

## Taxonomic Urges

In May 2010, Sagar Karki and I were standing in the courtyard between a house and an open-air blacksmithery on the far side of Bodhe, a good hour's walk from the bazaar in Maunabudhuk, where we both lived and where Sagar was teaching an NSL outreach class for deaf adults. One of Sagar's responsibilities was to facilitate the enrollment of deaf children into one of the district's three residential classes for deaf students, and we had been following the trail of a young deaf girl whom we had been told was of school age. An acquaintance directed us to a small jeweler's shop located by the football field at one end of Maunabudhuk's bazaar; the man we met there suggested we go to the school in Bodhe; and the teachers at the school asked a cousin of the family in question to guide us along the paths from the school to the house. Upon arrival, we met the young girl's grandparents and several other relatives including her uncle, who was around Sagar's age, though not the girl herself or her mother, who were visiting the latter's *māitighar* 'natal home.'

As we talked, the grandfather paused from the task of fixing a tool, for which another man sat waiting. In Nepali and NSL (I served as translator) we discussed the possibility of the girl attending a deaf residential class. The family seemed open to the idea, although over the next couple months they decided that she was too young to send so far away and that they would wait another year or two. During our discussion we asked if they knew any other deaf people in the area; they said no. Then toward the end of the conversation, one of the family members remembered that in fact, as I wrote in my fieldnotes, "the man sitting right there [waiting for his tool to be fixed] is also 'like that.'" I continued:

We turned to him and he kind of grinned at us and Sagar and I talked to him, he speaks pretty much fluently but is definitely hard of hearing, and proclaimed [to have] no interest in going to school [i.e., attending the NSL class] and didn't want to take us to his house because he had to go cut grass [for fodder] first. He wasn't at all unfriendly, just very sure of where his priorities were. The [girl's] family members said that we should talk to his mother, because what she says rules, so we decided to go find the house, especially since they also said that his wife is also "like that," and even more so (i.e., hears/speaks less). A young boy led us most of the way there, and then we asked at the house above theirs, where they said there were actually three deaf/hard of hearing people, the mother too.

My fieldnotes go on to explain that upon meeting her, I perceived the mother as someone who had been hearing most of her life and was becoming deaf in old age.<sup>1</sup>

One of the key ways that scholars have approached deaf sociality and communication—particularly in settings beyond large, urban, institutionally scaffolded, and/or nationally scaled communities—involves the enumeration of deaf people in terms of numbers, familial relationships, and overall percentage of some sociospatially delineated population, such as a village. These figures stand in, implicitly or explicitly, for the likelihood that a deaf person can regularly engage in social interactions in sign. While this book argues that ethical orientations regarding deaf people and signing are not reducible to numbers or even familiarity, it also is evident that demographics and relationships very much matter. Indeed, part of what is striking about Maunabudhuk and Bodhe is that in terms of deaf people as a percentage of the total population, these villages resemble some of the settings where shared sign languages have developed. A more detailed analysis, however, reveals consequentially different demographic and communicative patterns. These differences and patterns are the focus of the second half of this chapter, where I explore what makes Maunabudhuk and Bodhe distinct from the classic descriptions and models of places where both deaf and hearing people sign. I argue that this distinction demands a rethinking of deaf persons and signing as an integral part of human histories and presents across space and time.

It would be possible to dive immediately into an enumeration of Maunabudhuk and Bodhe's deaf population and a comparison of local natural sign practices in these places to (how scholars classify and describe) other signing practices in other places. Doing so, however, would erase the complexity of the category *deaf*. The particulars of this chapter's opening vignette—the fact that the family seemed to forget about a deaf man "sitting right there," their characterization of the man and his wife as "like that," their assertion in comparison with the neighbor's mention of three deaf people, my own clumsy attempts to describe in written English my and others' observations of people's different relationships to hearing and speech—point to the various ways in which people get perceived, identified, and counted as *deaf*. The vignette offers a sense of the complexities involved in asking and answering questions like the following, whether in the field or in this book: Who

is deaf? Who counts as deaf (and who counts them)? What does deaf mean in such accountings?

The first half of this chapter therefore focuses on the social (re)production of the category *deaf*—or rather, the category that in this book I refer to with the English word *deaf*. I consider how deaf residents of Maunabudhuk and Bodhe discuss being deaf. This was not a frequent topic of conversation. As with “culture” more generally, what being deaf means to people was most explicitly articulated in contexts of “interaction” and “confrontation” (Trawick 1990:90) between distinct domains or logics: here, in conversations and lessons in the NSL class about the NSL sign DEAF. These conversations enabled me to get a sense of how deaf residents recognized and constituted themselves as similar and also made distinctions among themselves, particularly in relation to speech and hearing. Next I explore hearing residents’ ways of categorizing and counting deaf people in conversations and lists. These sections argue for the importance of ethnographic attention to the socioculturally specific ways that people (get) count(ed) as deaf as well as to the interplay of hearing and deafness, speech and sign, in deaf people’s lives and communicative practices (Bahan 2009, 2010; Friedner and Helmreich 2012; Lucas et al. 2015; Kusters 2019; Sanchez 2020; Friedner 2022).

I show that the category *deaf*—itself an imperfect translation of the categories present and (sometimes) named in the field—encompasses a variety of people, including people who use sign exclusively, people who use both speech and sign as primary communicative modalities, and perhaps even a few people who can hear. Deaf studies scholars have long argued that in deaf-centered communities, *deaf* is a social category that goes far beyond audiological status (Padden and Humphries 1988; Ladd 2003). In conversation with scholars including Kusters (2015), Haviland (2016), Hou (2016, 2020), and Goico (2019), this section shows that *deaf* is a culturally specific, socially produced category in hearing-majority communities as well. Moreover, even the question of whether someone hears is more complicated than it might appear.

The second half of this chapter explores the scholarly urge to taxonomize settings and signing, an urge I both resist and yield to. In recent years, as part of a broader proliferation in research on deaf sociality and signed communicative practices, the English-language scholarly literature has manifested a dazzling array of categories used to make sense of the many sociolinguistic circumstances in which deaf people live and communicate and the kinds of signed communication they create and inherit (Nonaka 2007; Green 2014c; Kusters and Hou 2020; Hou and de Vos 2022; Goico and Horton 2023; Moriarty and Hou 2023). The sociolinguistic circumstances in which people use sign are extraordinarily diverse, generally unaccounted for by spoken language-based models, and undeniably give rise to communicative practices that differ both formally and functionally (Hou and de Vos [2022] and Kusters and Lucas [2022] offer related arguments). Classificatory schemas do the important work of both making distinctions and linking

similar cases. The taxonomic urge represents important intellectual (and political) impulses toward recognition of both differences and similarities. Yet in the quest to categorize, it can also ignore and erase specificity that matters, or differences that make a difference, to use a common anthropological phrase. Relatedly, scholars often laminate the classification of communicative communities onto the classification of signing (Kisch 2008), even though different kinds of signing practices can appear in apparently similar settings and vice versa.

Contemporary classifications run along two primary axes: sociospatial and temporal. In relation to space, some of the most prominent categories, and ones that are particularly relevant to this discussion, include *home sign* (often written *homesign*), generally understood as the signing of an individual (e.g., Kegl, Senghas, and Coppola 1999), and *shared sign languages* (Nyst 2012, adapting a term from Kisch 2008, cited in Kisch 2012b), generally understood as the signing that emerges in places with a relatively large number of deaf persons across generations. In relation to time, Meir et al. (2010) have distinguished between *emerging sign languages* and *established sign languages*, depending on the age of the language in question. (Appendix 2 further explores the logics underlying these and other categories.)

