

Ethics

In 2010, Stella Limbu was fifteen or sixteen years old, a sharp, funny, and kind hearing teenager whose extended family lived in two modest homes: one in the farmlands near the home of two deaf sisters-in-law and another in the bazaar. The latter was smack in between the house where Sagar Karki and I rented rooms and the one where we took our meals, so we saw a lot of each other. When I first arrived in Maunabudhuk, Stella took me under her much-younger wing, and over the next several weeks she often accompanied Sagar and me as we explored the area. The three of us would walk the packed-dirt paths, joking together, visiting deaf residents' homes, and taking breaks to climb the high limbs of sour plum and *kāphal* berry trees to pick fruit (or in my case to watch them do so and then enjoy the literal fruits of their labor). I was struck by the ease with which Sagar and Stella communicated, and even more by her abandonment of speech when in Sagar's company. In general, hearing people who signed would do so only briefly, and I was not the only one so struck by Stella's actions. On one occasion a hearing shopkeeper enquired of Stella, entirely without rancor, "Why aren't you talking?"¹

There was no obvious explanation for Stella's positive, even delighted, orientation toward signing. None of Stella's immediate relatives are deaf, though like nearly everyone in Maunabudhuk, she knew deaf people. As well as having deaf neighbors, Stella frequently hung out with her best friend in a small snack shop where Jyoti Limbu, an older deaf woman, could often be found doing odd jobs. More important, it seems to me, was the fact that Stella and Sagar genuinely liked each other. They were playful together, joking and teasing in a way that is common among young people in the area. Stella and I also had an affectionate and easy rapport, and the three of us enjoyed spending time together.

Stella's willingness to communicate in sign, and the facility with which she did so, in some senses obscured that very willingness. But watching her and thinking about her has helped me to recognize the traces of pleasure and desire in hearing people's "ability" to sign.² Stella's two sisters, one older and one younger, were perfectly amiable with Sagar but neither as interested in nor as adept at directly conversing with him. Moreover, the contrast between Stella's willingness and the kind of refusal with which I opened this book—a woman moving her eyes away from Shrila Khadka as she signed—highlight the critical role played by hearing individuals' sometimes inexplicable orientations toward signers and signing. It is precisely because I do not have a straightforward explanation for Stella's willingness, even eagerness, to sign, nor for her facility in doing so, that I open this chapter by writing about her.

Willingness, refusal, ambivalence, hesitation, eagerness, begrudging attention, curiosity: these orientations toward sign and signers arise from a vast and often unchartable ground comprised of histories of interaction, family relationships and commitments, prejudices against and assumptions about deaf and disabled people, local social hierarchies and affiliations—from love, attraction, dislike, distraction, shyness, shame, and enjoyment. In any given instance it may be impossible to discern why one particular hearing person was so ready and able to communicate in natural sign and another one was so very not. Fully recognizing that I may not be able to pin down the reason for people's orientations, this chapter tracks the socially perceptible actions through which orientations manifest and create effects. As with Stella's joy, or, later in this chapter, Binita's disdain and Samman's quiet care, affect and emotions matter because their expression in actions have concrete consequences.

This chapter therefore pays attention to what disinterest, willingness, or hesitation literally look like and sound like, and to the consequences of other, usually hearing, people's actions on deaf natural signers' everyday participation in communicative sociality. My approach is rooted in a perspective on communication that recognizes the entanglement of pragmatics and metapragmatics—that is, the entanglement of what people (can) do with language and what people think/say about what they (can) do with language (Silverstein 1976; Hanks 1996, 2005a, 2009). The examples and themes in this chapter link back to chapter 1, where I argued that NSL signers' protest against the word *lāto* is also a protest against being treated as if they were incompetent or incapable of making sense to and of others. NSL signers theorize intelligibility as a situated quality of particular interactions, not a quality of individual persons. NSL signers also suggest that outside of deaf society, deaf people are particularly vulnerable to being excluded from communicative sociality because hearing people may or may not choose to interact with them in natural sign. This chapter both demonstrates the significance of NSL signers' insights and elaborates on them through fine-grained analyses of interactions in natural sign.

To be clear, not all instances of not-understanding or misunderstanding are the result of unwillingness. In natural sign, as I know from firsthand experience,

it is absolutely possible to try, even to try extremely hard, and nevertheless to not-understand or misunderstand. It is nonetheless true that interactions both depend on and (re)produce the ethical orientations people bring to these interactions. Put another way, while interactions are not fully reducible to the effects of orientations, orientations make a difference in whether and how people attend to and understand other people's utterances. That is, instances of communicating in natural sign that hearing people in particular experience as frustrating work to reinforce some of the very orientations that are an often unrecognized factor in creating those frustrating experiences, thus both naturalizing and reproducing the interactional circumstances of natural sign. How any given interaction plays out impacts people's generalized expectations about interacting with deaf signers, and over the long term, can influence the degree to which sign as both form and practice becomes conventionalized and widespread, as suggested in the introduction and chapter 2. Ethical orientations are thus inextricable from the questions of demography and sociolinguistics, affordances and constraints, explored in previous chapters, and not merely an additional factor necessary to make sense of natural sign, both interactionally and analytically.³

Some of the variation in hearing (and deaf) people's responses to and evaluations of deaf people and their use of natural sign clustered around particular people and configurations, as I explore more in the following chapter. Sagar consistently, though by no means always, understood and was understood by others, both deaf and hearing. There were times when I would try to tell the NSL class participants something, fail miserably, and watch as Sagar did so with ease. Many hearing people also noticed that it was easy to communicate with him. Among deaf residents, some were socially regarded as sensible people, while others were more likely to be ignored or dismissed, both by deaf and hearing people. But even those deaf signers who were considered effective communicators might not be attended to or understood in a given instance, and even deaf people who were generally thought of as difficult to understand were in fact often understood. To complicate matters further, potential participants' actions and orientations were often seemingly contradictory. For example, on more than one occasion I heard hearing people say in Nepali "I don't understand" but respond in sign to a deaf signer.

