

“I See That You Are Deaf”

1

FIGURES 1 AND 2 portray deaf Nepalis moving through a public place. The first image shows a mother, a father, and a child walking down a street (the traffic light suggests an urban context, possibly Kathmandu, Nepal’s capital city). As they walk past couples chatting and shopkeepers interacting with their customers, the parents take pains to silence their deaf son (as his vocalizations would likely make his deafness apparent) and prevent him from using his hands to gesture or sign (which would likewise reveal his deafness). The son looks confused and disturbed. In the second drawing, the same family is walking down the same street, but in this instance the parents and the child are happily using sign language to communicate with each other in public. Readers will notice, however, that, rather than going



Figure 1



Figure 2

about their business as in the first drawing, the bystanders have all stopped what they were doing to gawk at the signing family, looking shocked and displeased.

Pratigya Shakya,¹ a Deaf² Nepali artist, produced these drawings, which capture important aspects of Deaf social life in Nepal during the historical period I describe in this book: that of a decade-long civil war (1996–2006)

1. Following anthropological convention, most of the given names in this text are pseudonyms. However, I have used real names in the case of well-known public figures, such as Pratigya Shakya. Throughout the book, if I include a last name in identifying a person, I am using the person's actual name. If I use only a first name, it is a pseudonym.

2. As will be discussed in detail later in the chapter, in this book I follow the common Deaf Studies convention of writing the English word “deaf” in lowercase to indicate the inability to hear, “Deaf,” written with a capital D, to indicate identification as a member of a signing community, and using the mixed case, d/Deaf, to refer to groups or situations in which both biological and cultural framings of d/Deafness are relevant. As this book will make clear, my use of this convention

that transformed the Hindu Kingdom into a secular republic. At that time, many deaf Nepalis, particularly those in urban centers, had begun to adopt and promote the idea that Deaf signers constituted a distinct, but marginalized, ethnolinguistic group, identified and constituted by the use of a particular language, Nepali Sign Language (NSL). Within this model, one’s status as Deaf was thus not based on an inability to hear per se but on competence in a sign language and engagement in Deaf social networks. These networks extended beyond Nepal, as local associations of Deaf people formed social, financial, and ideological relationships with a range of international Deaf persons and organizations that had been instrumental in introducing this framework to the country.

From an ethnolinguistic perspective, a person should not hide their Deafness; rather, through displays of NSL use it was possible to claim membership in a social group both close knit and far ranging. However, even as this understanding of Deafness had been adopted and championed by members of Deaf social networks in primarily urban settings, deafness continued to carry highly negative connotations for the hearing majority: “seeing that someone was d/Deaf” could have a wide range of social consequences in Nepal.

Indeed, although organizations of Deaf people around the globe were increasingly adopting ethnolinguistic framings of Deafness, leading some to speak of an emerging transnational “Deaf-World” (e.g., Lane 2005), the meanings and consequences of this perspective varied within and across cultural contexts (Monaghan et al. 2003; Friedner and Kusters 2014). For example, in the United States, ethnolinguistic understandings of Deafness emerged in contrast to a biomedical perspective, in which deafness was seen as a physical disability.³ However, a biomedical framework was not the most widespread alternative understanding of the nature and consequences of deafness in Nepal. Though this perspective was salient in some parts of the country, the most common alternative belief was that an inability to hear was the result of bad karma, or misdeeds in a previous life. Karma was

should not be taken to imply that I view this distinction as relevant in the same ways across social contexts.

3. See Baynton (1996) for a more complex account of how understandings of deafness have varied and shifted in the United States over time.

thought to influence a person's relative degree of personal purity or pollution, which could be transmitted to others through contact. As a result, deafness was highly stigmatized, and deaf persons were often shunned.