Some classificatory schemas, or uses of them, involve an implicit or explicit spectrum and/or trajectory of languageness, often moving from gesture to home sign to signed languages (Kusters et al. 2020b; Kusters and Hou 2020). While my approach firmly rejects a single trajectory, it seeks to acknowledge and make further sense of how particular kinds of resources facilitate particular kinds of communication and modes of sociality and vice versa. Moreover, as I argue throughout this book, it is critically important to consider the role of ethical orientations when thinking about relationships among language, communication, interaction, and social settings—relationships that are embedded in more frequently invoked concepts such as critical mass, social proximity, language emergence, and (ease of) understanding.

Although an anthropological cliché, it is also true that I went to the field with one set of categories and returned with another. When writing grants for dissertation fieldwork, I used the term *home sign*, and I continue to find it fruitful to think about natural sign in relation to research on home sign, along with research on shared sign languages and the earlier manifestations of emerging sign languages.<sup>2</sup> However, I have found the primary available categories inadequate to the phenomenon I research, as have other scholars working in other settings (e.g., Hou 2020; Reed 2020, 2022). Thus my use of the terms *natural sign* and *local sign* represents both resistance and acquiescence to the taxonomic urge. As I will show, natural local sign has important features in common with, but also critical differences from, home sign, shared sign languages, and emerging sign languages; so too the places where they are used. These similarities and differences help make sense of the specific characteristics of natural sign discussed in the introduction and previous chapter: its possibilities and precarities, availability and fragility. Indeed, while

adding to the taxonomic landscape, I also want to insist that the local concepts and practices with which I work themselves insist on attention to particularity and context.

Finally, I consider how examining what I call *deaf demography* in the context of natural sign pushes against a tendency, even in some work focused on deaf people and signing, to think about the presence of deaf people and signed communication as unusual.<sup>3</sup> This is evident when, for example, deaf people's signs are analyzed as elaborations of hearing people's gestures. There is no doubt that such analyses make sense in certain circumstances; there are locales in which residents can recall when the first deaf person was born within collective memory. Such framings, however, can inadvertently suggest that social time and space are hearing by default. The situation in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, and indeed Nepal more broadly, requires a radical refiguration of (what is assumed to be) generic space-time. At least in some times and places, the world has always been deaf *and* hearing.

#### DEAF CONVERSATIONS AND CATEGORIES

In an overview and critique of scholarly literature, Kusters (2010:11, emphasis in original) observes that researchers frequently fail to "report *deaf* people's attitudes and experiences of being deaf" outside of large deaf communities. Building on Kusters, this section centers what deaf people themselves have to say about being deaf. It is important to note, however, that during my fieldwork deaf residents of Maunabudhuk and Bodhe infrequently made reference to their own or others' deafness, whether in sign or a spoken language. The major exception was the conversations analyzed below that happened in the context of Sagar teaching the NSL sign DEAF.

Outside of those conversations, I heard two class participants refer to deaf people with the spoken Nepali word *lāṭo*, a term discussed at length in chapter 1. One of the participants was generally regarded by others and regarded herself as hearing but appeared on a list of potential students and attended class several times because she was interested in the literacy training provided. The other person was socially regarded as deaf; it is impossible for me to say whether her use of the word reflected a negative attitude toward being deaf, and, if so, for what reasons. I wrote in my fieldnotes about two other instances when a deaf person directly mentioned their own or someone else's deafness, these times in sign. Once, Bal Limbu, a deaf man, was complaining about his hearing employer, and Sanu Kumari Limbu, an older deaf woman, told him that "if he's not getting paid [for his work], he shouldn't do the work, and that he was being cheated because he's deaf."<sup>4</sup> This offers evidence that deaf natural signers both perceive and name the ways in which being deaf can render them vulnerable to being taken advantage of by hearing people.

On another occasion, a deaf man from Atharasaya, a village across the valley where Sagar had taught previously, visited Maunabudhuk. Based on notions of

deaf sociality and sameness (explored and troubled in Friedner and Kusters 2014), I—and apparently Sagar—expected that the deaf residents would be interested in talking to him, but they were not especially excited to do so. Bal happened to be present, and Sagar tried to get him and the visitor to engage. He told the visitor where Bal lived and that they were both Limbu (pointing to further sameness), but they did not interact very much. At one point, Bal commented, “Neither Sagar nor [this man] can hear or speak, but I can speak.” Sagar told Bal that he, Bal, was also deaf, but Bal more or less ignored this statement.<sup>5</sup>

This example illustrates Friedner and Kusters’s (2014) argument that a sense of similitude between deaf people is by no means a given and points to how during my fieldwork in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, deaf and, as shown below, hearing people categorized deaf people together but also differentiated among them on the basis of speech and hearing. This differentiation came into play in the most explicit and elaborate discussions that I witnessed by deaf people about being deaf. A conversation from June 2, about a month and a half into the NSL class, is my first recorded instance of a lesson and ensuing discussion about the NSL sign DEAF (though it is possible that one occurred in the first several weeks the class was running before I moved to Maunabudhuk). I recorded a related conversation on video the following day. Taken together, these conversations reveal the complexities and variations of deaf residents’ understandings, definitions, and descriptions of what it is to be deaf, showing that natural signers do not present a blank slate onto which deaf society’s logics are inscribed.<sup>6</sup> The issues of translation, (in)commensuration, and (mis)alignment that occur in this mixed NSL–natural sign space also demand recognition of the translation, (in)commensuration, and (mis)alignment that occur between that space and what you are reading in this English-language text.

Here is my description of the first conversation, as I wrote it with pen and paper while sitting in the classroom:

Sagar just taught a brief but powerful (to me anyway) lesson: you are deaf. He explained what [the NSL sign] DEAF meant (not-hearing, not-speaking) and then went around and asked everyone if they are deaf or hearing. Krishna was quick to say he was deaf. Padma was more hesitant, saying he can hear some—he and Bal had just been talking about how they can both hear some, Padma made a high-pitched noise that [to my ear] Bal correctly imitated. But Sagar repeated that Padma is deaf and Padma accepted this and signed DEAF. Bal also at first said he can hear, so Sagar grabbed a small pamphlet laying around and handed it to Bal and instructed him to read it aloud. Sagar then mimed reading Sanskrit scripture at a wedding, and Bal rejected this possibility (whether of the reading, the Sanskritness, or the [possibility that he would be engaged in that kind of activity at a] wedding, I’m not sure) and accepted DEAF. To my surprise Lalita—who [from my perspective] probably has the clearest spoken language production and reception of anyone present today—just signed DEAF when Sagar asked “deaf or hearing?” I signed [the NSL

sign] HEARING and Padma and Krishna nodded in approval. [Not of my being hearing per se but of the correctness of the stated facts.] Parvati also said she was deaf, as did Shrila—stating along with an approximation of the sign DEAF that she can't hear. Jyoti first indicated she can talk/hear (which is true) and Sagar did the “read this” routine again, and Jyoti relented (this sounds like it was mean or harsh—the whole time it was playful and light-hearted, as class usually is). Sanu Kumari also said she can talk (true) so Sagar asked if she can talk on a mobile phone (a better test, I thought, than reading aloud). There was some confusion as to whether Sagar was asking whether she *has* a phone, because she kept answering that her son does, and Sagar kept asking, “No, *you*, can *you* talk on a phone?” He showed that he can't, how when he feels his phone ringing he finds a hearing person such as me [to answer it]. Sanu Kumari eventually said she's deaf.