TRACKING ORIENTATIONS: EYE GAZE, SIGNS, TRANSLATIONS, EVALUATIONS

Whatever their source(s), orientations get expressed in various actions that also constitute conversational moves. I track orientations through eye gaze (where did people look when someone signed to them or in their proximity?), sign production (what did they sign in response, if anything?), translation (did someone translate what had been signed, or request such a translation? what did that translation involve?), and evaluation (what if anything did people say about the interaction, whether in sign or speech?). These actions—eye gaze, signing (or

not), translations, and metalinguistic evaluations—are both part of conversational dynamics and a commentary on them, providing insight into how participants perceive the potential or ongoing interaction. While not unmediated reflections of people's feelings, desires, or opinions, these actions do offer a concrete way to follow how interlocutors engage and disengage in conversation and to analyze the orientations expressed by and realized through those (dis)engagements.

Methodologically, tracking orientations in these ways allows me to attend to the materiality of social interaction and to anchor claims about ethics in observable bodily actions. Moreover, I can review these actions in video recordings from the field. Eye gaze, accompanying shifts in posture, and signing, or its absence, were available both to me and at least potentially to other participants during interactions, as to the best of my knowledge, everyone with whom I worked in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe was sighted. Spoken translations and evaluations were not fully accessible to deaf signers, although they could see that something was being said, and some spoken evaluations were accompanied by facial expressions or gestures. Eye gaze in particular, as both a conversational move and a commentary on conversation, merits further exploration. Attention to the role of sight in deaf practices has played an important role in deaf studies' commitment to understanding, describing, and theorizing deaf sociality in terms of what it involves and entails rather than what it lacks.

In 1912, long before deaf studies as a discipline came into existence, George Veditz, president of the US National Association of the Deaf, famously characterized (sighted) deaf people as “first and foremost and for all time, people of the eye” (cited in Bauman 2008:12).⁴ Bahan (2008) writes about a deaf man and his deaf daughter who are able to pick out another deaf man in a crowd by watching how he orients and responds to the visual dimensions and rhythms of a generic urban scene. Father and daughter are able to identify the stranger as deaf because they see and recognize the visible dispositions characteristic of deaf visual practices (Bahan 2008:83). According to Sirvage (2015), such practices also include an implicit commitment to “watching out” for what is happening behind the back of one's interlocutors and informing them as needed.⁵

While these are examples of more paraconversational social actions, sighted signers and sighted speakers also use eye gaze to establish participant frameworks, manage conversational turns, and convey appropriate interest (Goodwin 1981; Bahan 2008; Sidnell 2010). Goodwin (1981) reports that speakers actively monitor their addressees to see if they are watching them. When addressees are not watching, speakers perform particular actions, such as verbal restarts, to “secure the gaze and orientation of” those addressees (Goodwin 2006:118). A similar claim is implicit in Bahan's (2008) work on signers and their addressees. People watch each other and they watch each other watch each other, attributing meaning to what they see of the other person's eye gaze. And in general, conversational participants interpret eye gaze as attention. The object of attention might be a conversational partner, a third party, an object in the environment, and so forth. As Goodwin

(2006:99) writes: “The gaze direction of an actor . . . allows others to make inferences about what the party is attending to”—and in this case those “others” include an anthropologist. The idea that eye gaze is an attentive and agentive act resonates with the conceptualization of aural listening as active rather than passive (e.g., Hirschkind 2006; Marsilli-Vargas 2014; Friedner 2022).

Of course, as any teacher can attest, the eyes may be directed toward a speaker while the mind is directed elsewhere; nor am I claiming that attention can only be enacted or tracked by eye gaze.⁶ However, in visual signed communication, eye gaze is not only an important but also a necessary mode of paying attention; the absence of an intended addressee’s eye gaze precludes all other possibilities of their engagement: perceiving what has been signed, attempting to understand, actually understanding, asking for clarification, or otherwise responding. Eye gaze is not sufficient for understanding visual sign, but it is necessary, and looking at a signer both signals potential willingness to interact and makes it materially possible to do so. Eye gaze embodies intention to participate in the conversation and makes that intention actionable.

The importance of eye gaze is, moreover, clear to deaf signers. During a conversation with Prajwal Dangol about his educational experiences, he told me that even though he had successfully passed his School Leaving Certificate exam, he hadn’t really liked school. When I asked if the problem was communication, at first he said that the teachers could sign just fine. But then he explained that they would “just say the signs that go along with the words,” rather than providing conceptually rich explanations or delving into topics deeply. In other words, the teachers would sign in what NSL signers call LONG SIGN, using NSL signs but Nepali grammar, leaving students with only a superficial sense of what was meant, as if I had written this sentence with English words but according to the syntax and pragmatics of an unrelated language. During our conversation Prajwal provided a memorable representation of his response to the teachers’ failures to offer him meaningful lessons, using what sign linguists call “constructed action” (Cormier, Smith, and Sehry 2015:167). As I wrote in my fieldnotes: “He did an incredible rendition of himself refusing to even look at the teachers (and looking like a real punk-ass) once he lost respect for them.” This conversation illustrates the link for sighted deaf signers between respect and eye gaze and emphasizes the materiality of language.⁷ There are, however, other ways of showing disrespect than failing to look.

