

# Introduction

One day in June 2010 in Maunabudhuk, a village in eastern Nepal, Shrila Khadka, a fifty-year-old deaf woman, signed to a younger hearing woman as they stood in a tea shop, surrounded by wooden tables and water pitchers. Speaking Nepali, the hearing woman said that she didn't understand. Meanwhile, her gaze slid away from Shrila's hands and face. A second young hearing woman present exclaimed in spoken Nepali, "She said you should come to her house and her daughter-in-law will make you tea. Don't you even understand that much?"<sup>1</sup> Despite the woman's scolding words, and despite the profound ordinarieness of the setting and topic, it was by no means a given that a hearing person, or for that matter another deaf person, would understand Shrila's invitation.

This scene points to and challenges two entwined assumptions about human sociality that are so foundational in the social sciences and in many people's everyday lives that they tend to go unstated. The first is that to be human is to be born into a world of accessible language. Deaf studies, sign language linguistics, and allied fields have disproven this supposition by documenting the experiences of deaf people, the vast majority of whom are born into hearing, nonsigning families. Indeed, for many such deaf people, learning a conventional signed language and becoming part of a deaf community or communities is a transformative process (Padden and Humphries 1988; Ladd 2003; Monaghan et al. 2003; Bechter 2008; Friedner 2014; Kraus 2018).<sup>2</sup> The second, corollary assumption is that in everyday life, people can count on their own and others' intelligibility. Nearly all studies on "deaf sociality" (Friedner 2015) and communicative practices—including this one—challenge the factuality of this assumption *and* underscore that signing environments matter because they enable deaf people to experience

the ease of shared language, of understanding and being understood (Mathur and Napoli 2011; Friedner 2016). This idea is critical in work on nationally scaled deaf communities as well as in places known as “shared signing communities” (Kisch 2008), characterized by high percentages of deaf people and widespread use of a signed language.

But Shrila’s circumstances are distinct both from those of people raised in robust signing environments and those of people who encounter such environments later in life. She communicates in what, following users of Nepali Sign Language (NSL), I call *natural sign*. (Throughout this book I draw on the terminology and concepts of NSL signers a great deal.) Briefly put, natural sign involves a small repertoire of widely available, shared signs complemented by strategies that make use of the body’s capacity to point to and mimetically represent places, people, movements, objects, and other elements of the social world. Natural sign practices vary but are more conventional and conventionally understood across signers than *home sign*, and less so than *shared sign languages* and *emerging sign languages*—three key categories in the literature (discussed more in chapter 2). Across persons and contexts, natural signers experience a range of responses from those with whom they try to communicate—from not-understanding to understanding, as the vignette with Shrila demonstrates. This unevenness is a pervasive and consequential characteristic of natural sign conversations. I witnessed lively natural sign conversations about politics, love, yesterday’s gossip, or tomorrow’s work plans, on the one hand, and conversations that came to a grinding halt, or failed to occur in the first place, on the other. The immense variability in whether, what, and how people communicate and understand is one of natural sign’s most socially significant and intellectually puzzling characteristics. The contradiction that animates this book is the fact that in natural sign, referential understanding is possible yet precarious, often achieved but never guaranteed.<sup>3</sup>

All language users experience the possibility of being misunderstood, not-understood, or even ignored. Yet most language users, at least in specific circumstances, get to take for granted that they will understand and be understood “well enough” for the purposes at hand—and that if not, a change in who they are talking with, or what language, dialect, or modality is in use, will yield the sought-after understanding.<sup>4</sup> But for Shrila, there is no otherwise; having someone to whom she was signing directly not understand her was par for the course. Grounded in long-term fieldwork with deaf and hearing people in Nepal, this book explores what it means to communicate when understanding and being understood are radically contingent and persistently in question.

It is tempting to analyze the discrepancy between how the two hearing women responded to Shrila by positing a difference in how well they “know” natural sign. Hearing people in Maunabudhuk and the adjacent village of Bodhe have a range of relationships to deaf people and signing. Deaf people live throughout the area, constituting roughly 1 percent of the total population; some hearing people grow

up with deaf family members or close neighbors, while others interact with deaf people far less frequently. Any given individual, deaf or hearing, thus has more or less exposure to and experience with producing and seeing others produce sign.

And familiarity with natural sign certainly matters. I learned this through communicating in natural sign as well as watching others do so. Prior to conducting fieldwork in Maunabudhuk, I had gained some practice communicating in natural sign in Kathmandu, spending time at a program for elderly deaf people. When I moved to Maunabudhuk, I was able to draw on some particular signs I had acquired as well as general strategies for communicating in natural sign. I also learned signs that I had not encountered in Kathmandu, simultaneously becoming familiar with the broader social and material context. For example, many people in Maunabudhuk raise pigs. I learned how pigs are butchered, with a sharp stab to the chest, that PIG is signed with an index finger jabbed into the signer's own ribs, that eating pork is associated with certain ethnic groups, and that asking "PIG EAT?" is one way of ascertaining ethnicity. For people who grew up in the area, these visual, kinetic, cognitive, and social associations are part of what makes natural sign usage possible. While the degree of conventionality in natural sign is limited when compared to languages like Nepali Sign Language, American Sign Language, Nepali, or English, there are conventional natural signs in domains as varied as kinship, places and events, and agricultural and household activities. There are also some conventions in the way that signs get combined.

If, however, "knowing" natural sign were all that mattered, variability in people's responses to natural sign conversations would be no more puzzling than the fact that some people know NSL or Nepali and some people do not. Critically, many natural signs, whether conventional or improvised in the course of conversation, involve potentially "decipherable" (Kuschel 1973) relationships between form and meaning—as suggested by PIG. Natural sign offers the possibility that someone might figure out the articulation and meaning of a new-to-them sign. I analyze these signs as *immanent* in the sociomaterial context. Put another way, the relationship between the signed modality and the world itself offers communicative potential. For example, signers can point at and thus direct addressees' attention to objects, people, and places. I learned that a village visible across a valley was named Kurule and that many women who had married into families in Maunabudhuk had grown up there. For these women, pointing toward Kurule could invoke their birth family or the time period of childhood.

Signers also use their bodies to indicate actions, sizes, shapes, and qualities that addressees can (try to) recognize and connect with social patterns. For example, people in farming communities know that cornfields should be weeded when the corn plants reach a certain height; that knowledge is available for representation through the body by means of using a hand to indicate height—and thus by extension, the time when that happens. Similarly, in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, stone grinders adorn many porches; a signer who moves one fist in a horizontal circle

can evoke an understanding of grinding flour because the addressee has seen or performed this movement even if she has never seen or done it qua linguistic sign.

