs.³ Thus it is especially important to explicitly address how I have selected the glossing language(s) and the content of individual glosses.

3.1.2 *Glossing language*

Most of the glosses are in English, since this is an English-language text. A few, however, are in Nepali, represented by *ITALICIZED CAPS*. Slobin (2008:122) argues that it is “misleading to read an article written in English about a sign language from another country – say Germany – and find capital-letter glosses in German, as if DGS [German Sign Language] were a form of German.” While I recognize the danger in perpetuating the myth that sign languages are merely versions of spoken languages, I also think it is important to recognize the semantic, syntactic, pragmatic, and meta-linguistic links between spoken and signed languages (see e.g. Green 2009). When such links are relevant to the analysis, I give a Nepali gloss followed by an English translation.

3.1.3 *Content of glosses*

In the case of Nepali Sign Language, I follow the English and/or Nepali glosses given in the Nepali Sign Language dictionary (Nepal National Federation of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing 2003).⁴ When I do *not* use the standard gloss, I mention it in a footnote for the sake of people familiar with the language and dictionary.

There is no dictionary or other written documentation for natural and local sign. The interlocking issues involved in choosing a gloss are most easily understood through a detailed example. Take for example the sign in Figure 1, a conventional sign in natural/local sign in several places including Maunabudhuk and Bodhe. Note that the sign is articulated by mimicking an action – writing⁵ – that is typical of and comes to represent a place where it is performed –

school (we can leave aside whether the sign denotes a particular school or the concept of a school).⁶



Figure 1: The sign in question

Based on this very minimal account of the sign's semiotics, there are already multiple glossing options: TO.WRITE, WRITING.PLACE, PLACE.OF.WRITING, SCHOOL, and so on. (The period between the capitalized words is used when multiple English words represent a single sign; see Appendix 1). As the options I have listed indicate, I must first decide with which word class to represent the sign. In the given example, the sign is usually used to denote a physical location or social space, that is, not to denote the action of writing itself. Yet we could ask, when someone signs SCHOOL followed by a comment about what happens there, should we interpret the sign to mean "at school" or "when I am at school" rather than "school"? In other words, might a place function as a marker of time? My answer is yes, and that I do not intend for the gloss itself to account for the complex pragmatics involved on the part of both signer and addressee. Put simply, I gloss the sign with a noun.

As to *which* noun or noun phrase, a gloss like WRITING.PLACE has the advantage of making somewhat explicit a key aspect of the semiotics through which the sign denotes its object.⁷ Such a gloss, however, is pragmatically and stylistically marked in a way that the sign is not, so I use SCHOOL instead.

In context, the sign can also function to indicate a person's involvement in a school, as when someone is identified as being a teacher with this sign in combination with other signs such as a point. We might ask whether in such cases, this sign *means* "teacher," or whether it *means* "school" and the identification of a person as a teacher is pragmatically achieved through frame metonymy, knowledge that persons associated with schools of a certain age are likely to be teachers, and so on. For the sake of consistency, and because pragmatic inferences play a critical role in how natural/local sign systems function, I use the gloss SCHOOL even when the sign is used to identify someone as a teacher. In other words, my rule of thumb is to gloss signs as simply as possible rather than to cram an analysis of semiotic representation and social processes of understanding into the gloss. Such analyses are the core of Chapters 3 and 4.

3.1.4 Two exceptions

Especially in Chapter 1, I represent some signed utterances in their translated form without accompanying glosses. In some such cases I use a gloss within the broader English translation to emphasize that a particular sign was used.

For NSL concepts that I use as ethnographic analytics (e.g., DEAF SOCIETY, NATURAL.SIGN), I use CAPS to reference the sign itself and regular font to discuss the

concept, making adjustments such as removing a period (e.g. NATURAL.SIGN → natural sign). Of course at times it is hard to distinguish between the sign and the concept in a particular sentence.

3.2 *Spoken and written*

To represent the material forms of spoken and written Nepali (the only non-English, non-signed language transcribed in the dissertation), I use a modified version of the International Alphabet for Sanskrit Transliteration (see Appendix 2). This system functions for both transcription and transliteration, since written Nepali is fairly phonologically accurate, at least for the varieties of Nepali with which I am dealing. Within the body of the text, Nepali words are set off by *italics* and followed immediately by a regular-font translation in single quotes. On occasion I also provide interlinear glosses, following spoken language linguistics conventions. Proper names are an exception; I write them without diacritics and do not italicize them.

3.3 *Signed, spoken, and written*

Transcriptions of sign are all my own. Nepali transcriptions are the work of Shristi Ghimire, Abinash Pradhan, Himali Dixit, and/or myself, as indicated in footnotes.⁸ Translations into English, whether from sign or speech, are all my own unless otherwise indicated.

4. **On deaf**

Readers familiar with Deaf Studies will immediately notice that I do not employ the distinction between “Big-D Deaf” and “little-d deaf.” In the United States, where this distinction arose in the 1970s (usually attributed to Woodward 1972), as well as in other places where it is now used, *Deaf* is associated with Deaf cultural identity, alignment with other Deaf people, and using and valuing a shared sign language. Lower-case *deaf* is in contrast associated with the medically defined inability to hear and/or with a deficiency-based model of deafness. The mixed-case *d/Deaf* is also used. This distinction, which gets reproduced even in *d/Deaf*, is inseparable from the histories, social processes, and analyses that produce(d) and are indexed and enacted by it (for a similar point, see Mathur and Napoli 2011:7). To apply these historically and culturally specific dynamics to Nepal would obscure more than it would illuminate, and would, I believe, naturalize teleological narratives in which non-Western (for lack of a better term) ways of being deaf and of being deaf together are understood as inevitably coming to be like those in the West (see Friedner and Kusters 2014, Green 2008). In this dissertation, then, I use the lower-case *deaf* as the least marked option available in written English; it is not intended to signify the lower-case meanings of *deaf* that exist in opposition to and relation with *Deaf*.

It is worth noting that when I first went to Nepal in 2002, the examples I saw of deaf Nepalis’ written English, such as on the national deaf organization’s website, used only the term *deaf*. (In written Nepali there is not a distinction between upper and lower case letters.) In the last few years, I have seen a few deaf Nepalis post on Facebook using *Deaf* or both *Deaf* and *deaf*.⁹ These posters include in particular persons who have pursued education outside of Nepal. My point is not, of course, that such experiences render their orthographical choices inauthentic, but instead that it is important to analyze rather than take for granted connections between deaf (and Deaf) communities worldwide.

In fact, the first post I saw that explicitly contrasted *deaf* and *Deaf* Nepalis actually creatively reinterpreted the original binary in order to distinguish between supporters of different varieties of NSL (though not the focus of this research, see Chapter 1 for a brief account of the practices and politics involved in these differences). It is precisely in order to remain attentive to these and other particularities that I have not used the distinction myself. More broadly, by refraining from using *Deaf* for every deaf person I write about as well as from trying to decide

who is *Deaf* and who is *deaf*, my goal is to recognize and make space for the specific histories, structuring logics, and communal and individual experiences of and in deaf Nepal.

5. On tense

I use several tenses in ethnographic passages: present tense for describing a state of affairs that I have no reason to believe has changed over time (e.g. “The organization also coordinates with government offices,” “About ten percent of the population is ...”) and past tense for specific events (e.g. “The conference was held in December,” “He told me that...”). I also employ present tense in detailed descriptions of interactive exchanges (e.g. “At 9:36 in the video, she turns to her daughter”). The mixture of tenses is intended to make it clear that my research and analysis are historically situated (that is, not timeless), while still following the conventions of English narrative.

Introduction

Introduction

This dissertation is about how deaf Nepalis engage in signed communicative practices with each other and with hearing Nepalis. The overarching theme is the relationship between sociality – that is, being with others – and communication – that is, talking with others – in situations where language cannot be taken for granted. I refer to this relationship, which is both an object of (my) analysis and an object of (my informants’) discourse, as communicative sociality. In the following chapters, I examine how communicative sociality is constituted, negotiated, and commented on in my two primary field sites: Kathmandu in central Nepal and Maunabudhuk and Bodhe in eastern Nepal (see Figure 2).

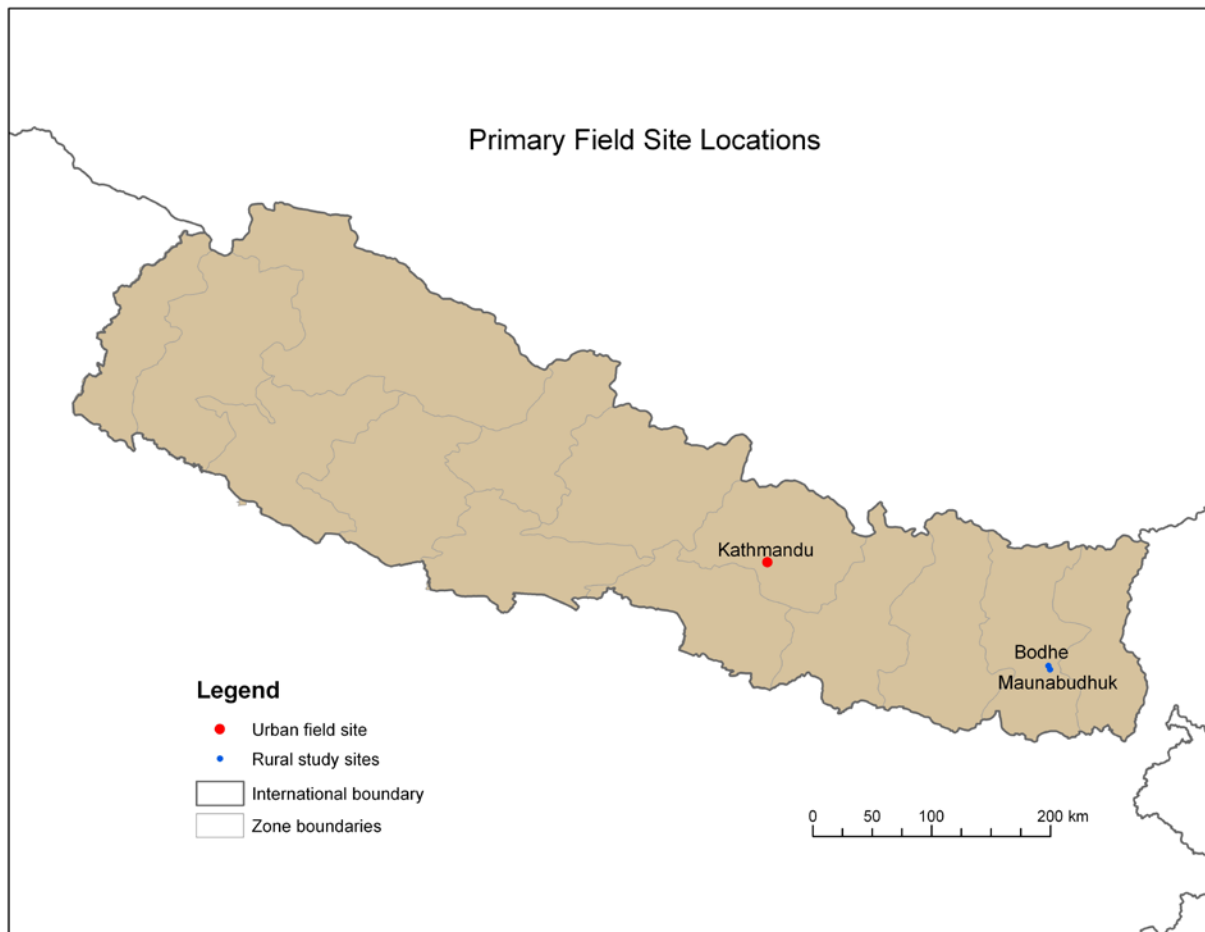


Figure 2: Map of field sites¹

Kathmandu is historically and at present the social and organizational center of what Nepali Sign Language signers call *BAHIRĀ SAMĀJ* 'DEAF SOCIETY,' an existing and imagined network of actual and potential deaf Nepali Sign Language (NSL) users. As mentioned in Notes I and as discussed in more detail in Chapter 1, what is now known as NSL has emerged over the past 35-50 years. The oldest generations of NSL signers lay claim to its very creation, younger generations of NSL signers have learned it upon entering deaf schools as children or

when they attended NSL classes as adolescents or young adults, and new generations continue to learn NSL in these settings. In the collective life of deaf society, then, as well as in the lives of individual deaf signers, the existence or acquisition of language in the sense of a fully elaborated, communal resource is a discrete historical event. NSL signers, moreover, make up a very small percentage of all deaf Nepalis (see Appendix 3).

NSL signers in Kathmandu, and elsewhere in Nepal, also communicate in what they call NATURAL.SIGN, which are limited signed repertoires widely shared by hearing and deaf Nepalis (see Notes I and Chapter 1). Even after acquiring NSL, NSL signers easily and frequently switch between NSL and natural sign; they use the latter not only with hearing people but also with deaf people who are not NSL signers. In other words, NSL signers inhabit sociolinguistic fields where communicating in a full and fully shared language is not only historically but also contemporaneously contingent. In the everyday lives of NSL signers, the admixture of NSL and natural sign is the trace of this contingency.

Maunabudhuk is a Village Development Committee (VDC)² in eastern Nepal that in 2010, during my main period of fieldwork, hosted a 6-month NSL class for deaf adults both in Maunabudhuk and the adjoining VDC of Bodhe. The class was administered by Nepal's national deaf organization, the National Federation of the Deaf Nepal (hereafter NDFN).³ Prior to the class, none of the twelve adults who regularly attended had met an NSL signer or learned any NSL signs, nor, for that matter, had their hearing families or neighbors. They communicated instead in what NSL signers call natural sign and what Nepali speakers in the area call "local sign," a phrase they said in English.

As this dissertation demonstrates, local sign in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe is characterized by both conventionality and variability.⁴ Sometimes communication proceeds fluidly and without problems, as family members and neighbors exchange greetings, discuss recent events, tease each other, and make plans. Yet hearing people also describe themselves as having to "guess" what deaf signers say, and they frequently report that they cannot understand specific utterances articulated by deaf signers.⁵ I argue in Chapters 4 and 5 that such statements are both keen meta-communicative insights *and* reflections and enactments of ethical stances towards communicating with deaf people. On the one hand, deaf and hearing residents of Maunabudhuk and Bodhe take for granted that deaf people and their interlocutors communicate with their hands rather than, or in addition to, their mouths. On the other hand, the actual process and practice of communication – from the achievement of referential success to the corporeal positions and social assumptions necessary for its achievement to the affect and evaluations emergent from both easy and difficult interactions – are continually at stake.

Central Arguments and Contributions

Based on my research in these two sites, this dissertation makes two central arguments that contribute to research at the intersection of linguistic anthropology, cultural anthropology, sign language linguistics, and Deaf Studies. First, I argue that the range and character of actual signing practices in Nepal exceed current scholarly categories of signed communication and the settings in which signed communication occurs. To be more specific, natural sign in urban and rural spaces and local sign in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe both challenge the assumption – sometimes implicit, sometimes spelled out – that either deaf people communicate in *ad hoc* sign systems known as home sign because they are "isolated" or they communicate in a fully conventional sign language because they are situated either within a deaf-centered, institutionally-scaffolded community or are born into a hearing-majority community characterized by a high percentage of deaf people across multiple generation. The latter is

variously called a shared signing community (Kisch 2008), speech/sign community (Nonaka 2007), or deaf village (Branson et al. 1996, cited in Kusters 2010), and the language used there a shared sign language (Nyst 2012 adapting a term from Kisch 2008, cited in Kisch 2012a) or village sign language (Woodward 2000, cited in Nonaka 2007). The corollary of this assumption is that deaf and hearing people only communicate in unusual circumstances; natural and local signing practices disrupt these assumptions. According to deaf NSL signers' own reports as well as my own observations, deaf and hearing people in Kathmandu as well as in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe interact through sign on a regular basis. Focusing on Maunabudhuk and Bodhe in particular, I show that in terms of the sociolinguistic field or what I call "deaf demographics," this site is different from settings associated both with home sign and with village sign languages. The nature of deaf and hearing signers' communicative practices, evidencing more cross-signer conventionality than home sign but more gaps and variability in understanding than village sign languages, also makes local sign categorically distinct.⁶

My second argument is that communication is ethical in two senses. Here I follow Rumsey (2010:105) in defining ethics as "acting with regard for another person or people." I argue that communication is predicated on participants' willingness or refusal to engage, both of which entail ethical action. Moreover, communicative encounters have ethical effects, producing (un)intelligible utterances and persons.⁷ Whether or not participants engage with and understand each other depends in part on the affordances of linguistic forms as well as on habitual familiarity with those forms and with the broader context (familiarities that are at times indistinguishable, as I argue in Chapter 3). In all cases, and particularly when a linguistic system is lean, unevenly distributed, and heavily scaffolded on context, as in the case of natural or local sign, engagement and understanding also depend on the bodily, cognitive, and affective orientations of participants towards each other and towards the very possibility of intelligible communication. In such circumstances, the ethical dimensions and consequences of communication are (revealed) as foundational.

These two arguments – especially the second – are deeply informed by deaf NSL signers' powerful insights into signed practices and communicative sociality. In this sense my dissertation follows the call of Hanks et al. (2009) for an "emancipatory pragmatics," that is for research on language-in-use that treats speakers'/signers' own theories as no less astute, valid, and useful than traditional Western scholarship.

Fieldwork

This text is grounded in extensive fieldwork and in the understandings and intuitions produced by and in me during my fieldwork with deaf Nepalis. More concretely, I have relied on my fieldnotes and on video-recorded speeches, conversations, classroom interactions, and interviews. I conducted the longest period of fieldwork from the middle of September 2009 to the end of December 2010. Within that time frame, I lived in Maunabudhuk during the six months between late April and late October 2010, minus a month of travel to and from Kathmandu and in India, with the remaining nine and a half months spent primarily in Kathmandu. I have also drawn on my previous experiences and fieldwork in Nepal, beginning with my participation in Pitzer College's Pitzer in Nepal study abroad program from August 2002 to December 2002, toward the end of which I conducted three weeks of fieldwork with deaf people in Kathmandu. I also conducted preliminary dissertation research during the summer months of 2006 and 2008, mainly in Kathmandu, and in July of 2007 I met up with several Nepali delegates at the World Federation of the Deaf's World Congress in Madrid, Spain. Most recently I was able to return to Nepal for three weeks in the summer of 2012, visiting Kathmandu

and Maunabudhuk. During the 25 total months I have been in Nepal, the first four prior to beginning research with deaf people, I have also spent short periods of time in other parts of the country in order to attend deaf events and/or for pleasure travel.

Over the course of a decade-plus, I have visited deaf schools in Kathmandu, Pokhara, Lalitpur, Bhaktapur, Dolakha, and Dhankuta, observed NSL outreach classes for young women and the elderly in Kathmandu and for adults in general in Dolakha, Dhankuta, and Kathmandu, and participated in events put on by the National Federation of the Deaf Nepal and/or its affiliated district-level associations in Gorkha, Kohalpur, Pokhara, Kathmandu, Lalitpur, Bhaktapur, Baglung, and Dolakha. Such events include International Deaf Day and International Disability Day programs, communal picnics, national and district-level General Assemblies, reproductive health trainings for women, a youth leadership conference, an interpreters' conference, and a meeting on collecting data for a new volume of the NSL dictionary. With deaf friends and acquaintances I have also attended wedding feasts for deaf couples or deaf persons' relatives, celebrated New Year, Holi, Tihar, and other holidays, learned how to properly cook Nepali *chiyā* 'tea,' watched soccer matches and cricket practice, discussed the intricacies of organizational politics, ridden pillion on motorcycles, visited homes and workplaces, argued about which bus to take, wandered through Kathmandu's crowded streets in search of the perfect jacket, exchanged stories of childhood and love, and otherwise spent countless hours immersed in Nepal's deaf society.

In Maunabudhuk and Bodhe I attended the NSL class on a daily basis, took part in the everyday rhythms of bazaar life, and made frequent visits to my deaf interlocutors' homes, most located in the farmland surrounding the bazaar. In accordance with local etiquette, I would bring with me a gift of food items such as small packages of biscuits or chocolates. In return my hosts would serve a snack such as juicy slices of huge cucumbers rubbed with salt and hot chili peppers and either tea (in "high" caste and some Dalit houses) or grain alcohol (in Limbu and some Dalit houses). I cooed over children and admired livestock, listened to parents worry about their adult deaf children's futures, laughed when others made subtle and not-so-subtle jokes about marriage and sex (and made a few myself), and protested that really, I could not eat another bite or drink another sip.

I am immensely grateful for the hospitality of deaf and hearing persons in the distinct yet connected worlds of Kathmandu, Maunabudhuk, Bodhe, and elsewhere, only some of whom are mentioned by name, either in the acknowledgements or in the body of the dissertation.

Overview of chapters

Chapter 1 "Deaf Society: Communication, Responsibility, and Intelligibility" examines the world of deaf NSL signers, primarily in Kathmandu. It begins with historical information about the simultaneous emergence and spread of deaf society and the communicative practices now known as Nepali Sign Language. Against this background, I explain that although there are tensions around intra-NSL variation, NSL signers experience *BAHIRĀ SAMĀJ* 'DEAF SOCIETY' as a sphere of easy communication. This ease is deeply valued, set off by the recent historical development of NSL as a shared language as well as with individuals' acquisition of it well into childhood or even adulthood, and linked to a sense of intimacy wherein the language's creators are known persons and the language is transmitted among familiars. At the same time, fluent NSL signers are regularly called upon to engage in communication with deaf non-NSL signers and hearing people through natural sign. I argue that NSL signers' perspectives on language and sociality, and particularly their emphasis on deaf people's responsibilities to each other, are shaped by the distinct yet interwoven domains of NSL and natural sign. I show that

NSL signers value NSL for the communicative sociality it enables; yet they also see communicative sociality as potentially independent of NSL.

A close analysis of NSL signers' campaign against the word *lāto* – a derogatory term for deaf people – reveals a powerful critique of what I call interactional vulnerability, to which both NSL signers and those who use only natural sign are subject. This critique acknowledges that in some circumstances deaf people have a difficult time communicating, while insisting that such difficulties are not due to individual's inherent qualities but rather to properties of specific situations. Hence hearing people have a hard time communicating with a group of deaf signers! In addition, NSL signers suggest that deaf people are sometimes rendered unintelligible by hearing people because the latter refuse to engage with them. As members of deaf society, NSL signers claim, they are far less vulnerable to being treated as, and made, unintelligible, not only because deaf society is a domain of shared language, but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, because deaf people assume that other deaf people can make sense, thereby creating the possibility for meaningful communication. NSL signers also suggest that hearing people are more likely, though by no means guaranteed, to consider deaf people intelligible when the latter use NSL in addition to natural sign.

While in certain regards Chapter 1 stands apart from the remainder of the dissertation, which is concerned primarily with Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, it is valuable in its own right as an ethnographic account of a dense and vibrant deaf world. As suggested above, moreover, my understandings of what it is to be deaf, to communicate, to share a language, to seek or to refuse understanding in the absence of a shared language, are all indelibly marked by deaf society. In addition, my fieldwork in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe purposefully coincided with an NFDN-facilitated NSL class.⁸ Chapter 1, in other words, grounds the dissertation because my work in and about Maunabudhuk and Bodhe was – and is – socially and theoretically embedded in my much longer involvement with deaf society.

Chapter 2 “Deaf in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe: Being a Signer the Local Way” echoes my move to Maunabudhuk and situates local signing practices and their setting in relation to contemporary sign language studies. I start by describing the NSL class that was the central space in which I came to know deaf people in Maunabudhuk and they me. As a unique event in Maunabudhuk's history, the class also provided a break from the ordinary and an occasion for both hearing and deaf people to reflect on signing practices and deafness. More generally the class offered me entry into and was embedded in the broader social fields that comprise Maunabudhuk and Bodhe. After sketching the geographic and social contours of these fields, I ask how this setting relates to the settings of other forms of deaf communication described and typified by current scholarship. In order to do so, I argue, I must first address the question “who is deaf?” I answer this question ethnographically, by looking at what hearing villagers, deaf villagers, and the NSL class's deaf teacher have to say. I show that while their categories are not identical, they all encompass people who are do not hear or speak at all as well as people who can hear and speak to some degree. This point is important because work on deaf people outside of nationally scaled deaf communities tends to homogenize deaf experiences by either including only profoundly deaf people or by neglecting to mention whether or not the deaf people in question also use, and talk about using, speech. This dissertation, in contrast, explicitly acknowledges that deaf people may use speech, and that deaf as well as hearing people's communicative practices may draw on oral as well as signed repertoires. In the final part of the chapter, I turn to a consideration of what I call “deaf demographics.” I analyze the percentage of deaf people in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, the kin and marriage relations among deaf people, the

spatial distribution of their homes, and the social contact they had with each other prior to the class, and compare my data to research from elsewhere in the world. I conclude that Maunabudhuk and Bodhe bear similarities to but are substantively distinct from the settings associated with home sign systems on the one hand and village sign languages on the other. In linguistic terms as well, local sign in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe is distinct from both home sign and village sign languages, at least as they are classically defined.

Chapter 3 “The Social Relations of Grammar and the Grammar of Social Relations” documents conventional patterns in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe’s local signing practices on the level of individual signs as well as combinations of signs. Bringing together research that analyzes the characterizing (Kendon 1980b) dimension of sign language with a practice theory approach to communication (Hanks 1990, 1996), I highlight the way in which sign forms are immanent in landscapes, bodily routines, caste practices, and other domains of everyday life. I suggest that this immanence helps us to think about the wide distribution and availability of signs to both deaf and hearing people as going beyond convention in the purely linguistic sense. In the second half of the chapter, I focus on the social/semantic domain of *jāt* ‘caste/ethnicity,’ in order to provide an in-depth example of how sign forms and usages are situated in historical processes. My examination of a conversation in the NSL class conducted almost entirely in local sign also reveals that local sign, like other communicative systems, not only reflects but also provides insightful commentary on contemporary political and social dynamics.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I offer detailed analyses of conversational practices, showing that the referential and social intelligibility of local sign is predicated in part on knowledge of the system (itself not fully conventional), in part on knowledge of the world signers live in and talk about (never fully shared), and in part on the embodied willingness of signers (deaf and hearing) to engage with each other. Chapter 4 “She Says What She Says: Understanding, Not-Understanding, and Mis-Understanding” is predicated on the social fact that while hearing local signers often understand deaf local signers, they also often do not understand them. In other words, the achievement of basic referential understanding is far less guaranteed in local sign than it is, e.g., in Nepali or Nepali Sign Language. Here it is helpful to remember that while reference is only one of the functions of language (Jakobson 1960, Hymes 1995 [1962]), the other functions are usually understood as co-existing with intelligible reference (for important exceptions, see Briggs [1996] and Hanks [2012] who argue that the unintelligibility of shamans’ verbal rituals is actually critical to their healing capacity). Through close examination of conversations recorded in fieldnotes and on video, I show how both understanding and not-understanding are often based on partial understanding. Moreover the transformation of partial understanding into understanding or not-understanding was sometimes instigated by my own fieldwork practices, such as asking for translations. This chapter also suggests that hearing signers sometimes think they have understood deaf signers but have actually mis-understood them. I identify verbal mood as one of the domains in which misunderstandings are most likely to happen.

The material in Chapter 4 is important not only because it shows the situated unfolding of understanding as a social process, but also because understanding and non-understanding are differentially distributed among deaf signers. What is more, those signers whom hearing people had the most trouble understanding are also those considered by their hearing interlocutors to be unreliable narrators or even liars. In other words, iterative failures and frustrations in communication sediment into broader social evaluations of specific deaf people. Yet these evaluations also accrue to deaf people in general, an observation that resonates with deaf NSL signers’ concerns laid out in Chapter 1. More generally Chapter 4 traces the practical, theoretical,

and ethical challenges of fieldwork with people whose closest interlocutors consistently mis- or do not understand them.

Chapter 5 “The Ethical Eye and the Ethical Other” examines habitual forms of engagement and disengagement that determine whether signers get to be Speakers in participation frameworks. Following NSL signers, I also consider how signed encounters between hearing and deaf people are highly vulnerable to the whims of the former, i.e., to their willingness or refusal to even try to communicate. Situating willingness and refusal as ethical actions, I argue that previous studies of the ethics of communication for the most part have taken for granted the ethical and bodily postures that underlie participant frameworks. My work in contrast focuses on several modes of orientation – eye gaze, signing, translating, and evaluating – that reflect and constitute sometimes-conflicting stances toward communication in sign and toward deaf signers. Eye gaze in particular both demonstrates people’s beliefs that communication is possible or impossible and, simultaneously, renders it possible or impossible. Through fieldnotes-based examples and transcription of a video-recorded multi-party interaction, I track how shifting, sometimes conflicting orientations are embodied and displayed and how they affect the making and unmaking of persons in communicative sociality.

Notes I

1. On love

My understanding of the central theme of this text – the relationship between language, sociality, and the responsibilities people have for and to one another – has been shaped not only by the particular statements, actions, and activities analyzed in the following chapters, but also by the process of coming to love and be loved in particularly deaf/Nepali ways. To put this concretely: I recall going out for Tibetan food one evening in 2009 or 2010 with two deaf Nepali friends, whom I had known since 2002, along with two hearing American friends from the Fulbright program, whom I had met more recently. Throughout the meal, punctuating our lively conversations, the two Nepali men repeatedly advised the two American women on how to consume their soup such that they would neither spill it nor burn themselves. Eventually one of the women said to me in exasperation, “Tell them we’ve eaten soup before!”¹ I must not have ordered soup that night, because I was also frequently the target of ADVICE from both deaf and hearing Nepalis, sometimes about mundane matters such as how to hand wash clothes (appreciated the first few times) but also on proper forms of conduct. In late 2010, for example, my deaf *bhāi* ‘younger brother’ chastised me for swearing even though I had done so in my own apartment, explaining that it made me seem crass and inappropriate. I cried, and then he cried, even as he explained that – this is what I remember; my departure was imminent and I had stopped writing fieldnotes – it was meaningless to have made each other siblings if he didn’t carry through on that relationship by telling me what I needed to be told. Similarly, I watched deaf people advise each other on when and how to work, what forms of gossip to ignore, how to behave with members of the “opposite” sex, etc.

These forms of advice are reminiscent of what Trawick (1990) writes about her involvement in a Tamil family’s daily affairs. When one of the women with whom Trawick lived advised her not to look at her (Trawick’s own) son too lovingly, lest doing so cause harm, Trawick told her that “it was our custom to let people lead their own lives” (ibid:93). Trawick writes, “[S]he said simply, ‘Tappu [That is a mistake].’ After some time I learned that *if you cared about people, you would interfere*” (ibid, emphasis added, second brackets in original). I too was swept into a world where withholding one’s opinion or knowledge is asocial, and I experienced this as both the recipient of sometimes uncomfortable advice and as the advice-giver. When I first arrived in Maunabudhuk two weeks into the NSL class, for example, the deaf NSL teacher, Bhola Thapa, was spending most of class time teaching the Nepali alphabet in written and signed modalities. I thought to myself that he should spend more time teaching signs.² I mentioned to him one day that another deaf teacher I knew taught NSL signs first, and then the written/fingerspelled version. Although I did not directly suggest that Bhola change his methods, he began to spend more time on signs, implying that class was more enjoyable that way. At the time, I rationalized my “interference” in my fieldnotes by noting that prior to his first teaching assignment (he had taught two other classes), Bhola was scheduled to go to Kathmandu for teacher training but a *bandh* ‘strike, shutdown’ had prevented him from doing so.³ I would now say that the ethical imperatives of deaf society to participate, not only observe, and to share knowledge (see Friedner 2011) overrode my concerns about interfering with his teaching, concerns that are perhaps grounded in problematic notions of difference and even observational neutrality.

Giving advice to – taking responsibility for the conduct and sociality of – others is by no means restricted to deaf people, as my use of Trawick indicates. Nevertheless, deaf people

frequently framed it as a particularly deaf duty. After my friend Tsering Ghale and I ate at a Tibetan restaurant in Thamel, for example, she drove me home on her new scooter. As I described in my fieldnotes, “I told her that she could drop me off at the intersection where you turn to the house, but she drove me all the way, and then said, ‘It’s dark, deaf people help.’”⁴

2. On being hearing

Along with demonstrating how deaf NSL signers understand helping, which includes giving advice, as a critical and normative aspect of being deaf, the above anecdote also points to my own sometimes-ambiguous status as a hearing participant in deaf society. I wrote at the time, “I’m not sure if she meant that deaf people help their friends, or that deaf people help each other, where I was in the category of ‘deaf’ as in ‘people who sign and are close to me.’”⁵ I am not at all trying to claim that I was seen as deaf or that I became deaf any more than I was seen as or became Nepali – which is to say, I wasn’t and I didn’t. Yet I have seen the sign DEAF used as a first-person or third-person plural pronoun (roughly, “we” or “they”) to refer not only to a group of deaf people but also in ways that encompass hearing people such as interpreters accompanying a deaf sports team.

Friedner (2011) and Kusters (2012a) write about how powerful notions of what they gloss as DEAF DEAF SAME or DEAF SAME shape their work as deaf anthropologists studying deaf sociality, while Dikyuva et al (2012) and Hou (2013) emphasize the importance of involving deaf linguists in sign language documentation and analysis. Less attention has been paid to how conducting research as a hearing person in deaf worlds is not the same as conducting research as a hearing person in other hearing worlds. As a hearing person who has become quite fluent in Nepali Sign Language and in colloquial Nepali, I have found myself in a position different, I believe, from that experienced by most anthropologists. I am not an “insider” in the sense that I am neither Nepali nor deaf. (To be clear, neither Friedner [2011] nor Kusters [2012a] claim to be insiders in the particular communities in which they work. On the contrary, they pay keen attention to questions of national, class, educational, and racial differences, problematizing the notion of DEAF SAME while also acknowledging its effects.) Yet I have linguistic access to Nepali speakers and to NSL signers that most NSL signers and Nepali speakers, respectively, do not have. Indeed I have found myself in the sometimes pleasurable, sometimes uncomfortable role of interpreting between NSL signers and hearing Nepalis, including family members, shopkeepers, and even the police – or perhaps I should say, shopkeepers, police, and even family members. In Maunabudhuk, this situation was intensified because I was the *only* NSL signer other than the deaf teacher who lived there at the same time.

3. On epistemology and ethics

What it is to know a language, a system, a place, and what it means to interact and relate with and to others are core concerns of the dissertation. In this section I discuss how these epistemological and ethical questions run not only through the text of the dissertation and the phenomena I analyze but also through the processes involved in researching and then writing about those phenomena, particularly local sign. Put a different way, this section addresses the recursive nature of fieldwork and analysis, or methods and objects.

A fundamental precept of the dissertation is that intelligibility is a social production, a subtly different point from the anthropological axiom that *meaning* is a social production. Nevertheless, I take quite seriously the effects of shared knowledge of linguistic forms and of persons’ differential competencies that go beyond knowledge of form. When, for example, I am conversing in Nepali – a language in which I am competent but neither natively nor flawlessly

fluent – and I can’t understand my interlocutor, I can sometimes, though by no means always, figure out why: unknown lexical items, an accent I am not used to, unfamiliar syntactic constructions. If the utterances make propositional sense to me but I am still confused about “why this now,” to use Schegloff and Sack’s (1973) potent phrase, then I can assume that I missed key contextualization cues (Gumperz 1982), or that the speech genre resembles one I know but is actually different. If, on the other hand, I am the speaker and my addressee doesn’t understand or misunderstands, then I can assume that I have made a mistake in anything from phonology to pragmatics. In other words, whether I am speaker or addressee, I try to assume it is I, the non-native speaker, who has somehow failed.⁶ (Of course, in practice there are times when I get as frustrated and ego/ethnocentric as any non-native speaker.) As a fieldworker conducting research in languages other than those I command natively, to place the responsibility on myself makes analytic and ethical sense to me.

When using NSL with fluent signers, I make the same assumption.⁷ As is true of most sign languages that emerge and are transmitted in deaf schools and organizations, however, the NSL language community is comprised not only of fluent signers who have been signing for many years but also what NSL signers call NEW signers.⁸ I have found that when I encounter communicative difficulties in conversation with new signers, fluent signers frequently intervene, telling me that the other person is new. In a way, they are placing the responsibility for the breakdown in communication with the new signer. Yet when a fluent signer then mediates the conversation, as frequently happens, I am faced with evidence that the other person *is intelligible* – just not to me. Or inversely, I am the one who is unintelligible to the other person.⁹

In Maunabudhuk the situation is more complicated still. Local sign is not transmitted from one generation or cohort to the next in an obvious or regular way (see Chapter 2), and the formal system leans heavily on non-linguistic structures, knowledge, and intentions (see Chapters 3 and 5). I found that I came up against communicative barriers on a regular basis, and to some degree, I attribute this dynamic to my own inexperience. After all, I lived in Maunabudhuk for only five months of a six-month period. As mentioned in the Introduction and discussed in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5, however, I also saw others come up against similar barriers. Hearing signers, including relatives, could not always translate for their deaf kin or neighbors.¹⁰ Deaf local signers appeared frequently but by no means always to understand each other. Even Bhola, the deaf NSL teacher who could frequently communicate with hearing villagers in ways deaf local signers could not and with deaf villagers in ways hearing local signers could not, came up against dead ends.¹¹

My point here is this: it was, and is, very difficult to figure out how to understand the gaps and moments of incomprehension or unintelligibility that I both experienced and observed. In the field, and now when watching videos and writing, I am besieged by questions. *Why is understanding not achieved? Is this thing unsayable or un-understandable by the participants, including but not limited to me, or is it unsayable or un-understandable within the system itself? If the former, which participants or combination of participants and why? If the latter, whose system?* And perhaps most critically, *how might I know the difference?* I noticed that even when speaking Nepali or signing NSL with fluent speakers/signers, some people find me more intelligible than others, and I them. Such experiences suggest that understanding is more complicated than knowledge of a language, however broadly we define that phrase, and that the particular communicative relationship formed by two or more people matters. Yet because local sign as both a formal and social system of communication does not, in contrast to Nepali and

NSL, “look” like language as it is generally understood, the above-articulated questions grow exponentially more difficult to answer.

Perhaps such fundamental uncertainties and the way that local sign in particular foregrounds the relational nature of intelligibility are the reason that, as one early reader has noted, I am more present in the narrative portions of this text than is customary in the traditions of contemporary anthropology with which I am most engaged. In the sense that all anthropological fieldwork is a matter of being present in and to practices, the research and writing of this text epitomize the now-mundane observation that all ethnography is about making, not finding, knowledge (Clifford and Marcus 1986). The relationships between the ethnographer and her informants always in part constitute the context of research.¹² As Trawick (1990:24-25) puts it:

In an anthropological situation, the ethnographer, willing or not, must form part of the context of performance, part of the audience, and sometimes, part of the act. Especially in intensive, face-to-face studies of small groups of people, this must be true. A firsthand anthropological study then becomes, deliberately or not, a study of intercultural communication

When the explicit object of the study is communication, and when both the structure and the unfolding of that communication are fragile, how much more true that the anthropologist becomes “part of the ... performance, part of the audience, ... part of the act” (ibid 24-25)!¹³ More generally the way that Trawick describes the mixing of persons, and of culture through persons, is very much reminiscent of what I am claiming – and what I am claiming NSL signers are claiming – about language, not as medium, but substance, or better, as “what happens between us” (ibid:90). Put another way, ethical orientations and relations are always enfolded into communicative acts, making them (im)possible, and in the situations investigated in this text, these processes and their consequences get distilled.

4. On writing for others

When scholars write about many communicative practices, they can assume that their readers have some degree of familiarity with the subject matter – if not with the particular language, then with an analogous form. The writer can rely on the reader having at hand and being able to bring to mind a lifetime of phenomenological experiences with the practices, or the kind of practices, being objectified. (The challenge, in such cases, is to make visible what is taken for granted.) In somewhat different terms, we might say that the figure of the object of analysis takes its shape not only in relation to the ground of *analysis* but also in relation to the reader’s ground of *experience*. With natural and local sign, many of my readers will have no such phenomenological experiences; the text alone will constitute the ground.¹⁴

Writing is objectification; it has a stabilizing effect, and so first I worry about making local sign seem more systematic and more functional than it actually is. Yet I also worry about making it seem *less* systematic and less functional than it is. With local signers in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, and with natural signers in Kathmandu, I was often in absolute awe of how people communicated, easily and casually, in the absence of what most of the world – scholarly or not – thinks of as language. But I have also watched someone try to communicate something that clearly existed in her mind and that she *knew* she was representing with her signs – and yet her addressee could not grasp it.¹⁵ In what follows, I have tried to engage analytically with the paradoxical nature of natural and local sign, and also to allow my senses of both wonder and frustration to color this account.

Chapter One

Deaf Society: Communication, Responsibility, and Intelligibility

Introduction

This chapter is based on my fieldwork with NSL signers who are members of *BAHIRĀ SAMĀJ* ‘DEAF SOCIETY.’ My primary concern is to examine how deaf NSL signers experience and conceptualize language, communication, sociality, and the relationships between them. Section 1 is an account of the institutions and networks through which Nepali Sign Language initially emerged and through which it is now transmitted to a growing number of deaf people, who nevertheless make up a very small fraction of all deaf Nepalis. Older generations of NSL signers, those who at the time of writing are in their early 40s to early 50s, personally recall and proudly take credit for the emergence of NSL. Language as a shared, community-wide resource has literally come from their hands. Younger generations of signers, who have also undoubtedly contributed to the language’s development but who are not framed as linguistic originators in the same way, can remember the disorienting and exciting experience of encountering and learning NSL. In other words, they remember encountering and learning language in a way that people who learn their first language from infancy do not.¹ My account thus demonstrates that the emergence and acquisition of NSL is, within the life of the community and the individual lives of signers, an historical event. I suggest in Section 2 that because NSL signers know what life is like without NSL, they are particularly committed to ideals of standardization but at the same time highly flexible in their signing practices. Interactions without NSL are not limited to the past; in the present NSL signers not only communicate with each other, they also communicate on a regular basis with hearing people as well as with deaf people who are not NSL signers. These two spheres of sociality are distinct yet intermingled, reflected in how NSL meta-signs (signs about signing) both make and also blur distinctions between the different kinds of communicative practices experienced in those spheres; I address these signs in Section 3, before turning in the fourth section to a detailed examination of how NSL signers characterize and evaluate what they call natural sign. Sections 3 and 4 together demonstrate that according to NSL signers, communicative sociality is not *necessarily* dependent on a fully shared language as much as it is dependent on a willingness to communicate. Indeed, as I explore in Section 5, the communicative responsibilities of deaf people to each other get framed not only in terms of NSL but also in terms of attention to bodily care and appropriate behavior. On an institutional level, deaf society enacts its responsibility for other deaf people through NSL outreach classes, primarily to (places defined as) villages. The following section (Section 6) argues that deaf discourses map communicative practices and sociality onto space and time, in ways that resonate with but are nevertheless different from broader (hearing) Nepali discourses on development. In the final section (Section 7), I present a theory of situated intelligibility through the detailed analysis of deaf and hearing perspectives on several Nepali words that refer to and characterize deaf people.

1. Historical emergence and institutional structure

As with many deaf communities and sign languages around the world, the founding of Nepal’s first school for the deaf in 1966 was a critical moment in the history of Nepal’s deaf society and NSL. The school was first located in Kathmandu’s Bir Hospital; according to its founder the “hospital was not an appropriate venue for a school for special education,” and the school soon moved to its present location in Bal Mandir, a sprawling complex in the Naxal

neighborhood in central Kathmandu (Prasad 2003:117). (In NSL the school is referred to with the sign NAXAL, and I refer to it henceforth as the Naxal School.) From 1966 until 1988, the school adhered to a strict oral philosophy (Joshi 1991): the use of sign was banned and students were required to learn speech and lip-reading. Acharya (1997), a former Naxal student, remembers that if students signed, “[t]he teachers would scold them, hold their hands down, twist their ears, pull their hair, etc.” (see also Kafle and Sharma 1998).² Neither the policy nor the teachers’ actions, however, stopped the young deaf students from signing. Informants who are now in their early 40s to early 50s recall meeting up for the pleasure of using their hands to talk. As Acharya (1997) describes:

When 1:00 came, the time for tiffin, the students could surreptitiously communicate manually. After 4:00 in the afternoon students were free to talk to each other using signs after leaving school. There was no particular reason to return home early if they did not have to, since they were unable to communicate effectively with their families. Thus they would gather in a specific place after school to socialize using sign language until 7 or 8 in the evening.

Another former student, slightly younger than Acharya, described the making of NSL to me in similar terms. I wrote in my fieldnotes:

There was the younger crowd of school boys, who weren’t allowed to sign and had to sign only on the sly – they’d set times and places after school and they would meet to let their hands go crazy, signing and signing. There was also the older crowd who founded the Kathmandu Association of the Deaf. As [my friend] told it, these two groups eventually merged, and with this merging came the formation of NSL.³

According to common deaf narratives, then, NSL grew out of the communicative interactions of several generations or cohorts of deaf children and young adults who spent their days together at the Naxal School and, later, at the Kathmandu Association of the Deaf (KAD) (see also Khanal 2013). In Green (2003:86) I noted that as in the well-documented case of Nicaraguan Sign Language (see e.g. Kegl et al 1999), deaf Nepali children probably entered school using home signs, a point echoed by Morgan (2012), cited in Khanal (2013). I would now say they used natural signs. Regardless, we can see that narratives of sign language development occurring in deaf schools are present not only in scholarly texts but also in community discourses.

KAD was founded in 1980 by a group of former Naxal students and is usually considered the first deaf-run association in the country.⁴ In an interview,⁵ Bikash Dangol, a deaf leader for over three decades,⁶ remembered what it was like in the early days:

We would meet at someone’s house to get together and talk. We’d go to someone else’s house each week, rotating, for months. At some point we just kept going to Raghav [Bir Joshi]’s house, over and over, and stuck with that. We’d gather on the ground floor – the roof was kind of low – and sign and discuss things as a group.⁷

Fifteen years later, leaders from KAD and seven other regionally based deaf organizations formed what is now known as the National Federation of the Deaf Nepal (NDFN).⁸ Over the years, the number of district-based deaf associations has steadily grown, so that by the second half of 2012, the NDFN headed up a total of 29 member chapters (four more than I had recorded in late 2010).⁹

Lacking consistent and sufficient state support, NDFN has relied since its inception on INGOs dedicated to deaf and disability issues, including (over the years) the Danish Association of the Hard of Hearing (LBH), the Swedish Organization of Disabled Persons International Aid Association (SHIA), the Swedish National Association of the Deaf (SDR), and Deafway (based in England).¹⁰ The role of international players in the deaf Nepali scene goes beyond finances; foreign NGOs send staff members (both deaf and hearing) to Nepal on a regular basis, and volunteers, anthropologists, and unaffiliated travelers (mostly deaf people but also hearing signers) frequently seek out contact with deaf Nepalis. Deaf and hearing staff members from NDFN also visit the NGOs in their home countries. In addition, NDFN is a member of the World

Federation of the Deaf, an international, deaf-run organization comprised of over one hundred national members. The first time a deaf Nepali attended a WFD event was in 1987 (Joshi 1991:167). In 2007 and again in 2011, deaf delegates from Nepal (Bikash Dangol and Ramesh Lal Shrestha, respectively) were elected to the 11-member WFD board, and in 2008 Nepal hosted the WFD's Regional Secretariat for Asia and the Pacific. A few deaf Nepalis have pursued employment opportunities in the US, sometimes returning after years abroad, as well as education in India and the US.

In narratives and descriptions of their communal histories, deaf Nepalis sometimes mention the role of foreigners, as did Rajendra Sharma, a deaf leader from Pokhara, during a speech at the 2009 NDFN General Assembly opening ceremonies, which publicly commemorated the founding of the Federation (see also Joshi 1991:165-17). He recalled that following its establishment by eight district-level associations, "deaf [people] from around the world came here and taught us a lot. They encouraged us to open new deaf associations and gave us advice."¹¹ This statement is more than a simple reflection of facts. It also points to how international contacts between deaf people are embedded in broader trends in development, foreign aid, research, and tourism, including the material-discursive positioning of (deaf) foreigners as bearers of help/expertise to "developing" countries (see below for more on Nepal as a development state; see also Friedner and Kusters 2014 on deaf universalism and its discontents and Green 2008 on how critical analyses of deaf North-South relationships should take into account the specificity of deaf experiences and the structural conditions of deaf politics).

What deaf NSL signers call DEAF SOCIETY, then, consists of a growing network of NSL signers who socialize together at both formal and informal events. At KAD's offices, for example, deaf people, both members and others, not to mention hearing and deaf staff, can be found every day of the week but Saturday; on Friday afternoons in particular, they crowd the pleasant courtyard. The ever-expanding Bakery Café chain hires deaf waitstaff, providing opportunities for both employment and socializing. District-level associations as well as the NDFN hold yearly meetings, offer cultural events such as dance performances and picnics, and facilitate vocational training programs, sometimes resulting in jobs, while a Deaf Cricket League coordinates games both within the country and in India. Outside of institutional sites and events, friends get together at homes, teashops, soccer fields and restaurants. They invite each other to celebrate birthdays, rice feedings, and weddings. Indeed, marriages between deaf sweethearts are now common. My point is not of course that deaf society is without problems or internal fractures, but rather that deaf people have forged both durable spaces and iterative events in which they come together, on local, regional, and national levels.

The growth of deaf-run institutions over the past few decades has been accompanied, and in part made possible, by skyrocketing numbers of educational facilities for the deaf. Eighteen deaf schools and more than 125 deaf classes operate in nearly all of Nepal's 75 districts.¹² Many deaf classes, like deaf schools, offer residential facilities and serve a similar – though differently scaled – function: to bring deaf children, both linguistically and socially, into the wider network of deaf NSL signers. The NSL term DEAF SCHOOL includes both schools and classes. In the summer of 2006, NDFN's then-president, Bikash Dangol, addressed an audience of deaf activists, parents of deaf children, and hearing functionaries. In the context of a discussion about deaf education, he argued that establishing schools for the deaf is more urgent than establishing schools for the hearing, because hearing children who don't attend school still have a social education. From the perspective of deaf NSL signers, then, "education" is not only about acquiring skills such as Nepali, and increasingly English, literacy but also, and more

fundamentally, about acquiring a shared communal language for the first time and being part of deaf society. As we will see, however, NSL signers do not claim that communicative sociality is *only* available in NSL.

Uttam Maharjan, now in his late 20s, recalled how excited and disoriented he felt during his first day at the deaf school, at the age of eight. He had previously attended an educational program for children with disabilities, but this was his first experience in a signing environment. During the interview quoted here, Uttam was sitting next to his former schoolmate, Tsering Sherpa, who, Uttam explained, had started school a year earlier and was repeating the same grade.

So I was new, and Tsering was already a good signer, in fact he was the cleverest kid in class. And I didn't know sign. You know the posters with the NSL alphabet, those were up on the walls, and I just stood staring at them open-mouthed. Tsering got my attention and showed me the signs for the letters. I kept looking, and tried to make those signs. I didn't know sign at all. I tried and tried and tried, and I did learn.¹³

At deaf schools, deaf children not only encounter their deaf peers, but also older generations of deaf people. Although the vast majority of deaf schools are run by hearing officials, deaf schools are nevertheless tied closely to the deaf organizations outlined above and thus to deaf society more broadly. This is especially evident at the larger schools. The aforementioned Naxal School and KAD, for example, are only a few minutes apart on foot, and many older students are KAD members. Younger students also have occasion to observe and talk with deaf adults (beyond teachers and older students), including national deaf leaders, at programs such as the yearly International Disabled Day parade. Pokhara's Sirjana Residential Higher Secondary School for the Deaf runs under the auspices of the district-level deaf association, and several deaf adults hold positions in both. Several deaf adults staff the boarding facility, while the private school bus, which picks up staff and students who live at home, provides informal opportunities to witness and take part in intergenerational exchanges. Even those educational institutions that are less intimately bound to particular deaf associations are still connected to deaf society and its institutions; conferences, programs, and events put on by the NDFN and its district associations also draw attendees from schools. For example teenage girls and young women from deaf schools throughout southwestern Nepal attended the 2010 NDFN-run National Committee of Deaf Women's health training in Kohalpur. In addition, deaf adults visit deaf schools, both for institutional purposes and as individuals. For example, during the six months I spent in Dhankuta, the deaf NSL teacher visited two of the district's three deaf classes and fondly recalled visits from deaf NSL teachers back when he was a student. Such visitations are examples of the intimate responsibility deaf people feel for each other that I discuss below.

Together these schools and organizations and the social connections that run through and beyond them provide institutional and informal networks through and across which NSL and NSL-mediated sociality have been and are currently produced, circulated, and reproduced (with changes). This ongoing process has involved an active effort at standardization, particularly at the level of lexicon (Hoffmann 2008) through the material form of illustrated dictionaries and vocabulary charts. My claim is not that NSL lacks variation, but rather that deaf people from different parts of the country who sign NSL both understand each other and understand themselves as sharing a single language. We might ask how this is possible given that, according to Hundley (2011), approximately 75% of teachers of the deaf are hearing. She explains that because some of the larger schools employ more than one deaf teacher, this percentage is "skewed" (in other words, smaller schools or classes may employ *only* hearing teachers).¹⁴ Hearing teachers receive training in NSL that lasts from 10 days to 6 months. Perhaps unsurprisingly, as Green (2003), Hoffmann-Dilloway (2008), and Khanal (2012) all report,

hearing teachers sign very differently from their deaf students (see below). Indeed many deaf students and former students complain that their teachers do not communicate clearly or explain concepts deeply.

Given that many deaf classes are residential facilities taught day in and day out by a single hearing teacher, it is worth considering how deaf children end up signing in ways that are recognizable as NSL. In addition to the highly standardized lexicon, I suggest two other reasons that NSL is widely intelligible across Nepal. First, it has been argued that sign languages *may* be typologically much more similar to each other than are spoken languages (e.g. Supalla and Webb 1995, Newport and Supalla 2000), particularly in their exploitation of the affordances of spatial/diagrammatic grammar. Such affordances are frequently invoked to explain the ability of deaf signers of different languages to communicate with each other (e.g. Moody 1989, Supalla and Webb 1995); we might also think of these affordances as facilitating the formation and use of regional or national sign languages. In the case of NSL, what Morgan (p.c.) calls the “South Asian gestural base” may provide an additional foundation for cross-regional similarities within Nepal. Second, as I have shown, there is regular contact between deaf adults from different parts of the country, as well as between deaf adults and children, providing ample opportunity for linguistic forms to circulate and regularize.

2. Unity, standardization, and variation

In this section I highlight how deaf signers themselves objectify processes of emergence and standardization, particularly in relation to concerns about deaf (institutional) unity and the importance of understanding each other. In the following excerpt from a speech at the NDFN’s 2009 General Assembly, Ramesh Shrestha seamlessly links the development of sign language and its standardization, the establishment of deaf organizations, the possibility of individual deaf achievements, and the responsibilities of members of deaf society to each other.

In the period prior to deaf organizations, every deaf person walked sadly alone, without sign language, without knowledge of where to find a deaf school. At this time it was very difficult to get an education. It was even hard to know where we might air our problems, because how would we communicate? At this time, the deaf were educated orally, and learning was slow. Outside of school, however, they signed together. Through sharing signs with each other, sign language developed. The development of sign language enabled the establishment of the first deaf associations. In different districts and different places, however, sign language was different. Out of concern that this might be problematic, the different deaf associations created a standardized sign language and founded the NDFN. The NDFN continues to implement a standard sign language used across Nepal. If deaf people do not learn sign, they cannot express themselves, and if they can’t express themselves, their lives are very difficult. Looking around today at the participants in this program here in Baglung, I see the strength of our communication in sign language.¹⁵

Ramesh goes on to mention the important deaf personages who are present – including members of the NDFN board and Raghav Bir Joshi, the only deaf member of the now-dissolved first Constituent Assembly of Nepal – and points out that government ministers and high officials in the army and police have also had deaf children who have, with good education, attained self-sufficiency.

We deaf are not weak. For the development of the deaf, everyone’s assistance is necessary; without assistance, deaf people experience sadness/suffering ... I ask of all of you: learn sign language, share with each other, form strong bonds. This is how our society will develop.¹⁶

I will return to the issue of deaf people’s communicative and social responsibilities to each other below. For now, I want to emphasize how linguistic standardization and organizational unity are framed as the foundation for everything mentioned afterwards: the rise of individual deaf people, strong communication, and the development of deaf society.

Such rhetoric is not limited to political speeches. A deaf man¹⁷ in his 40s – from one of the two generations/cohorts credited with NSL’s emergence – once vehemently criticized an age-mate for opening a training center that would be unaffiliated with the deaf associations but would also teach NSL classes. He argued that monetary profits resulting from NSL should accrue to the already-extant structure of deaf associations, and that increasing the number of centers of dissemination would lead to further variations in signing.¹⁸ On a different occasion, the same man poetically compared NSL to a fish that he had fed and cared for, only to have it slip away through his hands.¹⁹ He was not claiming proprietary rights as a fisherman might to a fish but rather mourning the possibility that a language he had helped bring into existence might change so much that it became unintelligible to him, as it moved, quite literally, from his hands into the hands of others. This fear is not entirely unfounded, as people from different generations do differ somewhat in their signing, and sometimes complain about not understanding each other as fully as they do people in their own group. At a meeting on ongoing lexical work being conducted by the NDFN, a man of about the same age who had lived abroad for nearly a decade complained that some older signs were no longer in use. For people of his age as well as hearing teachers who were accustomed to this signs, he said, such changes created LOSS/WASTE. New signs were fine, he said, but signs that already existed should stay the same.²⁰

What is so interesting is that even people who adamantly insist that NSL’s norms, however defined, should be followed are not necessarily consistent in their own practices. One friend, for example, was upset that his brother-in-law, who is also deaf, had taught his little sister signs that he didn’t recognize, signs he described as *ĀPHNO* ‘his own.’ Similarly, he said, the then-competing national organizations (see Endnote 8) taught different signs. People who had learned from the one he did not support signed rain with a two sign sequence, WATER RAIN, whereas he and his social group signed RAIN – which he said conformed to the official dictionary. He made fun of the former, asking if the water in one’s drinking glass came down from the sky.²¹ Ironically, however, when I checked the dictionary later it was the two sign sequence that appeared. Similarly, the man who called NSL a fish frequently uses foreign signs, as well as signs that he and his friends credit him(self) with inventing, such as one meaning “to gain substantial knowledge through first-hand/visual experience.” Indeed many if not most deaf NSL signers exhibit incredible flexibility in moving between various signed repertoires and sometimes between spoken or mouthed ones as well. I do not want to imply, however, that all signers can inhabit any and all linguistic positions. Indeed significant tensions arise precisely because, for example, only some deaf signers (those with a better command of spoken and/or written Nepali) fully understand NSL that is heavily inflected by Nepali, a variety that many interpreters and some deaf persons use (see below).

Thus there is often an apparent dissonance between actual practices and stated meta-linguistic stances. These practices and stances – what people understand and produce, what people *say* they understand and produce, and what they say they or others *should* understand and produce – also shift in relation to context. What I want to argue here is that these seeming contradictions reflect a tension in deaf people’s experiential knowledge of communication. On the one hand, NSL as a shared code has made possible a shared sociality wherein the material means of communication can, at least in theory, be taken for granted. On the other hand, non-standard linguistic practices are known to be necessary (even with other deaf people, even with other NSL signers) and even pleasurable. Deaf people are aware that they do not all sign the same way. Khanal (2013) provides examples of lexical variation (primarily education-related signs) and minor phonological variation in signers from Pokhara and Kathmandu. He adds that

syntactic variation appeared as well but as much within as across regions, and that this variation was related to the degree of influence of spoken Nepali (see below). I noticed differences between young people's in-group vocabulary in Kathmandu and that used by Bhola Thapa, the NSL teacher who grew up signing in Dhankuta and later Jhapa (both eastern Nepal). At the NDFN conference in Kohalpur mentioned above, the signers from Kathmandu and Pokhara (most in their 20s and 30s) corrected the signers from the western schools (most in their late teens) on the articulation of the sign *JĀT* 'CASTE/ETHNICITY.' The former also commented that the girls used a local dialect and that they would have more difficulty understanding the conference material than had the audience in Pokhara. My sense was that this evaluation was based less on a meta-linguistic judgment about dialectal hierarchy and more on a meta-communicative/meta-social judgment about the girls' relatively narrower exposure to deaf society.

Hoffmann-Dilloway (2008:193, 197) has argued that standardization practices and discourses among NSL signers can be linked to contrasting linguistic ideologies and political projects, namely, whether NSL is its own language or a version of spoken Nepali. In contrast I understand deaf signers' concern with standardization to be animated by the phenomenological experiences of creating and learning NSL and of communicating with various NSL signers, as well as with non-NSL signers. Indeed, NSL signers must regularly shift out of NSL in order to communicate with others: with hearing family members, the vast majority of whom do not know sign; with shopkeepers, bus drivers, and neighborhood friends; and with deaf people who are not NSL signers whom they encounter at deaf events or in the course of everyday life. Out of this particular configuration of communicative experiences, NSL signers objectify and name different forms of signing, to which I turn in the next section.

3. NSL meta-signs

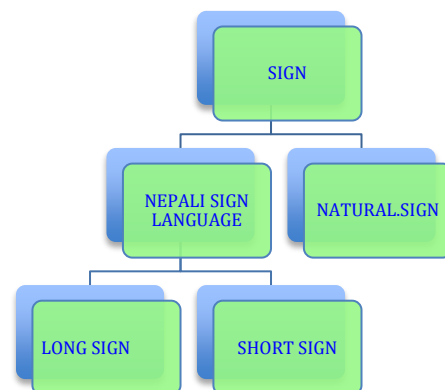


Figure 3: NSL meta-signs

The chart in Figure 3 shows the major NSL meta-signs: signs used to talk about signing. SIGN is the overarching category, encompassing NSL and natural sign, as well as foreign sign languages. (I have not included the latter because they are not an everyday topic of conversation.) SIGN does not include co-speech gesture that is not directed at deaf people (and in fact, I never saw deaf NSL signers discuss co-speech gesture as a category; the absence of this distinction makes sense given that natural sign includes bi-modal communication directed at deaf persons).

NEPALI SIGN LANGUAGE is the sign language used by deaf Nepalis who have grown up in deaf schools, socialize with other deaf people, participate in deaf-run organizations, etc. As we have seen, there are tensions around variation and change related to place and time. What are

probably the most commented-on differences, however, are those related to the relationship of NSL to spoken/written Nepali. At the very least, those are the differences that have been given name: LONG SIGN and SHORT SIGN. All forms of NSL share some features of/with Nepali, understandably so given that NSL emerged in a context where spoken and written Nepali were ubiquitous and explicitly taught (see Green 2009; Khanal 2013 seems to suggest something similar). Such relationship by no means suggest that NSL is derived from, dependent on, or a version of Nepali, or that it is not a full language. Long sign is “long,” however, because it incorporates signs that directly represent spoken/written Nepali grammatical patterns (Green 2003, Hoffmann 2008, Hoffmann-Dilloway 2008).²² The use of two signs corresponding to the Nepali *le*, an agentive marker, and *lāi*, a recipient marker) are particularly emblematic of long sign and often mentioned by people when they characterize someone’s sign as long. Long sign also incorporates other explicitly Nepali-derived grammatical markers such as the possessive *ko* and follows in varying degrees and in different ways other aspects of Nepali pragmatics, semantics, and phrase structure. The most obvious feature of short sign, meanwhile, is that it does not incorporate such markers, or it incorporates far fewer. In addition, it makes fuller use of diagrammatic grammar and other modality-specific features (Green 2003, Hoffmann 2008, Hoffmann-Dilloway 2008) and of course possesses its own pragmatics, semantics, and phrase structure. Roughly speaking, we might think of long and short sign as occupying end points on a multi-dimensional continuum (the multiple dimensions representing different linguistic features). What is judged to be an instance of long or short sign (not to mention un/intelligible) depends on the context, including the signer and addressee(s), as well as on the linguistic features. While I do not pursue it further in this dissertation, I want to note that the question of long versus short sign is extraordinarily important. It has long been a topic of commentary and has more recently entered official political discourse as well. As mentioned above, some varieties of long sign are completely unintelligible to deaf people. Inversely, a late-deafened man who used long sign told me that he found anything else difficult to understand.

Returning to Figure 3, NATURAL.SIGN covers a range of communicative practices used in several situations, as shown in Figure 4.²³ Note that the number of hearing Nepalis who do know NSL is very, very small.

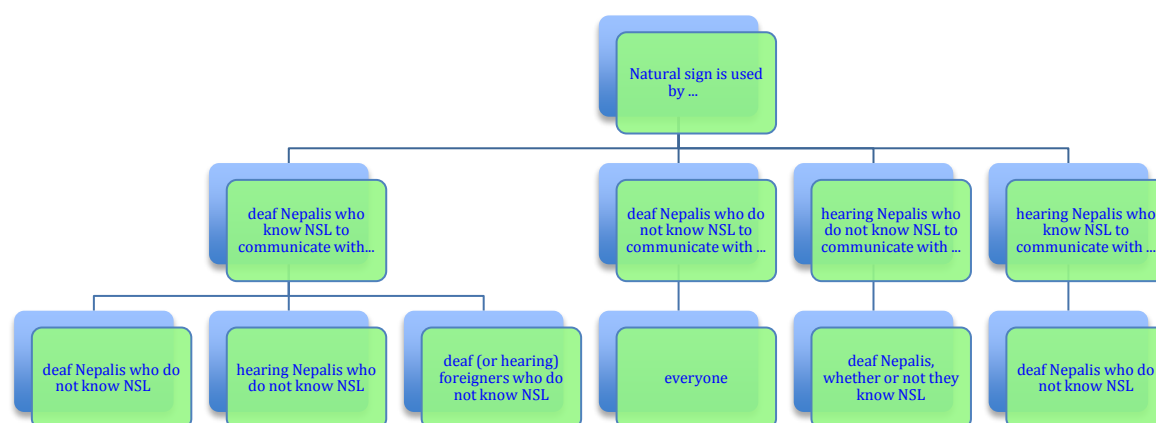


Figure 4: Natural sign

What characterizes these interactions is that the communication occurs in the signed modality but *not* in NSL (nor in a foreign sign language).²⁴ In fact the sign NATURAL.SIGN has a second but related meaning that might be glossed ON.ONE’S/ITS.OWN, WITH.ONE’S.OWN.HANDS, or NATURALLY.²⁵ In this sense the sign might be used in the context of talking about, for example, how someone learned to weave (without instruction) or why one’s wife had twins (without IV fertilization). This second meaning suggests that natural sign is sign that one is not directly taught. While deaf people no doubt mostly acquire NSL through watching and engaging with NSL signers, all deaf NSL signers I have ever met have been explicitly *taught* NSL signs, whether at school or in deaf organizations.²⁶ In other words regardless of the actual acquisition process, the socially remarked-on fact is that NSL is learned in the context of formal education. Natural sign, in contrast, is learned in homes and neighborhoods.