A REFUSAL

One July morning in 2010, Shrila Khadka, the deaf woman featured in this book’s opening vignette, approached a shop in the bazaar to ask a tailor to make a *cholo*, a type of women’s shirt, with some pretty red fabric her family had given her. She signed the item she wanted by twice mimicking the act of tying, once at her left breast and once at the left side of her stomach, and indicated that she wanted the typically long sleeves to have buttons. The tailor, Binita Pradhan, said she didn’t

understand what Shrila was saying. Other young women hanging out at the shop quickly recognized what Shrila was requesting and translated her utterance into spoken Nepali, signaling referentially and metalinguistically that her signs had meaning (Jakobson 1959, 1960). At this point Binita said that she didn't know how to make a *cholo*, which may or may not have been true.⁸

As with the opening vignette of this book, the question of why some people understood Shrila and others did not is complicated. Binita had not grown up in Maunabudhuk, so perhaps she had less familiarity with natural signing than longer-term residents. However, as discussed in chapter 2, there is no particular reason to believe that there were not deaf people wherever Binita had grown up and, although there are differences across regions, familiarity with natural sign in one place scaffolds one's ability to communicate in it elsewhere. Moreover, Binita, Sagar, and I all rented rooms in the same home, and this particular morning in July was by no means the first, second, or third time Binita was interacting with a deaf signer.

In terms of Binita's reception of this specific utterance, it is important to know that a *cholo* has a very particular design, recognizable to anyone with a passing knowledge of Nepali sartorial habits and certainly to someone who sewed professionally (figure 16).⁹ In the language introduced in chapter 3, Shrila's signs were immanent in the shirt as a sociomaterial object. The form she used enacted the sign's base: what hands do when tying a *cholo*. Furthermore, Shrila addressed these signs to a tailor in a tailoring shop, not to a cook in a restaurant nor even to a tailor in some other context, such as at a communal water tap or on a bus. The meaning of her signs was both immanent in and emergent from the articulation of the signs in context. Everything thus conspired to make Shrila's signing interpretable.

One possibility is that Binita did understand what Shrila had signed but responded by saying she had not. People profess not-understanding for a variety of reasons and strategically misunderstand others (Hinnenkamp 2003; Bernstein 2016). Perhaps Binita felt awkward or wanted to distance herself from deaf people. If she understood but said she did not, then in semiotic terms she interpreted the sign in her own mind but produced for others a sign that denied that she had done so, saying in Nepali that she didn't understand.¹⁰ It is also possible that Binita "really" did not understand. As shown in chapter 3, it is possible to try and to fail, as I initially did when Jyoti was signing about pomegranates. Did Binita try and not succeed? Or did she not try in the first place?

In writing about this event, I find it difficult to separate Binita's general orientation toward deaf people from her stated lack of understanding. I saw Binita act in several instances with blatant disrespect for Sagar, using the derogatory term *lāto*—and letting her young daughter use it in reference to Sagar—even after we asked her not to.¹¹ In contrast, I noticed that some village residents adjusted how they referred to deaf people after being asked to do so. I also have a strong memory of Binita addressing Sagar in spoken Nepali with the second-person pronoun *tā*.

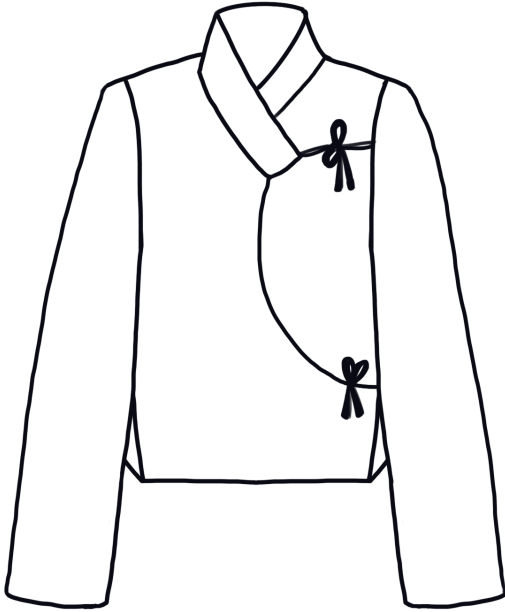


FIGURE 16. A *cholo*: a long-sleeved collared women's shirt that wraps across the torso and fastens with ties on the side. Illustration by Nanyi Jiang.

In everyday speech *tapāi* (or even the more formal *hājur*) is used for strangers of similar age, elders, and people in positions of prestige. The second-person *timi* is used for children, among close friends, and frequently by husbands toward wives. The pronoun *tā* is generally reserved for young children and for insults and was glaringly inappropriate for Binita to use with Sagar, given their roughly similar age, their lack of close friendship, and his position as a teacher. And again, the sign that Shrila used was begging to be understood. Even the most immanent of signs, however, do not simply make sense; someone must make sense of—perceive and interpret—them. To do so requires willingness, and that which requires willingness can be refused.

From one perspective it very much matters whether Binita tried and failed, did understand but pretended not to, or did not try and therefore did not understand. If Binita tried and failed to understand, her failure did not in fact constitute a refusal at all. But her responses did not give any indication that she was trying, and I find it almost impossible to imagine that she could have tried and not understood. Of the remaining two options, the first (understanding and saying otherwise) would constitute an intentional social refusal of Shrila as an intelligible signer. The second (not trying and therefore not understanding) would also constitute a social refusal, as well as a cognitive, embodied, and/or unconscious one, depending on one's view of linguistic processing, decision-making, and the psyche. This kind of not-understanding, in other words, would not reflect the possibilities and constraints of natural sign's semiotics; it would instead constitute

a refusal of the very possibility that an intelligible semiotics was present in the first place.