These different binaries (ethnolinguistic vs. biomedical; ethnolinguistic vs. karmic) were reflected and reproduced by the different terms used to refer to d/Deaf persons in these settings. In the United States (and indeed, in this book), a terminological distinction is often made in writing between the terms “deaf” and “Deaf.” The uncapitalized spelling refers only to audiological impairment, whereas the capitalized version indicates self-identification as a member of a signing community. The d/Deaf distinction in the United States thus contrasted disability and ethnolinguistic frameworks, in which “deaf” was typically (mis)understood by hearing speakers as a socially neutral term.

In Nepal, on the other hand, different understandings of d/Deafness were often mapped onto distinct Nepali-language terms: *lāṭo* and *bahirā* (or *bahiro*). *Lāṭo*, a pejorative term meaning “deaf and dumb” in the literal and the figurative senses, reflected the stigma surrounding deafness. Deaf leaders often pointed out that the term *lāṭo* indicated a lack of communicative or intellectual ability rather than simply hearing loss; signers, therefore, were exempted from such a state and should be referred to as *bahirā*. Broadly, *bahirā* connoted a more positive view of d/Deaf people and often an alignment with an ethnolinguistic perspective on Deafness as well.

Lāṭo was by far the most widely known term among hearing Nepalis during my research. For example, in 2005 I traveled through Mustang (a remote mountainous region in the north of Nepal), searching for deaf persons for an informal survey I was conducting for the National Federation of the Deaf Nepal. On reaching each village, I would ask whether any *bahirā mānchhe* (deaf people) were in residence. I usually received a blank stare or a negative response. But if I used the term *lāṭo*, my interlocutor would often indicate understanding and reply that there were “dumb” people living in the village.⁴ This posed a problem: Understandably, the term *lāṭo* had become highly politicized by the associations of Deaf people in Kathmandu as a symbol of the larger society's negative characterization of deafness.

4. Taylor (1997) reports the same experience in her travelogue on d/Deafness in Nepal.

Groups such as the Kathmandu Association of the Deaf had campaigned vigorously to remove the term from media accounts that focused on their activities. Accordingly, I felt very uncomfortable using the term *lāto* even though its alternative, *bahirā*, was often not understood in the villages I was visiting. Ultimately I settled on an awkward formulation, *kān-na-suune mānchhe* (“people whose ears do not hear”), supplemented occasionally with *mukh-na-bolne mānchhe* (“people whose mouths do not speak”).

The predominance of the term *lāto* was not restricted to rural areas. During my first trip to Nepal in 1997, and on later visits in 2001 and 2004–2006, when I would walk down the street chatting in NSL with Deaf friends in Kathmandu, the hearing people we passed would often gape (as in Shakya’s illustration) and make comments about us, assuming that I was deaf or that, as a *videshi* (foreigner), I would not understand their spoken Nepali. I overheard observers almost exclusively use the stigmatizing term *lāto* while discussing us.⁵ Such a situation, in which outsiders do not use a group’s preferred ethnonym (name used to refer to an ethnic group), out of refusal or ignorance, was an experience shared by many other stigmatized ethnolinguistic groups in Nepal.⁶

Though the karmic and ethnolinguistic framings of d/Deafness might seem diametrically opposed, attention to the convergence of, as well as contrasts between, these models is necessary to understand the social transformations through which Nepal’s Deaf community has emerged and continues to grow and change. For example, although d/Deaf Nepalis were often believed to be capable of polluting others, they were not unique in this respect: During the period in which Deaf Nepalis began to adopt and enact an ethnolinguistic model of Deafness, most social groups in Nepal were associated with hierarchically ranked degrees of pollution or purity, believed to derive from karma, which could likewise be transmitted

5. On a trip in 2015, I found that younger people in Kathmandu had begun to use the term *bahirā* or *bahiro* when speculating about my friends and me as we walked down the street while signing. However, occasionally their older companions would not understand the term and would need it translated into the term *lāto*.

6. For example, while Thangmi is their preferred ethnonym, this group was often referred to as the Thami (Shneiderman and Turin 2006).

through interaction. For example, if a hearing person was born into a low-caste social group that was associated with pollution, this, too, was considered a karmic consequence. Accordingly, to describe Deaf people as an ethnolinguistic group did not in and of itself refute an association with bad karma and pollution. As I show in chapter 3, to combat this stigma, leaders of the associations of Deaf people sought to link a standardized NSL—and with it an emerging Deaf social category—with practices and symbols of high-caste Hinduism that connoted good karma and purity.