As another example, *bhāi tīkā dīn* is a ritual and holiday celebrated by many Nepalis during a series of holidays known collectively as Tihar. *Tīkā* is a ceremonial powder or paste placed on foreheads during celebrations; *bhāi tīkā dīn* means ‘younger brother’s *tīkā* day’ and focuses on the relationship between brothers and sisters. On this day, families tend to dress up. Gifts of money or cloth are given or received, as are sweets. Food is consumed. But these are actions also typical of other holidays and rituals. In contrast, it is only during *bhāi tīkā dīn* that siblings carefully place colored dots of *tīkā* in vertical lines on each other’s foreheads; moreover, *bhāi tīkā dīn* is for many the pinnacle event during Tihar. Signers refer to *bhāi tīkā dīn* and to Tihar more generally by using their fingers to enact the placing of those dots, or to point to the location of those dots, albeit on the signer’s own forehead. The sign is immanent in the social practice and structure of the holiday; the world nudges signers to refer to Tihar in this way. Immanence means that communication beyond (or before) conventionality is quite possible, in a way that does not seem to be available in speech/sound. Building on a long tradition in sign language studies of thinking about how the signed modality offers affordances for iconic and indexical representation (Kuschel 1973; Kendon 1980b; Taub 2001; Liddell 2003; Dudis 2004, 2011; Cuxac and Sallandre 2008; Padden et al. 2013, 2105), I emphasize here how the sociomaterial world of bodies, landscapes, and routines in which signs are produced and interpreted offers itself up for use in the production and interpretation of those signs.<sup>5</sup>

The demographic and semiotic characteristics of natural sign are necessary for explaining variability in what communication in natural sign looks like, and why understanding is so uneven, as with Shrila’s interlocutors. But accounting for natural sign in these terms is not enough. Returning to the opening vignette, recall that the first woman, even as she said that she could not understand, stopped looking at Shrila. Looking away from a signer is a particularly obvious way for a potential addressee to both signal a disinterest in, and enact a barrier to, understanding. The vignette demonstrates quite literally that to understand natural sign, addressees must be willing to look. Even if the woman had continued to look at Shrila, however, she might have been uninvested in trying to understand and put together the meanings of the signs—in trying to *make sense* of what Shrila had said. Addressees, in other words, must be willing to try.

This ethnographic argument recursively underpins the book’s primary methodological and theoretical argument. Interactionally, making sense in natural sign requires that interlocutors attend to each other and try to understand each other; methodologically and theoretically, making sense of natural sign requires that I attend to social and semiotic relations, and to the willingness, or unwillingness, of potential interlocutors to do the work of communicating. I approach willingness, unwillingness, and a range of other embodied orientations through the framework

of ethics, which emphasizes both the depth and nuance of the entanglement of selves with others (and others with selves) as well as the sometimes unpredictable, sometimes unintended, but nevertheless pervasively consequential effects of people's actions on others.

Natural sign, as a communicative practice, both highlights and heightens the ethical foundations of all language. Chatting about existential dilemmas in a language a person has known since before memory, politely trying to purchase fruit in a language they are just learning, reading dense academic texts, or commenting casually on social media posts: linguistic communication involves work, whether framed as cognitive, embodied, or interpretive. It involves a turning-toward, a desire, an orientation (Weber 1947; Hanks 1996; Goodwin 2006; Green 2014a, 2022a; Friedner 2015). Refusal or unwillingness to engage in sense-making is its own kind of orienting, a turning-away.<sup>6</sup>

Thus natural sign lays bare the bones of human communication: the way others must attend to someone in order for them to be understood; the way that making sense *to* someone requires that they make sense *of* you; the entanglement of word with world, language with context, semiotics with sociality. Natural sign shows that ethics is not only intrinsic to linguistic interaction but also grounds its very possibility. While ultimately true for all language use, natural sign heightens this relationship and its consequences, in terms of both interaction (how and whether people understand) and analysis (how scholars understand whether people understand). The particularities of natural sign demand something more and perhaps different from potential interlocutors than conversation in conventional language: more attention, more labor, more willingness. Drawing on lean conventionality and semiotic immanence, natural signers can and do use various resources in skillful and creative ways (Green 2017, 2022b). Both expressing and understanding what gets said, however, requires people to do more work than they do with conventional languages. While all communication requires that addressees make inferences about “what is meant” beyond “what is said,” interlocutors using natural sign must, to varying degrees, also do the work to infer what is being said.<sup>7</sup> Such work is not guaranteed. People may, and often do, choose not to engage. They may also try to engage and nevertheless fail to understand or be understood. Or they may understand, as the second hearing woman understood Shrila.

Throughout this book my goal is to center deaf signers as creative and expert communicators and theorists. This goal draws on and responds to anthropological traditions of grounding analysis in local categories and concepts (e.g., Mahmood 2001); growing calls from deaf scholars to center deaf epistemologies and ontologies (e.g., Kusters, De Meulder, and O'Brien 2017); and research in linguistics that troubles the often implicit hierarchy of academic over lay and Western over non-Western approaches to language (e.g., Hanks, Ide, and Katagiri 2009; Kusters and Sahasrabudhe 2018).<sup>8</sup> As chapter 1 explores in detail, NSL signers both cherish NSL—itself a marginalized language—and recognize that natural sign enables

them to communicate with non-NSL signers, both deaf and hearing.<sup>9</sup> Most deaf Nepalis, in fact, use natural sign as their primary communicative mode, sometimes alongside some use of one of Nepal's many spoken languages. Natural sign does not involve a lot of metalinguistic talk; but NSL discourse is replete with it, and NSL signers have much to say about natural sign—in fact, they posit the very existence of the category. I move between thinking and writing about natural sign as a metalinguistic category and natural sign as an interactional phenomenon. In terms of the latter, most of my data is from Maunabudhuk and the adjacent village of Bodhe, where Nepali speakers sometimes distinguished between NSL and, using the English word, “local” sign.<sup>10</sup> I use *natural sign* and *local sign* as overlapping though not exactly equivalent metalinguistic terms; the former refers to this mode of signing throughout Nepal, including in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, whereas the latter is reserved specifically for these two villages.<sup>11</sup>

#### LANGUAGE, BODIES, AND MATERIALITY IN SOCIAL THEORY

In anthropology and related fields, it has become fashionable to dismiss scholarship that focuses on the referential or propositional functions of language: how people use language to create shared understandings on the level of what heuristically can be called content. Such dismissals often invoke Saussure's (1972) model of the talking heads (figure 1), but only to point out how much it oversimplifies, as indeed it does.

Language is not only oral and aural. Language can be produced and received in the visual signed modality (Stokoe 1960; Klima and Bellugi 1979; Padden and Perlmutter 1987) and the tactile modality (granda and Nuccio 2018; Edwards and Brentari 2020; Clark and Nuccio 2020). Some language users communicate primarily or only through written/typed text (Sequenzia and Grace 2015). Moreover, alternative theories of semiotics such as Peirce's (1955), and younger disciplines like neurolinguistics, show that language does not neatly transfer from one person's mind to another's via sensory input. Understanding what someone else has meant involves complex neurological, psychological, and social processes. But to entirely dismiss the talking heads model is to disregard what it gets right, or at least what it captures about many people's experience: on the level of reference, in everyday conversations, people often understand each other quite well. When you say, “I hate lima beans,” I know you mean *lima beans*, not *kidney beans*, and if I mistake one for the other, my mistake can be identified and probably corrected. And I know you mean you strongly dislike them, not that you are allergic to them (though you might use the phrase “allergic to” more loosely, to mean you hate them a lot).