In the scenario where Binita understood but said she didn't, ethics manifests in the social reporting of or response to semiotic interpretation. In the latter scenario, where Binita didn't even try, ethics saturates semiotic interpretation itself—a process that frequently happens below the level of awareness (as with the sentence you are reading now). This analysis deepens the framework and claims of ordinary ethics, in which ethical action is agential but also deeply habitual and corporeal, as discussed in the introduction. In cases like this one, the line between sense-making as an ethical process and sense-making as a semiotic process becomes so thin that it disappears. The line between ethics and semiotics is similarly obscured—or rather, made particularly clear, which here comes to the same thing—in instances like the book's opening vignette, when hearing people would enact an assumption of unintelligibility with their bodies, announcing "I don't understand" while shifting their gaze away from the signer, thus making it impossible to see what the signer was saying. Other times, people did not necessarily turn their gaze or posture, but they would cease to attend to the signer, their eyes taking on an expression that I came to think of as an eye glaze.

And from another perspective, whether Binita tried but failed, understood but refused to acknowledge it, or did not try does not matter at all. Her stated not-understanding was interactionally indistinguishable from an unwillingness to try to make sense of Shrila. Without additional actions to contradict or nuance her statement of not-understanding, such as signing an answer while saying she had not understood or asking someone else to provide a translation, the effects of (a statement of) not-understanding are the same regardless of the locus of refusal, marking the signer as not-understood and perhaps not-understandable. Both the orientation and the consequences are ethical in nature.

Binita refused to perform the service of sewing a *cholo*—but Shrila could, and eventually did, get her *cholo* sewn elsewhere. More important (for my analysis, if not for Shrila at the moment), Binita refused to engage as a conversational participant. By saying that she had not understood, she refused to constitute herself as an addressee. Given Duranti and Goodwin's (1992:148) argument that "most basically a speaker needs a hearer," Binita failed to ratify Shrila as a signer. Her lack of request for a translation could be interpreted as either a pragmatically neutral move, or as an implication that Shrila was most likely not intelligible to anyone, not just to her. The other girls and women did voice Shrila's request, transforming themselves from overhearers (unaddressed people who nevertheless perceive communication) to animators (people who physically articulate what someone else has communicated), to use Goffman's (1981) terminology. Their animation ratified Shrila as a signer, albeit one who required mediation, within the broader multimodal ongoing conversation, but did not constitute a response to Shrila in sign. It is also important to note that there are not always other people around

who are willing or able to provide translation.¹² During my fieldwork, refusals like Binita's were by no means ubiquitous. Hearing people in Maunabudhuk, Bodhe, and other parts of Nepal are often very willing to adjust their communicative practices in interactions with deaf people, shifting from speech to sign, trying to understand. However, refusals such as Binita's were also not unusual.

SHIFTS AND CONTRADICTIONS

On a warm June afternoon in 2010, Sagar and I went to visit Krishna Gajmer, a regular participant in the NSL class, who lived with his older brother, Samman, about fifteen minutes downhill from the bazaar. We followed a steep zigzagging path that led us between fields of thigh-high corn and past bursts of bamboo. Upon reaching the farmhouse, a neat two-story building surrounded by lush flower and vegetable beds, we found Krishna in his family's open-air blacksmithing workshop. We settled down for several hours, watching, listening, and conversing as family members and clients came and went; we filmed these interactions for just over an hour. The sequences of exchanges on which I focus here involve Krishna, Samman, their nephew, a neighbor, Sagar (behind the camera), and me. Krishna and Sagar are deaf; everyone else is hearing, including Samman and Krishna's young niece, snuggled into my lap, and a second neighbor, who did not participate in speech or sign in the focal sequences. Figure 17 shows and describes our spatial configuration.

In the following analysis, I focus on eye gaze, sign production, translations, and evaluations to show the instantiation and consequences of shifting ethical orientations. Line numbers refer to the transcribed excerpts in appendix 5 and are complemented by sketched illustrations of framegrabs from the video. I also offer examples from other conversations that confirm or complicate the dynamics present in the conversation at Krishna's home. These additional examples help to provide a broader but also more nuanced sense of how people do, and don't, engage in natural sign conversations in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe.

For much of the time we were there, Krishna and the neighbor were sitting close to each other, often touching casually. Krishna initiated their first recorded linguistic interaction about five minutes into the video: they briefly discuss the knife the neighbor has brought with him to get fixed. Their second on-video exchange comes at Sagar's prodding; he seems to have requested off-camera that Krishna and the neighbor talk. Krishna touches the neighbor on the shoulder, and the neighbor looks at him, making himself an available addressee. Krishna responds with the conventional sign TALK-WITH, shown in figure 18, followed by a point toward Sagar and the general wh-question sign: "TALK-WITH Point-Sagar Q 'so he says we should talk with each other'" (lines 1–6).¹³

The neighbor gives a perhaps paradoxical reply to Krishna's suggestion, signing "SAY" and then the negating sign (line 7). With its lean form this utterance—"SAY



FIGURE 17. In an outdoor blacksmithing workshop, eight people form a rough circle. The neighbor, Krishna, and Mara, with the niece on her lap, sit on a bench; Samman sits on a mat; the nephew works at the forge; and a second neighbor sits near the forge. Sagar is behind the unpictured video camera that recorded this scene. Illustration by Nanyi Jiang.