[From my perspective,] there was not a denial of speech or hearing—no pressure to *not* talk but rather a teaching that *despite* (some) speech or hearing, you are deaf. It was an effective lesson. Sagar went around the room again and everyone (except me of course) said they are deaf.<sup>7</sup>

The lesson on the following day, which I recorded on video, began with Sagar asking how many deaf people were present and immediately segued into a brief counting lesson. Then Sagar asked Sanu Kumari whether she was deaf or hearing, and she responded that she could in fact hear and talk, despite, or perhaps not at all in contradiction with, the fact that at the end of the previous day's lesson, she—along with the rest of the class—had seemed to accept Sagar's logic that everyone but me was deaf.

At this point the lesson shifted to defining what the NSL sign DEAF means and teaching people that they *are* deaf. Like the day before, Sagar offered up reading material and then his phone to point out to Sanu Kumari that she could not read aloud or speak on the phone. And like the previous day, Sanu Kumari reacted to him handing her the phone by telling him, “No, that's your phone!” Following a brief adjustment to the angle of the camera and where Sagar stood (this was one of the first classes I filmed), Sagar proclaimed that everyone except me was deaf. He then began to enumerate: “You are deaf, you are deaf, I am deaf,” using the NSL sign DEAF. When he got to Buddha Yonjan, however, he clarified: “He's HALF-HEARING, he's HARD-OF-HEARING.” (The NSL dictionary [NDFN 2003] glosses both of these signs HARD-OF-HEARING, as per figure 10, but it is helpful to distinguish between them here, especially because HALF-HEARING, literally HEARING-HALF, would most likely be interpretable, whereas HARD-OF-HEARING, an initialized sign at the ear, would be opaque to natural signers.)

Soon after, Sagar asked Sarawata Limbu if she was deaf; Sarawata responded with both speech and sign, indicating that she can hear. Sagar asks her in NSL, “Oh, you're hearing, you speak?” to which Sarawata responds, using the NSL sign SPEAK, “Yes, I speak.” Sagar tries to hand Sarawata his phone; she responds in



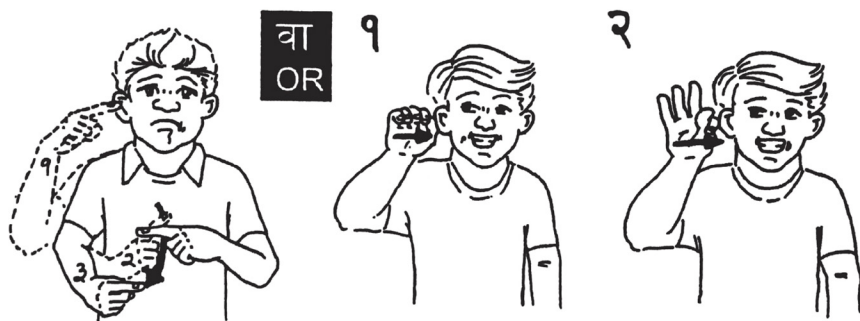


FIGURE 10. NSL signs for HARD-OF-HEARING. On the left, in the sign I gloss HALF-HEARING, a person points with an extended index finger to the ear, then moves the index finger across a second extended finger at chest level to indicate partiality. On the right, in the sign I gloss HARD-OF-HEARING, a person makes two handshapes at the ear, corresponding to the *devanāgarī* initials for the Nepali phrase *susta shrawan* 'hard of hearing.' Illustration by Pratigya Shakya (NDFN 2003:17). Reproduced by permission from the National Federation of the Deaf Nepal (NDFN).

natural sign, "My sister-in-law has a phone," to which Krishna Gajmer says, "You can't hear! You're deaf!" using the bivalent sign HEAR and the NSL sign DEAF. The conversation continues, Krishna and Sagar telling Sarawata that she is deaf like them. Sagar, clearly frustrated, asks me to speak with Sarawata. I comply, asking her in Nepali if she can hear. She responds in Limbu, which I don't speak or understand. Later in the conversation Sarawata depicts conversations between herself and her parent(s)-in-law, showing that they use speech as well as sign, and says that she can hear. With her older daughter too, she adds, she uses speech; or perhaps she says that her parents-in-law use speech with her older daughter.

Krishna asks her if she can hear in both ears or only one. Sarawata tells him only one. Krishna replies that he can't hear in either ear, and reports to Sagar that Sarawata can in fact hear in one ear. Sagar responds by saying, "She's deaf! We're all deaf!" He continues: "Can you read [aloud]? Can you talk with your mouth and not use your hands? We sign, we're all deaf." He gives examples of natural signs used in the area, then reiterates: "Hearing people can stand and talk like this with their arms crossed. Deaf people use their hands. Can the two of you, Krishna and Sarawata, speak to each other?" Sarawata replies, "We do speak," then mentions her sister-in-law. Sagar counters by again showing someone signing. The angle of the video makes it hard to see, but it looks like he is acting as if he is using his mouth and signing at the same time. "You're deaf, you sign," he says.

A few minutes later, Sagar returns to the position that "all of us are deaf," thus reincorporating Buddha, whom he had called hard of hearing, back into the category of *deaf* (and ignoring my hearingness). Much later in the conversation, Sagar states that three people present are hard of hearing, one hearing, and seven deaf. This inclusion of the category *hard of hearing* was one of two key differences



in relation to the previous day. The second was that on June 3 both Sagar and Sarawata depicted different communicative modalities as an important aspect of defining the sign DEAF and deciding who was deaf, as I explore momentarily.

As with other NSL lessons, Sagar taught the sign DEAF through a combination of NSL signs, natural signs, and bivalent signs. He also offered examples, often using what is known in sign language linguistics as constructed action (Cormier, Smith, and Sehry 2015) - that is, acting out the role of various characters - and asking his students about their personal experiences. More so than with other lessons, however, teaching the sign DEAF involved complex negotiations, both of its meaning and applicability to specific persons. Some people, such as Krishna, easily agreed that they were deaf, while others, such as Sanu Kumari and Sarawata, repeatedly laid claim to their abilities to speak and to hear. In response, Sagar shifted his definitions and explanations of what the NSL signs DEAF and HEARING mean. For example, early in the conversation on June 3, Sagar equates being hearing with speaking and thus implicitly equates being deaf with not speaking. When Sanu Kumari says she can speak, he moves his focus to whether she can speak on a phone—offering her his own—or read aloud.

As these descriptions make evident, Sagar had a phone, as do many deaf people in Nepal. When Sagar held out his phone to his students, he was asking if they could use it as hearing people do. Hearing villagers also must have been thinking about normatively hearing uses of phones when they asked why Sagar had a phone. In the same vein, I interpret his questions about reading not as a way of disavowing that deaf people can read (he himself could do so) but rather as invoking a shared understanding that deaf people don't usually read aloud using speech (Green 2022b further discusses typification in signing practices). Similarly, although it is unclear from the video if Sagar was watching Sarawata when she depicted herself talking and signing, his shift in emphasis from not hearing or speaking, not using the phone and not reading aloud, to the observation that deaf people must use their hands (implied: even if also speaking), suggests that he was both watching and responding.

These examples also draw attention to the conversational participants' diverse responses and communicative and sensory experiences. Krishna, who seldom if ever used speech and who said he couldn't hear in either ear, quickly understood what the sign DEAF meant and accepted it for himself. Given Sagar's definitions of DEAF as not-speaking and not-hearing, perhaps Krishna experienced the sign with a kind "of course!" feeling, similar to the socially embedded experience of congruence that Kraus (2018) describes for new deaf signers at Gallaudet University. I am not, however, suggesting sensory determinism. Lalita Limbu, who uses speech as much as if not more than Sarawata and who playfully depicted herself talking on the phone by saying, "*ālo, ālo* 'hello, hello,'" said "yes," when asked if she was DEAF. Interestingly, Sagar included Lalita in his list of hard of hearing people, despite her acceptance of the sign DEAF.