While Hoffmann-Dilloway (2011) translates NATURAL.SIGN into the scholarly category of home sign, I argue that the two are actually not commensurable. During an interview, when talking about a group of deaf adults to whom he was teaching NSL, Bhola Thapa defined natural sign like this:

NATURAL.SIGN is their own LANGUAGE that they’ve used their entire lives. Did they grow up going to school? They’ve never been in their lives. I’m teaching them now, but before, from the time their mothers gave birth to them, they would talk about things, using signs to say that the father had gone somewhere, gone outside. Their communication works. Laxman [a deaf man in Maunabudhuk] and the other deaf grow up understanding this kind of sign. There were no [deaf] schools here then, people didn’t know about them.²⁷

Bhola attributes natural sign to communication between mother and child, contradicting the prevailing view of home sign, which Goldin-Meadow and Mylander (1983) have argued does not make use of “parental input.” Tsering Sherpa, quoted at length below, similarly states that as a child he “learned to use NATURAL.SIGN in accordance with what I saw.”²⁸ Although more recent work “suggests that adult (Coppola & Senghas, 2010) and child (Goldin-Meadow, Franklin, & Mylander, 2007) homesigners can appropriate the gestures that hearing speakers produce and integrate them into their homesign systems” (Coppola et al 2013, parenthetical citations in original²⁹), there is still a strict division between gestures that hearing people make and the signs that deaf people make. It is also unclear whether those gestures are produced during speech directed at other hearing people, or whether they are gestures produced with or without speech when directed at deaf people. In the case of Goldin-Meadow et al, it is possible that those gestures would be very similar, since much of the research conducted by Goldin-Meadow has been with families who actively eschew the use of sign. Nyst et al. (2012:268) make a similar point when they explain that

[t]he main body of literature on home sign is based on deaf children growing up in hearing environments with no exposure to a conventional sign language, following oralist educational advice ... The term ‘home sign’ is also used to refer to the signing of a deaf person who lives in a hearing environment in a typically rural area where deaf education and/or a signing community is not available ... The social settings of these two types of home signers are likely to differ quite radically in a number of ways, many of which are known to affect language and communication.

Drawing on research conducted in a rural region in Mali, the authors state that among rural home signers, “hearing signers seem to play a central role in the transmission of the signing to deaf children” (ibid). I return to the work of Nyst et al. in the following chapter. For now I want to highlight how my own work complicates the productive introduction of a division between “oral home sign” and “rural home sign” because, as I will show in the following section, natural sign is used in both urban and rural settings. Moreover, my aim here is draw explicitly on deaf signers’ own meta-linguistic categories, which none of the above-cited scholars has done. Like “rural

home sign,” natural sign implicates the existence of widely shared gestural repertoires upon which hearing people draw when they find themselves called upon to communicate with deaf people, whether their own children, elderly neighbors, or anyone else. Natural sign encompasses not only how non-NSL signers communicate, however, but also how NSL signers communicate with those who don’t use NSL, whether deaf or hearing, foreign or Nepali.

Returning to the meta-signs in Figure 3, it is evident that they refer to distinct modes or kinds of signed communication. Yet two factors produce a blurring of categories. First, what counts as an example of a given category is subject to social evaluation, perhaps especially in the case of long and short sign as mentioned above. Second, as I explore momentarily, one sign can refer to more than one category, and several different signs can refer to the same category. The *category* SIGN, as I stated above, contains within it a variety of signed communicative practices. The *sign* SIGN may be used to refer³⁰ to signing-in-general as well as to a specific form or instance of signing, which may be *categorically* NSL, natural sign, or a foreign sign language.³¹ What kind of sign may be identifiable through context, or the referent may remain ambiguous. As I discuss below, this ambiguity articulates with the flexible boundaries of deaf society that can contract to include only active participants in deaf-centered networks and expand to include all deaf Nepalis.

Inversely, not only the three-sign phrase NEPALI SIGN LANGUAGE but also one of several two-sign phrases (NEPALI SIGN and SIGN LANGUAGE) and the one-sign phrase SIGN can designate NSL (the abbreviation “NSL” is not used in NSL). In everyday conversation, in fact, SIGN usually refers to NSL and NSL is usually referred to with the sign SIGN. Yet, as implied above, a person who communicates in natural sign might be described simply as using SIGN. For example, an NSL signer might nod affirmatively when asked if their parents SIGN, and then again when asked if they mean their parents use NATURAL.SIGN (that is, not NSL). Similarly, Bhola used the sign SIGN almost exclusively when discussing signing that, when asked directly, he considered to be natural sign.

4. Natural sign: “a smaller thing”

It is not only the one-to-many and many-to-one relationships between meta-signs and their referents that contribute to a sense of ambiguity about what exactly natural sign is or what functions it can(not) serve. NSL signers also implicitly and explicitly characterize natural sign both as perfectly adequate for communication – with a broader range of people than NSL – *and* as imposing limits on communication. As I demonstrate momentarily, NSL signers portray natural sign as having stable lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic properties and establish equivalence between NSL and natural sign and between NSL signers and natural signers (that is, signers for whom natural sign is their primary mode of communication). At the same time, NSL signers also directly and indirectly distinguish between the communicative affordances of NSL and natural sign, thus differentiating themselves from natural signers. Natural sign thus emerges as a mode of communication that is simultaneously, and contradictorily, powerful and limiting.

In an interview I conducted in Kathmandu in 2012, Tsering Sherpa compared the lexical items used “here” by NSL signers in Kathmandu and “there” by natural signers in the Solu Khumbu region (where he’s from), also calling the latter items both “their own” and “our own.” At one point, for example, I reminded him that prior to the interview we had talked about the signs for “school” in Maunabudhuk and in his own village. Tsering replied:

Yes. Here, [it is signed] SCHOOL [in NSL]; there, [it is signed] SCHOOL [in Maunabudhuk]; [and it is signed] SCHOOL [in Solu Khumbu region].”³²

By naming discrete, different lexical items used “here” in Kathmandu (the place stands in for the kind of signing, that is to say, NSL; see below on space) and in two non-Kathmandu places, he sets up a meta-pragmatic correspondence between NSL and natural sign. Similarly, several deaf teachers explained how they teach non-NSL signers NSL through the use of their students’ own natural signs. Bhola, for example, reported a conversation between himself and Laxman Bishwakarma, a deaf resident of Maunabudhuk.³³ On the left, I have transcribed Bhola’s utterance with glosses; on the right, I have provided a translation.

Bhola: LAXMAN. HOUSE Q? PT-downhill. PRO-2 Q? SACRED.THREAD? BLACKSMITH.	I asked Laxman, “Where do you live?” “Downhill.” “What caste are you, Bahun/Chhetri?” “No, I’m Kami.”
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It is interesting to note that in these reported utterances, every sign is *also* an NSL sign (Hoffmann-Dilloway 2011 mentions NSL-natural sign bivalence; Peter Graif 2012 also notes that NSL signers produce signs that do not contradict NSL grammar when signing with non-NSL signers; see below). Our preceding turns, however, have framed the conversation as having occurred in natural sign, a characterization that is reinforced by the formal and pragmatic features of Bhola’s second question to Laxman about caste. In NSL, the conventional way of asking someone their caste is “*JĀT* ‘CASTE/ETHNIC GROUP’ WHAT?”³⁴ In natural sign, at least in the Maunabudhuk area, the conventional way to ask about someone’s caste is to ask, “X?” or “X PRO-2?” where X is a conventional way of naming a specific *jāt*. In other words, in NSL, you directly name the meta-category (*jāt*) and ask the person to identify her *particular* caste/ethnic group. In natural sign, you provide an example of the meta-category, thus eliciting a confirmation or a correction.

Both Tsering and Bhola, then, demonstrate that natural sign has grammatical and pragmatic conventions (at least some of which vary by location). In doing so, I argue, they make an implicit claim that, like knowing/using NSL, knowing/using natural sign is a linguistic skill – a claim with which I agree.³⁵ I have also seen NSL signers proudly describe how they have given tours to signers from other countries or explain how they use natural sign to teach NSL. Furthermore, I have both seen and been told how NSL signers talk with their family members and neighbors using natural sign. For NSL signers, then, natural sign is powerful; in some senses it is more powerful than NSL in that it enables them to communicate with a wide variety of people beyond the sphere of deaf society.

Yet NSL is still most closely associated with good communication, as we can see when we look at the broader context in which Bhola reported his conversation with Laxman. I had asked if the deaf could communicate when he first came to Maunabudhuk to teach them.

Bhola: No, in the beginning, there was missed communication [COMMUNICATION MISS; see Figure 5].

Mara: So like -

Bhola: When I came here, if I asked where they lived [HOUSE Q?]³⁶ they would point, or if I asked about their mother or father [using natural signs], they would understand. I have been teaching them, so they have changed [how they sign].

Mara: SIGN and NATURAL.SIGN are different, so there’s missed communication, but if you yourself change and put aside sign -

Bhola: I teach using NATURAL SIGN.

Mara: and use natural sign – from the beginning using natural sign did communication work [COMMUNICATION LINE-UP; see Figure 6]?³⁷

Bhola: Yes

Mara: From the beginning?

Bhola: Yes, it was good. [Like I said] if I asked where they live, they would point. I asked Laxman and he pointed downhill, and I asked if he was Brahman/Chhetri and he said no, he was a blacksmith [caste]. Yeah.
 Mara: So from the beginning communication did line up?
 Bhola: Only in NATURAL.SIGN.³⁸



Figure 5: COMMUNICATION LINE.UP



Figure 6: COMMUNICATION MISS

Note that for Figures 5 and 6 the facial expressions involved are specific to the grammar of the utterance and are not part of the lexical item.

The above transcript-in-translation shows that I had some difficulty specifying what exactly I was asking. Even taking into account my non-native NSL, however, I think that some of Bhola's equivocation arose from the strong association of the sign COMMUNICATE with NSL communication. In other words, good communication (communication that "lines up") is primarily what happens in NSL. Even after we reached a clear consensus on how Bhola and his students communicated when he first came to class, he still reminded me that communication happened "only" in natural sign. Note that Bhola also positions himself as skilled at code-

switching between NSL and natural sign, a facility that as discussed above implies some degree of equivalence between the two.

In a related example, when I asked Tsering if for a deaf person in his village who does not know NSL, natural sign suffices for complete communication, he said yes. Yet when I asked how NATURAL.SIGN and SIGN (interpreted by Tsering to mean NSL, which is indeed how I meant it) are different, he answered like this:

Previously I didn't know that there are two kinds of SIGN. People [in Solu Khumbu where I grew up] used their own NATURAL.SIGN. I learned to use NATURAL.SIGN in accordance with what I saw. Later when I was brought here, I realized that SIGN LANGUAGE in Kathmandu was different. The purpose of SIGN LANGUAGE is *full* communication. The NATURAL.SIGN there [in Solu Khumbu] is not enough. It's less. For example, for the purpose of talking about politics, NATURAL.SIGN has nothing. In NATURAL.SIGN you can point at things, but that's about it. It's a smaller thing.³⁹

When pushed to articulate how natural sign is different from NSL, as opposed to taking natural sign on its own terms, then Tsering states that natural sign is not sufficient after all, at least not for all communicative purposes. I want to make it clear that I do not consider this judgment to be a language ideology on par with those that demean one language in relation to another. The communicative affordances of natural sign are truly different from those of NSL, although natural signers can and do also lead richly communicative lives.

My argument here is that NSL signers experience natural sign as NSL signers. We can see this clearly in the following examples, in which Uttam Maharjan reports a long-ago conversation between his father and his much-younger self.⁴⁰

Uttam quotes his father:

NSL	HEY	PRO-2+		GROW.UP	(MARRIAGE)		NEG
Natural	HEY	PRO-2+	FUTURE	GROW.UP	MARRIAGE	WOMAN	NEG
Nepali				<i>thulo</i> 'big'	<i>bihā</i> 'marriage'		

Translation: "Hey, when you grow up aren't you going to marry a woman?"

Uttam quotes his younger self:

NSL	PRO-1	Q-marker	1 st	WRITE	SCHOOL
Natural	PRO-1	Q-marker		SCHOOL	
Nepali			(unclear)		

LATER		MARRIAGE		COME
[LATER]	PRO-1	[MARRIAGE]	WOMAN	COME
<i>pachhi</i> 'later'				<i>āuchha</i>

Translation: "Who me? First I need to go to school, I'll get married and bring a woman home later."

Key

Merged cells, identical GLOSSES	single bivalent sign; equivalent meanings in NSL and natural sign
Merged cells, identical GLOSSES (one in parentheses)	single sign with equivalent meanings; included in NSL dictionary but generally viewed as natural sign
Non-merged cells, identical GLOSSES [one in brackets]	single NSL sign; meaning probably would be retrievable in context to non-NSL signer
Non-merged cells, different GLOSSES	single bivalent sign; different though not contradictory meanings in NSL and natural sign

When Uttam quotes both his younger self and his father, he produces several vocalizations, consistent with the general portrayal of natural signers (deaf and hearing) as working to understand each other by using both speech and signs. In terms of signs, when he reports what

his father said, he uses signs that are either specific to natural sign or are bivalent for natural sign and NSL. Yet when quoting himself, Uttam uses several signs that are specifically NSL. In order to understand why, it is helpful to turn to a second example drawn from the same interview, in which Uttam again reports how hearing people – here old folks in his neighborhood – would affectionately tease him about getting married.⁴¹

NSL	ALL	OLD.PERSON*	ASK.ME	OLD.PERSON*	HEY		MARRIAGE	NOT
Natural		OLD.PERSON*		OLD.PERSON*	HEY	WOMAN	[MARRIAGE]	NOT
Nepali		<i>old</i>					<i>marriage</i>	

Translation: “All the old people would ask me, ‘Hey aren’t you going to get married?’

NSL	PRO-2	THINK	NEG		MEANING	FOOL		PRO-1*		PRO-1*
Natural	PRO-2	MIND	NEG	FOOL			FOOL	PRO-1*	FOOL	PRO-1*
Nepali										

You have no mind! Fool!’ That last sign means ‘fool.’ And I would reply,

NSL	PRO-2		SAME	OLD.PERSON	SIGN	COMPLETE.ABSENCE	PRO-1	
Natural	PRO-2	FOOL		OLD.PERSON			PRO-1	FOOL
Nepali								

‘You’re the fool! You’re old and you can’t even sign! I say you’re the fool!’”

All conventions identical to the above example with one addition:

Merged cells, identical GLOSSES followed by asterisk *	single bivalent sign with equivalent meanings in NSL and natural sign, used as NSL (that is, within an NSL-medium clause with no quoted natural sign)
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What does Uttam mean when he says that the “old fools” can’t even sign? This statement is an apparent contradiction. Uttam has just depicted the old people as carrying on a signed conversation, even as he claims that they “can’t even sign.” This contradiction is relatively easy to resolve: what Uttam means is that they couldn’t sign NSL. The sign SIGN, as I have shown, can mean either signing in general or signing NSL specifically. Yet by resolving this contradiction we reveal a temporal inconsistency in Uttam’s narrative: the reported utterances supposedly took place *when Uttam was four years old*. As we learned earlier in this chapter, however, he did not learn to sign NSL until he was eight. Like the old fools, then, Uttam himself couldn’t “sign” (NSL) at this time either. Yet not only does he contrast himself with his elders, he also peppers his own natural sign utterances with NSL signs.

Narratives do not always follow strict chronological time; my point is not to highlight the temporal inconsistency for its own sake but rather to argue that once deaf people become NSL signers, their relationships to earlier selves and to earlier (though still-used) forms of communication get inflected through NSL and through their participation in deaf society. The temporal inconsistencies and the appearance of NSL signs in pre-NSL natural sign utterances mirror deaf people’s “conversion” (Bechter 2008) to a specific form of deaf, sign language-based sociality. Yet perhaps we should think of this as an incomplete conversion, because, as I explored above, deaf NSL signers articulate an experiential tension between the ease and even the pleasures of communicating in natural sign and the sense that natural sign imposes limits that NSL does not.

In my interviews with Bhola, Tsering, and Uttam, they each demonstrated their competency in natural sign. In Uttam’s case, he also recursively embedded NSL lexical items in natural sign reported speech in NSL narratives. Such conversations serve to produce NSL signers as masterful communicators and as both profoundly similar to and profoundly different from

deaf people whose only mode of communication is, as Tsering put it, “a smaller thing.” This duality is at the heart of how NSL signers conceive of and act on their intimate and institutional responsibilities to others, to which I turn in the following section. Questions of natural sign and NSL are also embedded in NSL signers’ conceptions of space (Section 6), as well as in their profound concerns about the relationship between intelligibility (Section 7).

5. Responsibility

The centrality of NSL to NSL signers’ sense of deaf sociality is clear in the following example, excerpted from a conversation between Uttam and a friend of his in Patan, the city bordering Kathmandu to the south.⁴² In the context of discussing why potential sweethearts should talk with each other and not use go-betweens, Uttam asked the following question: “You’re deaf, I’m deaf, these other [hypothetical] people are deaf. Do we COMMUNICATE or miscommunicate [MISS], which?” Uttam’s friend, also a young man in his 20s, replied, “We communicate [LINE-UP].” Uttam confirms, “Right, because of SIGN LANGUAGE.” The rhetorical power of this simple question and answer sequence, employed by Uttam as part of an argument about dating and marriage, rests on the fact that it is only within deaf society – that is, because of SIGN LANGUAGE, which to the best of my knowledge only ever refers to NSL – that deaf people can take for granted that communication lines up. That deaf NSL signers do not always communicate with ease is, rhetorically, beside the point, because deaf society is the only space in which communication can *ever* be taken for granted.

Sign language links real as well as hypothetical deaf persons together. Especially for persons who learned NSL after childhood, its acquisition gets intimately associated with the particular person who taught them. People frequently asked me, “Who taught you NSL?”⁴³ Even if the asker did not immediately recognize the name of my first NSL teacher (who taught me in 2002, emigrated to the United States shortly after, and returned to Nepal around 2011), the *form* of my response – that is, a name sign⁴⁴ – served to place me in a constellation of personal connections. My friend Rasila Tamang, who had learned NSL at the age of 16 continued, ten years later, to refer to the woman who had first taught her in those terms. Many signers, in fact, name the persons they have mentored or were mentored by socially and linguistically. Recall that Uttam, describing his first day at school, brought Tsering into the narrative as a figure of greater knowledge who helped orient him into a new world of language.

Such personal connections name and index the deeply held notion that deaf persons *qua* deaf persons are responsible for each other. During the conversation between Uttam and his friend, Uttam expressed what he would like to say to several deaf associates whom he felt were not acting according to deaf norms of unity.

If there’s a deaf person flinging their hands around meaninglessly [acting unsocialized or inappropriately; see Figure 7], you shouldn’t push them aside. You should be thoughtful with that person – interrupt them, sit them down and explain things to them.⁴⁵

At this point he indicated the friend seated next to him, using him as a real example in the hypothetical conversation playing out. (The imagined addressee now shifts from the deaf people not taking proper care of other deaf to the persons in need of that care.)

Just like him, when he was small, he acted the same way, flinging his hands around. I told him not to be like that, I advised him over and over, and he became self-sufficient [lit. STAND.UP.ON.FEET; see Figure 8]. All of you can too. It won’t happen right away, but over time – 4 years, 5 years – and with effort, you can. With him, it was the same. It wasn’t just one or two years, but eventually his mind became supple. In the same way, if you try, you all can too.⁴⁶



Figure 7: FLING.HANDS.AROUND.MEANINGLESSLY



Figure 8: SELF.SUFFICIENT/STAND.UP.ON.FEET

Uttam's lecture clearly articulates how deaf people should act in relation to one another. It also makes explicit an understanding that deaf people who are "flinging their hands around meaninglessly" are capable, with necessary guidance, of changing. Indeed Uttam was not using his friend as a rhetorical example. The friend really had been quite different as a child. Several months earlier, Uttam and I were sitting in his house, looking through photographs. One picture featured himself as a young boy, standing with three other young boys, two of them relatives. The appearance of the remaining child reminded me of postures and facial expressions that, rightly or wrongly, I associate with mental retardation. I asked who he was, and Uttam replied that he was the deaf friend with whom we had been hanging out earlier. I looked disbelieving, and said that the photo did not resemble him at all, but did not say that he looked retarded. To my surprise, Uttam replied, "He looks mentally retarded, right? He used to be 'half-minded,' and didn't know how to eat or behave and I gave him lots of advice and he turned out fine, and his family was happy."⁴⁷

It seems that being deaf not only established that Uttam, even as a young child, was responsible for his friend, it also made it possible for Uttam's lessons to be effective. Indeed in his retelling of their shared past, Uttam – himself a young child – somehow was able to teach his friend fundamental skills that the friend's own family could not. The following excerpt from my fieldnotes similarly paints a portrait of deaf people being responsible for and capable of socializing other deaf people in very basic ways.

KP also asked me ... about coming to Baglung [a district near Pokhara] for a couple months, and I expressed interest. I told him my research focus was on people who grow up without a language (sic). He had a proposal, which was this. He wants to document how to change poor, uneducated deaf people. He described how you find deaf people in these villages, and they're dirty and their clothes are torn and they don't know

how to eat properly or take care of themselves, and first you teach them how to be clean and how to eat. And how to sign, I added. Yes, he said. He said he wants to film this for 25-30 minutes every day, from that first dirty state to the last day (at the end of a couple months), when they would sign for themselves. *And this would show how deaf people can be transformed through education and care.*⁴⁸

I will turn in the following section to the association of adverse experiences of deafness with village locales indicated here. For now, I want to point to how – even though I specifically mentioned language in framing my own research – KP’s description of what I would document highlighted the deaf villagers’ physicality, not their communicative skills. When successful, deaf interventions in others’ lives result in clean, cared-for deaf bodies. Cleanliness is seen not as an attribute of an individual self but of a self properly enmeshed with others.⁴⁹

These examples strongly indicate that deaf people view sociality as going far beyond communication and yet depending on it as well. Neither KP nor Uttam suggested that deaf people should bathe or feed each other, but that as well-socialized deaf people, they should assume that less-socialized deaf people are capable of such actions and should teach them how to perform them. NSL itself does not appear necessary to such endeavors; KP makes it clear that the *first* order of business is to teach deaf persons to take care of their own bodies, not teach them NSL. Presumably this teaching involves communication in natural sign. But if not only deaf NSL signers but also hearing people use natural sign, then why have these deaf people not already been taught to care for themselves?

We can discern one possible answer in the words of Suresh Shahi, a former president of the Kathmandu Association of the Deaf (KAD), who explained to me in an interview why KAD had established a program for elderly deaf people (see below for details).

At home, hearing family members enjoy themselves, but old deaf people don’t. They can’t understand or communicate; they have to sit there passively. It’s as if they’re fools, SUPPRESSED and sad.⁵⁰ Thus the idea was that if KAD opened a program for old deaf, they could participate. They would meet regularly, and their understanding would increase. They would realize they were all deaf. They could SIGN with each other and use NATURAL.SIGN. Their communication would come together. They would enjoy themselves and be happy, and be able to let go of how they felt with their families.⁵¹

Earlier in the interview, Suresh had said that old deaf people don’t understand NSL, but do understand natural sign, defined as “the same as [what is used in] their homes with their families,”⁵² implying that hearing family members and old deaf people were in fact capable of communicating. What I understood him to be saying, therefore, was that in the family setting, hearing people generally didn’t *bother* to communicate with the deaf. It is left unsaid in the examples from KP and Uttam whether their families did not try to teach their deaf members how to care for themselves or whether they were unable to. Similarly we can ask if the ability of deaf people to teach them is because of NSL signers’ skill in using natural sign or their desire to do so. The relationship between the desire or willingness to communicate with deaf people and the capacity to do so in meaningful ways is an important theme to which I return below and take up more fully in Chapter 5.

Despite the fact that deaf NSL signers acknowledge natural sign as an important and productive communicative mode, the primary responsibility of deaf people to each other is conventionally framed in terms of NSL, on both personal and institutional levels. Many years ago, I recall, a young man told me that he would like to marry a deaf woman “from the hills” to whom he would teach NSL. In a more public forum, in 2009 at the NDFN General Assembly program, Bikash Dangol, former NDFN president and then board member of the WFD, concisely expressed the spread of NSL as an animating principle of deaf society. He thanked the founding members of the NDFN and expressed hope that in the future, deaf associations would open in all

75 Nepali districts and that educational and employment opportunities for deaf people would continue to grow.⁵³ He then signed:

SIGN [point] SIGN STRONG SIGN [point] ALL [point] SIGN [point] DISPERSE.⁵⁴

During the moments I have represented here with the bracketed [point], Bikash used one hand to point to the other, which was held in the handshape and position of the sign SIGN for the duration of the underlined portion. Simple and powerful in NSL,⁵⁵ this utterance can be translated into English as follows: “This sign language that we hold in our hands is our strength; may it spread [or, it will spread, or, we will spread it] across all of the land.”

The imperative to share NSL is operationalized in NSL classes, which I have classified into three types for expository clarity.⁵⁶ Type 1 classes are offered at district association offices and are attended by deaf people (some new to NSL, others wishing to improve their Nepali or English literacy) as well as hearing people (relatives, friends, and others who want to learn NSL and/or become interpreters at deaf organizations). The first organization to do so was KAD, beginning on June 1st, 1990 (Acharya 1997). Type 2 classes, which I call “outreach,” are facilitated around the country by the NDFN. Classes of this type were first initiated under the NADH, with help from the Danish LBH, in February 1995 (Acharya 1997). Such classes – which at the time of my fieldwork lasted either 6 or 10 months, depending on funding⁵⁷ – target deaf people who did not attend deaf schools as children (because there wasn’t one anywhere nearby, even by Nepali standards, or because their families didn’t know about it or didn’t allow them to attend).⁵⁸ The class in Maunabudhuk was of this type. Type 3 classes consisted of two programs, similar to the second type but located in Kathmandu and designed for even more specific populations. Neither being conducted at the moment of writing. The Skill Training Institute for the Deaf (STID) ran from 1992-2010, bringing young women (approximately ages 15-25) to a residential training center for a period of 12 months. For many years, the policy was to give only a few spots to residents of the Kathmandu Valley and reserve the rest for girls from elsewhere. Once there, they received daily training in NSL (the first order of business), literacy, numeracy, and tailoring. In the program’s final year, the long-time deaf director, Kalpana Bajracharya, told me that in recent years, due to the ongoing efforts of NSL outreach classes, fewer of the trainees arrived entirely without any prior signing experience/education. The Old Deaf Project (ODP), meanwhile, ran from 2008-2011, and was open to deaf residents of Kathmandu above age 45, who attended 3 times a week for NSL classes and social activities (see below for more details).

According to Bhola, who has taught three NSL outreach classes in Dhankuta district, the NDFN facilitates classes year after year in order to “raise up deaf communication” and ensure equality with hearing people.⁵⁹ The intended beneficiaries are not only the students, however, but also existing members of deaf society. As he said at the concluding program of the Maunabudhuk class, its purpose was also to increase membership in Dhankuta’s deaf association (to the best of my knowledge, none of his former students became regular or even sporadic participants in the deaf association, but I have met active members of deaf society who first learned NSL in an outreach class). An increase in membership would mean more people to spend time with, more people who were invested in communicating with each other and in forging connections with other deaf people in Nepal (and beyond). Thus teaching is not only about sharing NSL and deaf-centered values,⁶⁰ but also about broadening the reach of deaf society. In this sense, DEAF SOCIETY is both an actually existing network of people and an aspirational project. Deepak Shakya, a founding member of the NDFN and then president of KAD, illustrated this duality in his speech at the General Assembly program in 2009. Early in his speech he stated that deaf people as signers are equal to hearing people as speakers, then said that deaf people

have their own society of which they are all members. He did not specify whether “all” designated every deaf person present (“all of us”) or all deaf people in Nepal. Later, he mentioned that while there are many old deaf people in Nepal, they were not in attendance at the Assembly. He encouraged everyone present not to shun older deaf people, saying that it was important for *all* deaf people to participate in deaf programs and be part of deaf society. Again, it was not entirely clear whether the point was that old deaf people *are* part of deaf society or *should be*. The ambiguity is socially productive, in that it laminates the real and the imperative onto each other.

6. The space and time of sign and sociality

I now turn to how deaf discourses of sociality, communication, and language – particularly the above-analyzed imperative to *share* them – produce particular spatial and temporal maps. I begin with the close analysis of an excerpt from an interview I conducted with Rajendra Sharma at the World Federation of the Deaf in 2007 in Madrid, Spain. Rajendra was there as one of two official Nepali delegates; I was there as an anthropologist.

He began by stating, “I was born deaf,” then said:

Rajendra: VIL--- [nm-neg] <u>PT-down CITY</u> NEG, VILLAGE PT-left SYANGJA	[I was born] in a vil-, not (here) in a city, but there in a village in Syangja district.
---	--

Key

---	false start
nm	nonmanual grammatical marker
neg, NEG	negator
<u>UNDERLINE</u>	scope over which nm holds

To establish the place of his birth, Rajendra uses lexical items as well as a nonmanual grammatical marker (furrowed brows and head shake). He also employs several deictic points. The first, glossed above as PT-down, he articulates very briefly. It is so brief, in fact, that it is difficult to tell whether it is a second false start that he immediately corrects with the sign CITY. He then signs VILLAGE, followed by a very clearly articulated point to the left that moves away from his body with a wiggling/dipping motion that serves not only to locate the village in signing space as a distinct referent but also in what Dudis (2004, following Fauconnier and Turner 1996, 1998) calls a real-space blend, that is, in the spatialized world constructed by the narrator and his bodily movements. The motion of the point in particular emphasizes that the village is quite far-off. What is it far away from? The answer lies in what preceded the village: the city, which has (perhaps) been deictically located “here.”

Rajendra has thus done either one of two things. If we consider the PT-down to have been a fully articulated sign (that is, not a false start), then he said, “Not here in the city,” thus transforming the indexical ground (Hanks 1992:53) from a convention center in Madrid to a (Nepali) city. If we take PT-down as a false start, then he said, “Not in the city,” in which case the second point (PT-left, “there), which gets named as a village, also presupposes that “here” is the city. In either case, through deictic point(s), Rajendra set himself up as the ground or origo (ibid:55), thus laminating the space of the city with the space of his body, and creating a contrast not only between the village and the city but also between his childhood self, whom he goes on to describe as struggling to communicate and as not knowing other deaf people, and his adult self: a fluent signer, a teacher of deaf children, a leader on national and international levels. With a simple point or two, Rajendra has simultaneously made reference to and construed the village

as a place from which a journey must be made.

Rajendra's discursive moves reflect deaf experiences and ideas of different kinds of Nepali places. These formulations articulate with broader (hearing) tropes of development and modernity and their attendant desires, anxieties, and ambivalences. Pigg (1992, 1996) and Liechty (2003) have shown that many Nepalis experience themselves as condemned to always aspire to, but never achieve, a modernity that already exists elsewhere, in the West.⁶¹ Within Nepal, furthermore, modernity and development on the one hand and tradition and underdevelopment on the other are mapped recursively onto the city and the village (the village is to the city as Nepal is to the West).⁶² As Pigg (1992:507) argues, "[d]evelopment focuses its efforts on villages because (ostensibly) most Nepalis live in them, but in doing so it reifies the village as the locus of Nepal's underdevelopment."

In deaf discourses, the outreach (Type 2) classes mentioned above take place in a variety of settings, including large bazaar towns, but are talked about as happening in the generic VILLAGE,⁶³ a sign that like its spoken Nepali counterpart *gāũ* 'village' contains everything that is not (talked about as) urban and developed (Pigg 1992).⁶⁴ Or more precisely, the village does *not* contain development. For deaf people, the village is a space without NSL, a space where deaf society has not yet reached. While NSL classes certainly can be construed as a form of development, as in the case of a hearing man in Maunabudhuk who I recall remarking that the village was "developed" now that its deaf persons were receiving NSL instruction,⁶⁵ I want to argue that to fully collapse deaf notions of space with hearing notions is to ignore what is particular about deaf experiences. For deaf people, cities – where deaf associations are located, where deaf schools are more likely to be found, where many NSL signers live – offer a much better guarantee of what I am calling communicative sociality.

Here I examine an excerpt from an interview with Bhola, whom I have already introduced as the teacher in Maunabudhuk. In relation to my argument here, it is also important to note that he is a deaf NSL signer from a rural village a few hours' walk from Dhankuta's municipal headquarters (a large town). Bhola is the third of four sons: his oldest brother is also deaf, while the other two brothers and an older sister are hearing. When Bhola was seven, and his oldest brother was about 14, they started attending a deaf class in the village of Akisalla that later relocated to Mulghat, a small river town on the highway between Dharan and Dhankuta. Bhola also briefly attended a secondary deaf school in Jhapa, in a more urban environment.⁶⁶ While we lived in Maunabudhuk, Bhola expressed ambivalence about his experiences of being a deaf person in villages and cities. On the one hand, he took obvious pleasure and pride in his mastery of farm life. He tried (somewhat successfully) to teach me how to identify vegetables by their leaves, and talked with authority about the proper timing and techniques for planting, harvesting, and processing grains as well as about animal husbandry. He would often compare the quality of soil, the topography, and the availability of water sources in Maunabudhuk with those in his own home (the latter were always deemed superior). At times, he clearly stated a preference for village life. He pointed out the variety of activities available in villages: tending fields, chatting, watching a DVD, and eating, whereas in the city, he said, people just *GHUMNA* 'GO.AROUND/WALK.AROUND.'⁶⁷ In addition, cities are too noisy because of traffic; villages are peaceful. On the other hand, Bhola also complained that village homes are far apart and socially isolating; bazaar life, he said, was better. He also said how hard it was to meet other deaf people when he was at home. I asked him about these conflicting feelings directly during an interview we conducted while sitting in a field overlooking Maunabudhuk's bazaar.

Mara: Do you prefer to live in a village, bazaar, or city?⁶⁸

Bhola: City.

Mara: Why?

Bhola: I don't know. There's society. There's not in the village, none at all. I'm like a donkey. In the city, with society, I'd have friends, people I knew, we could meet up and go off on a motorcycle, spend time going around. If they went off to work, I'd have my own work, maybe a dry-goods store, or a tea-and-momo shop. The village is empty [there's nothing there]. My mother leaves the house to go work, or talks with my dad, or goes to cut grass; my younger brother is off at school. When they return in the evening, their bodies are sore from working, they don't want to talk, they want to rest, and they tend to go to sleep at 7 or 8, not even 9 or 10. After they eat, they'll watch TV for maybe 15 minutes, and then pass out. Then I'm all alone. I can write, but there's no one to talk to. I might study, but then I feel lazy, and I just lie down and daydream.

Mara: Okay, so here's a hypothetical example. If you grew up in a village where there were lots of other deaf people, would the village be okay?

Bhola: Yes, like that –

Mara: That would be good?

Bhola: - I would like it. It's deaf society that matters. Alone, a donkey, no way.

Mara: Okay, so there's deaf society in the city, if there were deaf society in both village and city, which would you prefer?

Bhola: Either one.

Mara: Either one?

Bhola: Yeah.

Mara: It's deaf society that's important.

Bhola: Yes. I *need* society.⁶⁹

Our interchange clarifies that what is important to Bhola is spending time with people. Even though he loves his family deeply, the brief moments he spends with them seem unsatisfying. It is striking that Bhola did not initially use the phrase “deaf society,” yet the hypothetical I offered – “lots of other deaf people” – and the ease with which he oriented to it and then named it – “deaf society” – illustrates how for NSL signers, the unmarked meaning of “society” is deaf.^{70,71} We can see, furthermore, that society gets located in the city. At the same time, Bhola's motifs of city life are not *necessarily* urban in nature (although to be sure there are more stores and motorcycles in cities than in villages). Similarly, busy and tired families exist in cities as well as villages.

While Bhola describes deaf life in a village as boring and lonely, there are more overtly critical representations of it as well. At a deaf women's health conference in Pokhara, the opening ceremonies featured a skit with two female actors, one dressed like a man. The female character acted out doing chores such as cutting grass for fodder (the quintessential labor of village girls). Alone in the fields, she meets a man, who through displays of material wealth – a mobile phone, fancy clothing – seduces her into agreeing to marry him. The two go off together, but not to his house, the proper place to take a fiancée. The skit concludes with the girl's solitary appearance. She is pregnant and crying. The audience is meant to understand that the man reneged on his promise to marry and take care of her, delivering her into a life of prostitution instead. Implicit is the idea that if the girl had more education, more language skills, and more friends – that is, if she were not a deaf village girl but a deaf girl embedded in deaf society – none of this would have happened.⁷²

Although in fact men – and women – in villages may have nice clothes and mobile phones (and people in cities may lack them), the skit plays on the strong association of material wealth with the urban. The girl is seduced less by the *man* than by his belongings. Liechty (2003:96) writes that “[w]hat sets the rural youth apart from their rural counterparts is not an orientation toward the future but the way that future is imagined. City youth had the category of ‘things that can be bought’ firmly and centrally implanted in their imaginations.” However the deaf play implies that “things that can be bought” are as tempting to people in the village as they

are to those in the city.⁷³ Despite the skit's emphasis on material goods, I argue that for deaf people, the city represents a space not only of material wealth but also and more importantly of social wealth in contrast to the village.

The temporal as well as the spatial dimensions brought up by the play are key. There is a general equation of developed modernity with the urban and underdeveloped backwardness with the rural, and a specifically deaf equation of deaf society with the urban and lack of deaf fellowship and language with the rural. In the play, the village girl wants what people in the city *already have*, and what she can have *in the future* if she goes off with the man *now*. As Pigg (1992:507) writes, "the village becomes a space of backwardness ... that imprisons people in what is considered an inferior and outmoded way of life." For deaf people, as for hearing people, the city represents the present and future, while the village represents, if not the past, then certainly a kind of lagging or backwardness. Rajendra Sharma, at the 2009 General Assembly meetings, for example, explicitly stated that the "culture" of negativity around deafness still prevails in the villages, though that "we hope that with our efforts that will change."⁷⁴ At the same time, then, the village also represents the future, in that deaf society must be spread there (see *ibid*:501). As Pigg (1992:507-508) explains, the village(r)'s future is the urban present.⁷⁵ Collapsing time and space, the village present is the urban past.

For NSL signers in cities, these mappings are embodied in elderly deaf people who are not active members of deaf society or NSL signers. The wonderfully literally named Old Deaf Project mentioned above targets such people. Some of the participants had actually attended the Naxal School as children, but after finishing or dropping out had lost touch with other deaf people and were no longer fluent signers. Apropos of the above section on the capacity of deaf people to change with proper socialization, the opposite is equally possible, though not inevitable. NSL signers repeatedly pointed out a participant in ODP to me, saying that he had attended the deaf school, had in fact been the classmate of a contemporary deaf leader. After leaving school, however, he stopped spending time with other deaf people, and so his mind "decreased."⁷⁶ Along with former Naxal students, the elderly participants in ODP included people who had never gone to a deaf school – some were too old to have attended – and were not NSL signers but who were nevertheless already known to NSL signers, as well as still others who were entirely new to deaf society. Even though these elderly deaf people were alive during the formation of deaf society, then, they seemed to have missed out on the deaf present.⁷⁷ By targeting elderly people in the city, the Old Deaf Project in Kathmandu becomes the exception that proves the rule: deaf interventions target villages or places categorized as villages. (Remember that other Type 3 program, STID, though located in Kathmandu focused its efforts on young women from rural areas.)

The general sense, then, is that cities are better places to be deaf. As Ramesh Shrestha, then the NDFN president, stated:

In the city, I have observed positive attitudes on the subject of deafness; in the village, I have not seen these positive attitudes, in fact, deaf people are oppressed. Deaf friends, society, deaf associations: we must advocate on behalf of the oppressed.

Bhola, addressing a mostly-hearing audience in Maunabudhuk, explained in detail what this oppression might consist of.

In the villages [the deaf] are made to sit like donkeys, doing nothing but work. This is not necessary. Deaf and hearing are equal! The deaf are oppressed, while the hearing travel to foreign countries, but we should be treated equally. Property should be divided equally [between deaf and hearing heirs]. Making the deaf stay at home, oppressed, while the hearing are allowed to *GHUMNA* 'GO.AROUND/WALK.AROUND' is unacceptable. Deaf and hearing are equal ... Hiring a deaf person but paying only a pittance for his/her labor is also unacceptable. Their guardians should advise them on this as well, for their guardians to be

passive is unacceptable. To shoo the deaf away from stores is unacceptable. To tell the deaf repeatedly, “Just a second,” and keep talking with other hearing people is unacceptable. Shopkeepers should talk with the deaf and hearing in turn.⁷⁸

After discussing his own motivation for teaching NSL (see above), Bhola reminded the audience that deaf people should be allowed by their families to attend events sponsored by deaf organizations, given reasonable amounts of work, and cared for when sick. Bhola makes it clear that deaf people deserve the same opportunities and rights as hearing people. What I want to emphasize here is the juxtaposition of quantifiable or legal rights, such as fair wages and equal inheritance, with the ethical demands of mundane situations, such as dealing with customers and with sick relatives. In particular, I am interested in Bhola’s vivid depiction of how deaf people get treated when they approach a store: they are told to leave, or ignored in favor of the shopkeeper’s hearing customers or friends. When Bhola says that “shopkeepers should talk with the deaf and hearing in turn,” he posits that hearing people can and should treat deaf people as potential and actual interlocutors. As in the above section, we see that the communicative sociality does not depend only on knowledge of NSL.

Yet, as the counterexamples imply, hearing people frequently do not treat deaf people as interlocutors. Not only in the village, but elsewhere as well, deaf people, even and perhaps especially NSL signers who have experienced sign-centered deaf society, know that hearing people may ignore them. They cannot take for granted the attention of a shopkeeper, cannot guarantee that hearing people’s eyes will not glaze over as if preemptively refusing the very possibility of communicating with a deaf person (see Chapter 5). It is to this vulnerability to being (rendered) unintelligible that I turn now through an examination of alternative words for deaf.

7. Intelligibility

Soon after I moved to Maunabudhuk, staff members at the government health post painted on the side of the building information about mothers’ and children’s health, including warnings that vitamin and mineral deficiencies could cause babies to be born deaf or mentally retarded. The bright red letters included the word *lāto*, a pejorative term for deaf people that strongly upset the deaf teacher. Enlisting me as an interpreter, he approached the staff and convinced them to paint over the offending word and write *bahirā* instead.⁷⁹ The teacher’s response instantiated an ongoing campaign by deaf and disability leaders to replace derogatory words for persons with disabilities in spoken and written Nepali with appropriate terminology (see Figure 9).

सभ्य भाषाको प्रयोग गरौं			
बुलो लङ्गडो	×	शारीरिक अपाङ्ग	✓
लाटो	×	बहिरा	✓
गोज्यांगो	×	तौद्धिक अपाङ्ग	✓
अन्धो	×	दृष्टिविहिन	✓


समाज कल्याण परिषद
 लैनचौर, काठमाडौं
 
 Supported by: NCI

Figure 9: Derogatory and appropriate terms for people with disabilities

The image, sourced from a deaf Nepali woman's Facebook post, is a photograph of a poster.

Like other insulting or hurtful words, *lāto* has a performative effect (Butler 1997), producing anger and sadness in deaf NSL signers and in some hearing persons involved in deaf society. In this section, I examine how hearing and deaf people, in spoken Nepali and NSL, use and talk about the words *lāto*, *bahirā*, and other ways of saying deaf. Through the close analysis of recorded NSL utterances, I argue that undergirding the deaf objection to *lāto* is a claim about intelligibility as a feature of situated social interactions.⁸⁰

In colloquial Nepali, the word *lāto* can either denote or describe people whom in this text I call “deaf,” as in “*lāṭalāṭilāi paḍhaune* ‘s/he teaches the *lāṭa-lāṭi*’” or “*lāṭo ho* ‘is s/he *lāto*?’”⁸¹ The online *Practical Dictionary of Modern Nepali* (Schmidt 1994) defines *lāto* (noun) as “a mute person; a person with a speech impediment.” As an adjective, *lāto* can mean “foolish, stupid,” “numb” (as in a foot that has fallen asleep), or “naive, artless, guileless.” Similarly, according to the *Students’ Companion English/Nepali-Nepali/English Dictionary* (Singh 2004), the adjectival form means “dumb; dull; stupid; inarticulate” while the nominal means “half-wit; idiot.” Note that neither definition mentions being deaf or unable to hear. The *Practical Dictionary* does include a sample sentence, the translated version of which reads: “The mute have their own language,” which is presumably a reference to signed communication. In contrast, the *Practical Dictionary* defines *bahiro* (sic; there is no *bahirā* listed) as an adjective meaning “deaf” and a noun meaning “a deaf person,” while the *Student Dictionary* offers only a single adjectival definition of *bahiro* (sic; there is no *bahirā* listed): “deaf; hard of hearing; inattentive.”⁸² While “inattentive” implies a collapse between not hearing when someone is talking and ignoring them, the rest of the definitions do not involve pejorative judgments about cognition or attention.

Several other phrases are also commonly used to refer to deaf people, namely:

(<i>mukh</i>)	<i>na-bol-ne</i>	(<i>mānchhe</i>)
mouth	NEG-speak-3PRESENT	person/s
(<i>kān</i>)	<i>na-sun-ne</i>	(<i>mānchhe</i>) ⁸³
ear	NEG-hear-3PRESENT	person/s

In both phrases, the nouns in parentheses can be dropped entirely; dropping the first does not require or prevent dropping the second, and vice versa. When the latter is dropped, the truncated phrase can be used adjectivally (e.g., *nabolne ho* ‘s/he is not-speaking’), verbally (*nabolne* ‘s/he doesn’t speak’), or nominally (*nabolneharu* ‘non-speakers’). I have never seen or heard a deaf person or an interpreter object to these descriptive phrases.⁸⁴ Indeed, I attended a trivia quiz-style program at KAD in 2008 where one of the questions asked was “‘BAHIRĀ’ BHANEKO KE HO ‘what does ‘deaf’ mean?’” The facilitators refused to grant anyone a point until the following sentence was articulated in NSL: “*KĀN NASUNNE MUKH NABOLNE, YO MĀNCHHELĀI BAHIRĀ BHĀNCHHA* ‘a person whose ears do not hear and whose mouth does not speak is called deaf’.”⁸⁵

In practice, of course, many people who consider themselves deaf and who are considered deaf by others can hear and speak to some degree, a point I take up further in the following chapter. Similarly the word *lāto* gets applied to a wide variety of people. I have heard it said of people who appeared or were assumed to have⁸⁶ a significant amount, a little, or absolutely no hearing, and whose speech ranged from none to fully comprehensible but still different from hearing people’s.⁸⁷ Even someone momentarily mute can be said to be *lāto*, as when a child who is capable of speech refuses to talk. One day in Maunabudhuk, for example, I was visiting Laxman, the deaf man whom Bhola mentions above, and his family, all other members of which are hearing. We were sitting in the family’s blacksmithing workshop, and one of their young nieces was cuddling on my lap. Noticing my unsuccessful attempts to engage her in spoken conversation, her adult cousin asked “*boli āūdaina tero?* ‘you don’t know how to speak?’”, while her uncle chided, “*lāṭi nāi bhaichha ta yo ta, tā lāṭi bhaki?* ‘this one’s become *lāṭi*, so you’re *lāṭi* (now)?”⁸⁸

As the dictionary definitions suggest, however, the word *lāto* has as much or more to do with perceptions of intelligence as with the inability – whether permanent or temporary – to hear or speak. These meanings are well-illustrated by this excerpt from a speech given by Shrawan Lal Rai, a hearing man who teaches at one of Dhankuta’s three residential deaf classes and also serves as a liaison between the Dhankuta Association of the Deaf and the NDFN, at the end of the 6-month NSL course in Maunabudhuk. Addressing the mostly-hearing audience, Shrawan said:

What is more, it seems to us – in village homes, we continue to say *lāṭalāṭi*, of incompetent people [*najanna*], people who don’t understand [*nabujhna*], foolish people [*agyānta*].⁸⁹

The first two words Shrawan uses to characterize the kinds of people of whom villagers say *lāṭalāṭi* are verbal adjectives (similar to the construction described above), meaning “those who do not know how to do things,” which I have translated as “incompetent,” and “those who do not understand.” *Agyānta* (from the root *gyān* ‘wisdom’) means “foolish (unwise) ones.” It is small wonder that deaf people do not want to be called *lāto*, if to be *lāto* is to be incompetent, non-comprehending, and foolish.

It might be argued that when people say *lāto* to talk about someone who is deaf, they do not mean everything that *lāto* means. One young man in Dhankuta explained to me that the word was simply an aspect of “our colloquial speech” (*hāmro thet bhāshā/boli*)⁹⁰, implying that villagers’ use of the word was not intended offensively. I do not doubt that in many cases he is

right, though it is worth noting that even in Maunabudhuk, where the word was widely used, family members of deaf people usually referred to their loved ones using different terms such as *apāṅga* ‘disabled.’ In other words, the unfavorable content was quite clear to them.

Moreover a common refrain that a given deaf person doesn’t *seem* like s/he is *lāṭo* or even *bahirā*, the analysis of which I turn to now, offers evidence that the multiple shades of meaning in *lāṭo* are always present, not only in the word itself but also in the expectations sutured to the figure of the deaf person. Since the first time I did research in deaf Nepal, in 2002, I have noticed that hearing people frequently express surprise when confronted with evidence that deaf people look normal (that is, not recognizably deaf). Literally countless times, hearing people from a variety of regional, class, and *jāt* backgrounds have remarked that a given deaf person “does not seem deaf.” I use the English here to cover a range of Nepali phrases, including “*lāṭo jasto chhaina* ‘doesn’t seem *lāṭo*,’” “*boldaina/sundaina jasto dekhidaina* ‘doesn’t look like someone who can’t speak/hear,’” and “*sunne jastāi rahechha* ‘surprisingly just like a hearing person.’”⁹¹ I have even unintentionally elicited such comments by showing hearing Nepalis photographs of my deaf friends. Trying to move beyond what were in the field my often indignant responses, I propose that such statements reveal moments of incoherence that occur when hearing people perceive a deaf person as differing in some fundamental way from their previously held typification of what deaf people are like.

The headmaster in Maunabudhuk told me that before meeting Bhola, he thought that you could always tell if someone was deaf from the way they walk, their facial expressions, and their hand movements (the latter, I assume, even when not signing), but Bhola walked and looked just “like us, like speaking people.”⁹² In other words, something about Bhola’s embodied presentation of self contradicted the image he held of a deaf person, an image drawn from the stereotypes encapsulated and circulated in words like *lāṭo* as well, no doubt, from experiences with actual deaf people. That is to say, some deaf people are difficult to understand – or put another way, it is difficult for hearing people to understand them – whereas many people found Bhola easy to interact with. Yet even people who only saw him, and did not interact with him directly, often made the kinds of comments cited above. Bhola wore fashionable clothes, carried himself with confidence, and had a handsome face – features that are obviously unrelated to being deaf, but that may have contributed to a sense that Bhola was somehow different from other deaf people and/or from the category *deaf*.

Durga Chemjong, a man in his 30s with whom both Bhola and I had a respectful and affectionate relationship, told a story about the first time he met Bhola. They were introduced and Durga was told he was a teacher. Durga didn’t get a chance to talk with him, so he found him later that day. Not knowing he was deaf, Durga talked and talked, but Bhola didn’t reply. Feeling shy, and wondering “*kasto kālko māstar* ‘what kind of a master [teacher] is this’?”, Durga stopped talking. When I asked if Bhola hadn’t explained that he couldn’t hear, Durga replied that he had done so only later, because the whole time Durga was talking, Bhola had been facing the other direction!⁹³ I find this story endearing because Durga was willing to poke fun at his own confusion and incorrect assumptions. It also clearly illustrates how Durga was, at least back when he first met Bhola, unable or unlikely to think of a teacher as anything other than hearing, and how nothing about Bhola’s visual appearance (other than his refusal to turn around) contradicted this assumption. Indeed the social stereotype of what a deaf person is like is so entrenched that even people who knew Bhola well would sometimes ask, “But he can hear, can’t he? He just can’t speak?” Once, memorably, a woman with whom Bhola chatted and joked

almost daily requested that he stick out his tongue for inspection, searching for a bodily fact to which his seeming difference – not from her, but from other deaf people – might adhere.

Mark Liechty (2003:143-144) writes about a different kind of visual typification.

[O]ne afternoon while sitting on the steps of a temple overlooking a crowded street in the heart of old Kathmandu a Nepali friend and I were scrutinizing passersby, he trying to educate me in a few of the more elementary rules of distinguishing social types by clothing and comportment. ... By the end of the afternoon I realized that a Kathmandu native could recognize the stiff-legged shuffle of an Indian (or Tarai Nepali) or the bent-knee strut of a person from the hills, from a distance of a hundred meters. The way a woman moved her arms while walking or a man carried packages on the street might indicate either city or rural origins. One's speech – volume, vocabulary, accent – and hand gestures gave hints about one's education, caste, regional origins, and general degree of urbanity. Finally, the cut, fit, and fabric of one's clothes, not to mention how up-to-date the styles were, were also taken into account almost instantaneously by my Nepali acquaintances.

Liechty characterizes these “embodied features of class practice” (which go far beyond class in any narrow sense) with Bourdieu's words, “the imperceptible cues of body *hexis*” (ibid:144, italics in original), although at least for Liechty's informant such cues are not only fully perceptible but also objectifiable. It appears that hearing people also associate cues of body hexis with deaf people, yet these associations often fail, creating cognitive dissonance.

When deaf people decry the use of *lāto*, then, they are protesting the derogatory meanings of the word on a citational level, the traits associated with it as listed by Shrawan, and the deeply held assumptions about deaf people indexed by comments like “he doesn't seem deaf” and by Durga's story. An examination of publicly articulated statements against the word reveals that this protest employs two primary rhetorical strategies, namely, equating speech and sign as equal forms of communication, and listing the positive attributes of deaf people that contradict the pejorative attributes implicit in *lāto*. Before turning to a consideration of actual utterances, I explain how deaf NSL users represent the word *lāto* in signed discourse. As mentioned in the Notes, for many Nepali words there are commonly held NSL equivalents and vice versa. The word *lāto*, however, does not appear in NSL dictionaries or have an official sign equivalent. In practice NSL signers do one of the following:

- A. fingerspell it in the NSL manual alphabet (which corresponds to the Nepali version of *devanāgarī* script)
- B. do A while mouthing *lāto*
- C. mouth *lāto* (without fingerspelling it) while performing the sign in Figure 10⁹⁴



Figure 10: Sign accompanying the mouthing of *lāto*

Image from NSL dictionary (NFDH 2003)⁹⁵



Figure 11: DEAF

Image from NSL dictionary (NFDH 2003)

The NSL sign in Figure 11, meanwhile, refers to or describes a deaf person, deaf society, etc., and is glossed and translated (in dictionaries, when deaf signers fingerspell or write, by hearing interpreters) with the Nepali *bahirā* and the English *deaf*.⁹⁶

At the 2009 NFDH General Assembly, Rajendra Sharma, a long-time deaf leader from Pokhara, recalled the history of the deaf movement in Nepal.

I am very happy because [the result is that] our communication is good. Just as hearing people have their speech, we deaf have our sign. Speech and sign are equal. There should be a moratorium on the word *lāto* [fingerspelled]. Just because hearing people speak, this doesn't make us deaf people fools – our bodies are fine, we can walk, we can do work, help people, so we are actually equal.⁹⁷

Before he even mentions the word *lāto*, Rajendra posits a relationship of equivalence: hearing is to speech as deaf is to sign. This formulation, invoked by other deaf people as well, reconfigures the relationship between communication and modality, from an equation of communication with speech to a recognition that communication can occur in various modalities. In other words, what matters is not *how* someone communicates but *that* they communicate. To sign is no less, and no more, than to speak. Rajendra then articulates a theory that different human capacities – bodily, mental, communicative, moral, economic – are ontologically separate or separable. Deaf people are physically unimpaired (“our bodies are fine, we can walk”), capable of productive labor (“we can do work”), and situated within networks of sociality (we can “help people”), just like hearing people. At the same program, Raghav Bir Joshi, a former president of the NDFN and the only deaf member of the first Constituent Assembly (now dissolved), made a similar argument, inflected with his signature humor and insight.

Hearing people think that deaf people are fools, but this is not the case. Our minds are still fine. We can't speak or hear, but our minds and our hands and our signing are good. Hearing people's way of thinking is oppressive. Let me make an analogy. Let's say there's a car. The horn is broken, it can't produce a sound, but the rest of the car is in great condition. Would we throw away the whole car? Those people [with oppressive attitudes] should think about that!⁹⁸

Raghav makes two points here with the analogy. First, like Rajendra, he points out that though deaf people can't emit the sounds expected of them,⁹⁹ they are perfectly capable of communicating. Second, he suggests that when members of hearing society treat deaf people as if they were “fools,” they are in fact “throwing away” a valuable resource in “great condition.” The unstated – and very funny – takeaway is that the *real* fool is someone who throws away an entire car because of a broken horn.

At the farewell program in Maunabudhuk, Bhola's speech took a similar tack, not surprising given that he had attended the General Assembly from which the above quotes are taken, as well as other NDFN-sponsored programs. Indeed the repetitive quality of the speeches at the General Assembly and the reiteration of similar rhetoric in other contexts exemplify how national events serve as nodes for the circulation of particular deaf logics. This is what Bhola said:

To look down on and consider deaf *lāto* [fingerspelled] is unacceptable. *BAHIRĀ* must be said. Look at the deaf here in front of us: they are clean, they are capable, they are not *lāto*. You can see this for yourselves. They¹⁰⁰ are thoughtful and capable of walking in a straight line. They do not gesticulate randomly. They are not MR [mentally retarded], that's different. They are deaf.¹⁰¹

Like the older leaders quoted above, Bhola points out the positive traits of deaf people, including their cleanliness. He also further specifies what deaf people are *not*: people who are mentally retarded, people whose actions look similar to signing but which are actually meaningless. While it might be argued that the 2009 speeches are implicitly referring to NSL signers, given the context of an NDFN national meeting, Bhola explicitly frames his comments as about the deaf people “here in front of us,” all of whom are natural signers.

Regardless of the mode of signed communication, the implicit accusation in the above excerpts is that when deaf people move their hands, it is *hearing people* who fail to understand that they are making sense. The double meaning of the English phrase “to make sense” is instructive here. One can *make sense to someone* (“She told me what I was saying made sense”) or *make sense of something* (“I made sense of what he was saying”). These are co-constitutive, not merely grammatically but phenomenologically. Person A makes sense to Person B (only) when Person B has made sense of what Person A has said. So what happens when Person B does not complete the loop? I turn now to a common trope that addresses this question head-on.

During the program mentioned above, Raghav Bir Joshi made the following remark:

If we deaf are *lāṭo* [mouthed with the sign shown in Figure 10] because we can’t understand hearing people with their sweet talk, then hearing people who can’t understand deaf signing are equally *lāṭo* [same].¹⁰²

Put in the terms just mentioned, if Person B doesn’t complete the loop, she is the *lāṭo* one, not Person A. Acharya (1997) invokes a similar premise.

The derogatory term *lāṭo* is used to describe the deaf in Nepali society. However, in a situation in which a conversation is ongoing between deaf signers, a hearing onlooker who does not know sign language is him/herself *lāṭo*.¹⁰³

In this written version (implied but not explicitly stated in Raghav’s), deaf signers signing *with each other* are revealed not to be *lāṭo*; they – if not the hearing people who watch them – understand each other just fine. Here we can see the importance of deaf society, not only in the use of NSL but more so in the configuration of multiple signers communicating with each other.

This trope thus takes to its logical end the premise, discussed above, that sign and speech are equivalent. Strikingly, NSL signers are not the only ones to draw this conclusion. Once, while I was talking with a group of older hearing men at a teashop in Maunabudhuk, one of them – who would never have encountered this joke in NSL or in writing – stated that when deaf people sign, it is the hearing who become *lāṭo*. It is doubtful that he was strictly differentiating between a group of NSL signers and a group of natural signers; what matters is that when deaf people communicate with each other, they are revealed as not being unintelligible after all.

In the above three formulations, hearing people are considered *lāṭo* not because they fail to *produce* (what are recognized by others as) communicative forms but because they fail to *understand* the forms that others have produced. Critically, the (in)ability to understand – and hence to be understood – is contingent on who is speaking/signing and who is listening/watching. In other words, being *lāṭo* is not a fixed or inherent attribute but rather dependent on context. Yet the trope’s ironic humor – hearing people are *lāṭo*! – rests on the fact that while in theory anyone *can* be rendered unintelligible (that is, anyone can fail to understand and to be understood), in practice it is almost always deaf people to whom this happens. The hearing *lāṭo* joke thus indexes a theory of situated intelligibility, which both legitimates deaf people and acknowledges their interactional vulnerability.

This vulnerability helps to account for an ambiguity I detected between an argument that deaf people are categorically not *lāṭo* and an argument that only certain kinds of deaf people are not *lāṭo*. The following examples reveal that ambiguity. Remember that Shrawan Lal Rai, the hearing teacher of the deaf, admitted that in the villages “we continue to say *lāṭālāṭi* of incompetent people, people who don’t understand, foolish people,” and admonished the audience that “we must say *bahirā*.” Let us look closely at a longer stretch of speech surrounding the utterances quoted above:

In this 6-month program, the reason for providing the deaf with sign language [*sāṅketik bhāshā*] – that is to say, what is in their own hearts, their emotions, to express these, they will have been using only their natural language [*prakritik bhāshā*]. Now in these modern times, they also have a mother-language [*mātribhāshā*], that is, for the deaf, sign language is their mother-language. And a program such as this one,

its reason is so that they can express what is in their hearts, their emotions, and make others understand. What is more, it seems to us – in village homes, we continue to say *lāṭalāṭi*, of incompetent people [*najanna*], people who don't understand [*nabujhna*], foolish people [*agyānta*]. Saying *lāṭalāṭi* is unacceptable; when speaking of *bahirā*, we must say *bahirā*. Because calling people who understand *lāṭalāṭi*, well, that's not right, to say this to/of uncomprehending people, well, that's okay.¹⁰⁴

Like Rajendra and others, Shrawan enters a discussion of *lāṭo* through a discussion of sign language and, like NSL signers, explicitly contrasts “natural language” (i.e. natural sign) with “sign language” (i.e. NSL). What I want to focus on here is how Shrawan sets up a line of demarcation that places deaf people *qua* deaf people safely on the non-*lāṭo* side but leaves room for the possibility that there are people of whom it is *thikāi* ‘okay, more or less alright’ to say *lāṭo*. It is unclear whether he means that it is okay because as *nabujhne* (uncomprehending) people, they *are* in fact *lāṭo* or because as *nabujhne* people they will not understand, and thus not be hurt by, the word.

This latter possibility reminds me of an encounter in the Maunabudhuk teashop that was frequented by the deaf participants, Bhola, and me following NSL class as well as by the usual assortment of villagers and people passing through. A visiting hearing woman expressed the above-discussed sentiment that Bhola did not seem *lāṭo*, and I politely asked her not to use that word.¹⁰⁵ She defended herself, saying that she wasn't actually saying something bad about him, and another woman – someone from Maunabudhuk whom we knew well – agreed. I said that the word itself was bad, adding that Bhola found it upsetting. To my surprise, the local woman replied, “Can Bhola hear?” Later Bhola and I talked over what had happened with the hearing teashop owner, who criticized the other hearing women. In the course of our discussion, she contradicted the logic implicit in “Can Bhola hear?” (and potentially present in Shrawan's comments) with this analogy: “Just because you're not seen doesn't make it okay to steal.”¹⁰⁶

In fact, while Shrawan did not say that there are *lāṭo* deaf people, I once saw a deaf person say so explicitly. The following discussion took place between two young women, both deaf, one of whom had significantly less education than the other. The more educated Gita asked Sushila¹⁰⁷ if she wanted to continue her studies. Sushila said yes, but that she was too old to do so, and proceeded to describe how as a girl she had attended a hearing school. She made one friend, but had trouble understanding the teacher, and the other students made fun of her for not being able to hear or speak. Later, after dropping out, she learned Nepali Sign Language, and the people who had teased her apologized. Gita responded to Sushila's story by saying that she should not be sad and should keep trying (to further herself). She then relayed a parallel story, revealing that she used to be called *lāṭo* (which she fingerspelled), but later the people who had said this realized they were wrong. She added, “These days there are many *bahirā*, but few *lāṭo* [fingerspelled]. There are *lāṭo* in the villages, but there are so many deaf schools now in different places.”¹⁰⁸

In both Sushila's and Gita's stories, hearing people taunted the deaf protagonist, only to see the error of their ways. In Sushila's recounting, this realization is explicitly linked to her acquisition of NSL. That is, Sushila frames the change in hearing people's attitude towards her in terms of a transformation in her own communicative capacities. By becoming someone who could understand others (NSL signers if not hearing teachers), others came to understand that she could communicate even if she couldn't hear or speak. Gita, meanwhile, does not specify the temporal relationship between her own linguistic competence – she learned NSL relatively young – and the hearing others' recognition that calling her *lāṭo* was wrong. In fact, her final comment suggests that as a deaf person educated from a young age, she never fit into the *lāṭo* category. Yet in firmly staking her claim to being *bahirā*, she also explicitly states that there are

deaf people who belong in the *lāṭo* category. They live in villages and are uneducated. In Gita's formulation, then, the categories of *bahirā* and *lāṭo* are distinctive and mutually exclusive, separated by space, by education, and – since schools and cities are places of NSL – by language.

The reference to the village should now be familiar. Recall that Rajendra Sharma, quoted above, situated the equality of sign and speech in relation to the growth of deaf organizations and social networks. Stating that deaf and hearing people “are actually equal,” he also noted that things are different in villages (see above). Here is what he said:

There is one place left, the village, where the word *lāṭo* is still used, where the culture continues, but we hope that with our efforts this will change in the future.¹⁰⁹

What I want to ask now is *why* deaf people continue to be called *lāṭo* in the village. Rajendra has just given an account of deaf history, praised deaf signing, named signed communication (and other capabilities) as evidence that deaf people are not *lāṭo*, and then admitted there being one place where *lāṭo* still gets used. Given the context, it is clear that when Rajendra says SIGN, he means Nepali Sign Language, and we know that deaf villagers as a category do not sign NSL. We might wonder, therefore, whether the “culture” to which Rajendra refers consists entirely of detrimental hearing attitudes, or whether it also includes deaf villagers' lack of NSL. I am not, of course, claiming that Rajendra would ever suggest that deaf villagers should be called *lāṭo*. But his framing of the issue suggests the stakes for NSL signers of participating in a form of communicative sociality in which they are (made) consistently, un-problematically intelligible.

Remember that I made two assertions earlier. First, I said that a certain ambiguity in some arguments against the word *lāṭo* hints that some people might correctly (in the semantic, not moral sense) be called *lāṭo*. This potential is realized most fully in Gita's statements. Second, I claimed that the “hearing *lāṭo*” joke reveals that intelligibility is contingent on social factors, and that deaf people are much more likely than hearing people to be rendered unintelligible. Putting these two assertions together, I can now state that the deaf campaign against the word *lāṭo* is not only a protest against being *perceived* as *lāṭo* but also against being *made lāṭo*. And we can see that NSL signers view learning NSL and participating in deaf society as the best way to ensure that they are not treated as *lāṭo*. Yet a slight variation on the above joke shows that all deaf people are vulnerable to being ignored or not understood. At the 2009 NDFN program, Ramesh Shrestha characterized deaf people's historical relationship with the Nepali state.

In the past the Nepali government did not treat deaf people as equal to hearing people. We explained our plight, told them we had no sign language training, requested their assistance. Yet even though we told them this repeatedly, they paid no attention (lit. they did not hear us), because they did not understand our signing. And I ask, if you can't “hear” us sign, who is deaf? We or you?¹¹⁰

In asking these questions, Ramesh uses the standard NSL sign DEAF, while mouthing *bahirā*. By calling the government *deaf* and asking why they were unable to “hear” their signs, Ramesh neatly plays on the literal and figurative meanings of *hearing*.¹¹¹ Yet he also implies that the experience of being unable to understand, of being outside shared language practices and incapable of making sense of what others say (as the government was in relation to deaf signing), belongs not only to *lāṭo* people but to *bahirā* ones as well. The strict separation of deaf people from *lāṭo* people shows slippage, unintelligibility being a state to which *all* deaf people are vulnerable, precisely because intelligibility is – as deaf discourse so powerfully demonstrates – a social fact.