NEG”—could mean something like “I don’t know what to say,” on the one hand, or something like “I don’t know how to sign,” on the other. He may well have felt put on the spot with a video camera recording him. Taking into account the rhythm of the conversation, and his later statements in Nepali that he does not understand much if any sign, however, the neighbor’s brief response could also imply that a signed conversation is outside his capacities. Yet in his and Krishna’s previous interaction about the knife, and later in the conversation, the neighbor makes it clear that he can sign (even on camera). Regardless of how I interpret it, his utterance suggests that he has understood what Krishna signed—or at the very least, that he is being asked to engage in signed conversation—but also ends the interaction.

During my time in Maunabudhuk, I noticed multiple instances when people said much more explicitly that they couldn’t understand yet responded in ways that indicated otherwise. One day, for example, Shrila wanted to get her watch fixed, so she went to a store that sold electronics and waited for a while. Someone told her that the shopkeeper was eating and to come back tomorrow; she waited a little longer and then walked to another shop that used to provide watch repair services but, it turned out, no longer did. She asked the shopkeeper about having her watch fixed, and he said in spoken Nepali that he didn’t understand her. But then he pointed her back in the direction of the shop where she had already been. (He would not have known that she had already been there, so he wasn’t giving



FIGURE 18. Sitting between the neighbor and Mara, Krishna signs “TALK-WITH,” two bent index fingers moving toward each other. Illustration by Nanyi Jiang.

her the runaround.) Even though he said he didn’t understand, he had understood enough to direct her to a place where he thought she could get the service that she had just requested of him. On another day Shrila and her sister-in-law Parvati were talking to a teacher from a nearby town who happened to be in Maunabudhuk. Watching them, I noticed that he sometimes engaged with them and sometimes did not, and that out loud he said that he didn’t understand anything, despite the fact that he clearly could understand and interact, at least to some degree.¹⁴

These examples illustrate how at times hearing people say that they cannot understand a deaf person’s sign, even when they can, at least in part. Such statements are produced in reference to a particular instance of communication and to the ability of the addressee to understand, but they function more broadly as evaluations of deaf signers’ general capacity to make sense/be made sense of. Evaluating yourself as having not-understood while responding as having understood serves as commentary on the type of interaction going on—the type that is likely to be not-understood, even if in this instance you happened to—and such statements reflect, reproduce, and naturalize the option of nonengagement by potential addressees, even in instances where engagement occurs.

Over the next five and a half minutes, Krishna and the neighbor do not interact. Krishna briefly leaves, then returns to sit on the long wooden bench between the neighbor and me, at which point Krishna, Sagar, Samman, and I exchange signs for about twenty seconds. From our on-camera responses, it appears Sagar was again instructing Krishna to start talking with someone. During this exchange the neighbor looks away and downward, presumably at the forge. Samman is both signing and speaking, so the neighbor's disengagement is from both sign and speech. Indeed, a few minutes earlier I had asked the little girl cuddled on my lap where she attended school using spoken Nepali. She stayed quiet, and both the nephew and Samman teased her about not speaking; the neighbor did not seem to pay attention. It is possible for hearing people to hear speech even if they are not looking at or tuned into a conversation, however, while "overhearing" visual sign requires looking, as discussed in the introduction. Thus the neighbor's potential to become a more active participant in the spoken conversation was not affected by his visual and verbal disengagement in the same way that his potential to become a more active participant in the signed conversation was affected by his eye gaze.

Soon Krishna again signs to the neighbor to report Sagar's suggestion that they interact (line 9). When addressed directly, the neighbor turns and looks at Krishna, who affectionately pats the neighbor's thigh but does not say more. During the same exchange between Sagar and Krishna, Samman visually tracks them, glancing from one to the other. The nephew also looks up from his work to look at Krishna. In other words, while the neighbor looks at Krishna only when Krishna's posture shows that he is directly addressing him, Samman and the nephew constitute themselves with their gaze as overhearers or as unaddressed but ratified participants—people who could be recruited as addressees (Goffman 1981).

Following this exchange, the neighbor returns to looking at the forge, and I ask Krishna about the neighbor. Then Sagar, Krishna, and I engage in a lighthearted discussion about whether the two men present who are Chhetri (a "high," historically dominant caste) wear a sacred thread across their torsos. Sagar and the neighbor are Chhetri; neither wears the thread. During this minute of interaction Samman again visually tracks the conversation, which takes place primarily in natural sign with a few NSL signs. The nephew is engrossed by his own work and does not visually attend to the signed conversation. The neighbor gazes at the forge. I have been asked if the neighbor might have been avoiding the conversation in order to not talk about caste. Despite tensions, people in Maunabudhuk joke about caste and ethnicity across caste/ethnic lines (indeed, I initiated the jokes in this sequence, reflecting my socialization into local humor and conversational practices), and later the neighbor joined in the fun. Figure 19 illustrates the contrast between the neighbor's and Samman's eye gaze.