Sagar wondered if his repeated claim that Sarawata was deaf made her angry, implying that she did not want to be (seen as) deaf. When Sarawata says to Sagar that she can hear, he seems to interpret this as a rejection of the category *deaf*, which to Sagar indexes an entire world of shared social experiences—in short, what it means to be deaf in deaf society. I take her to mean, much more literally, that she is not deaf in the sense of being a person who can neither hear nor speak—which is how Sagar has just defined the sign. Using the logic of this definition, Sarawata's phenomenological experience of her body and of communication contradict the claim that she is deaf. To be clear, within deaf society there are many people whose sensory and communicative repertoires appear similar to Sarawata's who consider themselves, and are considered by others, to be deaf. In other words, from the perspective of deaf society, Sarawata's experiences are by no means inconsistent with the category *deaf*, but they are inconsistent with Sagar's explicit definition, made succinct for the purposes of pedagogy. In the same vein, when Sagar suggests to Sarawata and Sanu Kumari that they *cannot* hear, I do not think he is trying to deny the validity of their sensory experiences but is instead following the logic of his own definition, which states that a person who is deaf is someone who cannot hear.

Sagar and Sarawata both acknowledge that modality is a key dimension in people's experiences of communicative sociality. Their difference lies in whether not-speaking or using sign is more important. Sarawata, having been told that to be deaf is to not-speak, indicates that she speaks as well as signs. Sagar counters by saying that if someone needs their hands to communicate, they are deaf. They eventually settle their disagreement when Sagar offers Sarawata the option that she is HALF-HEARING, a designation she accepts. It is possible to conclude from this conversation that Sarawata's and Sagar's understandings of DEAF were incommensurable. I suggest, however, that they actually were making different references with the same sign. The NSL sign DEAF was new to Sarawata, so her prior experiences and categories could only be compared with the explicit definition given to her, and not with the broader and more flexible meanings that the sign and category hold for NSL signers. I wonder how Sarawata would have responded if Sagar had originally defined deaf as sign-using rather than not-speaking. It seems worth mentioning here that with the exception of one teenager, who stopped coming to class after some sessions, none of the NSL class attendees expressed confusion, dissatisfaction, or disapproval at having been invited to participate in this deaf, signing space.

Deaf studies has shown that in deaf (sometimes self-identified Deaf) communities, what it is to be deaf or Deaf goes far beyond not-hearing. According to Bauman (2008:12), for example, "two factors combine to form the common ground of a Deaf identity: audiological deafness and use of sign language." The emphasis on "Deaf culture" and on the cultural dimensions of "Deaf identity" makes sense in relation to deaf studies, and deaf people's, battles with biomedical definitions of

deafness as lack (Bauman 2008). Yet as Friedner and Helmreich (2012:74) argue, citing Keating and Hadder (2010), “deafness” and “hearing” now “operate as ideal types, which downplays continuums between and multiplicities of sensory capabilities.” Works such as “Sensory Orientations” (Bahan 2009, 2010), “Sensations of Sound” (Kolb 2017), a special issue on “deaf and hearing signers’ multimodal and translanguaging practices” (Kusters ed. 2019), “Deafness and Sound” (Sanchez 2020), and “Writing as Being: On the Existential Primacy of Writing for a Deaf Scholar” (Snoddon 2022) indicate a shift away from ideal types and toward acknowledging and exploring deaf peoples’ diverse corporeal experiences and communicative practices. Contributing to this shift, I have focused my attention on how participants in the NSL class in Maunabudhuk articulate their own bodily schemas and experiences of signed and spoken communication. In relation to scholarly discussion of entering deaf sociality as a kind of conversion experience (Bechter 2008; Friedner 2014; Kraus 2018), these conversations show that deaf people’s definitions of being deaf might not be immediately transparent, relevant, or clear to other deaf people with different social and/or phenomenological experiences.

My analysis also builds on previous scholarship showing that *hearing* as much as *deaf* is a sociocultural category. While prior work has focused on the affects and effects of shifting technologies—from telephones to hearing aids to cochlear implants of various kinds (Mills 2012; Mauldin 2014; Booth 2021; Friedner 2022)—the conversations analyzed here took place in a setting where those particular technologies are not widely utilized for the purposes of medicalizing or measuring people’s audiological capacities. Nevertheless, in this setting, hearing—like speaking, not-hearing, and not-speaking—is organized around culturally specific logics and concerns and cannot be understood as portable, transparent, or unmediated descriptions of sensory and communicative configurations and experiences.

#### MY USE OF THE TERM *DEAF*

In conversation with the growing literature on deaf people’s multimodal repertoires and sensoria, I do not in this book distinguish between *deaf* and *hard of hearing* people or experiences, other than when discussing my interlocutors’ own distinctions as in the earlier conversations. For me to make these distinctions throughout the book would be untenable for multiple reasons. Lalita, for example, happily acceded to being called both deaf and hard of hearing. Sarawata, meanwhile, seemed to accept the NSL sign HALF-HEARING and to reject the NSL sign DEAF. Yet to refer to her as *hard of hearing* would imply that the English *deaf* and *hard of hearing* and the NSL DEAF and HALF-HEARING are identical. It also would decontextualize her insistence/rejection from the specifics of the conversation and the way Sagar sought to define DEAF. If my goal were to use the terms desired by each of my interlocutors (and if I were writing about named self-identification, that would be a key aim), how would I translate, not only across

the complex negotiations of meaning between NSL and natural sign but also into English?

In the spaces where I spent most time—in deaf society, in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, in homes, and in this classroom—the primary categories in operation are, however imperfectly, best captured by the English words *deaf* and *hearing*. Therefore, when writing about people such as Sagar, Krishna, Sarawata, and Lalita, I use the term *deaf*. I try in this chapter and throughout the book to attend to people's sensory configurations and communicative actions in a way that does not flatten deaf people's experiences—for example, by making explicit the social fact that some of my interlocutors talk with, and talk about talking with, both their mouths and their hands. I remain ambivalent about my decision not to use the phrase *deaf and hard of hearing* in favor of *deaf*, and hope that it will be read in the expansive sense in which it is intended rather than an exclusionary or narrowing one.

### HEARING WORDS

In addition to visiting class participants' homes, Sagar and I relied on village-generated lists of deaf people (discussed below) as well as on word-of-mouth (I use the speech-centric phrase on purpose) to seek out and talk to other deaf people in the area. Hearing people in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe refer to a variety of people, including those whom I call *deaf*, with the term *lāto*—a Nepali word that connotes someone who has trouble making sense. This word is probably the most common way in spoken Nepali to refer to someone deaf. As much as possible, I refrained from invoking the vernacular *lāto* to ask about deaf people, using phrases like *kān nasunne* '[people with] not-hearing ears' or *mukh nabolne* '[people with] not-speaking mouths.' These phrases are by no means unusual ways to talk about deaf people and are examples of a generative Nepali structure in which verb phrases become noun phrases (such as *kām garne mānche* 'work-doing people'—i.e., workers). Nevertheless, it is possible that my use of these phrases contributed to moments like the one in the opening vignette of this chapter, when to my confusion a hearing person seemed to suddenly recall a deaf person.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, when Sagar and I first tried to find Sarawata's house, we ended up at the wrong home, down the hillside from her actual house. We entered into conversation with an older hearing woman as she fed her cow. After ascertaining that neither Sarawata nor any other deaf person lived there, I solicited the old woman's help by asking about a married couple whose *kān nasunne* 'ears don't hear' or who *boldaina* 'don't speak.' After insisting that no one like that lived nearby, she then remembered that in fact there was a *lāṭolāṭi* couple (here, *lāto* is pluralized and given gender markings that indicate male and female). If I had asked for a *lāṭolāṭi* couple, would she have remembered them immediately? Interestingly, earlier I had asked a different hearing woman for directions using the phrase *kān nasunne* '[people with] not-hearing ears.'<sup>9</sup> Either she mistakenly thought Sarawata

lived in the older woman's home, or, more likely, I followed her directions incorrectly. Either way, her response indicated that she had understood my question and connected it with Sarawata and her husband—although as the previous section showed, Sarawata could hear to some degree and as this section shows, her husband may also have been able to, again demonstrating that (not) hearing, as much as being deaf, is a social category.