These efforts were also responsive to the political situation in Nepal during the historical era (1997–2006) described in this book. This period was a time of increased political mobilization by many of the country's marginalized ethnolinguistic groups, who protested that the state's framing of Nepali nationalism was grounded in symbols and practices that marginalized them. This tension was one important driver of the Maoist "People's War", which ravaged the country from 1996 to 2006 and ultimately led to the aforementioned transition of the country from a Hindu kingdom to a secular republic. One of the primary means by which such ethnic groups defined themselves was through the claim of a mother tongue other than Nepali. As Deaf Nepalis adopted an ethnolinguistic model of deafness, they became potentially aligned with other marginalized, but increasingly politically active, ethnolinguistic groups in Nepal. This alignment risked exposing them to the governmental discrimination and oppression such groups often encountered during that period. Deaf leaders' efforts to associate NSL with high-caste practices also linked the language to Nepali nationalism, thereby making Deaf identity politics less subject to repression by the state. At the same time, however, the standardization project complicated the ability of some Deaf Nepalis to simultaneously affiliate with Deaf and birth social networks.

Similarly, a given person's inclusion in a Deaf category was determined by the intersection of ethnolinguistic and karmic understandings of personhood. The stigma of deafness in Nepal could lead to the social and linguistic isolation of deaf children, such that some were not able to acquire language in childhood. Those who were first exposed to NSL in adulthood were often highly constrained in their ability to learn the language. Accordingly, their inclusion in a Deaf social category could be problematic. However, just as the ritual pollution associated with deafness could be shared through social contact, so could other qualities such as competence. By copying the

signs of competent signers, some such Nepalis were permitted to share that competence and partake in a Deaf identity based in NSL (see chapter 4).

Interactions between karmic and ethnolinguistic models of d/Deafness in Nepal also affected hearing Nepalis who interacted with Deaf signers. At the time of my research, the dominant understanding was that deaf people transmitted ritual pollution to hearing people. Despite that widespread belief, and despite the fact that food was an especially effective medium for the transmission of such pollution, from 1997 on a popular restaurant chain in Kathmandu began to hire Deaf waitstaff and prominently advertise their presence. While karma and the attendant belief in ritual pollution were significant idioms for structuring social relations, during the period under discussion, *bikās* (development), class, and modernity had come gradually to coexist and/or compete with karma as important social frameworks. By taking food from servers traditionally considered polluted and, increasingly, using NSL signs to place orders, hearing clientele could demonstrate *bikāsi* ("developed," in contrast to "undeveloped" or "backward") qualities by rejecting the ritual pollution model (see chapter 5). This practice simultaneously combated and reinforced the stigma surrounding deafness during this period.

The primary argument of this book is thus that, rather than outright rejecting local understandings of personhood and social groups based in notions of karma and transmissible purity and pollution, Deaf signers employed them in producing Deafness as an ethnolinguistic category in Nepal. Indeed, as the following chapters show, both the ethnolinguistic and karmic models of d/Deafness ultimately drew on the same basic premise: that persons and larger social formations are mutually constituted through interaction. Further, just as the framing of NSL and Deaf as mutually constitutive drew on both contrasts and convergences between models for understanding d/Deafness, the meanings and effects of such interactive processes hinged on both similarity and variation in embodied practices, including language use.

I Enter (with a Smile)

I first developed relationships with Deaf signers in Nepal in 1997, when I was twenty years old, during an undergraduate semester abroad. A hearing American, I had been studying American Sign Language (ASL) at my home institution for several years. That training had disabused me of many oddly popular and persistent myths, such as the notion of the existence of a single universal sign language. Therefore, after getting settled in Kathmandu, I made

inquiries about whether there were any associations of Deaf people in the city that might offer lessons in a local sign language. A friend of one of my Nepali language teachers passed along the address, not far from my homestay in the Naxal neighborhood, of the Kathmandu Association of the Deaf (KAD).