My broader point here is that despite claims to the contrary, signifier and signified have not come apart. If they had, neither that sentence nor this one could have

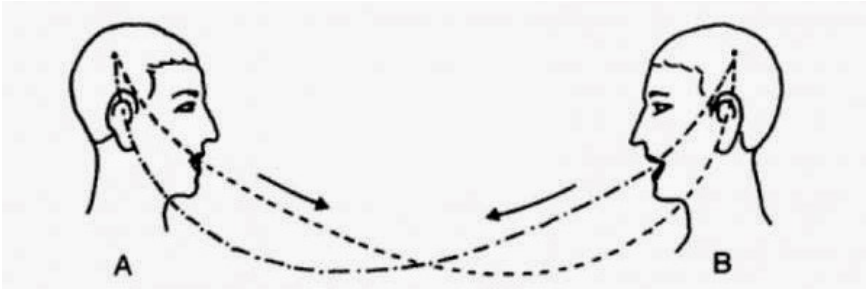


FIGURE 1. Saussure's talking heads (1972:11): a drawing of two heads facing each other, labeled A and B. One line moves from A's upper head to A's mouth to B's ear to B's upper head. A second line traces the reverse trajectory, from B's head to B's mouth to A's ear to A's head. Reproduced by permission from Open Court, a division of Cricket Media.

been written or understood. Indeed the functions of language (Jakobson 1960) that are not (only) referential almost always depend on referentiality—I include here referentiality that is mediated by interpreters and translators—and critiques of referentiality depend on reference to be understood in the first place. There are important exceptions; patients *not* understanding shamanic healing rituals may in fact be at the heart of such rituals' efficacy (Briggs 1996; Hanks 2012), and the "denotational unintelligibility" of glossolalia produces important social and devotional effects (Harkness 2017). In both cases, however, it is assumed that what is being said makes sense to *someone*—the shaman, the ancestors, the gods, or God—and this presumed intelligibility is critical to the power of the ritual or prayer.

The important attention paid to the many ways that human language use is more than referential often takes reference for granted. And in fact most people *can* take it for granted, at least most of the time. But not everyone; Shрила certainly can't. This book thus asks what happens to people's experiences of language and sociality, as well as to foundational social scientific accounts of those experiences, when referentiality itself is in question. What are the experiential, ethical, and intellectual stakes of living in and thinking with worlds wherein language cannot be taken for granted?

To begin to answer these questions, it is critical to interrogate what assumptions about bodies, minds, and senses are woven into how social scientists theorize and make claims. Take, for example, a primal scene in the social scientific imagination: Althusser's 1971 example of interpellation. He asks the reader to imagine a scene of "the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing": "There are individuals walking along. Somewhere (usually behind them) the hail rings out: 'Hey, you there!' One individual (nine times out of ten 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" (1971:174–175). Althusser is careful to note that "in reality these things happen without any succession" (1971:172); the scene is supposed to be

read as metaphorical, or at least, as not exactly real. But, as Kunreuther (2014:10, emphasis added) argues in her analysis of voice, Althusser is specifically theorizing how “an individual becomes a subject, endowed with consciousness, desires, and specific values, through *reiterated forms of address and conventions* that delineate a social position.” In other words, the metaphor is also the actual means of subject-making. Building on Kunreuther, I argue that it is necessary to take seriously the scene’s material and communicative dimensions more broadly. Althusser assumes that the “individuals walking along,” as well as the police, are speakers and hearers, not just in Goffman’s (1981) sense of participating in a communicative relationship but also in bodily terms.

Both the call, “Hey, you there,” and the response, turning around upon recognizing that the call is meant for oneself, require bodies that literally speak and hear. I first wrote about this scene in relation to deaf people in 2013 or 2014, and it was only in 2021 that I really noticed the phrase “walking along.” The naturalization of certain kinds of bodies is endless. The fact that the call comes from behind further effaces modality and the senses, in that if the sound of speech is enough to draw attention to the fact that someone is speaking, people must have been able to hear it. Moreover, the individual who recognizes themselves as hailed seems not only to have heard the police’s call but also to have understood it—and this seems to be true as well for the other people, those not hailed directly, whom Goffman would call overhearers. With this seamless hailing and response exemplifying the process of interpellation, social actors or subjects are naturalized as having normatively configured minds and bodies and as sharing a conventional, spoken language.<sup>12</sup>

Of course language is not the only way people are interpellated. The cry “It’s a boy/girl!” indexes and instantiates an entire apparatus of linguistic and non-linguistic ways that people are gendered (Butler 1997). Senghas (2003:271–272) argues that deaf Nicaraguans who are “linguistically isolated” from their hearing compatriots are unmistakably Nicaraguan. People turn when called, or run away in terror, as much because of the institutional force of the police as because of language—and this is in fact part of Althusser’s point.<sup>13</sup> I am not claiming that social and political systems do not hail and interpellate deaf people. Rather, I am arguing for careful attention to unstated and therefore unnoticed assumptions about the actual means through which interpellation, subjectification, and other foundational social processes happen. I am arguing that in both theory and everyday life, the linguistic and material modes through which persons come into relation with one another matter.

Language draws people in through the sensory capacities of bodies, the material affordances of sound, sight, and touch, and the force of shared grammar, or at least a shared understanding of what language sounds, looks, or feels like. What happens when this sharedness cannot be taken for granted? As in the opening vignette, on multiple occasions I saw hearing people look or wander away from deaf people who were signing to them. People seem to feel able to ignore what

has been said when they do not understand it. How might natural sign—not fully shared, not fully conventional—unhook hearing, and occasionally other deaf, people from the responsibility to be socially hailed, not so much by the police as by deaf relatives, friends, and neighbors? And how do the ethical foundations of communication become literally visible in such cases?

#### LANGUAGE AND ORDINARY ETHICS

An important recent focus of scholarship on ethical practice in everyday life centers on how people act in relation to others and how the substance, contours, and actions of the self are shaped by the presence and particularity of those others (Lambek ed. 2010; Pandian and Ali 2010; Faubion 2011; Das 2012; Venkat 2017). Sometimes referred to as *ordinary ethics*, these approaches do not set out to draw a sharp line between the ordinary and nonordinary—after all, what is ordinary is historically, culturally, and biographically contingent—but rather to call attention both to the capaciousness of ethical orientations, actions, and consequences in social life and to the usefulness of ethics as an analytic (Lambek 2010). Following Lambek (2010:8–9), I am not invested in distinguishing between morality and ethics, and I use the category of the ethical in “the broader sense,” such that it includes what from other perspectives might be labeled unethical actions or consequences.