In the case of the family described in the opening vignette, we had been talking about deaf people for some time, yet they “forgot” about a man who was right there when we asked if they knew other deaf people. I wonder if they were thinking about the man not in terms of him being deaf but in terms of the more immediately salient feature of their relationship: he was a client, there to get a tool fixed. Or perhaps their own granddaughter was someone they would consider “more deaf” and this difference contributed to the grandparents’ “forgetting.” In short, beyond a general understanding that recalling and naming persons on the basis of particular characteristics when asked to do so is a communicative task that does not necessarily “translate” across settings, I do not have a pithy analysis as to why such “forgetting” situations occurred. Yet it seems important to mention as part of a description of how hearing people thought and talked about their deaf neighbors, friends, and family members. It also turned out that Sagar and the young deaf girl's uncle had met before, and that at the initial meeting, the uncle hadn't mentioned his niece. Upon meeting the uncle again, Sagar was surprised that he hadn't mentioned his own niece was deaf. For Sagar, knowing that someone has a deaf relative is (almost) always socially relevant. For the uncle, meeting Sagar may or may not have brought to mind his niece; if it did, sharing this information apparently did not feel necessary the way that knowing that information felt necessary to Sagar.

As discussed in chapter 1, hearing villagers frequently remarked on Sagar's apparent lack of fit with their image of someone deaf, and certainly their image of someone *lāṭo*. Hearing people did not, however, regard local deaf persons as an entirely homogenous group. When differentiating among deaf people, hearing people did so in terms of either a perceived quality of mind and action that might be glossed as intelligence or competence, or a perceived capacity to use and understand speech. The people with whom I talked did not always link these qualities, although as Graif (2018) has shown, hearing people often do equate the two, and as discussed in chapter 1, deaf NSL signers explicitly dismiss this equation. A hearing man in the tea shop where we all ate after class once made a comment that no one could ever cheat Krishna, implying that he was smart and competent—and also that his being so was worth remarking on. In this particular instance, comparison with other deaf people was left implicit, while a woman with whom Sagar and I chatted when looking for several deaf people told us directly that one person we were seeking was *bāṭi* ‘smart, with-it,’ while the other was not.<sup>10</sup> (Hearing people pronounced not-always-complimentary judgments on other hearing people as well; such evaluations were not restricted to deaf people.)

Another young hearing woman I met had known at least three deaf people for her entire life, a man and a woman who came to class and a woman who did not. During our conversation this young woman noted differences between deaf people like the woman who came to class, Surya Kumari Limbu, whom she described as knowing what work she had to do and doing it well and conversing with people when they meet on the road, and people like the woman who did not participate in class, whom she said would cry when told to do something.<sup>11</sup> I often struggled to communicate with Surya Kumari, an important reminder that communication is always relational and context-specific. The young hearing woman also said that, unlike other deaf people, Surya Kumari almost never used her voice. This makes clear that she at least was not equating the use of speech with intelligence or competence, although some people nevertheless framed it as valuable, important, or at least worthy of comment. One deaf man's relative, for example, told me on several occasions that he could use his voice for certain words, such as *buā* 'father.' And a young woman with two deaf relatives commented on the fact that one of them was more able than the other to hear and produce words that others could understand.<sup>12</sup>

Despite such (perceived) differences, hearing people also classified deaf people as similar. Once, at Padma Puri's request, I spent some time talking with his mother about why it was worth his while to attend the NSL class. I suggested that he might enjoy meeting other people like himself. She replied that he already knew such people, including an elderly person down the hill from them in Bodhe, and a woman named Sarita Nepali in the other direction back toward Maunabudhuk.<sup>13</sup> I did not meet the elderly person in Bodhe, but Sarita was a close interlocutor, and someone whom I too would consider to be like Padma. Perhaps because our categories aligned seamlessly, Padma's mother and I did not discuss what constituted Sarita and Padma as similar from our perspectives: their perceived audiological configuration, how they communicated with their hands, how other people communicated with them using their hands, and/or something else.

Another indication that hearing people broadly perceive deaf people as similar is the fact that in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, there were three married deaf couples currently living together, a fourth deaf couple who were separated at the time—she had moved elsewhere—but have since reunited, and one deaf woman whose late husband was deaf. Only two deaf people I knew or knew of were married to hearing people at the time of my research. While below I argue that Maunabudhuk and Bodhe are distinct from what are known as shared signing communities, the literature on such places constitutes an important source of information about deaf people's experiences in contexts other than primarily urban, institutionally-scaffolded deaf communities such as Nepal's own deaf society. In this literature, marriage—whether or not deaf people get married, and if so, to whom—is often mentioned in relation to deaf people's level of "integration" into their community, as Kusters (2010) reports. She argues, however, that the simple fact of marriage says

very little; it is important to know *why* certain marriages do or do not take place. In Adamorobe, Ghana, for example, deaf-deaf marriages have been illegal since 1975 in an effort to prevent the birth of more deaf children (Kusters 2012a:348). While this ban indicates a negative evaluation of deafness, Kusters (2012a:349) describes Adamorobe in general as a “deaf-inclusive place” where “deaf people interact naturally with hearing people through sign language.” The broader point, then, is that attitudes toward deaf people, and deaf people’s experiences of life in hearing-majority communities, are frequently complex and even contradictory.

In Maunabudhuk and Bodhe deaf persons both “interact naturally with hearing people through sign” as they do in Adamorobe (Kusters 2012:349a) *and* struggle to do so. Here, though, deaf-deaf marriages are considered appropriate. Indeed, when an older deaf man showed up in Maunabudhuk for several days, someone jokingly suggested that he and Jyoti Limbu, a deaf woman of similar age, should get married.<sup>14</sup> Although I did not investigate the reasons behind deaf-deaf marriages, in this place where both love marriages and arranged marriages are common, I got the sense that families who arranged marriages for their deaf adult children with other deaf people did so on the assumption that the parents of a hearing person would not consent to a match with a deaf person, whereas the parents of a deaf person would be open to such a pairing. Such match-making implies that hearing people categorize deaf people as different from hearing people and as similar to each other.

In mid-October 2010, Sagar, Krishna, Krishna’s hearing twin brother Prakash (who lived nearby), and I were signing together, and I asked why Krishna wasn’t married, since Prakash was. (Although I had only met Prakash once or twice, I know that he understood my signing because he translated it into Nepali for another hearing person nearby.) Prakash replied: “*Boli na āune* ‘he doesn’t speak.’” Interestingly, on a different occasion, Krishna’s older brother Samman said that Krishna wasn’t married because they didn’t have enough money.<sup>15</sup> Taking both statements into account, along with the fact that Krishna’s living brothers were all hearing and married, it seems that being deaf and not wealthy meant Krishna had two matrimonial strikes against him. In a return visit I remember Samman telling me that he had made inquiries about a potential match for Krishna but had decided that the woman would not be a good worker, a deal-breaker in a family where—from my perspective—everyone works hard and shares labor.