Conclusion

This chapter has sketched the contours of deaf society and deaf NSL signers' perspectives on language, communication, and sociality. I have shown that NSL signers, who are part of an institutionally scaffolded network of deaf people, consider themselves both similar to

and different from deaf people who use what they call natural sign. I have also shown that NSL signers articulate a strong and deeply felt sense of responsibility for other deaf people, including natural signers. This responsibility is operationalized in sign language outreach programs to villagers and to elderly people. These two categories of people in need of intervention are part of a broader mapping of sign and sociality onto space and time.

On the one hand, I have argued, we can understand deaf NSL signers as claiming that a fully elaborated and communally shared language is of critical importance. In at least one case, we saw, a deaf NSL signer goes so far as to say that the problem is not only that hearing people call deaf people *lāto* but also that some of them – those in villages, those who are not NSL signers – actually are. Deaf society, in contrast, provides deaf NSL signers with what I think of as a horizon of intelligibility that persists even when they find themselves in a situation where they are unable to understand or make themselves understood. We also saw that people outside of deaf society are seen as lacking this horizon, not so much because of a lack of language but because of a lack of something else.

It is here that I think deaf NSL signers' more subtle (and perhaps more powerful) argument can be seen. When Bhola criticizes how hearing shopkeepers ignore deaf people, when KP talks about dirty, unkempt deaf villagers, and when Suresh describes the loneliness of elderly deaf people, they are making a claim about ethical relations that goes far beyond language as a system of shared grammar. We can see deaf society as not only a space of shared language but also and perhaps more importantly as a space of shared ethics, wherein deaf people are presumed to have, and thus *do* have, the capacity to *make sense*. Let me be clear that I am not claiming that deaf villagers or old people actually are or should be thought of as *lāto*. What I am claiming is that differently situated deaf people have very different, although sometimes overlapping, relationships to signed communicative practices and to other signers. Thus, as NSL signers recognize, NSL signers and natural signers are positioned differently in relation to interactional vulnerability. I return in Chapter 5 to this theme and to the ethics of communication.

This chapter has also shown that in many instances communication does occur between deaf and hearing people. They tell stories in which they, hearing people, and deaf people who do not sign NSL easily communicate in natural sign. The following four chapters focus on one particular space, Maunabudhuk and Bodhe in eastern Nepal, where that (sometimes) happens.

Chapter Two

Deaf in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe¹: Being a Signer the Local Way

Introduction

As I explained in the Introduction to this dissertation, I conducted fieldwork from the end of April to the end of October 2010 in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe Village Development Committees (VDCs) in Dhankuta district, in conjunction with an NDFN-facilitated NSL class. The chapters following this one (Chapters 3-5) focus on the formal, interactional, and ethical dimensions of the local signing practices used by deaf and hearing people in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, but a brief description is warranted here. In the previous chapter I quoted Bhola Thapa, the teacher of the Maunabudhuk-hosted NSL class, who stated that he was able to communicate with the local deaf participants, and they with him, in natural sign. Indeed, deaf and hearing people in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe employ a number of conventional and semi-conventional signs that they combine in fairly regular ways (see Chapter 3) and for countless purposes. I saw Maunabudhuk-Bodhe Local Sign (MBLS) used among deaf persons and between deaf and hearing people to exchange news, make jokes, curse, negotiate work arrangements, flirt, argue, describe past, ongoing, and hypothetical events, evaluate others' internal states, tell stories, express worries, and wonder about the future. It is important to recognize, however, that communication in MBLS, particularly between deaf and hearing people, is characterized by a patchwork of absolute ease and puzzled or dismissive incomprehension (see Chapters 4 and 5).

The present chapter sets the stage for the following chapters by laying out the social fields in which these practices and my research took and take place. Through comparison with prior research, I also demonstrate why I consider local sign to be a phenomenon that is distinct from home sign and village sign languages as they are typically understood. Here it is helpful to note that these categories are based not only on linguistic features but also – or even more so – on the settings in which they occur (see Kisch 2008).

As it was my own entry point into the social worlds of deaf (and hearing) people in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, I begin in Section 1 by describing the NSL class in some detail. I also reflect on how the class and my research coincided with and shaped each other and the communicative practices that were, in different ways, the object of each. In Section 2, I move into the broader social fields in which the class was embedded and in which deaf participants and their hearing families and neighbors move, literally and conceptually, as they exchange news; cuddle and scold children; plant, tend, and harvest crops; worry over sick relatives; cut fodder to feed livestock; plan the future marriage of a grown son working abroad; laugh, grieve, and love. Section 2 also helps to scaffold my analysis in Chapter 3 of the relationship between the formal and pragmatic properties of local sign and their social-material context. More immediately, it provides the background for my discussion in Section 4 of the number and percentage of deaf people in the area and of their spatial and kin relations with each other.

Before turning to this discussion, however, in Section 3 I ask a deceptively straightforward question: “Who is deaf?” I answer by way of an ethnographic account of how my interlocutors explicitly and implicitly addressed this question. I show that the category *deaf* – itself an imperfect translation of the categories present in the field – encompasses a variety of people, including people who use sign exclusively, people who use both speech and sign as primary communicative modalities, and perhaps even a few people who can hear. Deaf Studies has long argued that in deaf-centered communities *deaf* is a social category that goes far beyond audiological status; my work in this section shows that *deaf* is social category in hearing-

majority communities as well, and that even the question of whether someone hears is more complicated than it might appear.

In Section 4, I draw on official records as well as my own research to sketch out what I call the “deaf demography” of Maunabudhuk (and to a lesser extent, of Bodhe): the number and percentage of deaf residents, their spatial distribution, their kinship relations, and their social relations prior to the NSL class. I consider these social features in relation to the patterns that have been documented and typologized in sign language studies, arguing that the sociolinguistic field inhabited by deaf people in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe is distinct from the settings classically associated with home sign, on the one hand, and village sign language, on the other. This section also explains how I use local sign as both a label for and an approach to describing and analyzing the signed practices employed in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe.

In the remainder of this Introduction, I briefly address some methodological concerns. I want to make it clear that the purpose of my research was not to study the NSL class’s impact on local deaf and hearing residents’ daily lives, communicative practices, and social relations. The NSL class certainly did have effects, however, both on the *process* of research and on the *object* of research (the everyday lives and communicative practices of deaf villagers and their hearing interlocutors). In terms of my work as an ethnographer, the not-coincidental temporal coincidence of my research with the NSL program, my daily presence in class, and the fact that Bhola and I frequently pursued activities that combined his and my own objectives, such as visiting deaf people’s homes (something he had done in his previous two teaching appointments as well), all worked to position me in particular ways. As discussed in the previous chapter, Bhola’s corporeal self seemed to disturb the category *deaf*. I, on the other hand, seemed to fit relatively well into the pre-existing category of the white/foreign/American *mis* ‘miss, teacher,’² a term that can serve as a gender-specific but occupation-general polite form of address/reference or an occupation-specific form address/reference. And in fact there were many times when I did take up a teaching role, most consistently when Bhola had to return to his own home for a couple weeks to help out with farm work and I took over the work of running the class, but also in smaller ways on a regular basis, since I already knew most of the vocabulary being taught as well as many of the letters of the alphabet. (My fingerspelling and ability to recite the alphabet in NSL improved greatly over the course of six months!) As I discuss below, hearing teenagers and adults who stopped in the class even momentarily would frequently engage in instruction and evaluation, so for me to refrain from helping a deaf student with her letters or to pretend not to know the signs already would have been considered odd and selfish.

When people verbalized their assumption that I was a teacher or even the one in charge of the NSL program, I would reply that I wasn’t in actuality a *mis*, that I was there to conduct fieldwork, and that Bhola was the teacher. I did so not only to inform or remind people of my research purposes but also because I desperately wanted to make it clear that deaf people are teachers, too, and that the automatic respect due to educators should be directed towards *Bhola*. More generally, while being (seen as) a teacher made me legible to Maunabudhuk’s residents, it also often felt at odds with my role as researcher and indeed as *learner* – of local communicative practices, relationships, geography. I was always glad therefore when my incompetence was revealed, as when I got lost on pathways (happily reported by Bhola to his students), spilled water on myself when drinking in the Nepali fashion (leaving a space between one’s mouth and the vessel), or naively wondered what a human-made hole in the ground was for (sewage!). It is also worth noting that along with “Mara *mis*” I was addressed and referred to with the phrases “Mara *bahini* ‘younger sister,’” “Mara *didi* ‘older sister,’ and “Mara *an̄i* ‘auntie.

In terms of deaf and hearing people's communicative practices, several hearing people said that after the class, the deaf participants would be able to communicate better with each other, but not any better with hearing people.³ The implication was that the hearing people had not learned the new signs being taught in class. While a few deaf people did incorporate several NSL signs into their daily repertoires (see below), they mostly continued to use local signs, even in the physical space of the NSL class. One day, for example, Trilochan Giri was talking about his sister's inter-caste marriage, and he used the signs LONG.NOSE and SHORT.NOSE to denote Chhetris and Limbus, although he knew the NSL signs well.⁴ On the other hand, once in a conversation between Bhola, a deaf signer, the deaf signer's mother, and me, the signer said that his mother seemed ANGRY, using the NSL sign. His mother misinterpreted the sign to mean crazy (I quickly explained what it really meant).⁵ On another occasion, I recall that someone – perhaps the same mother – was confused by her son's use of Bhola and my name signs. In general, however, I did not observe nor was I told about any communicative difficulties arising from the NSL class (nor did the hearing people's comments imply that they would).⁶ Moreover some families enjoyed learning new signs. For example Laxman Bishwakarma's older brother Maila and the brother's daughter were excited to learn the NSL sign POOR, which Maila noticed as Laxman, Bhola, and I playfully bantered about who was rich and who was poor. When I translated it for him, I wrote in my fieldnotes, "he seemed – well, the best word I can think of is 'tickled.'"⁷ In 2012 when Bhola and I visited Maunabudhuk again, I brought NSL calendars that the NDFN had given me to distribute. In the same vein, Maila was interested in talking about the differences between NSL number signs, which are illustrated on the calendar, and the local number signs.

I also want to note that despite the aforementioned borrowings and what I saw as an increase in the amount of conversation that went on among deaf signers in the class, I do not have a sense that there were major changes in signing *repertoires*. It is possible that further analysis of my video-recordings will produce evidence to the contrary. Yet even if it does, it could be difficult to determine whether such changes were a result of having been taught NSL or a result of sustained, daily interaction among multiple deaf signers, a situation that was not the norm as I discuss in the following section.

1. The NSL Outreach Program

The NSL class ran from mid-April 2010 to the end of October 2010, meeting Sundays through Fridays 6 am to 10 am in Maunabudhuk's VDC hall, an airy building comprised of a corrugated metal roof, white-washed walls, and a concrete floor, furnished with rows of long wooden benches along with a few wooden tables and chairs. Ten deaf people from Maunabudhuk and two from Bodhe attended the class on a fairly regular basis.⁸ Most days the students would sit along two benches facing the teacher, as shown in Figure 12. Usually I would sit with them, or in an adjoining chair if the benches were full, except when I was tending to my video cameras (I did not film every day) or offering assistance to Bhola. On occasion, when the rain or chores kept the majority of participants at home, we clustered around a single table.



Figure 12: NSL class participants

Back row: Trilochan Giri, Dhan Limbu, Bhim Limbu, Nil Limbu
Front row: Maili Limbu, Man Kumari Limbu, Dewi Basnet, Hira Basnet

The class participants were a fairly diverse group in terms of age, gender, and *jāt* ‘caste/ethnicity.’ Table 1 lists participants who attended class at least twice. An asterisk indicates that I have guessed their age (all ages are for the year 2010). VDCs are abbreviated as follows: MB = Maunabudhuk, B = Bodhe. The names in bold are the persons whose homes I visited on multiple occasions (I visited the homes of all of the following people at least once).

Name	Gender	Age	<i>Jāt</i>	VDC	Attendance
Amrita Kumari Pariyar	F	48	Damai (Dalit)	MB	Regular
Bhim Maya Limbu	F	37	Limbu	MB	Regular
Dewi Maya Basnet⁹	F	46	Chhetri	MB	Regular
Chandra Tamang	M	40*	Tamang	B	Attended a few times
Dhan Bahadur Limbu	M	43	Limbu	MB	Regular
Hira Maya Basnet	F	50	Limbu	MB	Regular
Kamal Kumar Yakkha*	M	15	Yakkha ¹⁰	B	Semi-regular, then stopped
Kanchi Maya Limbu	F	55*	Limbu	MB	Regular for few months, then stopped
Laxman Bishwakarma	M	42	Kami (Dalit)	MB	Regular
“Maili” Harka Maya Limbu	F	54	Limbu	MB	Regular
Man Kumari Limbu	F	43	Limbu	MB	Sporadic
Nil Kumari Limbu	F	36	Limbu	MB	Regular
Om Kumari Ghimire	F	40*	Bahun	B	Attended a few times
Trilochan Giri*	M	40	Chhetri	B	Regular

Table 1: Participants in the NSL class

The class served a number of social functions. Officially it was a pedagogical space. To the best of my knowledge, the NSL class was in fact the first experience with formal (including community-based) education for eleven of the above fourteen people. Trilochan Giri had as a child gone to school until 5th grade, and Kamal Yakkha was currently enrolled in the local primary school.¹¹ According to a hearing villager, Nil Limbu had participated in a literacy course at some point in the past, but she herself said she had not. I am not sure about Om Ghimire's educational experience; in answer to direct questions, she said that she was not literate but that she could write her name.¹² Laxman Bishwakarma had never been to school, but knew how to write his letters, having been taught by his siblings. It is important to note that deaf people were unexceptional in not having gone to school. Of twelve total siblings, for example, only two of Laxman's brothers and two of his sisters had attended school (one brother had died at the age of 25; I did not find out whether or not he had gone to school).

The formal curriculum taught by Bhola revolved around three sets of forms: 1. NSL vocabulary items, represented on a series of educational posters or charts organized by topics such as animals, birds, nature, kinship, and antonyms; these charts are present in NSL classrooms around the country and feature beautiful colored illustrations by Pratigya Shakya, a deaf artist, of the signs and their meanings, along with the Nepali and English glosses; 2. the NSL-Nepali manual alphabet; and 3. Nepal's *devanagari* alphabet (including the letters *qua* letters as well as the participants' own names). Students did learn many NSL signs, in the sense that they could look at the charts and recite the signs and/or sign them when Bhola signed them (see Hoffmann-Dilloway 2011:294-295 for a similar description of NSL learning). Some students even incorporated a few NSL signs into their everyday repertoires, such as JOKE, LOVE, HAPPY, EASY, and DIFFICULT,¹³ and remembered one or two when Bhola and I visited again in 2012. Interestingly the NSL signs people regularly used were not necessarily those that lacked a local equivalent. Bhim Limbu, for example, often used the NSL signs MALE and FEMALE, both of which can be expressed with highly conventional local signs.

First and foremost, however, the class was a space of social encounters, where deaf villagers, Bhola, myself, and on not-infrequent occasions hearing villagers interacted. There were pre-existing relations among some of the deaf participants. Dhan Limbu and Laxman Bishwakarma, for example, had known each other for decades; Dhan, who lived farther down the eastern-facing hillside, usually stopped by Laxman's house on his way to class so the two could walk together. Others did not know each other prior to the class, and the class was the first time that deaf people from Maunabudhuk and Bodhe *formally* and *regularly* met together. Over the six months, the deaf participants spent many hours in each other's company, sharing news about their neighbors and families, comparing the progress of their crops, discovering and expressing affinities and tensions, making jokes, and working hard to learn NSL vocabulary and writing skills. The class became a uniquely deaf-oriented space within the village and produced several new deaf-deaf relationships, though these did not necessarily endure after the end of the class. Laxman and Trilochan, for example, had met but not really known each other well before class. In class, they nearly always sat next to each other and talked frequently. They were both quick learners who sometimes became impatient with the slower students, and they seemed to find real enjoyment in each other's presence. Yet when I returned to Budhuk several years later, I found out that the relationship had not been maintained, no doubt because they live about an hour's walk apart and both are busy contributing to their household's subsistence and economic activities. Bhim Limbu and Amrita Pariyar, on the other hand, hadn't known each other prior to the class. This fact surprised me because Bhim has relatives who live close to Amrita, and both

women interact with people far beyond their immediate households. I suppose they simply hadn't had reason to cross paths in the fifteen or so years since Bhim had married into the village. While I would not have characterized their relationship as especially close during the class (Amrita usually sat in the first row and Bhim in the second), during my visit in 2012 both of them made sure to tell me that when Bhim's father-in-law had passed away, Amrita had been among those who went to her house to help out with the various duties incurred due to the death. Although in many ways a deaf-centered arena, the class was never closed off, either materially or socially, from the broader context. Before class started, students would often sit at the teashop across the road from the VDC hall, interacting with each other as well as with passersby. On mornings when only a few people had arrived by 6:00 or 6:15, I would treat us to cups of hot tea and packages of biscuits, and at 10 am when class finished all the participants received a bowl of soup or other snack courtesy of the VDC. During class – especially when someone new, such as me, appeared – hearing villagers frequently peered in through the slatted windows or wandered inside. When the lesson was writing, sometimes they would bend over the students to help or correct them. Other times, especially when the class was practicing signed vocabulary items or the manual alphabet, people would just sit and watch, as is evident in Figure 13. Several hearing men seemed fascinated by the manual alphabet, and would practice making the letters (also visible in Figure 13), although one day when I encouraged a few of them to actively participate in class by signing along with everyone else, one of them suddenly insisted that he had to return to his shop. I saw him moments later at a teashop. Several kids also enthusiastically if somewhat shyly participated on multiple occasions, learning at least the beginning of the alphabet quite well. In fact the only time the classroom door was ever locked was when a few kids, high-spirited and playful, dashed in and out so many times that it became a distraction.



Figure 13: The NSL class with deaf participants, hearing observers, and an anthropologist

NSL class – associated as it was with a “handsome,” hip young deaf man (see previous chapter) and a white foreigner – was also a source of prestige for the deaf participants. It was the first time that deaf people were not only formally included in but actually the *reason* for an ongoing event. (Other social groups, such as a women's collective, held meetings regularly.)

Deaf participants took pride in showing their notebooks – in which they had hand copied letters and, in some cases, words or numbers – to friends and acquaintances. As mentioned above, the curriculum was comprised of NSL vocabulary, the manual alphabet, and basic Nepali literacy. When leaders of deaf society talk about NSL outreach classes, they seldom if ever mention literacy, but this aspect seemed most understandable to hearing villagers, who would frame friendly questions about how the class was going or how particular students were performing in relation to learning to write. While illiteracy does not appear to be stigmatized in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, certainly not among older adults, literacy and literacy training are sources of value. During literacy lessons, the deaf participants gamely drew the letters of the alphabet over and over for what felt to me like interminable periods of time. Practicing the alphabet did not, for many students, lead to functional literacy. Instead, by forming shapes on paper, they formed themselves as educated people.¹⁴ Thus in some ways the class – and specifically its literacy dimension – positioned deaf people as different from hearing people, in that they were participants in a deaf event, and yet similar to them, in that they became the kind of person who does things like attend classes in the town hall, carry notebooks, and practice writing letters.

In addition to being a source of value, the class was also at times a source of tension for deaf participants and their families. Kanchi Maya Limbu said that her son was upset with her for coming to class, and her husband came to class one day to tell Bhola and me that “she was gone too many hours (5 to noon) and who would do the work, and she got home too hungry.”¹⁵ Amrita Pariyar’s mother explained that with her only son working abroad, she, the son’s wife, and Amrita were responsible for all the farm and household work. In other words, they could not afford for Amrita to lose a morning’s work six days a week. The fact that the six month class coincided with the more labor-intensive half of the year – e.g., the corn had to be weeded, harvested, bundled, and stored, the millet planted and tended to – exacerbated the situation. Laxman’s elder brother Maila pointed out that the class was poorly timed, as did another deaf person’s family member. Maila added that during the winter months, when there is far less farm work, people would have been able to attend more regularly. In fact, Laxman was one of the most regular attendees, and when he did have to miss class to work, he never complained. Several other deaf people, however, asked Bhola and me to intervene with their families, suggesting that they were being asked to bear too great a workload and/or to miss class too frequently. Such requests for intervention were one of the ways that I was positioned as being an advocate for deaf people rather than “only” a researcher.

Interestingly, even those family members who explicitly stated that they needed all hands for work also framed their arguments as if from the perspective of the deaf person. Kanchi’s husband claimed she was hungry, while Trilochan’s proud mother reminded us that he had been to school and already knew how to write, so it was embarrassing for him to sit in class learning the alphabet, even though both of them also worried about lost labor. Inversely, one day when I stopped by to see Amrita as she worked in a neighbor’s fields, she greeted me with a *namaste* and then announced to the people around her that I was there to yell at her for not having come to class. Trying to mitigate my perceived authority and show that I understood or was trying to understand the demands of a farming economy, I told her repeatedly that I wasn’t. It only occurred to me a few days later that, just as Kanchi’s husband and Trilochan’s mother had invoked their deaf family members’ bodily and emotional needs, distancing the speaker from the demand that the deaf person stay home to work, so Amrita might be strategically displacing her desire to go to class onto me (see Ahearn 2001 for a discussion of how people enact and talk about agency in Nepal).

2. Maunabudhuk and Bodhe

As these tensions and negotiations indicate, the NSL class was embedded in the broader context of the village and in the exigencies and affections of everyday life. This section concerns that broader context. By giving a sense of what Maunabudhuk and Bodhe look like and what activities and movements people frequently engage in, my exposition serves two distinct though related purposes. First, it offers important background for Section 5, where I lay out the area's "deaf demographics" – that is, the number, familial relationships, and spatial distribution of deaf persons – and consider what this case, in comparison to relevant examples in the literature, might suggest about the emergence and transmission of semi-conventional signed communicative practices. Second, it introduces key features of the cultural and material landscape such as food production, agricultural cycles, caste/ethnic relations, and built space, about which signers frequently talk about and on which they draw in making, and making sense of, individual signs and signed utterances, as analyzed in Chapter 3.

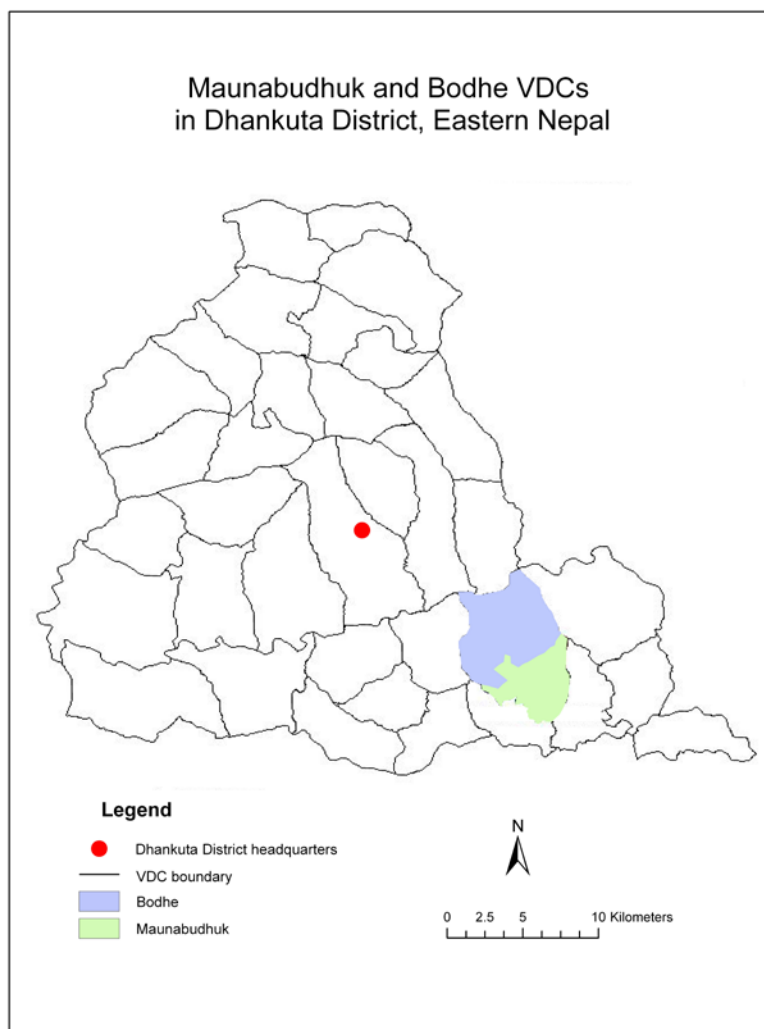


Figure 14: Maunabudhuk and Bodhe in Dhankuta¹⁶

Located in the southeastern corner of Dhankuta district (see Figure 14), Maunabudhuk and Bodhe VDCs lay draped across the hills, such that from many vantage points one can see nearby houses and fields, neighboring villages, the district's eponymous headquarters, and, in the cooler clearer months, the massive white peaks of the Himalayas (see Figures 15-18). Numerous well-trod footpaths curve along the slopes or zigzag up and down them, connecting houses, grazing areas, fruit trees, water taps, fields, gardens, and forests. Several wide dirt roads – leveled by bulldozers – also wind through the VDCs. Maunabudhuk's bazaar (Figure 15) is located on such a road, which is dusty or muddy according to the changing seasons. At the south end is the government primary school, and at the north end, the government secondary school, the private primary school, and an open soccer field. In between sit the VDC offices and health post (clinic), along with houses and stores constructed from concrete or wood and offering ready-made clothes, medicine, sewing services, umbrellas, beauty supplies, fertilizer, foodstuff, watch repair, a place to stay for the night, and assorted snacks, hot tea, and alcohol.



Figure 15: View from the path to Bhim's house of Maunabudhuk's bazaar (May)



Figure 16: View from the path to Laxman's house of Maunabudhuk and adjoining valley (July)



Figure 17: View from the bazaar of eastern Himalayan peaks (October)



Figure 18: View from Bhim's home of Maunabudhuk, Bodhe, and beyond (October)

I have two data sources for Maunabudhuk's population: a series of spreadsheets generously given to me by Durga Chemjong, the VDC's secretary, and the official 2011 national government census (Government of Nepal 2012b). For Bodhe, I have only the latter. According to the VDC's own data¹⁷ for the Nepali year 2066 (English year 2009-2010), Maunabudhuk has 2966 residents divided among 524 households.¹⁸ The primary *jāt* 'caste/ethnic group(s)' are Bahun (Brahman), Chhetri, Limbu, Rai, and Dalit (primarily Damai and Kami), as shown in Table 2. (Note that the percentages are the same whether calculated on the basis of households or individuals). The 2011 census provides slightly different figures: 2569 residents divided among 584 households,¹⁹ with the *jāt* breakdown shown in Table 3 that is based on individuals because the census does not list households by *jāt*. According to the 2011 census, Bodhe has 691 households, for a total of 3056 people.²⁰ Its *jāt* percentages are shown in Table 4.

<i>Jāt</i>	%
Limbu	67
Bahun & Chhetri	17
Rai	9
Dalit	6
Other	1

Table 2: *Jāt* in Maunabudhuk (VDC data)

<i>Jāt</i>	%
Limbu	64
Bahun & Chhetri	17
Rai & Yamphu ²¹	8
Dalit	6
Other	4

Table 3: *Jāt* in Maunabudhuk (2011 census)

<i>Jāt</i>	%
Yakkha ²²	29
Bahun & Chhetri	25
Limbu	10
Dalit	9
Rai & Yamphu	9
Tamang	9
Other	9

Table 4: *Jāt* in Bodhe (2011 census)

I discuss caste and ethnicity in Nepal in more detail in Chapter 3. For now, let me note that Limbus, Rais, and Yakkhas – all of whom are grouped together as Kiranti – are, along with Tamangs, classified as *janājāti* ‘ethnic group(s).’ Bahuns and Chhetris and Dalits, meanwhile, are considered to be *jāt* ‘caste’ groups. In everyday parlance, however, all are referred to as *jāt* or *jāti*. In the 1854 Muluki Ain (Nepali national law), Limbus, Rais, Yakkhas, and Tamangs, along with other groups, were classified as “enslavable alcohol-drinkers” (Hofēr 2004:118), that is, as the third of five broad categories within the prescribed caste hierarchy. Bahuns and Chhetris were grouped in the first of the five categories, with Chhetris ranked lower than Bahuns, and Dalits were “untouchable,” the bottom of the five categories. While Nepal’s 1959 constitution officially “proclaimed all citizens to be equal before the law” (ibid:187), the long-term residue of legally sanctioned caste-based hierarchy continues to have very real consequences. Caste discrimination is also still *socially* sanctioned in many domains, though Eastern Nepal is generally considered have less caste discrimination than Western Nepal.

Maunabudhuk is a place where *jāt*-based discrimination and hierarchical relations are both visible and hidden, depending where and how you look. On the one hand, in the bazaar teashop frequented by the deaf class members, everyone ate and drank from the same set of dishes, and Dalits handled the water jugs as freely as anyone else. Similarly, at the public taps, people from any caste could and did fetch water and bathe. Close friendships, even fictive kin relations, crossed caste and ethnic line, as did three marriages that I know of – though the latter were only between Bahuns/Chhetris and Limbus, not Dalits. On the other hand, one day when I spent time at a hearing Bahun woman’s house outside the bazaar, I found that she did not allow her Kami (Dalit) neighbors inside, despite their seemingly casual and friendly interactions. I also knew of one high-caste man who refused to enter a Limbu-owned bar where Dalits were served, and I knew one Limbu woman who refused to sit next to a Dalit woman while eating, though the latter example seemed to be as much about personal animosity as caste. In addition, Brahmans

and Chhetris own most of the dry goods stores and larger snack shops in town; Limbus own those which served alcohol; and Dalit families own and operate artisan shops but no dry goods or food stores. Given the population ratio, moreover, Bahuns and Chhetris are over-represented among shop owners. These patterns can be thought of as the effects of several centuries of state-sanctioned discrimination and differential government policies surrounding land and migration (see Caplan 2000 on Bahun-Limbu relations east of Dhankuta). In the two-plus decades since democracy was established in 1990, these effects have been ameliorated somewhat by the work of ethnic and Dalit movements as well as by the increased importance of and opportunities for remittances (that is, extra-local sources of cash wealth).

Nepali is the native language of Bahuns, Chhetris, and Dalits, while Limbu, Rai, Yakkha, and Tamang families may speak Nepali as well as Limbu, Rai, Yakkha, or Tamang.²³ Reflecting the above-mentioned history of linguistic, cultural, and economic dominance by high caste Nepali speakers, Nepali is the spoken medium in VDC offices and schools, and in conversations between people from Nepali-speaking and other linguistic backgrounds. I did, however, hear Limbu spoken, not only in homes but in Maunabudhuk's bazaar as well.²⁴ The 2011 census lists Limbu as the mother tongue of 1641 people, which is 64% of the VDC population, i.e. the entire Limbu population. This figure indexes the salience of mother tongue politics in Nepal (see Turin 2014, 2005) but masks the massive language shift toward Nepali among the younger generations.

In Maunabudhuk VDC's own records, Limbu and Rai families are classified as following the Kirat *dharma* 'religion, duty' (with the exception of one Limbu Christian household), while Bahun, Chhetri, and Dalit families are classified as Hindu. Funereal rites for the two groups are different – the former are buried, the latter cremated. In the fall of 2010, far fewer Limbu and Rai women celebrated Tij, a Hindu women's festival, than did Bahun and Chhetri women. Unfortunately I did not note the involvement of Dalit women. On another occasion I attended an evening of song and prayer where only upper-caste Hindus were present. In the everyday idiom, however, such differences are expressed in terms of *jāt*, not religion.

Most families in Maunabudhuk, regardless of caste/ethnicity, are primarily farmers.²⁵ Although the ideal is to eat rice for the two major meals of the day, few people in Maunabudhuk grow rice, at least in the higher wards where my interlocutors live; the land is not sufficiently irrigated. (In fact, Maunabudhuk occasionally suffers from water shortages, in contrast – I was told – to neighboring VDCs.) The major field crops are corn and millet, mostly used for subsistence purposes. Nearly every house also has a lush garden planted with cucumbers, squash, tomatoes, chili peppers, and other vegetables that are mainly for household use. The two biggest cash crops are *nāspāti* 'Asian pear' and *suntalā* 'mandarin orange';²⁶ pigs and chickens are also a source of extra income. Other livestock include goats (used and sold for meat), cows (milk), and water buffaloes (meat or milk). In addition, nearly every family in Maunabudhuk relies on remittances. Durga Chemjong, the VDC secretary mentioned above, estimated that 95% of households have at least one male member working abroad, primarily in the Arabian Gulf states or Malaysia (though see Endnote 18). Locally men also earn money by doing labor on construction sites and loading trucks, and a minority of families own shops, work as teachers, or provide services such as sewing or blacksmithing.²⁷ On Saturday mornings (market day), farmers from the surrounding area line the street near the VDC offices with piles of assorted fruits and vegetable; at the other end of the bazaar, near the government primary school, butchers offer chunks of fresh meat, and women sell fermented grain alcohol.

Agricultural, domestic, and other labor activities, and the built spaces in which they occur, are embedded in and productive of a dense field of sociality. As in Junigau, the Magar village

described by Ahearn (2001:13), people in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe spend much of their time outside: on porches, in courtyards, at personal or communal water taps,²⁸ in fields and grazing areas. In most farm households, family members perform some and frequently all of their own agricultural labor: cutting grass for fodder, grazing and feeding animals, hauling water, chopping firewood, hoeing and ploughing fields, weeding, harvesting, and storing crops. While products such as milled rice, tea, and sugar are readily available in the bazaar stores, many other everyday consumption items – such as millet- and corn-derived beer and hard liquor, cornmeal, pickles, and hot sauces – are produced at home. When people are home, their doors are nearly always open, and they are usually outside, anyway. In the bazaar, the small teashops and little restaurants are open on the street side, allowing interactions between patrons and passersby. People also frequently sit in front of the pharmacy, the watch-repair shop, and other stores to pass time talking together, while kids run between their own and their friends' homes. In the rest of the VDC, fields surround some houses, the nearest neighbors a few minutes' walk away, while other houses are built in clusters or hamlets (see Figure 19). During most of my visits to people's homes, I met not only members of the household but also other relatives and/or neighbors, some of whom came to see the foreign anthropologist and the "handsome" deaf Nepali, others of whom were dropping by for social and/or work-related purposes.



Figure 19: The hamlet where Amrita lives

People travel not only within the VDC but also beyond it. Buses depart from Maunabudhuk twice each morning, at 7 am and 9 am, the vehicles and their drivers having spent the night before in the bazaar. During the growing season, the buses transport people as well as items for sale. In June and July, for example, passengers clamber over enormous bags bursting with Asian pears to perch on the hard seats; more sacks get strapped onto the bus's roof (see Figure 20). After leaving Maunabudhuk, the bus stops at a number of bazaars and hamlets. Three hours later, it reaches Bhedetar, a small town of food shops and inns where the dirt road from Maunabudhuk intersects the paved highway that runs from Dharan, a city at the edge of the *Tarai* 'plains' in Sunsari district, to Dhankuta's eponymous headquarters. In Bhedetar, passengers can transfer to a Dhankuta-bound bus that will loop downhill, across the Tamor River,

and back uphill to the headquarters, arriving a few hours later. If they remain on the Maunabudhuk bus, they will spiral down toward the plains to reach Dharan within the hour. In the afternoons, buses depart from Dharan's crowded bus depot, reversing the route to arrive in Maunabudhuk around 4 pm and 7 pm. Along with buses, tractors carrying loads of construction material, an ambulance used to transport serious cases from the health clinic to a hospital, and the occasional motorcycle ply Maunabudhuk's roads, but usually they serve as exceptionally broad footpaths for people and livestock.



Figure 20: Loading buses

Whether they walk or ride buses to reach their destinations, children as well as adults frequently travel or live away from home – for days, weeks, months, or years – in order to attend school, receive job training, or pursue employment. Early in my stay, for example, I went for a walk with several young women from neighboring VDCs who were there to take exams at the local government secondary school. While strolling around the bazaar, we ran into two of their co-villagers who were walking home; one of them had just returned to Nepal after a few years working in Saudi Arabia. While men frequently move for employment, women usually move to get married; married women almost never reside in their natal village. On major holidays such as Dasai, women try to return to their parents' or brothers' home for a visit. A number of the married women in Maunabudhuk, including Dewi Basnet who is deaf, were born in Kurule, a village less than a day's walk from Maunabudhuk, visible across a valley to the southeast. Many people in Maunabudhuk also have relatives in Morang, a Tarai district, reflecting a Nepal-wide migration from the hills to the plains occurring over the last few decades. Relationships based on kinship, labor, friendship, and co-residence thus characterize particular localities and also constitute connections between localities.

A brief example will help to illustrate this pattern. Bhim Maya Limbu's home is situated on a hilltop in Maunabudhuk. Just downhill to the south are relatives; Bhim's children's generation call a woman who was in her 20s in 2010 *didi* 'older sister' and her husband *bhinā*, which is short for *bhinājyu* 'older sister's husband.' To the west, past the corn and millet fields and down the hill, lives a woman slightly older than Bhim. When I visited, she was frequently at

Bhim's house, though I'm not sure if she is related. This woman lives alone; her husband lives with another woman, their oldest son was disabled and had died young, the younger son lives in Dharan, and the daughter is married and lives with her own husband. About ten minutes north of Bhim's is the household of Bhim's father-in-law's youngest brother. Other relatives also live in the area and drop by. Farther away, Bhim's husband's youngest brother lives in the Tarai, as do his eldest and youngest sisters, who are themselves married to brothers (or cousins; the Nepali phrase can mean either), though the latter two were not on speaking terms in 2010. Bhim's own *māitighar* 'natal home' is less than a day away in Dhankuta, while Bhim's husband's middle brother's wife (who also lives in Maunabudhuk)'s *māitighar* is in Panchthar, the district to the east of Dhankuta. Although it is not her own *māmāghar* 'maternal uncle's home,' Bhim's older daughter had visited it with her cousins at some point. We can picture a web of connections, differently colored threads connecting people to each other and to different places; in some areas, such as right around Bhim's house, there are many short threads, while longer threads connect households across distance.

The conventional greetings people give each other along pathways reflect the salience of movement in everyday life and the importance of keeping track of consociates' movements: "*Kahā bāṭa ānunubhaeko* 'Where are you coming from?' *Kahā jānubhaeko* 'Where are you going?'" Such questions are asked even when the answers are obvious, as when children would sing out, "*O didi, nuhāuna jānubhaeko* 'Hey older sister, are you going to bathe?'" as I walked the hundred meters from my home to the nearest water tap bearing a bucket of laundry, shampoo, and soap. Through movement within and across spaces, people are socialized into belonging to particular places that are themselves connected to other places and people, a point to which I return in the final section of the chapter.

The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to thinking about how the deaf participants in the NSL class, and other deaf people about whom I could gain information, are embedded within this broader field. What percentage of the population do they make up? Do they live close to each other, or are they spread out? Are some of them related? Do deaf people cluster in certain families? What do these patterns suggest about the communicative practices I observed and participated in? To answer these questions, I must first address a deceptively simple question.

3. Who is deaf?

Bhola and I were standing in the courtyard between a house and an open-air blacksmithery on the far side of Bodhe, a good hour's walk from the Maunabudhuk bazaar. One of Bhola's duties was to facilitate the enrollment of deaf children at deaf school, and we had been following the trail of a deaf Bishwakarma (Kami sub-caste) girl, whom we had been told was of school age. An acquaintance in Maunabudhuk directed us to a small jeweler's shop located by the football field; the man we met there suggested we go to the school in Bodhe, near Trilochan's house. The teachers there asked a cousin of the family in question to guide us along the paths from the school to the house. When we arrived we found the little girl's grandparents and several other relatives including her uncle (roughly Bhola's age), though not the girl herself or her mother, who were visiting the latter's *māitighar* 'natal home.'

As we talked, the grandfather paused from the task of fixing a tool, for which another man sat waiting. We discussed, in Nepali and NSL (I served as translator), the possibility of sending the child to one of the district's three deaf schools (residential deaf classes). The family seemed open to the idea, although over the next couple months they decided that the girl was too young to send so far away, and that they would wait another year or two. On that day we also

asked if they knew any other deaf people in the area; they said no. Then toward the end of the conversation, one of the family members remembered that in fact “the man sitting right there [waiting for his tool to be fixed] is also *like that*.”²⁹ Here is my written account of what happened next.

[W]e turned to him and he kind of grinned at us and Bhola and I talked to him, he speaks pretty much fluently but is definitely hard of hearing, and proclaimed [to have] no interest in going to school [i.e. the NSL class] and didn’t want to take us to his house because he had to go cut grass [for fodder] first. He wasn’t at all unfriendly, just very sure of where his priorities were. The B[ishwa]K[arma] family members said that we should talk to his mother, because what she says rules, so we decided to go find the house, especially since they also said that his wife is also like that, and even more so (i.e. hears/speaks less). A young boy led us most of the way there, and then we asked at the house above theirs, where they said there were actually THREE deaf/hard of hearing people, the mother too, but when we got down there, it turns out the mother is hard of hearing in the “I’m old and going deaf” kind of way, she is fluent in speaking and understanding speech.³⁰

The details of this scene – the fact that the BK family seemed to forget about a deaf man sitting right there, their assertion that both the man and his wife were “like that” in comparison with the neighbor’s mention of *three* persons of interest, my own attempt to describe and make sense of people’s varying relations to hearing and speech – open up questions about who gets perceived, identified, and counted as deaf. This section explores these questions by looking closely at how people in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe talk about people whom I call *deaf*. Sub-section 4.1 focuses on hearing people’s explicit and implicit categorizations of deaf people, and sub-section 4.2 examines deaf people’s perspectives through close analysis of conversations in class that revolved around the introduced NSL sign DEAF. In the latter section I also consider my findings in relation to Deaf Studies, and clarify my own use of the English word *deaf*. In sub-section 4.3, I compare different numerical accounts of deaf people in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe.

First let me briefly address the issue mentioned above of people seeming to forget to tell us about someone deaf.³¹ In addition to visiting the deaf people who came to class, Bhola and I relied on a list (discussed below) and on word-of-mouth to seek out and talk to other deaf people in the area, both for research purposes and to encourage them to come to class. In the course of making our way to known people’s houses and trying to match people we had been told about or who were on the list to actual bodies, I would ask people we met for information about deaf people in the area. As much as possible I refrained from invoking the vernacular *lāto* ‘dumb’ to ask about deaf people; perhaps my use of other terminology, such as *kān nasunne* ‘[people with] not-hearing ears,’ disrupted the social/cognitive alignment of persons and categories, even though such phrases are frequently used by people in this area.

For example, when Bhola and I first went to visit Bhim’s house, we ended up lower down the hillside than we needed to be, and entered into conversation with an older woman as she fed her cow. After ascertaining that neither Bhim nor any other deaf person lived there, I solicited the old woman’s help by asking about a married couple whose *kān nasunne* ‘ears don’t hear’ or who *boldaina* ‘don’t speak.’ After insisting that no one like that lived nearby, she then remembered that in fact there was a *lātolāṭi* ‘dumb (pl.)’ couple nearby. If I had asked for a *lātolāṭi* couple would she have remembered immediately? I am not sure. Here it is worth mentioning that we had been directed to this old woman’s house, albeit incorrectly, by another woman whom I had asked using the phrase *kān nasunne* ‘[people with] not-hearing ears.’ Although the directions she gave were incorrect (or more likely we followed them incorrectly), she seemed to have understood my question and to have connected it with Bhim and her husband (although as I discuss below, Bhim *could* hear to some degree and her husband may also have been able to). And in the case of the Bishwakarma family described above, we had been talking

about deafness for some time, and they still “forgot” about a man who was right there. In this instance, I wonder if they were thinking about the man not in terms of him being deaf but in terms of the more immediately salient feature of their relationship: he was a client. Or perhaps their own granddaughter was “more deaf” and this difference contributed to the grandparents’ forgetting. As discussed in the previous chapter and below, however, people with a range of speaking, hearing, and signing abilities and tendencies are classified together, so this differentiation is unlikely. In short, beyond a vague understanding that not only identifying but also bringing to mind and naming persons on the basis of particular characteristics when asked to do so is a culturally specific activity, I am still confused as to why such situations occurred.

3.1 Hearing comments and categories

As suggested above, hearing people in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe refer to a variety of people, including those whom I call deaf, with the word *lāto*, a term that connotes persons who have trouble making sense. Though hearing villagers frequently remarked on Bhola’s apparent lack of fit with their image of *lāto* and/or deaf people, it is not the case that local deaf persons were regarded as identical. When differentiating among deaf people, hearing people did so in terms of either a perceived quality of mind and action that we might call “intelligence” or “competence” or the capacity to use and understand speech. A hearing man in the teashop where we all ate after class, for example, once made a comment that no one could ever cheat Laxman, implying that he was smart and competent.³² In this particular instance, the comparison with other deaf people was left implicit, while a woman with whom Bhola and I chatted when looking for Bhim’s house told us directly that she (Bhim) was *bāṭhi* ‘smart, with-it,’ while her husband (who is also deaf – perhaps; see below) was not.³³ Another young woman I met had known for her entire life Dhan Limbu, Dhan’s younger sister who is also deaf, and Man Kumari Limbu. During our conversation, this young woman noted differences between deaf people like Man Kumari, whom she described as knowing what work she has to do and doing it well and conversing with people when they meet on the road, and people like Dhan’s sister, whom she said would cry when told to do something.³⁴ The owner of the teashop, meanwhile, did not tend to comment on deaf people’s differences, but she would joke around and make conversation with Nil Limbu, Bhim, and Trilochan, but not with two other deaf women, whom she would even tell at times to leave after they finished eating. More generally, villagers treated these two women somewhat differently from other deaf people, perhaps because the two of them would often ask to buy something despite not having the money for it and would complain unceasingly about their home life, saying things that most people with whom I talked did not believe to be true (see Chapter 4).

The young woman mentioned above also said that, unlike other deaf people, Man Kumari almost never used her voice.³⁵ Here we can see that the ability to use speech was not mapped directly onto intelligence or competence, although some people nevertheless framed it as valuable and important. Trilochan’s mother, for example, told me on several occasions that he can use his voice for certain words, such as *buā* ‘father.’³⁶ The daughter-in-law of Dewi and Hira Basnet, who are themselves in-laws, similarly commented on the fact that Hira is more able than Dewi to hear and produce words that others can understand.³⁷

Despite such (perceived) differences, people whom I call deaf are clearly grouped together. For example, in the course of trying at Trilochan’s request to convince his mother that it was worth his time to attend the NSL class, I suggested that he might enjoy meeting other people like himself. She replied that he already knew such people, including an elderly person down the hill from them in Bodhe, and Amrita in the other direction.³⁸ I did not ever meet the

elderly person in Bodhe, but Amrita was one of my close interlocutors, and someone whom I, too, would consider to be “like” Trilochan. Perhaps because our categories seemed to align so perfectly, we did not actually discuss what constituted Amrita and Trilochan as similar: their audiological status, their use of their hands to communicate, the necessity of other people using their hands to communicate with them, and/or something else.

The fact that there were five deaf (or at least sign-using; see below) married couples in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe also indicates that deaf persons are perceived as being a type of person or as constituting a group. One member of four of the couples was a regular NSL class participant. Both Trilochan’s and Dewi’s spouses were deceased, but I was told by multiple sources that they were deaf. I met Nil’s husband on a few separate occasions; like Nil, he used both speech and sign to communicate (see Figure 21). I discuss Bhim and her husband in more detail below, and the fifth couple is the blacksmithing client mentioned at the beginning of this section and his wife.



Figure 21: Nil Kumari, her husband, and their two children

Only two deaf people in the class – both women – were married to hearing people. Kanchi Maya Limbu was her husband’s second or third wife (sequentially, not simultaneously). Dhan Limbu’s younger sister was married to an older hearing man after having several children out of wedlock. Maili Limbu, meanwhile, told me a long, sad, complicated story about having been married or betrothed to a man who then died, but no one could confirm what she said (or rather, what I had understood her to say).³⁹ She lived with her brothers, not with a husband’s family, and did not wear any of the sartorial markers of marriage or widowhood, so in a sense she was socially unmarried, regardless of what happened or what she narrated. I am of course troubled by the mismatch between what she seemed to be saying and what others said (and what I ultimately believed; see Chapter 4 on deaf stories).

In Section 5 I argue that Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, despite their deaf population and the existence of local signing practices, are distinct from the category of community known as deaf villages or shared signing communities. The literature on such places nevertheless constitutes an important source of information about deaf sociality in contexts *other* than urban, institutionally-

scaffolded deaf communities such as Nepal's own deaf society. In this literature, marriage – whether or not deaf people get married, and if so, to whom – is often mentioned in relation to deaf people's level of "integration" into their community (Kusters 2010). Yet the simple fact of marriage tells us very little (ibid). As Kusters (ibid:5, emphasis added) argues,

It is not yet clear *why* deaf people tend to marry other deaf people in some communities and to wed hearing people in other communities. It may be that deaf-deaf marriages are motivated by a feeling of "deaf belonging," by cultural expectations within the community, or for other reasons, yet undetermined.

Even when we understand why deaf-deaf marriages do (or do not) take place, the reasons are only one aspect of complex and even contradictory understandings and experiences of deaf life in hearing-majority communities, as Kusters' later work demonstrates. Adamorobe, Ghana is a "deaf-inclusive place" where "deaf people interact naturally with hearing people through sign language" (Kusters 2012:349). Nevertheless, since 1975 deaf-deaf marriages have been illegal because they "invariably brought forth deaf offspring" (ibid:348); this ban in relation to its reason indicates some negative evaluation of deafness.⁴⁰ In Maunabudhuk, as this dissertation demonstrates, deaf persons both "interact naturally with hearing people through sign" *and* struggle to do so. Here, though, deaf-deaf marriages are considered appropriate, as evidenced by the fact that of the married members of the class, all but two were married to other deaf people. Similarly, when an older deaf man showed up in Maunabudhuk for several days, someone jokingly suggested that he and Maili Limbu, who was of a similar age, should get married.⁴¹ I did not systematically investigate the reasons behind deaf-deaf marriages while in the field, but the sense I got was that families sought to arrange marriages between their adult deaf children on the assumption that the parents of a hearing person would not consent to a match with a deaf person. In other words, the family of a hearing person could reasonably expect to find a hearing match for their son or daughter, but the family of a deaf person could not, and would therefore accept a deaf spouse. In mid-October, Bhola, Laxman, Laxman's hearing twin brother Kaila, who lived nearby but not in the same house, and I were signing together, and I asked why Laxman wasn't married, since Kaila was. Although I had only met Kaila once or twice, I know that he understood my signing because he translated it into Nepali for another hearing person nearby. Kaila replied, "*Boli na āune* 'he doesn't speak.'" ⁴² Interestingly, on a different occasion, Laxman's older brother Maila said that Laxman wasn't married because they didn't have enough money.⁴³ Taking both statements into account along with the fact that all Laxman's living brothers were married, the implication is that being deaf and not wealthy meant Laxman had two strikes against him.

A closer look at one of Maunabudhuk's deaf-deaf couples reveals further nuances in my above claim that deaf people are considered to be similar to each other. Bhim Maya Limbu was a regular participant in NSL class and became my closest deaf interlocutor in the village. She is chatty and sociable, both in class and at home, where she helps to manage a three-generation household and farm. Her sister-in-law told us that she (Bhim) speaks and understands Limbu, and also uses her hands, and that the family communicates with her using speech and their hands (*hāt̪le chalchha* 'doing with hands'), implying that speech alone is insufficient.⁴⁴ My own observations and interactions with Bhim support this characterization – although, not speaking Limbu, my ability to communicate orally with her was obviously very limited.

Dil Kumar is Bhim's husband. He came to class on one solitary occasion, and did not return. When Bhola and I visited Bhim's house, we occasionally ran into him on the path there or while hanging out. He was always very shy, sometimes refusing to say (sign) anything at all, although Bhola told me that he was slightly more outgoing when they were alone. After six months in Maunabudhuk, I was still unsure whether Dil Kumar was deaf or hearing but mute. I

also did not have a clear sense of to what degree he understood when people spoke or signed to him. Much more importantly, it seemed that his family did not either. As I wrote in my field notes:

His mom told a long story, which I didn't fully understand, about him being sick as a young child and having several operations on his throat, which was hugely swollen, and being taken to different wards and to Biratnagar [a large city about an hour from Dharan, where there are better medical facilities], and I asked at some point, "So that's why he can't hear?" and she replied, "No, that's why he can't talk." And it turns out he can hear. Maybe. Bhola asked, "So he understands what people say when they talk?" And she said she didn't really know what he understands or doesn't understand but he dances when there's music (like at feasts and such) and he talks with his hands.⁴⁵

Later in the summer, I asked Dil Kumar's oldest younger sister

if he can hear – she said if you speak loudly, and that one ear hears and the other doesn't, but he doesn't speak, and she said he does use his hands to speak. But later I was talking with their mother, and I commented that he doesn't talk very much (meaning, communicate), and she said that was true, and he doesn't even talk very much with his hands – he'll look at her to tell her he's hungry, or make an eating gesture, but not a lot past that.⁴⁶

The example of Bhim and her husband brings up an important point to which I return in the following sub-section. Using speech, both in terms of reception and production, does not make someone not-deaf (or not part of the category of people referred to by many hearing Nepalis with the term *lāto*, although this was not a term that I ever heard Bhim's in-laws use). What mattered most to Dil Kumar's family was that he, like Bhim, uses his hands to communicate.

I also want to note that Bhim herself did not see them as a good match – not because he was (more) deaf (or mute) than she but because he was so much less *communicative*. It often seemed to me that she wished for a husband with whom she could talk as volubly and easily as she did with the other deaf people in class (and with many hearing people). In other words, what had made them a good match in their parents' eyes – his communicative modality and hers, the fact that neither would likely be marriageable to a hearing person – did not, in her eyes, make them alike.

Finally, let me state that I did not ever get the sense that deaf people in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe are stigmatized in the ritual or religious sense. Hearing people do, however, seem to consider deaf people unfortunate. In late July Maili Limbu hurt her arm quite badly, and I went to her home to visit her and bring her tea. An older neighbor from down the hill was also there, and she asked why God lets deaf people be born.

"They feel thirst, they feel hunger, but unlike us, they cannot speak. *Na janmas* ['do not be born']." She painted a vivid portrait of human life as one of suffering, which is relieved by the ability to speak; either that or of human life as a series of needs which are satiated through the ability to speak (and thus get what one needs).⁴⁷

The parents of several deaf people also expressed worries about what would happen to their adult children after they, the parents, died. Trilochan's mother expressed this worry in terms of love: "You have to love your disabled children the most, who else will love them, especially when we old folks die?"⁴⁸

3.2 Deaf conversations

As part of a broader critique of the literature on deaf villages, Kusters (2010:11, emphasis in original) observes that researchers frequently fail to "report [on] deaf people's attitudes and experiences of being deaf." What, in other words, do deaf people themselves say? In general, deaf people in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe very infrequently made reference to their own deafness. I should note here that I am not making a claim about what this lack of discussion *means*. I did hear two people who participated in class (one of whom was regarded by and regarded herself as hearing, one of whom was classified as deaf) refer to deaf people with the derogatory term *lāto*.

The use of the common term in and of itself however tells us every little. With the exception of the conversations analyzed below, I have found in my fieldnotes only two instances where a deaf person explicitly mentioned their own or someone else's deafness. Once, when Dhan was complaining about his employer, Kanchi told him that "if he's not getting paid [for his work], he shouldn't do the work, and that he was being cheated because he's deaf."⁴⁹ On another occasion, a deaf man came to Maunabudhuk from Atharasaya, a village across the valley from Maunabudhuk where Bhola had taught previously. Based on my own notions of deaf sociality and sameness (see Friedner and Kusters 2014), I expected that the deaf NSL class participants would be interested in talking to him, but they were not especially excited to do so. Dhan was present and Bhola told the visitor where Dhan lives and that they are both Limbu, but they didn't interact very much. At one point, however, Dhan said, "Bhola and him both can't hear or speak, but I can speak." Bhola told Dhan that he is also deaf, but Dhan more or less ignored this statement.⁵⁰ I do not think that Dhan would have been more interested in talking with the visitor if he perceived the visitor as more similar to himself. In other words, this anecdote brings up two points. First, it is not the case that deaf people are always interested in meeting each other, although certainly in many settings they are. Second, not only hearing people but also deaf people in Maunabudhuk differentiate among deaf people on the basis of speech/hearing.

We can see the latter dynamic at play in the most explicit and elaborate discussions by deaf people about being deaf. These discussions occurred in the context of the NSL class – not only in the literal space-time of the class but as part of overtly pedagogical exchanges. In the rest of this section, I focus on two conversations that occurred on June 2nd and June 3rd, about a month and a half into the 6-month NSL course. The conversation from June 2nd, which I summarized in-situ immediately following its conclusion, is my first recorded instance of a lesson and ensuing discussion about being deaf, though it is possible that one occurred before I began attending the class on April 30th. The conversation on the following day was captured on video camera; below, I briefly note how it differed from the previous day's conversation. I have also used the footage to transcribe key exchanges. Drawing on both conversations (or rather, on my analysis of their written and filmed representations), I demonstrate that the participants' understandings, definitions, and descriptions of what it is to be deaf are neither pre-given nor seamlessly translated from one linguistic system or social field to another.⁵¹

Here is my description of the first conversation:

Bhola just taught a brief but powerful (to me anyway) lesson: you are deaf. He explained what deaf meant (not-hearing, not-speaking) and then went around and asked everyone if they are deaf or hearing. Laxman was quick to say he was deaf. Trilochan was more hesitant, saying he can hear some – he and Dhan had just been talking about how they can both hear some, Trilo made a high-pitched noise that Dhan correctly imitated. But Bhola repeated that Trilo is deaf and Trilo accepted this and signed deaf. Dhan also at first said he can hear, so Bhola grabbed a small pamphlet laying around and handed it to Dhan and instructed him to read it aloud. Bhola then mimed reading Sanskrit scripture at a wedding, and Dhan rejected this possibility (whether of the reading, the Sanskritness, or the [possibility that he would be engaged in that kind of activity at a] wedding, I'm not sure) and accepted DEAF. To my surprise Nil – who probably has the clearest spoken language production and reception of anyone present today – just signed DEAF when Bhola asked "deaf or hearing?" I signed HEARING and Trilo and Laxman nodded in approval.⁵² Dewi also said she was deaf, as did Hira – stating along with an approximation of the sign DEAF that she can't hear. Maili first indicated she can talk/hear (which is true) and Bhola did the "read this" routine again, and Maili relented (this sounds like it was mean or harsh – the whole time it was playful and light-hearted, as class usually is). Kanchi also said she can talk (true) so Bhola asked if she can talk on a mobile phone (a better test, I thought, than reading aloud). There was some confusion as to whether Bhola was asking whether she *has* a phone, because she kept answering that Kancha (her son) does, and Bhola kept asking, "No, you, can you talk on a phone?" He showed that he can't, how when he feels his phone ringing he finds a hearing person such as me [to answer it]. Kanchi eventually said she's deaf.

There was not a denial of speech or hearing – no pressure to *not* talk but rather a teaching that *despite* (some) speech or hearing, you are deaf. It was an effective lesson. Bhola went around the room again and everyone (except me of course) said they are deaf. Then Bhola counted the deaf in the room (9) and then pointed out me as being hearing – I expected a “we’re all deaf” discourse (which is so common in Kathmandu) but instead he pointed out into the rest of the world and indicated that there are many, many hearing people in the world and very few deaf – in fact, I had the sense of this little VDC hall being the only place in the world (or at least this corner of Dhankuta) with deaf people. The many-few seemed to resonate with Trilo and Laxman (or at least, they responded with nods and gestures – they tend to be most visibly responsive in general).⁵³

I have included my in situ analysis of what the conversation meant (“teaching that *despite* [some] speech or hearing, you are deaf”) and evaluation of its effectiveness, given that when “Bhola went around the room again ... everyone ... said they are deaf.” On the following day, however, students again expressed to Bhola that they could in fact hear and speak. I address this point more fully below. First I turn to a summary of the following day’s conversation.

The June 3rd lesson began with Bhola asking how many deaf people were present, and immediately segued into a brief counting lesson, directed primarily at Laxman, who incorrectly included me in his overall count of deaf people and then had trouble giving the right number.⁵⁴ Then Bhola asked Kanchi whether she was deaf or hearing, and Kanchi responded that she could in fact hear and talk. At this point, the lesson shifted to defining what the NSL sign DEAF means and teaching people that they *are* deaf. Like the day before, Bhola offered up reading material and then his phone so that Kanchi could experience for herself (or recognize) that she cannot read aloud and cannot speak on the phone. And like the previous day, Kanchi reacted to him handing her the phone by telling him, “No, that’s your phone!” Following a brief adjustment to the angle of the camera and the placement of bodies (this was one of the first classes I filmed), Bhola proclaimed that *everyone* except Mara was deaf. He then began to enumerate: “You are deaf, you are deaf, I am deaf.” When he got to Chandra Tamang, however, he clarified, “He’s half-hearing, he’s hard of hearing.” A few minutes later, however, he returned to the position that “all of us are deaf,” thus reincorporating Chandra back into the category of deaf (and ignoring my hearing presence). Much later in the conversation, Bhola again stated that three people present were hard of hearing, one hearing, and seven deaf.

This inclusion of a third category (hard of hearing) was one of two key differences in relation to the previous day. The second was that on June 3rd both Bhim and Bhola depicted different communicative modalities as an important aspect of defining the sign DEAF and deciding who was deaf, a point to which I return below.

In both classes, Bhola sought to teach the sign DEAF in the same way that he taught other signs such as RICH, SNOW, MOUSE, etc.: by giving definitions, providing examples (often using depicted action), and asking his students about their personal experiences. In addition to the NSL sign DEAF, Bhola used the NSL signs HEARING/HEARING.PERSON, TO.SPEAK/SPEAKING, HARD.OF.HEARING, and HALF.HEARING. He also used signs that are bivalent with NSL and natural sign, such as HEAR, as well as signs that are particular to natural sign or that have a different meaning in natural sign than in NSL, such as TO.TALK.WITH. With some of the above signs, Bhola combined the sign NEG (bivalent in NSL and natural sign), to yield concise definitions of DEAF: HEAR NOT, SPEAK NOT. He also stated that everyone was DEAF except for me, who was HEARING, and directly opposed the two signs by asking people directly, “Are you DEAF or HEARING?” This method of definition through opposition was structurally identical to a strategy he frequently used with one of the NSL charts that featured antonyms such as LONG and SHORT, RICH and POOR, and NEAR and FAR.

More so than with other signs, however, Bhola's lesson on the sign **DEAF** involved a complex negotiation of its meaning and of the applicability of the sign to specific persons. Some people, such as Laxman, easily agreed that they were deaf, while others, such as Kanchi and Bhim, repeatedly laid claim to their abilities to speak and to hear, as the following excerpt shows. Note that in all of the following excerpts, I have marked signs that are strictly NSL by putting them in **BOLD**.

Time code 18:36-20:55

1 Bhola (difficult to see fully): DEAF HEARING Q PRO-2-Kanchi?)	Are you (Kanchi) deaf or hearing?
2 Kanchi: (inquiring head thrust)	Hunh?
3 Bhola: HEARING DEAF Q PRO-2?	Are you hearing or deaf?
(18:40-18:46: Mara interrupts to request that Bhola move over so as not to block the videocamera; Bhola complies while complaining.)	
4 Kanchi: PRO-2-Mara (inquiring head thrust with vocalization) (2-fingers-to-ear, which approximates the first half of the sign DEAF)?	(Ambiguous between asking Mara if she is deaf or hearing and asking for assistance in answering the question herself; Mara's answer shows that at the time she understood it as the former)
5 Mara: PRO-1 Q?	(What) am I?
(18:49-18:52: Laxman and Maili direct Kanchi's attention back to Bhola, who reminds Kanchi in NSL that he is the one TEACHING)	
6 Bhola: HEARING DEAF Q?	Are you hearing or deaf?
7 Kanchi: (head nod/2-fingers-to-ear)	(Ambiguous, because placing two fingers at the ear is the beginning of the sign DEAF but is also pointing to the ear; see endnote) ⁵⁵
8 Bhola: PRO-2-Kanchi [HEARING /(moving mouth to show speech) PRO-2-Kanchi]	What? You're hearing, you use speech?
9 Kanchi: [(2-fingers-to ear) HEARING]	(Ambiguous sign, followed by) hearing
10 Bhola: HEARING /(moving mouth to show speech) PRO-2-Kanchi?	You're hearing?
11 Kanchi: (affirmative nod) HEARING (beginning to look hesitant)	Yes, I'm hearing.
(Bhola looks away in frustration. Maili gets Kanchi's attention; it looks like she's beginning to form the sign deaf)	
12 Laxman (taps Kanchi, who turns around): PRO-2-Kanchi HEARING ? PRO-2-Kanchi HEARING PRO-2-Kanchi?	Really, you're hearing?

13 Kanchi (turns back to Bhola): HEARING	Hearing.
14 Bhola: SPEAK PRO-2-Kanchi?	Oh so you speak?
15 Kanchi: (affirmative head tilt) HEARING, SPEAK,,	Yes, I hear/I'm hearing, I speak.
16 Bhola (looking around the room for reading material): [BOOK/(moving mouth to show speech).]	Sure, so you can read.
17 Kanchi: [(2-fingers-at-ear, wiggling slightly)]	(Ambiguous)
18 Bhola: WAIT.	Hold on.
(19:10-19:20 Laxman and Maili both try to help Bhola with suggestions, then Bhola takes his own phone out of his pocket and holds it up to his ear, as if talking, and, though it is hard to see, probably looks enquiringly at Kanchi)	
19 Kanchi (leaning back): PHONE NEG-var POSS-2	No, that's your phone!
(19:25-19:37 Camera angle adjustment, Mara asks Bhola to step over, Bhola offers Kanchi reading material, Kanchi moves it away from herself)	
20 Bhola: BOOK/PAPER/(moving mouth to show speech) PT-3-reading material?	Can't you read it?
21 Kanchi: (puts fingers to mouth, then signs either Q or NEG)	I can't read that/I can't speak, or How could I read that?.
22 Bhola: DEAF PRO-2-Kanchi! HEARING /(moving mouth and vocalizing), HEARING /(moving mouth and vocalizing), HEARING PRO-3-Mara HEARING. HEY. HEARING PRO-3-Mara. DEAF ALL-dir (movement of hand includes all students). (With right hand:) DEAF ++++/(With left hand:) PRO-2/3-Kanchi PRO-2/3-Maili, PRO-1. PRO-3-Chandra, HEAR-HALF . PRO-3-Chandra. HEAR /(moving mouth), HALF, HALF. HEAR-HALF, HARD.OF.HEARING.	You're deaf! She says, "I'm hearing, I'm hearing, I speak." Mara is hearing! Hey. She's hearing. All the rest of us/you are deaf. You're deaf, you're deaf, I'm deaf. Chandra is half-hearing, hard of hearing.
(During the above, Maili has been starting to form the sign DEAF ; Laxman and Dhan sign HEAR-HALF , Chandra attempts to sign it)	
23 Maili: HEY (pretending to read aloud, giggles). PRO-3-Bhola	Hey, I'm reading/pretending to read.
24 Bhola: (gets Maili's attention)	
25 Maili: PRO-3-Bhola	(Not sure what her meaning is.)
26 Bhola: HEY HEARING DEAF PRO-3-Bhim?	Hey Bhim, are you hearing or deaf?