About a minute later, Krishna again directly addresses the neighbor, who turns to look at him (lines 11–12). At this point I inquire in spoken Nepali, "*bujhnu bhayo* 'Did you understand?'" The neighbor replies, "*ma ta hātko ishārā*

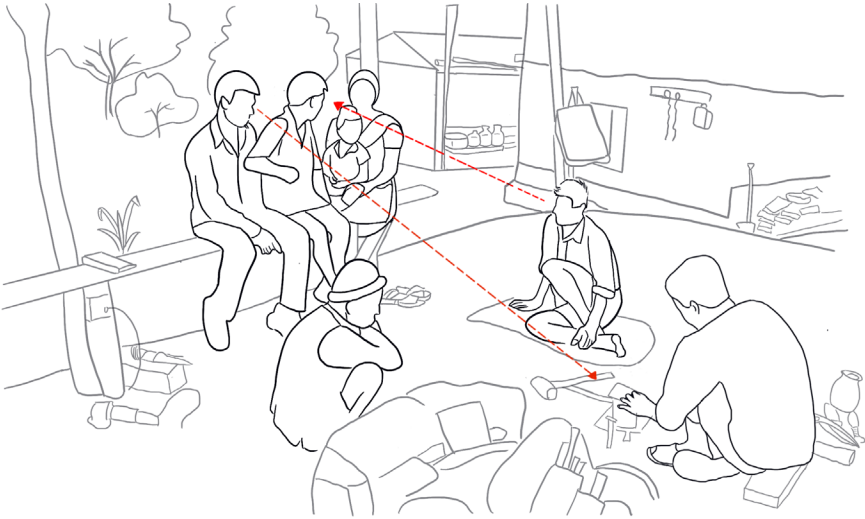


FIGURE 19. In the outdoor workshop the neighbor, Krishna, Mara, the niece, Samman, the nephew, and the second neighbor sit in a circle. Arrows indicate the direction of the neighbor's gaze, at the forge, and Samman's, at Krishna. Illustration by Nanyi Jiang.

ta bujhdina ta 'I don't understand hand signs'" to which Samman responds, "*tyo bāni ho* 'It's a habit'" (lines 13–15). There is a striking convergence here between Samman's invocation of *bāni* 'habit' and the notion of *habitus*, discussed in chapter 3, as both productive of and produced by engagement with signing; like NSL signers' characterizations of natural sign, comments like this one have informed my analysis.

The neighbor's spoken claim in line 14—"I don't understand sign"—offers a general response to my question "Did you understand?" But in this instance he hadn't given himself the opportunity to understand; he had mostly been staring at the forge. This moment exemplifies how people's orientations, actions, and evaluations are intricately linked. The nephew's eye gaze, meanwhile, shifted as he alternated between watching people sign and attending to his blacksmithing work. People frequently (must) do more than one thing and orient to more than one ordinary ethical project at a time (Lambek 2010:23). In some instances these orientations require shifting hierarchical relations among potentially competing demands (Venkat 2017). This plays out in interactions on a microlevel. In a video taken at the home of Sarawata Limbu, a deaf woman, she is visually and manually engrossed in washing the dishes, but she looks up immediately when someone else begins to sign. Her hearing mother-in-law's attention is also divided between interacting with the other adults present in both sign and speech, and caring for her grandchildren. Sarawata was being a hard-working daughter-in-law and also a deaf signer attuned to signed communication; her mother-in-law a caring

grandmother and an engaged host; similarly, Krishna's nephew was working for his family's livelihood and being a younger relative of a deaf uncle.

Soon after Samman's statement about habit, I urge in a mixture of NSL and natural sign that Krishna repeat himself; he does so, signing in natural sign, "SACRED-THREAD THROW-AWAY 'you've thrown away your sacred thread'" (lines 23–25). This time, the neighbor takes a more active role by asking, "*ke bhaneko* 'what did he say?'" (line 27). This short request for translation acknowledges that the neighbor has not understood but that others surely have. Between Samman and the nephew, who is now alternating between attending to the forge and engaging in the conversation, a translation is offered amid much laughter (lines 29–35). Krishna begins to sign again, and now all participants ratify him as a signer, with the neighbor and the nephew both tracking the conversation visually.

A closer examination of Samman's responses shows that even people who strongly orient toward communicating in sign do not always understand. He says to the neighbor that understanding is a habit, and another occasion I asked him directly "*purai bujnuhunchha* 'do you understand completely' [what Krishna signs]?" He answered that he did, explaining that as they have been talking since Krishna was small, the family understands everything he says and vice versa.¹⁵ Yet Samman fumbles at first when he tries to translate (lines 29–35). In the previous sequence of turns we had used a few NSL signs, and Samman was not accustomed to signing with Sagar or me. Taken alone, then, his hesitation might simply be a matter of unfamiliarity. But I observed other instances when someone's inability to understand or translate specific utterances contradicted their more general statements about always understanding. For example, during a summer afternoon at Sarawata's house I had the chance to chat with her hearing neighbor and relative, Kanchi. I asked if Kanchi understood everything Sarawata said, and she said yes. Later, however, when Sarawata was talking and I asked what she had said, Kanchi replied that she didn't know, that she hadn't understood.¹⁶

Such contradictions invert the times that people say they don't understand but respond in a way that indicates at least partial understanding. And similarly to how such cases index a general skeptical orientation toward the possibility of making sense in sign, cases such as Samman's and Kanchi's index a speaker's general orientation toward the signer as intelligible. In both of these instances, and in others wherein hearing people articulated a position of understanding, the relationship between the speakers and signers involved kinship, affection, and/or frequent interactions, and it is not surprising that the hearing people would both generally understand and evaluate themselves as such. That in a particular instance they nevertheless found themselves unable to understand further demonstrates the contingencies of natural sign; understanding is not guaranteed, even when the addressee is willing to engage.

Less than thirty seconds after the translation, the neighbor initiates a turn for the first time. Krishna is currently talking with Sagar, so Samman gets his attention



FIGURE 20. Sitting between the neighbor and Mara, Krishna signs “SACRED-THREAD,” a forefinger tracing diagonally across the chest. Illustration by Nanyi Jiang.