Just past a heavily trafficked intersection, where cars and motorcycles flowed around a tree housing a temple in the middle of the street, I found an alleyway marked by a small blue metal sign bearing the KAD's logo. The alley opened into a residential courtyard, from which a small white dog came bounding, barking and blocking my way. I was a bit afraid of dogs, so I hesitated, thus encouraging it to growl more aggressively. I considered retreating to the main road and trying my luck another time. However, though the sunny day did not allow me to see through the windows and open door into the relatively dim interior of KAD, I could hear sounds of people interacting within.⁷ Realizing that it was possible that association members inside might observe me being chased away by the dog, I pulled myself together and continued to the entrance (with the dog only feinting at my leg. That dog remained my nemesis for some time). I entered, grinning awkwardly and laughing to mask my embarrassment both at being afraid of the dog and my shyness about entering the KAD without introduction.

Inside it was cool and dim, compared to the hot sunny autumn afternoon. The room was lined with benches and chairs, to the left of the door a desk, and to the right an entry to a private office. About fifteen people were there that day, seated in the chairs circling the room, chatting together in sign language. After a *namaste*, a gesture of greeting used by most Nepalis, I introduced myself using ASL. (I later learned that my use of ASL had helped settle the debate that had been going on inside about my country of origin; I *had* been observed with the dog in the alley.) A young woman approached me and replied in ASL that I was welcome to take a course in NSL. This woman, Amita, took me aside, and, through a mixture of ASL, English fingerspelling (manual representations of the letters of the alphabet), and written English, we arranged for me to attend NSL classes in the afternoons. I was asked to sign a guestbook, in which I saw notes from d/Deaf and hearing

7. Deaf signers are not necessarily silent and can use sound as a strategic resource (e.g., vocalizing or banging on a table to attract attention via sound or vibration).

visitors from a wide range of countries. Then I waved good-bye to all, again braved the scary dog, and reemerged into the bright light of the alley.

A fairly shy person, I had been nervous during this first encounter. I had anxiously wondered: Would I be able to explain what I wanted? Would classes even be available? Would I be welcome to participate or would I be imposing? Would the dog bite me on the way out? Consequently, as mentioned earlier, I spent the duration of that brief encounter smiling widely and occasionally laughing in order to both indicate and smooth over my nervousness. This habit may seem quite natural to readers whose cultural backgrounds are similar to mine. However, I learned that such smiling was by no means a universal communicative strategy. Nepalis did not habitually grin and laugh when nervous, nor did they typically smile in photographs. That is not to say that Nepalis were grim or humorless—far from it—but rather that laughing and grinning were reserved for a smaller range of interactive contexts that were specifically about humor or joy rather



Figure 3 My husband smiling for a photo on his first day visiting Nepal, while I try hard to suppress the urge to smile (and only partially succeed), along with Nepali friends posing with typical serious faces.

than serving as a default facial expression or one that was appropriate when one was nervous. (See figure 3 for an illustration of this cultural contrast.)

After a few months of studying NSL and forming friendships at the KAD, I was given a name sign that related to my (from a Nepali perspective) excessive smiling. Name signs are signed alternatives to spoken language names, typically created and bestowed by Deaf peers.⁸ Names signs sometimes had an initialized component (that is, a hand formed into the shape of the fingerspelled letter with which the signer's written name began). The form of name signs also typically related to some distinctive physical feature or notable habitual activity of the person named. For example, an initialized handshape might be located near a salient physical feature (e.g., a scar, birthmark, or unusually large ears) or performed in a manner suggestive of a characteristic activity (e.g., flipping one's hair out of one's eyes).