Closer consideration of one of Maunabudhuk’s deaf couples reveals further nuances to my descriptions of how deaf and hearing residents think of deaf people as both similar and different. Sarawata Limbu, a regular participant in NSL class, became my closest deaf interlocutor in the village. Talkative and sociable, both in class and at home, she played a key role in managing her family’s three-generation household and farm. Her sister-in-law told me that Sarawata speaks and understands Limbu, and also uses her hands, and that the family communicates with her using speech and their hands (*hāt̤le chālchha* ‘doing with hands’), implying that



for them to use speech alone would be insufficient.<sup>16</sup> My own observations and interactions with Sarawata support this characterization—although, not speaking Limbu, my ability to communicate in speech with her was obviously very limited.

Sarawata's husband, Sal Bahadur Limbu, came to class only once. When Sagar and I visited their home, we occasionally ran into him on the path there or while hanging out. He was always very shy, sometimes declining to communicate at all, although Sagar told me that he was slightly more outgoing when they were alone. I also did not have a clear sense to what degree he understood when people spoke or signed to him, but much more important, it seemed that his family did not either. As I wrote in my fieldnotes:

His mom told a long story, which I didn't fully understand, about him being sick as a young child and having several operations on his throat, which was hugely swollen, and being taken to different wards [i.e., areas of the village] and to Biratnagar [a large city in the Tarai with better medical facilities], and I asked at some point, "So that's why he can't hear?" and she replied, "No, that's why he can't talk." And it turns out he can hear. Maybe. Sagar asked, "So he understands what people say when they talk?" And she said she didn't really know what he understands or doesn't understand but he dances when there's music (like at feasts and such) and he talks with his hands.<sup>17</sup>

Later in the summer, I asked Sal Bahadur's oldest younger sister "if he can hear—she said if you speak loudly, and that one ear hears and the other doesn't, but he doesn't speak, and she said he does use his hands to speak. But later I was talking with their mother, and I commented that he doesn't talk very much (meaning, communicate), and she said that was true, and he doesn't even talk very much with his hands—he'll look at her to tell her he's hungry, or make an eating gesture, but not a lot past that."<sup>18</sup>

The example of Sarawata and her husband shows that for hearing people, as for (some) deaf people, the production and reception of speech does not make someone not-deaf, nor necessarily does having (some) hearing. What mattered most to Sal Bahadur's family was that he, like Sarawata, uses his hands to communicate. Yet, returning to deaf people's own perspectives, Sarawata did not see them as a good match—not because he was more or less deaf than she but because he was so much less communicative. It often seemed to me that she wished for a partner with whom she could talk as volubly and easily as she did with the other deaf people in class (and with many hearing people). In other words, what presumably had made them a good match in their parents' eyes—his communicative modality and hers, the fact that the parents of a hearing person would be unlikely to consider them—did not, in her eyes or heart, make them compatible as life partners.

Some hearing villagers seemed to consider deaf people not only different from hearing people, and less likely to be accepted by them as marriage partners, but also as potentially more vulnerable to the vicissitudes of life. In late July 2010, Jyoti Limbu hurt her arm quite badly, and I went to her home to visit her and bring her

tea. An older hearing neighbor from down the hill had also come to visit, and she asked why God lets deaf people be born. “[She said,] ‘They feel thirst, they feel hunger, but unlike us, they cannot speak. *Na janmos* [‘may they not be born’].’ She painted a vivid portrait of human life as one of suffering, which is relieved by the ability to speak; either that or of human life as a series of needs which are satiated through the ability to speak (and thus get what one needs).”<sup>19</sup> The parents of several deaf people also expressed worries about what would happen to their adult children after they, the parents, died. Padma’s mother expressed this worry in terms of love: “You have to love your disabled children the most, who else will love them, especially when we old folks die?”<sup>20</sup>

#### DEAF DEMOGRAPHY

Along with deaf and hearing people’s conversations, an important source of information pertaining to the categorization of deaf people comes from government-generated lists. Scholars of South Asia and beyond have analyzed the epistemological, political, and practical complications of enumerative and classificatory projects in far more depth than is possible here (e.g., Pigg 1992; Dahal 2003; Dirks 2001). While recognizing these complications, thinking with numbers can still be productive, especially for comparisons across places and especially when there is a tradition of using such numbers for comparisons, as with scholarship on signing and deaf sociality beyond national urban settings.

In Maunabudhuk, Sagar shared with me two lists that the village had compiled as part of the process of hosting an NDFN-sponsored NSL class. The lists contained the names of twenty-five people from Maunabudhuk and nineteen from Bodhe, each person labeled *bahirā* ‘deaf’ or *susta shrawan* ‘hard of hearing.’ (I do not know if the village or NDFN initiated this distinction; I combine them into a single category.) The lists seemed fairly comprehensive if imperfect. They left off some deaf people (for example, the husband of Lalita, herself a regular class participant) and included several hearing people (for example, a young man with a cleft palate, which is perhaps significant in the linking of non-normative speech with the category *deaf*). In addition, a few people who were listed had very slight hearing disabilities but communicated easily in speech and did not seem to consider themselves, or be considered by others, deaf, *lāto*, or *apānga* ‘disabled.’ (One of these people nevertheless came to class on a few occasions because of its literacy training opportunities.) Toward the end of our stay in Maunabudhuk, Sagar and I revised the list for Maunabudhuk based on our experiences. While the original list had twenty-five people, our revised list had twenty-seven people, twenty-three of whom were on the original list. (We did not revise the Bodhe list because our knowledge of Bodhe was much less extensive.)

I also examined the 2011 census (Government of Nepal 2012), which lists twenty-two deaf/hard of hearing people (grouped as a single category) and three

deafblind people in Maunabudhuk, with forty-two deaf/hard of hearing people and six deafblind people in Bodhe. (There is also a category of multiply disabled people that may or may not include deaf people.) While the numbers from Maunabudhuk's own list (which I have no reason to believe would have excluded deafblind people) and the 2011 census are identical, Bodhe has 2.5 times as many deaf people according to the census versus the NSL class list.

What to make of the striking discrepancy between the census, which counts forty-eight deaf people in Bodhe, and the class list, which counts nineteen? As the previous discussion has shown, this difference may be attributable to issues of ontology or epistemology ("Who is deaf?" and "What does *deaf* mean?") as well as methodology (what happens when you ask, "Do you know anyone deaf around here?"). My understanding is that a person from Maunabudhuk compiled the lists for both Maunabudhuk and Bodhe; he may not have had as much knowledge about whom, and where, to ask about deaf people in Bodhe, and asking does not necessarily (immediately) yield answers. Acknowledging the uncertainty of numbers (Jennifer Johnson-Hanks, pers. comm.), I used the different available figures to calculate a range of percentages representing deaf people as a proportion of the total populations of Maunabudhuk and Bodhe. Detailed further in appendix 1, the lowest calculated percentage for Maunabudhuk is 0.8 percent and for Bodhe is 0.6 percent, while the highest are 1.1 percent and 1.6 percent, respectively.

These percentages overlap with the low end of the range of percentages of deaf people within a total population that scholars have reported for what are often referred to as shared signing communities. Shared signing communities are generally represented as places where a sign language has emerged and become widely used by both deaf and hearing people, due to a relatively high proportion of deaf people over multiple generations, generally between 1 percent and 3 percent, often attributed to genetic causes. At particular times and places, researchers have reported a much higher percentage of deaf residents. For example, 25 percent of the population was deaf in Chilmark, on Martha's Vineyard, in the United States, at various points from the 1700s to the mid-1900s, and 11 percent of Adamorobe, Ghana, was deaf in 1961 (Kusters 2010:1, 2012a:347). However, scholars report "close to 0.6%" in Ban Khor, Thailand (Nonaka 2012); 0.75 percent in Alipur, India (Panda 2012); 1.1 percent in Adamorobe, Ghana, in 2012 (Kusters 2012a); 2.2 percent in Bengkala, Indonesia (de Vos 2012); 2.4 percent in Chican, Mexico (Delgado 2012); and 2.5–3 percent in Al-Sayyid, Israel (Kisch 2012a, 2012b). If I use the higher figures calculated for Maunabudhuk and Bodhe (1.1 percent and 1.6 percent), these are squarely within this range; if I use the lower figures (0.8 percent and 0.6 percent), they are at the lower end but still within the range.