(20:06-20:09 Mara interrupts about the camera)	
27 Laxman: HEY PRO-2-Bhim DEAF -	Are you deaf -
(20:13-20:48 technical adjustment; for at least part of the time conversations ongoing)	
28 Nil: DEAF	(I'm) deaf
29 Bhola: PRO-2-Bhim Q?	And you?
30 Bhim: [(speaking, then moves fingers near her ear in what looks like an approximation of the sign HEARING) (this and the next 2 turns overlap)]	I'm hearing/I hear.
31 Bhola: HEARING SPEAK PRO-2-Bhim?	Oh, you're hearing, you speak?
32 Bhim: affirmative head tilt, SPEAK	Yeah, I speak.

Soon after Line 32, Bhola tries to hand Bhim his phone⁵⁶; she responds, “My sister-in-law has a phone,” to which Laxman says, “You can’t HEAR! You’re **DEAF**!” The conversation continues, Laxman and Bhola telling Bhim that she is deaf like them. Bhola, clearly frustrated, asks me to talk orally with Bhim. I comply, asking her in Nepali if she can hear. She responds in Limbu speech, which I don’t understand. Later in the conversation Bhim depicts conversations between herself and her parent(s)-in-law, showing that they use speech as well as sign, and says that she can hear. With her older daughter, too, she adds, she uses speech (or perhaps she says that her parents-in-law use speech with her older daughter). Laxman then asks her if she can hear in both ears or only one. Bhim tells him only one, and Laxman replies that he can’t hear in either ear, then reports to Bhola that Bhim can in fact hear in one ear. Bhola responds by saying, “She’s deaf! We’re all deaf!” He continues, “Can you read? Can you talk with your mouth and not use your hands? We sign, we’re all deaf.” He gives examples of natural signs used in the area, then continues, “Hearing people can stand and talk like this with their arms crossed. Deaf people use their hands. Can the two of you, Laxman and Bhim, talk to each other orally?” Bhim replies, “We do talk (orally),” then mentions her sister-in-law. Bhola counters by again showing someone signing. The angle of the video makes it hard to see but it looks like he is acting as if he is using his mouth and signing *at the same time*. “You’re deaf, you sign,” he says.

Based on my transcription (Lines 1-32) and the above paragraph, let me make a few points about how Bhola, Bhim, Laxman, and others seem to understand what it means to be and to talk about being deaf. First, we can see that Bhola shifts his definitions and explanations of what the NSL signs **DEAF** and **HEARING** mean in response to what others say. In other words, although he is running the class, the conversation unfolds through multi-party negotiations of meaning. For example, Bhola begins in Lines 8, 10, and 14 by equating being deaf/hearing with not speaking. When Kanchi says she can speak, he then focuses on (not) speaking on a phone (between Lines 18 and 19) and (not) reading aloud (Line 20).⁵⁷ Similarly, although it is unclear from the video if Bhola was watching Bhim when she depicted herself talking and signing, his shift in emphasis from (not) hearing or speaking, (not) using the phone and (not) reading aloud, to the observation that deaf people must use their hands (even if also speaking), suggests that he was. Second, we see that Laxman takes up Bhola’s cause (insisting, for example, that Bhim is

deaf) while also remaining interested in the specificity of Bhim's sensory experience (as does Bhola, though perhaps less so). It is interesting to me that of all the members of class, Laxman's corporeal experiences were the most similar to Bhola's. I say this based on both of their self-descriptions and on their observable habituses. Laxman, along with Trilochan and sometimes Bhim, tended to be the quickest to understand new signs, and in this conversation he evidences absolutely no hesitation or confusion about what the introduced NSL signs meant, while others appear to wrestle with both the forms *and* the applicability of those forms to themselves (see Endnote 55). I wonder if Laxman's uptake in this instance was aided by the sensory or phenomenological congruency of his and Bhola's experiences. I am not, however, suggesting sensory determinism. Nil, who uses speech as much as if not more than Bhim, said "yes," when asked if she was DEAF (although she also playfully depicted herself talking on the phone by saying, "*alo, alo* 'hello, hello'"). And interestingly, Bhola includes Nil in his list of hard of hearing people, despite her acceptance of the sign DEAF.

Most importantly, what is going on with Kanchi and Bhim's insistence that they can speak and hear? Bhola wondered if his repeated claim that Bhim was deaf made her angry, implying that she did not want to be (seen as) deaf. I understand what happened somewhat differently. When Bhim says to Bhola that she can hear, he seems to interpret this as a rejection of the *category* deaf, which to Bhola indexes an entire world of shared social experiences. I take her to mean, much more literally, that she is not deaf in the sense of a being a person who can neither hear nor speak – which is how Bhola has defined the sign. Within the logic of this definition, Bhim's experience of her own body and the phenomenology of communication contradict the claim that she is deaf. What is interesting is that in Nepal's deaf society, there are people who describe themselves and are considered by others to be deaf who can in fact hear and use speech.⁵⁸ In other words, Bhim's experiences are, from the perspective of deaf society, fully encompassed within the category deaf, but they are excluded by Bhola's definition. In the same vein, when Bhola suggests to Bhim and Kanchi that they *can't* hear, I do not think he is trying to deny the validity of their *sensory* experiences, but instead following the logic of his own definition that a person who is deaf is *categorically* someone who can't hear.

Bhola and Bhim also both acknowledge that modality is a key dimension in one's experience of communicative sociality. The difference lies in whether not-speaking or using sign is more important. Bhim, having been told that to be deaf is to not-speak, indicates that she speaks as well as signs. Bhola counters by saying that if you need your hands at all, you are deaf. They eventually settle their disagreement when Bhola offers to Bhim the option that she is **HALF-HEARING** or hard of hearing, a designation she accepts. While this compromise suggests that Bhim's and Bhola's understanding of the category deaf are incommensurable, it seems to me that they are actually referring to different categories. The sign **DEAF** is new to Bhim, so her own pre-existing experiences and categories could only be compared with the explicit definition given to her, and not to the broader meaning that the sign and category hold for NSL signers. I wonder what Bhim would have said if Bhola had originally defined deaf as sign-using rather than not-speaking.

Deaf Studies has shown that in deaf (frequently self-identified Deaf) communities, what it is to be deaf or Deaf goes far beyond not-hearing.⁵⁹ According to Bauman (2008:12), for example, "[t]wo factors combine to form the common ground of a Deaf identity: audiological deafness and use of sign language." The emphasis on "Deaf culture" and on the cultural dimensions of "Deaf identity" makes sense in relation to Deaf Studies (and Deaf communities') battle with biomedical definitions of deafness as lack (see *ibid*). Yet as Friedner and Helmreich

(2012:74) argue, citing Keating and Hadder 2010, “deafness” and “hearing” now “operate as ideal types, which downplays continuums between and multiplicities of sensory capabilities.” Works such as “Sensory Orientations” (Bahan 2009, 2010) indicate a shift toward examining diverse corporeal and communicative experiences. Following the lead of the just-mentioned authors and also expanding the domain of enquiry beyond Western (primarily US- and England-based) Deaf communities, this section has paid attention to how participants in the NSL class in Maunabudhuk articulate their own bodily schemas and experiences of signed and spoken communication. As mentioned above, Kusters (2010) makes the critical point that researchers should pay attention to the subjective experiences of deaf persons in so-called deaf villages. I am suggesting that we must also ask, “Who is deaf, and according to whom?” As the above analysis shows, even seemingly straightforward yes-or-no questions like “Can you hear?” are no less social than questions like “What does it mean to be deaf? What are deaf people’s experiences?”

It may seem odd that throughout this dissertation I primarily employ the term deaf, and do not usually write “deaf and hard of hearing.” I have done so because to assign each person a label such as “deaf” or “hard of hearing” is untenable. Nil, for example, happily acceded to being called both. Bhim, meanwhile, seemed in this conversation to accept the NSL sign HALF HEARING, but the English “deaf” and “hard of hearing” and NSL DEAF and HALF HEARING are not themselves identical. In other words, if my goal were to use the preferred terms of each of my interlocutors, how would I translate from the complex negotiations of meaning between NSL/deaf society and local sign/Maunabudhuk into English/academic text? My imperfect solution is to use the term deaf. I have done so in the hopes of opening up this category and making explicit the social fact that some of my interlocutors speak with, and talk about speaking with, both their mouths and their hands, as analyzed above and listed in Table 5.⁶⁰

Name	Primary communicative modalities
Amrita Pariyar	Sign
Bhim Maya Limbu	Sign, speech (primarily Limbu)
Bhim Narayan Limbu (Nil’s husband)	Sign, speech (Nepali, Limbu)
Dil Kumar Limbu (Bhim’s husband)	Sign
Dewi Maya Basnet	Sign, sounds
Dhan Bahadur Limbu	Sign, some speech
Hira Maya Basnet	Sign, speech (Nepali)
Kamal Kumar Yakha	Speech (Nepali), sign
Kanchi Maya Limbu	Sign, speech (Limbu)
Laxman Bishwakarma	Sign
Maili Limbu	Sign, speech (Limbu, Nepali)
Man Kumari Limbu	Sign
Nil Kumari Limbu	Sign, speech (Nepali, Limbu)
Trilochan Giri	Sign

Table 5: Communicative modalities

3.3 Official counts

As part of Maunabudhuk’s role in hosting the NDFN-run NSL class, the VDC government had compiled a list of 25 names from Maunabudhuk and 19 from Bodhe, each person labeled either *bahirā* ‘deaf’ or *susta shrawan* ‘hard of hearing.’ Given the variety of persons who are variously defined by self and others as DEAF, *lāto*, *apanga* ‘disabled’ (used by some families in Maunabudhuk to refer to their deaf members), etc., and given the well-known problems with enumerative projects (see e.g., Dirks 2001), it is probably not surprising that these

lists both did not name some deaf and hard of hearing people (for example, the husband of Nil, herself a regular class participant) and included a couple of definitely not-deaf people (for example, a young man with a cleft palate). In addition, a few people who were listed had very slight hearing losses but their speech was unaffected and they did not seem to consider themselves, or be considered by others, deaf, *lāto*, or *apanga*. (One of these people, Om Ghimire, nevertheless came to class on a few occasions.) Toward the end of our stay in Maunabudhuk, Bhola and I revised the list for Maunabudhuk. The original list has 25 people. Our revised list has 27 people, 23 of whom were on the original list. One person was removed because she appeared to be a repeat, and one person had, if I remember correctly, moved out of the area. Four people were added including one member of the NSL class and her brother. The original list for Bodhe has 19 people. We did not revise it while in the area, because our travels in Bodhe were much less extensive, but I can say that it (incorrectly) includes the abovementioned young man with a cleft palate and does not include Chandra Tamang, who participated in class.

The 2011 census, meanwhile, lists 22 “Deaf/hard to hearing” (sic) and 3 “Deaf-blind” people in Maunabudhuk, and 42 “Deaf/hard to hearing” (sic) and 6 “Deaf-blind” people in Bodhe. (There is also a “multiple disabled” category that may or may not include deaf people.) The numbers from Maunabudhuk’s own unrevised list and the 2011 census are identical, although it is impossible to know if the numbers “refer” to the *same* 25 people. Bodhe, meanwhile, has 2.5 times as many deaf (including hard of hearing and deaf-blind) people according to the census as according to the VDC list. My understanding is that the VDC-based lists were actually compiled by someone from Maunabudhuk. He may not have had as much knowledge about who and where to ask about deaf people in Bodhe, and as we have seen, asking does not necessarily (immediately) yield answers in any case. It would be interesting to learn more about the data collection process for both sources. Regardless, this rather vast difference points to the fact that figuring out who is deaf has *methodological* as well as epistemological and ontological dimensions. In the following section, I consider a range of possible figures when calculating the percentage of deaf people in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, although it is possible that *none* of the figures is accurate.

4. Deaf demography and sign language (community) classifications

One of the major questions to emerge from my fieldwork in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe is how to classify the signing practices used by people there. In contemporary sign language research, scholars laminate the classification of communicative communities onto the classification of sign languages/sign systems, as shown in Table 6 (see also Kisch 2008). According to this classificatory schema, the case of Maunabudhuk and Bodhe shares some important characteristics with both home sign (settings) and village sign language (settings). The sociolinguistic field and the communicative practices are nevertheless distinct from those typical of home sign and village sign languages, hence I have used the category local sign throughout this dissertation.

In the first part of this section, I focus on those aspects of social setting that are typically discussed in the literature – the number and percentage of deaf people within a community, and their social and spatial relationships – to compare the deaf demographics of Maunabudhuk and Bodhe to other relevant sites. Next I ask what my findings, in combination with my observation that local signing practices are somewhat conventional, suggest about deaf-hearing relationships and how we think about shared sign repertoires. Finally, I outline the theoretical implications of the term *local sign*.

Sign type	Characteristics	Community/users	Characteristics	Example(s)
sign language, national sign language, urban sign language	full language with properties like compositionality, paradigmatic opposition, etc.	deaf community, Deaf community	educational institutions, deaf-run organizations	American Sign Language, Idioma de Señas de Nicaragua, Israeli Sign Language, Nepali Sign Language
original sign language	not described; presumably full language but without institutional standardization	(no label)	urban-based deaf network, presumably without formal institutions	Old Chiangmai Sign Language
village sign language, shared sign language	full language with somewhat different features than urban/national sign language	shared signing community, speech/sign community, deaf village	high incidence of (genetic) deafness, at least several generations deep; usually rural setting	Adamorobe Sign Language, Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language, Ban Khor Sign Language, Kata Kolok
home sign ⁶¹	variable; sometimes described as highly systematic, other time as barely systematic	(no label)	one deaf person or several deaf people who do not learn a previously existing language	<i>mimicas</i> in Nicaragua, David's home sign in the US

Table 6: Sign types and communities

Sources for Table 6 are Goldin-Meadow and Mylander 1983, Kegl et al. 1999, Nonaka 2007, Kisch 2008, Kusters 2010, and de Vos and Zeshan 2012.

Note that Meir et al. (2010) offer a temporally rather than spatially oriented classification, “emerging sign languages,” that includes younger national sign languages such as Israeli Sign Language and Idioma de Señas de Nicaragua along with younger village sign languages such as Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language.

In terms of the number and percentage of deaf people in the population, Maunabudhuk and Bodhe are similar to places classified as shared signing communities, speech/sign communities, or places with village sign languages. Using the population and deaf population figures discussed in Section 2 and Section 3.3, I have calculated a range of possible numbers and percentages for Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, as shown in Table 7. Table 8 summarizes the figures reported for a selection of shared signing communities. The range in percentages in the latter table shows that Bodhe and Maunabudhuk are comparable to places where village sign languages have been documented.

	Lowest # of deaf	Highest # of deaf	Lowest total pop	Highest total pop	Lowest % deaf	Highest % deaf
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Maunabudhuk	24	29	2569	2966	0.8%	1.1%
Bodhe	19	48	3056	3056	0.6%	1.6%

Table 7: Number and percentage of deaf people in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe

Explanation of numbers:

Lowest # of deaf (Maunabudhuk) = everyone on revised list minus three people who spoke without using sign

Highest # of deaf (Maunabudhuk) = everyone on revised list plus two women I met or was told about

Lowest # of deaf (Bodhe) = everyone on original list minus young man with cleft palate plus Chandra Tamang

Highest # of deaf (Bodhe) = the census total for deaf, hard of hearing, and deaf-blind

Place	Deaf population	Total population	Percentage	Source
Ban Khor, Thailand	16 (formerly 18)	2,741	“close to 0.6”	Nonaka 2012:282-283
Alipur, India	150	20,000	0.75	Panda 2012:353
Bengkala, Indonesia	46	2,740	2.2%	de Vos 2012:381
Chican, Mexico	17	720	2.4%	Delgado 2012:377
Al-Sayyid, Israel	130	-	2.5-3%	Kisch 2012a:97, 2012b:356
Adamorobe, Ghana	34-45, between 1961 & 2012	1961: 405 2012: 3,500	1961: 11% 2012: 1.1%	Kusters 2012:347
Martha’s Vineyard, USA (1700s-mid 1900s)	-	-	0.6% overall 25% in the town of Chilmark	Kusters 2010:1

Table 8: Deaf populations in shared signing communities/communities with village sign languages

All figures are reported as relatively current as of the year of source publication unless otherwise noted

Yet far more important than the number and percentage of deaf people are the spatial, social, and temporal connections among them that enable the development and transmission of language. Home signers are by definition the first signers in their social network (but see below), while in many village sign language settings, deaf people have kinship ties to multiple other deaf people, and live close to one another as well, as two examples will show. In Ban Khor, Thailand, houses are “densely clustered” in three sub-villages (Nonaka 2009:216). The sixteen total deaf persons (only one of whom was not born in Ban Khor) live in two of them, eleven in a single one, and in both sub-villages many deaf persons live very close to one another (ibid). Moreover, all but four deaf people trace their lineages within a single extended family. With the exception of those four, deaf people in Ban Khor all have deaf siblings, a deaf parent, and/or a deaf aunt or uncle (parent’s sibling) (ibid: 218-219). Similarly, in the Bedouin community known as Al-Sayyid, deaf persons cluster in families. A kinship chart of selected deaf individuals shows that many deaf people have a number of deaf siblings as well as deaf relatives among extended family (Kisch 2012a:94-95). There are deaf members of each of the five major lineages, and people live in “several dense clusters of multiple compounds, as well as slightly more dispersed compounds” (Kisch 2012b:366). In these two communities, then, deaf people live close to one another, and have family connections with each other within and across generations. Reports on

Alipur (Panda 2012), Chican (Delgado 2012), Adamorobe (Kusters 2012), and Bengkala (de Vos 2012) also indicate that in each of these places, deaf people share family connections, live close enough that they have very frequent contact with each other, or both. In such settings, communicative forms that emerge with the first generation of signers develop quickly and get transmitted through and across generations (see e.g., Nonaka 2007, Sandler 2012). In Al-Sayyid, for example, the first group of deaf siblings was born between 1924 and 1940 (Kisch 2012a:91). Less than a hundred years later, “all deaf and many hearing Al-Sayyid infants are exposed to signing from birth, within the family environment, with additional (deaf or hearing) adult models in the community” (Kisch 2012b:365). In Adamorobe, meanwhile, deaf people – and presumably Adamorobe Sign Language – have been part of village life “since time immemorial” (Kusters 2014:150, quoting a hearing villager).

In contrast, in Maunabudhuk and, to the best of my knowledge, Bodhe, there are no cases in which deaf people cluster in lineages, although there are several cases of deaf siblings and a reported mother-daughter pair. (While both mother and daughter were on the VDC’s list, I was only able to meet the daughter, Man Kumari, and from talking with other people I did not get a clear sense of to what degree her mother uses signs.) Moreover, whereas many of the above communities are endogamous – and endogamy has been proposed as one of the defining characteristics of such places – in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe four of my primary informants had married into the village, and as we have seen, deaf people are found in each of the major caste/ethnic groups, between which there is almost no intermarriage. Not all signers in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, in other words, grew up there, and the distribution of deaf people across caste/ethnic groups correlates with the absence of deaf family lineages. These relationships, except for caste/ethnicity listed in Table 1 (above), are summarized in Table 9. Deaf people are also spread out spatially, as shown in Figure 22.⁶²

Name	Gender	Marital status	Natal home	Spouse deaf or hearing	Children (all hearing)	Other deaf kin
Amrita Pariyar	F	Not married	Maunabudhuk	n/a	No	No
Bhim Maya Limbu	F	Married	Near Tamor River (Dhankuta district)	See Section 3.1	2 daughters	See notes below
Dewi Basnet	F	Married (d)	Kurule VDC (Dhankuta district)	deaf	3 sons	Sister-in-law Hira
Hira Basnet	F	Not married	Maunabudhuk	n/a	No	Brother (d.), sister (d.), sister-in-law Dewi
Jetho Limbu	M	Not married	Maunabudhuk	n/a	No	Sister Maili
Kanchi Limbu	F	Married	Maunabudhuk	hearing	1 daughter, 1 son	Brother Dhan
Kanchi Maya Limbu	F	Married	don't know	hearing	2 daughters, 1 son	No
"Maili" Harka Maya Limbu	F	Not married	Maunabudhuk	n/a	No	Brother
Man Kumari Limbu	F	Not married	Maunabudhuk	n/a	No	Maybe (mother)
Nil Kumari Limbu	F	Married	VDC in Dhankuta or close by	deaf	1 son, 1 daughter	No
Dhan Bahadur Limbu	M	Not married	Maunabudhuk	n/a	No	Sister Kanchi
Kamal Kumar Yakkha	M	n/a (young)	Bodhe	n/a	No	No
Laxman Bishwakarma	M	Not married	Maunabudhuk	n/a	No	No
Trilochan Giri	M	Married (d)	Bodhe	deaf	No	No

Table 9: Deaf kinship relations

Notes: d = deceased.

Bhim told me that all her sisters hear and speak, but her daughter and mother-in-law told me that only Kanchi (the youngest sister) is completely hearing, and that Jethi (the oldest sister) and Saili (the third oldest sister) do not hear completely and do not speak clearly. Bhim told me that Jethi's husband can't hear. Bhim's daughter confirmed that he does not hear completely. I did not meet any of Bhim's sisters, so I do not know if they are signers.

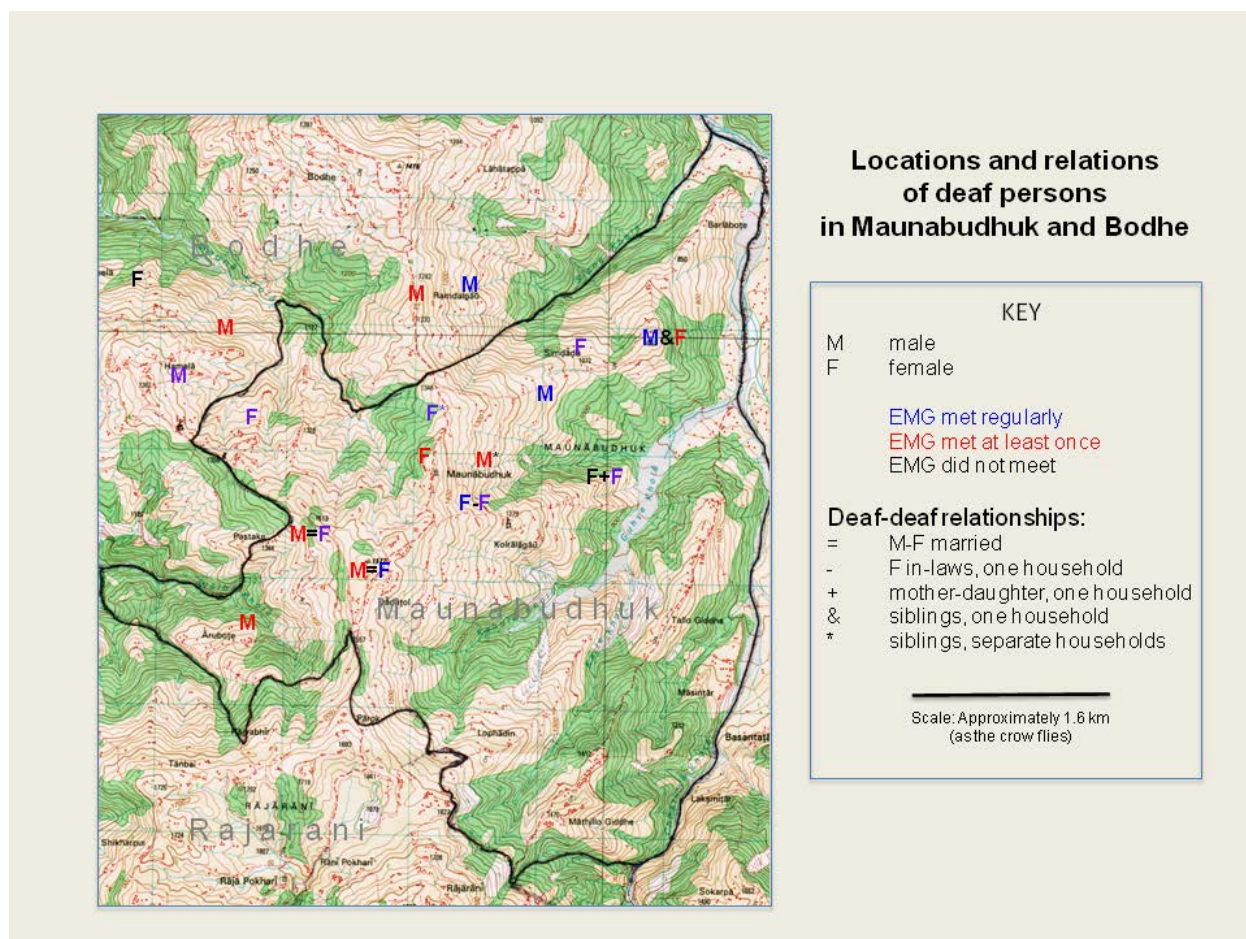


Figure 22: Map of deaf homes⁶³

I have included only homes that I personally visited.

Unlike in shared signing communities, then, most of the deaf people in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe with whom I am familiar do not have deaf relatives. With the exception of the one possible mother-daughter pair, moreover, those people who do have deaf relatives have deaf siblings; *no one* is part of a kinship group with multiple deaf people across generations. In terms of spatial proximity, most deaf people in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe do live close to several other deaf people, but there are no locales where deaf people cluster. Deaf people in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe did, however, have some contact with each other prior to the NSL class, although by no means did they all know each other (see Table 10). Thus despite the “high” percentage of deaf people (and it is worth asking whether it is especially high *within Nepal*; I have no evidence that it is), Maunabudhuk and Bodhe are distinct from the shared signing communities described above. And yet – despite the fact that many of the deaf residents are the only deaf person in their families – Maunabudhuk’s and Bodhe’s deaf residents are also not home signers as classically understood, given their contact with one another.

NAME	Amrita	Bhim	Dewi	Dhan	Hira	Kanchi Maya	Lax-man	Maili	Man Kumari	Nil	Trilo- chan
Amrita											
Bhim					X						
Dewi						?				X ?	X ?
Dhan											
Hira		X ?				?			?		?
Lax- man										Once	
Maili							X		?	X	
Nil			X					X			
Trilo- chan			X								

	Yes - knew/interacted with that person
Once	Yes - knew/interacted with that person but only once
	No - did not know/interact with that person
	No - did not know/interact with that person but had seen that person
	Answer unrecorded
?	Lack of clarity during question/answer process
X	Answers provided by two people about each other contradict

Table 10: NSL class participants' social contact prior to NSL clas⁶⁴

On October 4th 2010, I asked the deaf participants in the NSL class whether they had talked with each other before the class started. The person who answered the question is on the vertical axis; the person asked about is on the horizontal axis. I did not obtain answers from Kanchi Maya or Man Kumari, but both are included on the horizontal axis. Laxman was absent on October 4th and I recorded his answers at his home on October 9th.

In linguistic terms as well, I argue, deaf people in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe cannot be classified as home signers, because unrelated signers' repertoires are more than incidentally conventional and mutually intelligible, although certainly not fully so. For example, on June 1, I showed Laxman and his family a few clips of video that I had recently filmed in class and at Bhim's house:

I translated some of what Bhola was saying in the first couple films, especially when he was teasing people. Maila [Laxman's older brother] really enjoyed that, and would laugh when he could see that someone else was teasing Bhola. [When he saw the film from Bhim's house, h]e translated what the neighbor lady ... said to Bhim's husband (*she was teasing him that Bhola might steal his wife*).⁶⁵

The "neighbor lady" and Maila live on opposite sides of the village and come from different caste/ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. According to their own reports, Bhim and Laxman had never met (though Bhim had seen Laxman), precluding the possibility that they had directly co-created or merged linguistic repertoires that they might have then passed on/back to their families. How then was Laxman's hearing brother able to understand and translate what Bhim's hearing neighbor had signed?

I propose that local sign in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, as one aspect of a broader repertoire of linguistic/semiotic resources including spoken language and co-speech gesture, does get transmitted from one generation to the next. This view is supported by Bhola, Uttam, and Tsering's descriptions in interviews of deaf children learning natural signs from hearing people (see Chapter 1). My point is not that deaf people are not critical in the development of signing practices. To the contrary, my point is that the existence of deaf people in the social field and of signed forms in the linguistic field is not – in Maunabudhuk, Bodhe, other parts of Nepal, and no doubt many places in the world – exceptional.⁶⁶ Zeshan (2011:228-229) makes a similar argument, namely that situations in which "a number of deaf individuals ... are in sporadic, unsystematic contact with each other" are, "far from being something extraordinary, ... actually a common occurrence." Zeshan, however, ascribes the resulting communicative practices – which she calls "communal home sign" – only to deaf contact with other deaf people.

My claim is also (more) congruent with that made by Nyst et al. (2012), who conducted research in Douentza, a rural region in Mali consisting of a town and the villages surrounding it, the farthest of which is 80 kilometers from the town.⁶⁷

[T]here seems to be a good deal of lexical consistency across the various signing varieties in the *cercle* of Douentza ... It appears worthwhile to consider the scenarios that may have led to this consistency. Is it the result of the irregular contact some deaf people have with each other? Or does mainstream hearing culture exploit an extensive, conventional vocabulary of gestures/signs to communicate with deaf people or others in the absence of shared language? ... If indeed mainstream hearing culture avails of an extensive conventional gesture vocabulary, this implies it is transmitted across generations as well. Although the conventional vocabulary is hypothetical, and its relation to the actual home signing found is not clear, the current findings suggest intergenerational transmission cannot be ruled out either. (ibid:269)⁶⁸

Nyst (ibid:270) et al. go on to argue that what they term "rural home sign" may in fact be a *language*, rather than a *system* because it "meet[s] the criteria of a) a community of users, and b) transmission across generations. At the same time, they state that "[s]ome signers are very fluent and communicative, whereas others have limited skills," though "the variation in fluency ... is not due per se to the number of deaf people found in a given community, or even in a given family" (ibid:267).

Here my work diverges from that of Nyst et al. as I have approached questions of what they call "variation in fluency" quite differently. As I explain in Chapter 4, interactions in local sign produce a mixture of understanding, not-understanding, and mis-understanding. I do not use the notion of fluency in discussing local signers, however, because doing so locates

communicative competence in an individual, whereas I focus on the situated nature of (un)intelligibility. In addition I have not sought to distinguish strictly between a language and a system. As I show in Chapters 4 and 5, the relationship between linguistic systems and their users is complicated, and accounting for differences in use and understanding requires fine-grained analysis of forms, interactional practices, ethical orientations, and their interplay. My work is also somewhat different from that of Nyst et al. in my introduction of the concept of immanence (see Chapter 3). Despite these differences, I think that my work resonates with theirs and that both provide a productive challenge to current ideas about signed communication occurring in settings other than urban/institutionally-structured deaf communities.

Here let me make explicit the point that local sign, despite a great deal of conventionality, is also distinct from village sign languages because the former is characterized by gaps and variability not found in the latter. It might seem that I am proposing that local sign is “in between” home sign and village sign languages, and there are ways in which that may be true – though as others have noted in relation to similar questions, much more research is needed to make such sweeping generalizations. I want to point out, however, that for the people who live in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, for the people who use local sign in these spaces, there is nothing “intermediate” (Zeshan 2011:ibid) about it.

The term ‘local sign’

The term local sign has several resonances. It is one of the phrases – the only English phrase – that Nepali speakers in Maunabudhuk use to refer to the signing practices in use among themselves and their deaf relatives and neighbors. The designation “local” conveys both a sense of ownership and belonging *and* a sense of inferiority that articulates with the patterns of “development” analyzed in Chapter 1 Section 6. To give a concrete example, there are two types of guavas in Maunabudhuk. The fruits of one type are small and tasty whether hard or fully ripened; these are known as *local* guavas. *Bikāshit* ‘developed’ guavas, meanwhile, are larger, sweeter, and pink inside, but only edible when ripe.⁶⁹ According to Fortier (2009), the term *local* also relates closely to the Nepali *prākṛiti* ‘nature, natural.’ She writes, “Local places ... are thought of as *prākṛiti* ... or a local dialect is called *Prākṛit*, the natural language of the local people” (ibid:60). In contrast to the quality of being *sanskṛiti* (cultural), that which is *prākṛiti* “contains an emergent quality that is *contingent on local circumstances*” (ibid:60-61, emphasis added). Yet “the concept of *prākṛiti* ... [is] also fraught with a negative valence of the *ābikāsi*, an undeveloped state of being.” Given that NSL signers call the practices seen in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe NATURAL.SIGN, the convergence between the *local* and the *natural* indicates that NSL signers and Nepali speakers frame these practices in very similar ways.

The local has also been the focus of theoretical concern in cultural geography, linguistic anthropology, and cultural anthropology. Bringing together work by Massey (1994), Hanks (2004), and Das (2007), I understand the concept of the local to have a series of interrelated characteristics or dimensions. First, the local implicates both spatial and temporal aspects of social practice that, as I have argued above, are significant for questions of linguistic form and usage. Das (ibid), for example, theorizes the local in terms of the messy accretion of social actions and dynamics over time. Hanks (ibid:2), meanwhile, states that in interaction analysis, “[d]espite the spatial overtones of terms like adjacency, contiguity and locality, the relations they describe are not typically spatial or even perceptual. They are either temporal or, broadly, cognitive.” Yet the importance placed on the “situation” as a “field of co-presence in which two or more parties have the potential to monitor one another” (ibid:3) returns us to space and to the importance of face-to-face interactions. Indeed, in deaf Nepal, despite the increased use of video

communication in recent years, face-to-face interactions remain both deeply valued and the way signing practices – whether NSL or other – are learned and shared.

Second, the local is both embedded in and emergent from context. In Hanks's terms, "rather than conceive of locality as a feature of simple co-present elements, it is better to think of it in terms of embedding relations. There are multiple levels of context, each of which imports certain relations and forms of organization" (ibid:5). In other words, the local is not simply what happens in a certain time, place, or conversation.⁷⁰ It is structured by its relationship to what surrounds it, and the local is itself a context (ibid:19). This conceptualization further articulates with cultural geographers' insistence that the local and the global are not opposites; both consist of social relations in and across places (see Massey 1994). In both of these formulations, we can also see clearly that local places – even the most "out-of-the-way" (Tsing 1993) or "marginalized" (Kisch 2011) ones – do not exist in isolation. The second dimension leads to the third: the local is a strictly scalar, or relational, phenomenon or unit. As Hanks writes, "[t]he implication of embedding is that 'context time' cannot be measured on any single scale" (ibid:6), and, I would argue, neither can space. What and where counts as "local" might be seen as "national" or "distant" in another context (see Schegloff [1972] on how this quality of place manifests in talk). In fact, from a certain perspective we could understand Nepali Sign Language itself as local – although not as *local sign* in the sense used in this dissertation.

These three dimensions are important for my understanding of local sign. As we have seen, signed communicative practices are shaped by the relationships between people not only in space but also over time. In the following chapters, I will examine how particular sign forms and utterances are embedded in and emergent from their social and material context, as well as how interactional practices are shaped by and also constitute the ground for orientations toward signing. I also want to point to the fact that Maunabudhuk and Bodhe as social fields are, as we have seen in this chapter, connected to other places both within Nepal and abroad. Indeed local signers talked not only about "locally" relevant issues such as crop harvests, fights among neighbors, and visits from relatives, but also about national elections and about their visits to other locales in Dhankuta and even India. And as I stated above, four of the signers with whom I worked most closely grew up in other VDCs. Connections across places as well as scale are also relevant for thinking about the scope of natural and local signing practices – something this dissertation has not attempted to do but that is nevertheless worth mentioning. The sign FEMALE, for example, is the same in Maunabudhuk and Kathmandu, but different in Atharasaya, the VDC directly across the valley on Maunabudhuk's eastern side. The sign NEG, on the other hand, is in use not only across Nepal, but also throughout north and south India and perhaps beyond.

In using the term local sign I have intended to do several things. First, my choice of a spatial term is meant to emphasize the relationship between places and the communicative practices that go on in them. Second, I have sought to distinguish local sign – at least local signing practices in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe – from the categories of home sign and village sign language. Third, as I understood it the term local demands empirical specificity. It is, in other words, not only a category but also a placeholder that directs us to examine the particularities of the local(e) in question.⁷¹ In Das's (ibid) work, for example, the concept of the local converges with that of the ordinary and the everyday. It is, in other words, what actual people do in their lives, and as such the local always exceeds its categorization.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced Maunabudhuk and Bodhe as social fields and as places in which local signing practices take place. I began by describing the NSL class, and then moved into a description of Maunabudhuk and Bodhe in social, economic, and geographic terms to provide a sense of the movements, activities, and concerns that occupy my interlocutors on an everyday basis. I also interrogated the meaning of *deaf*, pointing out that it is a social category in communities like Maunabudhuk and Bodhe as much as it is in the urban deaf communities traditionally analyzed in Deaf Studies. Comparing how hearing and deaf people – including local signers and the deaf NSL teacher – in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe understand deafness in relation to speech, hearing, and the use of sign, I argued that despite differences among their conceptions, all include people who can hear and speak to some degree as well as people who do neither. Using this definition of deaf, I turned to an examination of Maunabudhuk and Bodhe's deaf demographics along the lines laid out by previous research on deaf communication. Through a consideration of numbers, percentages, and patterns of social interaction, I demonstrated that Maunabudhuk and Bodhe are distinct from the extant classifications, although they bear resemblances to settings in which home sign and village sign languages are used. Local sign in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe is, moreover, different from home sign in its degree of conventionality and cross-signer intelligibility, and distinct from village sign languages in the degree to which interactions may not result in understanding. Finally I briefly situated the term *local* in its "local" context as well as in relation to social scientific theory.

In the next chapter, I turn to an examination of conventions in local sign and to the tightly woven relationship between local sign forms and utterances and the world in which they are articulated, a world that this chapter has sought to describe.

Chapter Three

The Social Relations of Grammar & the Grammar of Social Relations

Introduction

In the previous chapter I demonstrated that the sociolinguistic field in which Maunabudhuk and Bodhe's deaf residents communicate is distinct from those associated with village sign languages and home sign. Unlike in shared signing communities, Maunabudhuk and Bodhe are not characterized by clusters of intergenerational deaf kin and neighbors through and across which a sign language can emerge, develop, and be transmitted. In interactional terms, moreover, participants in local sign conversations are far more likely to not-understand or misunderstand each other than are participants in village sign language conversations. At the same time, I argued, the amount of contact between and the degree of conventionality across signers makes local sign different from home sign and suggests some kind of transmission across generations.

This chapter takes up where the previous chapter left off to offer a preliminary description and analysis of conventionality in local sign. It also complicates the claim regarding transmission by highlighting the tightly woven relationship between sign forms and utterances and the world in which they are articulated. Local signs, I will argue, are immanent in the social-material world: in the topography of built space, in corporeal routines, in everyday objects and agricultural production, in kinship relations and caste/ethnic practices. In its account of conventions in local sign, this chapter reveals how the affordances of the signed modality and of the material-social world come together in corporeally produced representations of habitually experienced and socially typified features of that world. In doing so, it follows Hanks's (1993:152) call to "see the literal core of language as already permeated by context."

In the remainder of this chapter, I focus on documenting the linguistic material and – with the exception of Section 1 – cite exceedingly sparingly. Therefore I note here that my approaches to language as a system in use and to the signed modality have been shaped by readings and conversations in several theoretical traditions, namely: the practice theory approach to communication (Hanks 1990, 1993, 1996, 2005, and p.c.), cognitive linguistics (particularly Sweetser p.c. and Taub 2001), social phenomenology (primarily Schutz 1970), and semiotics (in particular Peirce 1955 and Kendon 1980b). In addition to Kendon's, Sweetser's, and Taub's scholarship on gesture and/or signed languages, I am also indebted to many other scholars – and users – of signed languages whose written analyses, creative language use, and reflexive commentary have given me insight into sign's rather extraordinary possibilities.

Following this introduction, Section 1 frames the remainder of the chapter by considering the relationship between alternative ways of thinking about convention and intelligibility: as acquired linguistic knowledge and as the realization of immanent forms. I resolve the potential tension between them by situating linguistic practice in embodied dispositions. This section also addresses the relationship between semiotic structures and ways of knowing/understanding signs. The second section focuses on conventions at the level of individual signs – classified both in terms of semiotics and semantics – and at the level of sign combinations. Throughout this section, I emphasize the mutual imbrication of social and linguistic conventions or, to use the phrasing of this chapter's title, social relations and grammar. Section 3 focuses on *jāt* 'caste/ethnicity' as a case study of the social and historical complexity involved in semiotic characterization (iconicity) and typification.

1. Immanence

Thus far I have offered several different ways of accounting for the degree of cross-signer conventionality and inter-signer intelligibility observed in signed communicative practices in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe. I have suggested that local sign is transmitted over time and space. I have also pointed out that local sign is tightly tied to its interactional, material, and social contexts in ways I delineate more fully below. These two points are not in and of themselves in contradiction, but they do offer different approaches to thinking about how people use signs in ways that others can interpret and understand. When people communicate in local sign, do they draw on a stock of sign types or do they produce and recognize forms that are immanent in social practices, and how might we know? To address these questions, this section brings together Hanks's (1990, 1996) theory of communicative practice and Kendon's (1980b) description and analysis of a sign language in Enga Province in Papua New Guinea. In different ways each of these works seek to bridge the (theoretical) gap between language and the world in which it is used.

Hanks's (*ibid*) approach to understanding communication as a social practice recognizes that grammatical structures can be analyzed in systematic ways while seeking to account for how people use language in ways that are both patterned and unpredictable. Drawing on practice theory, in particular Bourdieu's work, and on phenomenology, especially Merleau-Ponty's and Schutz's scholarship, Hanks introduces the notion of communicative practice, rooting language usage in the socially habituated body of culturally situated actors. In communicative as in other social practices, each iteration – each word, gesture, utterance, conversation – becomes part of the schematic ground from which the next iteration arises. Put another way, people encounter, embody, and produce the habitual forms of practice that characterize their social worlds. This process of (re)production helps us to understand how language in use is conventional but not-determined, continuous with the past but always changing. Moreover, habit, or habitus to use Bourdieu's term, is implicated in communicative practice not only in the forms employed, but also in the orientations and schemas we use to produce actual utterances and to understand each other. These forms, orientations, and schemas do not exist in isolation but are instead part of the social and linguistic fields that are in turn mutually embedded in each other.

The close relationship between the social and the linguistic is particularly salient and visible in the case of non-arbitrary sign-meaning relations. Kendon (1980b) follows Mandel (1977) to identify three parts of a sign: its base, its form, and its referent. The base is "the object or action that the production of the sign is derived from," the form is how a sign is made, and the referent is "the meaning that it carries in a given context of use" (Kendon 1980b:83).¹ With this tripartite division, Kendon makes it possible to talk about two separate relationships – one between the base and the form and one between the base and the referent (*ibid*:84) – and to classify signs on the basis of the base-form relationship as presenting, pointing, and characterizing. The important point here is that in each of these types, the base is something that exists in the social world. To appreciate the analytical work enabled by the notion of the base, it is helpful to look at a concrete example from local signing practices in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe.

Sign: GRAIN.ALCOHOL (one of several variations)

base	form	base-form relationship	base-referent relationship ²
squeezing fermenting grains (see Figure 23)	the hands squeeze toward each other (see Figure 24)	mimetic enactment	action stands for object produced (grain alcohol)

Table 11: GRAIN.ALCOHOL



Figure 23: Bhim making grain alcohol



Figure 24: Maili signs GRAIN.ALCOHOL³

If we left out the base, how would we describe the form and the referent – the two dimensions of signs frequently invoked in accounts of iconicity (see e.g., Pietrandrea 2002)?⁴ If we described the form and the referent in the same terms as above – “the hands squeeze toward each other” and “grain alcohol” – we would erase entirely the non-trivial relationships between the embodied (non-linguistic) practice seen in Figure 23 and the embodied (linguistic) practice seen in Figure 24. If, however, we described the form as a “motion made as if squeezing fermented grain,” we would be sneaking the social world into the form. My point is not that the world is not present in the form, but rather that the distinction between the form and base allows us to state very precisely *how* it is made present. It lets us see, in other words, how sign forms are immanent in the “routine patterns of experience and interaction through which actors [encounter and] recognize objects, individuals, and events not as mere things but as instances of familiar categories” (Hanks 1990:70).

Kendon (1980b:83) cautions that “[t]he modes of signification we here distinguish ... do not necessarily play a part in the process by which a sign serves to convey its meaning to its recipient.” If, however, “the process [of typification] whereby actors represent (and therefore understand) themselves and their world” (Hanks 1990:150) applies both to communicative and other social practices, then recognition of a sign on the basis of prior familiarity with the sign and recognition on the basis of prior familiarity with the referent and the world in which it exists are less different than they might seem.⁵ As Peirce (1955:100) writes, “The Sign can only represent the Object and tell about it. It cannot furnish acquaintance with or recognition of that Object.”

We might even think of a continuum of recognition. At one end would be conventional signs, the forms of which are not immanent in bodily or other non-linguistic routines. An example would be the local sign NEG shown in Figure 25 (the hands move slightly back and forth horizontally). We also could include here signs such as SCHOOL (discussed in Notes I). Although the base of SCHOOL is a bodily routine, it is only by engaging in overtly linguistic interactions that one can learn the sign's referent. These signs, in other words, must be learned as signs.



Figure 25: Bhim's hearing neighbor signs NEG (var 2).

On the other end of the continuum would be signs that, although one had never encountered them before, could be recognized through what Hanks (p.c.) calls “the knowing body.” Once, for example, I saw one person watch another act out eating a pomegranate, and the addressee – who had eaten pomegranates in the past – realized what the signer meant. Similarly, to someone familiar with Nepali religious practices, tracing the shape of a long beard and then holding out a hand as if begging would be recognized as referring to a *yogi* ‘holy mendicant.’⁶ We can also imagine understanding that someone was talking about “an old bearded beggar” without realizing that the referent was a “yogi” per se, or that someone was talking about a sour fruit without realizing it was a pomegranate.

In between these two ends are the many signs in use in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe that are articulated with a “movement pattern ... consist[ing] of a selection from elements of action that would be performed if the action sequence or pattern being characterized were *actually being carried out*” (Kendon 1980b:87, emphasis added). For such signs, the concept of immanence is especially relevant because the actions taken while articulating or watching a sign are actions known by the body (perhaps even activated by mirror neurons!). Two hands squeezing towards each other is not, therefore, merely *representative* of preparing grain alcohol, it *is* preparing grain alcohol, minus the fermented grains, and a hand grasping and rotating in a circle is not merely *representative* of grinding flour, it *is* grinding flour, minus the grinder and the grain.⁷ In other words, while we might think of certain forms as conventional in the linguistic sense, we might also think of them as immanent in the conventional bodily dispositions shared across persons. In what follows, I do not try to distinguish between these kinds of convention.

To summarize what I have argued in this section, forms motivated by shared habituses need not be formally converted into linguistic knowledge to be nevertheless available and recognizable. I want to point out here though that forms are only immanent if you are disposed to seeing them and to embody them. Here I mean disposed both in the sense of “having a particular

habitus” and in the sense of “being willing to.” Doing the work to bring immanent forms into actuality and to understand them also requires and produces habits, as I explore in Chapter 5.

2. Basic description of local sign in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe⁸

The following description outlines the conventions that I observed and also situates them in relation to social and bodily knowledge of locations, landscapes, movements, kinship systems, and shared histories more broadly. This section is divided into two parts. In the first part, I give examples of common, conventional signs, categorized by semiotic types and then by semantic groups. In the second part, I sketch the conventional patterns that characterize signs in combination.

2.1 Lexicon

It remains for further analysis of my video corpus to say exactly which signs are conventional across signers and contexts; Appendix 3 offers a preliminary list. Many of these signs are also immanent in the world in the sense discussed above.

As in the rest of the dissertation, this section identifies signs by glosses. As explained in Notes I, glosses necessarily imply a word class because of how English grammar functions, but many signs cannot really be classified by English categories. Would we say, for example, that when someone signs, “GRAIN.ALCOHOL DRINK.GRAIN ALCOHOL PRO-3-personX,” that she has said, “Person X is an alcohol drinker,” or “Person X drinks alcohol” (not to mention, “Person X is Limbu” – see Section 3)?

It is also worth mentioning that a single form can refer to several objects. Sometimes the referents are closely related, as with the sign I have glossed TO.GRIND/GRINDER/BREAD, while at other times they are quite different, as with a sign that can mean, variously, DRUNK, SICKLY, JOKESTER, or TO.GRAZE.ANIMALS. Both of these examples were offered to me in conversation by a hearing resident of Maunabudhuk, who also said that it was sometimes hard to determine which referent was in play.⁹ I return to hearing signers’ meta-linguistic evaluations in the following two chapters.

2.1.1 Lexical items classified by primary semiotic dimension

Drawing on but also departing from Peirce (1955) and Kendon (1980b), I have classified signs in terms of their primary semiotic dimensions: those that are primarily iconic or characterizing signs, those that are primarily indexical, and those that are neither characterizing nor indexical. I do not call the third group symbolic because the others may or may not also be symbolic in the Peircean sense of “a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes [only] by virtue of a law” (1955:102) as discussed at length above.

2.1.1.1 Iconic/characterizing signs¹⁰

Iconic or characterizing signs make up the largest group of signs. GRAIN.ALCOHOL (above) is one such sign, as are the following three examples.

base	form	base-form relationship	base-referent relationship
turning the handle of a stone grinder around and around	single hand in a fist, thumb side facing upwards, rotates in small horizontal circle	mimetic enactment	action stands for action (to grind) action stands for object used in action (grinder) action stands for object produced (bread) from object produced (flour)

Table 12: TO.GRIND/GRINDER/BREAD

Note that this sign is likely to be understood by someone in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe who had not encountered it before because nearly every home has a grinder; this sign is one the body would know.

base	form	base-form relationship	base-referent relationship
the height of a young person (see Figure 26)	a flat palm facing down at about waist level (when standing)	virtual depiction (measuring)	feature (height) stands for person

Table 13: CHILD/CHILDHOOD



Figure 26: Bhim signs CHILD.

base	form	base-form relationship	base-referent relationship
touching someone's cheeks	palms of hands move upwards across one's own cheeks	mimetic enactment	action stands for quality

Table 14: PRETTY/FAIR.SKINNED

2.1.1.1.1 Metaphor

A fair number of signs have a characterizing dimension that also involves metaphor, as the following two examples show.¹¹

Metaphor: To penetrate something is to denigrate or insult it.

base	form	base-form relationship	base-referent relationship
physical penetration	one hand held with palm facing signer; other hand closed with index finger extended; extended index finger moves away from signer and inserts firmly between first and second fingers of other hand	mimetic enactment	metaphoric

Table 15: FUCK.IT

This sign can be directional; I once saw Nil sign FUCK.IT toward the sky because of the incessant monsoon rains.

Metaphor: To be selfish is to hold on tightly to something.

base	form	base-form relationship	base-referent relationship
holding something tightly in one's hand	squeezed fist held in neutral signing space	mimetic enactment	metaphoric

Table 16: SELFISH

2.1.1.2 Indexical signs

According to Kendon (1980b:85), “[in] indexical signs, the base is pointed at.” I have included in this category presenting signs, in which “the base is a concrete object ... grasped by the signer and presented to the recipient as a token of the referent” (ibid) because presenting signs are also indexical in the sense that they are “based on contiguity” (Hanks 1996:46).

2.1.1.2.1 Presenting objects

base	form	base-form relationship	base-referent relationship
signer's clothing	hand grasps clothing	presenting	exemplar

Table 17: CLOTHING

Amrita Pariyar used this sign to inform me that her neighbor had the unusual habit of eating clothing. To tell me this fact Amrita grabbed her own shirt, turning her head to the side to bite it.

base	form	base-form relationship	base-referent relationship
signer's <i>pote</i> 'bead necklace worn by married women'	hand lifts bead necklace	presenting	exemplar (<i>pote</i>) object stands for social status/relationship (marriage)

Table 18: POTE 'BEAD.NECKLACE'/ MARRIAGE

I saw the sign *POTE* used to refer to marriage in a conversation between Dewi Basnet and a hearing woman; they did not know each other prior to the conversation, at least not well. First they exchanged information about how many children they each had, and then the hearing woman signed MALE and lifted her own *pote* in order to enquire about Dewi's husband. Dewi understood her, and told her that he had died. I do not know whether the more common conventional sign MARRIAGE (see Figure 27) would have been pragmatically inappropriate because it was obvious (or at least assumed) that Dewi was married since she had children or whether the use of the object *pote* is simply a variation.



Figure 27: Trilochan signs MARRIAGE; the hands move up and down alternately.

2.1.1.2.2 Pointing

Pointing is extraordinarily productive.¹² Signers point at or towards:

- people
- animals
- plants
- inanimate objects (whether to identify object or some aspect of it such as color)
- visible places/locations
- places/location that are out of sight
- the sky (to show times of day)



Figure 28: Kanchi points to her *māitighar* ‘natal home.’



Figure 29: Maili points across the landscape.

Pointing is generally done with index fingers extended, as shown in Figures 28 and 29, with several exceptions. Signers sometimes point to themselves using an index finger that touches the chest; at other times they do so with a flat or slightly curved hand touching the chest as shown in Figure 30. I'm not sure whether this variation corresponds to a distinction between the pronominal and the possessive; in this dissertation I have transcribed both forms as PRO-1.¹³ The second exception to index finger pointing is pointing at the sky to indicate times – that is, to locations in the sky where the sun would be at certain times. To do so signers use a full-hand point (a flat forearm and hand).



Figure 30: Laxman's older brother Maila signs PRO-1.

2.1.1.2.3 Relationships between places

Along with pointing at or toward locations, people also indicate relationships *between* places by using a flat or slightly bent hand to indicate THIS.SIDE and THAT.SIDE as in the freeze frames shown in Figure 31. The signs shown occur in the context of Bhim trying to identify a non-present person for me by locating his home. In the top freeze frame, Bhim points at Nil; Bhim knows that I know where Nil's house is. In the middle frame, Bhim indicates that Nil's house is THIS.WAY. In the bottom frame, she shows that the person in question's house is THAT.WAY. In other words, from Nil's house one would go in the direction indicated to reach the second person's house. The directions shown in this example are absolute (see Levinson 2003), as are, of course, all indexical points that serve to identify particular places.



Figure 31: Bhim signs THIS.SIDE and THAT.SIDE.

Signers also trace pathways in space that correspond to routes between places. In other words, they sometimes indicate the direction of travel as well as the final destination. The signs COME and GO might also be thought of as indicating the direction of travel. These signs can be situated in relation to the signer's and/or addressee's body in which case the body is the origo as shown in Figure 32 or in relation to absolute directions as shown in Figures 33 and 34. In Figure 32, Trilochan is jokingly asking the young woman on the far right, who is his neighbor, "Shall we go off and get married?" GO here has both a literal and a metaphoric quality. In Figure 33, Bhim is talking about whether or not her daughter will come to visit from the Tarai. She orients the sign along the path taken by buses as they arrive in Maunabudhuk. In Figure 34, Bhim explains that her father-in-law refuses to come to the health post in town; the sign COME is

oriented along the path that runs from her home to the bazaar along which he would walk if he were willing to do so.



Figure 32: GO



Figure 33: Bhim signs COME-dir



Figure 34: Bhim signs COME-dir

Indexical signs that point to, toward, or along places and routes, along with those that establish relations between places, serve not only to identify places but also to identify people and social relationships. All of these uses rely on people knowing – more or less – where other places exist in relation to the current location. It is clear, then, that signers must be oriented not only in terms of absolute directions but also in terms of relationships between and among places and the people who live in and move between them (see Chapter 2). Padden (2011:24) may be right that “[p]ointing to a particular location ... is easy to do in a village sign language,” or in local sign as we see here, but we should not let that ease disguise the complex social work involved in knowing (a) place.

2.1.1.3 Non-iconic & non-indexical signs

This section offers a few examples of signs that do not appear to me to have a characterizing or indexical element in the senses outlined above, though it is possible that local signers themselves might analyze them differently were they wont to do so.

GLOSS	form	uses
Q	one or both hands – held loosely open or with only thumb and index extended – flip(s) from palms down to palms up (see Figure 35)	Q can be used for all WH-questions, for a general query akin to the English “hunh?,” and to indicate a skeptical or distancing stance
NEG (var 1)	hand with fingers slightly spread apart shakes/twists back and forth (see Figure 36)	negation
NEG (var 2)	hand with fingers slightly spread apart moves from side to side (see Figure 25, above)	negation
NAMASTE/SEWĀRO	hands come together in front of chest, palms pressed together	polite greeting (<i>namaste</i> is Nepali, <i>sewāro</i> is Limbu)

Table 19: Examples of non-characterizing and non-indexical signs



Figure 35: Laxman's older brother Maila signs Q.



Figure 36: Man Kumari signs NEG (var 1).

2.1.2 Lexical items classified by semantic category

I turn now to a consideration of signs grouped by (overlapping) semantic categories; my division is intended for heuristic and expository purposes only. In relation to the previous section, it is interesting to note that places and times are most likely to involve indexical signs, whereas

all other signs with the exception of numbers and grammatical signs are likely to be characterizing. In this section when I describe the relationship of signs to the world, however, I use ordinary language rather than Kendon's base-form-referent schema.

2.1.2.1 People

As mentioned above, signers refer to people either by pointing at them or at/towards places associated with them or with non-indexical signs. Places associated with people might include a chair in which someone usually sits, a window to which someone regularly comes to chat, or a home. Non-indexical signs include characterizing descriptions of salient/distinguishing features such as a limp, pockmarked skin, or a septum ring, as well as conventional lexical items relating to:

- gender
- age
- parental or spousal relationship
- birth order
- caste/ethnicity

The sign for FEMALE is a loosely bent hand running through the hair on the side of the head. The signs for MALE are a loosely curved hand placed on the top of the head as in Figure 37 or a hand in the shape shown in Figure 38 that moves across the body at chest level. The latter also means TO.PLOUGH, which is, as Cameron (1998:112) writes, "men's work."



Figure 37: Dewi signs MALE



Figure 38: Handshape for TO.PLOUGH/MALE

As mentioned above, a child – or childhood itself – is indicated through height. An old person is indicated with a bent index finger, as shown in Figure 39. OLD.PERSON usually is used to refer to either one's parents or parents-in-law or, for older signers, one's spouse. It can, however, be used to refer to other old people. In a conversation between Laxman and his brother about grazing the bulls, for example, Laxman explained where the bulls were in relation to a neighbor, whom he referred to as OLD.PERSON FEMALE.



Figure 39: Dewi signs OLD.PERSON

While relations between people are often left implicit (see below), the sign BIRTH marks a mother-child relationship while the sign MARRIAGE marks a marital relation.

The most commonly used signs to refer to persons in local sign, as in the variety of Nepali spoken in the area, are birth order terms. They are, though not overtly characterizing, iconic in a diagrammatic sense. The signs are shown in Figure 40 with Nepali glosses and English translations. Note that while the Nepali distinguishes between male and female (e.g., *kānchā* vs. *kānchi*), I have given only the male terms because the local signs do not encode gender, though gender can be specified with one of the lexical items described above.



Figure 40: Signs for birth order

Upper row, from left: *JETHĀ* 'OLDEST,' *MĀILĀ* 'SECOND.OLDEST,' *SĀILĀ* 'THIRD.OLDEST'
 Bottom row, from left: *KĀILĀ* 'FOURTH.OLDEST,' *KĀNCHĀ* 'YOUNGEST'

In everyday usage, the referent of these lexical items – in particular OLD.PERSON, MALE, FEMALE, and the birth order terms – is underspecified and must be resolved by the signer’s addressee on the basis both of the particular context of utterance and the signer’s usual meaning. (At least for birth order terms, this point also applies to Nepali as it is spoken in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe.) When Bhim signed OLD.PERSON, for example, she almost always was referring to her mother-in-law or father-in-law, while Trilochan usually was talking about his mother, and Kanchi about her husband. Maili, meanwhile, invariably referred to Bhola with (and only with) the sign MALE, while when she signed *KĀNCHĀ* ‘YOUNGEST’ she usually meant the sister-in-law with whom she lived (who was the “youngest” by virtue of her marriage to Maili’s youngest brother). The niece pictured in Figure 41, however, could also be referred to with the sign *KĀNCHĀ* in combination with the sign CHILD.



Figure 41: Maili and her niece.

2.1.2.2 Places

Along with pointing to neighboring settlements, or at least in the direction that those settlements lie, there are also lexical items used to refer to places, including: DHANKUTA (the municipal headquarters, not the district), SCHOOL, HOME, HOSPITAL, ABROAD (see Figure 42), and *TARĀI* ‘PLAINS.’



Figure 42: Laxman signs ABROAD.

There were in fact several signs for *TARĀI* ‘PLAINS.’ The one used by Trilochan depicts the action of pumping water, because water comes from pumps in the Tarai and from water taps/pipes in the hills (or at least, this part of the hills; see Figure 43). This fact illustrates my general sense that distinctions in local sign are *social* as opposed to *phonological*. As another example, I once saw Limbus referred to as *SHORT.NOSED* and Bahuns/Chhetris as *LONG.NOSED*; what matters of course is that Limbus’ noses tend to be *shorter than* Bahuns’ and Chhetris’ and Bahuns’ and Chhetris’ noses tend to be *longer than* Limbus’.



Figure 43: Sources of water

Left: A water pump in the Tarai

Right: I rinse my water jug at a water tap in Maunabudhuk

2.1.2.3 Times and events

As stated above, people refer to times of day by pointing to the place where the sun would be in the sky at that time. NIGHT is signed by closing the fist near the face, as if indicating a lack of light.

Recurrent events such as *BAZAAR.DAY* (Saturdays in Maunabudhuk), *DASAI* (a major fall holiday), and *TIHAR*¹⁴ (a second major fall/winter holiday; see Figure 44 – Maili’s thumb continues to move up her forehead) are also conventional lexical items. *DASAI* in particular seems to also function as a means to count years. Specific times of the year can also be indicated via metonymy with signs that indicate agricultural cycles such as *CORN THIS.HIGH* as well as weather patterns such as *COLD*. Further research would be needed to ascertain whether non-lexical markers such as facial expressions accompany/signify such meanings or whether they are only conveyed.



Figure 44: Maili signs TIHAR.



Figure 45: Bhim signs COLD.

The context for the sign shown in Figure 45 is Bhim's explanation that the millet will not be harvested until later in the year – when it's cold.

TOMORROW is, I believe, indicated with an upright index finger and signers sometimes indicate two days or three days from the present with numbers. While I found temporal relations difficult to understand, it is possible there are conventional signs that indicate futurity and the past.

2.1.2.4 Daily life: Actions & objects

There are many signs pertaining to actions undertaken in and objects produced or encountered in daily life. Examples include: VEGETABLES, TELEVISION, TO.GRAZE.ANIMALS, TO.CUT.GRASS, COOK, AIRPLANE, *DOKO* 'BASKET,' MONEY, MILL (also a place). Farming, livestock care, and food production are particularly rich semantic fields. Several examples are given below.



Figure 46: Bhim signs TO.PLANT.MILLET



Figure 47: Bhim signs TO.HARVEST.MILLET

In Figure 46 Bhim's right hand will continue to move downward as if placing a seedling in the ground (the sign TO.PLANT.RICE is identical). In Figure 47 Bhim signs TO.HARVEST.MILLET (the identical sign means TO.CUT.GRASS). In both Figures 46 and 47 Bhim's facial expressions are parts of the grammar of the utterance and are not specific to the lexical item).



Figure 48: TO.HARVEST.CORN

In Figure 48, Bhim's right hand stays stable, as if grasping the corn stalk. Her left hand moves diagonally as if pulling the ear of corn down and away from the stalk.

2.1.2.5 Emotions and interactions

Signs relating to emotions and social interactions are also numerous. Examples include: AFRAID, GRUMPY, SHY, TALK.WITH (see Figure 49), ELOPE (see Figure 50), CRY,

HAVE.SEX, and SCOLD/YELL.AT. The sign SEE (see Figure 51) can indicate both literal seeing and perhaps also serves as an evidential in the sense of “having been there” or, in combination with the sign NEG, “I don’t know because I wasn’t there.”



Figure 49: Laxman signs TALK.WITH.



Figure 50: Bhim's neighbor signs ELOPE.



Figure 51: Kanchi signs SEE.

2.1.2.6 Numbers

Numbers can be used to refer to various objects: people, days, animals, etc. There are not category-level signs for people, days, or animals, however, so the number given is frequently the *only* indication of what is being counted (e.g., 2 → 2 days).

2.1.2.7 Grammatical markers

There are multiple grammatical markers, a few of which are listed in Section 2.1.1.3 above. In addition to manually produced lexical items, local signing practices incorporate affirming, negating, and questioning head movements, including the one shown in Figure 52 and those discussed in Section 2.2.1.



Figure 52: A young hearing woman articulates an affirmative head tilt

2.2 Sign combinations

I now turn from an examination of individual signs to a description of conventional ways of combining signs. In analyzing these patterns, I have not sought to distinguish between syntactic and pragmatic conventions to account for the fact that, for example, the sequence of signs “PRO-person.X PRO-person.Y Q” signed with a questioning facial expression means “what is the relationship between persons X and Y?” Borrowing Saussure’s (1972:122-123) term though using it in a somewhat different sense, I refer to the relationships among signs and to their combination as “syntagmatics.” As implied by the just-mentioned example, sign combinations include both *simultaneous* and *sequential* articulations.

2.2.1 Simultaneous Combinations

I have identified three types of simultaneous constructions: those that combine facial expressions or head movements with lexical items or pointing, those that combine two facial expressions or head movements (and perhaps a lexical item or point), and those that combine two different signs. The former two are far more common than the latter. Note that head movements and (some) facial expressions can also be articulated independently.

The following three figures illustrate combinations of head movements or facial expressions and lexical items. The first also shows a facial expression that may or may not have a fully conventional as opposed to emergent or situated meaning.



Figure 53: Kanchi gives an affirmative head tilt and signs ALONE/BY.ONSELF.

In Figure 53, Kanchi responds to my question by affirming that she does indeed walk to her *māitighar* ‘natal home’ by herself.



Figure 54: Trilochan signs PRO-1 with a polar question head tilt.

In Figure 54, Trilochan is jokingly asking if the young woman on the far right will marry him, while in Figure 55 Maili says, “No.”



Figure 55: Maili signs NEG (var 1) with accompanying negating facial expression.

The next example, Figure 56, is somewhat difficult to see but it illustrates the combination of an affirmative head nod with a polar question facial expression and an indexical point, yielding a request for confirmation (“You?”).



Figure 56: Young hearing woman asks, “You?”

Facial expressions do not only mark questions, affirmations, and negations (the latter is not illustrated here – find if possible). They can also serve to inflect verbs, as in Figure 57. Bhim’s hearing neighbor is teasing Bhim’s husband by predicting that Bhola and Bhim are going to run off together. In the freeze frame on the left, she signs DRINK.GRAIN.ALCOHOL and then in the right depicts someone drunkenly fighting. Note the slightly dazed (drunk) look on her face.