Ordinary ethical actions are routinely incorporated into the bodily practices of life with others and nevertheless performed with purpose and care (Das 2012:135). This duality characterizes much of ordinary ethical action (Lambek 2010). In the settings I write about, orienting to a signer or not is both habitual and agentive, located in the space between what Lambek (2010:6), citing a much “old[er] distinction,” refers to as the “is” and the “ought.” Drawing on Keane (2016), it might be said that routine tasks and interactions offer ethical affordances or opportunities for ethical expression. As Das (2012) describes: How do you make tea for each member of your family? When your partner comes home at the end of a workday, how do you greet them? These “minutest of gestures” (Das 2012:135) are in the case of natural sign quite literal: the making of signs, the direction of eye gaze. Ordinary ethical practices can also include the everyday actions of people who seek to transform the world such that it is more fully inhabitable by marginalized groups such as deaf or queer people (Dave 2012; Friedner 2015). There are important resonances between these kinds of ethical projects and the ones taken on by NSL signers that I explore in chapter 1. NSL signers’ efforts to learn NSL, to become members of *BAHIRĀ SAMĀJ* ‘DEAF SOCIETY,’ to teach others NSL, and to cultivate an ever-larger deaf society are acts both of self- and world-making.<sup>14</sup>

NSL signers understand themselves as responsible for other deaf people in fairly expansive ways; they also talk about hearing people’s responsibilities. Sagar Karki, a deaf NSL teacher with whom I worked closely, once told an audience of hearing people that shopkeepers have a duty to talk in turn with deaf and hearing

customers.<sup>15</sup> He was not suggesting that all shopkeepers, let alone all hearing people, could or even should learn NSL but rather that shopkeepers, and hearing people more broadly, could communicate with deaf people in natural sign *if they bothered to do so*. I understand this less as a call for building a radically different world and more as a call for attending to and actualizing a world that already can or even does exist; my attention to such a call is thus as much an anthropology of the *meanwhile* as it is an anthropology of the *otherwise* (Povinelli 2011).<sup>16</sup> Sagar's call also highlights how a social actor, such as a hearing shopkeeper, might or might not understand their own practices as ethical in nature, while still having profound ethical consequences. Forgetting that someone likes clotted milk in their tea may result in hurt feelings. Forgetting that over and over again may result in a rift in a relationship. Not engaging with someone's signing results in a rift in not just a relationship but relationality itself.

Sagar's admonishment that shopkeepers should interact with both deaf and hearing people, rather than shoo away deaf customers, resonates with the anthropological assertion that interaction is an inherently ethical domain (Garfinkel 1963, 1967, cited in Heritage 1984; Goodwin 2006; Sidnell 2010; Keane 2016; Green 2022a). Interaction requires that people establish and maintain relations through corporeal and cognitive acts of attention and turn-taking (Goffman 1964, 1967, cited in Goffman 1981; Duranti and Goodwin 1992:148; Sidnell 2010). And both the person talking and their addressees must do further work, on several levels. Not everything "talked about" is explicitly "mentioned" (Garfinkel 1963:221, cited in Heritage 1984:81). Hanks (1990) shows that even reference is a socially complex endeavor, while Kockelman (2005:245) proposes that "pragmatics is prior to semantics." Put another way, even what *does* get explicitly mentioned does not simply make sense; someone must make sense of it (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007). Addressees must figure out what is meant from multiple "possible interpretations" (D. Cameron 1998:439), and interlocutors have a "moral" expectation of each other to do "whatever is necessary" to understand (Heritage 1984:82, 95). This relies on the addressee's "commitment" and "degree of *hermeneutic openness*" (Kockelman 2005:251–252, 261, italics in original).<sup>17</sup>

Yet the claim that speakers/signers and addressees do work, including at the level of semantics and reference, is in tension with how most people experience language and understanding—as "automatic and obligate" to use Levinson's words (2006:52), illustrated earlier by my discussion of Althusser. I draw on Hanks (1990) and Rumsey (2010) to resolve this tension. Hanks utilizes the concept of *habitus* to explain how linguistic structures get reproduced in novel utterances; grammar is the sedimentation of habit, and particular instances of habitual language use (re)animate grammar. Rumsey (2010:206), meanwhile, argues that ethical action "is not only enabled by language but is positively required by it": when people speak or sign, they cannot help but inhabit ethical positions, such as an *I* in relation to a *you*, that are grammatically encoded by language. Bringing these approaches

together, I argue that grammar performs not only cognitive and communicative but also ethical labor for its users (Green 2022a). Each time someone understands someone else without effort, or despite being distracted, bored, indifferent, or even hostile, grammar is doing powerful but unnoticed work for both the person talking and the addressee. By hooking people into a robust grammatical system that facilitates easeful communication, conventional language does a great deal to let its users off the hook in ethical terms.<sup>18</sup>

If conventional language provides ethical scaffolds, it is unsurprising that emergent language practices offer especially generative material for thinking about the ethical underpinnings and processes of communication. Here it is helpful to expand on the distinction between conventional language and emergent language that I introduced in the preliminary definitions. *Conventional language* refers to language as most people in the world experience and think about it. Conversing with others who share your language, whether spoken or signed, is an instance of conventional language. Processing it is experienced as “immediate and obligate,” to return to Levinson’s phrase. *Emergent language*, of which natural sign is one mode, involves more putting-together, more work, more guessing, more back-and-forth. Conventional language in use also has emergent properties, and emergent language makes use of conventions, whether linguistic or otherwise. These are heuristic categories, the purpose being to draw attention to the qualities of emergence and conventionality as they manifest in particular settings, and to aid in analyzing the social consequences of those qualities.<sup>19</sup>

Emergent language practices, whether classified as signing or not, often involve modes of meaning-making such as pointing, gesture, or object incorporation, that offer some kind of possibility for decipherability (e.g., Goodwin 2006; Levinson 2006; Kusters dir. 2015). But this possibility—as opposed to the more immediate understanding produced by conventional language—means that it is critical that people *want* to make sense of each other. Goodwin (2006), for example, writes about his father, who had aphasia following a stroke and communicated primarily with gestures, prosody, and several English words. Goodwin (2006:106) explicitly states that his father’s conversational partners, who work with him to produce meaningful utterances, consider him “someone who is trying to say something relevant”—an orientation that is fundamentally “moral” in nature.<sup>20</sup>

I also build on prior work that theorizes signing as moral practice. Nonaka (2007:15) suggests that in shared signing communities such as Ban Khor, Thailand, a shared language and what she calls a “moral habitus” of use (which includes “the willingness of hearing people to acquire and use that language”) coemerge over time. In what is broadly known as International Sign (IS), signers consider communication across different signed languages to be not only possible but also morally valuable (Green 2014c).<sup>21</sup> Friedner (2015) documents how new and experienced Indian Sign Language (ISL) signers frequently check in with each other about their understanding and repeat information for each other, characterizing

deaf, ISL-centered spaces as “moral.” But the case of natural sign is distinct from these examples. Unlike Ban Khor, the settings where I have researched natural sign do not have familial and geographical social clusters in which signing, and orienting to it, have become fully habitual for some critical number of people, both deaf and hearing. Unlike in the kinds of international encounters where signers use International Sign, not everyone has another language to fall back on, nor is there a shared commitment to mutual moral orientation. And unlike in urban deaf India, these are mixed deaf-hearing spaces, lacking the kind of moral imperative to create deaf similitude and to orient toward collective understanding and “deaf development” (Friedner 2015).