Yet I argue that Maunabudhuk and Bodhe do not constitute a shared sign community, nor does natural sign communication seem to function like a shared sign language, at least as they are classically described. Generally, the signed conversations I observed and took part in there were more tenuous than what has been

documented in places like Adamorobe, Al-Sayyid, and Ban Khor. I suggest that one key reason is differences in social, spatial, and temporal densities, which can be obscured by raw numbers and even percentages. As Panda (2012:355) writes about Alipur, “deafness occurs throughout the village, but is more strongly represented in particular families, some of which have had deaf members for several continuous generations.” Moreover, a map of Alipur shows a significantly higher number of deaf people in the northwest quadrant than elsewhere, and Panda (2012) reports that deafness and signing go back at least six generations. In Ban Khor, of sixteen total deaf persons, fifteen had been born in the village, and eleven of them lived in one of three subvillages (Nonaka 2009:216). The other five deaf people lived in another subvillage, and in both subvillages deaf people lived very close to one another. All but four deaf people could trace their lineages within a single extended family, and with the exception of those four, deaf people in Ban Khor at the time of Nonaka’s research all had deaf siblings, a deaf parent, and/or a deaf aunt or uncle (parent’s sibling) (2009:218–219). Similarly, in Al-Sayyid many deaf people have a number of deaf siblings as well as deaf relatives among extended family (Kisch 2012b:94–95). There are deaf members of each of the five major lineages in the community, and people live in “several dense clusters of multiple compounds, as well as slightly more dispersed compounds” (Kisch 2012a:366). Research on Chican, Mexico (Delgado 2012), Adamorobe, Ghana (Kusters 2012a), and Bengkala, Indonesia (de Vos 2012) also indicate that in each of these places, deaf people share family connections, live close enough that they have very frequent contact with each other, or both.

In some such settings, people cannot recall a time when there weren’t both deaf and hearing residents. In Adamorobe deaf people—and presumably Adamorobe Sign Language—have been part of village life “since time immemorial” (Kusters 2014:150, quoting a hearing villager). In other places people can collectively recall when deaf children were born. In Al-Sayyid a group of deaf siblings was born between 1924 and 1940 (Kisch 2012b:91). Fewer than a hundred years later, there are a large number of deaf villagers, and “all deaf and many hearing Al-Sayyid infants are exposed to signing from birth, within the family environment, with additional (deaf or hearing) adult models in the community” (Kisch 2012a:365). In such settings communicative practices that emerge with the first generation of signers develop quickly and get transmitted through and across generations (e.g., Nonaka 2007; Sandler 2012).

In the parts of Maunabudhuk and Bodhe where I have spent time, some deaf people have deaf relatives, but there are no deaf lineages of the sort described for shared signing communities. I know three deaf people with deaf siblings. It was also reported on the village list that one deaf woman’s mother was deaf; I was not able to meet her, and I did not get a clear sense from talking to other people as to how accurate this classification was. Unlike in shared signing communities, though, the majority of deaf people in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe with

whom I am familiar do not have deaf relatives to whom they are related by birth or adoption, as opposed to marriage. Critically, I did not meet, nor was I told about, any kinship group with three or more deaf signers across generations, although I spent time with two sisters-in-law whose late brother and husband, respectively, was deaf. I never encountered lineages of deaf people with deaf parents, aunts and uncles, cousins, and grandparents. Moreover, in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, four of my primary interlocutors had grown up elsewhere and married into the village. Maunabudhuk and Bodhe are multiethnic and multicasite, and there are deaf members of each of the area's major *jāt* 'caste/ethnic' groups, between which there is almost no intermarriage. In contrast, many of the above communities are endogamous; indeed, endogamy has been proposed as one of the defining characteristics of places where shared sign languages emerge (Kusters 2010).

Twelve out of twenty-two people whose homes I visited were the only deaf person in the household (Green 2014c:82). Beyond the household most deaf people in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe live close to several other deaf people, although "close" is a relative term. Many had previously met and some were in regular contact with other deaf people prior to the NSL class. By no means did they all know each other, however, nor are there geographic clusters within which deaf people tend to live. In northwest Maunabudhuk and southeast Bodhe, where I spent time and was able to map people's residences, deaf people's homes were spread quite evenly across the area (Green 2014c:82–83). These patterns of kin-based and other social relationships, both spatial and temporal, distinguish Maunabudhuk and Bodhe from shared signing communities as well as from instances where "family home-sign" (Haviland 2013) and "family sign languages" (Hou 2016) have emerged.

The relationships among deaf people and between deaf and hearing people, as well as the degree to which natural sign is shared across signers in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, also contrast with the classic understanding of home sign. In the usual model signers are the first and usually the only signer in their social network; home sign in turn is defined as arising from a deaf signer and particular to that person (e.g., Goldin-Meadow and Mylander 1983; Goldin-Meadow 2003; Coppola, Spaepen, and Goldin-Meadow 2013).<sup>21</sup> In Maunabudhuk and Bodhe deaf signers' repertoires are more than incidentally conventional and mutually intelligible. I discuss, and complicate, the relationship of conventionality to mutual intelligibility in chapter 3, but as a brief example, take the following. On June 1, I showed Krishna and his family, including his hearing brother Samman, a few clips of video that I had recently filmed in class and at Sarawata's house: "I translated some of what Sagar was saying in the first couple films, especially when he was teasing people. Samman really enjoyed that, and would laugh when he could see that someone else was teasing Sagar. [When he saw the film from Sarawata's house,] he translated what the neighbor . . . said to Sarawata's husband: she was teasing him that Sagar might steal his wife."<sup>22</sup>

Sarawata's neighbor and Samman live on opposite sides of the village and come from different *jāt* 'caste/ethnic' and language backgrounds. According to

their own reports, prior to the NSL class, Sarawata and Krishna had never met (though Sarawata had seen Krishna), precluding the possibility that they had co-created or merged linguistic repertoires and then passed those repertoires back to their families. The fact that Krishna's hearing brother was nevertheless able to understand and translate what Sarawata's hearing neighbor had signed suggests that some conventions in local natural sign are widely shared among both deaf and hearing people. Relatedly, as a learner, I did not have to acquire individualized repertoires for each deaf person with whom I spent time in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, even if I came to recognize particular signs or pragmatic patterns as specific to individuals. And Sagar could easily communicate with both deaf and hearing people—a testament, to be sure, to his communicative skills and also evidence of some conventionality.

Given that not all deaf people in the area knew each other or spent time together, this conventionality in turn suggests that even in the absence of spatial and familial clusters of signers, people transmit signs across time and space (Nyst, Sylla, and Magassouba [2012] suggest something similar). Sagar, Prajwal, and Furba's descriptions in chapter 1 of deaf children learning natural signs from hearing people support this claim. In fact, the existence of both differences and similarities in signs across different Nepali settings are evidence of multiple, variously scaled semiotic traditions. The sign GIRL/WOMAN, for example, is the same in Maunabudhuk and Kathmandu but different in Atharasaya, the village directly across the valley on Maunabudhuk's eastern side. The negating sign, however, is in use not only across Nepal but also India and according to Adam Schembri (pers. comm.) in other parts of Asia as well.