These physically descriptive signs could take forms that may have seemed insulting to outsiders but were understood in positive terms by insiders. For example, some Deaf Nepalis had sign names that suggested a runny nose (e.g., an initialized handshape performed below the nostrils, with a short movement down toward the lips). Although Deaf adults would certainly not allow snot to run freely down their face, many were proud of such a sign name because it suggested that they had entered into Deaf social life at a very young age as, literally, a "snot-nosed kid." The name sign I was given took the form of an American English fingerspelled letter E to mark my American nationality (as opposed to an initialized form from the NSL fingerspelling system, based on the locally dominant Devanagari script), located at the side of an exaggeratedly grinning mouth. Thus, this name sign drew attention to my habit of smiling at inappropriate times.

8. When referring to Deaf friends in this book, the pseudonyms I use are based on spoken Nepali names rather than sign names even though I used the latter to refer to them in practice. This is because I cannot describe sign names while preserving anonymity and because assigning arbitrary sign names would suggest inaccurate social or physical information about the person so named. This is not to say that spoken language names do not also imply social information (such as caste or ethnic membership). However, such implications are less highly specific than is the case for sign names.

When I was given this name in 1997, none of us had heard of email. However, my initial visit to the KAD led to the formation of a set of relationships that have now endured for nearly two decades. During that time the world has changed in many ways, not least via the worldwide spread of Internet access. The NSL sign that was eventually coined to refer to email closely resembled my name sign: an English fingerspelled E positioned at the side of the signer’s mouth, often but optionally followed by a movement resembling typing on a keyboard.⁹ During my first visits to Nepal after this sign emerged, I constantly saw from the corner of my eye people signing what appeared to be my name, whipped to attention, and then realized that they were not discussing me after all. My confusion was exacerbated by the fact that, over time, the exaggerated smiling element of my name had softened, either reflecting my increasing adaptation to local facial expression norms or (more likely) the fact that my friends had grown accustomed to my habit of smiling inappropriately, such that it became less noticeable to them. Accordingly, my name and the sign for email became increasingly similar. As a result, many Deaf Nepali friends I made in later years, who had not known me in the 1990s, assumed that my name sign had indeed sprung from an association with email (perhaps because, during the time I spent in the United States, I remained in contact with Deaf friends in Nepal via that medium). How a given person interpreted the origin of my name sign indicated the time depth of our relationship.

The ways in which my name sign emerged and changed over time (in both its form and people’s interpretations of its significance) illustrate that language is not a static phenomenon independent of human relationships but that linguistic forms and structures, as well as their meanings and effects, emerge from, reflect, and affect social interactions and relationships. Indeed, this book is full of situations in which people try to make sense of linguistic forms by linking them to social information about a person or group of people, as well as situations in which people creatively manipulate linguistic forms to effect social change.

9. The form EMAIL represented in the 2003 version of the NSL dictionary did not include the initialized E. Nevertheless, the version described in the text is the one I observed signers using most frequently.

Theoretical and Methodological Approach

This understanding of the nature of language led me to and was refined by my graduate training in linguistic anthropology, which treats language as a culturally situated practice. Although, whenever possible, I avoid using the technical terminology of my field in this book (we linguistic anthropologists are known for our jargon!), I explain key theoretical concepts. Most fundamentally, I expand on what I mean in this book when I write about “language.” As a linguistic anthropologist, when I talk about a language such as English or NSL, I mean something different from what a layperson (or even someone from a related discipline such as linguistics) might. I do not treat languages as discrete and homogeneous bundles of linguistic structures imagined to both exist independently of and be uniformly shared by a community of speakers. Instead, I approach language as practice rather than product, something that informs and emerges from people’s social interactions. Even though there is certainly a great deal of overlap between what people who we would say use “the same” language do in their interactions, no one uses and understands language in exactly the same way.

Rather, each person has a particular “linguistic repertoire,” that is, specific ways of using and interpreting linguistic forms (Gumperz 1965; Blommaert and Backus 2011; Benor 2010; Rymes 2014). Such repertoires never represent the entirety of what people typically call “a language,” such as French or Spanish (e.g., we can consider someone fluent in English even if the person is not familiar with all varieties of English or all sets of arcane professional terminologies), nor are they restricted by language boundaries (linguistic repertoires are always—to varying degrees—multilingual and include the ability to use or recognize elements of languages a person might not claim to fully know). These repertoires differ according to people’s particular biographical histories. At the same time, lest I be seen as promoting a view of language as a property of individuals, I must stress that the development and deployment of linguistic repertoires are fundamentally social processes.