Figure 57: Bhim’s hearing neighbor signs DRINK.GRAIN.ALCOHOL + FIGHT.DRUNKENLY

Although there may be other examples, I can recall only one instance of a simultaneous construction involving two manual signs. This instance actually involved the creative transformation of a lexical item – *KĀNCHĀ* ‘YOUNGEST’ – into a person classifier. I did not record this usage on video so I have reproduced it with my own hands.¹⁵

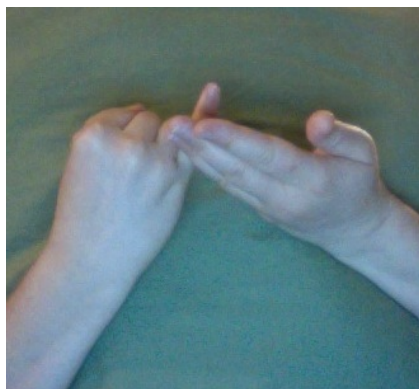


Figure 58: HIT-*KĀNCHĀ*

2.2.2 Sequential combinations

In Conversation Analysis, sequentiality is understood as expressing a relevance relation across turns (see Hanks 2004). Sequentiality seems to do the same thing in local sign not only across turns but also *within* them. In other words, temporal proximity becomes a primary means of expressing a relationship between two or more objects. Indeed while sign language grammars are often characterized as diagrammatic, spatial, or iconic, we can think of them – or at least that

of local sign in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe – as being temporally indexical as well. To ask who someone is, for example, a signer points at the person and then signs Q. The sequence of signs makes it clear that the question is about the person. To ask about a relationship between two people, as mentioned above, a signer points at each person in turn and then signs Q. The sequence of signs – the proximity of the reference to one person and then the other – indicates that it is the relationship that is being thematized. Similarly, reported speech or reported action is indicated by signing what someone said or performing what they did and then pointing to the person who said/did it.¹⁶ I have found only one example of reported speech of an absent person, and in that case the signer had already established the person as a topic of conversation. She then signed his utterance, followed by a lexical item referring to the person. I do not know how this sequence might have been different if the person had not already been introduced. In neither case – reporting the speech of someone present or absent – does the relationship between what is said and who said it get identified with a lexical item meaning “say.” Instead the relationship is given by their sequence.

As these examples suggest, there are also strong tendencies regarding the order in which signs are combined, namely:

- Negatives follow what they negate.
- The sign Q follows the object(s) in question.
- Speaker follows speech in reported speech.

2.2.3 Combinations of speech and sign

As several of the extended examples in this dissertation indicate, signers – whether deaf or hearing – may combine speech and sign both simultaneously and sequentially. This point is beyond the scope of the dissertation but of considerable interest.

3. *Jāt*: Iconicity, Typification, and Bodies

In this section I further examine the semiotic and social structuring of local sign forms by focus on a single – albeit extraordinarily complex – social/semantic domain: *jāt* ‘caste/ethnicity, caste/ethnic group.’ As mentioned in Chapter 2, *jāt* is an important dimension of Nepali society and polity – a topic directly addressed in the NSL course and a category of identification readily invoked by both deaf and hearing people in Maunabudhuk and the surrounding area (though see below).¹⁷ This section reveals how the relationships among signs’ bases, forms, and (sometimes multiple) referents incorporate historically sedimented social norms, expectations, and even contradictions. In fact, I will argue that there is a productive parallel between the structure and practice of *jāt* and that of local sign in terms of apparent tensions between the general and the specific. Due to this parallel, local signing practices actually have helped me to think about *jāt* in a new way; in this sense, this section also shows that local sign, like other communicative practices, has the capacity to tell us something about the social world, and not only about itself.

In the first part of this section, I define the term *jāt* as it is used in Nepal and more particularly in Maunabudhuk. I then provide demographic data from Maunabudhuk VDC that indicates that the various *jāt* groups discussed in Chapter 2 fall into a tripartite division that, I argue, has been shaped by national-level laws over the past several hundred years. In the second part, I list the various signs and sign combinations used by local signers to identify persons as belonging to different *jāts*; these signs and sign combinations all invoke particular attributes and actions associated with the relevant *jāt* – although sometimes not uniquely so. Many of these collocations, moreover, serve not only as *jāt* identifiers – that is, to say who a person is – but also as verbal constructions – that is, to say what a person does. Not infrequently, I will show, the

typifications of caste practices encoded in signs used to name *jāts* actually contradict the actions taken by specific individuals. In the third part, I show how in conversation this potential tension is resolved through what I call the dual ontology of the casted body.

3.1 *Jāt in Maunabudhuk*

Since at least the second half of the 19th century (see e.g., Höfer 2004), the Nepali word *jāt* has been used to designate social groups that in present-day English we refer to as *caste* and *ethnic* groups (see Chapter 2). While in contemporary political arenas Nepalis frequently distinguish between the two, in everyday speech the word *jāt*, as well as the variant *jāti*, encompasses both categories.¹⁸ For example, when people in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe ascertained that I was a hearing foreigner who spoke Nepali, and that Bhola was a deaf Nepali who did not, they frequently asked me, “*Bhāi ke ko jāti* ‘what *jāti* is younger brother’?” In Nepali Sign Language, similarly, the sign *JĀT* covers both ethnicity and caste. Thus, as mentioned in Chapter 1, one would ask the same question – “*JĀT WHAT* ‘What is your *jāt*?’” – of someone regardless of whether the addressee was perceived as being from a caste or ethnic group. And, as also mentioned in Chapter 1, local signers in Maunabudhuk do not appear to have a category-level sign equivalent to *jāt*, but they talk easily and knowledgeably about differences between the various *jāts*.

Now I turn to an examination of the demographic data that Maunabudhuk VDC collected itself. The material that was shared with me consists of a series of spreadsheets that are divided by ward (wards are sub-VDC units). For each of Maunabudhuk’s nine wards, a spreadsheet lists all the households contained in the ward, followed by shorter lists that include only a sub-set of the households (some of the sub-set lists are named, others are not). An examination of their names and contents, shown in Table 20, reveals the logic governing their existence. We can see that with the exception of Ward #1 in which Rai and Limbu households are separated (and the single Shrestha household listed in a separate sub-list in Ward #7), households are divided into three broad categories: Bahuns and Chhetris; Dalits; and Limbus, Rais, and others.

Ward #	# of sub-lists	sub-lists named?	<i>jāts</i> of households in sub-lists	Comments
1	2	Yes ¹⁹	a. Rai b. Limbu	All households in this ward are Rai or Limbu
2	2	Yes ²⁰	a. Bahun/Chhetri b. Dalit	Limbu households and the one Rai household are not re-listed
3	2	No	a. Bahun/Chhetri b. Dalit	Limbu, Rai, and two other (Magar, Dewan) households are not re-listed
4	2	No	a. Bahun/Chhetri b. Dalit	Limbu households are not re-listed
5	2	No	a. Bahun/Chhetri b. Dalit	Limbu households are not re-listed
6	0	n/a	n/a	The entire ward is Limbu
7	3	No	a. Bahun/Chhetri b. Dalit c. Shrestha	Limbu households are not re-listed
8	1	No	a. Bahun/Chhetri	Limbu households are not re-listed
9	1	No	a. Bahun/Chhetri	Limbu households are not re-listed

Table 20: Intra-ward divisions by *jāt*

This classificatory logic is repeated in the two spreadsheets that are VDC-wide (that is, not divided into wards). The second re-lists all households and does not concern us here. The first is comprised of four tables, two of which lay out the number of households and number of persons by *jāt*, divided into three mutually exclusive categories: *janajāti* ‘ethnic groups’, *anya jāti* ‘other *jāti*’ and *dalit* ‘Dalit.’ Comparing the number of houses (only numbers are given, not names), it becomes evident that the category *janajāti* comprises non-Bahun/Chhetris and non-Dalits (that is, Limbus, Rais, and a few other households); *dalit*, obviously, includes Dalits; and by process of elimination (and checked against the numbers), *anya jāti* means Bahuns/Chhetris. (This spreadsheet also categorizes houses and persons by religion, a topic beyond the scope of the dissertation.)

Most academic work on contemporary Nepal – roughly speaking, since democracy in 1990 – emphasizes processes of emergence and *change*, analyzing how groups come into being, name and define themselves and pointing to the ways in which such processes are always caught up in though not determined by broader political projects of state-making (see e.g., Fisher 2001, Guneratne 2002).²¹ Here I want to point to how both bureaucratic forms of enumeration and – as we will see – local sign forms indicate *continuity* as well. In fact it seems certain that the tripartite division of Bahun/Chhetris, Limbus and others, and Dalits has its roots in national laws and policies dating back to the 1800s. The Muluki Ain (MA) of 1854 was the first in a series of laws that sought to legally incorporate and rank the many different social groups living in the territory ruled over by the first in a line of hereditary prime ministers (Höfer 2004:2, 8). The MA makes a five-part division among the various social groups (only some of which understood themselves at that time as being part of a system of *jāts*): “Wearers of the holy cord,” “Non-enslavable Alcohol-Drinkers,” “Enslavable Alcohol-Drinkers,” “impure but ‘touchable,’” and “untouchable.” While slavery and untouchability are now illegal, Bahuns and Chhetris are still cord-wearers, many ethnic groups are still distinguished in theory if not in practice by their alcohol drinking (I remember, for example, an older Limbu woman telling me directly, “We’re a drinking *jāt*”) and Dalits are, as discussed in Chapter 2, sometimes still treated as untouchable. At least in Maunabudhuk, distinctions between “enslavable” and “unenslavable” and “impure but ‘touchable” and “impure and untouchable” fall away to yield a three-pronged system of classification.

3.2 Signs

Tables 21-23 show that in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe *jāts* are referred to in relation to actions and qualities of four types: 1) engaging in ritual activities (wearing a sacred thread, playing a specific kind of drum), 2) consuming alcohol and meat, 3) engaging in artisan activities, and 4) having a specific physiognomic feature. In what follows, I will not treat the latter, as it was the least commonly used way to differentiate among *jāt* groups that I saw. It is clear that signs of types #s 1-3 show the traces of state-sponsored categories and laws. In particular, Bahuns and Chhetris are referred to as people who WEAR.SACRED.THREAD, while Limbus are called GRAIN.ALCOHOL.DRINKERS. Dalits, meanwhile, are named by the occupation with which their particular caste is associated. In the Muluki Ain, groups are also differentiated among and described in terms prescribed and proscribed foods, including alcohol and the “meat they habitually eat” (Höfer 2004:119). We can see in the following tables that in contemporary local sign, *jāts* are frequently named in terms of what they do and do not eat. I want to make it clear that I do not consider eating practices to be related only to national laws and not to everyday cultural practices (and of course the two have mutually affected each other).

Bahun and Chhetris slaughter and eat goats at Dasai, for example, while pigs are part of Limbus' marital prestations. Tea and alcohol, meanwhile, are the appropriate drinks offered to guests, and consumed frequently during the day by family members, by Brahman/Chhetris and Limbus, respectively. (I was served both at Dalit homes.)

For the following tables, note that I have followed Kendon's (1980b) schema for describing characterizing signs (see Section 1), and that the + symbol indicates two separate lexical items and the arrow means "stands for." Also note that to say someone is *not* of a particular *jāt*, the conventional NEG sign can be added to anyone of these signs/sign phrases.

base	form	referents (glossed)	base-referent relationship
location of sacred thread worn by men	index finger or side of hand traces from left shoulder diagonally down and across chest	1. SACRED.THREAD 2. WEAR.SACRED.THREAD 3. BAHUN/CHHETRI	1. body location → object 2. body location → action 3. body location → class of persons
goat's horns + eating goat meat	index fingers held at sides of head + loosely closed hand moves to mouth	1. GOAT + EAT 2. BAHUN/CHHETRI	1. feature → object + action → action 2. action → class of persons
(having a) long nose	(did not record)	1. LONG.NOSE 2. BAHUN/CHHETRI	1. feature → object 2. feature → class of persons

Table 21: Signs for Bahuns/Chhetris

base	form	referents (glossed)	base-referent relationship
squeezing/pounding fermented grains (2 variants)	a. two hands squeeze toward each other b. one fist pounds flat palm	1. GRAIN.ALCOHOL 2. LIMBU	1. action → object 2. action → class of persons
drinking grain alcohol from shallow bowl	closed hands held apart move upwards toward mouth	1. DRINK.GRAIN.ALCOHOL 2. LIMBU	1. action → action 2. action → class of persons
killing a pig by stabbing + eating pork	index fingers pokes ribs + loosely closed hand moves to mouth	1. PIG/KILL.PIG + EAT 2. LIMBU	1. action → object/action → action + action → action 2. action → class of persons
playing large drum	open hands face each other two feet apart, one hand taps inwards; often accompanied by one foot extended	1. PLAY.DRUM 2. LIMBU.FESTIVITY 3. LIMBU	1. action → action 2. action → setting 3. action → class of persons
(having a) short nose	(did not record)	1. SHORT.NOSE 2. LIMBU	1. feature → object 2. feature → class of persons

Table 22: Signs for Limbus²²

base	form	referents (glossed)	base-referent relationship
hitting a piece of metal with a tool	both hands as if grasping, one stays still, the other moves up and down over it	1. TO.BLACKSMITH 2. KAMI	1. action → action 2. action → class of person
sewing by hand ²³	flat hand faces down, other hand closed with index and thumb touching circles next to flat hand	1. SEWING 2. DAMAI	1. action → action 2. action → class of person
playing a small drum	(did not record)	1. PLAY.DRUM 2. (did not ascertain Nepali name; Dalit caste, possibly Sarki)	1. action → action 2. action-class of person
bull horns + eating beef	index fingers at sides of head ²⁴ + loosely closed hand moves to mouth	1. BULL + EAT 2. (did not ascertain Nepali name; Dalit caste, possibly Sarki)	1. feature → object + action → action 2. action → class of person

Table 23: Signs for Dalits

What makes these signs especially interesting to me is that the relationships between the actions depicted by them and the *jāts* to which they can refer are not nearly as straightforward as their typification might suggest. First, some of the actions that metonymically refer to one specific *jāt* are actually permitted for others *groups*. Dalits as well as Limbus, for example, eat pork and drink fermented grain alcohol, and are *expected* to do so.²⁵ Second, actual *individuals* who are members of a particular *jāt* do not necessarily partake in the actions depicted by the signs that name that *jāt*. There are, for example, Limbus who do not drink, Bahuns and Chhetris who do not wear the sacred thread, and Dalits who do not practice their “traditional” occupations. Third, some *individuals* partake in actions that according to at least some generally recognized norms are proscribed for their groups. I know multiple Bahun and Chhetri men, for example, who drink alcohol and eat pork, though many do so with a bit of embarrassment and only out of the house. To summarize, we find that actions normatively performed by several *jāts* – e.g., drinking alcohol and eating pork – are typified in local sign as emblematic of only one of those *jāts*. Furthermore, the actual embodied practices of particular persons might or might not accord with the actions associated through typification with their *jāt*.²⁶

3.3 Conversation

How do these contradictions – if they are contradictions – play out in actual language use? I turn now to an example taken from the NSL class during a lesson in which the participants were expected to name their caste/ethnic groups with NSL signs.²⁷ As the transcript shows, Maili Limbu in particular had difficulty with answering that question when it was put to her in NSL using the category-level sign **JĀT**. For that reason – and because class sessions nearly always involved a great deal of conversation – we ended up in a discussion about what various people do and do not do, or more particularly what they do and do not eat and drink. The first transcribed sequence begins partway into the lesson, when we are standing in the configuration shown in Figure 59.



Figure 59: Participants in conversation.

From left: Man Kumari Limbu, Nil Kumari Limbu, Dhan Limbu, Maili Limbu, Trilochan Limbu, Bhola Thapa, and me.

In Lines 1 and 3, Bhola Thapa establishes the activity – naming one’s *jāt* – and gives the floor to Trilochan, who easily answers the implicit question in Line 4. In Line 5, Bhola passes the floor to Maili, but Maili does not provide a statement of the sort Bhola expects. Bhola then asks her using local sign if she is Bahun/Chhetri (Line 7), and Maili says no. Trilochan also responds, using the signs GRAIN.ALCOHOL and DRINK.GRAIN.ALCOHOL. The fact that Trilochan has just correctly employed the NSL signs **JĀT** and **CHHETRI** makes it clear that he, like Bhola, is engaged in naming *jāt*. In other words, Line 9 definitively illustrates the use of GRAIN.ALCOHOL and DRINK.GRAIN.ALCOHOL to identify the Limbu *jāt*. In Line 19, similarly, we see Maili use the sign SACRED.THREAD to characterize Trilochan in terms of his *jāt*. In both of these uses, the signers use the sign to refer to the person in question as a member of a group; his or her personal habits are not in question.

In Lines 27 and 28, by contrast, we see that Maili answers my question – “does Trilochan eat pork?” – with regard to his own bodily habits, not the prescribed customs of his *jāt*. And in Line 50 Maili states that Trilochan, contrary to the typified if not necessarily the typical behavior of Bahun/Chhetri men in the area, drinks “a little bit of grain alcohol.” Trilochan denies both of these claims (Lines 25 and 54); for my purposes it does not matter who is right. The point is that in each of these cases, Maili has used the signs in order to make a claim about Trilochan’s actual eating and drinking practices.

Time code: 10:54-12:49²⁸

1 Bhola: PRO-1++ JĀT CHHETRI. JĀT CHHETRI.	My <i>jāt</i> is Chhetri.
2 Nil, Man Kumar: JĀT CHHETRI.	(repeat signs)
3 Bhola: PRO-2-Trilochan.	Trilochan’s turn.

4 Trilochan: JĀT CHHETRI.	My <i>jāt</i> is Chhetri.
5 Bhola: PRO-2-Mailī. PRO-2-Mailī JĀT.	Mailī's turn. Mailī's turn to say her <i>jāt</i> .
6 Mailī: JĀT+	(repeats sign)
7 Bhola: PRO-2-Mailī JĀT SACRED.THREAD?	Are you Bahun/Chhetri?
8 Mailī: ([shakes head])	No.
9 Trilochan: [NEG.] GRAIN.ALCOHOL DRINK.GRAIN.ALCOHOL.	No, she's Limbu.
10 Bhola: [Q?]	So what are you?
11 Mailī: JĀT	(signs JĀT)
12 Bhola: PRO-2-Mailī JĀT SACRED.THREAD?	So is your <i>jāt</i> Bahun/Chhetri?
13 Mailī: NEG. PRO-3-Trilochan SACRED.THREAD PRO-3-Trilochan.	No. Trilochan is Bahun/Chhetri.
14 Bhola: PRO-2-Mailī Q? PRO-2-Mailī Q?	So what are you?
15 Mailī: JĀT MAILI (provides name sign given in NSL class, then holds hands up) ²⁹	My <i>jāt</i> is Mailī, there.
16 Bhola: NEG. PRO-3-Trilochan SACRED.THREAD. PRO-2-Mailī SACRED.THREAD?	No. Trilochan is Bahun/Chhetri. Are you Bahun/Chhetri?
17 Mailī: (laughs) NEG	No!
18 Bhola: Q? PRO-2-Mailī Q?	Well then what are you?
19 Mailī: ONE.MOMENT. PRO-1 JĀT NEG, PRO-3- Trilochan JĀT SACRED.THREAD PRO-3-Trilochan.	Hold on. I'm not, Trilochan's <i>jāt</i> is Bahun/Chhetri. ³⁰
20 Bhola: PRO-2-Mailī Q? PRO-2-Mailī Q?	And you? What are you?
21 Mailī: PRO-1+ (starts to sign JĀT) MAILI.	I'm Mailī.
22 Bhola: (hand still in Q sign)	
23 Mailī: NEG	I'm not.
24 Mara: (taps hand on Bhola's arm) PRO-2-Mailī + (starts to sign GRAIN.ALCOHOL) PRO-3-Trilochan PIG EAT PRO-3-Trilochan?	[Implied]: Let me try. You dri – Does Trilochan eat pig?
25 Trilochan: NEG	No.
26 Mailī: (affirmative head tilt)/ <i>kānchha</i> 'eats'	Yes.
27 Mara: (emphatically) PRO-3-Trilochan++ [PIG EAT?]	No, does Trilochan eat it?

28 Maili: (affirmative head tilt)/ <i>kānchha</i> ‘eats’	Yes, he does.
29 Bhola: HEY SACRED.THREAD PIG EAT? [SACRED.THREAD PIG EAT?]	Hey do Bahun/Chhetris eat pig?
30 Maili: [NEG]	No.
31 Bhola: Q PRO-2-Maili Q?	And what about you?
32 Mara: PRO-2-Maili PIG EAT PRO-2-Maili?	Do you eat pig?
33 Maili: (affirmative head tilt)/ <i>kanchha</i>	Yes.
34 Mara: PRO-2-Maili Q?	So what about you?
35 Maili: (affirmative head tilt)/ <i>kanchha</i>	Yes I eat [pig].
36 Mara: HEY PRO-3-Trilochan DRINK.GRAIN.ALCOHOL++ PRO-3-Trilochan?	Hey does Trilochan drink grain alcohol?
37 Maili: NEG	No.
38 Mara: GRAIN.ACOHOL DRINK.GRAIN.ALCOHOL? PRO-2-Maili DRINK.GRAIN.ALCOHOL PRO-2-Maili?	Do you drink grain alcohol?
39 Maili: (negative shakes head)	No.
40 Mara: (looks disbelieving)	(looks disbelieving)
41 Maili: ### (puts both hands up to temples, then opens up hands)	(I don’t understand what she signs)
42 Mara: (laughs)	(apparently I did at the time, as I laugh)
43 Trilochan: HEY PRO-2-Maili DRINK.GRAIN.ALCOHOL(variant on sign) PRO-2- Maili DRINK.GRAIN.ALCOHOL(variant on sign) PRO-2-Maili	Hey you do drink grain alcohol.
44 Maili: PRO-1 NEG ### (puts both hands up to temples) NEG. PRO-3-Dhan DRINKS.GRAIN.ALCOHOL PRO-3-Dhan.	I don’t (unclear). Dhan does, he drinks grain alcohol.
45 Mara: PRO-2-Maili <i>KĀNCHA</i> ‘YOUNGEST’ DRINK.GRAIN.ALCOHOL PRO-2-Maili?	Does your youngest brother drink grain alcohol?
46 Maili: (affirmative head tilt)/ <i>chha</i> ‘existential yes.’ PRO-1 NEG	Yes, but I don’t.
47 Mara: PRO-3-Trilochan SACRED.THREAD. PRO- 2-Maili Q?	Trilochan is Bahun/Chhetri. What are you?
48 Maili: PRO-1 DRINK.GRAIN.ALCOHOL? PRO-1 NEG.	Do I drink grain alcohol? No, I don’t.

49 Mara: NEG. PRO-3-Trilochan SACRED.THREAD	No. Trilochan's Bahun/Chhetri.
50 Maili: DRINK.GRAIN.ALCOHOL PRO-3-Trilochan THIS.MUCH (indicates a small amount)/ <i>āli</i>	Trilochan drinks a little bit of grain alcohol.
51 Bhola: PRO-2-Mailī THIS.MUCH (indicates a larger amount)	And you drink more.
52 Maili: PRO-1 NEG	No, not me.
53 Mara: PRO-3-Trilochan EAT NEG EAT NEG. PRO-2/3-Trilochan DRINK.GRAIN.ALCOHOL?	He does not. Does he/you?
54 Trilochan: (negative head shake)	No.
55 Bhola: JOKE	She's just joking.
56 Trilochan: (to Maili) JOKE . NEG.	You're joking. I don't.
57 Bhola: PRO-2-Mailī SACRED.THREAD?	Are you Bahun/Chhetri?
58 Maili: NEG	No.
59 Bhola: DRINK.GRAIN.ALCOHOL PRO-2-Mailī?	Do you drink grain alcohol?
60 Maili: (negative head shake)	No.
61 Mara: (to Bhola, who has looked at her in frustration) PIG EAT?	What about eating pig?
62 Bhola: (to Maili) PIG EAT?	Do you eat pig?
63 Maili: (affirmative head tilt)	Yes.
64 Bhola: Q? PIG EAT PRO-2-Mailī?	So what are you? You eat pig?
65 Maili: (affirmative head tilt)	Yes.
66 Bhola: BUFFALO - ³¹	And buffalo?
67 Maili: PT-locA. NEG (var). PT-locA.	(I do not understand what she means)
68 Bhola: BUFFALO EAT?	Do you eat buffalo?
69 Maili: NEG (var)	No.
70 Bhola: PIG?	Pig?
71 Maili: (affirmative head nod)	Yes.
72 Bhola: PRO-2-Mailī Q? PRO-2-Mailī Q? HEY. LIMBU.	So what are you, what are you? Hey, look. You're Limbu.

Eight minutes later, the lesson is still going on, though with other students, and Bhola and I have switched places. A similar conversation then ensues between Bhola and Maili, at which point I ask Bhola to switch back with me, and then have people move a little bit so that there is a space between Trilochan and Maili. We are therefore standing in the configuration shown in Figure 60.



Figure 60: New spatial configuration.

In Lines 73 and 79, Maili is again faced with the question of whether or not Trilochan eats pork or drinks grain alcohol, and this time she answers that he does not. I understand this difference not as a capitulation to Trilochan's earlier claim but rather as a shift in Maili's perspective from talking about embodied persons as doers to embodied persons as members of a class. Perhaps the close physical proximity of Trilochan and Bhola's bodies brings to the fore their shared *jāt*, or perhaps something in the preceding conversation has shifted Maili's frame of reference. Regardless of why, Trilochan has now become someone of whom it cannot be said DRINK.GRAIN.ALCOHOL or PIG EAT.

Time code: 21:32-21:44

73 Mara: PRO-3-Trilochan, PRO-3-Bhola, PRO-3-Trilochan, PRO-3-Bhola PIG EAT? PRO-3-Trilochan, PRO-3-Bhola [EAT PIG] EAT PRO-3-Trilochan/Bhola?	Do Trilochan and Bhola eat pig?
74 Maili: NEG	No.
75 Nil, Kumari: NEG	No.
76 Mara: EAT PIG EAT NEG	They don't eat pig.
77 Dhan: NEG	No.
78 Maili: HEY PRO-3-Trilochan, PRO-3-Bhola NEG	Hey, they don't.

79 Mara: EAT NEG. PRO-3-Trilochan, PRO-3-Bhola, PRO-3-Trilochan, PRO-3-Bhola GRAIN.ALCOHOL DRINK.GRAIN.ALCOHOL PRO-3-Trilochan, PRO-3-Bhola?	Okay they don't. Do they drink grain alcohol?
80 Maili, Man Kumari: NEG	No.

Following Line 80, I use the NSL sign and say that the Bhola and Trilochan are **CHHETRI**. Then I ask the four Limbu participants if they eat pig. Man Kumari says she does, and Maili (correctly) says that I don't. When I emphasize that I am asking her about herself, she says yes. I then ask Dhan, who replies that he does not, and Bhola says, "Some time ago," as if beginning to explain that they had discussed this topic in the past, then asks Dhan, "PRO-2 PT-direction.of.Dhan's.house OLD.PERSON?," meaning, "Does your mother?" Dhan says yes. This exchange is interesting because it exemplifies how in discussion of caste, when someone's own habits contradicted normative *jāt* practices, Bhola would extend to question to some other member of the home, revealing the salience of related bodies. Similarly, though without thinking it through, I would often explain that while I do not eat meat, my parents do. This explanation, I realized eventually, was my pragmatically appropriate way of saying that my refusal to eat meat should not be understood in relation to *jāt* or *jāt*-like membership.

Following Dhan and Bhola's exchange, I confirm that each of the four Limbu people present either drinks grain alcohol or lives with someone who does, and then say, "You are **LIMBU**." Then, thinking of other social distinctions I have seen mentioned, I ask Bhola about the large drum that Limbus play.

Time code: 22:44-22:49

81 Bhola: [PRO-1 NEG, PRO-1 NEG, PRO-1 NEG]	Not me (i.e., Chhetris don't).
82 Trilochan: [(depicts playing a flute, small drums with sticks, and a third instrument)]	In a wedding march!
83 Mara: PRO-2-plural (Maili, Dhan, Nil, Man Kumari) PLAY.BIG.DRUM?	Do you all play the large drum?
84 Maili: (affirmative head tilt)	Yes.

At this point, Nil, Bhola, and Dhan have a side conversation about goat meat (which Nil finds smelly and doesn't eat), while Maili tries to draw everyone's attention to herself. More or less securing it, she moves into a detailed description in Lines 85 and 87 of Limbu festivities, named in Line 87 as those associated specifically with the Tihar celebration. Maili depicts the playing of the large drum that I had asked about just prior to Line 80, and then shows herself placing small shallow bowls in front of people. Although Maili does not say so directly, it is clear that these bowls would contain alcohol, as only alcohol is served in this kind of vessel. As we can see in Figure 61, Maili enacts herself giving alcohol to *everyone* present, or, perhaps, she depicts herself giving alcohol to people present only in the signing space whose bodies happen to correspond closely with our own. In other words, the actual habits of our fleshly bodies are not the factors at stake in characterizing the appropriate distribution of food.

Yet when I ask Maili in Line 90, “What about Trilochan?” Maili replies, “No, not him,” explaining that he would in fact drink tea (Lines 91 and 93; see Figure 62). Singling out Trilochan seems to return his body to himself, though it remains a Bahun/Chhetri body that categorically receives tea and not a Bahun/Chhetri body who might drink a little of the alcohol.



Figure 61: Maili depicts herself giving Trilochan a bowl of alcohol. [Time code 23:05]



Figure 62: Maili signs TEA DRINK PRO-3-Trilochan.

Time code: 23:02-25:08

85 Maili: ### (brings back of fist to mouth) PLAY.BIG.DRUM/(dances) PUT.BOWL+++ (moves hands as if placing bowls in a line, first to her left, then to her right, roughly but not exactly in accordance with the people standing around)	At festivities, someone plays the drum and dances, and you give everyone a bowl of grain alcohol to drink.
86 Mara: [PRO-3-Maili?]	You?
87 Maili: [TIHAR]. NEG. TIHAR+. PLAY.BIG.DRUM/(dances). ### (carrying something?) PUT.BOWL+++ (moves hands as if placing bowls in a line, first to her left, then to her right, roughly but not exactly in accordance with the people standing around)	Like at Tihar. No. At Tihar, someone plays the drum and dances, and you give everyone a bowl of grain alcohol to drink.
88 Mara: PRO-3-Maili?	You?
89 Maili: (affirmative head nod), ### (hands lightly held closed at fingertips, then released toward Trilochan)	Yes, that's what I would do. (?)
90 Mara: PRO-3-Trilochan?	(Ambiguous between asking if that is what Trilochan's celebration would be like and asking if Maili would serve him a bowl of grain alcohol)
91 Maili: PRO-3-Trilochan NEG	No, not him.
92 Mara: (nodding, to Bhola) UNDERSTAND	She understands [the concept of <i>jāt</i>].
93 Maili: ONE.MOMENT. TEA/ <i>chiyā</i> 'tea' [DRINK PRO-3-Trilochan.]	He would drink tea.
94 Bhola: [JĀT DIFFICULT.] PT-left.to.right PLAY.DRUM UNDERSTAND Q.	She has difficulty with the sign JĀT , but she understands what people do, it seems.
95 Maili: TEA/ <i>chiyā</i> 'tea' [DRINK PRO-3-Trilochan.]	Trilochan would drink tea.
96 Mara: [TEA PRO-3-Trilochan?]	Trilochan would have tea?
97 Bhola: [NATURAL.SIGN UNDERSTAND] PRO-3-Maili Q	She only understands natural sign.
98 Mara: (nods)	Yeah.
99 Nil: TEA . HEY-Maili	[This is the NSL sign for] tea. Hey, Maili.
100 Maili: [(affirmative head tilt)]	Yes.
101 Mara: [RIGHT.]	You're right.
102 Maili: PRO-1 TEA PRO-1 NEG	I wouldn't have tea (?).
103 Nil: [TEA PRO-3-Trilochan]	Trilochan would have tea.
104 Trilochan: [TEA+]	(repeats the NSL sign)

105 Man Kumari: [TEA]	(repeats the NSL sign)
106 Maili: PRO-3-Trilochan [TEA DRINK]	Trilochan would drink tea.
107 Mara: (pretending to stir) HEY PRO-3-Trilochan, PRO-3-Bhola, PRO-3-Trilochan TEA DRINK, PRO-2-plural (Maili, Dhan, Nil, Man Kumari) GRAIN.ALCOHOL.DRINK PRO-2-plural (Maili, Dhan, Nil, Man Kumari)	(pretends to stir a cup of tea). Hey. Trilochan and Bhola would drink tea; the rest of you would drink grain alcohol.
108 Maili: HEY SACRED.THREAD TEA GIVE-dir.toward.Bhola NAMASTE PRO-3-Bhola [###] (give?)	Hey. He's Bahun/Chhetri, so I would serve him tea like this, with a <i>namaste</i> .
109 Mara: [RIGHT.] PRO-3-(unclear from video who) Q? PRO-3-(unclear from video who) Q?	Right. And what about (unclear to whom I am pointing)?
110 Maili: PRO-3-Bhola PRO-1 NEG DRINK.GRAIN.ALCOHOL GRAIN.ALCOHOL NEG PRO-3-Bhola PRO-1 DRINK.TEA+ ([depicts stirring tea] GIVE.TEA-Bhola]	I wouldn't give Bhola grain alcohol to drink. I would prepare tea for him and give him tea.
111 Bhola: MISUNDERSTAND [PRO-3-Maili? MISUNDERSTAND?]	Has she misunderstood?
112 Mara: [WAIT. UNDERSTAND.] PRO-2-Maili TIHAR HEY TIHAR Q?	Wait, she understands. So at Tihar -
113 Maili: (affirmative head nod)	Yes.
114 Mara: WAIT. TIHAR GIVE +++ (shows placing something with two hands in front of Trilochan, Bhola, and own) Q PRO-2-Maili Q? ³²	Wait, at Tihar what would you give Trilochan, Bhola, and me?
115 Maili: TIHAR TEA/ <i>chīyā</i> 'tea' COOK POUR SUGAR STIR COOK MILK POUR	At Tihar I would cook tea with milk and sugar.
116 Mara: PRO-2-Maili?	You?
117 Maili: (affirmative head nod)	Yes.
117 Mara: (looks at Bhola, confirming head nod)	Really?
119 Bhola: NEG. DIFFERENT.	No, it's different.
120 Maili: LONG.AGO/ <i>aghi ne</i> 'long ago' TIHAR	A long-ago Tihar (?).
121 Bhola: DISTILLED.ALCOHOL GIVE.TUMBLERS++ PRO-3-general USE PRO-3-general	They give distilled alcohol in tumblers. That's their custom.
122 Maili: TIHAR? PRO-3-Bhola, PRO-3-Trilochan 2 SACRED.THREAD [PRO-3-Trilochan, PRO-3-Bhola ###] (brings two hands up as if to give something)	At Tihar? The two of them are Bahun/Chhetri.

123 Mara: [(nods) PRO-3-plural (Dhan, Nil, Man Kumari)?] [PRO-3-plural (Dhan, Nil, Man Kumari)? TIHAR Q?]	Yeah. And what about Dhan, Nil, and Man Kumari, at Tihar?
124 Maili: [ONE.MOMENT+ (?). PRO-3-Man Kumari], PRO-3-Nil, PRO-3-Dhan. GRAIN.ALCOHOL++ (three variations, perhaps corresponding to three stages in process of making). DRINK.GRAIN.ALCOHOL ### PRO-3+ (points toward Nil and Man Kumari, then to Dhan) PRO-1 GRAIN.ALCOHOL DRINK.GRAIN.ALCOHOL	Hold on. For Man Kumari, Nil, and Dhan, I would prepare grain alcohol. They would drink grain alcohol.
125 Mara: PRO-2-Maili?	You too?
126 Maili: NEG	Not me.
127 Mara: PRO-2-Maili HOME DRINK.GRAIN.ALCHOL PRO-2?	Is grain alcohol drunk in your home?
128 Maili: (affirmative head tilt+). GRAIN.ALCOHOL. ONE.MOMENT. HEY. (then depicts herself giving grain alcohol very specifically to each of the other three Limbus there, then depicts herself going through the process of making the bowls or cups ready) PRO-3-plural (Man Kumari, Nil, Dhan)	Yes. And I would serve each of them (Nil, Dhan, and Man Kumari) grain alcohol. I would prepare it carefully for them.
129 Mara: PRO-2-Maili PUT.CUP PRO-2-Maili PUT.CUP?	You would give it to them?
130 Maili: (affirmative head nod, again shows putting it in front of each of the three, then DRINK)	Yes, I would give it to each of them, and they would drink.
131 Mara: PRO-plural (Trilochan & Bhola)?	And these two?
132 Maili: PRO-3-Bhola TEA DRINK PRO-3-Bhola	I would give tea to Bhola to drink.
133 Mara: (affirmative head waggle) UNDERSTAND	She understands (or, I understand).

Immediately following Line 133, there is a multi-party conversation about the exact process of giving drinks – who gives the *namaste* greeting to whom – and Maili reaffirms that she would give tea to the BAHUN/CHHETRIS. When I ask about the others, Maili shows again that she would give grain alcohol to the others, this time showing herself putting the bowls at their feet and giving a *namaste*; the others return the *namaste* (Bhola explains that Chhetris do not return the *namaste*); and then I ask Maili what she would give me, and she says tea, with a *namaste*, even though she had seen me drink alcohol.

In Lines 1-133 and in the above paragraph, then, we see two kinds of bodily shifts that reveal the dual nature of bodies in both local sign and in *jāt*. First, in the space in which Maili signs, bodies can stand for generic bodies (Trilochan, Bhola, and I receive grain alcohol; or rather, Maili depicts herself distributing grain alcohol to people whose position in space roughly corresponds with ours) or they can stand for themselves, though in an imagined situation (Trilochan, Bhola, and I receive tea). Second, we see that bodies are construed sometimes as having particular habits specific to an individual (according to Maili, Trilochan eats pork and

drinks alcohol) and sometimes as having *jāt*-based habits (according to Maili, Trilochan neither eats pork nor drinks alcohol). In the remainder of this section, I address only the second shift, a shift I see as evidence of the dual ontology of what I call the casted body. With this concept I mean that in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, people are understood as individual and in some measure independent entities with the capacity to carry out actions of all sort. At the same time, they are also understood as people who as members of a class carry out only certain actions. Thus someone can be a body who *ontologically* does/does not do X even if *temporally* that body does the opposite of that ontological characterization. Moreover partaking of, for example, proscribed foods does not render you into a different kind of person, precisely because the casted body is dual. Even if Trilochan drinks alcohol, he is not an alcohol drinker. The particular nature of local signs is such that this duality is made visible because the same sign forms are used to characterize people in both manifestations of the casted body.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have sketched the contours of local sign in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe at its most conventional and systematic. I provided, analyzed, and illustrated examples of signs, many if not most of which are rooted in the material and cultural landscape. As I suggested in Section 1, we might understand these signs as being immanent in the social world, though I have argued that this analysis does not contradict a claim that (some) forms are (also) transmitted qua linguistic forms. Section 3 extended my analysis by showing that local sign forms – those related to caste/ethnicity in particular – bear the traces of historical and political processes far beyond the immediate time and place. By analyzing how signs encode typifications and how signers use signs to negotiate apparent contradictions in those typifications, I also was able to demonstrate that local sign, like all communicative practices, not only reflects but also reveals cultural dynamics such as the dual ontology of the casted body.

If this dissertation ended here, local sign might appear to be not only marked by conventionality but very much like other conventional languages. Despite the many patterns discussed in this chapter, however, local sign is also characterized by breakdowns in communication, to which I turn in the following chapter.

Chapter Four

She Says What She Says: Understanding, Not-Understanding, & Mis-Understanding

Introduction

One afternoon in May 2010 I walked with Bhumika Limbu,¹ a deaf woman in her early 40s, to one of the communal water taps just off Maunabudhuk's main road. A small group of women, teenage girls, and children were taking turns filling up their plastic and metal containers, and I hung back to watch the interactions between Bhumika and her hearing neighbors. While she did not appear to catch the casual spoken banter and chatter between the waiting women,² Bhumika was by no means shunned or ignored. One teenage girl asked her about her new *pote* (bead necklace), bracelet, and haircut, and another woman – the owner of a shop in the bazaar – also interacted directly with her. Earlier in the day, the same woman had asked me in a very friendly manner if I understood Bhumika's *kurā* 'talk.' I replied that I did in part, and asked the same of her; she said some. When I asked her at the tap what Bhumika had said, she replied with the phrase "*ke bhānchha, bhānchha*," despite the fact that she was engaged with Bhumika in signed communication.³ This phrase literally means "(s)he says what (s)he says,"⁴ and implies not only that what has been said has not been understood but also that either it is either impossible to understand, and thus to repeat or translate, or is representative of the speaker/signer's more general nonsense, and thus not worth repeating or translating.

In Chapter 3, I focused on conventionality and immanence as ways of understanding the wide intelligibility of local sign across signers. In Chapter 5, I examine the interactional production of intelligibility, including the way that evaluations such as "*ke bhānchha, bhānchha*" work to constitute the field of communicative possibility. This chapter links the previous and following chapters by describing and analyzing a key social fact: people whose primary communicative mode is *not* local sign both easily understand and frequently fail to understand deaf local signers' utterances. As suggested by the above anecdote, when I requested translational assistance with local signers, I received a striking mixture of responses. For example, one afternoon Bhumika, Bhola, and I were chatting with several of Bhumika's hearing next-door neighbors outside their home. As we were getting ready to depart, Bhumika signed something to her elderly neighbor, and I asked what she'd said. The old woman replied, "She said that I asked to see her photos, and [that] she showed them to me."⁵ This spoken utterance, which reports Bhumika's signed utterance as having included both reported sign and reported action, shows that hearing local signers were able to understand quite complicated signed utterances. On another day, as I wandered down the main bazaar street from a teashop back to my room, I found Parvati Khadka chatting with a group of women who were sitting in front of a store with their children. It turned out that two of the women were from the same *māitighar* 'natal home' as Parvati. Several times I asked in Nepali, "What did she say?" The first time, one of the women replied that Parvati had been asking about mutual friends and family. The second time, the other woman answered that she did not understand anything.⁶ While we might understand this difference to be located in the two different women's own linguistic competencies, I also found that the *same* person would sometimes provide elaborate translations and other times say that they hadn't understood (see e.g., the extended example below). When I requested translations I was *often* told, "I don't know," "I didn't understand," or the above common refrain, "*ke bhānchha, bhānchha*." In other words, while communication in local sign

often proceeded fluidly and straightforwardly, it was also marked by frequent incomprehension. I consider the mixture of ease and difficulty, understanding and not-understanding, to be a key characteristic of local sign communication in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe.

Here I want to acknowledge the entangled relationships among practices of translation, forms of ethnographic evidence, and the process of fieldwork. Jakobson (1959:261, emphasis added) writes that “[f]or us, both as linguists *and as ordinary word-users*, the meaning of any linguistic sign is its translation into some further, alternative sign,” whether through rewording (into the same language), translation proper (into another language), or transmutation (into a non-linguistic semiotic system). But translation is a social action, and asking for translation demands that people verbalize their understanding of meaning. Here it is helpful to note that translating is a common practice in Maunabudhuk.⁷ Both Bhola and hearing people frequently asked me to translate between them, although they also communicated directly in natural/local sign, and I sometimes overheard hearing people say aloud in Nepali what they saw deaf people saying. My observations of and participation in translation were by no means limited to deaf-hearing interactions. For example, despite Kanchi Maya Limbu’s husband’s complaint that class took Kanchi away from the house for too long, he and I had an affectionate relationship. Nevertheless we had difficulty understanding each other, and on one occasion I used a young Nepali speaker to “translate” between my foreign-accented, not-quite-fluent, Kathmandu-learned Nepali and his elderly, village-based, eastern Nepali-accented Nepali.⁸ And according to Kanchi’s youngest daughter’s husband, a man from the Rai ethnic group, Kanchi’s husband would translate between Kanchi and himself because the former doesn’t speak Rai (or Nepali) and the latter doesn’t speak Limbu or sign.⁹

My own requests for translation had several motivations. Especially in the beginning of my time in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, I often asked Bhola to translate what local signers were saying, thereby helping me to understand in the immediate context and to learn local sign conventions. Bhola also frequently spontaneously translated for me and offered his own unsolicited evaluations of signers’ truthfulness or believability. I also asked hearing people to translate, sometimes because I really hadn’t understood, and also in order to get a sense of what other people understood.¹⁰ In other words, I did not want to assume that my own understanding, both of particular utterances and of “what’s going on,” was representative of others’, and one way I sought to calibrate my understanding with others’ was by asking for translation. In some ways triangulation-through-translation did help me to disentangle my own process of learning and understand from others’, although, as I discuss more fully in Section 1, situated instances of requested translation not only demonstrate but also produce social assessments of understanding and not-understanding. Moreover, my requests for translation also ended up raising, or at least drawing my attention to, questions about the limits of deaf local signers’ hearing interlocutors’ own understanding. In Jakobson’s work (1959), translation – no matter how imperfect – appears more or less inevitable. In my own work, however, translation is by no means guaranteed, as this chapter shows.

The remainder of this chapter focuses on specific interactions between deaf local signers, their hearing neighbors and friends, Bhola, and me. Section 1 presents transcribed excerpts from a videotaped conversation in which the primary participants are Parvati Khadka, a deaf woman, her son Maila, and me; another relative was also present, and Bhola was filming. My analysis demonstrates how moments of understanding and not-understanding arise and unfold across conversational turns. I also show how understanding gets laminated onto implicit notions of what makes a story translatable or worth translating. By looking carefully at which of Parvati’s

utterances Maila does and does not understand (or translate), I argue that what distinguishes them is not the material forms Parvati signs but rather Maila's (un)familiarity with the stories those forms refer to and index. This observation leads me to suggest that not-understanding is not a totalizing state of incomprehension but rather an inability to figure out the relations among (or the relevance of) understood parts. Social articulations of not-understanding, in other words, may conceal understanding.

In Section 2 I pursue this claim by analyzing its inverse through a fieldnotes-based example. I suggest that a young hearing woman's interpretation of a signed utterance is probably incorrect but that it contains all the elements of the more likely interpretations. In other words, just as understanding may get socially transformed into not-understanding, not-understanding may masquerade as understanding. The young woman was quite certain of her interpretation, but she did not believe what (she thought) had been said. This example thus brings up the possibility that in some cases utterances that were "understood" and evaluated as false might be re-interpreted from an *analytic* standpoint as having been *mis*-understood. Section 3 expands on this theme by focusing on a specific grammatical/semantic domain – verbal mood – that appears particularly vulnerable to mis-understanding, and asks how we might account for this vulnerability in terms of signers, addressees, or the linguistic system.

In Section 4 I argue that repeated communicative difficulties of the type analyzed in Sections 1-3 sediment into (negative) assumptions about both particular deaf, with some signers getting socially positioned as liars or unreliable narrators, even of their own lives.¹¹ Indeed my selection of an opening scene featuring Bhumika was not random; out of the twelve people with whom I worked most closely, some were much more likely than others not to be understood and/or to incur negative judgments, e.g., that they had lied. I have not sought to explain the differences among people, but I think it is important to acknowledge that addressee's responses and evaluations of understanding and not-understanding were not evenly distributed across signers. Nevertheless, as I show in the final chapter, even the most communicatively skilled and respected persons such as Laxman Bishwakarma were not unfailingly understood, and negative assumptions about particular people leak into broader understandings of what it is to be deaf or a signer. I conclude by asking what the broader implications are for thinking about the relationship between a linguistic system and the interactions through which it gets instantiated.

1. An extended example

On a warm June day Parvati Khadka, her neighbor and aunt-in-law Shrila Khadka, who is also deaf, and I sat on her front porch chatting. Bhola was filming us,¹² and Parvati's son Maila was inside the house. Early in the video, I asked Parvati some basic questions to get us talking in front of the camera (Lines 1-5 in the transcript below). She told me that her late husband had walked with a pronounced limp and that she had given birth to three sons (Lines 6-8). Then Parvati launched into a story involving herself, Shrila, someone referred to as *JEṬHĀ* 'OLDEST,' a location downhill, and a man, perhaps associated with that location, who drank or was drinking grain-alcohol or who was Limbu (see Chapter 3). In the story, Parvati got hit, and a house fell apart (Lines 10-16). Although I have been unable to detect any transition between the topics introduced by my questions and her answers and the story itself, earlier in class that day we had been talking about the earthquake that struck Maunabudhuk in approximately 1980¹³ that, as we will see, was the setting and/or topic of Parvati's story. Also note that in the following excerpts, points to locations in the landscape are labeled in the gloss by letter (e.g., locA, locB) and described when relevant in the translation (e.g., downhill).

Time code 1:52-2:29

1	Mara: HEY HOME PRO-2-Parvati HOME++ Q?	Hey Parvati, where do you live?
2	Parvati: PRO-1 PT-downwards	I live here!
3	Mara: PT-downward	Here
4	Parvati: (emphatic head nod)	Yes
5	Mara: OLD.PERSON+ Q?	And your husband?
6	Parvati: MALE++ PAST (?) OLD.PERSON POINT-downwards PRO-1 MALE WALK.LIKE.THIS PT-downwards	My husband – the man who walked with a limp – lived here.
7	Mara: WALK.LIKE.THIS+?	Walked like this – oh with a limp?
8	Parvati: (uses left foot to demonstrate a pronounced limp) BIRTH <i>MĀILĀ</i> ‘SECOND.OLDEST’, BIRTH <i>JEṬHĀ</i> ‘OLDEST’ -	A limp like this. I gave birth to my middle son, to my oldest son -
9	Mara: [<i>JEṬHĀ</i> ‘OLDEST’ Q?]	Where’s your oldest son?
10	Parvati: [<i>KĀNCHĀ</i> ‘YOUNGEST’] <i>JEṬHĀ</i> ‘OLDEST’ PT-locA (grazes side of own head with hand) PRO-3-Shrila (touches Shrila) <i>JEṬHĀ</i> ‘OLDEST’ PT-downhill	and to my youngest son. My oldest son (unclear). Shrila and my oldest (son), downhill -
11	Mara: [(repeats the movement of grazing side of own head with hand) Q?]	What was this sign?
12	Parvati: [HIT-self] HIT-self ¹⁴ PT-locA	I was hit downhill/someone (from) downhill hit me
13	Mara: PT-locA Q?	What about downhill?
14	Parvati: HIT-self HIT-self	I was hit/someone hit me.
15	Mara: Q?	What?
16	Parvati: ### HOUSE FALL.OPEN [FALL.OVER HIT LEAVE/GO.OFF (?)]	The house fell apart, tumbled down. Someone hit someone.

Between Lines 16 and 17, there is a brief exchange between Bhola and me regarding video issues, and then the conversation between Parvati and me continues. Note in the following that Parvati’s use of the sign *JEṬHĀ* ‘OLDEST’ (Lines 31-35) is potentially ambiguous in its referent, because her husband was the eldest son in his family and Parvati often referred to him, as well as to her oldest son, with the sign *JEṬHĀ* ‘OLDEST.’ Also note that I have not simply translated MILLET.ALCOHOL DRINK[ER] (Lines 22, 38) as Limbu because as we saw in the previous chapter those signs can refer either to the act of drinking or to caste affiliation. Since this story involves hitting and hitting often involves drinking, I have left it ambiguous. Finally note that in Line 22 Parvati incorporates Shrila’s body into her signing; it is unclear whether Shrila is standing in for Parvati or for the alcohol drinker. (It is also possible but less likely that Shrila’s body represents Shrila herself; neither she nor Parvati seemed to say that Shrila had been hurt.)

Time code: 2:41-3:28

17	Mara: HEY-Parvati PT-locA Q?	So what about downhill?
18	Parvati: ### (drinking gesture?) ### (unrecognized variation on the sign 'male'?) HAT [HIT-self HIT-self PT-locA]	(unclear) I was hit. Downhill.
19	Mara: [PRO-2-Parvati?]	You?
20	Shrila: [HEY-Mara PT-locA/u <i>yahã</i> HEY-Mara]	Mara, downhill, over here – Mara!
21	Mara: [PT-locA]	Downhill there
22	Parvati: [MILLET.ALCOHOL] DRINK MILLET.ALCOHOL DRINK HIT-self HIT-self GRAB-Shrila SHOVE-downwards/to the side	Someone drinking/who drinks millet alcohol/who is Limbu hit me. He grabbed me and shoved me/I grabbed him and shoved him.
23	Mara: [MALE?]	A man?
24	Parvati: [PRO-1 CRY.]	I cried.
25	Mara: PRO-2-Parvati MALE [Pro-2-Parvati?]	Your man (husband)?
26	Parvati: (affirmative head nod)	Yes
27	Mara: MARRIAGE?	Your husband?
28	Parvati: (nodding)	Yeah
29	Mara: HIT-self HIT-self?	Hit your face?
30	Parvati: (nodding)	Yeah
31	Mara: PRO-2-Parvati MALE MARRIAGE?	Your husband??
32	Parvati: PRO-1 MALE WALK.LIKE.THIS (hand moves as if releasing/throwing something) MALE (touches the porch) HOUSE. MALE <i>JETHĀ</i> 'OLDEST' PT-locA HOUSE HIT HIT	My husband who walked with a limp (unclear). The oldest here at the house ... There was hitting.
33	Mara: PRO-2-Parvati MALE <i>JETHĀ</i> 'OLDEST'?	The man you're talking about is the oldest?
34	Parvati: PRO-1 <i>JETHĀ</i> 'OLDEST' HIT-self NEG	My oldest (son or husband) didn't/doesn't hit me.
35	Mara: [<i>JETHĀ</i> 'OLDEST' HIT-self] NEG	He didn't/doesn't hit you.
36	Parvati: [<i>JETHĀ</i> 'OLDEST' HIT-self NEG]	He didn't/doesn't hit me.
37	Mara: PRO-2-Parvati <i>MĀILĀ</i> 'SECOND' HIT-self? HIT-self?	Does your second-oldest son hit you?
38	Parvati: PT-locA MILLET.ALCOHOL HIT-self HIT-self [SHOVE]	The person from downhill, the alcohol drinker/Limbu/person drinking alcohol, hit and shoved me!
39	Mara: [MILLET.ALCOHOL?]	What's this sign?

40	Bhola: (makes noise from off-screen to get Mara's attention)	Hey -
41	Parvati: MILLET.ALCOHOL, MILLET.ALCOHOL (other variant of sign) DRINK	Millet alcohol – you drink it.

Following Line 41, Shrila takes a turn trying to explain the story to me, with Parvati chiming in. The video recording shows – and I remember – that I was able to follow/understand some aspects or parts of Parvati's story, and that I did not fully understand how the parts fit together. Who exactly had hit Parvati? What was the relationship between the hitting and the house falling apart? I was troubled by Parvati's description of violence against herself and wanted to know more.¹⁵ I also wanted to know whether someone more familiar with Parvati and her communication would understand what she was saying. Indeed a frequent premise in the literature on home sign – which is how I was thinking of these signing practices at the time – as well as on village sign is that close social relationships produce understanding (see below).

I asked Maila to join us to help translate, and he agreed. After we settled onto the porch in a configuration that worked for videotaping, I re-initiated conversation by asking Parvati about the alcohol-drinking person downhill (Line 42). Parvati took up the question immediately, and over the course of the next few turns (Lines 43, 45, and 47), she repeated the elements present in Lines 10-41 (except for the alcohol drinker, whom I had just mentioned with Maila present) and added several more, as shown in Table 24. Note that locD (Line 43) was the former location of the family's house; after it fell apart in the earthquake, they rebuilt in the current location. I learned this fact later in the conversation.

Time code 5:10-5:35

42	Mara: HEY-Parvati (begins to turn/look toward locA) MALE MILLET.ALCOHOL Q?	Hey Parvati, what about the alcohol drinking man (from downhill)?
43	Parvati: PT-locA FOUR PT-locB PT-locC FOUR. CARRY.ON.BACK COME-this.way ### (foundation and walls?) PT-locD EARTHQUAKE FALL-APART	Down there, and there, and there. Four (places?). (Someone) carried (something) on their back and came this way. The house there fell apart in the earthquake.
44	Mara: HIT-self Q?	And the hitting?
45	Parvati: ### HOUSE PT-locA HIT HIT	(Meaning unclear; clear elements: house, downhill, hitting).
46	Mara: [PRO-2-Parvati HIT?]	Hit you?
47	Parvati: [(turns body toward locA and maintains posture) (grazes top of head with hand) <i>JEṬHĀ</i> 'OLDEST'] PRO-1 (grazes top of head with hand) <i>JEṬHĀ</i> 'OLDEST' <i>KĀNCHĀ</i> 'YOUNGEST' (uses pinky of previous sign to touch Shrila) PRO-3-Shrila PRO-1 <i>KĀNCHĀ</i> 'YOUNGEST' (grazes top of head with hand) <i>JEṬHĀ</i> 'OLDEST' HIT LEAVE/GO.OFF. CURSE-locA! [CURSE-locA!]	(Meaning unclear; clear elements: oldest, youngest, hit, leave, downhill.) Damn him/it! Damn him/it!

Initial and Added Elements of Parvati's Story
• Parvati, Shrila, and <i>jetho</i> • a location or a person (from) downhill • Parvati getting hit • House just uphill fell apart during the earthquake • a man drinking grain alcohol/who is Limbu • 4 locations (including downhill, but invoked as a foursome) • someone carried something on his/her back

Table 24: Initial and Added Elements of Story

As Line 47 ends, I direct my attention to Maila, tilting my head upwards in a conventional questioning motion (Line 48). Maila shakes his head, laughing quietly (Line 49). Shrila at this point tries to help clarify the story using both signs and speech (Line 50), but Maila directs his question to his mother, asking in Nepali, “*ke bhayo* ‘what happened?’” and using the conventional Q sign and corresponding questioning head nod (Line 51). Parvati responds, again mentioning the earthquake and something falling apart, and also adding a new detail: the height (and by conventional extension the age) of someone small and young (Line 52; Table 25). Maila again indicates that he hasn’t understood (Line 53).

Time code 5:36-5:50

48	Mara: (looks at Maila, nods head upwards in a question)	(implied) Do you understand?
49	Maila: (shakes head, laughs quietly) %%	(implied) I don’t know (can’t hear what’s said)
50	Shrila: [PT-locA %% <i>yahā</i> %%]	Downhill, over here (unclear).
51	Maila: [(sharply nods head upwards in question) <i>ke bhayo/Q?</i>]	What happened?
52	Parvati: (hand grazes top of head) PT-locE (or locA with body rotated?) PRO-1 THIS.HIGH ### (walls?) EARTHQUAKE ### (bubbling up and crumbling?) FALL.APART PT-locD	(Beginning unclear) someone (who?) was this little ... in the earthquake the house that was over there fell apart .
53	Maila: (purses lips) Q? <i>thāhā bhaena malāi</i>	I don’t know.

Initial and More Added Elements of Parvati's Story
• Parvati, Shrila, and <i>jetho</i> • a location or a person (from) downhill • Parvati getting hit • House just uphill fell apart during the earthquake • a man drinking grain alcohol/who is Limbu • 4 locations (including downhill, but invoked as a foursome) • someone carried something on his/her back • someone small and young

Table 25: More Added Elements of Story

Following Maila’s second disavowal of understanding, I raise the topic of “the man” again, while Parvati simultaneously continues with her narrative, saying that she was pregnant with Maila.

“And the oldest?” I ask. To which Parvati replies with 3 signs (Lines 58 and 60): “*JETHĀ* ‘OLDEST’? EARTHQUAKE PUT.ON.BACK ‘The oldest? In the earthquake I put him (or he was put) on my back.’”

Time code: 5:50-6:03

54	Mara: HEY-Parvati MALE [PRO-2-Parvati]?	Hey, Parvati, the man/your man
55	Parvati: [PRO-2-Maila] (touching Maila) PREGNANT PRO-3-Maila	I was pregnant with Maila.
56	Mara: [PRO-3-Maila]?	
57	Mara: HEY-Parvati MALE [JETHĀ]	Hey, and the oldest?
58	Parvati: [JETHĀ?]	The oldest?
59	Mara: [MALE JETHĀ]	The oldest.
60	Parvati: EARTHQUAKE PUT.ON.BACK	In the earthquake I put/someone put the oldest on my back.

Parvati’s utterances in Lines 55 and/or 59 appear to have been clearly understood by Bhola, Maila, and me. I respond to Parvati in Line 60 with a nod; in Line 61 Bhola gets my attention to make sure I’ve understood that Parvati was pregnant with Maila (apparently I have); and most momentarily Maila in Line 62 begins to translate for the first time since I asked for his assistance. Note that in Line 66 Parvati uses Maila’s present body as a stand-in for (what we find out is) his older brother’s much-younger-body, similar (perhaps) to her usage of Shrila’s body in Line 22. I am unsure as to whether this substitution of present bodies for absent ones is conventional (across signers or for Parvati herself), and whether it might have caused confusion for people other than Maila or even for Maila himself had he not already known this particular story within the broader narrative (see below).

Time code: 6:04-6:25

61	Mara: (nods head)	Okay.
62	Bhola: (gets Mara’s attention)	(off-camera)
63	Mara: (looks at Bhola) UNDERSTAND, UNDERSTAND PRO-3-Maila PREGNANT [PRO-3-Maila]	I understand. She was pregnant with him.
64	Maila: [<i>bhanuhunchha</i>] <i>bhuichālā āudākheri</i> [<i>khoi</i>]	She says when the earthquake came, that –
65	Shrila: [(taps Parvati) %%]	Unclear
66	Maila: <i>bhuichālā thāhā chha, bhukampa</i>	An earthquake (lexical variant 1) – you know, an earthquake (lexical variant 2)
67	Mara: <i>unh, unh</i>	Yeah

68	Parvati: %% ¹⁶ FLOUR.GRINDER (touches Maila with both hands) PICK.UP ### (thrusts hands upwards)	I was grinding flour/we were by the flour-grinder (?) and I picked up (someone) and (we left?)
69	Maila: <i>bhuichālā āudākheri dājulāi bokhera lāgeko kahā lānubhaera bhanuhunchha</i>	She says when the earthquake came she picked up my oldest brother and carried him off [to safety].

In Lines 64, 66, and 69, Maila translates Parvati’s account from local sign into spoken Nepali, indicating through the act of translating that he had understood what she had said. He indicated this not only to me (the only other hearing person present) but also to the deaf persons present; his facial expression and the fact of his speaking were both visually accessible. Indeed had the conversation ended at this point, Parvati’s story in some senses would have been socially marked as understood, despite the fact that Maila’s translation did not account for all or even most of the elements raised by her narrative (see Table 26). In other words, by continuing to ask questions (see Line 70), I – as a fieldworker who was determined to *fully understand* Parvati’s story in a way that satisfied me – ended up re-introducing the specter of not-understanding that had been *socially* if not *referentially* resolved in Lines 61-69.

Elements accounted for directly or <i>indirectly</i> by Maila’s translation	Notes
• Parvati, Shrila, and <i>jetho</i> ‘oldest’	• Parvati picked up her eldest son; as a member of the family, it makes sense that Shrila was also present
• a location or a person (from) downhill	• Not accounted for
• Parvati getting hit	• Not accounted for
• <i>House just uphill fell apart during the earthquake</i>	• Maila directly mentions the earthquake; earthquakes cause houses to fall apart
• a man drinking grain alcohol/who is Limbu	• Not accounted for
• 4 locations (including downhill, but invoked as a foursome)	• Not accounted for (at the most, the former location of the house is accounted for, leaving 3 locations and the relationship among the 4)
• someone carried something on his/her back	• Maila states that Parvati picked up her son and carried him
• someone small/young	• Parvati’s oldest son would have been small/young
• <i>Parvati pregnant with Maila</i>	• All of us indicated that we had understood that Parvati was pregnant with Maila

Table 26: Accounted and Unaccounted for Elements

In Lines 70 and 71, I address Maila in spoken Nepali while Parvati continues her own train of thought, again using Maila’s present body as a stand-in for his older brother’s much-younger-body. Once I ask Parvati again about having been hit by a man (Line 76), Parvati reiterates two elements: that this man was related to the downhill location and that he was Limbu (by using the NSL sign, which shows no resemblance to grain alcohol or drinking, she resolved the ambiguity of the reference) (Lines 77-84). I ask, “And he hit you?” (Line 85) to which Parvati answers, “I was hit” or “He hit me. My face was swollen like this” (Line 86). Maila watches her sign, but ultimately concludes “*khoi thāhā bhaena*,” literally, “Hunh/what ... I don’t know,” or more idiomatically, “I have no idea” (Line 88).

Time code: 6:26-6:56

70	Mara: <i>ani bharkar uhāharu utā basne mānchhe[le piñubhayo ki ke bhanubhayo tapāi %% bitra basnu-basdā]kheri</i>	And just before they said that the person who lives down there hit (someone) or something - while you sat - were sitting inside.
71	Parvati: [PT-locD PRO-3-Maila (touches Maila) PICK.UP GO]	It was over there, I picked up my child and left.
72	Mara: HEY-Parvati MALE	Hey, the man
73	Maila: <i>hoina %%</i>	No.
74	Mara: <i>hoina, bharkar tapāi bitra basdākheri</i> PT-locF-in.the.house	No, just now, you were inside.
75	Maila: <i>unh</i>	Oh.
76	Mara: MALE HIT-self HIT-self Q?	What about the man who hit your face?
77	Parvati: MILLET.ALCOHOL PT-locA ### (shove? go off?) [MILLET.ALCOHOL DRINKS]	The man downhill who drinks millet alcohol/is Limbu.
78	Mara: [MILLET.ALCOHOL?]	What is this sign?
79	Bhola: (gets Mara's attention)	(signs something off-screen)
80	Parvati: MILLET.ALCOHOL (var)	Millet alcohol/Limbu.
81	Mara (looking at Bhola): HUSH (laughs)	Don't tell me!
82	Parvati: LIMBU, LIMBU	Limbu, Limbu (presumably Bhola has just signed the NSL sign for Limbu)
83	Mara: (looks at Bhola in surprise)	(surprised at Parvati's uptake of NSL sign)
84	Parvati: LIMBU , MILLET.ALCOHOL DRINK	He's Limbu, he's Limbu.
85	Mara: HIT-self?	And he hit(s) you?
86	Parvati: HIT-self HIT-self SWOLLEN.LIKE.THIS (puffs out cheeks, holds hands out from cheeks)	He hit me, my face was swollen like this.
87	Maila: <i>khoi thāhā bhaena</i>	Hunh, I don't know.
88	Mara: <i>thāhā bhaena?</i> (nods head)	You don't know? (Implied:) Okay.

At this point in our conversation Maila has said two times that he “doesn’t know” what to say about his mother’s signing, shaken his head once, and translated once. Why was he able to understand and translate some elements of Parvati’s narrative and not others? Let me note here that neither his ability nor his failure to understand/translate were isolated to this particular sequence. In the remainder of the 50-minute recording, I counted three total instances when Maila translated his mother’s statements (including the story of Parvati picking up his oldest brother), and four instances when he declared himself unable to (including the story involving Parvati getting hit that counts as a single instance).