Discussion of transmission implicates the temporal axis in the literature on signing classifications. Meir et al. (2010) propose the category of emerging sign languages, contrasting with established sign languages. Emerging sign languages cut across sociospatial axes, including, for example, Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language, a shared sign language (Meir et al. use the term "village sign language"), and Israeli Sign Language, which they call a "deaf community sign language." What these languages share is a relatively recent and rapid emergence, characterized by significant linguistic change, over a few generations or cohorts of signers. In the case of Israeli Sign Language this emergence is tied to the founding of deaf schools and other institutions, while in the case of Al-Sayyid it is tied to increasing numbers of deaf people born into the village (Meir et al. 2010). As discussed in chapter 1, NSL has emerged recently and rapidly, at least in part from natural sign, and thus could be classified as an emerging sign language (as well as a deaf community sign language).<sup>23</sup>

In Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, where no one shared with me a collective memory of a time prior to which deaf people were not present in the region, there is no evidence that natural sign is new, young, or quickly changing. This lack of a pre-deaf epoch motivates my choice not to use a framework that positions hearing people's co-speech gestures as the material from which deaf people develop signs,

despite the fact that hearing speakers in Nepal use a rich gestural repertoire that overlaps with natural sign.<sup>24</sup> Without evidence I do not want to assume that this repertoire began by belonging only to hearing people. It is also hard to predict if and how natural sign might change in the future. In Maunabudhuk and Bodhe there are not families or neighborhoods in which there are large, and growing, numbers of deaf people, so it does not seem likely that natural sign will become a conventional signed language in this region, although as more and more children attend deaf schools, the way they use natural sign after learning NSL could certainly affect the broader usage of natural sign in their home communities, including Maunabudhuk and Bodhe. Here it is worth noting that in Kathmandu, natural sign continues to exist and be used both by non-NSL signers and by NSL signers, including young people.<sup>25</sup>

It is for these reasons that I use the term *emergent* to describe natural sign, both generally in Nepal and specifically in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe. *Emergent* in contrast to *emerging* emphasizes that natural sign is not necessarily new and does not have a predictable trajectory. *Emergent* in contrast to *conventional* highlights that signers and addressees have to do a great deal of sense-making work (although conventional language practices are also emergent, and emergent language practices involve conventionality, as discussed in chapter 3).<sup>26</sup> I also want to stress that Maunabudhuk and Bodhe are not considered unusual places in Nepal; they are not referred to by residents as having particularly high numbers of deaf people, nor did anyone at the NDFN imply that they were when we discussed the three or four places hosting NSL classes in 2010. Sagar himself had previously taught in two other locales in the same district. Indeed, the fact that NSL outreach classes have been ongoing for several decades implies that many places in Nepal are home to a “high” number of deaf people.<sup>27</sup>

Annelies Kusters (pers. comm.) suggests that the situation I have described in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe may in fact characterize the most common kind of communicative setting for deaf people in the world. Zeshan (2011:228–229) makes a similar argument—namely that situations in which “a number of deaf individuals . . . are in sporadic, unsystematic contact with each other” are, “far from being something extraordinary, . . . actually a common occurrence.” She ascribes the resulting communicative practices, which she calls “communal homesign,” only to deaf people’s contact with other deaf people, whereas natural sign is clearly a product of interaction both among deaf people and between deaf and hearing people.

My point is not that deaf people are not critical in the development of signing practices, but that the presence of deaf people in the social field and of signed forms in the linguistic field are not exceptional. Here I am in conversation with disability studies and disability justice scholars and activists (e.g., Ginsburg and Rapp 2017; Piepzna-Samarasinha 2022) who sharply critique mainstream, and mainstream social scientists’, understanding of disability as anomalous rather than as regular, even common: experienced, to be sure, in particular ways in particular



times and places but never absent. In the same vein, sustained attention to deaf experiences shows that while particular places may not have deaf residents for some period of time, in most times and places the social world has never just been hearing. Space-time has never not been deaf.

#### A BRIEF, FURTHER INDULGENCE IN TERMINOLOGIES AND TAXONOMIES

My goals in this chapter have been multiple: to think carefully about the categories, classifications, and taxonomies present both in the ethnographic and scholarly fields with which I am most engaged; and to open up the logics of the latter to those of the former. Moreover, *natural sign* and *local sign*, the two terms that I have borrowed or adapted from my interlocutors in Nepal and sought to put into conversation with extant scholarly ones, both demand further specificity and offer purchase into each other.

Using the word *local* is one of the ways—the only one involving English—that Nepali speakers in Maunabudhuk referred to the signing practices in use among themselves and their deaf relatives and neighbors. In Nepal the designation *local* conveys both a sense of ownership and belonging *and* a sense of fraught comparison to elsewhere. To give a concrete example, there are two types of *ambā* ‘guava’ in Maunabudhuk. The fruits of one type are small and tasty whether hard or fully ripened; these are known as *local* guavas. So-called *bikāsit* ‘developed’ guavas, meanwhile, are larger, sweeter, and pink inside (and no doubt fetch more per kilo) but are only edible when ripe. According to Fortier (2009), the term *local* also relates closely to the Nepali *prākṛiti* ‘nature, natural.’ She writes: “Local places . . . are thought of as *prākṛiti* . . . or a local dialect is called *Prākṛit*, the natural language of the local people” (Fortier 2009:60). In contrast to the quality of being *sanskṛiti* (cultural), that which is *prākṛiti* “contains an *emergent* quality that is *contingent on local circumstances*” (Fortier 2009:60–61, emphases added).<sup>28</sup> The Nepali, and perhaps broader South Asian, understandings of both *local* and *natural* emphasize particularity and contingency. As I understand them, both the terms *local* and *natural* demand empirical specificity. Hence I use them both as categories and also as placeholders that direct further examination.

#### CONCLUSION

This chapter has literally and figuratively located deaf users of natural sign in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe in relation to each other and to existing classificatory frameworks of deaf people and signing practices. I explored deaf and hearing residents’ perspectives on the category *deaf*, particularly in relation to sensory and communicative configurations. In concert with Kusters’s (2010) critical point that researchers should pay attention to the subjective experiences of deaf persons

beyond large signing communities, I suggested that doing so involves asking questions such as: “What does deaf mean?” “Who is deaf?” “How might I as a researcher know who is deaf?” Moreover, even seemingly straightforward yes-or-no questions like “Can you hear?” are no less socially specific than questions like “What are deaf people’s experiences?”

Seeking both to be in conversation with the rich and important literature on deaf socialities and communication and to push against the flattening effects of taxonomies, I showed how natural sign differs from extant scholarly categories in terms of the associated spatial, familial, and temporal relationships among signers. This demographically-oriented account further explains and elaborates on local natural sign’s paradoxical possibilities and precarities. In Maunabudhuk and Bodhe there are not dense clusters of deaf relatives and neighbors, among whom (and among whose hearing relatives and neighbors), natural sign would be a primary language; natural sign is not the communicative medium of a tightly connected group of people with a consistent need and desire to sign. Usage patterns, however, suggest that some natural sign forms are transmitted across time and widely available for use. Given these circumstances, it is unsurprising that natural sign communication is often easy and often difficult.

The demand for specificity invoked at the end of this chapter is answered in chapter 3 in two ways: (1) by describing and analyzing particular examples of signs and utterances from Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, and (2) by theorizing the affordances and limits of natural sign through a consideration of the relationship between linguistic and other bodily and social conventions or habits. This theorization arises specifically from my work with natural sign in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, while providing a general framework that can be used to analyze other emergent language practices. Chapter 3 also further elaborates on natural sign’s contradictions: it involves conventions, but it is not conventional language; it is readily available, but it requires work; it is known in the body, but it can be easily dismissed as unknowable, as explored in chapters 4 and 5.