Variation in how people use language is not a design flaw but is instead central to how linguistic and social meanings emerge in context. That is, although in some cases diversity in how we use language can lead to misunderstandings (e.g., Gumperz 1982; Bailey 1997), more often such variation is a vital communicative resource. For example, differences in how

people speak can provide clues about their identity and/or their stance on a given situation (e.g., my use of ASL and habit of smiling suggested my American citizenship to the members of the KAD). The ways in which language use can be taken as pointing to social and cultural contexts is one of the primary intersections between linguistic and social relations. However, variation in language use does not simply map onto preexisting identities, groups, or stances but is also a primary means of producing such social formations (Silverstein 1976, 1979). Linguistic anthropologists call the phenomenon of using language to both point to and create context “social indexicality” (Ochs 1993; Silverstein 1976).

In my introductory course in linguistic anthropology at Oberlin College (Hoffmann-Dilloway 2009), I often illustrate this concept for the class by playing random clips of English speakers talking, and then I ask students to tell me what they can infer about the speakers not only from *what* they say but also from *how* they say it. By interpreting differences in pronunciation, word choices, and grammatical structures, students offer a rich set of guesses about the age, geographical origin, gender, occupation, ethnicity, state of mind, activity, social class, and other aspects of the speakers just from decontextualized audio clips (here I am using a spoken example, but signed languages are just as characterized by variation yielding social indexicality).¹⁰ In more fully contextualized interactions, people have an even richer set of meaningful clues to work with. Their inferences are derived precisely from variation; we could not make such guesses if everyone used language in precisely the same way all the time.

However, it is not only how people produce language that varies but also how people interpret the significance of those forms. These different interpretations themselves provide meaningful clues about a person. The ability of KAD members to recognize my signing as ASL indicated their past exposure to d/Deaf signers from the United States. Likewise, someone’s understanding of the origin of my name sign revealed something about our relationship. Or, to return to the example from my classroom, when I play a clip of a speaker, students’ guesses do not just reflect differences in how

10. With regard to NSL in particular, Khanal (2013a, 2013b) has studied both age-related and regional variation in the language.

the speakers talk but also reveal differences in the students' backgrounds, as their histories affect the ways in which they interpret the clip.

For example, most of my students will identify some speakers as being from what they understand to be the American South. But which clips they identify as such can reveal where they themselves are from, as what constitutes "the South" varies according to social setting. Furthermore, if a student can offer more fine-grained guesses about a speaker's origin, placing the person in a particular region, state, or even city, I am usually correct in guessing that the student is also from that region or has spent significant time there. Alternatively, some students will guess that a speaker with what they perceive as a Southern accent is from a lower social class due to the students' exposure to linguistic stereotypes in the media (exposure to media is also a part of their biographical histories [e.g., Spitulnik 1996; Meek 2006]). Variation in how my students interpret "Southern" accents allows us to discuss how this social category is produced. "Southernness" is not an objective or natural category that students can simply recognize but is instead produced through such socially situated assessments.

An important task for a linguistic anthropologist is thus to explore both the processes by which people come to their particular interpretations of the social indexicalities of linguistic forms and the effects of these interpretations. Such interpretations, whether conscious or operating below conscious awareness, can indeed be very consequential, as people make deep social, political, economic, and emotional investments in their understandings of the significance of different kinds of language use. For example, social gatekeepers' assessments of language can facilitate or limit people's access to resources such as jobs or citizenship.

These indexical interpretations can crystallize into or be derived from broader language ideologies, the "ubiquitous set of diverse beliefs," whether implicit or explicit, which are "used by speakers of all types as models for constructing linguistic evaluations and engaging in communicative activity" (Kroskrity 2004, 497). Language ideologies are both a means by which people rationalize the indexical connections they perceive between language use and users and a filter through which they discern particular indexical connections. This typically involves a process called *iconization*, an ideological framing of a given language or linguistic feature as formally

congruent with an associated social group, thereby naturalizing or essentializing such links (Irvine and Gal 2000).