Translated	Untranslated
• During the earthquake that occurred when Maila was <i>in utero</i>, Parvati saved his brother • The time Maila's older brother broke his arm while gathering fodder • About the physical traits of Parvati and her own brother as children	• What happened with the man from downhill who hit Parvati • A story related to Parvati's natal home, perhaps related to cows • A story about Parvati's mother-in-law (?) and a relative who is in the police force • Details of some female relatives' family structure and where they live

Table 27: Translated and Untranslated Narratives

Looking closely at the transcribed sequences that Maila did not translate, I have to wonder whether Maila really did not understand what his mother said in Lines 84 and 86. If we look at those lines and compare them with the lines that Maila did translate (Lines 58 and 60), we see that the two sequences are actually very similar. MILLET.ALCOHOL and *JEṬHĀ* 'OLDEST' are conventional signs, while signs PUT.ON.BACK and SWOLLEN.LIKE.THIS may be nonce signs but they very transparently depict their referents. In Lines 58 and 60, moreover, we have a setting (the earthquake), an object (the oldest son), and an action (put on back); the subject (Parvati) is implied. In Lines 84 and 86, we again have an object (Parvati), an action (hit), and an implied subject (the Limbu man). The location in Line 77 – downhill – could serve as a further means of socially identifying the man (see Chapter 3) or perhaps as a setting, though Parvati never really implied that *she* was downhill. More likely the earthquake or the period of time of the earthquake is the setting, given that in Line 43, just after I asked about the Limbu man, Parvati's reply included the sign EARTHQUAKE, and the two stories were told together.¹⁷ My point in comparing the elements of these two sequences is to show that there are no obvious differences between them in terms of the conventionality of signs or the information structure. Certainly it is *possible* that Maila did not understand on a purely referential level that his mother said something like, "A Limbu man hit me," but my sense is that Maila *did* understand that Parvati said she had been hit by a Limbu man. If I am correct, this example shows that understanding something and translating it are not identical. Yet within a given situation such as this one, the latter can come to index and in fact constitute the former on a social level.

Regardless of whether Maila "really" understood or not, there does not appear to be any significant difference in the material forms produced by Parvati; in other words, it is not the case that her statement about a Limbu man was formally unusual. The difference appears to be located in Maila's interpretation of the relationship between what was said and what is translatable. I suggest that whatever Maila was able to understand on a referential level of the unaccounted for elements did not make up a *socially relevant* unit of discourse.

As for the translated elements, it is in fact quite likely that the story of how his mother picked up his brother during the earthquake was already familiar to Maila from previous tellings. Indeed, it is possible that not only his mother and aunt but also his hearing grandmother (who had only recently passed away) and other relatives had told it to him over and over. In other words, perhaps what enabled Maila to translate the utterance in Lines 58 and 60, "*JEṬHĀ* 'OLDEST'? EARTHQUAKE PUT.ON.BACK" was the connection of its referent to an event that Maila already knew about in full, an event that had already been rendered by others into a meaningful narrative. I am not claiming that in local sign, only already-known information can be communicated. As just stated, it is quite possible that Maila understood Parvati to say that a Limbu man had hit her (and it is certainly possible that she had never said this to him before),

and perhaps he understood other elements of what she said as well. And yet he said, “I don’t know,” and did not provide a translation. In other words, he could not connect all the parts of the story to make a coherent story, nor could he connect them to a narrative that he already knew and could therefore put together for me. (In fact, we might wonder if he had not already known the story about his brother, if he would have understood the referents of her signs in Lines 58 and 60 and yet have been unable to translate them.) It seems that in certain situations, an addressee’s prior knowledge can tip the signer’s utterance or series of utterances across the line of social intelligibility.

The fact that Maila is Parvati’s son asks that we re-evaluate some long-held assumptions about the link between social relationships and the capacity to use and understanding sign. Carol Padden (2011:24) writes that

how often signers interact with strangers impacts the form and structure of that language. When interacting with relatives, there is a great deal of shared information, but not so when interacting with unknown individuals. When signers are with relatives and members of the same village or community, the context for language is shared, and a common history develops over time ... In the case of strangers, communication needs to be more explicit, and shared knowledge cannot always be assumed.

Yet we can see here that even among family members in a small village “shared knowledge *cannot* always be assumed” (ibid, emphasis added). While Nonaka (2009) proposes that hearing people’s level of signing competency can be mapped onto what she calls social proximity, my claim is that social proximity cannot guarantee that someone understands what a local signer says (where what counts as “understanding” is situated in the unfolding interaction). As we see here, sometimes people who are socially close are still unable to understand (and sometimes people who are socially close are *unwilling* to understand; see following chapter).¹⁸

While it might be argued that understanding is not necessarily what is at stake – that something else, like attention or simply time spent interacting together is more important – the effort that Parvati puts into repeating her story for us indicates to me that she wants us to understand. Shrila, too, tries to help Maila and me understand. In fact, her input raises a serious question about how to analyze local signing practices. It appears that she understood Parvati’s story, if not every specific utterance Parvati made then at least the event to which she was referring. Yet what she said did not enable me to grasp the story, and Maila did not even acknowledge her input, focusing only on his mother. Shrila was engaged in what Jakobson (1959) calls rewording (translation within a language), but the story remained untranslated into another communicative mode. What does it mean – socially, analytically – for a story to remain caught inside a single communicative mode? I have no answer.

2. Relations among parts and possible mis-understandings

In Section 1 I suggested that not-understanding may contain understanding – that is, that someone may say they have not understood even if they have (perhaps) understood certain aspects of what has been said. In this section, I analyze an example of the inverse scenario, in which (apparent) understanding contains not-understanding, resulting in mis-understanding. This example also brings up a point implicit in the previous section, namely that addressees are called upon to figure out relationships among communicated parts.

On May 25th 2010, Bhumika led Bhola and me to the small house she shared with her youngest brother, his wife, and their two children, a minute or two to the west of the bazaar’s main street. No one was home, so Bhumika walked over to the house next door, where we met her neighbors. During the ensuing conversation the neighbor’s eldest daughter, Jethi, told me,

“Bhumika said she slept with you the other night, and I told her that was impossible; you’re smelly and your teacher is clean.”¹⁹

This instance is relatively unusual, and therefore important, because I had first-hand knowledge of the event to which Bhumika I believe was in fact referring. On May 15th, Bhumika and I had spent time together in the late evening at the home of her (classificatory) *buhāri* ‘wife of son or younger brother.’ Bhumika, her *buhāri*, her *buhāri*’s daughter, the daughter’s friend, and I snacked on *kāphal* berries, sweet hard peaches, and Coke, and then held an impromptu dance party. Afterwards I walked back to my own room, up a short path and across the street; Bhumika stayed at her *buhāri*’s, as she frequently did. I said as much to Jethi: “No, she didn’t sleep with me, but we did meet up at *buhāri*’s house. And where I live is close to that.”²⁰

Here I want to explore the possibility that Bhumika in fact had not said that she and I had slept together, that what she actually said was that she and I slept in close proximity that night,²¹ or perhaps that she and I were together in the place where she slept. What is so interesting is that what actually happened, and the two possibilities I have just offered, consist of the same elements as Jethi’s version, elements that Bhumika had successfully communicated: herself, me (whom she would have referred to probably as a FEMALE associated with the NSL class, perhaps invoked with the sign SCHOOL and a point in the direction of the VDC hall, and maybe augmented with descriptors such as FAT or FAIR.SKINNED), NIGHT and/or SLEEP. (Jethi had also understood, or guessed, that the narrated event was in the very recent past.) Jethi’s interpretation combined these elements into a meaningful scenario. Nevertheless, what she came up with – that Bhumika had spent the night with me – was *in her own estimation* “impossible.”

And yet Jethi did not re-evaluate her understanding of what Bhumika had said; she assumed that she had correctly understood Bhumika and that Bhumika had claimed to have done something that Jethi did not believe had (or even could have) actually happened. In one sense, by taking for granted that Bhumika was saying what she seemed to be saying and that what she said had a truth-value (whether negative or positive), Jethi was treating Bhumika as an intelligible interlocutor (see following chapter). At the same time, however, Jethi resolved the discrepancy between what Jethi understood Bhumika to be saying and what Jethi understood about the world at large by labeling Bhumika’s claim “impossible.” In doing so Jethi was treating Bhumika as an unreliable narrator. I return to this point below. For now I want to emphasize that I am not only suggesting that Jethi mis-understood Bhumika, I am also highlighting how that mis-understanding was fully rooted in Jethi’s correct understanding of the elements of Bhumika’s story.

My interpretation is supported by a conversation I had in July with the headmaster of Maunabudhuk’s government-run school and Durga Chemjong, the VDC secretary mentioned in Chapter 2.

The headmaster asked me if the [deaf NSL class] students were now using “standard” (his word) sign language, and I said no, not really, and he said oh they’re using the “local” (his word) sign language, and I said yes, and he asked if I understand it and I said some, not completely, and asked if he can, and he said somewhat, that he “guesses” at what they might be saying. I said Durga understands it well, and Durga said no, he does the same thing, guesses at what they might be saying, that all the villagers do the same thing.²²

This process of “guessing” or figuring out was frequently invisible but not always. I witnessed one conversation, for example, in which Parvati relayed a series of details: *fingerprints, many houses, on the other side of the river*. Maila and his best friend together figured out that Parvati was talking about going to get her youngest son’s citizenship card in Dhankuta headquarters (the fingerprints proved to be the most important key, or “clue” as I wrote in my fieldnotes).²³

Research on other sign systems further supports my claim. Sandler (2012:280) includes a detailed discussion of a video-recorded “story about a blood feud” told by a deaf man “in his late 60s ... to a group of hearing villagers in a tent.” Although she refers to the signer and his siblings as “the first four signers” of Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language (ABSL), the article also posits that the storyteller’s signing was very different from ABSL as it exists in the present. In contrast to younger/contemporary signers’ more syntactically complex narratives, the blood feud story consists primarily of one word propositions “separated by noticeable pauses” and of “pantomime.”²⁴ Sandler (ibid) describes how she analyzed the narrative: the “man’s son ... gave us some background and helped to translate the story, first with a voiceover in Hebrew, and then by working with me on a sign by sign gloss.” The following chart (reproduced verbatim) demonstrates the gap between the signs and the translation.²⁵ In Sandler’s own words:

Figure 9 [here Table 28] presents a segment of the story. In the gloss, on the left, words joined by hyphens are conveyed by a single sign. Each new line is a new utterance, and the utterances are separated by pauses. Bold underlined glosses represent a pantomimed form, shortly [sic]. On the right is a translation. Words in italics and parentheses are not present in the narrative; they are filled in *to tie the signs together*. (ibid:281, emphasis added)²⁶

Gloss	Translation
TAKE-OFF	<i>(The man from Al-Sayyid) took off at a gallop.</i>
RUN	Sword and gun <i>(were at the ready)</i> .
RUN	<i>(Someone) struck with a sword.</i>
SWORD	<i>(He) fired, fired.</i>
GUN	<i>(He) waved a cloth (for reinforcement).’</i>
<u>STRIKE</u>	The horse fell down.
<u>GUN BLOCK</u>	An eye fell out.
HIT	<i>(He) blocked with his gun.</i>
SHOOT	<i>(He got) hit.</i>
SHOOT	
HORSE FALL	
EYE FALL-OUT	
<u>CLOTH WAVE</u>	

Table 28: Glosses and translation of story

Reproduced from Sandler 2012:280

In a talk Sandler (2014) mentioned that a deaf woman from Al Sayyid had translated the video entirely differently than the man’s son had. (I assume that her translation was reasonable, or else Sandler would not have considered it a translation at all.) These different translations suggest to me that both the man’s son and the deaf woman understood the man’s signs on some level and yet created different stories from their understanding. In the same way, I argue, Jethi understood Bhumika’s signs and created a story from her own understanding – albeit one that was “impossible” – and thus ultimately mis-understood her. The point is that the putting-together may in fact be the default mode through which people understand and mis-understand (some) local signers. We might ask if this is because addressees do not properly interpret the syntagmatics of local sign or whether in local sign a syntagmatic feature is that certain relationships among signs are unstated and the addressee is required to put them together. And – anticipating the next chapter – if the latter is the case, might we think of the transformation of very lean signed forms into fully meaningful utterances – whether translated into speech or not – as an act of love?

3. An interlude: verbal mood

In the previous two sections, I have analyzed how partial understanding can get transformed into understanding or into social evaluations of non-understanding. I have also shown that sometimes understanding is actually mis-understanding, which is itself based on understanding, and that mis-understanding can lead to negative evaluations of deaf signers (e.g., that they say impossible things). In section 4, I elaborate on these inter-related claims. In this section, I turn to a series of examples indicating that the semantic/grammatical domain of verbal mood may “invite” mis-understanding.

On the road outside the NSL class in late May, Bhumika told me that her younger brother’s wife had been drunk while carrying water in a *doko* ‘woven basket worn on the back, supported by a strap around the forehead’ and had fallen, spilling water everywhere. She used speech (in my fieldnotes, I wrote “Limbu? Nepali?” but I don’t know if I meant that I wasn’t sure or I couldn’t remember) accompanied by signs, including one that depicted a substance spilling and spreading out in liquid form. I asked using spoken Nepali and signs if this event had happened yesterday or today. I thought she said today, so I indicated a very early morning time by using the conventional flat extended forearm to point very low in the east. Bhumika corrected me, indicating a late afternoon position.²⁷ Since it was still morning, the event must have happened the day prior to our conversation. Later, when Bhumika and I entered the classroom, Bhola told me that he had talked with her yesterday and that she had said something about a fight, or about slapping someone or getting slapped. He wondered if she was tricking him (that is, intentionally telling him something false in order to fool him). He was suspicious, in other words, about the truth-value of what she had said, a point to which I return below. I relayed the story she had just told me, and then asked Bhumika directly about whether slapping had been involved. She replied that in fact she had rolled up her sleeves, threatening to hit her sister-in-law for being drunk while carrying water.²⁸

I think that Bhumika had, on the previous day, described to Bhola her reaction to her sister-in-law’s drunken mishaps, and that Bhola had interpreted her as narrating an *actual* event, while Bhumika had either been depicting herself as *threatening* her sister-in-law or expressing her *desire* to smack her. Another instance supports this interpretation. On the morning of October 1st, Bhumika kept talking about her sister-in-law getting her wrists and ankles tied together and hauled off to jail by the police. Although I intuited that she meant that she *wanted* this to happen, or predicted that it *would* happen, I nevertheless tried to find out if perhaps this *had* happened, by asking (or trying to ask), “Did this already happen? Is your *buhāri* ‘sister-in-law’ at home?” I understood Bhumika to answer the first question in the affirmative, and the second in the negative. Bhumika then went to talk to Mal Didi, the owner of the tea shop where we all frequently ate, who told me that Bhumika “was saying that she was telling her *buhāri* that she’d get hauled off to jail.”²⁹ It may be the case that most hearing villagers would, like Mal Did, have understood Bhumika. Yet Mal Didi was known by other hearing people as being particularly good at understanding deaf people, a quality I (and others) attributed to the fact that she lived close to Shрила and Parvati, though Mal Didi herself later told me it was because she had grown up with deaf neighbors.

In the “hitting” case, the distinction between a threat and an occurrence caused confusion. In the “arresting” case, the distinction between a prediction (articulated in reported speech) and an occurrence caused the confusion. Other instances of possible mis-understanding present in my fieldnotes and memory center on similar distinctions. What unites these examples is the relationship of the action (above, hitting, getting arrested, and below, throwing away a notebook,

getting pregnant, accepting food, vomiting) to “reality” in the linguistic sense. Actions do not merely occur. They may be threatened, portended, possible, impossible, likely, desired, feared, or about to happen.

I remember, for example, multiple times when Shrila told Bhola and me that her daughter-in-law had thrown Shrila’s notebook in the toilet and then showed up the following day with said notebook. I wonder if the daughter-in-law had actually *threatened* to throw the notebook away (e.g., by holding the notebook near the toilet), or had signed that she *would* throw it away (e.g., by pointing to the toilet and to the notebook and making a throwing sign), and if in fact Shrila was actually telling us that, and we misinterpreted her. Similarly, Bhola and I once understood a deaf signer (who I’m not naming due to the sensitive nature of the comment) to be claiming that a close relative was pregnant by a man who was not her husband. Later she criticized the woman’s inappropriate behaviors without mentioning the pregnancy. In retrospect, I wonder whether the signer was saying that the relative could get pregnant or that she (the signer) was worried about such an eventuality or that she (the signer) had told the relative that she (the relative) might get pregnant.

On a different occasion, Laxman Bishwakarma, Trilochan Giri, Bhola, and I had a conversation about accepting food and water from Laxman (Bishwakarmas are Dalits, formerly known as “Untouchables”). The topic came up because we were talking about going to Trilochan’s later that day, and Laxman said that Bhola and I had come to his house. Trilochan asked if we had eaten there and I said no but that we had had water. Trilochan seemed somewhat surprised that I would accept water from Laxman (that is, at Laxman’s home). I asked if he would accept food and water from Laxman. At first I thought that he answered no, and Bhola seemed to think that as well, because he reminded Trilochan of his Maoist sensibilities (while none of the political parties actively advocates for caste discrimination, the Maoists were the most virulently anti-caste at the time). Trilochan then pointed out that at the teashop, he willingly drinks water Laxman pours for him. I wondered (in sign, not to myself) if maybe the rules were different at homes, and asked again if Trilochan would eat if Laxman cooked him food and offered it to him. This time Trilochan said yes. At the time of the conversation, I thought he was changing his mind, but when I recorded the conversation in my fieldnotes that evening, I suggested that when I first asked the question (that I probably signed as PT-Laxman COOK WATER EAT, with appropriate head tilt during the articulation of EAT), I had meant it hypothetically (“Would you accept food ...?”) and that Trilochan had interpreted it as asking about past events (“Have you accepted food ...?”). The second time I asked the question, it seems that we were both in the hypothetical mode.³⁰

There are a few possible ways to account for what appears to be a consistent domain of mis-understanding. We could assume that:

1. the system (meaning local sign as used in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe) does not have a conventional way to morphologically, lexically, or syntactically express verbal mood.³¹
2. the system does not have a conventional way to pragmatically express verbal mood.
3. the system does have formal and/or pragmatic means but (some) signers do not use those means or do not use them consistently.
4. signers do use those means consistently but addressees do not consistently understand them.

We might also ask if some aspect of system is not consistently used/understood by some significant portion of its users, is it in fact part of the system? How might we differentiate between a system, its usage, and its users, and what is the analytic and ethical fallout of different means of doing so?

4. Lies, untruths, and the sedimentation of failures and frustrations

In this section I describe how hearing and deaf people accuse deaf local signers of lying or express annoyance with the perceived discrepancy between their stories and what the addressee understood as possible. While I am not claiming that deaf local signers do not lie (such a claim would be absurd), I think it is worth considering whether some “lies” were actually misunderstandings, perhaps arising from difficulties with verbal mood and other semantic/grammatical domains. This section also addresses the longer-term social consequences of persistent communicative frustrations and failures.

In mid September, I encountered Bhumika carrying a load of firewood for her classificatory *buhāri* ‘sister-in-law’ (one of the jobs she did for pay and/or meals). She had a swollen eye, and told me that her brother and sister-in-law had been yelling at her. I asked her about her swollen eye. At first I thought she was saying someone had hit her, but on further questioning, she clearly stated that she had gotten hurt while cutting firewood. And, as I wrote in my fieldnotes, some hearing people “elaborated for me when I asked her in front of people, and they explained that the wood itself had hit her.”³² The following morning Bhola and Laxman, who had been talking with Bhumika while drinking tea before class, said that Bhumika had attributed her swollen eye to a hornet or wasp sting, though when I asked her she repeated that a piece of wood had bounced up and struck her eye. Both Bhola and Laxman appeared frustrated by Bhumika, and Bhola stated directly that the particular quality of the swelling looked like it had been caused by a bite, not a blow.³³

While in the just-described case neither Bhola nor Laxman directly accused Bhumika of lying (at least not according to my fieldnotes), I did observe hearing people explicitly say that a signer had lied. Deaf people did not always believe each other, but my focus is mostly on hearing people because they are deaf local signers’ primary interlocutors. In late October, I ran into Parvati’s middle son’s best friend while out walking. I asked if Parvati had gone to her *māitighar* ‘natal home’ for Dasai (a holiday that fell mid-October in 2010), and he said yes. We talked about how long she had stayed there during her last visit at Tij (a holiday that fell mid-September in 2010). He said that she had only been there a couple days, and I said no, it was much longer than that, around 2 weeks. When I said this, he replied, “*malāi ḍāṭṇubhayo* ‘she lied to me.’” “Maybe she meant two weeks,” I offered, but he said, “No, she said two days.” He showed what she had said, holding up two fingers, and I again suggested that perhaps she had meant two weeks. Later, when writing down fieldnotes, however, I realized that Parvati never expressed time in terms of weeks (nor did any of the local signers). It then occurred to me that perhaps she was not lying so much as answering a different question, one that she had understood but that he hadn’t asked. I can imagine, for example, him pointing to her natal village and then forming the Q sign, meaning, “How long were you there?” and I can imagine Parvati replying, “Two,” meaning something like, “Shrila and I both went,” and him thinking that she meant, “I was there for two days.”³⁴ This imagined scenario is supported by actual ones. Once, for example, Laxman’s older brother Maila and Bhola were signing together, and Maila asked Bhola where he lived, but Bhola thought he was asking if his (parents’) home was similar to Maila and Laxman’s.³⁵ (Maila often used speech as he signed, so I must have heard what he was “really” asking.)

Parvati’s son’s best friend was not the only one who assumed that she lied, and Parvati was not the only person who was disbelieved. Several people told me directly that both Parvati’s and Shrila’s claims that their *buhāris* ‘daughters-in-law’ hit them should not be believed. In one case, a woman in the bazaar responded to Shrila by telling her to “hit her back.” I asked if she

believed what Shrila said, and the woman said “no, not at all, it’s just what she says, so she gives her a reply.”³⁶ On another occasion, Parvati made the same complaint, and a hearing man angrily signed “*CHYE* ‘TO.HELL.WITH.YOU’” at her and then told her, in speech, to stop telling lies. The other hearing men gathered nearby agreed that she was lying.³⁷ Bhumika’s claim that her younger brother hit her was also disputed.

Again, I am not stating that deaf people do not lie. Yet it seems to me – particularly given the fact that hearing people sometimes recognized themselves as not understanding local signers – that it is also possible that these women were not lying. One possibility of course is that they were telling the truth. At least one person, the doctor at the health post, seemed to believe that their families mistreated Bhumika, Parvati, and Shrila³⁸; it is perhaps relevant that he was not from Maunabudhuk. A second possibility relates back to the previous section on mood. What if these women’s relatives had *threatened* to hit them or had raised a hand *as if* threatening to hit them, as a way of indicating anger (this is a common gesture), and what if the signers were referring to such an instance but were understood as describing a completed action? Related to this possibility, what if certain actions metonymically represent emotional states, but not all addressees recognize this? One day, for example, Parvati told me that she had cried when her son, Maila, returned to his job abroad. Her daughter-in-law (Maila’s sister-in-law) said that no one had cried.³⁹ To the best of my knowledge, there is not a local sign that means sad. Assuming that Parvati was not referring to having cried in private, perhaps the sign CRY also means SAD. Similarly, perhaps HIT can also mean ANGRY. Indeed signs for physical confrontation could stand in for verbal confrontations. For example when Dhan complained that his employer did not pay him properly, Kanchi told Dhan that he SHOULD refuse to work, and that he was being cheated because he’s deaf. Laxman chimed in that KANCHI should go tell the owner that herself, and imitated rolling up his sleeves for a confrontation.⁴⁰ I do not think that he was actually suggesting that Kanchi (an old thin woman) was going to physically tussle with Dhan’s employer (though he could have been portraying such an event humorously). A third, related possibility is that these women were using available signs and the idiom of kin relations to express profound dissatisfaction with their lives. In other words, even if signs like CRY and HIT do not conventionally “mean” anything other than cry and hit, perhaps Parvati, Bhumika, and Shrila were doing their best to say that they felt mistreated or sad, even if they had not literally been hit or cried.⁴¹

An alternative or complementary way of looking at this issue was indirectly suggested by Bir Bahadur Shrestha, a hearing man who in 2010 had been teaching deaf students – including Bhola – for 16 years, first in Akisalla and later in Mulghat (Dhankuta district). Bhola and I went to visit him in Mulghat, and then Bir returned with us to Maunabudhuk to talk to the parents of several deaf children about sending their kids to school. He also sat in on the NSL class, where Shrila upon meeting him immediately said, “My *buhāri* ‘daughter-in-law’ yells at me, come talk to her [on my behalf].” He did. Without accusing the younger hearing woman of yelling or mistreating the older deaf women, he explained that deaf people are often very suspicious, because they so often miss what’s going on around them. Therefore, he said, it is important to be especially clear about what one is doing (e.g., if you ask them not to eat some sweets, tell them that *no one* is allowed to).⁴² While I am not ready to generalize and say that “deaf people are suspicious,” it is true that in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe deaf people – even the ones whose families are most actively involved in communicating with them – are nearly always in situations where they are not full linguistic participants. Oral conversations – mundane and profound – swirl around them, and even when the deaf people can follow a great deal through tracking

bodily movements, postures, and activities, there is also a great deal that they miss, e.g., discussions of bus schedules, casual conversations about what the children in the family were up to that day, news about a neighboring family, reminiscences about working in the Gulf States.⁴³ Bir Bahadur's implication was that deaf people are understandably but incorrectly suspicious; that is to say, they assume they have been mistreated when they have not, but that assumption makes sense given what they miss. Again, I am not ready to say that Bhumika's, Parvati's, and Shrila's complaints were only or merely based on mis-understandings or on missed information that if they had experienced undiminished would have made them realize they were being treated well. I do, however, think that Bir Bahadur's point that deaf people miss much of what goes on orally between hearing people is important, and certainly deaf people may mis-understand hearing people just as hearing people mis-understand deaf people.⁴⁴

When analyzing statements about being hurt by others, we might think about them in terms of truth-values, as possible mis-understandings, or as utterances with affective meaning beyond referential facticity. Certainly these frameworks might be applied in any social situation where people are thought to have lied. I am haunted, however, by the degree to which, in Maunabudhuk, for these signers, questions of truth are inextricably entangled in the limits and possibilities of the linguistic system in which those truths (or lies) are articulated.

It is important to state that the degree of entanglement appears different for different people. Trilochan, for example, insisted on multiple occasions before Dasai that he was going to go to the Tarai over the holiday and bring back his wife who was living with her parents. Later I found out that his wife had died some years ago (while with her parents; the two had separated after only a month or so of married life) and that Trilochan's mother had shared this news with Trilochan but he refused to believe it. Yet perhaps because this was the only time that what Trilochan said misaligned with the socially legitimated version of truth, and because Trilochan's signing was in general very clear and easy to understand, neither I nor anyone else I know thought of Trilochan as being someone who lies or who doesn't make sense. In other words, it seems to be more than coincidence that the people whom I found hardest to understand were *also* the ones who were generally thought of as being people who lied and/or people of whom might one say "*ke bhānchha, bhānchha.*"

And yet negative evaluations, which I think of as the sedimentation of iterative miscommunications, settle not only on specific people but also more generally on the fact of being deaf and communicating in sign. In the summer of 2012, I returned to Maunabudhuk after almost two years. I spent my first night in the bazaar with plans to visit the hamlets where my deaf friends lived in the following days. Although my hearing friends in the bazaar had all immediately recognized me, several hearing people expressed doubt that the deaf people – with whom I had spent even more time – would remember me. I sensed that this potential forgetfulness was being attributed to some quality of deaf persons or deafness. A hearing woman who had just plied me with hot tea and freshly fried snacks later named this attribution. Wondering aloud if the deaf people would remember me, she twisted her hands in the air as if signing and said, "*hāt chalāudāi* 'they move their hands like this.'"⁴⁵ In other words, the source of forgetfulness was located in a communicative modality characteristic of deaf people. Why would deaf people, or perhaps more particularly certain deaf people, have forgotten me? How does this relate to questions of narrative reliability, understanding, mis-understanding, and more generally to the figure of the deaf or *lāṭo* person as discussed in Chapter 1? Perhaps it is unnecessary to do so but I nevertheless note here that not a single deaf person failed to know exactly who I was.

On one level the picture I have painted here is a familiar one; all communication is marked by gaps and mis-understandings, accusations and dismissals. I argue, however, that this case is truly different. To illustrate how, I find it helpful to compare the experiences of local signers with those of fluent Nepali Sign Language signers, who very frequently find themselves “made unintelligible” by hearing people who do not know NSL, as we saw in Chapter 1. Critically, however, the experiences of NSL and local signers have different temporal and social horizons. For an NSL user, a moment, even repeated moments, of frustrated, failed communication lie against a remembered past and anticipated future of fully intelligible interactions with other NSL signers. For (some) local signers, however, the juxtaposition between making sense and not making sense is typical and repeated; there is no “other way” with which to contrast. Put differently, the interpenetration of intelligible and unintelligible moments is not just a norm – as it is for NSL signers as well – it is for (some) local signers the norm.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined instances of understanding, not-understanding, and potential mis-understanding. We have seen that even hearing people who are close to deaf signers are not always able to understand, or at least translate, their utterances. In fact, hearing people recognize that they do not necessarily fully understand but instead sometimes “guess” at what deaf signers are saying.⁴⁶ At the same time, some things that signers say are (assumed to have been) understood – but are thought to be lies. Without claiming that everything local signers say is true, I have suggested that from an analytic perspective some “lies” might be better understood as mis-understandings. Here I want to acknowledge that it is somewhat paradoxical that by assuming that deaf people are not (necessarily) lying, I have also had to assume that hearing people have not properly made sense of deaf signers – which as I argued in Chapter 1 also means that the signers did not make sense to their addressees. Bhola in contrast was frequently suspicious of local signers’ stories (especially those that involved complaints or violence), sometimes asking me if they were lying or tricking him. And yet by asking this question, he assumed that sense-making had occurred.

Here we return to one of the themes with which I began this chapter – and indeed this dissertation (see Notes II): the relationship of fieldwork to the production of ethnographic knowledge. I wrote the following passage very early on in my stay in Maunabudhuk:

[Today Parvati] got very upset about a woman she saw walking by and both Bhola and I thought she was saying very clearly that that was her daughter but both yesterday and today a hearing woman insisted that she only has 3 kids, all sons. It’s strange when the veracity of your statement rests in your neighbor’s hands ... not testing one [person’s] word against another but more testing one interpretation of those words against another’s ‘facts.’⁴⁷

As someone new to local sign, it made sense for me to compare my understanding with what other people had said. Similarly, as I explained in Chapter 2, when a signer told me a story about her own marriage (or so I thought), I asked hearing people to help me sort out what (I thought) she had said. On the one hand, asking hearing people for assistance was absolutely critical; to do otherwise would have been arrogant (assuming that I could understand better than they) and foolish (ignoring a resource). At the same time, asking for hearing people’s help did not solve anything. It only provided another layer (or two or three) of material to sift through in trying to understand not only the utterances in question but also the broader social dynamics. When I received answers that conflicted with what I understood signers to have said, how should I make sense of those discrepancies without dismissing deaf signers’ own utterances *or* hearing signers’

competencies and background knowledge (surely greater than my own) or the frequent gaps I observed between deaf and hearing signers?

These questions raise theoretical quandaries as well, namely, where and in whom does a system exist? If, for example, some signers and not others command certain forms or expressions, do we say that some are less competent than others? To do so seems problematic given that signers never seemed to be in doubt about what *they* themselves were saying. Or should we say that there are as many systems as there are signers, and that different systems have different limits? While this option is tempting, it dismisses conventions across systems. It also displaces the question of difference from actual persons to abstract systems, a move that might or might not be productive. And where in this are addressees? If as I have argued in the previous chapter local sign scaffolds on non-linguistic knowledge, and if as I have shown in this chapter the parts of specific utterances may be put together by the addressee, then we should shift our focus to the competence and system of the addressee. Yet what happens when *no* addressee can understand, or when, as in the case of the extended example, another deaf local signer understands, but understanding cannot be achieved between deaf local signers and others?

Here I offer a final example to show that I have focused only on a subset of possible reactions to what is often, I have argued, partial understanding. On May 24, 2010 I recorded in my fieldnotes an interaction between Parvati and myself into which I drew Trilochan and Bhola, asking them to help me understand what she had said. Parvati was telling me about a *pujā* ‘worship’ and also mentioning her sons. Bhola and Trilochan were able to understand more than I had, explaining to me that the *pujā* involved *ghiu* ‘ghee’ and a sacrificial goat, though neither of them were able to pinpoint exactly who would be there and when it would happen. Trilochan described for me in detail how the goat’s throat is cut, and then its blood spread and its head offered up, and said that the *mandir* ‘temple’ in question is located in the Tarai. Bhola turned his attention back to Parvati, teasing her about the ghee. He depicted her as waiting until no one else is around, then opening a bottle of the rich food and scooping handfuls into her mouth, all the while keeping watch to make sure no one was coming. Parvati, along with everyone else, laughed at his mimed scenario. Meanwhile, I wanted to know *who, when, why, for how long*.

None of us, in other words, seemed to fully understand. While I indicated directly that I had not understood, Bhola and Trilochan were more equivocal. Neither of them translated or reworded what she had, nor did they say that they could not do so. Instead, they each took up a thread from her utterances and wove it into something new. Trilochan focused on relaying his own knowledge and experiences in relation to the general topic, while Bhola isolated a particular referent that had been clearly communicated and turned it into the foundation of a different kind of speech event, teasing Parvati in a recognizable and socially appropriate way. In doing so, they both indicated that they had, at least in part, understood.

Chapter Five

The Ethical Eye and the Ethical Other

“Most basically a speaker needs a hearer.” – Duranti and Goodwin (1992:148)

Introduction: Participant Roles and Communicative Sociality

One day in June, Hira Basnet was talking to a younger hearing woman at the small teashop where we ate after NSL class. The woman said she didn’t understand, and even as she said this, her face took on an expression that I came to think of as an *eye glaze*, her gaze sliding away from Hira’s signing. The teashop owner’s daughter-in-law exclaimed, “She said you should come to her house and her *buhāri* ‘daughter-in-law’ will make you tea. Don’t you even understand that much?” Hira continued to sign. While I thought she said that she would come to the NSL class in the morning and then leave mid-morning (when the sun was in the position to which she pointed), the shop owner’s daughter-in-law, interpreting out loud for the other woman, explained that Hira was telling the woman to come to her – Hira’s – house at the indicated time.¹

Whereas in the last chapter I was concerned with how and what various participants understand, do not understand, and mis-understand (all of which are evident in the above anecdote), in this chapter I focus on how people engage with and disengage from the very process of communication. In particular, I am interested in how hearing people – who in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe are deaf persons’ most regular interlocutors – orient (Weber 1947, Hanks 1996, Goodwin 2006, Green 2014²) themselves cognitively, corporeally, and ethically towards signed communication and how their orientations both influence and establish the terms of participation. In the above example, what was the relationship between each woman’s (in)ability to understand, her desire or unwillingness to interact in sign, and the actions she undertook? How did the bodily comportment of the woman who was invited to Hira’s house – the direction and quality of her gaze – both comment on and constitute her engagement with Hira as Speaker and Addressee (Goffman 1981)?

Goodwin (1981, following Goffman 1964, 1967) states clearly that occupying a participant role such as Speaker or Addressee is irreducibly interactional:

The identity assumed by one party is ratified, not by his own actions, but by the action of another who assumes a complementary identity toward him. (6)

The “action of another,” however, is by no means guaranteed (Goodwin *ibid*). As Duranti and Goodwin (1992:148) explain, “the availability ... of a recipient is something that participants actively accomplish and negotiate as an utterance unfolds.” In other words, someone speaking or signing is only a Speaker when someone else is listening or watching.³

This chapter brings together questions of orientation and participation by focusing on four types or modes of habitual action – attention (eye gaze), production (signing), translation, and evaluation – that both *do* engagement and *show* engagement. Inverting Hanks’ (2009) argument that meta-linguistic utterances not only inform ordinary language use but are also forms of ordinary language use, I treat eye gaze and sign production as conversational practices with an implicit meta-pragmatic dimension. Translating and evaluating, following Hanks (*ibid*), are explicitly meta-pragmatic, both shaping and part of everyday practice. These modes of action thus both reflect and enact participants’ situated, shifting, and sometimes contradictory orientations toward (the very possibility of) communicating in sign. As I explore more fully below, I consider these orientations ethical in the sense that they involve judgment, desire, and intention, and are both *about* and create consequences in the lives of others. By using eye gaze,

sign production, translation, and evaluation to track participants' (dis)engagements, I also seek to anchor my claims about ethics to bodily actions and to social consequences rather than to impenetrable psychological states.

In what follows, I focus in particular on eye gaze because in visual communication looking at someone chronologically and ontologically precedes and makes possible all other interactional practices such as turn-taking, sign production, indicating that one has understood, etc. Looking at a signer constitutes the gazer as an Addressee, and in turn ratifies the signer as a Speaker, as an intelligible person with something to say. While eye gaze is not sufficient for understanding, it is in the case of visual signing *necessary*, and its absence denies even the possibility of communication. As a material form of attention, looking at a signer produces an inter-subjective dyad in which two people can occupy and exchange the roles of Signer and Addressee and create shared communicative sociality.

The examples and themes in this chapter bring us back to Chapter 1, where I argued that NSL signers' protest against the word *lāto* is also a protest against being treated as if they were stupid, incompetent, or incapable of making sense to and of other people. Deaf discourses, I showed, reveal that intelligibility is a situated quality of particular interactions, not a quality of individual persons. NSL signers also suggest that in realms beyond deaf society, deaf people are particularly vulnerable to being excluded from communicative sociality because hearing people may or may not choose to interact with them. Recall how Bhola admonished the hearing audience members at the Farewell Program culminating the 6-month NSL program in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe. He gave a series of examples of how deaf people should and should not be treated, culminating in a hypothetical scene in a village shop:

In the villages [the deaf] are made to sit like DONKEYS, doing nothing but work ... To shoo deaf people away from stores is unacceptable. To tell the deaf repeatedly, "just a second," and keep talking with other hearing people is unacceptable. Shopkeepers should talk with the deaf and hearing in turn.⁴

In NSL generally, and for Bhola especially, the sign DONKEY connotes a person who is left out of the flow of everyday life while others engage in meaningful activities.

Similarly, when Suresh Shahi explained in an interview why the Kathmandu Association of the Deaf had sought foreign funding for the Old Deaf Project, he highlighted the mundane experiences of family life.

At home, hearing people family members enjoy themselves, but old deaf people don't. They can't understand or communicate; they have to sit there passively. It's as if they're fools, suppressed/oppressed and SAD.⁵

He went on to describe how the purpose of the Old Deaf Project was to bring together old deaf people so that they might use and further develop their communication. Doing so, he said, would be enjoyable and make them HAPPY. To be fair, earlier in the interview, Suresh had actually claimed that old deaf people and their family *can* communicate. He said, "They [old deaf people] understand natural sign – like if you communicate with them the way their families do."⁶ For my purposes here, I am not concerned with determining definitively whether or not elderly deaf natural signers actively communicate with family members and vice versa. Rather I wish to emphasize that Suresh equates communicative disengagement with sadness and being (made) a fool, and engagement with fun and happiness. In fact the NSL signs HAPPY and SAD have strong moral connotations, especially when used with new or natural signers.⁷ At deaf programs, for example, NSL signers would directly ask elderly deaf people, "Are you HAPPY?" and encourage them to answer that they were. Similarly, I remember that natural signers' stories about difficulties with family members were often met with the comment, "S/he is SAD." To be HAPPY or SAD is construed not as a purely private, internally-evoked emotion but rather as a

socially meaningful reaction to what are, according to the norms of deaf society, good or bad circumstances.

According to both Suresh and Bhola, then, participating in the communicative routines of family and neighborhood life brings a person out of the state of being a less-than-competent human (fool) or non-human (donkey) and into the realm of communicative sociality. While using deaf NSL signers' vision of personhood is somewhat problematic – after all, they have already been “converted” (Bechter 2008) to a particular form of deaf sociality that I cannot assume applies to deaf persons in Maunabudhuk – I nevertheless find its resonance with the concept of participation frameworks productive for my analysis. Telling the deaf, “Just a moment, just a moment” is in the language of interactional analysis refusing or deferring the deaf person's bid to be Speaker. What is more, in their powerful critiques of deaf-hearing relationships, NSL signers clearly implicate the ethical dimensions of communication. Communicative sociality depends on more –or perhaps less – than a fully shared language; it also depends on potential participants' willingness to engage, or lack thereof.

In the first section following this introduction, I examine how eye gaze has been theorized in Deaf Studies and interaction analysis, and briefly compare the act and material qualities of visual attention with those of auditory attention. The next section outlines several scholarly approaches to the ethics of communication on which my own work builds. In the third section, I offer several ethnographic examples to highlight what I mean by willingness and refusal, before turning in the fourth section to a detailed transcription and analysis of an extended, multi-party exchange. I track each of the four modes listed above, highlighting the habitual interactional practices with which hearing people ratify or refuse deaf people in the role of Speaker and revealing their shifting, sometimes-contradictory orientations toward signed communication. In the conclusion, I summarize the complex field of actions and orientations laid out in the preceding sections.

1. Eye Gaze

In a 1910 address, George Veditz, then president of the United States' National Association of the Deaf, famously characterized deaf people “first and foremost and for all time, people of the eye” (Veditz 1912 cited in Bauman 2008:12). More recently, Deaf Studies scholars have analyzed deaf visual practices in art, architecture, and the everyday as part of a broader movement away from defining deaf people in terms of how they do *not* relate to the world and towards recognition of how they *do*.⁸ Bahan (2008), for example, tells a story about a deaf man and his daughter who pick out another deaf man in a crowd by watching how he orients and responds to the visual dimensions and rhythms of a generic urban scene. The deaf father and daughter are able to identify the man as deaf because they are able to both see and recognize the visible dispositions characteristic of deaf visual practices (ibid:83).

In face-to-face signed communication, meanwhile, eye gaze contributes to grammatical functions and is an important means of managing the conversation.⁹ As Bahan (ibid:86) writes of American Sign Language users:

When engaging in discourse, the listener usually fixes and maintains his gaze on the signer's face, particularly the eyes, thus creating a conversational partnership in regulating different discourse functions ... The signer gazes away from the addressee (- gaze) for various linguistic and discourse-related reasons and gazes back to the addressee (+ gaze) to check on him/her, to keep him/her involved, and/or to give a turn ... In a situation where the addressee wants to initiate a turn, he will place his hands in the signer's visual field, wait until the signer is gazing at him (+ gaze), and then start signing. In a heated exchange, the signer can maintain his role by minimizing the number of times he performs + gaze. By doing this he minimizes the chances of being interrupted. (2008: 86)

Such intricate coordination of eye gaze is not limited to deaf persons or signed conversation. Among hearing-sighted persons as well, “for the effective conduct of talk, speaker and hearer had best be in a position to *watch* each other” (Goffman 1981:130, emphasis in original). This watching requires a great deal of nuance, as Sidnell (2010:126) explains:

[W]e have to convey just the right amount of attention to our interlocutor – if you look too long at the other you’ll make her uncomfortable; if you look too little you’ll give the impression you’re uninterested, bored, preoccupied, and so on.¹⁰

Goodwin (1981) provides a fine-grained account of precisely how English speakers and hearers use eye gaze to monitor and manage conversation. The details closely parallel Bahan’s description (above).

[O]ne way a nonspeaking party can indicate whether he is acting as a hearer is by gazing at the speaker¹¹
... A speaker can use gaze to indicate that the party being gazed at is an addressee of his utterance. (Goodwin 1981:9)

Even more strikingly, Goodwin’s study reports that speakers actively monitor whether or not they are being watched, and perform particular actions, such as verbal restarts, when they aren’t in order to “secure the gaze and orientation of hearers” (2006:118). In other words, people watch each other watch each other, and attribute meaning to what they see.

We can see then that speakers map *attention* onto *gaze*, a point that Goodwin makes explicitly and that is implicit in other work on eye gaze.¹² As Goodwin (2006:99) explains, “[t]he gaze direction of an actor ... allows others to make inferences about what the party is attending to,” whether the “what” is a conversational partner, with which we are concerned here, or a third (non-speaker, non-addressee) object.¹³ Certainly, conversations mediated by telephones and the communicative practices of blind and deafblind people show that attention can be paid, and recognized as paid, without visual feedback. Moreover in certain times, places, and cultural settings, looking at someone might be rude, aggressive, or even unethical,¹⁴ although to the best of my knowledge there has not been work on deaf communication in such spaces. Inversely, as any teacher can attest, the eyes may be directed toward a speaker while the mind is directed elsewhere. And even among sighted persons who are face-to-face and for whom directly gazing at the other is not taboo, the particular bodily postures, the duration and the intensity with which people look at each other, where their eyes go when they look away, and other aspects of *how* people watch each other cannot be assumed to be uniform across contexts and cultures.

My claim, therefore, is not that attention can *only* be enacted and tracked by the action of directing one’s vision towards another, but rather that in the circumstances analyzed by the above authors as well as by me, gazing at fellow conversational participants is a salient and – in my case – necessary mode for “doing” paying attention.¹⁵ My *methodological* claim is that the “others” who are able on the basis of watching eye gaze to “make inferences about what the party is attending to” (Goodwin *ibid*) include the ethnographer. Eye gaze as well as accompanying shifts in posture (*ibid*) were visible to me during interactions and are captured well on video. Let me be clear that I am not reifying video data. Without having spent months in the field, participating in and observing a range of interactions among and between deaf and hearing Nepalis in a variety of settings and codes, it would be impossible for me to analyze eye gaze or the other modes discussed in this chapter as central features of and guides to ethical orientations.

The forms of attention theorized in relation to eye gaze are resonant with anthropological work on aural listening. Listening is an agentive act as Hirschkind (2006)¹⁶ and Marsilli-Vargas (2014) have shown in relation to tapes of Islamic sermons in Egypt and psychoanalysis in

Argentina. In differentiating between listening *to* and listening *for* Marsilli-Vargas in particular distinguishes between simply hearing something and working to make sense of it. Just as someone may hear without listening, someone may see without really paying attention. Yet there is a critical difference in the materiality of sound and sight. Even when someone turns away from the producer of sound, the sound is often still audible, nor does covering one's ears entirely block out sound. In contrast and with the exception of light itself – which sighted people can sense even with their eyes closed – it is possible to turn away from or move one's eyes off of a specific sight, and in doing so, to block that sight from being perceived. To return to the above phrase, someone may hear without listening, but it is impossible to see without looking, and it is impossible to understand visual sign without looking at the signer.¹⁷

One need not, however, be looking at a speaker in order to understand speech, as we can see in Althusser's (1971) famous example of interpellation. This example also helps me to think about the relationship between grammatical – including intonational – conventions and the demands of language-in-use. Althusser (ibid:174) asks us to imagine a scene of “the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing” through which subjects are interpellated.

There are individuals walking along. Somewhere (usually behind them) the hail rings out: ‘Hey, you there!’

One individual (nine times out often it is the right one) turns round, believing/suspecting/knowing that it is for him, i.e. recognizing that ‘it really is he’ who is meant by the hailing. (ibid:174-175)

Althusser is careful to note that “in reality these things happen without any succession” (ibid:172). While I am not interested in debating whether people are “*always already* subjects” (ibid, emphasis an original), it is certainly not the case that people are always already Speakers or Addressees. And yet without the notion of participant frameworks, it is difficult to make sense of what interpellation means in everyday practice. I want for the moment, therefore, to take Althusser's scene literally. Doing so, we can see that the example's meaningfulness depends on subjects having the capacity to hear and on the material properties of sound. *A speaking policeperson “or other” can hail a hearing subject without the latter's attention being brought to the act of speaking by anything except that act of speaking.*¹⁸ In contrast on multiple occasions I have explained to a frustrated stranger that a deaf companion of mine hadn't responded to a noise such as a honking horn because s/he couldn't hear it.¹⁹ It is also worth mentioning that those “individuals walking along” who do not consider themselves to have been individually hailed are nevertheless interpellated as Overhearers – and my guess is that many of them would turn around, too.

Moreover the interpellated person in Althusser's example seems not only to have heard the police's shout but also to have understood it. It might be argued that even if the hailed individual were a speaker of English, for instance, and the police had called out in Spanish or Cantonese or Turkish, that the individual would still have turned around. Whether this would happen could be investigated through experimental and/or ethnographic methods, but let us assume first that it would. If “Hey, you there!,” rendered in a language unfamiliar to the individual nevertheless caused her to turn around, we would want to assume that something about the call was familiar, that she recognized its illocutionary force as demanding attention, or even that she was curious about what she recognized as a loud and linguistically structured sound. In other words, even if she were not interpellated as a “you,” since she could not understand the second-person pronoun spoken in a foreign language, she would still be recruited into the structure of communicative sociality. If on the other hand we assume that the person did not turn around, then we are left with the unavoidable conclusion that language interpellates subjects only when it is understood. My point is that language as sound and sound as language draws people in

through a combination of the sensory capacities of bodies, the material affordances of sound, and the power of shared grammar or at least a shared understanding of what language sounds like.

Of course I am not arguing that deaf people are less subject to interpellation as cultural or social subjects (see Endnote 19). Nor have I sought to closely analyze the fit between interpellation in Althusser's sense and participation in Goffman's sense. Nevertheless, I hope I have shown that it is important to pay attention to the linguistic and material modes through which persons are brought into relation with one another, both in scenes like Althusser's that drip with the institutional powers of police and states and in far more mundane situations. In the extended example in Section 4 a hearing man gazes away from a signed conversation going on around him, and on multiple occasions I saw hearing people just look or wander away from deaf people who were obviously signing to them. How might the lack of a fully shared language unhook people from the responsibility to be hailed? And how do the ethical foundations of communication become visible in such cases?

2. The Ethics of Communication

Other scholars have put forth the idea that communication is fundamentally ethical. This chapter extends their work by shifting the analytic focus from *what* gets communicated and even *how* it gets communicated to the underlying embodied forms of attention and orientation without which neither the what nor the how would exist at all. Let me note here that the authors on whose studies I build employ both the terms "ethical" and "moral." Following Lambek (2010b), I do not attempt to distinguish between them. To return to Rumsey's (2010:105) concise definition, quoted in the Introduction to this dissertation, "ethics necessarily involves acting with regard for another person or people," and it is in this fundamental sense that I use the concept.

Rumsey (ibid:106) claims that ethical action "is not only enabled by language but is positively required by it." The reason is that "there are certain grammatical categories within every language that require interlocutors to exchange perspectives with each other" (ibid:119). Bringing together formal properties with language in use, Rumsey shows how actual instances of speech involve "the reversibility of perspectives" (ibid:106) encoded in particular forms. Put another way, when people talk to each other using categories that "require the speaker to take up a position in relation to others" (ibid:111), the instantiation of those categories animates the ethical demands inherent in the structure of language. Rumsey takes for granted the embodied actions without which such animation would not occur; he is able to do so because of the material with which he works. On the basis of my own material, my claim is that the reciprocity of other-oriented sensory attention *precedes and makes possible* linguistic reciprocity (see also Duranti 2010).

Sidnell (2010) seems at first to address the foundational quality of corporeal conversational practices such as touch, movement, and eye gaze. He clearly states that *attention* is a key element in the ethics of interaction, writing:

There is a moral and ethical dimension to all interaction, because interaction is itself a moral and ethical domain. When persons interact, they necessarily and unavoidably assess whether they are being heard, ignored, and so on. Is this person really listening to me? Paying attention to me? And, in so doing, acknowledge me as [a] worthwhile person who merits such attention? These, I want to suggest, are some of the most basic ethical questions of ordinary social life. (ibid:124-125)

In the pages that follow, Sidnell (ibid:129-30, 134, 136-138) analyzes a range of issues, including "the ordinary ethics of telling jokes and appreciating them, of being able to laugh at one another and at oneself," the "darker" ethics of characterizing "an action as the action of an interfering, controlling woman" and the related "ethics and morality of sexuality," and the ethical

dimensions inherent when people ameliorate potentially embarrassing acts, attribute responsibility, complain, and make excuses. In spite of the passage quoted above, however, Sidnell ends up bypassing the “basic ethical questions” to focus on what happens *after* a structure of conversation has been established through listening, paying attention, and acknowledging each other as worthy and capable of conversation. My goal in this chapter is to direct ethnographic attention not only to how participants “assess whether they are being heard, ignored, and so on” (ibid:124-125, emphasis added) but also to *if* they listen to, look at, or ignore each other, and to how they indicate that they are doing so.

Goodwin (2006) comes closest to peeling away the layers of talk to get at the bodily and moral actions that form the ground of interaction. Writing about Chil, an elderly aphasic man with a communicative repertoire limited to intonational contours, rhythmic prosody, the words “yes” and “no,” and pointing, Goodwin demonstrates that through sequences of turns, Chil and his interlocutors work together to produce utterances. While the articulation is distributed across several people, the meaning of these joint utterances is understood as Chil’s. Without detracting from Chil’s own creative and persistent efforts to occupy the social roles of both Speaker (if not full Animator) and Addressee, Goodwin makes clear that those efforts can only be *realized* with the cooperation of Chil’s conversational partner(s).

It is important to note that Goodwin explicitly characterizes the orientation of one person to another as “someone who is trying to say something relevant” in terms of moral action.

Attributing communicative intent to another’s sounds and gesture and thereby treating that person as a full-fledged human being capable of performing relevant, consequential action, and being willing to do the work to find out what the other is saying, thus has not only a cognitive dimension, but also a moral one. (ibid:106)

In the absence of such attributions and willingness, Chil would be rendered speechless not only in an articulatory but also a social sense. Kasnitz and Block (2012:199, 211) similarly argue that communicating with persons with speech disabilities requires “effort,” “time,” “curiosity,” and “willingness.” In other words, the willingness of participants to impute intelligibility to their interlocutors makes possible the interactive achievement of that very intelligibility. Like Goodwin, I find that in situations where – for different reasons and in different ways – a conventional linguistic code is not uniformly distributed among the participants, the ethical dimension of communication becomes apparent. Unlike in Goodwin’s examples, in my own data people shift between engagement and disengagement.

Such shifts are also the key difference between my work and that of Nonaka (2007). Based on her fieldwork in Ban Khor, Thailand, a village with multiple generations of deaf people (see Chapter 2), Nonaka argues that “speech-sign communities” in general are characterized by a particular moral habitus.²⁰

[H]abitus captures the mutually transformative relationship between indigenous sign languages and their speech/sign communities.²¹ The moral dimensions of *habitus* in a speech/sign community refers to the community’s socio-communicative response to deafness: the spontaneous development of a local sign language by, with, and among villagers; the willingness of hearing people to acquire and use that language; and the seemingly effortless inclusion of deaf people in community life.

A speech/sign community’s moral *habitus* is generative of and generated by the creation, spread, maintenance, and above all, the use of the village’s sign language. The moral *habitus* of a speech/sign community resides in the local social praxis of deafness, which exhibits the following characteristics:

- widespread fluency in the local sign language among deaf and hearing people²²

- neutral to positive attitudes toward deafness, deaf people, and sign language

- a high degree of integration of deaf people into the mainstream of village life. (ibid:15, italics in original)

This work insightfully and productively ties together the moral, grammatical, and practical dimensions of communication. By drawing on Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, Nonaka also points

to how these dimensions dwell in and get instantiated by embodied social actors who in Hanks' (2005:69) words have "dispositions to act in certain ways" and whose "schemes of perception ... order individual perspectives along socially defined lines." In what follows, I extend or perhaps depart from Nonaka's formulation by more closely interrogating the "willingness" and "seemingly effortless" actions taken by hearing people to communicate with their deaf family members and neighbors. Here it is helpful to call again on Hanks' (ibid) reading of Bourdieu that "distinguish[es] three lines of thought joined in the concept of habitus." For the purposes at hand I am interested only in the first: "the Aristotelian idea of the hexis, which Bourdieu treats as the individual disposition that joins desire (intention) with judgment (evaluation)" (ibid). The joining of desire and judgment suggests that communicative interactions may not be as "effortless" as they look – a point that Nonaka perhaps makes with her use of the word "seemingly."²³ Regardless of whether my focus is an extension or departure, in what follows I am interested precisely in the intersection of habit and effort.

Das (2012:135) describes "the delicacy of maintaining regard for others through the minutest of gestures," gestures she characterizes as both ethical and habitual.²⁴ She notices for example that women refrained from bickering with each other when their husbands got home at night so as not to "confront a tired man who had braved the heat and dust of the streets with an atmosphere of discord" (ibid). Similarly a woman might

remember in such a small gesture as serving tea to the family that I did not take sugar in my tea, that one of her sons liked lots of sugar, another liked to have *malai* (clotted cream on top of the milk) to float on his tea rather than mixed in it, and that her husband preferred to drink tea in a glass rather than a cup. (ibid:140)

I want to highlight how these actions are part of ordinary everyday life, so small that they can be an absence (not bickering) or a substitution of one material object for another (a glass for a cup), or, in my own work, simply raising one's eyes to watch someone sign. In a scene from one of my videos, for example, Bhim Limbu is washing dishes outside her kitchen while her mother-in-law, an older relative/neighbor, myself, and some of the extended household's children sit nearby and chat. Bhim's husband stands shyly at the edge of the knot of people. When the older woman raises her hands to address Bhim's husband, Bhim's gaze shifts immediately to watch her.²⁵ Although engrained in the body by practice, actions such as these – refraining from bickering, remembering and bothering to follow through on people's tea preferences, raising one's eyes – are not automatic or inevitable, though they are habitual.

My use of the concept of habit is also based in a meta-communicative insight offered by one of my hearing interlocutors in Maunabudhuk. In the extended example examined in Section 4, Laxman Bishwakarma's hearing neighbor says that he can't understand the signed conversation going on around him, to which Maila, Laxman's hearing older brother with whom Laxman lives, replies, "*tyo bāni ho* 'it's (a) habit.'"²⁶ I want to suggest that the "habit" to which Maila refers is not merely a linguistic habit, the ability to decode semiotics or even the ability to make appropriate inferences, but also a habit of paying attention, a habit of believing that one will, or at least may, understand the signer, a habit of willingness. My difference here from Nonaka may be as much or more a difference in ethnographic observations as in theoretical emphasis. As I demonstrated in Chapter 2, Maunabudhuk and Bodhe are *not* speech-sign communities in the same way that places like Ban Khor are. While I believe that *all* communication takes effort, the effort is greater and more visible in places like Maunabudhuk and Bodhe where, as the previous chapters have argued, signs are immanent but lean and understanding is always in question. The willingness it takes to engage in signed communication also appears to be less evenly engrained in or distributed across potential signers than it is in shared signing communities.

3. Willingness and refusal²⁷

In order to highlight the fact that the habitual is neither pre-determined nor homogenous across social actors, that it involves as Hanks (ibid) emphasizes “desire” and “intention,” I find it helpful to follow NSL signers in their attention to what I have called willingness and refusal. The following ethnographic vignettes provide somewhat extreme examples of the range of orientations enacted by hearing people toward deaf signers.

In 2010, Anandi Limbu was 15 or 16 years old, a lively hearing girl whose family lived in the bazaar in a house smack in the middle of the two homes where Bhola and I had taken rooms and where we ate, respectively. When I first arrived, she took me under her much-younger wing, and over the next several weeks she often accompanied Bhola and me on our wanderings in town and through the hills, visiting deaf people’s homes and taking breaks to pick fruit from the high limbs of sour plum and *kaphal* berry trees, or in my case to watch others pick fruit. I was struck by the ease with which Bhola and Anandi communicated, often flirtatiously, and more so by the degree to which Anandi abandoned speech for sign when in Bhola’s company. In general, people who signed would do so only briefly.²⁸ I was not the only one so struck; on one occasion, a shop owner enquired of her, entirely without rancor, “Why aren’t you talking?”²⁹

I want to emphasize that there is no easily discernible reason for Anandi’s willingness and eagerness to sign. None of Anandi’s immediate relatives are deaf, though like nearly everyone in Maunabudhuk, she knows deaf people. Her family has a home in the farmlands as well as in the bazaar, and the former is only a few minutes away from Dewi and Hira Basnet’s home. While I have no evidence that Anandi sought them out or vice versa, it is not impossible that over the years spatial proximity provided Anandi with more than the usual opportunities to watch and engage in signing. In addition, the mother of one of Anandi’s closest friends ran a small restaurant in the bazaar where Maili Limbu could often be found doing odd jobs and where Anandi also spent a lot of time. I do not, however, want to make too much of biographical determinants, as Anandi’s two sisters were neither as interested in nor as adept at directly conversing with Bhola. Anandi clearly *enjoyed* signing, and watching her helped me to see the traces of pleasure and desire in the actions through which others are made into Speakers. Willingness such as Anandi’s is the necessary foundation of all communicative practice, becoming glaringly obvious when it is entirely absent, as seen in the following example. One July morning after class, Hira approached a young woman, Binata Pradhan, who operated a small tailoring shop on the main street where girls and young women often gathered to chat.³⁰ One of Hira and Dewi’s family members had bought pretty red fabric to make each of them a *cholo* ‘tied blouse,’ as shown in Figure 63. Hira used signs and gestures to indicate what she wanted, twice mimicking the act of tying, once at her left breast and once at the left side of her stomach, and then demonstrating that she wanted the typically long sleeves to have buttons. Binata said she didn’t understand. At the same time other people in the vicinity quickly recognized what Hira was saying and verbalized her request in spoken Nepali, mentioning not only the *cholo* but also the particular specifications. At this point the tailor said that she didn’t know how to make *cholos*.³¹



Figure 63: A cholo

Image from <http://sarishop.com/zencart/images/shop/images/patterns/chololine.jpg>

How can we understand Binata's stated lack of understanding? As with the example of Maila and Parvati in Chapter 4, we might take her statement at face value. Perhaps Binata simply did not understand that Hira was asking her to make a *cholo*. But then, why not? We might think that it was because Binata had moved to Maunabudhuk only a year or so before this encounter; perhaps where she lived previously there were fewer opportunities to interact with deaf people or they used different signs – though as signs go, the ones that Hira used were highly transparent. This occasion was not, moreover, the first time Binata had encountered sign, as she lived in the same building as Bhola and me, and when communicating with hearing people Bhola used natural sign forms that have much more in common with local signing practices than with NSL. Additionally, with the NSL class having already run for several months, there were multiple other deaf people in the bazaar every day. Most importantly, everything about the situation conspired to make Hira's signing intelligible: the frame was established by Binata's occupation as a tailor and the physical space of the tailoring shop. Hira did not approach a teashop owner, goldsmith, or schoolteacher, nor did she ask Binata while waiting to get water at a communal tap or while passing each other on the street.

Given the wealth of contextual cues available, my strong sense is that Binata *refused* to understand.³² Here I am not distinguishing between refusing to understand someone and pretending not to understand someone (though I do consider refusal distinct from trying but failing). As I discussed in the previous chapter and as I explore more below, it is sometimes possible to compare an explicit statement about understanding with other actions; for example, sometimes people verbally stated that they had not understood but interacted in sign in a way that made it evident that they had. In this particular case, at least as recorded in my fieldnotes, there were no such actions. For the purposes of this chapter, in which I track people's orientations to signing, I treat it as entirely inconsequential whether or not the tailor understood cognitively, because she *acted* as – and only as – someone who had not understood. And the situation leads me to believe that she could have understood if she had tried. I want to emphasize that Binata's lack of understanding seems not to be rooted in the actual semiotics involved, which I have argued should have been intelligible to Binata, but instead in a refusal of the very *possibility that there was an intelligible semiotics there at all*.

Binata in fact refused Hira in several senses. First, she refused to perform the service of sewing a *cholo*, either because she could not or would not – but Hira could, and did, get her

cholo sewn elsewhere. More importantly – at least for my analysis here, if not for Hira – as Hira’s intended Addressee, she refused to ratify Hira in the role of Speaker. In this particular encounter, the other girls and women who happened to be around voiced Hira’s request, transforming themselves from Overhearers to Animators and constituting Hira as a (partial) Speaker requiring mediation or animation. However, and in contrast to reports from shared signing communities (e.g. Kisch 2008, Kusters 2014), there are not always other people around who are willing or able to provide translation.

To be clear, such refusals are neither ubiquitous nor unusual. People in Maunabudhuk, Bodhe, and other parts of Nepal are often willing and able to adjust their communicative practices in order to interact directly with deaf people, as the very existence of natural and local sign shows. At the same time, refusals such as Binata’s were also not especially surprising or unusual. As we will see in the following example, moreover, willingness and refusal, along with understanding and not-understanding, often follow each other in short succession.

4. An Extended Example

On a warm June afternoon Bhola and I followed a path downhill out of the bazaar, zig-zagging between fields of thigh-high corn and past bursts of bamboo. We were on our way to visit Laxman Bishwakarma, who lives with his second-oldest brother, Maila Dai (lit. second-oldest elder brother) and the latter’s wife and 3 nearly grown children in the two-story house neatly painted with whitewash and red clay that is visible in the right side of the background of the video freeze frame in Figure 64. Walking through the courtyard toward the lush garden, Bhola and I entered the family’s blacksmithing workshop, a thatch-roofed structure furnished with a clay forge, manual and electrical tools, woven mats, and a thin wooden bench along one side. We stayed there for several hours, as people came and went.

The video we filmed that day is slightly over an hour long (1:02:02). I focus here on a few sequences (5:01-5:20; 10:05-10:17, and 19:59-24:03) that clearly show the modes of ethical orientation and engagement discussed at length above.³³ In the transcripts and descriptions that follow, I have noted not only sign production and spoken Nepali evaluations and translations but also eye gaze in order to highlight the relationships among these modes and the ethical stances that inform and are reflected by them. I am particularly interested in the exchanges between Laxman and his hearing neighbor because they show with such clarity how even within the course of a half-hour, participants shift back and forth between engagement and disengagement, with concrete consequences for understanding.



Figure 64: Participants

Clockwise from left: Neighbor 1, Laxman, Mara, Niece (on Mara's lap), Maila (seated on mat), Nephew (seated at forge), Neighbor 2. Bhola is behind the camera.

The primary participants are shown in Figure 64 in the configuration in which we were sitting during the third time period just mentioned (19:59-24:03). Laxman is the man wearing a red shirt and red shorts. The Neighbor seated on Laxman's right is a young Chhetri man who lives downhill from the Bishwakarma family; he was there to get his knife repaired. I am sitting on the other side of Laxman, with his niece on my lap. Maila is sitting on a woven mat, while his and Laxman's nephew, who lives nearby, is working at the forge. Bhola is behind the camera. A second neighbor squats, facing away from the camera; neither he nor the niece play a role in my analysis.

I begin with the first recorded sequence in which Laxman and the Neighbor directly interact with signs, though they had been and continued to be corporeally engaged through body contact in ways typical of male-male sociality in Nepal. During this sequence, I move from behind the camera to my seat next to Laxman; Laxman's *bhāuju* 'older sister-in-law' and another niece are also present, though the little niece from Figure 64 is not. In contrast to all the following sequences, I have not translated Lines 1-8 because I know nothing about (repairing) knives used to cut fodder and so I don't really understand what is being said. Nevertheless the transcription suffices to demonstrate that Laxman and the Neighbor exchange signs in a meaningful sequence. In fact while the neighbor seems ever so slightly hesitant in the production of his signs, he willingly engages with Laxman, and even produces the conventional sign CUT.GRASS (Line 6). It is possible that Laxman has signed CUT.GRASS in Line 5; I am unable to tell whether Laxman was indicating an action that would be taken on the knife or by the knife. If Laxman did *not* sign CUT.GRASS, then the Neighbor's use of the sign indicates some familiarity with conventional local signs. If Laxman *did* sign CUT.GRASS, the Neighbor's use *still* indicates familiarity because Laxman only articulated it with one hand while the Neighbor uses the conventional, asymmetrical, two-handed version. (If the Neighbor was unfamiliar with the sign and [re]produced it perfectly after seeing it articulated with only a single

hand, it would be akin to hearing for the first time the word “Cock-a-doodle-do” said by someone with a mouth full of crackers, and then repeating it with perfect pronunciation).