(lines 36–39). The neighbor repeats himself, signing “SACRED-THREAD NEG ‘I don’t wear a sacred thread’” (line 40). These signs, and their order, conform to conventional natural sign practices; SACRED-THREAD, shown in figure 20, is also immanent in prescribed caste practices. Then Krishna and the neighbor take turns affirming that while the neighbor has thrown his thread away, the neighbor’s older brother still wears his (lines 41–51). The neighbor signs with what appears to be ease, despite his previous protestations of inability.

From this point on, the conversation gets progressively sillier, with Samman teasing Krishna that he should wear a thread and not eat pork. Prescriptively, such actions are expected of Chhetris but not Dalits, so Samman is joking that Krishna should act as if he were Chhetri rather than Dalit. Then Sagar, off-camera, asks if the neighbor eats pork. While the neighbor briefly disengages from the conversation, when Krishna again turns to him, he looks back. Perhaps because of this reengagement, without being asked Samman translates what Sagar just signed into Nepali. In natural sign the neighbor confirms that he does eat pork,

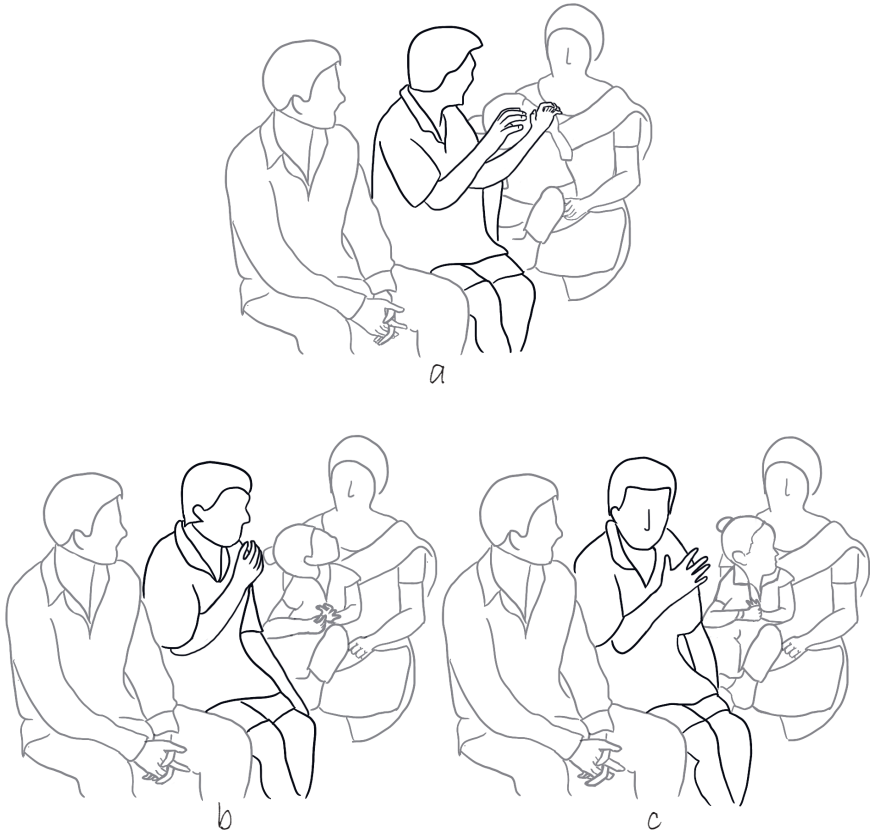


FIGURE 21. Krishna signs “DOG EAT NOT” as the neighbor and Mara watch: (a) two curved hands face outward to sign “DOG”; (b) his loosely closed right hand moves to his mouth to sign “EAT”; and then (c) the same hand, now open, rotates at the wrist in the negating sign. Illustration by Nanyi Jiang.

as well as buffalo (both normatively avoided by Chhetris). He then visually follows an exchange between Krishna, Sagar, and me, in which Sagar jokingly accuses Krishna of eating dog (lines 53–55), which Krishna firmly denies (figure 21). The neighbor understands and successfully intervenes in this exchange, signing with an impressively serious face, “DOG EAT Point-self ‘I eat dog’” (line 56; figure 22). This claim is met with raucous laughter.

Then, while Samman in his thoughtful way begins to talk in spoken Nepali about a caste group in India that he had heard eats dog, the neighbor actually continues to banter in sign rather than engage in spoken conversation. He uses a distal point to indicate somewhere far from here. Krishna makes sense of this vague point within the context of the conversation and offers a different sign for