In writing about natural sign and natural signers in Nepal, I bring together an ethical perspective on language and interaction with an ever-growing body of research on deaf communication, and in particular the communication of deaf people who are not part of deaf communities or shared signing communities (at least as classically defined), or who are but are communicating with hearing people (e.g., Kuschel 1973; Kendon 1980a, 1980b, 1980c; Goldin-Meadow et al. 1984; Jepson 1991a, 1991b; Torigoe, Takei, and Kimura 1995; Torigoe and Takei 2002; Fox Tree 2009, 2011; Haviland 2013; Kusters dir. 2015; Hou 2016, 2020; Kusters 2017, 2019; Kusters and Sahasrabudhe 2018; Reed et al. 2018; Moriarty 2019; Goico 2019; Horton 2020a, 2020b; Neveu 2020; Reed 2022; Friedner 2022). I argue that communication in emergent language is not only influenced by and reflective of its sociocultural contexts, it is literally made possible or impossible by them. When the forms and structures of conventional language are not in reach, language users—signers/speakers and addressees—are asked to pick up the slack; sometimes they do, and sometimes they don’t; sometimes they succeed, and sometimes they don’t. In natural sign, questions of bodily and cognitive attention, nonlinguistic knowledge shared or unshared by interlocutors, and interlocutors’ desire and willingness, become more perceptible, salient, and consequential than in conventional language use. Indeed, I argue, the processes of semiotic interpretation and ethical orientation become indistinguishable in certain moments.

Natural signers’ participation in everyday modes of *communicative sociality* is therefore profoundly vulnerable to ordinary ethical actions, such as averting one’s gaze, as in the opening vignette in this introduction. Moreover, potential interlocutors’ orientations toward communicating with natural signers can render them (un)intelligible, not only in the moment but as persons more generally. This is evident in the commonly-used spoken Nepali word *lāṭo*, which connotes someone who doesn’t make sense and is colloquially used to refer to deaf people—a word that NSL signers abhor and that they critique from the position of keen awareness of their vulnerability when using natural sign with hearing interlocutors.

There are times when being misunderstood or not-understood has self-evidently high stakes, and not only for natural signers. In a devastating passage, Goodwin (2006:106) writes about how his father’s catheter was inserted incorrectly following

a stroke, but the doctors “dismissed” as meaningless his gestures and speech when he tried to tell them so. In Nepal, I recall discussing with women NSL signers the particularly painful situation faced by deaf girls and women who had been raped and who were not NSL signers and thus were not understood or believed when they tried to describe or identify their attacker.<sup>22</sup> Deaf elders at the Old Deaf Project in Kathmandu told stories about being cheated out of land by unscrupulous hearing siblings, illustrating how deaf people’s material disempowerment, especially that of natural signers, is linked to language and communication.

There are important moments in this book that concern memories and allegations of mistreatment and violence. Recognizing with Das (2007) that violence can be ordinary and everyday, I nevertheless want to emphasize that many of the situations I write about are quite mundane: whether someone is understood when she makes casual conversation at a communal water tap; how someone else is evaluated when misunderstandings arise about how long she was out of town; what it takes for a signer to secure someone’s interest in chatting. I argue that it is precisely this everydayness that makes the stakes of understanding and being understood different for natural signers than for users of conventional but marginalized languages, whether signed or spoken.

When NSL signers are misunderstood or treated poorly by hearing people—whether they are using natural sign, NSL, writing, speech, or some combination—they have both behind and ahead of them experiences of linguistic ease and more or less consistent mutual understanding with other NSL signers. Natural signers, especially those who struggle the most with everyday communication (chapter 5), have no such horizon. NSL signers can chart specific moments when their (hearing) interlocutors ignore them, fail to understand, or misunderstand, against the memory and expectation of shared intelligibility. For deaf natural signers the juxtaposition of willingness and refusal, of understanding, misunderstanding, and not-understanding, of being attended to and ignored, saturates the ordinary. The horizons of yesterday and tomorrow look just like right here, right now. It is this profound ordinariness that makes the stakes of thinking with and through natural sign so high.

#### HOW I CAME TO WRITE THIS BOOK

I first spent time in Nepal in 2002, as a hearing undergraduate student on a study abroad program focused on cultural immersion and learning spoken Nepali. At that time, I was a decent American Sign Language (ASL) signer and was interested in meeting deaf signers in Nepal. My program connected me to the Kathmandu Association of the Deaf (KAD), where I was greeted warmly by deaf members and board members as well as hearing interpreters. Over the next three weeks a deaf teacher at KAD generously allowed me to sit in on his NSL class, and deaf interlocutors showed me around Nepal’s oldest deaf residential school, invited me

into their homes and to a wedding feast, and took me to the Bakery Café, which employed a large number of deaf staff, and to the Skill Training Institute for the Deaf (STID), where I met young women who had only recently begun to learn NSL. I remember at least one deaf interlocutor telling me emphatically how different deaf people's experiences are "in the villages." (As I relate in chapter 1, I learned later that "the village" is shorthand for places without networks of NSL signers.) These experiences sparked my interest in deaf Nepalis who are not NSL signers.

I returned to Nepal in the summers of 2006 and 2008 as a graduate student in anthropology and conducted my dissertation fieldwork, which forms the core of this book, from September 2009 to December 2010. I knew by then that I wanted to engage with people whom I now call natural signers by embedding myself in an NSL outreach program run by the National Federation of the Deaf Nepal (abbreviated NDFN to distinguish it from the National Federation of the Disabled Nepal, NFDN). One cycle of classes was ending when I arrived in the fall of 2009. Among several locations in spring 2010, Maunabudhuk in Dhankuta district seemed like a good fit. The NDFN generously agreed to my request to do research and helped facilitate my arrival in Maunabudhuk several weeks into the six-month program. There I met the deaf teacher, as well as the deaf participants from both Maunabudhuk and the adjoining village of Bodhe. One teenager attended briefly; the other participants were adults in their thirties to sixties. Ten of them attended regularly, and three others more sporadically. I lived in Maunabudhuk from the end of April through the end of October of 2010.

My goal was not to study the NSL class per se, but the class certainly had effects both on the process of research and on the everyday lives and communicative practices of deaf villagers and their hearing interlocutors. The class gathered deaf residents regularly in a way that had not occurred prior. Moreover, NSL teacher Sagar Karki's pedagogical goals and my research goals happily coincided; we both, for example, wanted to spend time visiting the homes of the deaf people who participated in the class. His linguistic and social expertise became critical to my research process; he in turn expressed how glad he was to have the company of an NSL signer during the long afternoon hours after the morning class. My daily presence in class, and the fact that Sagar and I frequently visited deaf people's homes together, also worked to position me in particular ways. As discussed in the following chapter, Sagar seemed to disturb hearing people's sense of the category *deaf*. In contrast, I seemed to fit relatively well into the category of a hearing, white, foreign/American *mis* 'miss, teacher,' familiar from United States Peace Corps Volunteers who had worked in the village.<sup>23</sup>

And in fact, there were many times when I did take up a teaching role. Hearing teenagers and adults who stopped by the class even momentarily would frequently take up a teaching role during literacy instruction; for me to refrain from helping deaf students with their letters or the NSL signs that I knew would have been considered odd and selfish. The NSL class was a source of value for participants

but also of friction (Green 2014c), as attendance meant that they couldn't perform household and farm labor during class and while they walked to and from their homes. Several deaf people asked Sagar and me to intervene with their families, suggesting that they were being asked to bear too great a workload in comparison to their hearing family members 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 in addition to being a researcher.