Language ideologies include both scholarly theories and people's casual opinions of or feelings about language. They might focus on language broadly (e.g., claims that humans are the only species to use language), particular languages (e.g., opinions that some languages sound "beautiful" while others sound "ugly"), or specific aspects of language structure or use (e.g., a belief that double negatives are illogical and should not be used) (Ahearn 2012, 21). Language ideologies are loaded with "moral and political interests" (Irvine 1989, 225). That is, because beliefs about language always carry implications about speakers, they typically serve the interests of some social groups over others.

One common and deeply consequential language ideology is the "linguistic monolith" understanding of languages that I briefly invoked and rejected earlier. This is the notion that languages are (or should be) discrete, internally homogenous, and map onto likewise discrete and homogeneous communities of speakers (Irvine and Gal 2000; Makoni and Pennycook 2007; Rymes 2014). Although I argue that this perspective is not accurate, this language ideology requires study because it has been a powerful resource in the creation and maintenance of identity politics at various levels, including but not limited to the national (e.g., as governments may insist on the dominance of a single national language to promote national unity) and the ethnic (e.g., as minority groups may use a minority language as an emblem in resisting oppression by national governments). Both Nepal's government and its marginalized ethnic groups have harnessed a linguistic monolith understanding of language in precisely these ways.

A linguistic monolith ideology has also been both harnessed and critiqued by those promoting a view of Deaf people as an ethnolinguistic group. Sign languages often were, and in some settings still are, mistaken to be simple gestures, outside the provenance of human language (Baynton 1996). This ideological perspective has had devastating consequences for many d/Deaf persons. In the 1960s, however, William Stokoe drew on structural linguistic theory to demonstrate that, because signed languages could be described according to the same criteria linguists used for spoken language analysis, they were in fact fully linguistic systems (Stokoe 1960). Such research has been a major factor in the social validation of

both sign languages and their users. However, in social settings in which a linguistic monolith understanding of language dominates, many scholars and activists have stressed a given sign language's purportedly discrete and homogeneous nature to defend its status as a bona fide language. Variation within and contact between sign languages, as well as contact between signed and spoken languages (via signers' complex linguistic repertoires), can be rendered invisible by this perspective. For example, scholars have only recently begun incorporating into their descriptions of ASL varieties that emerged in racially segregated schools for deaf students in the United States and asking whether and how these varieties relate to different varieties of English (McCaskill et al. 2011).

A linguistic monolith perspective is not the only ideological framework through which sign languages and their role in constituting d/Deaf sociality has been understood (e.g., Brueggemann 2009). For example, Wrigley (1996, 104) has argued that what he calls "deaf citizenship" inheres in "a process, in social relations. This citizenship is not a static commodity of deafness or of sign language as a modality: it lies in the social exchange of recognition produced through signing." Similarly, in this book I approach NSL as a collection of overlapping but diverse practices, whereby recognition, belonging, and distinction within a Nepali Deaf social category are indexically produced. Ultimately, this book shows how both personas and larger social formations such as ethnolinguistic identity (e.g., Deaf) or nationality (e.g., Nepali) affect and emerge from interactive language use, while closely attending to rather than erasing all of the rich variation that entails. I further ask how these processes are mediated by participants' ideological understandings of the relationship between the linguistic and the social, which treat that variation sometimes as a problem and sometimes as a resource (Rosa 2014).