Time code: 5:01-5:20

1 Laxman: (takes the knife the neighbor is holding) PT-knifetip Q?
2 Neighbor: Q?
3 Laxman: (handling the knife)
4 Neighbor: PT-knife
5 Laxman: PT-knife CUT (or CUT.GRASS articulated with only one hand since other hand is holding knife) PT-knife
6 Neighbor: PT-forward ### (view of camera blocked) ### (draws line with finger on other hand) CUT.GRASS
7 Laxman: ### (moves hand as if breaking something off from the knifetip) CUT ### (bunches fingers together, spreads them as if letting go of something) NEG
8 Neighbor: (small affirmative or questioning head nod)

The beginning of the second sequence, about five minutes later, is the next time that Laxman and the Neighbor directly interact. Everyone in Figure 64 is present, as well as the niece and sister-in-law mentioned above. Laxman is signing with Bhola (off camera), who seems to have requested that Laxman and the Neighbor talk to each other (Lines 9-11).³⁴ When Laxman in Line 11 touches the Neighbor on the soldier, the Neighbor looks at him (Line 12), making himself a potential Addressee. Laxman indeed addresses him: “Bhola says we should talk [to each other]” (Line 13). In Line 14, the Neighbor and Laxman exchange roles, with the Neighbor giving a paradoxical reply to Laxman’s statement.

Time code: 10:05-10:17

9 Laxman: (responding to Bhola off camera) PRO-1? PRO-3-Neighbor?	Me? Him?
10 Bhola: (off camera)	(off camera)
11 Laxman: (affirmative head tilt). PT-3-Neighbor? (questioning head thrust up, touches neighbor’s shoulder) Q? TALK.WITH? (laughs, touches neighbor’s shoulder)	Yeah. Him? What am I supposed to do? We should talk?
12 Neighbor: (turns to look at Laxman)	
13 Laxman: TALK.WITH PRO-3-Bhola Q (laughing, patting neighbor on shoulder)	So he says we should talk.
14 Neighbor: (looks away, perhaps toward Maila) SPEAK NEG (looks toward Laxman)	I don’t know how to speak (sign).
15 Laxman: (side-hugs neighbor)	

In Line 14, then, the Neighbor signs, “I don’t know how to speak,” yet his response indicates that he *has* in fact understood what Laxman signed and that he also knows how to produce a meaningful response *in sign*. This line illustrates my earlier claim that people may act in contradictory ways. Here, the mode of sign production and the mode of evaluation are in direct opposition to each other. (It is of course possible to know just enough to be able to say that you can’t speak/sign a given language or system. But we will see from Lines 60 onwards that the Neighbor can say much more than that.) Although unusual in that the evaluation itself is signed, I noticed multiple other instances when people said they couldn’t understand but acted as if they did.

One day, for example, Hira wanted to get her watch fixed, so she went to a store that sells electronics and waited for a while. Someone told her that the shop-owner was eating and to come back tomorrow; she waited a little longer and then left to go to another shop that used to provide watch repair services but, it turned out, no longer did. She asked Indra – the shop-owner – about having her watch fixed, and he said in spoken Nepali that he didn’t understand her. Yet he then proceeded to interact with her in a way that made it clear that he *had* understood her; he pointed her back in the direction of the other shop where she had already been (he didn’t know she had already been there; he wasn’t giving her the run-around). In other words, even though he said he didn’t understand, he indicated that he had by directing her to a place where she could get the service that she had just requested of him.³⁵

On another day Hira and Dewi were talking to a teacher from a nearby town who happened to be in Maunabudhuk. Watching them, I noticed that he sometimes engaged with them and sometimes did not, and that out loud he said that he didn’t understand anything, despite the fact that he clearly could understand and interact to some degree.³⁶ Moreover such contradictions were not limited to sign. In early May Bhola and I went to Kamal Yakkha’s house, where we had the opportunity to talk with his mother. I could not make sense of everything that Kamal said in Nepali, but I assumed his mother would be able to. At one point I directly asked her what he had said, and she replied, “I don’t understand, I don’t understand everything she says,” and then proceeded to translate.³⁷

Taken together these examples clearly demonstrate that even when people say they can’t understand, they sometimes are able to. I interpret such statements about not-understanding to be about signed communication or a particular person’s mode of communication *in general*, even if on a literal level the statement refers to a particular instance of communication. They are in other words general evaluations of speakers’ abilities to understand sign – either one signers’ sign or sign in general – and concomitantly of signers’ abilities to make themselves understood. In other words, evaluating oneself as having not-understood is more of a commentary on the type of interaction going on (the type that *may not* be understood) than on the actual specific interaction. Such statements also reflect and help to legitimize the ever-present availability of a non-engaged position. I do not mean this cynically. While sometimes people, as I have argued, refuse to understand, at other times they are truly unable to understand. Yet in the complicated interactions of daily life, the line between the linguistic and the ethical grows thin and disappears. The fact that people expect that they may not understand does, I think, affect whether or not they (put in the work to) understand.

To return to the primary example at hand: over the course of the following five and a half minutes, there is no direct interaction between Laxman and the Neighbor. Laxman then briefly leaves, returning at 19:44 to sit as before on the long wooden bench between the Neighbor and myself. During the next 20 seconds (not transcribed), Laxman, Bhola, Maila, and I exchange

signs, with Bhola (presumably, based on our responses) instructing Laxman to stop sitting quietly and start talking with someone, and both Maila and I repeating or elaborating on Bhola's words in sign and speech. During this time, the neighbor is looking away and downwards (presumably at the forge). From Line 16 to Line 109, we are sitting as shown in Figure 64.

In Line 17 Laxman again signs to the Neighbor, telling him, "He says we're supposed to talk." Although the Neighbor has not tried to follow the signed conversation up to this point, when addressed directly he turns and looks at Laxman, providing him with the opportunity to say more. Laxman affectionately pats the neighbor's thigh but does not take another turn. I have included this short sequence because it is important to recognize that deaf signers do not, of course, *always* maintain the role of Speaker, even when they have the opportunity to do so. I also want to note that during the exchange between Bhola and Laxman that takes place half off-camera in Line 17 Maila visually tracks their back-and-forth, glancing from one to the other. The nephew also glances up from his work to look at Laxman. In other words, while the Neighbor looks at Laxman only when Laxman's own posture shows that he is inviting the Neighbor to become the Addressee, Maila and the Nephew constitute themselves with their gaze as "unaddressed recipients" (Goffman 1981:132) referred to hereafter as Recipients.

Time code: 19:59-20:07

16 Neighbor: (looking at forge)	(looking at forge)
17 Laxman: (presumably in response to Bhola) PRO-3-Neighbor+? (turns to look at neighbor, briefly rests hand on neighbor's thigh) Q? (laughs) [TALK.WITH PRO-2-Neighbor Q PRO-3-Bhola Q]	Him? Hunh? He says we're supposed to talk I guess. [Implied:] What about that!
18 Neighbor: [(turns to look at Laxman)]	(turns to look at Laxman during previous turn, maintains gaze through following turn)
19 Laxman: (laughs, pats neighbor's thigh, looks at Bhola, looks down, looks back at neighbor, puts arm around neighbor, pat's neighbors shoulder)	(laughs, pats neighbor's thigh, looks at Bhola, looks down, looks back at neighbor, puts arm around neighbor, pat's neighbors shoulder)
20 Neighbor: (looks down)	(looks down)

In the minute following Line 20, Bhola, Laxman and I engage in a short conversation (also not transcribed) that begins with me asking Laxman about the age relationship between himself and the Neighbor: "Is he younger and you're older?" Laxman replies by telling me where the man lives – downhill, but not so close as the nearby family members' homes – and then confirms that the neighbor is the younger of the two. I then ask, using an NSL sign that had recently been discussed in the sign language class, "Is he Chhetri?" Laxman nods, pauses, and then uses his index finger to trace the place on the body (from the left shoulder diagonally down across the chest) where Chhetri (and Bahun) men wear a sacred thread, following this movement with a thumb-point at the neighbor, to signify in the most conventional of local signs that the neighbor is upper-caste. Laxman then adds that Bhola is as well. I teasingly point out that Bhola has thrown his thread away, and ask if the Neighbor wears his thread. Laxman replies that he does not. After a lull in conversation, Laxman points at the other neighbor and signs LIMBU using the NSL sign. At this point Bhola, from off-camera, joins the conversation; he and Laxman talk about the Neighbor's caste and lack of actual thread. During the minute of interaction described in this paragraph Maila tracks the conversation visually, although he doesn't sign at all.

His eye gaze, however, maintains his participation. The neighbor in contrast does not raise his eyes from looking at the forge,³⁸ and the nephew is engrossed by his own work and does not attend to the signed conversation either.

In Line 21 Laxman again directly addresses the Neighbor, who turns to look at him (Line 22). At this point, I enquire, “Did you understand?” The Neighbor denies understanding anything at all (Lines 24, 26). Maila explains that understanding requires “habit,” and in Line 33 I urge Laxman to repeat himself. He does (Line 35), and this time the Neighbor takes a more active role by asking, “What did he say?” Although Maila has just positioned himself as someone who understands in Line 25, he finds himself unable to translate in detail: “I didn’t understand either, he’s talking about sacred threads” (Line 39). At this point the Nephew indicates via eye gaze and head movement that he wants to know what Laxman said, and Laxman repeats himself. Maila now understands, and begins to translate (Line 43), but stops as the Nephew also begins to speak. The Nephew’s speech is drowned out by laughter (Line 44), and Maila reiterates the translation in Line 45.

Time code: 21:02-21:35³⁹

21 Laxman: (turns to neighbor) SACRED. THREAD [Q? THROW.AWAY PRO-2-Neighbor (laughs, pats neighbor’s thigh)]	Your sacred thread? You’ve thrown it away.
22 Neighbor: [(turns to look at Laxman)]	(turns to look at Laxman part way through prior turn)
23 Mara: <i>bujhnbhayo?</i>	Did you understand?
24 Neighbor: (looking at Maila) <i>ma ta hātko ishārā ta bujhdina ta</i>	I don’t understand hand signs.
25 Maila: <i>tyo bāni ho</i>	It’s habit.
26 Neighbor: <i>eutā eutā āūdāina</i> [<i>ma ta mmm</i> (looks down)]	I don’t get even one little thing, I’m like – nothing.
27 Laxman: ([looks at neighbor, pats neighbor’s knee, laughs], [squeezes neighbor’s knee])	(pats neighbor’s knee, laughs)
28 Neighbor: ([looks at Laxman])	(looks down)
29 Laxman: (glances down, looks at neighbor)	(looks at neighbor)
30 Mara: (taps Laxman)	Hey.
31 Maila: (looks at Mara)	(looks at Mara)
32 Laxman: (looks at Mara)	
33 Mara: AGAIN UNDERSTAND NEG SACRED.THREAD THROW.AWAY/SIGN.TO-dir(Neighbor)	He didn’t understand, tell him again.
34 Neighbor: (looks at Mara part way through prior turn, then looks at Laxman as Laxman begins to sign)	(looks at Mara part way through prior turn, then looks at Laxman as Laxman begins to sign)
35 Laxman: SACRED.THREAD [THROW.AWAY]	You threw away your sacred thread.

36 Nephew: ([looks at Laxman])	(looks at Laxman part way through prior turn)
37 Neighbor: (looks at Maila) <i>ke bhaneko?</i>	What did he say?
38 Nephew: (looks down at task)	(looks down at task)
39 Maila: <i>khoi maile pani bujh[dina, janāiko kura garchha]</i>	I don't understand either, he's talking about sacred threads.
40 Nephew: ([looks up at Laxman, questioning head nod])	(looks at Laxman part way through prior turn] What?
41 Laxman: SACRED.THREAD? THROW.AWAY	The sacred thread? He threw it away.
42 Neighbor: (looks at Laxman)	(looks at Laxman)
43 Maila: <i>eh janāi [phālera]</i> –	Throwing away the sacred thread -
44 Nephew: [<i>janāi</i>] <i>phukālera</i> - (general laughter)	(You) took off the sacred thread – (sound interrupted by laughter)
45 Maila: (points at neighbor) <i>tapāiko janāi phukālera phāldine bhanchha tyo</i> (points at Laxman)	He says you took your thread off and threw it away.

I want to highlight three aspects of the above sequence. First, let's look at the Neighbor's claim that he doesn't understand sign. On the one hand, it maintains the stance that he took earlier in Line 14 even as his actions (signing that he couldn't sign) contradicted it, as discussed above. On the other hand, we might note that he hasn't given himself much of an *opportunity* to understand since he has been staring at the forge during the entire conversation described in the above paragraph up until the second half of Line 21. Second, and in contrast, the Nephew's eye gaze and head movement shifts him from being uninvolved to being a Signer and Addressee. We have seen that he shifts between watching the ongoing signed communication – although it appears that he continues to monitor what's going on aurally – and attending visually to the blacksmithing work he is carrying out. Similarly, in the scene that I described from Bhim's home, she immediately looked up when someone began to sign, but she was also visually and manually engrossed by washing the dishes, and her mother-in-law's attention was divided between interacting with the adults (in both sign and speech) and caring for her grandchildren. People are frequently doing more than one thing, and orienting themselves to more than one ordinary ethical project (Lambek 2010). Bhim was being a hard-working daughter-in-law, her mother-in-law a caring grandmother, and Laxman's nephew was working for his family's livelihood.

Third, we can see that even those people who are strongly oriented toward communicating in sign do not *always* understand. Here Maila says that understanding is a habit – implying that that habit is one he has – but then fumbles when he tries to translate in Line 39. I once asked him directly “*purai bujhnuhunchha* ‘do you completely understand’ [what Laxman signs]?” and he answered that he did, explaining that since they have been talking since Laxman was small, the family understands everything he says and vice versa.⁴⁰ In the sequence of turns between Lines 20 and 21, there were a few NSL signs used, and Maila was of course not accustomed to signing with Bhola or me, so I do not want to make too much of his brief

hesitation, quickly resolved in Lines 43 and 45. I did, however, notice other instances in which someone's inability to understand or translate specific utterances contradicted with a general statement about always understanding. For example, during a summer afternoon at Bhim's house, I had the chance to chat with her hearing neighbor/relative Saili. I asked if Saili understood everything Bhim said, and she said yes. Later, however, when Bhim was talking and I asked what she had said, Saili replied that she didn't know, that she hadn't understood.⁴¹

I interpret this apparent contradiction in a manner similar to how I interpreted the inverse contradiction discussed above, that is, when people say they don't understand but act as if they do. In this case, I understand the general statement about understanding as a reflection of the speaker's abiding orientation toward the signer as an intelligible person. It is not coincidental that in both of these cases, and in others wherein people took a strong stand that *they understood*, the relationship between the speakers and signers can be characterized both in terms of kinship and as deeply affectionate.⁴² The inability to understand a specific instance, meanwhile, demonstrates the contingencies of actual interactions in local sign, wherein understanding is not guaranteed, even when the Addressee is more than willing to engage.

Returning to our example, immediately following Maila's speech in Line 45, Laxman begins to sign, and now all participants ratify him visually as Speaker. In fact, from Line 46 to 59, while neither the Neighbor nor the Nephew contributes any signs, both of them track the conversation visually.

Time code: 21:36-21:58

46 Maila, Nephew, Neighbor, Mara: ([look at Laxman])	(all look at Laxman as he begins following turn and keep looking at him throughout turn)
47 Laxman: [(laughing) SACRED.THREAD THROW.AWAY PRO-3-Bhola]	Bhola's thrown his away too!
48 Maila, Nephew: (glance at Bhola)	(they look at Bhola)
49 Nephew: PRO-3-Bhola?	Him?
50 Laxman: (affirmative head nod)	Yes.
51 Nephew: <i>janāi phukālera</i>	He threw away the thread
52 Laxman: PRO-3-Bhola	He did.
53 Maila: HEY PRO-3-Laxman PRO-3-Bhola SACRED.THREAD (variant 1) PRO-3-Bhola?	Hey, is Bhola high caste?
54 Laxman: (questioning head thrust)	What?
55 Maila: SACRED.THREAD (variant 2) PRO-3-Bhola?	Is he high caste?
56 Laxman: (affirmative head nod)/PRO-3-Bhola. PRO-3-Neighbor PRO-3-Bhola FINISH	Yes, he is. The two of them are/just the two of them.
57 Maila: PRO-2-Neighbor/ <i>tapāi ra uhā</i> /PRO-3-Bhola <i>eutāi ho re</i> /PT-3-Laxman %%% <i>janāi</i> [lāune.]	He says the two of you are the same (caste), thread-wearing.
58 Mara: [SACRED.THREAD] HAVE-dir-Bhola++?	Does he have his sacred thread?

59 Laxman: (begins to nod affirmatively, then turns toward Bhola) ⁴³ PRO-3-Bhola Q? SACRED.THREAD THROW.AWAY PRO-3-Bhola Q. PRO-3-Bhola.	Him? He's thrown his away! [implied:] What can I say?
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In Line 60 we see the Neighbor *initiate* a turn for the very first time, using completely conventional signs and conventional sign order despite his previous protestations that he doesn't understand sign whatsoever. Laxman is distracted by a conversation with Bhola about what kinds of meat people eat (Line 61), so Maila gets his attention (Line 62). The Neighbor repeats himself (Line 63). Then Laxman and the Neighbor take turns affirming that the Neighbor has thrown his sacred thread away, but that his older brother still wears his.

Time code: 21:58-22:14

60 Neighbor: (touches Laxman's arm) SACRED.THREAD/ <i>mero</i> [NEG/ <i>chhaina</i> (touches Laxman's arm)]	I don't wear a sacred thread.
61 Laxman: [(to Bhola, clearly responding to something he's said) PIG? PIG], PIG PRO-2-Bhola	Pig? You (eat) pig.
62 Maila: HEY PRO-3-Neighbor	He wants you.
63 Laxman: [(looks immediately at Neighbor)]	(looks immediately at Neighbor)
64 Neighbor: [(touches Laxman)] SACRED.THREAD NEG	Hey, I don't wear a sacred thread.
65 Laxman: (negative head shake)	No?
66 Neighbor: NEG	No.
67 Laxman: [THROW.AWAY]	You threw it away.
68 Neighbor: [FINISH]	Gone!
69 Laxman: (touches chest) THROW.AWAY	You threw it away.
70 Laxman, Neighbor: (laughing)	(laughing)
71 Laxman: <i>JEṬHĀ</i> 'OLDEST'-dir-downhill SACRED.THREAD <i>JEṬHĀ</i> 'OLDEST'-dir-downhill	Your oldest brother wears one.
72 Neighbor: PRO-1/ <i>hāmro</i> <i>JEṬHĀ</i> 'OLDEST'/ <i>jeṭho</i> ?	Our <i>jeṭho</i> (our oldest brother)?
73 Laxman: (affirmative head nod)	Yes
74 Neighbor: SACRED.THREAD/ <i>chha</i> ?	He wears it?
75 Laxman: (affirmative head tilt)	Yes.
76 Neighbor: (laughs, looks at Maila, back at Laxman)	(laughs, looks at Maila, back at Laxman)

In Line 77 Maila takes the teasing up a notch, claiming that Laxman should wear a thread – an action normatively undertaken only by upper-caste men and certainly not by those of the blacksmith caste – and stop eating pork – something that, as we saw in Chapter 3, people of various castes do, but is proscribed only for thread-wearers.

Time code: 22:14-22:33⁴⁴

77 Maila: ⁴⁵ HEY/ <i>aba tã pani</i> (looking around) <i>yastoko lagã</i> (picking up twine, stretching it across chest as if sacred thread) PRO-3-Laxman/ <i>tã pani</i> (general laughter)	Hey, you should wear one too – you can wear one made out of twine. (general laughter)
78 Laxman: (smiling, shakes his head negatively while turning away, then looks back at Maila, then again turns toward Neighbor) NEG	No way, no.
79 Maila: HEY-Laxman <i>ani</i> PIG/ <i>sungurko khãdãinas</i> /EAT NEG <i>ani yasto lãunuparchha</i> /(puts thread across chest)	Hey, and you won't eat pig (pork) and you'll wear a thread.
80 Laxman: (turns away, smiling and shaking his head)	(turns away, smiling and shaking his head)

Following Line 80, Maila continues the joke and then uses a sign for rolled twine that I don't understand; I ask about it, and Maila and Bhola explain (I have not transcribed this sequence). It is only toward the end of this little explanation that the neighbor appears to stop tracking visually, looking again at the forge. He then turns back to Laxman part way through Line 81, in which Laxman is talking about the Neighbor. In Line 80 Maila spontaneously (that is, without being asked) translates the conversation – perhaps because the Neighbor is now watching, tuned in – and in Line 82 the Neighbor again joins in. In fact I wonder if the Neighbor would have understood without Maila's translation, given the ease with which he now begins to converse. In Lines 84 and 85, the Neighbor affirms that he eats buffalo meat, and then visually follows the exchange between Laxman, Bhola, and me, in which Bhola jokingly accuses Laxman of eating dog.

Time code: 22:57-23:21⁴⁶

81 Laxman: (responding to Bhola) PRO-3-Neighbor? EAT+ PRO-3-Neighbor EAT-FINISH. HEY [EAT-FINISH] PRO-3-Neighbor. PRO-3-Neighbor EAT-FINISH (affirmative head tilt)	Him? Yeah he eats (it). Hey, yeah he absolutely eats it.
82 Neighbor: ([turns to look at Laxman])	(turns to look at Laxman part way through previous turn)
83 Maila: <i>sungurko mãsũ khãnu</i> [<i>hunchha bhanera sodhnuhunchha</i> %%]	He's asking if you eat pork.
84 Laxman: [(affirmative head tilt)/EAT-FINISH PRO-3-Neighbor] (turns to neighbor) PIG (touches neighbor) PIG EAT PRO-2-Neighbor	Yes, he definitely eats it. You eat pork.
85 Neighbor: (affirmative head tilt)	Yes.

86 Laxman: (affirmative head tilt)/PRO-3-Neighbor Q/ (questioning head thrust, then gives affirmative head tilt in response to something Bhola has asked, and turns again to Neighbor) BUFFALO?	He does, what did I say? ... Yes. You eat buffalo?
87 Neighbor: (affirmative head tilt)	Yes.
88 Laxman: (looking away) Q (looking at Bhola, gives questioning head thrust) NEG (looking away in disgust) <i>LOPPĀ</i> 'TO.HELL.WITH.ME.' (general laughter) NEG	There you go. What? No, gross. How insulting! (general laughter) No.
89 Mara: DOG SAY PRO-3-Bhola? DOG SAY PRO-3-Bhola?	Did he say dog?
90 Laxman: (affirmative head nod). ANIMAL.CL DOG EAT NEG	Yes. I do not eat dog.

Apparently the Neighbor has understood this last exchange because in Line 90 he tops all the previous jokes by making the outrageous claim, “I eat dog” with a completely straight face. Raucous laughter meets his statement. Maila in his thoughtful way begins to ponder out loud about an Indian caste that eats dog (Line 96), but the Neighbor at this point actually ignores the opportunity to engage in oral speech in order to continue bantering in sign with Laxman (Line 97).

Time code: 23:22-23:42⁴⁷

90 Neighbor: (touches Laxman) DOG EAT PRO-1 (general laughter, rather raucous)	Hey. I eat dog. (general laughter, rather raucous)
91 Laxman: (playfully shoves neighbor, laughter continues)	(playfully shoves neighbor, laughter continues)
92 Laxman: FINISH NEG, [EAT NEG]	No you don't! You don't eat [dog].
93 Mara: [<i>ke bhanubhayo?</i>]	What did you say?
94 Neighbor: <i>eh kukur pani khāīdinchhu bhaneko</i> (general laughter)	Oh I said I absolutely eat dog.
95 Mara: (to Bhola) [PRO-3-Neighbor EAT.UP+ PRO-1 PRO-3-Neighbor]	He said, “I eat dog right up!”
96 Maila: [<i>yo</i> (pauses)] <i>Indiāko koki jātharule che</i> [<i>khānchha yo kukur pani</i>]	So ... In India one of the castes eats dog.
97 Neighbor: [(touches Laxman) DOG NEG PRO-2-Laxman?]	What you don't eat dog?
98 Laxman: (look of disgust) NEG	No.

In the remainder of the transcribed sequence below, the Neighbor describes his experiences in a foreign country (like many young men in Maunabudhuk including the Nephew he had worked abroad). He uses an indexical point to indicate “abroad” (Line 99), to which Laxman responds with the appropriate conventional lexical item (Line 100). The Neighbor easily incorporates the proffered sign (Line 101, and again in Line 109), creatively invents a sign for bull/cow (Line 103), and then takes advantage of Maila’s bimodal expertise to ascertain the correct sign (Line 105-107). He then describes the slaughtering technique employed abroad using body partitioning (Dudis 2004): his neck becomes the neck of the animal, while his hand becomes the knife.

Time code: 23:43-24:03

99 Neighbor: PRO-1 PT-up/away EXIST-dir DOG HOLD SLAUGHTER OVER.THERE	When I was over there, they slaughter dogs there.
100 Laxman: ABROAD+?	You mean abroad?
101 Neighbor: (affirmative nod) ABROAD, EAT	Yes, they eat dog abroad.
102 Laxman: EAT NEG	(I/They) don’t eat dog.
103 Neighbor: HORNS/ <i>goru</i>	And this animal (bull)
104 Laxman: HORNS?	What kind of animal?
105 Neighbor: <i>gāilai ke bhanchha?</i>	What do you call a cow?
106 Maila: HORNS <i>gāilai yaso</i> /MILK COW ⁴⁸ [MILK/ <i>yaso</i>]	You sign cow like this.
107 Neighbor: [<i>eh</i> /MILK] (touches Laxman) <i>yaso</i> /MILK <i>EAT/khānchhan</i> SLAUGHTER CUT.ACROSS.THROAT	Oh like that. They eat cows too, they slaughter them by cutting their throats.
108 Laxman: Q?	Yeah?
109 Neighbor: CUT.BACK.OF.NECK NEG CUT.ACROSS.THROAT. ABROAD.	Yes, they won’t cut them on the back of the neck, only on the throat. That’s what they do abroad.

This extended example has shown in fine-grained detail the complex, shifting relationships not only between participants but also among the four modes of orientation enacted and displayed by any given participant. I have focused in particular on how the hearing local signers – the Neighbor, Maila, and the Nephew – orient toward and away from signed conversation, as reflected and constituted by eye gaze, sign production, meta-linguistic evaluation, and translation. We saw that when directly addressed, the Neighbor consistently ratified Laxman as a Speaker by looking at him. In the first sequence, the Neighbor signed with Laxman, while in the second, he claimed – in sign – to be unable to sign, and then – up until the dramatic change in participation beginning in Line 60 – fulfilled his own judgment by visually disengaging, thereby making himself neither a Recipient nor even an Overhearer. On the one hand, by evaluating himself as unable to sign, the Neighbor located a lack of competence in himself, in contrast to other hearing people who strongly imply that their inability to understand has nothing to do with them and everything to do with the signer. On the other hand, by looking away, he then proceeded to preclude materially the possibility that he might be able to follow the

conversation. Finally, we saw that despite the Neighbor's disengagement and self-evaluation, he eventually joined the conversation and conducted himself with linguistic and interactional ease. To be more specific, between Lines 24 and 26 and the end of the transcription in Line 109 – that is, in just under three minutes – the Neighbor disproved his own claim of incompetence by making a very successful joke, initiating a turn and exchanging turns appropriately, understanding and taking up a new sign *in sign*, making use of sign-speech translation to learn a second new sign, and even offering a counterfactual statement (“they won’t/don’t cut them on the back of the neck”). The Neighbor's shifts in orientation and participation definitively show that hearing people who are able to use and understand sign may nevertheless render themselves non-participants, and that without looking at a signer, no other form of participation is possible. In this particular case, Laxman was at home, surrounded by other people who were ready and willing to engage with him, and so continued to be ratified in the role of Speaker. Deaf people are not, however, always in such situations, as implied by Bhola Thapa and Suresh Shahi (see Introduction to this chapter).

Maila and the Nephew, meanwhile, embody the intersection of habit and willingness discussed in Section 2. Maila's eyes moved steadily from one party to the other during nearly every signed exchange, adjusting the direction of his head/sightline slightly in accordance with who was signing, and only occasionally looked down during someone's conversational turn. While his momentary inability to translate in Line 39 demonstrated that the desire to understand is not in and of itself a guarantee of understanding, the steadiness of his gaze maintained his involvement in the conversation as an active Recipient. Maila also signed directly with Laxman on several occasions, asking him for information about Bhola and teasing him as older brothers are wont to do. The Nephew, meanwhile, spent most of the conversation described here busy with his own work, yet when it became evident that Laxman – or better, the Neighbor – needed a translator, he made himself available, and quickly grasped and relayed what was going on. In both of them, we can see an underlying orientation toward considering Laxman to be a fully intelligible person, and we can see how that orientation gets materialized in eye gaze, sign production, meta-linguistic evaluations (“it's habit”) and (attempts at) translation.

Conclusion

In this chapter I explored how deaf signers are made and unmade as participants in communicative sociality. I argued that communicative actions and orientations are both habitual – born from and reproductive of the sociolinguistic/communicative field – and ethical in the sense of affecting and even constituting foundational relationships between people. Highlighting four modes of action that both reflect and produce shifting orientations toward specific deaf persons and instances of signed communication and toward deaf people and signing in general, I analyzed specific examples of interaction, tracking the above-mentioned modes as well as shifts in participant role configurations. I have sought to show that in Maunabudhuk, hearing people exhibit a range of stances, from eager willingness to engage to complete refusal to do so, and that these differences co-exist not only across persons but within them as well. Table 29 represents a synthesis of the various relationships among actions, orientations, and participant roles considered here. The chart is organized around a hypothetical hearing person's interactions with and comments about a deaf person but other configurations can be easily extrapolated from it.

Action	Hearing person's participant role	Deaf person's participant role	Orientation and consequences
Eye gaze +	Addressee	Speaker	"There is the potential that I will understand"; material potential for understanding exists
Eye gaze -	non-participant	If dyad, non-participant; if others present, Speaker, but one who is not intelligible to all	"There is no possibility that I can understand"; material impossibility of understanding
Eye glaze (moving from + to – as deaf person signs)	non-participant	If dyad, non-participant; if others are present, Speaker, but one who is not intelligible to all	"These movements are unintelligible and not worth looking at"; material impossibility of understanding
Signing +	Speaker	Addressee	"Communicating in this way is possible" (even if the content implies otherwise!); "the deaf person with whom I am signing/deaf people in general can make sense of others' words"
Signing – (when by turn-taking norms, it is time to do so)	If dyad, non-participant; if others present, Overhearer, Recipient, or non-participant	If dyad, non-participant; if others present, various possibilities	"I cannot sign"; "I can't be bothered to sign"
"I do not understand" (said while interacting as if having understood)	Addressee, but one who may at any moment stop understanding & participating	Speaker, but one who is negatively evaluated	"This is a person who I am likely not to understand"; explicit comment is referentially about specific interaction but indexes person's intelligibility more generally; reflects and reinforces a sociolinguistic field in which understanding is not guaranteed
"I do not understand" (said while eyes slide away from person signing)	non-participant	If dyad, non-Speaker; if others present, Speaker but one who is not intelligible to all	"These movements will not make sense to me"; fulfills explicit evaluation by materially preventing the possibility of understanding
"I do not understand" (said while looking at signer)	Addressee, but one who is not understanding	Speaker, but one who is not being understood	"I am trying but I can't understand"
Translation in response to request	Animator	Speaker who requires Animation	"I understood and can tell a third party what was said"; affirms Speaker's intelligibility and that translation is possible

Translation not in response to request	Animator	Speaker	“I understood and can tell a third party what was said, and that third party probably needs me to do so”; affirms Speaker’s intelligibility; acknowledges and perhaps reinforces the fact that understanding is not guaranteed/that translation is needed
“I understand” (said of a particular deaf person X but not during an interaction with that person)	n/a	n/a	“Person X is an intelligible person; person X is intelligible to me”; perhaps influences likelihood of person X’s being treated as intelligible by self and others
“I sometimes understand” (said of a particular deaf person X but not during an interaction with that person)	n/a	n/a	“Person X is somewhat but not fully intelligible [to me]”

Table 29: Modes and orientation

Note that people did not tend to say, “I understand” during signed interactions nor to say “I don’t understand anything” away from signed interactions, so I have not included these combinations.

In this chapter I have focused on overtly linguistic exchanges, but I want to end with an example that does not involve the exchange (or the refusal) of linguistic signs. This example returns us to the scenes in Chapter 1 in which deaf NSL signers described the importance of teaching other deaf people how to care for themselves in bodily terms. On a late-May evening in Maunabudhuk, Bhola and I were walking down the main bazaar road in search of Maili. We found her at her *buhāri*’s restaurant, where she often worked. In the restaurant was also sitting an older deaf man dressed in tattered clothing. Maili’s *buhāri* said that she had given him food, and that he wanted a place to sleep for the night but that she was closing up shop and he couldn’t stay there. I asked who he was, and a few young men walking by said that he was from Dadabazaar (a village an hour or two away). The man did not sign very much, and some people thought he was crazy.⁴⁹ Later that evening he showed up at the home where Bhola and I, and a few young women who were in town to take exams, ate dinner every night. I told my friend who owned the home and cooked that I would pay for his dinner. Before he ate, one of the young women from out of town brought him water to wash his hands, an act that struck both Bhola and me as surprisingly respectful. The point I want to make here is that by bringing the old man water, the young woman made a presupposition that he would know what to do with it, that he was competent in the social norms of cleanliness. Giving the old man water also gave him the opportunity to demonstrate his social competence and embeddedness in the social field and also to reproduce that embeddedness by engaging with the young woman and with the environment in meaningful ways.

I recognize that by focusing on hearing people's actions throughout this chapter I have run the risk of making it seem that deaf people are entirely dependent on hearing people. Certainly deaf people are active in their own lives, as we can see from the fact that, for instance, Laxman addressed his Neighbor with signs, the old man was in Maunabudhuk in the first place or, returning to an earlier example, Hira approached a tailor to get a shirt sewn and sought to get her watch fixed. These examples also reveal what I have tried to demonstrate: like hearing people, deaf people live in worlds comprised of others, and the orientations and actions of those others have ethical consequences for deaf people's participation in communicative sociality.

Conclusion

This dissertation has examined two very different, though connected, sites in deaf Nepal, focusing on the fundamental relationship between communication and sociality, or what I call communicative sociality. In Chapter 1, I sketched the social and institutional processes through which NSL has emerged and spread, and showed that older cohorts of NSL signers proudly recall its recent development, while younger cohorts remember learning it as young children or young adults. NSL signers of various ages, in other words, remember a time before NSL existed. In their everyday lives, moreover, NSL signers regularly shift (back) into using natural sign. These experiences, I argued, shape NSL signers' understanding of language, communication, sociality, and the responsibilities they bear for other deaf people. Looking closely at how they articulate those responsibilities and at the campaign against the derogatory term *lāto*, I showed that deaf society is understood as an ethical as well as a communicative domain.

Chapter 2 introduced the sociolinguistic field inhabited by deaf and hearing residents of Maunabudhuk and Bodhe. I described the NSL class in which a number of deaf villagers participated before turning to a broader description of the economic, geographic, and social contours of daily life. Next I asked, "Who is deaf?," arguing that the category *deaf* is no less culturally contingent in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe than it is in urban, deaf-majority communities. In the final section, I turned to a demographic comparison of Maunabudhuk and Bodhe on the one hand and settings associated with home sign and village sign languages on the other. I concluded that Maunabudhuk and Bodhe constitute a distinct category that, following hearing signers, I call local sign. Chapter 3 served to document and analyze conventional aspects of local sign on the level of both individual signs and sign combinations. I argued that local signs are not only transmitted across persons *qua* signs, they are also immanent in the landscape, corporeal routines, agricultural cycles, and kinship structures, such that the use of signs depends as much on social as on linguistic horizons. These horizons are not, I demonstrated, confined to the here-and-now; signs for caste/ethnic groups, for example, bear the traces of national law from the 1800s. My examination of *jāt* signs also showed that signers make creative use of signs' capacity to refer both to particular actions and to actions that are categorically undertaken by specific *jāts*.

Despite the high degree of conventionality and inter-signer intelligibility, interactions in local sign are characterized by a patchwork of understanding, not-understanding, and mis-understanding, as examined in Chapter 4. I established that both not-understanding and mis-understanding arise out of partial understanding, and that addressees' prior knowledge and capacity to piece together elements of signers' narratives are a critical part of understanding. The role of addressees as well as the fact that verbal mood appears to be a particularly problematic semantic/grammatical domain also raised questions about how as analysts we should theorize the relationship between signers and systems. Finally, Chapter 4 suggested that as a result of repeated frustrations and communicative failures, (some) signers are considered to be unreliable narrators, even liars, and that negative evaluations of communicating in sign leak into general conceptions of what it is to be deaf.

Chapter 5 returned us to the ethical questions raised in Chapter 1 by NSL signers' powerful critiques of deaf-hearing relationships and to their claim that people can communicate without a fully shared language if, and only if, they are willing to do so. In order to ground this claim in habitual, embodied action, I tracked eye gaze, sign production, evaluations, and translations as modes that both display and enact shifting ethical orientations to signed communication. Focusing on eye gaze in particular, I showed that when hearing people refuse to

look at signers, they both show that they consider, and literally make, communication impossible. The habitual gaze of willing participants, in contrast, renders deaf people into intelligible Speakers in the sociological sense.

In both linguistic anthropology and Deaf Studies, it is axiomatic that language is the cornerstone of social and cultural processes, the medium through which we make ourselves, and are made into, persons. The previous chapters both affirm and radically challenge this view. While, as I noted in Chapter 2, I have not sought to strictly distinguish between a language and a system, my ethnographic and interactional analyses have made it clear that local sign in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe is not exactly like (spoken or signed) language as we tend to both conceptualize and experience it. However we account for this difference, it has real consequences. While some signers are more frequently mis-understood than others, all local signers are vulnerable to the contingencies of interaction, to the possibility that even a close relative may not understand, or that an Addressee will turn away. While it might be argued that these characteristics are features of all linguistic encounters, I think it is important to recognize how local sign is both distinct from and representative of communication more generally. Perhaps more so than in other cases or perhaps like all communicative modes, local signing practices ultimately reveal the fundamentally social and ethical nature of intelligible signs.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Transcription Conventions for Sign

CAPS REGULAR	signed utterance (NSL or local/natural)
CAPS BOLD	used to mark NSL signs when both NSL and local/natural sign are used
<i>italics</i>	spoken utterance
[brackets]	[overlap in two or more adjoining turns]
(regular)	description of co-accompanying movements or signs, possible meanings
/	links simultaneously articulated speech/sign or simultaneous signs
+	repetition of the immediately preceding sign(s)
###	sign(s) that I do not know how to gloss or describe
%%	speech that I cannot hear clearly
(?)	indicates that I am unsure about my gloss of preceding sign
PRO-#(-Name)	pronominal indexical; # specifies person, name given for 2 nd and 3 rd person
PT	point (excluding pronominals)
CAPS-loc/dir	lower-case describes direction or location of sign or point
Q	local/natural sign that functions as WH-questions

Appendix 2: Nepali Transcription and Transliteration

I use the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST) for spoken and written Nepali, with the following modifications, most of which are common among Nepal scholars:

Vowels

I do not differentiate between long and short *i* and *u*.

I write $\tilde{x}$ for nasalized vowels, where *x* is any vowel.

Consonants

I do not differentiate between IAST $\acute{s}$ and IAST $\grave{s}$; for both I write *sh*.

I write *ch* for IAST *c* and *chh* for IAST *ch*.

I write *ng* for $\dot{n}$.

I write *w* for *v*.

An American English-based (more precisely, a South Floridian/Northern Californian American English-based) guide to pronouncing transcribed/transliterated Nepali is as follows:

Vowels

a as in *holly*, sometimes as in *about*

$\bar{a}$ between *mat* and *father*

e as in *melt*

i as in *see*, sometimes as in *sit*

o as in *cone*

u as in *mood*

ai as in *bile*

au between *endow* and *below*

$\bar{a}i$ as in *my*

Consonants

Pronounced (roughly) as in the above-specified variety of English, though note the following:

j is pronounced quite like the final sound in *garage*

d, *t*, *dh*, and *th* are dental (the tip of the tongue touches the back of the teeth)

$\dot{d}$, $\dot{t}$, $\dot{dh}$, and $\dot{th}$ are retroflex (the tip of the tongue touches the top of the mouth)

th is pronounced with aspiration (and does not sound like *then* or *thin*)

sh and *ph* are pronounced (or sound to Americans) sometimes like aspirated *s* and *p* and sometimes as in *shale* and *pharmacy*

ch is pronounced like *cheese* but without aspiration

All other combinations of *xh*, where *x* is any consonant, are pronounced with audible aspiration.

Appendix 3: Statistics

This appendix is not intended to provide accurate numerical counts of deaf people or NSL users in Nepal. Instead the purpose is to indicate the range of definitions and numbers encountered when searching for such counts. It is worth noting that the last time I looked for statistics on deaf people in the US, I found similar “statistical disarray” (Green 2003:18).

Report	Year	# deaf/ hearing disabled	total population	signers	% of deaf who sign
Sample Survey	1980	140,500	n/a	n/a	n/a
Situation Analysis	1999	48,300	n/a	n/a	n/a
2001 Census	2001	25,540	22,736,934	5743	22.5%
2011 Census	2011	88,743	26,494,504	4476	5.0%

Table 30: Statistics on deaf people in Nepal

Figures in bold are given directly in the named report or can be calculated on the basis of addition only. Figures in regular font have been calculated.

Sample Survey and Situation Analysis are sources cited in Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA 2002) as follows:

Report on Sample Survey of Disabled Persons in Nepal 1980, Katmandu [sic].

A Situation Analysis on Disability in Nepal, 1999, Volume I, National Planning Commission Secretariat, UNICEF (unpublished).

I was not able to find the original sources, so I have not listed them in References Cited.

The JICA report (2002) is listed in References cited.

Sources for census data are Government of Nepal (2012a) and Government of Nepal (n.d.), both listed in References Cited.

The above documents use the following terms and make the following notes:

JICA (2002:3): “Hearing impairment” and “Hearing disability,” which “includes both hearing and speaking disabilities.”

2001 Census (Table 23): “Deaf.”

2011 Census (2.12, Table 24): “Deaf/Hard to hearing” and “Deaf-Blind.” (The number provided is based on addition of values for these two categories [79,307 and 9,436, respectively].)

2001 Census (Table 19): “Nepali Sign Language.”

2011 Census (Table 21): “Sign Language,” records 717 “urban” signers and 3,759 “rural” signers.

Appendix 4: A Preliminary List of Conventional Signs in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe

This list tends toward conservatism: I have listed only signs that are either directly attested in videos or fieldnotes in ways that prove or strongly imply conventionality or that I can cite myself on the basis of having learned conventional signs. I would be very surprised if there were not many more signs that are conventional to at least some subset of signers. I have also not included in this list the signs for caste and ethnic groups (see Chapter 3). Some of the signs listed, moreover, can serve multiple functions (e.g., the Q sign can be invoked not only to mark an utterance as a question, but also to indicate an affective stance).

Content Words

ABROAD/FOREIGN.COUNTRY

AFRAID (TO.BE)

AIRPLANE

ANGRY/GRUMPY

BAZAAR/MARKET.DAY

BIRD

BREAD/GRIND (TO)

CHILDHOOD

CHYE 'THAT.SUCKS'

CLOTHING

COME/BRING (TO)

COOK (TO)

CORN

COW

CRY (TO)

CUT.NETTLES (TO)

DANCE (TO)

DARK/NIGHT

DARKSKIN/NED (TO BE)

DASAI (major holiday)

DEAD/DIE (TO)

DHANKUTA (2 var)

DOKO 'BASKET'

DRINK.*JĀD* 'GRAIN.ALCOHOL' (TO)

DRUMS (TO PLAY)

ELOPE (TO)

FAT (TO BE)

FEMALE, WOMAN

FEMALE.GENITALS (2 var)

FIGHT (TO)

FOOD/EAT (TO)

GO (TO)

GOAT

GRASS/CUT.GRASS (TO)

GRAZE.ANIMALS (TO), DRUNK (TO BE), SKINNY (TO BE), WALK.AROUND (TO)

HEY
HIT (TO)
HIT.SOMEONE.OF.PARTICULAR.BIRTH.ORDER
HOE (TO)
HOSPITAL, CLINIC
HOUSE, HOME
HUNGRY (TO BE)
HURT (TO)/PAIN (TO BE IN)
JĀḌ 'GRAIN.ALCOHOL'/MAKE. *JĀḌ* 'GRAIN.ALCOHOL' (2 var)
JEṬHĀ 'OLDEST' through KĀNCHĀ 'YOUNGEST'
LOOM/WEAVE (TO)
MALE.GENITALS
MALE/MAN (2 var)
MANY
MARRIAGE
MILL
MILLET
MONEY
MONKEY
NAMASTE
NEAR
numbers
OLD.PERSON
PIG
PIGEON
PLANT.MILLET.OR.RICE (TO)
PLOUGH (TO)
PRETTY/LIGHTSKINNED (TO BE) (sic)
QUICKLY
QUIET/NOT.ARGUE (TO)
RAIN
RAKSI 'DISTILLED.GRAIN.ALCOHOL'
RECENT.PAST
RELIGION, RESPECT
ROOSTER
SCHOOL
SCOLD/YELL.AT (TO)
SEE (TO)
SELFISH
SEX (TO HAVE)
SHY/ASHAMED (TO BE)
SLEEP
TALK/MEET.WITH
TARĀI 'PLAINS'
TEA
TELEPHONE

TELEVISION
TIE.CORN.INTO.BUNDLES.FOR.STORAGE (TO)
TIHAR (major holiday)
times of day (locations of sun)
UNCOOKED.RICE
VEGETABLES/COOK.VEGETABLES (TO)
WALK
WATER
WATER.FAUCET
WEED (TO)
WHAT.THE.HELL

Other Word Classes

FINISHED (aspectual)
NEG (2+ var)
Q (2 var)

There are also conventional head movements/facial expressions: an affirmative tilt to the side, a (polar) questioning tilt to the side, a (WH) questioning thrust upwards, a negative head shake, and perhaps others.

Endnotes

Notes I

¹ Coincidentally I did not end up writing in detail about most of the people who definitively told me not to use their real names, though I may do so in the future, respecting their wishes.

² This dictionary is a ubiquitous presence in NSL signers' homes and in NSL classes. Each sign is represented by an illustration, beautifully done by deaf artist Pratigya Shakya, that demonstrates the sign's physical articulation.

³ Slobin (2008:122) argues that the practice of glossing leads to "implicitly analyzing glosses rather than the signs that they are believed to represent." In theory I agree. Indeed the issues discussed in this section provide evidence in favor of his argument. Yet in practice I have found glossing to be far more practical both as a writer and a reader than alternative means of representation. For examples of such alternatives see Fishberg et al (2012), Farnell (1995) and Hoffmann-Dilloway (2008). See also Rosenthal (2009) for an analysis of the theoretical and ethical stakes involved in representing signed languages in academic texts.

⁴ Each sign, represented graphically, is accompanied by Nepali and English glosses. This trilingual format produces meta-pragmatic effects of equivalency and, more concretely, extraordinarily standard translations by deaf and hearing people from one language into another. These translations are sometimes inaccurate or confusing when taken out of the context of this circulation of equivalencies – and sometimes even within it, as when interpreters use NSL signs and Nepali words as if they were perfectly interchangeable.

⁵ More accurately, one hand mimics what a hand does when writing, while the other hand stands in for the object upon which one writes.

⁶ By typical of, I mean that for many if not most Nepalis, writing is first and foremost an activity that is learned and practiced in school. While other activities occur at school, and some(times) people use writing outside of school, the two are deeply and mutually associated. For more on typification, see Chapter 3.

⁷ This kind of gloss also makes transparent interesting parallels between (some?) signed languages and spoken languages in which

predicative sentences ... may also be used for denominative purposes. For example, the Chinook may say, *He runs into the water*, and may designate by this term *the mink*; or the Hupa may say *They have been laid together*, meaning by this term *a fire*. (Boas 1991:76, italics in original).

Thanks to Dan Slobin (2008 and p.c.) for making the more general point that while we tend to compare signed languages with the spoken languages that surround them, such as ASL and English, it may be more productive to compare, for example, ASL and Yucatec Maya. Doing so, Slobin argues, reveals typological similarities between signed and certain classes of spoken languages.

⁸ Abinash Pradhan, Shristi Ghimire, and Himali Dixit are all native Nepali speakers who are also fluent or native English speakers.

⁹ If in the future deaf Nepalis widely adopt *Deaf* to identify themselves, then I will re-evaluate my decision in light of both the topic about which I am writing and the audience for whom I am writing.

Introduction

¹ Map prepared by Karen Minkowski.

² A VDC is a small-scale administrative unit. At the time of writing, Nepal is comprised of 5 regions, divided into 14 zones, divided into 75 districts, divided into VDCs, divided into wards. Dhankuta, for example, where Maunabudhuk and Bodhe are located, is comprised of 35 VDCs plus the eponymous municipal headquarters. Nepal's future administrative division is one of the key issues at stake in framing the new constitution. Despite some agreement on the general outlines of a federal structure, there is significant controversy over the appropriate role of caste, ethnicity, language, and regional identity in determining and naming the composition of various proposed states.

³ The National Federation of the Deaf Nepal goes by the initials NDFN despite the order of words in order to distinguish itself from the National Federation of the Disabled – Nepal (NFDN). See Chapter 1 on the history of the NDFN, including name changes.

⁴ I use the term variability to distinguish what I mean from variation. Whereas the concept of variation is premised on systematicity (in other words, variation can be related to supra-individual factors), variability is opposed to systematicity. My use thus differs from Saussure's (1972:74).

⁵ While deaf people did not necessarily always understand each other either, I focus on deaf-hearing dynamics because outside of the NSL class deaf people communicate primarily with hearing people.

⁶ As I discuss in Chapters 1 and 2, this argument resonates with several other scholars' recent and ongoing studies.

⁷ This argument is closely related to my analysis of the role of moral orientation in *International Sign* (Green 2014). The similarities and differences between the ethnographic sites and the specific arguments are beyond the scope of the dissertation.

⁸ I sought to meet deaf people who were not NSL signers in the context of an NSL class for practical and ethical reasons. Practically speaking, doing so enabled me to easily contact and regularly meet with a number of deaf people. Ethically speaking, because of the history of (foreign-led) development in Nepal, the extractive nature of (foreigner-conducted) research in general, and the frequent stories of OPPRESSION (glossed SUPPRESSION in the NSL dictionary) told to me by deaf people about themselves and even more so about deaf people outside of deaf society, it made sense to me to work with non-NSL signers to whom the NDFN was itself reaching out.

Notes II

¹ This event and the quote are reconstructed from memory.

² Fieldnotes (hereafter FN) 4/30/2010.

³ FN 05/02/2010.

⁴ Quoted from FN 10/02/2009; quoted utterance translated from NSL and recorded in English. Unless otherwise noted, it should be assumed that *all* quotations from fieldnotes were recorded after the fact in their translated form.

⁵ Quoted from FN 10/02/2009.

⁶ Bharat Venkat (p.c.) reminds me that "to assume that you're always failing assumes that the other is never failing – in that sense, you retain a certain privileging of the self as capable of failure, while the other is not." This point is an interesting one that I hope to think about further.

⁷ I have not used the term *native* signer here because none of my interlocutors learned NSL at

home or as babies/toddlers (see Chapter 1). I am not, of course, arguing against deaf Nepalis' claim that NSL is their *ĀPHNO* 'OWN' language.

⁸ Not all Nepali speakers in Nepal are native, or even fluent, speakers, but I am simplifying in order to point to the contrast between Nepali and NSL language communities.

⁹ I am indebted on this important point to Eliza Greenwood (p.c.), who pushed me to understand the fluent signer as interpreting not only for the new signer but in fact for both of us.

¹⁰ Hearing family members do not always understand their deaf, NSL-signing deaf relatives either, whether the latter uses NSL or natural sign. As I argue in Chapter 4, however, NSL signers know that another NSL signer would be able to understand.

¹¹ What such a dead end looks like – what constitutes communicative breakdown or failure or for that matter success – is also situational, depending on the interlocutors and/or the analytic framework. I noticed, for example, that when reference faltered, I tended to try to pursue its resolution; Bhola would seize on something his interlocutor had said that he *had* understood and turn it into a joke, thus keeping the interaction going; hearing people would frequently lose interest (see Chapter 4 for more detail).

¹² I use the term *informant* to mean someone who helps to form and inform me.

¹³ Goldin-Meadow (2003:19-20, italics in original) discusses the resilient and fragile properties of language, which she defines as those that are “*unaffected* by a given manipulation” to the “environmental conditions under which language-learning takes places” and those that “will *not* survive a particular manipulation,” respectively. My usage of the term fragile, while inspired by hers, departs from it considerably. Natural and local signing practices are fragile because the number of conventional forms and conventional ways to combine them are relatively limited. Moreover social and linguistic knowledge of these forms (including combinations) and the capacity to produce unconventional ones are unevenly distributed across both deaf and hearing people. Even more importantly, as I discuss in Chapter 5, these patterns seem to enable hearing people to easily disengage from or not enter into conversation. Communication itself is thus fragile.

¹⁴ The difference between portraying a familiar and unfamiliar object is quite striking. In late 2010 I gave a few lectures about my research to deaf and hearing audiences in Kathmandu, and to a group of deaf BA students in Delhi. When lecturing to NSL signers, I merely had to invoke their own meta-linguistic category NATURAL.SIGN. I could then discuss the particular circumstances and features of local sign in Maunabudhuk. In Delhi, although I can't remember if the several NSL signers present translated NATURAL.SIGN for their non-Nepali peers or if I explained the kind of signing situation that I was talking about via examples, the general category was, again, entirely recognizable. When lecturing to hearing people (both Nepali and American), in contrast, I had to provide detailed background on scholarly categories and on different modes of signing in Nepal, before I began to characterize local sign.

¹⁵ Saussure's (1972:11) famous talking heads model certainly oversimplifies the process of communicative meaning-making, but seeing someone try, and fail, to make someone else understand *in his mind* what was so clearly *in her mind* has made me realize how much we take for granted when we critique such a model.

Chapter 1

¹ I know of exactly one deaf person, a young girl, whose primary language is NSL and who has

learned it from birth.

² I have only an English-language version of Acharya's unpublished "History of the Deaf in Nepal," which is a "rough translation" done by Erika Hoffmann-Dilloway and Dambar Chemjong, provided to me by Upendra Khanal. Therefore I am unable to comment on the striking use of the third person "them" rather than "us" and for that matter I do not know if the original was composed in NSL and translated into Nepali by an interpreter or written in Nepali by Acharya.

³ Quoted from FN summer 2006, reproduced in Green 2007.

⁴ Acharya (1997) notes that a "deaf cultural association was established in Rupandehi" 6 years earlier but argues that "because its organizational structure was very weak" and because "it came to be registered [with the government] ... 19 years after its establishment" (in comparison, KAD was registered 10 years after its founding), KAD should be considered "a trailblazer."

⁵ All interviews cited in this dissertation were conducted by me.

⁶ Bikash is not mentioned in Acharya's (1997) list of the KAD founding members. I assume Bikash's residence in Lalitpur, which is contiguous to but administratively separate from Kathmandu, precluded him from formal inclusion in KAD.

⁷ Translated from mixed NSL and International Sign interview, video 07/2007 (date unrecorded). The interview was conducted in 2007 in Madrid, Spain, at the World Federation of the Deaf World Congress, an affair so intensely international in its linguistic practices that when Bikash and I later discussed his language use during the interview, he expressed surprise that he had used any NSL signs at all.

⁸ In the mid-1990s there was an intense rivalry between two national-level organizations: what was then known as the National Federation of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (NFDH) and the National Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (NADH). The NADH eventually became an "affiliated member" of the NFDH. The details of this split are somewhat opaque to me (see Sharma 2061 [Nepali calendar] and Prasad 2003), but the tensions that precipitated and followed the split continue to trouble deaf Nepalis many years later, although less so in more recent years. In late 2011 or early 2012 the NFDH was renamed the National Federation of the Deaf Nepal (NDFN), dropping all mention of "hard of hearing" but maintaining the NSL name sign, logo, founding date, and membership structure. Also note that I attempt to keep NADH's activities separate from NFDH/NDFN's for purposes of historical accuracy but refer to the latter only by its current name for purposes of readability.

⁹ At this time there were also 4 associations in the process of affiliation. I do not know if/how many exist that are officially and/or socially non-affiliated.

¹⁰ INGOs also directly support some district-level associations, which can be a source of tension. As one member of the Lalitpur Association of the Deaf noted, it has not been able to secure foreign support in the way that KAD has, and has suffered in terms of the activities and resources it offers to its members.

¹¹ Translated from NSL political speech, video 10/08/2009.

¹² Hundley (2011) lists 18 deaf schools and 133 deaf classes, and offers a map of educational facilities with all but 5 districts highlighted. She mentions two types of deaf classrooms: self-contained and inclusive. The former refers to "a self-contained class in which the deaf students (usually of varying grades and ages) remain in the deaf classroom for the entire day and receive their instruction as a group" while in the latter, "deaf students are instructed with their hearing

peers at least half the time, and given specialized, remedial education in Nepali Sign Language the remaining time. When not teaching, the teachers of the deaf go from class to class interpreting and explaining difficult concepts” (ibid). In 2012 a deaf Nepali in a leadership position reported on Facebook that according to the Ministry of Education there were 169 deaf resource classes (deaf classes in hearing schools). I am unable to say whether the numerical difference represents an increase in classes; a difference in definitions (note the different terminology); missed classes by the American researcher; over-reporting by the Ministry; or something else.

¹³ Translated from NSL interview, video 08/15/2012.

¹⁴ My impression is that the number, and perhaps percentage, of deaf teachers has been rising over the past decade, maybe as a result of increasing numbers of deaf SLC (School Leaving Certificate) graduates along with (hopefully) changing attitudes among hearing administrators.

¹⁵ Translated from NSL political speech, video 10/08/2009.

¹⁶ Translated from NSL political speech, video 10/08/2009. (The ellipses represent the statements about powerful Nepalis’ deaf children that I have put earlier for the sake of clarity. Other than that I have not changed the order or left anything out from the excerpt beginning with “In the period” and ending with “will develop.”)

¹⁷ For statements such as this one that entailed strife between deaf associates, I do not name the signer. In this particular case, a reader with knowledge of the social field in question might be able to attribute authorship (whether correctly or not), because he made similar statements on multiple occasions in front of different groups of people, which is why I have chosen to include it at all).

¹⁸ FN summer 2006, reproduced in Green 2007.

¹⁹ FN summer 2006, reproduced in Green 2007.

²⁰ FN 07/29/2007. At least at the meeting, this signer seemed to accept another signer’s response consisting of three points: 1) all languages change, 2) fingerspelling had influenced some signs (leading to initialization), and 3) the changes were not so problematic for people who had not left the country.

²¹ FN summer 2006, reproduced in Green 2007.

²² Green 2003 calls LONG SIGN “Signed Nepali,” a term Khanal (2013) adopts and uses alongside “Sign Supported Nepali.” (I think these two terms actually designate somewhat different practices.) Thank you to Peter Graif who many years ago pointed out the NSL meta-terms LONG and SHORT SIGN, which I then realized were in frequent use.

²³ Some NSL signers’ lexicon also includes the sign WFD.SIGN, referring specifically to cross- or international sign influenced by or in the context of the World Federation of the Deaf and its somewhat conventionalized set of “international” signs. Finally, NSL has a conventional sign that I gloss as POINTING.SIGN that is used for (some forms of) natural sign. The sign POINTING.SIGN highlights how deaf Nepalis who do not know NSL rely heavily on pointing (see Chapter 3). POINTING.SIGN is a somewhat derogatory sign; while NSL signers do not hesitate to say that they use NATURAL.SIGN, I have only once seen someone refer to *himself* as using POINTING.SIGN to communicate with non-NSL signers.

²⁴ Some deaf and hearing foreigners, such as those involved in INGOs (and anthropologists!), learn NSL to varying degrees; communication between them and NSL signers would not be considered natural sign.

²⁵ The sign can also mean NATURE in the sense of the sun, stars, mountains, etc.

²⁶ Peter Graif (p.c.) argues that signers also use NATURAL.SIGN to characterize the signing practices of deaf NSL signers in their teens and 20s sign that, as mentioned in the text, often differ dramatically from those of the older generations of NSL signers and go beyond the officially sanctioned signs in dictionaries (as do the practices of older signers, as we have seen). I have observed this use of NATURAL.SIGN one time, in a situation where I would have expected to see the sign SHORT SIGN used, as the type of signing in question was being contrasted with a style highly influenced by Nepali (i.e. LONG SIGN). In that long sign is strongly associated with (hearing) teachers, to describe young deaf people's own intra-group communication as natural sign accords very much with the sense of signing that is not taught. Along the same lines, the kind of signing commonly called short sign is also frequently called DEAF. It is high praise, for example, when NSL signers say that a hearing person signs DEAF SAME 'like a deaf person.'

²⁷ Translated from NSL interview, video 10/04/2010.

²⁸ Translated from NSL interview, video 08/15/2012.

²⁹ The original citation for Goldin-Meadow, Franklin and Mylander is dated 2005, but the reference cited in the article is for 2007, so I have changed the date in the quotation.

³⁰ SIGN usually functions as a verb that may be inflected in various ways; thus the reference is achieved verbally.

³¹ SIGN can also mean a name sign (signed NAME SIGN, SIGN NAME, or simply SIGN) or a signed lexical item (as in "what's the sign for X?").

³² Translated from NSL interview, video 08/15/2012.

³³ Translated from interview, video 10/04/2010. The reported natural sign conversation is embedded within a longer NSL-medium interview. Full discussion of the mechanisms Bhola uses to distinguish between what he said and what Laxman said are beyond the scope of this dissertation but it is worth noting that he does not appear to use changes in torso position or eye gaze to role shift as signers do in ASL and other signed languages (though he does use eye gaze to set off the reported conversation from comments about it). Bhola first names his addressee using Laxman's name sign, then reports his (Bhola's) own first utterance. The next utterances follow in rapid succession and are attributed to their signer primarily through the content.

³⁴ The NSL WHAT and the natural sign I have glossed Q are identical.

³⁵ Insofar as natural sign and home sign refer to overlapping kinds of communicative practices, NSL signers' insight into the *skill* required to communicate in natural sign brings into question some of the methodologies used in studies of home sign. In Spaepen et al (2011:3167), for example, researchers claim that homesigners

do not consistently produce gestures that accurately present the cardinal values of sets containing more than three items. Moreover, they cannot reliably make the number of items in a second set match the number in a target set if the sets contain more than three items.

They thus argue that

[a] cultural context in which exact number representations are valued, and a social context in which one's communicative partners share a counting routine and an associated system of exact number concepts, are not enough to scaffold the creation of a count routine or representations of exact number that are flexible and generalize across domains.

Recognizing the possibility that "failure on our tasks might have been a result of our inability to communicate the task successfully, rather than the homesigners' lack of conceptual knowledge," the authors note that "the first author, who knows no sign language, tested the deaf ASL signers

[who are control subjects] using the same gestures and techniques she used to convey the task goals to the homesigners” (ibid:3163). The question of “numerical cognition” (ibid) is beyond my area of specialization, though I did perform informal elicitation of counting routines in 2010 with signers in Maunabudhuk and I hope at some point to examine the data. What I want to point to here are the underlying assumptions about what home sign is and what skills are necessary to communicate *with* home signers. I suggest that even if a non-signing researcher (who as far as I can tell from the internet is European and has lived in the US for at least some time) could communicate clearly to American ASL signers, she might not have the skill to communicate with Nicaraguan home signers. We might wonder whether the home signers would have performed better had a Nicaraguan hearing person or a deaf user of ISN (Idioma de Señas de Nicaragua, Nicaraguan Sign Language) communicated the task to them, or whether the “unschooled, hearing Nicaraguans,” who were presumably communicated to in Spanish, would also have failed had a non-Nicaraguan gestured to them. When helping out Bhola in the class in Maunabudhuk, I noticed on several occasions in Maunabudhuk that signers failed to understand my instructions and comprehended his (e.g. FN 05/06/2010).

³⁶ As I explain in Chapter 3, in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe local sign the sign Q functions for all WH-questions.

³⁷ I have simplified the timing and exact interlay of our overlapping signing here.

³⁸ Translated from NSL interview, video 10/04/2010.

³⁹ Translated from NSL interview, video 08/15/2012.

⁴⁰ Transcribed and translated from interview, video 08/15/2012.

⁴¹ Transcribed and translated from interview, video 08/15/2012.

⁴² Translated from NSL conversation, video 04/2010 (date unrecorded). This conversation took place between two NSL signers; I was not present and had requested of one of the participants that he film himself and his (informed) friend.

⁴³ In the US, I am more likely to be asked *why* or *how* I learned ASL.

⁴⁴ A name sign is a sign specific to a person. A few name signs are based on the semantics of their spoken name (the sign *MAYA* ‘LOVE’ for the name *Maya* ‘love’ for example). Most name signs, however, are based on a physical attribute (large lips) or habit (frequent prayer) or on the first manual alphabet letter of the person’s fingerspelled/written name (the latter more common among the generations raised after the development of the manual alphabet). Note that people may share a spoken/written name but not a name sign or (less commonly) vice versa.

⁴⁵ Translated from NSL conversation, video 4/2010 (date unrecorded).

⁴⁶ Translated from NSL conversation, video 4/2010 (date unrecorded).

⁴⁷ Translated from NSL, recorded in FN 11/7/2009. Obviously our (shared) assumptions about what it looks like and means to be mentally retarded are themselves worth thinking about more closely but doing so is beyond the scope of the dissertation.

⁴⁸ Quoted from FN 10.09.2009, emphasis added.

⁴⁹ And not only deaf people link deaf intervention with physical cleanliness: when I visited Maunabudhuk in the summer of 2012, almost two years after the end of the NSL program there, my closest hearing friend said that the deaf former students – two in particular – dressed better and were cleaner than before the NSL program. (FN 07/31/2012.)

⁵⁰ The sign pictured in Figure 65 and glossed here SUPPRESSED is glossed in the NSL dictionary with the Nepali *daman* and the English ‘suppression.’ The Students’ Companion

Dictionary (2061) defines *daman* as follows: “subjugation; subjection; suppression.” Throughout this chapter I sometimes gloss or translate the sign SUPPRESS/ED/ION and sometimes OPPRESS/ED/ION, based on the context of use.



Figure 65: SUPPRESSION

Image from NSL dictionary (NFDH 2003)

⁵¹ Translated from NSL interview, video 03/23/2010.

⁵² Translated from NSL interview, video 03/23/2010.

⁵³ It is important to note, however, that in terms of overtly political rhetoric, the emphasis has shifted somewhat over the decade in which I have been spending time in deaf Nepal. While achieving NSL access for all deaf people is still a key aspect of the political agenda, in the last few years there has been growing attention paid to such issues as institutionalizing the right to interpreters and changing the laws to allow deaf people to hold drivers' licenses. Nevertheless, NSL still holds a prime place; Raghav Bir Joshi, who was the country's only deaf member of the now-dissolved first Constituent Assembly, proudly announced at the 2009 NDFN General Assembly that the committee on which he served had agreed that NSL should be written into the constitution as one of Nepalis' mother "tongues" (*mātribhāshā*, lit. 'mother language').

⁵⁴ Transcribed and translated from NSL political speech, video 10/08/2009.

⁵⁵ Indeed this utterance is an exemplar of short sign.

⁵⁶ In addition, the Gandaki Association of the Deaf in Pokhara has also offered mobile NSL classes for parents of deaf children, and the Naxal School has held classes for parents on site (it may still). Perhaps other schools do as well.