When hearing people verbalized an assumption that I was a teacher or even the one in charge of the NSL program, however, I would reply that I wasn't in actuality a *mis* 'teacher,' that I was there to conduct fieldwork, that Sagar 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 respect due to educators should be directed toward Sagar. More generally, while being (regarded as) a teacher made me legible to Maunabudhuk's residents, it also often felt at odds with my role as researcher and learner—of local communicative practices, relationships, geography. I was (almost) always glad therefore when my incompetence was revealed, as when I got lost on pathways (happily reported by Sagar to his students), spilled water on myself when attempting to drink water with the appropriate gap between my 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.’”

I returned to Kathmandu and Maunabudhuk during summer trips in 2012, 2015, and 2018. I had been hoping to spend time there again during 2020 or 2021, but the universe has had different plans. Across nearly two years of fieldwork, in addition to spending time at deaf organizations, classes, and conferences, I have spent time with friends and acquaintances celebrating New Year, Holi, Tihar, and other holidays, learning how to properly cook *chiyā* ‘tea,’ attending soccer matches and cricket practice, discussing the intricacies of organizational politics, arguing about which bus to take, wandering through Kathmandu's crowded streets in search of the perfect jacket, exchanging stories of childhood and love, and otherwise immersed in Nepal's deaf society. In Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, along with attending the NSL class each morning, I took part in the everyday rhythms of bazaar life, and, with Sagar, made frequent visits to deaf interlocutors' homes, most located in the farmland surrounding the bazaar. In accordance with local etiquette, I would bring a gift of food items such as biscuits, and our hosts would serve a snack such as sliced cucumbers rubbed with salt and chili peppers accompanied by tea or alcohol. I cooed over children and admired livestock, listened to parents worry about their 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. At times, my

fieldwork involved filming or even, on rare occasions, formal linguistic elicitation. Most often it looked like hanging out.

Through these years of engagement, I have become fluent in Nepali Sign Language and, to a somewhat lesser degree, spoken Nepali. I also have gained a great deal of experience communicating in natural sign, both in Kathmandu (especially with older people) and even more so in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe. My fieldwork and the processes of learning to communicate across languages and modalities are inextricable from the fact that I am a hearing person, as I explore more below.

## ENTANGLEMENTS

My understanding of the central themes of this text—the relationships between language and sociality, the responsibilities people have for and to one another—has been indelibly marked by loving and being 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!”

I must not have ordered soup that night, because I was also frequently the recipient of what NSL signers call *ADVICE*, from both deaf and hearing Nepalis: sometimes about mundane matters such as how to hand-wash clothes (which, having grown up with a washing machine, I very much appreciated—the first few times) but also on more serious matters. In late 2010, for example, my deaf *bhāi* ‘younger brother’ chastised me for swearing, explaining that it made me seem crass and inappropriate. This made me cry, which made him cry, but he explained that it was meaningless to have made each other siblings if he didn’t actually uphold the responsibilities of that relationship. Similarly, I watched deaf people advise each other on when and how to work, what forms of gossip to ignore, how to behave when interacting with people of different genders, and so forth.

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 Trawick’s own son too lovingly, lest doing so cause harm, Trawick (1990:93) told her that “it was our custom to let people lead their own lives.” Trawick writes, “She said simply, ‘*Tappu* [That is a mistake].’ After some time I learned that if you cared about people, you would interfere” (ibid., brackets in original). I too was swept into a world where withholding one’s opinion or knowledge is asocial, where people are expected to “interfere” as a form of ethical engagement. I experienced this as both the recipient of

sometimes uncomfortable advice and as the advice-giver. When I first arrived in Maunabudhuk, for example, Sagar was spending most of class time teaching the Nepali alphabet in written and signed modalities. I mentioned to him one day that another deaf teacher I knew taught NSL signs first and then the written and fingerspelled versions. Although I did not directly suggest that Sagar 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 NSL courses in rural areas twice before), Sagar was scheduled to go to Kathmandu for teacher training but a *bandh* ‘strike, shutdown’ had prevented him from doing so. I would now say that the ethical imperatives of deaf society to participate, not only observe, and to share knowledge (Friedner 2015) overrode my concerns about interfering with his teaching, concerns that are themselves grounded in problematic notions of difference and observational neutrality.

Giving advice to others, taking responsibility for their conduct and sociality, is by no means restricted to deaf people nor to Nepalis, as my mention of Tra-  
wick’s fieldwork with hearing Indians suggests. Nevertheless, deaf people I knew frequently *framed* it as a particularly deaf duty, a point I explore at greater length in chapter 1. As a brief example, once my friend Dawa Gurung and I ate at a Tibetan restaurant in Thamel, a neighborhood in Kathmandu, and 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.’”

This anecdote also points to my own sometimes ambiguous status as a hearing participant in deaf society. As I wrote in my fieldnotes 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.’”<sup>24</sup> She certainly might have been emphasizing that deaf people consider it important to help others, whether deaf or hearing, Nepali or foreigner, and are capable of doing so. At the same time, the category *deaf* can sometimes encompass people who would not be considered deaf as individuals. NSL signers often use the sign DEAF in ways that function very much like a plural pronoun (usually “we,” sometimes “they”), to refer to deaf Nepalis or deaf people in general, to a particular group of deaf people, or even to a group of deaf people that might include hearing people (e.g., a deaf sports team and the interpreters who accompany them).

Friedner (2015) and Kusters (2012b) write about how notions of DEAF DEAF SAME or deaf similitude across difference 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. To be clear, neither Friedner nor Kusters claim to be insiders in the 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 analyzing its effects. More recently, Friedner (2022) has also explored her complicated position conducting research on cochlear implants (CIs) as a deaf person with a CI who both speaks and signs.

Here, I want to think through the specificity of conducting research as a hearing, signing person in deaf worlds. As a white, Jewish, hearing woman from the United States who signs and speaks, I am very clearly “different” from my interlocutors. Yet I frequently had linguistic relationships with deaf people—particularly NSL signers—that my hearing interlocutors did not have and vice versa. Both speech and sign are understood in deaf society as valuable, and NSL signers with whom I spent time often recognized and appreciated that I was learning, or had learned, NSL. NSL-signing deaf friends not infrequently asked me to interpret in informal situations—with shopkeepers, on a phone call, or even with family members. This relationship was not unilateral, as NSL signers also served as interpreters for me—for example, with NEW signers (deaf people who had recently started to learn NSL) and deaf natural signers—and tended to be deeply patient accommodating my NSL learning process. On occasion, my deaf friends would instruct me not to speak when we were in hearing-majority spaces so they could negotiate the situation as cultural experts. My point is not to reify, nor to simplify, power imbalances or differences but rather to acknowledge that my abilities to speak and sign with deaf and hearing people were often unique in a given setting, a point some of my hearing and deaf friends explicitly made.