Methodologically, this entailed my not only paying attention to what people explicitly said about the relationship between language and social groups but also closely analyzing how people signed in multiple contexts and how they interpreted that signing (an important source of evidence for such interpretations is how interactions unfold since we cannot read minds) (Sidnell and Enfield 2012). Such analysis requires a good deal of cultural and linguistic competence, which I worked to develop by participating in Deaf social life in Nepal. I acquired my linguistic skills in NSL

in part through explicit classroom instruction, which began after my first visit to the KAD. Because the vast majority of deaf Nepalis were born to hearing parents who rarely learned to sign, a common question Deaf Nepalis asked one another on first meeting was “who taught you to sign?” I was lucky to have three excellent early NSL instructors, Amita, Shrihari, and Birendra (all of whom appear at various times throughout this book).

However, my competence in NSL and Deaf cultural life emerged primarily from years of intensive social interaction via signing: chatting at associations of Deaf persons, schools for d/Deaf students, businesses that Deaf persons owned or worked for, and the homes of Deaf friends. Additionally, in 2004 and 2005 I videotaped approximately forty hours of footage of signed conversations and interviews, which I closely analyzed, often with help from signers in Nepal. Though readers should look to my journal articles for more detailed linguistic analyses (Hoffmann-Dilloway 2008, 2010, 2011a, 2011b), the arguments in this book have emerged from these materials.

Just as my language skills emerged primarily from social interactions, the same is true of the data and analyses I present here. My relationships with Deaf signers in Nepal have been mediated by my role as a researcher but in many cases have also been some of the longest-lasting friendships in my life. Thus, in this book I frequently refer to particular Deaf Nepalis as my friends. Some readers may wonder whether that is an appropriate term to use in an academic study. Might friendships with research participants skew my findings? However, rather than write in a style that erases my social positionality in Nepal in order to represent my findings as “pure,” “objective,” or “raw,” I want to make clear to the reader that my research (like all ethnographic research) is produced not in spite of, but through, relationships, with all the complexities and obligations they entail. As medical anthropologist Crystal Biruk, my colleague and, in fact, friend puts it in a book in progress, my data are “cooked” (by the social and cultural processes through which they were gathered) rather than “raw” (purified of such social and cultural entailments). However, truly “raw” data do not exist; by signaling the social mediation of my arguments, I hope to provide the reader additional critical insight into the processes by which they emerged.

Due to constraints on travel imposed by the war (1996–2006), which co-occurred almost exactly with the period in which my primary research trips took place (1997–2006), the majority of these interactions were conducted and recorded in the Kathmandu Valley, home to the country's capital city and a major center for Deaf social life. However, more than twenty regional associations of Deaf people were active in the country, organized under an umbrella institution known at the time of my research as the National Federation of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (NFDH) and renamed in 2011 as the National Federation of the Deaf Nepal (NDFN).¹¹ I was able to interact with Deaf Nepalis in a wide range of sites in this geographically diverse country, from the high mountains in the arid northern Mustang region bordering Tibet, to the middle-hills lake town of Pokhara, to the flat, hot, southern Terai region on the border with India.

In addition to being geographically diverse, Nepal has been characterized by a great deal of social, cultural, and linguistic diversity. Broadly speaking, four major politically salient sociocultural groups were active in the country, none of which formed a majority and each of which contained a great deal of internal variation. The politically dominant group consisted of high-caste Hindus from the middle-hills region of the country (at 30.89 percent of the population). Two other major groups were the Dalits (low-caste Hindus, 14.99 percent) and the Madhesis (castes and tribal groups from the Terai region, 32.29 percent). The fourth major grouping consisted of the *ādivāsi janajāti* (indigenous nationalities, 36.31 percent), which included many ethnic groups, such as the Sherpas, Newars, Gurungs, and Magars (Hangen 2007, 4; Lawoti 2005, 99). As the next chapter shows, understanding the historical and political processes by which this social variation was produced and organized is vital for comprehending both attitudes toward deafness and the emergence of Deaf sociality in Nepal.

11. The name change highlighted the federation's focus on culturally Deaf activities rather than the mitigation of difficulties for those hard of hearing Nepalis who orient toward spoken language and hearing social networks. The organization goes by the initials NDFN, although these do not reflect the order of the words in its title. This is in order to distinguish the organization from the National Federation of the Disabled Nepal, which uses the initials NFDN (Green 2014).