⁵⁷ Current funding sources include Deafway (England), the Swedish National Association of the Deaf (SDR), and the Nepali government. Swedish-funded classes, such as the one in Maunabudhuk, used to run only 6 months. During a return visit to Nepal in summer 2012, Dipawali Sharma, a staff member at NDFN, reported proudly that the NDFN had renegotiated the funding so that all the programs could run for equal periods of time (10 months).

⁵⁸ These classes target adults. Deaf teachers do their best to encourage parents to send deaf children to deaf schools; see Chapter 2.

⁵⁹ Translated and paraphrased from NSL interview, video 10/04/2010.

⁶⁰ Many participants do not gain competency in NSL.

⁶¹ Pigg's and Liechty's ethnographic studies offer nuanced analyses of how in particular contexts

people align themselves with “traditional” and “modern” things and values.

⁶² When talking with me, many Nepalis lamented that Nepal isn’t like America, but perhaps the place of comparison would have been different were I not American (thanks to Lawrence Cohen, p.c., on this point). The question of Nepal’s complex relationship to India, which is deemed both superior and inferior to Nepal, is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

⁶³ The rural gets homogenized because it is viewed from a distance (Pigg 1996:193), and this distance is often (imagined as) literal such that the generic village is always seen as far away. I have seen NDFN memoranda that characterize NSL outreach locations in general as “remote” (in relation, we assume, to Kathmandu, or perhaps other cities) even though many sites can be reached by bus – this in a country where many villages take hours, days, even a week to reach from the closest bus route. Somewhat contradictorily, I remember, the director of a foreign NGO once described deaf teachers as being willing to go only as far as the end of a bus line, a somewhat hyperbolic statement as I know of several sites that can only be reached on foot.

⁶⁴ I want to be clear that neither Pigg nor Liechty are arguing that differences in places are “merely” discursive, or that such differences do not matter. In an example from my fieldwork, a young woman in Maunabudhuk was transported from the VDC health clinic to a hospital several hours away when her appendicitis burst because the local clinic wasn’t equipped to take care of her. The fact that she lived in the bazaar (and did not have to be carried from a farm to the health clinic), that Maunabudhuk has a health clinic and an ambulance at all, and that the hospital was several hours (not several days) away were of material, life-and-death import. Similarly, children move away from their parents and parents away from their children in order to pursue educational and employment opportunities that are unavailable at home.

⁶⁵ Unfortunately I did not record this incident in my fieldnotes.

⁶⁶ After teaching the class in Maunabudhuk, Bhola resumed his own education at a deaf school in Biratnagar, but had not done so at the time discussed here.

⁶⁷ The NSL dictionary glosses this sign with the English WANDER. This gloss has resulted in charming SMSes sent to me by deaf friends about how they “wander the city,” in an example of what Leah Cohen (1994:31) calls the “involuntary poetry” of non-native writers.

⁶⁸ Bhola used the sign BAZAAR at times, but did not take it up here, limiting his comparisons to the more categorical village and city.

⁶⁹ Translated from NSL interview, video 10/04/2010.

⁷⁰ At a deaf picnic where a fight occurred between two deaf men, one friend told me how ashamed she felt that her SOCIETY was there, referring to an intra-caste social group. I remember being struck both by her shame and by her use of the sign SOCIETY to refer to a specific, but non-deaf, group.

⁷¹ Bhola also does not explicitly state that his imagined city friends would be NSL signers. When he says that when his friends went to work, he would also work, it is hard to tell whether he is narrating (WORK, NOT-GO, WORK ‘When they went to work and couldn’t go around together, I would have my own work’) or using reported speech (“WORK, NOT-GO.” WORK ‘When my friends said, “I can’t go around, I have work,” I would have my own work’). If the latter, then use of the NSL WORK (which is not a natural sign the way NOT-GO can be) presupposes that the friends are NSL signers.

⁷² FN 02/06/2010.

⁷³ This skit suggests strongly that in the patterned oppositions urban/developed/modern vs.

rural/undeveloped/traditional, men are assigned to the first set and women to the second, which accords with Liechty (2001), who argues that (middle-class urban) women are affected more strongly than men by the paradoxes of modernity's demands and desires. They are, for example, expected to wear "modern" (foreign) clothing, but when they stray from "traditional" clothing their morals become suspect.

⁷⁴ Translated and paraphrased from NSL political speech, video 10/08/2009.

⁷⁵ These equations get naturalized, as evidenced by the mismatch between a speech given in NSL, in which a deaf signer described how deaf people were treated badly in unspecified locales, and its interpretation into spoken Nepali, which included the phrase *gāũ tirā* 'out in the villages' (lit. 'toward the village'). I have no doubt that my fieldnotes similarly reflect my own internalization of common-sense spatial tropes, which is one of the reasons that throughout the dissertation I am careful to note the source (fieldnotes, on-the-fly transcription, video, etc) of quoted utterances.

⁷⁶ It is interesting to note that when discussing natural sign in his home district in the interview quoted above, Tsering mentioned a deaf acquaintance who, his NSL having declined, used more natural sign. There was no suggestion that the acquaintance's *mental* skills had declined, perhaps because many people in the area where he lives use natural sign, according to Tsering.

⁷⁷ The ODP as a project framed elderly people as still capable of partaking in deaf sociality and benefitting from it. In contrast, one NSL teacher I know was told by a hearing advisor to work only with students under the age of 50, presumably because they would be the most able to learn.

⁷⁸ Translated from NSL speech, video 10/27/2010. The ellipses represent a short break from the speech into a different frame (a pause for an interpreter to catch up and a comment that someone in the audience needed to sit down).

⁷⁹ Interestingly Bhola did not seem perturbed by the implicit message that one could and should prevent congenital deafness when possible, though to be fair I don't know how carefully he read the entire wall of writing. Taylor (1997) offers insight into how as a hearing child of two self-identified Deaf Americans, she had complicated feelings about "preventing" deafness in Nepal.

⁸⁰ Hoffmann-Dilloway (2011:286) states that "[m]embers of Nepal's Deaf Associations have mapped" the distinction made in English between *deaf* and *Deaf*, defined respectively as "indicat[ing] the inability to hear" and "indicat[ing] identification as a member of an ethnolinguistic category," onto the distinction between "*latto* [sic] (a pejorative term meaning dumb in the literal and figurative senses) and *bahiro* [sic] (a more neutral term for nonhearing persons)." The problem with this kind of claim, for which no ethnographic evidence is provided, is that it erases the specificity of deaf Nepali experiences and discourses, reducing them to what can be mapped onto American or Western tropes. Peter Graif (p.c.) also points out that *bahirā* is if anything a term meant to focus on the bodily fact of not being able to hear, shorn of the connotations of *lāṭo*.

⁸¹ *Lāṭo* is sometimes rendered in speech as *lāṭā*. According to Hutt (1997:24, 22) in modern literary Nepali, which "reflects, by and large, the educated speech of those higher castes in Kathmandu who have it as their mother tongue," *-ā* is a nominal pluralizer of nouns ending in *-o*. The feminine of *lāṭo* is *lāṭi*. In common speech, *lāṭā-lāṭi* is frequently employed as a plural. In all the varieties of Nepali represented in my fieldwork, *-o* and *-i* distinguished gender-neutral or masculine from feminine. In some varieties, however, the alternation between *-o* and *-ā* appears to be meaningless (as in *jeṭho* 'oldest-born male' vs. *jeṭhā* 'oldest-born male').

⁸² I have seen *bahiro* listed as a derogatory term and *bahirā* as the appropriate term (perhaps *bahirā* does not connote inattentiveness) so I use only the latter except when quoting.

⁸³ While these phrases sound awkward translated into English, they are examples of a highly productive Nepali construction. ‘Workers’ for example, are often called *kām garne mānchhe* (lit. work-doing people).

⁸⁴ Nevertheless the grammatical negativity of these phrases inspired the title of my undergraduate thesis: “Hands that Speak” (Green 2003).

⁸⁵ FN 07/13/2008. I wrote the question and answer down in Nepali several days after the fact, noting that they were asked in what I then called “quite formal/Nepali-style sign.” While the time lag between event and recording means that the transcription is probably not exact, it nevertheless indicates that long sign sometimes functions as an official code in spaces where short sign usually predominates. Phillip Waters (p.c.) describes the relationship between long and short NSL as diglossic.

⁸⁶ I say “appeared or were assumed to have” to emphasize that evaluating another person’s hearing abilities is a social and subjective activity.

⁸⁷ Deaf and hearing people do notice and comment on differences in abilities to speak and hear. See Chapter 2.

⁸⁸ Transcribed and translated from Nepali conversation, video 06/18/2010. Transcribed by Shristi Ghimire, translated by Himali Dixit and me.

⁸⁹ Transcribed and translated from Nepali speech, video 10/27/2010. Transcribed by Abinash Pradhan, translated by me.

⁹⁰ Thank you to Himali Dixit for helping me to figure out the Nepali phrase (I had transcribed it incorrectly in my fieldnotes) and for refining my understanding of what it means.

⁹¹ *Rahechha* (or its negative form *rahenachha*) is used with information that is new, surprising, and/or contradictory to expectation. When I returned to Maunabudhuk a year and a half after concluding my fieldwork there, for example, many people exclaimed with pleasure, “*birsinubhayo rahechha* ‘she didn’t forget after all’” and “*samjhanubhayo rahechha* ‘it turns out she has remembered.’” (FN 07/31/2010)

⁹² Translated from Nepali, recorded in FN 07/26/2010.

⁹³ FN 07/26/2010 & 07/27/2010; quoted speech recorded in Nepali.

⁹⁴ The third method functions as quoted speech, imputing to hearing people a habit of using this speech/gesture combination.

⁹⁵ This sign is glossed SUPPRESSION but I have only ever seen it used when accompanying the mouthing of *lāṭo*.

⁹⁶ When the sign is articulated, it is also often accompanied by a mouthing or mouth gesture. Upendra Khanal (2013) claims that it is a mouth gesture, i.e., that its movement “does not represent a [word in] spoken language,” and describes it as what the mouth would do if pronouncing the sound “daap.” My interpretation is different. I think that this mouth movement is a true mouthing, corresponding to the word “deaf” and borrowed from foreign signers. British and American signers are the most likely source for an English mouthing, but deaf Nepalis have had at least as much sustained contact with signers from Denmark, Sweden, and Italy. I do not know whether signers from these countries use a similar mouthing. If so then perhaps they are the source of the borrowing.

⁹⁷ Translated from NSL political speech, video 10/09/2009.

⁹⁸ Translated from NSL political speech, video 10/09/2009.

⁹⁹ I say requisite because many deaf can and do emit meaningful sounds (speech or otherwise) but not exactly as hearing people do.

¹⁰⁰ In NSL the subject is frequently dropped, as it is here in the original. I usually translate statements about deaf people made by deaf people using the first-person plural (as mentioned in X, the sign DEAF can function like a first-person plural pronoun), but since Bhola has just pointed to the village's own deaf residents, the third-person plural is more appropriate.

¹⁰¹ Translated from NSL speech, video 10/27/2010.

¹⁰² Translated from NSL political speech, video 10/09/2009.

¹⁰³ As noted in footnote X, I have only a rough translation of Acharya's manifesto. I have taken the liberty here to use the word *lāto* twice, whereas the "original" (that is, the translation) uses the word *lāto* in the first instance and the English *dumb* in the second, which I am certain was employed as a translation for *lāto*. I have also used the spelling I employ elsewhere rather than the spelling employed in the translation.

¹⁰⁴ Transcribed and translated from Nepali speech, video 10/27/2010. Transcribed by Abinash Pradhan and me. Translated by me, with small changes suggested by Shristi Ghimire.

¹⁰⁵ That I asked her this of my own accord indexes the complex positions I came to inhabit as a hearing foreigner who worked closely with NSL signers. I knew that Bhola had not seen the woman's comment, and I also knew, from previous conversations, that it was important to him that people not use that word. By asking her myself not to say what she had said, I skipped the part where I would tell him what she had said and he would tell me to tell her not to say that. While in the United States, this skipping would probably be viewed as inappropriate, in Nepal, and particularly in the daily, bi-directional interpretation Bhola and I engaged in, my initiative was unlikely to draw censure (and more likely to draw approval, in the sense that I had taken up the moral imperatives of deaf society). On a theoretical level this instance points to the clarity with and degree to which relationships wherein mediated/interpreted communication plays a dominant role call into question the singularity of an individual's voice.

¹⁰⁶ Translated from Nepali, recorded in FN 08/02/2010.

¹⁰⁷ These names are pseudonyms because of the potentially controversial nature of the conversation and because using pronouns would be too confusing.

¹⁰⁸ Translated from NSL, recorded in FN 11/19/2009.

¹⁰⁹ Translated from NSL political speech, video 10/08/2009.

¹¹⁰ Translated from NSL political speech, video 10/08/2009.

¹¹¹ These literal and figurative meanings are not confined to the Nepali context. In a recent protest in Bosnia and Herzegovina that I learned about via the Facebook posting of a deaf acquaintance from Australia who I met in Nepal (a great example of how deaf-related news circulates), "deaf and hard of hearing people" marched to the parliament building with "banners that read 'We Are Deaf, Do You Not Hear Us?'" (<http://www.sarajevotimes.com/deaf-people-gathered-outside-bh-parliament-today-to-demand-end-to-discrimination/>).

Chapter 2

¹ Most of the NSL class participants reside in Maunabudhuk VDC, while a few live in adjacent areas of Bodhe. I spent the majority of time in Maunabudhuk, since only one of my regular deaf interlocutors lives in Bodhe. While I did not gather data about Bodhe as a VDC, my general

descriptions (e.g., of livelihood practices) apply to the areas of both Maunabudhuk and Bodhe in which I worked. It is important to note that the social field does not map onto administrative lines. For example, Trilochan Giri and Amrita Pariyar both live in Hamela, a *tol* ‘neighborhood, hamlet’ straddling Maunabudhuk and Bodhe; they knew each other before the NSL class. Bhim Limbu lives equidistant from Amrita, in the Postake *tol* in Maunabudhuk, but the two did not know each other prior to class. Similarly, the youngest deaf participant, Kamal Yakkha, lives in Bodhe but attends the government school in Maunabudhuk. In contrast, no one from the parts of Maunabudhuk farthest from the bazaar ever came to class, nor did I conduct research in homes there.

² People frequently and with great affection mentioned Jill Chaskes, an American Peace Corps Volunteer who had lived in the village and taught at the school from 1997 to 1999, and I heard of other foreign volunteers who had worked in Maunabudhuk and the surrounding area. Jill Chaskes Foster (p.c.) confirms that Maunabudhuk hosted PCVs from 1984-1987, in the early 1990s, and in 1997-1999 and 2000-2002.

³ FN 09/14/2010.

⁴ FN 07/18/2010.

⁵ FN 06/06/2010.

⁶ Hoffmann-Dilloway (2010:437) draws on Taylor (1997) to argue that when a young Sherpa boy learned NSL and then returned to his home in Solu Khumbu, his use of the NSL sign MOTHER, which indicates the location of the nose ring worn by most Hindu castes, caused “affront to the family ... who felt he was becoming Sanskritised and less Sherpa.” While questions of ethnic and cultural identity are indeed thematized in Taylor’s telling (ibid:115-118), she also states that the boy’s parents were “frustrated” because they “were having a hard time learning his new sign language” (ibid:116). The misinterpretation of the sign ANGRY in my own data highlights the importance of (*mis*)*understanding* alluded to by Taylor, which complicates Hoffmann-Dilloway’s emphasis on semiotic ideologies over intelligibility.

⁷ FN 06/01/2010.

⁸ Therefore somewhere between 34% and 42% of the deaf persons in Maunabudhuk attended the class (these percentages are based on the figures discussed in Section 4.3 and Section 5). From Bodhe, two deaf persons attended regularly, while two others came infrequently. If we count four attendees, then between 8% and 21% of deaf people in Bodhe attended. I do not know why most non-attendees did not come. Quite likely those from farthest away in the VDCs either did not know about the class or thought it was too far away. I also met several people (including the husband of Bhim Limbu, herself one of the most regular and enthusiastic participants) who simply were not interested. The relatives of two other deaf people said that their deaf family member would likely wander off on their way to or from class. These two people were also considered/appeared to be cognitively disabled.

⁹ Dewi is pronounced “Devi.”

¹⁰ Yakkha has been described to me as a Rai sub-group (analogous to Chemjong for Limbus) and as a separate ethnic group. The complex issue of ethnic identification is for the most part beyond the scope of this dissertation, though see following Chapter 3.

¹¹ Kamal had attended the deaf school (residential class) in Dhankuta’s municipal headquarters a few years prior to my research. According to his mother, he had stayed there for several weeks and then run away, going missing for three days. He did not return to the deaf school.

¹² FN 05/18/2010

¹³ FN 06/06/2010

¹⁴ Deaf people did not describe class activities in this way, of course. In fact the participants never commented on pedagogical content, though they certainly talked about other aspects of the class – jokes that were made, tensions it caused at home, how sad they would be when it finished.

¹⁵ Translated from Nepali, recorded in FN 06/07/2010.

¹⁶ Map prepared by Karen Minkowski using an image provided by Durga Chemjong.

¹⁷ I went over the numbers in fine detail and found a few very small discrepancies. For example, the VDC lists 520 total households, but adding all households listed for each ward yields 526 houses. I subtracted the two listed empty homes to get 524.

¹⁸ A household (*ghar* ‘house, home, household’) is comprised of the people who normatively live together in a house, share resources, and eat meals together (see also Cameron 1998:57-60). My observations suggest that in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, household configuration varies as much within as it does across caste/ethnic groups. I identified four overall patterns: 1. households are commonly but not always comprised of 3 generations; 2. residence is overwhelmingly patrilocal (women move to their husbands’ homes; children of separated parents remain with the father’s family); 3. children not infrequently reside with relatives; and 4. many young men work abroad. Several examples are illustrative:

1. A Bahun household consisting of father, second wife, younger son, son’s wife, their baby, and an unmarried daughter. Older son and his (Limbu) wife live nearby.

2. A Limbu household: father and mother, oldest son, oldest son’s wife, son and wife’s older daughter. Daughters married, reside with husbands. Second son’s wife lived in the same house but cooked separately, though relationships were amicable; her husband was abroad for most of my fieldwork, and there was talk that they might live entirely separately after his return. Youngest son and his wife and children live in the Tarai; oldest son and his wife’s younger daughter lived with them at the time of fieldwork.

3. A Limbu household that split time between home in the bazaar and home on farmland (ten minutes away). In 2010: father and mother, three unmarried daughters, son’s wife (son working abroad), son and son’s wife’s young daughter. In 2012, son’s wife had eloped with another man; young daughter remained with her grandparents. The middle daughter, with whom I had been close, had gotten married and moved to the Tarai with her husband; the youngest daughter still lived at home (I’m not sure about the oldest daughter, with whom I was not close).

4. A Chhetri household: father, mother, and their young son; sometimes joined by mother’s youngest sister and/or father’s younger sister. Unusually, they live in the mother’s natal village.

5. Pariyar (Dalit) family: mother, unmarried daughter (past marrying age), son’s wife (son abroad), son and son’s wife’s two children (3 children in 2012). Other daughters married, reside with husbands.

¹⁹ The difference in household numbers reported by the VDC’s spreadsheets and the census may be explained by the fact that the VDC data does not include rented houses or institutionally owned houses, whereas the census data includes 34 of the former, 7 of the latter, and 8 “other” houses or housing units. Taking these differences into account, we see a numerical gap of only 11 houses (524 vs. 535), which can be accounted for in terms of regular enumerative discrepancies as well as new houses. It is also worth mentioning that Durga Chemjong explained

to me that the location of a household in a specific ward, which is how the VDC lists them, and the number of people attributed to it are based on a system of kinship and long-term residency. In concrete terms what I understand this method to mean is that so long as a family maintains ownership of their land, their household would be included in the count of, for example, Ward 7 even if the entire family, or a sub-unit of it, had relocated from the farm to the bazaar (Ward 2). The number of people counted would include all living male members of the patriline, plus their spouses and children, along with unmarried females. In other words, a son living abroad or elsewhere in Nepal would be counted, whereas a married daughter who had returned to her parents' home while her husband was working abroad would not be counted. My understanding is that renters, including teachers and doctors, are not included in the VDC's own tallies at all. These patterns are indicative not only of bureaucratic knowledge production, but also of the intimate relations between land and persons that are both particular to Limbus (Dambar Chemjong, p.c.; see also Caplan 2000) and others in eastern Nepal and more general to Nepalis of all castes/ethnic groups, as seen in the fact that people affectively orient to the villages where they, a parent, or even a grandparent, were born.

The census data also includes a category called "absentee population and household." Maunabudhuk is listed as having 250 "absentee households," and a total absentee population of 336, 309 of whom are male. The gender imbalance strongly suggests that "absentee" persons are those working abroad or perhaps elsewhere in Nepal. The number of households is confusing, as it seems low in comparison to the percentage of households (95%) that Durga Chemjong suggested have male members working abroad, but improbably high to indicate houses that are entirely empty. It is not clear if the census includes the absentee population in the total population. If not, this counting method would help to close the gap between the VDC's own total population count and the census's (2966 vs. 2905 as opposed to 2966 vs. 2569).

²⁰ Bodhe's absentee population is 376.

²¹ According to Wikipedia, "Yamphu is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken by the Yamphu Rai" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yamphu_language). I have therefore included the category "Yamphu" in the category "Rai" to make the data from the VDC and the census more comparable.

²² See Endnote 10. In Maunabudhuk's VDC data the single Yakha (sic) household listed in Ward 1 is listed with the Rai households in a table of Rai households. The 2011 census data does not list any Yakkha households for Maunabudhuk.

²³ Each of these actually includes multiple dialects and/or languages.

²⁴ I have no doubt that other languages such as Rai are also spoken in the bazaar. The people with whom I interacted on a regular basis – both deaf and hearing – were primarily Bahun, Chhetri, Limbu, and Dalit, reflecting not only the larger population of these groups in Maunabudhuk but also their spatial distribution.

²⁵ Much of the information in this paragraph was provided to me by Durga Chemjong, to whom I am very grateful.

²⁶ *Suntalā* is frequently translated 'orange' but the loose-skinned fruit is actually closer to a mandarin orange.

²⁷ These latter occupations are strongly but not strictly correlated with caste status. I know of no blacksmiths who were not Dalit, but two people who owned tailor shops at the time of my work are Limbu or Rai and Newar respectively.

²⁸ The VDC pays for and builds communal water taps, whereas individuals maintain private water taps. Even private water taps, however, may be used by anyone for purposes of drinking, bathing, or laundry, but the water may not be diverted to irrigate fields.

²⁹ Translated from Nepali, recorded in FN 05/18/2010, emphasis added.

³⁰ Quoted from FN 05/18/2010.

³¹ Here I mean that someone “forgot” when asked directly about either a specific person or about deaf people in general. The following example is somewhat different: It turned out that Bhola and the little deaf Bishwakarma girl’s uncle had met before. I wasn’t present at their initial meeting, but it is easy to imagine them exchanging the casually warm greetings typical of Bhola’s interactions with men his own age. In other words, regardless of whether the uncle had been told that Bhola was deaf, and no matter what words or signs were used to do so, he and Bhola would have interacted in a way that made it clear he was deaf. Upon meeting the uncle again, Bhola was surprised that he hadn’t mentioned his own niece was deaf. For Bhola, knowing that someone has a deaf relative is *always* socially relevant. For the uncle, meeting Bhola may or may not have brought to mind his niece, but we can assume – based on his not having mentioned her – that sharing this information did not feel necessary the way that knowing that information felt necessary to Bhola.

³² FN 06/18/2010.

³³ FN 05/03/2010. Here I should mention that hearing people also evaluated and made sometimes-scathing judgments about other hearing people. One family I knew was considered *bikāmi* ‘worthless,’ for example, because they hadn’t gotten a fire going or properly cared for an older family member after she fell and hurt her arm (FN 07/31/2010).

³⁴ FN 07/26/2010.

³⁵ FN 7/26/2010

³⁶ e.g., FN 05/12/2010

³⁷ FN 06/08/2010

³⁸ FN 05/12/2010

³⁹ FN 07/26/2010

⁴⁰ In relation to the ban on deaf-deaf marriages in Adamorobe, Kusters (2012:348) writes that there is a “local belief that deafness is passed on by men.” In Maunabudhuk, I did not encounter a single or conventional understanding of why people are deaf. Trilochan had become deaf around the age of 10 from an illness. In discussing how Amrita became deaf, her mother told me that Amrita had been very ill as a baby, once with a sickness that gave her pockmarks, and two other times. She also said that she met a *jangali* ‘jungly, wild’ mute/deaf woman, who may have caused the illness or deafness (FN 6/15/2010). The headmaster of the VDC’s school pointed out that there are no deaf [people] on the ridgeline, just on the sides of the hills, and his explanations were: poorer quality of drinking water, overall poverty, and also lack of awareness about things like not giving milk to a baby when it’s sleeping (he described this lack of awareness in terms of foreigners coming to share information that then doesn’t ‘flow’ to the more *durgam* ‘remote’ places). He said deafness isn’t hereditary, and I said it can be, which he accepted easily. There was no mention of karma. (Quoted from FN 7/26/2010)
In general, neither hearing nor deaf people in Maunabudhuk seemed especially interested in why deaf people are deaf; following their lead, I did not ask.

⁴¹ FN 05/26/2010

⁴² FN 10/09/2010; quoted phrase recorded in Nepali.

⁴³ FN 06/18/2010.

⁴⁴ FN 05/31/2010; quoted phrase recorded in Nepali.

⁴⁵ Quoted from FN 05/03/2010, edited lightly for punctuation and clarity

⁴⁶ Quoted from FN 07/16/2010.

⁴⁷ Quoted from FN 07/31/2010; quoted utterance in English translated from Nepali, quoted utterance in Nepali recorded in Nepali. The phrase *na janmas* is an imperative to an addressee addressed with the lowest/most intimate level of verbal conjugation, corresponding to the pronoun *tā*. I could not tell if the old woman herself was saying, “Don’t be born,” or whether she was saying what she thought God should say.

⁴⁸ Translated from Nepali, recorded in FN 05/12/2010.

⁴⁹ Translated from local sign, recorded in FN 06/04/2010. One person’s family member (anonymous here for reasons of privacy) told me that the deaf person had told the family member that the former wanted to cut his/her own throat because s/he couldn’t speak like other people. Another deaf person’s family member told me that the former had tried to commit suicide on several occasions. I did not feel it was my place to ask the deaf people in question about these incidents. Nor do I have any idea how (if we take these statements at face value) such suicidal ideations or attempts compare to hearing people’s. The single suicide during my time in Maunabudhuk was by a hearing woman.

⁵⁰ FN 09/22/2010; quoted utterance translated from local sign.

⁵¹ Echoing the issues of translation, (in)commensuration, and (mis)alignment discussed in this section is the question of translating from NSL and natural sign to English.

⁵² Not of my being hearing per se but of the correctness of the stated facts; here was a description of the world as it really is.

⁵³ Quoted from FN 06/02/2010, lightly edited for clarity

⁵⁴ Description, transcription, and translation from NSL class, video 06/03/2010.

⁵⁵ The NSL sign **DEAF** is shown in Figure 66.



Figure 66: DEAF

Image from NSL dictionary (NFDH 2003).

Note that the fingers touch both the ears and the mouth. To be deaf is to *not* hear or speak, at least not as hearing people do, yet the sign itself does not incorporate or include any negative

marker. I wonder, therefore, whether local signers understood it as meaning *not hearing or speaking* or *hearing and speaking*. In the sequence marked by this endnote, for example, Kanchi makes a sign in which she places two fingers at her ear, as shown in Figure 67 (Lines 4, 7, and 9 in the transcript in the main text). Is she signing a truncated version of **DEAF**, as either a not-fully-understood sign or an understood-but-not-correctly-articulated sign, or is she signing a two-fingered version of the bivalent sign TO.HEAR? In Line 8 in the main text, it looks like Bhola has understood her to mean that she can hear and is both questioning her and simultaneously offering her the correct NSL sign (HEARING).



Figure 67: Kanchi makes a sign with two fingers at her ear

Later in the conversation, this sequence occurs:

1 Bhola: DEAF HEARING Q PRO-2-Kanchi?	Which are you, deaf or hearing?
2 Kanchi: 2-fingers-at-mouth-then-ear, NEG	Not (signs DEAF backwards)
3 Bhola: DEAF?	You're deaf?
4 Kanchi: (affirmative head nod)	Yes.

In line 2 of this excerpt, Kanchi signs **DEAF** backwards (in NSL, unlike in ASL, the sign does not have a variant in which the fingers move from the mouth to the ears). But she then signs NEG, thus negating the (backwards) sign DEAF. In this case, Bhola's response to her indicates that he interpreted her to mean, "I don't speak or hear," rather than, "I'm not deaf," or "I'm not faed." Either that or he took advantage of her nearly correct articulation of the sign **DEAF** to prompt her to give the answer he was looking for. In Line 4, what does Kanchi mean when she nods affirmatively to Bhola's question in Line 3? Does the sign **DEAF** mean to her that she can speak and hear, as she has insisted she can? Or has she decided that she is, regardless of her speech and hearing (see below), deaf? I do not have an answer to these questions; my point in raising them is to demonstrate some of the difficulties (both for the conversants and the analyst) in moving between two similar yet distinct formal systems.

The implication of this last point is that the NSL class participants were not learning a linguistic

system for the first time; they were in fact interpreting the introduced forms – at least some of them – through their own forms. In *Introduction to the Handbook of American Indian Languages*, Boas (1991 [1911]:12) argues against the then-prevalent view that American Indian languages (or their speakers) were less precise than other languages (or their speakers) in terms of the “definite and limited group of sounds” that characterize any given language. As evidence, he shows that English speakers and American Indian speakers *mutually* miscategorize each other’s sounds based on their own sound system (what he calls phonetics, and what we would call phonology). Misinterpretation on the basis of a system, in other words, is evidence of the existence of that system. We can see this in the following example as well.

Following a break in the lesson during which Bhim, Bhola, and I discuss the fact that Bhim needs to stay home to do farm work for a few days, Bhola returns to his primary theme, explaining that hearing people speak with their mouths, while deaf people sign with their hands. “Mara is hearing,” he points out. “Each one of you, all the rest of you, are deaf.” Pointing one by one at the people in the front row, he asks, “Are they hearing? No, they’re deaf. A single person here is hearing.” He then asks Bhim a direct question (Line 1).

1 Bhola: HEARING NEG PRO-2-Bhim?	Bhim, you’re not hearing?
2 Bhim: (nods affirmatively)	Yes.
3 Bhola (momentarily distracted, looks toward window): NEG HEARING [LIKE] -	No, hearing means -
4 Bhim (speaking in Limbu): [sign-that-approximates- HEARING]	(Meaning unknown)

Following Line 4, Bhola begins to say again that hearing people use their mouths, while Bhim looks toward me, and says something aloud in Limbu, pointing with a curved index finger toward her own left ear and then pointing in the direction of her home. Laxman directs Bhim’s attention back to Bhola; Bhola then (from the angle of the camera it’s hard to tell) seems to sign, “You can hear?” by pointing at his ear (not using the NSL sign **HEARING**). The following exchange then occurs.

5 Bhim: PRO-1 [SIGN: see Figure 68] PT-dir-home. DON’T. ⁵⁵ NEG. PRO-1 [SIGN: see Figure 69], DON’T. NEG.	[See below]. “Don’t, don’t.”
6 Bhola: DEAF NEG, PRO-1+, HEARING .	“I’m not deaf, I’m hearing!” (quoting Bhim)
7 Bhim: PRO-1 NEG, DON’T, NEG. OLD.PERSON-dir-home DON’T.	My parent(s)-in-law tell me “no, don’t, don’t.”
8 Laxman: HEY PHONE GIVE-3-Bhim PHONE PRO-3-Bhola PRO-3-Bhim	Hey, Bhola, give Bhim your phone.
9 Bhola: (shrugs, shakes head negatively)	Nah.

10 Bhim: DON'T. PT-dir-home PLANT.MILLET Q? [UNKNOWN.SIGN] Q?	They tell me, "Don't." Who else will plant the millet, and (perform an agricultural task I don't understand)?
11 Bhola: DON'T. PUT-dir-home, 4 [hard to see]. SO HEARING? SPEAK PT-2-Bhim?	No, we're done talking about that, you'll come in 4 days. Are you hearing, can you speak?
12 Bhim (speaking): (affirmative head tilt) PRO-1 SPEAK	Yes, I can speak.

In order to understand this sequence, a few points must be made. First, the signs Bhim makes in Line 5 are shown in Figures 68 and Figure 69. They look to me like a combination of two bivalent signs: OLD.PERSON, which is shown in Figure 70 and TO.YELL.AT, which is shown in Figure 71. The signs *also* look like an "incorrect" pronunciation of HEARING in NSL, shown in Figure 72. One possibility is that – still thinking about what was going on at home and her parent(s)-in-law's insistence that she was needed to do farm work – Bhim interpreted the sign **HEARING** in Line 1 to mean something like "will you get yelled at?" The fact that Bhola had earlier consistently opposed **HEARING** with **DEAF** and that in Line 11, Bhim does not seem to interpret **HEARING** to mean TO.YELL.AT is not necessarily evidence against this possibility, because many local signs are polysemous. In other words, nothing in the linguistic system with which Bhim is familiar would preclude the sign from meaning more than one thing.



Figure 68: Bhim's sign (1)



Figure 69: Bhim's sign (2)



Figure 70: [MALE] OLD.PERSON



Figure 71: TO.YELL.AT



Figure 72: HEARING

Images in Figures 70-72 from NSL dictionary (NFDH 2003).

The dictionary illustrates the two part sign MALE OLD.PERSON. In both NSL and local sign, the second part of the sign (labeled with the number 2 on the drawing) articulated alone means OLD.PERSON. When local signers specify the gender of an old person, they do so using local signs for MALE and FEMALE.

TO.YELL.AT is a directional verb. In the illustration the object of yelling is the signer herself. We might interpret Bhim's utterances as simply returning to the previous theme of farm work and familial duties, but I think she has actually interpreted Bhola's question as giving her conversational license to do so. In other words, she has interpreted the sign **HEARING** via her own formal system as well as via her current concerns.

Broadly speaking, the examples in this endnote indicate the complicated connections among differences in categories, semantic mismatches, incomprehension of new signs, and formal mis- (but motivated) understandings.

⁵⁶ When Bhola held out his phone to his students, he was asking if they could use it in the most common manner that phones are used in hearing society. (Many hearing villagers were also thinking about this manner when they asked why Bhola had a phone.) It is interesting that several students responded to his proffered phone by stating that the phone was his and/or by stating that a member of their family owned a phone. These responses demonstrate that the pragmatics of natural sign and NSL are different (see Chapter 1) and also indicate the salience of phone ownership in Maunabudhuk. To put this in perspective: my friend Sobha Khatri's husband had fallen in love with her voice when she operated the village landline in the pre-mobile phone days and he was working abroad. Sobha had been married for perhaps five years when I met her, so the village landline was still the only mode of long-distance communication within very recent memory.

⁵⁷ Bhola's responses also show that sometimes he interpreted a person's response as evidence of their not understanding the linguistics/reference/signs, and sometimes as evidence of their not accepting the *label* DEAF (I have described only the latter in the main text). In other words, Bhola differentiated in his responses to people based on whether he interpreted their response as evidence that the person in question did not understand the form or as evidence that the person in question was stubbornly (in his view) insisting that their capacity to hear a little bit was what was at stake, when for Bhola it wasn't.

⁵⁸ Other people who can hear and speak to some degree are considered, by themselves or by members of deaf society, to be hard of hearing. This social and sometimes political dynamic is beyond the scope of the dissertation.

⁵⁹ Linguistic and psycholinguistic work on home sign often mentions that their deaf research subjects are profoundly and congenitally deaf, and thus have not had access to a "model" of language via speech and hearing. Ethnographic and linguistic work on village sign languages frequently mentions that the deaf inhabitants are congenitally deaf.

⁶⁰ In the future, I hope to analyze my data in relation to how deaf (etc.) and hearing people use words and signs, voices and hands, sight and hearing to communicate.

⁶¹ Haviland (2013) uses the label "family home sign" to describe signing practices used by several deaf people in a single family.

⁶² It is interesting to think about how communicative practices might be different in a place similar to Maunabudhuk in terms of the number of and relationships among deaf people but where houses and fields are arranged differently. In Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, with the

exception of the bazaar, houses are grouped with a few other houses, and fields and forests separate these groupings. In other parts of Nepal, e.g., the Gurung and Dalit village of Parche near Pokhara and the Tamang village of Gatlang in Langtang, nearly all the houses are close together, with the fields on the outskirts.

⁶³ Map prepared with the assistance of Karen Minkowski; topographical background provided by Durga Chemjong.

⁶⁴ Table prepared with the assistance of Karen Minkowski.

⁶⁵ Quoted from FN 06/01/2010, italics in original.

⁶⁶ More research, of course, is needed to ascertain in what ways different locales are similar and different.

⁶⁷ Schuit (2012a,b) and Maypilama and Adone (2012) also describe signed communication used by multiple, unrelated – and in the case of Schuit geographically widely dispersed – persons. The use of the term “sign language” by these scholars indicates a high degree of conventionality. Studies by Kuschel (1973), Kendon (1980a,b,c), and Jepson (1991) of individual signers and by Washabaugh (1980a,b) and Washabaugh et al. (1978) of signers on Providence Island also raise important questions about the relationship between convention, intelligibility, and social context and relationships.

⁶⁸ As discussed in Chapter 1, transmission of signed repertoires outside of classic shared signing communities is not limited to rural areas. See also Hoffmann-Dilloway (2011) and ongoing work by Kusters on deaf-hearing communication in Mumbai

(<http://www.mmg.mpg.de/departments/socio-cultural-diversity/scientific-staff/dr-annelies-kusters/>).

⁶⁹ FN 10/22/2010.

⁷⁰ One of Hanks’ points that I have not addressed in the body of the text is that conversation analysis (CA) takes for granted that the talk transcribed by analysts corresponds to and instantiates a grammar that persists past and exists entirely independently from the moment of talk. The degree of indeterminacy and not-understanding in local sign conversations brings this assumption into question.

⁷¹ Indeed my claims about “local sign” should be understood as pertaining to local sign *in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe* unless otherwise stated.

Chapter 3

¹ What I have called the form, Kendon calls “the sign.” I use the former term in order to distinguish what a sign looks like from the sign as a set of relations among base, form, and referent. I believe that our referents are equivalent. Also note that I have not sought to distinguish between reference in Kendon’s sense (token-level meaning) and meaning at the level of the type.

² Note that my classification of base-form relationships and base-referent relationships comes directly from Kendon (1980b); his discussion of the former is much more thorough than of the latter, so some of the latter are my own classifications.

³ Freeze frame images in Sections 1 and 2 are sourced as follows.

Featuring Bhim in a classroom setting: video 05/18/2010.

Featuring Kanchi and featuring Maili pointing: video 05/25/2010.

Featuring Bhim’s hearing neighbor: video 05/31/2010.

Featuring Trilochan and the young hearing woman: video 06/04/2010.

Featuring Dewi: video 06/16/2010.

Featuring Laxman and Maila: video 06/18/2010.

Featuring Maili (except for the image of her pointing) and Man Kumari: video 08/06/2010.

Featuring Bhim in a bedroom: video 09/17/2010.

⁴ I have used the terms characterizing and iconic as if they are interchangeable, but there are of course multiple accounts of iconicity. Let me briefly note that Peirce's account of the icon – indeed of all signs – is also tripartite, though in a different way than Kendon's signs.

⁵ Indeed Kendon (1980b:82-83) directly states that

there is no doubt that the potential for visual iconicity available in gesturing is widely exploited by signers. Signers will resort to a variety of devices of direct visual expression whenever they are confronted with the need to say something for which no ready-made sign exists. Signers will also often use devices of visual expression in modifying or inflecting signs, as they combine them into complex expressions. It would appear, thus, that although sign language does function much of the time as a system of purely arbitrary symbols, the potential for iconic expression is continually available and is made use of whenever necessary.

My continuum of recognition suggests something similar, though from the perspective of the addressee rather than the signer. At the same time, I have also tried to show that communicative practice as a *social* phenomenon is never arbitrary.

⁶ These kinds of referential practices are classified in sign language linguistics under different names, including depicted action, pantomime, and whole body classifiers.

⁷ The question of whether particular bodily movements are understood representationally or immediately is a related question (thank you to Bill Hanks on this point).

⁸ My video corpus of local sign requires significantly more analysis. This chapter is based primarily on what I learned of local sign while through fieldwork itself, augmented by watching videos. I leave for future analysis the details of the scope of conventionality as well as questions of variation (patterned differences) and variability (unpatterned differences).

⁹ FN 07.25.2010.

¹⁰ Hoffmann-Dilloway's (2008) analysis of NSL's "meta-semiotic regimentation" implicitly makes clear that NSL signers do not consider iconicity to detract from linguistic status. My own observations of and conversations with NSL signers concur with her findings. Among the hearing local signers with whom I talked about specific linguistic forms and according to the few meta-linguistic evaluations made by deaf local signers, it seems clear that they also find value and pleasure in iconicity.

¹¹ My analysis draws on Taub (2001) but maintains the categories used for the other characterizing signs.

¹² Whether or not pointing should be considered pronominal or gestural is a topic of fierce debate but not one that I enter into here. Pointing at people functions pronominally so I gloss such points with the abbreviation PRO.

¹³ I am fairly certain that PRO-1-plural is sometimes signed by pointing only at oneself and other times by pointing at the persons being incorporated in the "we." One hearing signer signing and speaking at the same time, for example, said "*hāmro* 'ours'" while laying a hand on his own chest (video 06.18.2010).

¹⁴ The same sign in NSL means TIHAR. It is possible that in local sign it only refers to the day known as *BHĀI TIKĀ* 'YOUNGER.BROTHER CEREMONIAL.PASTE' and not to the entire holiday.

¹⁵ I have identified at least one classifier that functions in the classical sense (it specifies the kind

of noun [large domestic animal] and then a more particular noun comes after it [dog in the attestation I have). In addition SASSes (Size and Shape Specifiers) can function as nouns.

¹⁶ As far as I can tell, there is no formal distinction between indirect and direct reported speech (i.e., “she said that X” vs. “she said, ‘X.’”)

¹⁷ In going through my fieldnotes, I found that I had repeatedly noted examples of interactions during which I had asked a deaf interlocutor about the caste or ethnicity of a third party. I would ask either by pointing and signing Q – a sequence that functions as a request to socially locate the person and might or might not yield the naming of caste – or by offering a guess and having it confirmed or denied. I was frustrated at first with the dearth of examples of *other* people asking about caste, until I realized that although *jāt* membership is easily represented, and discussions about *jāt*-related practices were frequent, there was seldom the need for any of my deaf or hearing interlocutors other than Bhola to ask about someone else’s *jāt*. Most of the people whom villagers in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe encounter on a daily basis are long-term, often life-long, residents of the area, have passed through the area before on their way to or from home and bigger cities, or are the family members, friends, or associates of known persons, enabling *jāt* to be inferred.

¹⁸ Cameron (1998:24, 13-14) observes that in the far west of Nepal, speakers of Bajhang, “a ‘dialect’ of Nepali,” use the word *jāt* to refer not only to caste/ethnic groups but also to other kinds of groups, for example, genders and what we would call species. These uses may also exist in the eastern Nepali variety used in Maunabudhuk, but what I focus on here – and what I believe is the most common deployment – designates caste/ethnic affiliation.

¹⁹ The titles of the sub-lists are: “*Maunabudhuk 1 mā raheko Limbu ghar sankhya ra janasankhya* ‘Number of Limbu households and Limbu population in Maunabudhuk [ward] 1’” and “*Maunabudhuk 1 mā Rāi jātika ghar ra janasankhya* ‘Rai caste households and population in Maunabudhuk [ward] 1.’”

²⁰ The titles are in a font that I can’t decode (not all devanagari fonts can be read in every program; most of the spreadsheet is in a font that is readable both in OpenOffice and Word for Macs but a few items appear to be in a different font and are garbled).

²¹ Interestingly, such work focuses almost exclusively on the making of *ethnic* as opposed to *caste* identities, as if castes were somehow more stable and timeless.

²² Unfortunately I did not investigate whether such signs can also refer to Rais, and if so, whether (and how) signers distinguish between Limbus and Rais.

²³ Here we see further evidence of historical sedimentation in the actual forms of signs; every tailor I knew in Maunabudhuk used sewing machines, but the sign itself enacts the hand guiding a needle through fabric.

²⁴ The local signs for goat and bull are very similar. I believe that the horns curve forward for one and backward for the other.

²⁵ Moreover some Limbu clans are forbidden from eating pork (Pauline Limbu, p.c.) though I do not know if any of those clans are present in Maunabudhuk.

²⁶ Let me note here that I am not the only scholar interested in such contradictions. Quigley (1993) for example addresses how in spoken language a single word can refer both to caste and to profession. Moreover, “Brahmans, more often than not, are not *brahmans* [priests]” (ibid:54). Moreover, “there may be no proof that today’s Brahmans were ever *brahmans* or related to *brahmans*” (ibid:55). The same is true for Dalits castes, for whom

the principle of identification is not based on current occupations. Perhaps it may not even safely be related

to past occupations. Perhaps these were given up many generations ago, so long ago that it is not at all clear if these occupations were *ever* actually performed by these groups ... [T]here is no evidence that Potters were ever potters, nor that Tailors were ever tailors. (ibid:10-11).

Certainly Quigley is right that some caste groups do not do what their name implies, and many *individuals* do not engage in their caste occupation. None of Amrita Pariyar's immediate relatives, for example, are tailors. At the same time, however, it is not the case that the associations between castes and occupations implied by their spoken names and signs are entirely coincidental or rhetorical, as I have shown.

Rawat (2011:5-6) directly states that the associations of lower castes with particular occupations has an ideological basis and material consequences:

The occupational stereotypes of Dalit castes have provided justification for the exploitation, oppression, and abuse of ... untouchable castes ... Every Dalit caste in India is defined solely in reference to a supposedly impure occupation that provides the basis for their untouchability.

I agree with him that the characterization of occupations as impure is part of entrenched systems of hierarchy, but have not taken up this issue in the dissertation.

²⁷ Transcription, translation, description, and freeze frames in this section from video 08.06.2010.

²⁸ I have slightly simplified overlap and repetition for readability.

²⁹ I think part of Maili's confusion is that in local sign, naming someone's *jāt* can serve to identify them as an individual, as can the sign names introduced by Bhola.

³⁰ Although what Maili literally says is "I don't have a *jāt*" I understand her here to be conflating the signs **JĀT** and **SACRED.THREAD**.

³¹ Between Lines 66-72, a second conversation goes on between Dhan and Man Kumari. Dhan looks at Man Kumari, and they exchange the sign **NEG** several times, then Dhan signs, "**JĀT LIMBU**," followed by affirmative head tilt (he has not been looking at Bhola, so it is not a repetition) and Man Kumari repeats the sign **LIMBU**.

³² In Lines 110-116, there appears to be a misunderstanding between Bhola and me on the one hand and Maili on the other. It looks like Bhola and I have interpreted Maili as having described in Line 93, 95, and 106 what Bahuns/Chhetris would serve at their own celebrations, whereas she understood herself as having said that she would give Bahuns/Chhetris tea (the video supports Maili's as more reasonable reading of the unfolding conversation). Therefore in Lines 110-116 I – that is, the I in the transcript – think that Maili has said that she would typically serve tea at Tihar, whereas Maili is saying that she would serve Bahuns/Chhetris tea.

Chapter 4

¹ I have used pseudonyms in this chapter and changed a few identifying details.

² Kusters (2014:145, emphasis in original) observes that in Adamorobe, Adamorobe Sign Language "is only used by hearing people when talking *directly* to or with a deaf person, not in mixed deaf-hearing group conversations," which she suggests is typical of shared signing communities (ibid:155). In this respect, then, Maunabudhuk and Bodhe are similar to shared signing communities.

³ FN 05/25/2010; quoted speech recorded in Nepali.

⁴ I originally translated this as "(s)he says what (s)he's saying." Thank you to Peter Graif (p.c.) for suggesting that "she says what she says" better preserves the formal repetition present in the Nepali.

⁵ Translated from Nepali, recorded in FN 05/25/2010. We might ask if such utterances represent what the speaker understood the signer to have *said* or what the speaker understood the signer to have *meant*. See Section 2.

⁶ FN 05/26/2010. She said this despite the fact that she appeared to be engaged in successful communication with Parvati. See Chapter 5 on how evaluations of understanding reflect not only whether someone has understood a particular utterance but also more general stances toward signed/deaf communication.

⁷ See Kisch 2008 for a nuanced account of translation in Al-Sayyid among spoken, signed, and written languages. She writes:

Not all hearing Al-Sayyid master the local sign language; in fact, they sign with varying degrees of fluency. Some might use local signs only to accompany spoken Arabic (thus using signed Arabic), while others might be capable of a simple chat in sign language but prefer translation for more intensive communication. (ibid:288)

When translators are necessary, there are “many ... to be found in the village” (ibid:295). While deaf people’s “need [for] mediation” is asymmetrical in some senses (308), the “asymmetry occurs within a larger context of similar asymmetries and meditations” (ibid). In other words, hearing people also require translation, not only between speech and sign but also between “different spoken languages, written languages, discourses, and social domains” (ibid:283).

⁸ FN 05/11/2010.

⁹ FN 06/18/2010.

¹⁰ Bill Hanks encouraged me to do this in a reply to an email I sent early on in my stay in Maunabudhuk.

¹¹ I am not of course claiming that local signers did not lie, or could not lie.

¹² Description, transcription, and translation from video 06/16/2010.

¹³ FN 06/16/2010

¹⁴ When I repeat the gloss HIT rather than write HIT++ within a single clause/sentence it indicates that alternating hands were used.

¹⁵ Many of the examples in this chapter involve domestic or everyday violence or threats of it. I am not sure what to say about this but I want to recognize it.

¹⁶ Parvati actually vocalizes through much of her signed utterances. I have only transcribed vocalizations that are not accompanied by/accompanying signs.

¹⁷ We might ask whether Maila immediately understood the sign EARTHQUAKE or whether he only understood it once he recognized the story being told about his brother (which as I have argued he probably already knew).

¹⁸ On the other hand, some deaf people’s hearing family members describe themselves as able to understand their deaf relatives completely (though see Chapter 5), and as more expert than others. For example, Laxman’s twin told me, “We’ve used our hands to talk since we were small. Everything I say, he understands, everything he says, I understand. And other people would ask me, ‘What did he say?’” (Translated from Nepali, recorded in FN 10/09/10.)

¹⁹ Translated from Nepali, recorded in FN 5/24/2010. Note that “to sleep with” is not a euphemism for sex, and that I was often asked to sleep at people’s houses, even if they were a minute away from my own room, as a form of hospitality/care. I also want to note that what Jethi said sounds much meaner than it really was in context; villagers frequently told me that they were dirty in comparison to me. While thinking about this dynamic is beyond the scope of the dissertation, my point is that within an environment where people said such things about

themselves, saying it about someone else is not cruel, though it may seem like it to American readers.

²⁰ Translated from Nepali, recorded in FN 5/24/2010.

²¹ I think the local signs for “together” and “near” are identical.

²² Quoted from FN 07/26/2010.

²³ FN 7/21/2010

²⁴ Sandler uses this video of storytelling, which is the only recording of the first generation or stratum of signers in Al-Sayyid, in her consideration of formal changes over time. My own research suggests that the repertoire of some natural signers, who are similar to this man in that they do not inherit an already-existing fully elaborated language, includes a performance genre that is formally somewhat different from conversational genres. The video data is still valuable and usable, of course, but I think a deeper consideration of the possible relationship between context/genre and form is warranted.

²⁵ Slobin might argue that the gap is actually between the *glosses* and the translation.

²⁶ In relation to the point made in Endnote 25, it seems to me that some of the words Sandler has put in italics are not present in the signing because the grammar does not require that they be articulated as separate lexical items (and perhaps she is not implying otherwise). For example, the narrative might not have included pronouns like “he” because sign languages frequently drop pronouns or incorporate them into verbs through directional agreement. Similarly, sign languages can incorporate verbs and adverbs into the articulation of nouns (or vice versa), so it is possible to both refer to objects like guns and swords and simultaneously hold them “at the ready.” The phrase “for reinforcement,” in contrast, seems to have been added by the translator (although we can wonder whether saying that he “waved a cloth” *necessarily* or only *potentially* implies “for reinforcement”).

²⁷ I frequently found time and temporal relations confusing, and I think Bhola sometimes did too, but I have no evidence that hearing villagers did. For example, I once understood Bhumika to have said that a young man around Bhola’s age had just drowned in a nearby lake. It turned out that someone had drowned there, about a year ago, a child around the age of 6 or 7. As I wrote in my fieldnotes, “I think Bhumika had all her details right, just couldn’t communicate to me the time, and what I interpreted as being someone of Bhola’s age was probably something else, like being fair-skinned like him or [being] Chhetri [like him]” (FN 10/1/2010).

²⁸ FN 5/31/2010

²⁹ Quoted from FN 10/01/2010; Mal Didi’s speech translated from Nepali and recorded as indirect speech.

³⁰ FN 06/04/2010

³¹ In fact I did see many signers clearly differentiate between HIT and RAISE.ONE’S.HAND, although even with this it was unclear if the latter meant “to be about to hit” or “to raise one’s hand as if about to hit but only to express anger.” See Section 4.

³² Quoted from FN 9/18/2010

³³ FN 9/19/2010. As I discuss in this chapter, Bhola often doubted the veracity of some local signers’ narratives. Here we see that Laxman was also annoyed.

³⁴ FN 10/22/2010. Quotations between the young man and myself recorded in fieldnotes; quoted Nepali phrase recorded in Nepali. Quotations between the young man and Parvati are, as marked, imagined.

³⁵ FN 06/01/2010.

³⁶ Quoted from FN 10/01/2010; quoted speech translated from Nepali.

³⁷ FN 10/17/2010.

³⁸ FN 07/31/2010.

³⁹ FN 07/27/2010.

⁴⁰ FN 06/04/2010. Note that while ‘rolling up sleeves’ here means a ‘preparing for a [possibly physical] confrontation, in International Sign it means ‘preparing for [not necessarily physical] hard work’ – an excellent example of how, as people from Rosenstock 2008 to Sahasrabudhe n.d. have noted, iconicity is culturally specific.

⁴¹ Even more abstractly (and concretely), once Parvati and Shrila went to buy flip-flops, and I accompanied them. They took a long time to make their selections, digging through the piles of pink, blue, purple, and black sandals. Shrila spotted a pair she liked – purple with flowers imprinted on the soles – and they fit perfectly. Parvati then wanted a similar pair, but there weren’t any. She selected another pair, and the shop-owner put them in plastic bags. Then Parvati again picked up Shrila’s shoes; it was clear that something had to change. The shop-owner said that it made the most sense to give them two of the same kind, even if it meant not buying the coveted pair. Eventually, though, she found another nice pair for Shrila, and gave Parvati the original purple shoes. Parvati laughed and appeared pleased. Although the episode seemed childish in a way – and the shop-owner, who used more speech and less signs than many people in town would with deaf people, addressed them with *timi* ‘you [informal]’ even though she is younger than the deaf women – I suggest that we might think of Parvati’s desire for Shrila’s shoes as a more general and somewhat inchoate demand – for equality, for satisfaction, for beauty – expressed in the idiom of things. (FN 05/19/2010)

⁴² FN 09/27/2010; directly quoted speech translated from local sign. Indirect speech reconstructed from memory, as fieldnotes are on this occasion rather terse.

⁴³ FN 06/17/2010, FN 10/23/2010. I have no evidence that these kinds of things *can’t* be said in sign – on the contrary – but frequently they *aren’t*.

⁴⁴ In fact we might take the idea of suspicion even farther and think of it as an epistemological stance toward a world in which so much oral interaction is inaccessible. I especially wonder about the fact that Bhola was often far more suspicious than I was of other deaf people’s stories, and this response was not unusual among NSL signers to natural/local signers’ tales of woe (e.g., 03/23/2010, FN 04/30/2010). And yet hearing people were also skeptical, so is being skeptical a deaf stance or does communication with natural/local signers engender skepticism, perhaps because of frequent mis-understanding?

⁴⁵ FN 06/31/2012; quoted speech recorded in Nepali.

⁴⁶ Not all hearing people described themselves this way, of course. As Chapter 5 shows, some people state that they understand everything a particular signer says.

⁴⁷ Quoted from FN 05/05/2010

Chapter 5

¹ FN 06/04/2010; quoted speech translated from Nepali.

² In Green 2014 I introduce the concept of moral orientation in the context of international deaf communication. My analyses in that piece and in the present chapter have mutually informed each other, but I do not take up their relationship in any detail here.

³ Of course “someone else” might be the self, a deceased ancestor, a deity, etc. My point is not to deny that meaningful roles can be held intra-subjectively or between different kinds of beings, but rather to focus on how, in ordinary multi-party interactions involving deaf and hearing persons in Maunabudhuk, such roles are negotiated, ratified, and denied.

⁴ Translated from NSL speech, video 10/27/2010.

⁵ Translated from NSL interview, video 03/23/2010.

⁶ Translated from NSL interview, video 03/23/2010.

⁷ The Nepali *dukhā* ‘sadness, suffering’ may be similar.

⁸ Of course, deaf people also engage meaningfully with sounds (including but not limited to speech), and deafblind people question that vision is central or even *necessary* to deaf ways of doing and being.

⁹ Note that the distinction between grammatical and other functions is not always clear; in the field of sign linguistics “there is no consensus on the lines between syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic uses of the many co-occurring elements of signed utterances, including handshapes, movement, body orientation, eyes, mouth, lips, and more” (Frishberg et al: 2012).

¹⁰ Here Sidnell echoes Goffman (1981:140-141): “Listeners are obliged to avoid staring directly at the speaker too long lest they violate his territoriality, and yet they are encouraged to direct their visual attention so as to obtain gesticulatory cues to his meaning and provide him with evidence that he is being attended.”

¹¹ Immediately following the word “speaker” is this sentence: “Hearership can of course be demonstrated in other ways” – but that may not be true for eye gaze and (visual) signers!

¹² Postcolonial and feminist scholars have written about how the gaze can produce a range of powerful effects, from placing the self in the world through mutual recognition to the abject objectification of the recipient of the gaze (see e.g., Fanon 2008).

¹³ For a discussion of “triadic” joint attention, see Rumsey 2010.

¹⁴ Thanks to Michele Friedner (p.c.) and Lawrence Cohen (p.c.) on this point.

¹⁵ Thanks to Michele Friedner (p.c.) for pushing me to denaturalize the link between eye gaze and attention/orientation.

¹⁶ While working to recuperate sound and listening, Hirschkind (2006:13) also that “historians have become increasingly cautious about accounts of modernity that posit a fundamental shift from the dominance of the ear to that of the eye.” Here I want to point out that the need to recuperate sound and listening in the first place only makes sense in relation to the primacy of hearing bodies. Deaf-centered accounts of Western modernity (e.g., Lane 1989, Ladd 2003) emphasize the systematic denigration and repression of deaf (here understood as visual) ways of being, demonstrating that if the dominance of the eye exists, it depends on hearing ears.

¹⁷ It is also important to recognize that people can be forced to see against their will, and that potential Addressees can refuse to ratify deaf or hearing people in the role of Speaker by interactional and institutional means other than those examined here.

¹⁸ I am not trying to make a deterministic argument. Deaf people of course use means other than sound to get attention. I agree with Bechter (2008:66) that when actions such as flicking light-switches on and off are offered as examples of “Deaf Culture,” there is a risk of reducing deaf culture to “what hearing culture would look like if hearing people were deaf.” I also think, however, that such examples direct our attention to the materiality of social relationships. Edwards’ (2014) research on Seattle’s DeafBlind community insightfully demonstrates both that

social relationships are materially configured and that they can be radically reconfigured.

¹⁹ What would happen if a group of deaf people were walking along on an otherwise empty street, and a police yelled at them from behind? Unfortunately this is not a rhetorical question. When I did a quick Google search of the phrase “deaf person can’t hear police,” the first two hits are about two *different* cases from the first two months of 2014. In one case the police beat a deaf man for not following spoken orders (<http://fox4kc.com/2014/01/13/group-cries-foul-after-they-say-police-beat-deaf-man-over-resistance/>) and in the other for resisting being handcuffed in order to use his hands to communicate (<http://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/local/lawsuit-hawthorne-police-allegedly-beat-deaf-man-245916161.html>).

²⁰ Kusters (2010) argues that many studies of deaf villages or speech/sign communities overstate and romanticize such normalization.

²¹ “Indigenous sign language” is sometimes used as a synonym for “village sign language.” Fox Tree (2011) argues that the two are distinct.

²² Nonaka (2007:170) states that in the sub-village where 11 of 16 deaf Ban Khorians live, an estimated 26% of persons “can sign,” and that “a conservative estimate is that 15% of all Ban Khorians sign village-wide” (see also Nonaka 2012). What happens when deaf people interact with hearing people who can’t sign, as they surely must? Kisch (2008) and Kusters (2014) both describe frequent interpretation or translation among community members, and Kusters (ibid:145) points out that deaf people also shift their practices when signing with

hearing people who are not fluent in AdaSL [Adamorobe Sign Language] ... [T]he interlocutors tend to sign slower, use a larger signing space, and use more imitations and make use of the large number of conventional gestures that are commonly used in Ghana (which often differ from AdaSL lexicon).

Nevertheless, deaf people do end up in situations where the hearing person has a really difficult time understanding the deaf person, to the frustration of the latter (see e.g., Kusters 2011:141-142). It is worth noting that in the example given by Kusters (ibid) the deaf person repeats himself several times, trying to get a hearing shop-owner to understand what he wants. Despite the shop-owner’s nonchalant attitude toward not knowing AdaSL (ibid), each time the deaf customer signs to her, she does offer him an item. In other words, she does *try* to understand, in contrast to the example of Binata in Section 3.

²³ Somewhat relatedly, while scholars frequently say that the emergence of sign languages in speech/sign communities is “spontaneous,” as Nonaka has done here (2007:15), their own work contradicts this description. Nonaka in fact carefully traces what has come to be called Ban Khor Sign Language to the birth of several deaf siblings 70 years ago (ibid:30, 45-50) and states clearly that it has changed over time (ibid:63-68).

²⁴ While Das (2012) specifically contrasts her view of ethics and habits with Bourdieu’s understanding of habit, I find them highly resonant, at least as the latter is read by Hanks (2005).

²⁵ Description from video 05/31/2010

²⁶ Transcribed and translated from Nepali, video 06/18/2010.

²⁷ Anandi and Binata are pseudonyms.

²⁸ “[M]ost signed interactions ... between deaf and hearing people” in Adamorobe are also “short” in duration (Kusters 2014:145).

²⁹ Translated from Nepali, recorded in FN 05/19/2010.

³⁰ In 2010 Binata’s was one of two tailoring shops in the bazaar that did not belong to Pariyar families (Pariyar is a subcaste of the Damai “tailoring” caste). The other three shops were owned and operated by Pariyars.

³¹ FN 07/15/2010.

³² No doubt my temptation arises not only from theoretical and methodological concerns but also and more viscerally because I saw Binata act on several instances with what I interpreted as blatant disrespect for Bhola as a deaf person. She continued to use the term *lāto* – and to let her young daughter use it in reference to Bhola – even after we asked her not to (FN 5/12/2010, FN 5/15/2010). I also have a strong memory of her addressing Bhola with the pronoun *tā* which as the least respectful/most intimate pronoun was not appropriate for her to use. I mention these points because I think it is important to acknowledge that our experiences of persons not only as “informants,” “interlocutors,” or “social actors” but as people with whom we spend our days, as co-participants in overlapping moral universes, shapes analysis.

³³ Description, transcription, and translation from video 06/18/2010. In addition to the usual transcription process in which I play the video and transcribe on paper or in a word document, I also transcribed the sequences from 19:43 to 23:06 using ELAN software, tracking eye gaze and posture (as well as signing and speaking), down to a tenth of a second but I am unsure about how to meaningfully represent shifts in eye gaze and posture at this fine level of detail.

³⁴ Just as I admonished people not to say *lāto* even when Bhola had not prompted me to do so, he encouraged people to sign while on camera knowing that I wanted footage of interactions.

³⁵ FN 05/31/2010.

³⁶ FN 06/01/2010.

³⁷ FN 05/02/2010; quoted utterance translated from Nepali.

³⁸ I have been asked whether the Neighbor might have avoided the conversation because it was about caste. I have absolutely no evidence to support or reason to believe this (reasonable) suggestion. Although caste tensions exist in Maunabudhuk, people also joke about caste practices, and as we see in the later part of the conversation, the Neighbor had no qualms about joining in the fun.

³⁹ The spoken Nepali in Lines 29-45 was transcribed by Shristi Ghimire; I also had input from Himali Dixit, Bicram Rijal, and Abinash Pradhan. Lines 24, 26, 39, and 43-45 are hard to hear. The differences in opinion on what was said in Lines 39 and 43-45 are quite small and do not make a difference to the overall meaning. For Line 24 the nearly-unanimous consensus is the line given. For Line 26 I also asked Mark Turin, a linguist and fluent Nepali speaker familiar with eastern varieties of Nepali, to listen. Two native speakers, Mark Turin, and I think what was said is closer to the line given in the main text and two think it is closer to (or precisely) the following: “*eutā eutā mātrai nabhae ta mmm mmm* ‘unless it’s one thing at a time, nope.’” If, as is completely possible, the line is actually closer to what is given in this Endnote, my overall analysis would be affected slightly but not dramatically.

⁴⁰ FN 06/01/2010.

⁴¹ FN 10/10/2010.

⁴² I want to make it clear that *engagement* is not the same as *being nice*. People can be oriented toward signing as an intelligible form of communication and have a fight, argue, or be mean in sign.

⁴³ I think that Laxman begins to nod affirmatively thinking that I have asked if Bhola is of thread-wearing caste, and then realizes I’m asking if he *has* his thread.

⁴⁴ The spoken Nepali in this sequence was transcribed by Shristi Ghimire.

⁴⁵ Maila’s use of the most informal second-person pronoun *tā* is appropriate because Laxman is

his younger brother.

⁴⁶ The spoken Nepali in this sequence was transcribed by Shristi Ghimire.

⁴⁷ The spoken Nepali in this sequence was transcribed by Shristi Ghimire and me.

⁴⁸ The sign that the Neighbor makes in Line 103 and the sign for COW that Maila makes in Line 106 are very similar. It is hard to say whether in Line 104 Laxman was saying, “COW?” or asking, “What kind of animal?”

⁴⁹ In fact, when I first asked Bhola if he thought the old man was deaf, Bhola said no, that he wasn’t deaf, he was PĀGAL ‘CRAZY.’ Several other people agreed that he was not deaf, while others said that he was. In the end Bhola and I agreed he was deaf, and when he did interact with people, it was in sign. I also noticed that the group of young men treated him differently than they treated the local deaf people, even those whom were sometimes laughed at or disparaged. When I asked Maili’s *buhāri*, who treated him kindly, whether he had a family, she replied, “I don’t know. I’d know if I’d met his people” (translated from Nepali, recorded in FN 05/25/2010). This experience made achingly clear how much it matters to have a home, to be connected to a specific place and to specific people. As I wrote in my fieldnotes, “A person without a home is not quite a person” (quoted from FN 05/24/2010) – and perhaps especially so for someone who cannot say for himself – or be understood to say – that he has a family.

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