In Maunabudhuk these dynamics of ambiguous sameness and difference further intensified because I was the only NSL signer other than Sagar living there at the time. While Sagar and hearing villagers frequently communicated directly (usually in natural sign, and less often in written Nepali), at other times I was asked to translate. He also asked me to monitor whether hearing people said the word *lāto*, the Nepali word often used to refer to deaf people that NSL signers consider derogatory. Similarly, while I often communicated directly with deaf natural signers, Sagar often translated for me to help me understand, especially in the earlier months. I would sometimes tell him what a hearing person had said and he would offer further background and context to help me understand more fully.

Translation was in fact a ubiquitous dimension of my fieldwork, and not only across sensory differences. For example, I had an affectionate relationship with the hearing husband of Sanu Kumari Limbu, an older woman who participated in the NSL class in Maunabudhuk. Nevertheless we had difficulty understanding each other, and on one occasion a young Nepali speaker “translated” between us, with all three of us speaking Nepali. Translational practices were not unfamiliar to this multilingual family. According to Sanu Kumari’s youngest daughter’s husband, a man from the Rai ethnic group, Sanu Kumari’s husband would translate between Sanu Kumari and the son-in-law because Sanu Kumari doesn’t speak Rai or Nepali and her son-in-law doesn’t sign or speak Limbu.<sup>25</sup>

My requests for translations of natural sign had several motivations. Especially in the beginning of my time in Maunabudhuk, I often asked Sagar to translate what local signers were saying to help me to understand in the immediate context and to learn local sign conventions. In addition, I asked hearing people to translate, sometimes because I hadn't understood and also to get a sense of what other people understood—that is, as a methodological tool.<sup>26</sup> I did not want to assume that my own understanding was necessarily representative of others'; one way I sought to calibrate my understanding with that of others was by asking for translation. These requests sometimes provided information that I found useful/instructive: translations, or a clear sense that a hearing interlocutor did or did not understand what a deaf signer was saying. However, as I discuss in chapter 5, instances of requested translation are conversational moves, often producing explicit social assessments of understanding and not-understanding that might not have been uttered in the absence of such a request.

#### DOING FIELDWORK IN AND WRITING ABOUT NATURAL SIGN

While self-reflexive questions about understanding are frequently foregrounded in anthropological practice, in my fieldwork I was constantly asking not only if I had understood but also if others had, sometimes at the most basic level of reference. This and related questions have followed me through the process of analyzing my fieldnotes and video recordings: *Did he understand her? Is it because she used a sign he couldn't interpret, because natural sign doesn't include a conventional way to say something, or because he looked away in frustration? Given that natural sign is both something learned and something always emergent, how might I know for sure?* Translation is never a simple process, but asking for or giving translations in languages like NSL or Nepali often felt fairly smooth, while asking others to translate natural sign often raised significant additional questions. *Why did she say she could understand and then tell me she couldn't translate what was said? Why did she say she couldn't understand but then respond?*

Watching and conversing with natural signers in Maunabudhuk, Bodhe, Kathmandu, and elsewhere, as well as with NSL signers using natural sign, I frequently have found myself in awe of how people communicate, casually, easily, and effectively, in the absence of what most people in the world think of and experience as language, whether spoken or signed. In months of living in Maunabudhuk, I saw natural sign used among deaf people and between deaf and hearing people to exchange news, make jokes, negotiate work arrangements, discuss national politics, curse, flirt, argue, describe past, ongoing, and hypothetical events, evaluate others' internal states, tell stories, express worries, and wonder about the future. But I have also watched a deaf signer try to communicate something that clearly existed in her mind and that she *knew* she was representing with her signs—and

yet her addressees, including me, could not grasp it. I have watched people—more often hearing, but occasionally deaf—act dismissive toward, or get bored trying to understand, a natural signer. I have found myself seduced by the ease of conventional language too, my attention shifting from a more laborious conversation in natural sign to an easier one in NSL in situations where both NSL and natural signers were present. Using natural sign, I have tried to make myself understood, and both succeeded and failed; I have tried to make sense of others, and both succeeded and failed. I felt frustration in the field, shame, anger; I felt joy, admiration, pleasure.

My experiences of learning natural sign through spending time with natural signers, of communicating in it, and of failing to communicate in it—the phenomenology of using natural sign, the corporeality, the surrounding emotions—deeply inform the way I write about it. At the same time, I am wary of falling into the trap of assuming that my experiences, and particularly my failures, actually belong to another, whether a person or a communicative mode. This wariness is informed by the history of a vast array of refusals by scholars and others to recognize the fullness, complexity, or linguistic status of non-Western languages, signed languages, and otherwise marginalized languages. Thus it becomes critical that I observed other people struggle to communicate in natural sign as well. Deaf residents often but not always understood each other. Sagar was able to communicate with hearing villagers in ways many deaf local signers could not and with deaf villagers in ways many hearing local signers could not. But he too came up against dead ends. In many instances, deaf natural signers and their family members could communicate more effectively with each other than I could; in others, it seemed to me that I was able to understand their utterances better than they could each other's. And as mentioned, my requests for translation sometimes ended up drawing my attention to the limits of deaf local signers' hearing interlocutors' own understanding.

These and other tensions were present in the field and they continue to animate my writing. It is vitally important to me not to dismiss or pathologize the brilliant ways the people I work with communicate, as people in similar positions have often been framed as "having no language," as Moriarty (2019) argues; part of how I work to do this is to focus my analysis on situated interactions that inevitably reveal complex, interpersonal sense-making processes. The desire to recognize the facility and inventiveness of deaf signers is also part of what motivates my choice not to use the framework of language deprivation, despite its importance in contemporary research and politics. The concept of language deprivation, or linguistic deprivation, is rooted in the fields of psychology and education, and both highlights and theorizes the many kinds of harm done when deaf people—in particular, but not only, children—do not have access to signing or other accessible language, negatively impacting their communication, their familial, educational,

and social experiences, and their physical and mental health (Humphries et al. 2016; Hall 2017; Hall, Levin, and Anderson 2017; Kushalnagar et al. 2020).

In many instances deaf people are actively denied access to signing because of what is known as oralism: ideologies and practices that promote, enact, and institutionalize ideas that speech is superior to sign, that learning to sign precludes learning to speak, and that deaf people should be forbidden to sign (Baynton 1996; Jokinen 2000; Ladd 2003). In other situations schools provide (variably proficient) sign interpreters—but to students who have not had the opportunity to learn a signed language and who continue to be surrounded by nonsigners (Caselli, Hall, and Henner 2020). Work on language deprivation is closely related to work on what is called late language acquisition: when deaf people learn a conventional signed language after childhood (e.g., Mayberry 2010), because they had been kept from it purposefully and/or because it was socially/geographically unavailable.<sup>27</sup>

Deaf and hearing scholars and activists raise these issues to support the critical need for deaf children to have early, consistent access to signers who are fluent in the locally relevant signed language(s) (e.g., Humphries et al. 2013). As several friends and colleagues have impressed upon me, the concept of language deprivation is a powerful tool for fighting *against* ableism, audism, and the suppression and delegitimation of sign, and *for* the flourishing of deaf socialities, signing practices, and sign-centered spaces—efforts with which I fully align.

Language deprivation is not, however, a framework that I encountered locally, although I discuss some parallels with NSL signers' discourse; moreover, I hesitate to call any particular person with whom I worked "language deprived." It is important to me to describe my interlocutors' creative and agentive communicative practices. It is equally important to me not to smooth over the rough patches; not to pretend that I did not see people who were lonely and in pain at least in part because others would or could not understand them—and I seek to give emphasis to the role of addressees and to both the "would not" and "could not." It is my desire to do justice to the complexities of what I experienced, what others allowed me to experience with them, that shapes my writing. The tension between recognizing the ways that signers outside of conventional signed language communities communicate and recognizing the vulnerabilities they face is shaped by long histories inside and outside of academia of both suppressing sign and dismissing communicative practices that look unfamiliar. I am thinking here with scholars such as De Meulder (2019), De Meulder et al. (2019), Henner and Robinson (2023), and Goico and Horton (2023), as well as with friends and colleagues who generously shared their perspectives on this and related tensions.<sup>28</sup> It is certainly possible that some of the experiences I describe in this book might be productively thought of in terms of language deprivation. I have chosen in this book, however, to frame and theorize natural signers' experiences by focusing on semiotic affordances and constraints, and on ethical orientations, acknowledging

and analyzing both the possibilities that natural signers create and the precarities they encounter.

This book is not a lament or a celebration, but it both laments and celebrates.

WRITING FOR DIVERSE AUDIENCES,  
OR WHY THERE IS NO *WE*

The specificity of the communicative practices I write about shapes how I think about my audience. When scholars write about many communicative practices, they can assume that their readers have some familiarity with the general type of subject matter—for example, conversations, debates, love letters, songs—and as Bill Hanks (pers. comm.) argues, in those cases, the challenge is to bring awareness to what usually goes unnoticed. Even when researchers write about conventional signed languages for audiences that include nonsigners, they can rely on those readers' experiences of conventional spoken language and co-speech gesture—not, of course, that signed languages are reducible to either of these, nor to the two in combination. In these cases the figure 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 sign, however, for many of my readers the text alone will constitute the ground.

You may have noticed that I avoid the use of the rhetorical *we* in this book. I do so in order to minimize my assumptions about readers' experiences. It is important to me that this book be meaningful—though perhaps differently so—to readers who have never communicated in natural sign or anything resembling it, or perhaps in any signed mode at all, as well as to those who have, and I expect that the experience of reading this will be very different for these two broad groups. Particularly for the former, there may be moments in the book when an earlier point only becomes clear in retrospect. Such moments are inevitable in all language use, and perhaps especially common in natural sign: what comes later clarifies, narrows down, or amplifies what came before. Imagine this book as a conversation: someone standing at a table points vaguely into the next room, and says, “Can you get one more?” She then glances around at the number of people gathered (five) and the number of chairs (four). Suddenly everything becomes clear: she is pointing at, and asking for, another chair, not the bucket beside it or the sweater on top of it. In those moments just before things come together, I ask patience of the former set of readers. At other times, I will engage in description that may seem interestingly familiar (I hope) or boringly obvious (I hope not) to the latter set of readers, and at those times I ask for their patience.

The fundamentally relational nature of intelligibility in general but more specifically in natural sign also has impacted how I write. By definition, ethnographic engagement is cooperative action (Goodwin 2018). The anthropologist is involved in what she studies (Trawick 1990; Hou 2020), and this truism is heightened when

communication is particularly profoundly contingent on the parties involved, as in the case of natural sign. I am quite present in the text, as a reader of a very early version of this book pointed out. My goal isn't to draw attention to myself *per se* but rather to remind the reader of my presence—as participant, as writer—in order to give a more nuanced and robust account. I am invested in trying to describe and present the messiness, the complicatedness, the irreducible relationality of the phenomena I'm writing about, even when that makes for more tentative claims. I appear quite a lot, and I often appear unsure, hesitant, caught up in the process of sense-making rather than necessarily holding out something definitive that I have already made sense of for you, the reader. This is especially apparent when I offer you the uncertainty contained in my fieldnotes or a series of possible interpretations of something that happened.

#### GUIDE TO CHAPTERS

Chapter 1 offers an account of how my fieldwork with NSL signers shaped my approach to natural sign. Arguing that NSL signers experience language as radically contingent both collectively and individually, I analyze NSL metalinguistic categories and discourses to show that NSL signers posit NSL and natural sign as similar in some ways but also distinct. I explore NSL signers' critiques of the vernacular Nepali term *lāto*, which strongly connotes unintelligibility and is frequently used to refer to deaf people. NSL signers challenge both the word and the logic of hearing people who use it, emphasizing that intelligibility is situational. NSL signers acknowledge that all deaf people experience communicative vulnerability but emphasize that it is far more common for natural signers, on whom the remainder of the book focuses.

Chapter 2 moves to Maunabudhuk, the village that hosted a six-month NSL class in 2010, and the adjacent village of Bodhe. The first half of the chapter queries what *deaf* means in this setting, both to deaf and hearing people, and demonstrates that both *deaf* and *hearing* have socioculturally specific meanings. The second half of the chapter focuses on the demographics of Maunabudhuk and Bodhe. It shows how from the standpoint of social, spatial, and generational relationships among deaf people and between deaf and hearing people, it is unsurprising that natural sign conversations can be both robust and fragile.<sup>29</sup> This chapter also argues that natural sign, as a mode of ever-emergent language, both exceeds the boundaries of familiar scholarly categories of signed communication and demands recognition that at least in some times and places, the world has always been deaf and hearing.

Deepening the analysis of natural sign's paradoxical nature as explored in chapters 1 and 2, chapter 3 both posits and troubles the boundary between linguistic and other sociomaterial conventions. The immanence of natural signs enables a great deal to be said and understood, both with and beyond (or before) linguistic conventions, while the leanness of those conventions and the work required to

wrest immanence into actuality mean that that neither signers nor analysts can assume automatic understanding. This chapter revisits the concept of *emergence* to think about how people put together pieces of utterances to make meaning, drawing on grammatical and pragmatic conventions, immediate linguistic and material contexts, and relevant social and cultural knowledge. While both conventional and emergent language users do this, natural sign tips heavily toward less routinized and more labor-intensive modes of sense-making.

Building on these analyses of the demographic and semiotic characteristics of natural sign, chapter 4 argues that interlocutors' orientations are foundational to the interactional production of intelligible utterances and persons. I track willingness and refusal through eye gaze, the production of signs, evaluations of understanding, and spoken Nepali translations, showing how shifting and often contradictory stances reflected and instantiated in these actions (re)produce a world in which understanding natural sign is always in question. Within this world deaf signers must work to try to secure the attention of their hearing interlocutors, who are only sometimes willing to look and to make sense of what they see.

Chapter 5 further explores what *understanding* means, methodologically, socially, and analytically. How did my fieldwork affect the very processes I sought to, well, understand? Are there particular kinds of topics that are especially prone to misunderstandings? How does partial understanding get transformed into misunderstanding or not-understanding or into engaged understanding? This chapter also addresses the long-term sedimentation of precarious communication in individual deaf people's lives and in the figure of the deaf person as *lāṭo*. The afterword reflects on translation, on love, and on why this book matters, and offers an alternative kind of sense-making, describing how deaf people engage with each other even when they have not fully understood what someone else has signed.