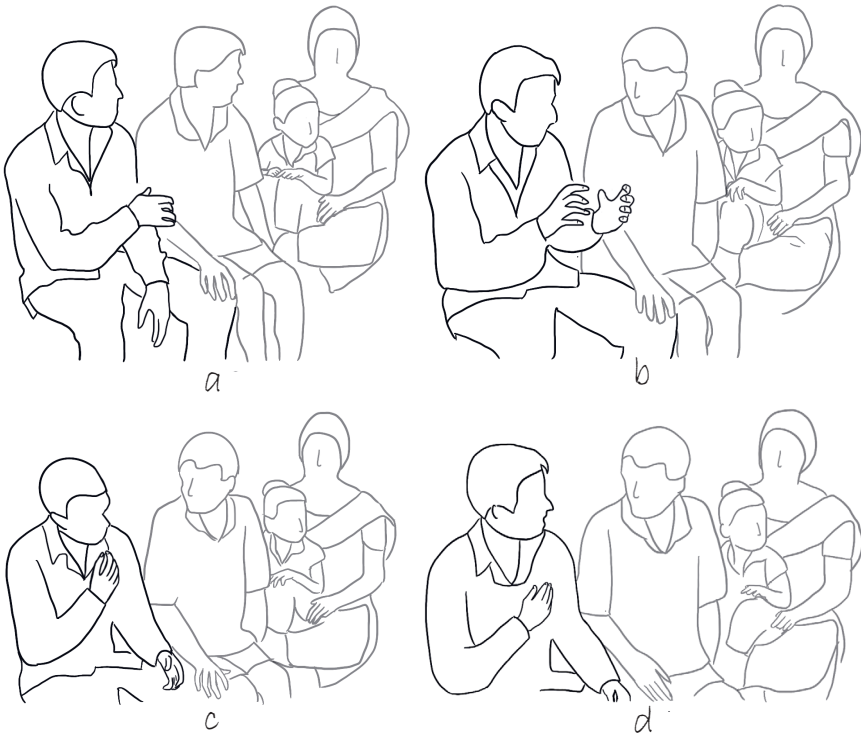


FIGURE 22. The neighbor (a) gets Krishna's attention by touching his arm; (b) signs "DOG"; (c) signs "EAT"; and (d) touches his own chest to indicate himself. The head tilt coarticulated with EAT functions as an emphatic. Illustration by Nanyi Jiang.

ABROAD. Once he uses a flat hand, but on the video it is hard to see how many fingers are extended, and once he uses a flat hand with thumb, pinky, and possibly first finger extended. This second articulation may be borrowed from the NSL sign AIRPLANE, or it may be a local sign. The neighbor takes up the sign with a flat hand, all fingers extended, the handshape I associate with ABROAD as generally signed in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe (lines 65–67, figure 23).

When the neighbor's sign for a horned animal, specified in spoken Nepali as an ox, inspires Krishna to repeat the sign questioningly, the neighbor uses spoken Nepali to request assistance from Samman, who provides it (lines 69–72). The neighbor then describes the slaughtering technique employed abroad, using both a contrasting negative ("they don't cut them like this on the back of the neck") and a signing technique known as "body partitioning" (Dudis 2004): his neck becomes the neck of the animal, while his hand becomes the knife (lines 73 and 75).

This extended example, along with the additional vignettes, reveals the complex, shifting, sometimes subtle and yet deeply consequential relationships between participants' orientations toward signing and the interactional unfolding



FIGURE 23. (a) The neighbor points up and to his left to indicate somewhere far from here; (b) Krishna offers a version of the more conventional sign “ABROAD,” a flat hand with some fingers extended, held high and moving away; (c) the neighbor takes up this sign with a flat hand with all fingers extended. Illustration by Nanyi Jiang.

of conversation in a given context. The neighbor signs that he can’t sign, or perhaps that he doesn’t know what to sign, and then renders himself a nonparticipant by visually disengaging. Later, he says in Nepali that he doesn’t understand; but he hasn’t been watching, so how could he have? When he finally joins in, it turns out that he can respond to questions, make jokes, learn new lexical items, talk about actual and counterfactual situations, and take turns appropriately. Samman, meanwhile, embodies and articulates how willingness is both an orientation and a kind of habitus, even if he doesn’t understand every single utterance, in part because of the use of some NSL. His eyes move steadily from one party to the

other during nearly every signed exchange, adjusting the direction of his sightline slightly in accordance with who was signing. He only occasionally looks down during someone's conversational turn. The nephew alternates between attending to the conversation and his blacksmithing labor.

In both Samman and the nephew, an underlying orientation toward Krishna as intelligible is apparent, as is the materialization of that orientation in eye gaze, sign production, metalinguistic evaluations ("it's habit") and (attempts at) translation. More broadly, these instances show that while refusals by potential interlocutors to engage can deny deaf people the role of signer and the social production of intelligibility, willingness to engage ratifies deaf people as signers and addressees, and produces communicative sociality through ongoing conversation.

BEYOND LINGUISTIC SIGNS

In this chapter's analysis of how hearing people orient toward deaf people and signing, I have thus far focused on overtly linguistic exchanges. Here I turn to an interaction without signs that also recalls how deaf NSL signers talk about the importance of teaching other deaf people to care for themselves in bodily terms (chapter 1). On a late-May evening Sagar and I were walking down the main bazaar road in search of Jyoti Limbu. We found her at her *buhāri*'s restaurant (the one owned by Stella's best friend's mother), where she often worked. In the restaurant there was an older man dressed in tattered clothing. Jyoti's *buhāri* said that she had given him food and that he wanted a place to sleep for the night but that she was closing up shop and he couldn't stay there. I asked who he was, and a few young men walking by said that he was from Dadabazaar, a village an hour or two away. There was debate as to whether or not the man was deaf, but one hearing woman definitely said he was; indeed, the man did not sign very much, but when he did interact, it was in sign, not speech.

Later that evening the older man showed up at the home where Sagar and I, and a few young hearing women who were staying in the bazaar to take exams at the local high school, ate dinner every night. I told my friend who owned the home and cooked that I would pay for the older man's dinner, and she agreed. Those of us who regularly ate there washed our hands as usual; it is even more unthinkable in Nepal than in the United States that eating would proceed without hand washing. Before the old man ate, one of the young women from out of town brought him water to wash his hands, an act that struck both Sagar and me as surprisingly respectful.¹⁷ By bringing the old man water, the young woman made, and perceptibly signaled, a presupposition that he would know what to do with it and that he was competent in the social norms of cleanliness. Using Keane's (2016) framework, the young woman's actions afforded him the opportunity to demonstrate his competency and embeddedness in sociality. Using Goodwin's (2018:268–269) terminology, the man acted on the substrate of the water offered by the young woman, interacting with the young woman and with his environment in meaningful and valued ways.

Whereas the previous examples involve participation in or exclusion from overtly communicative sociality, this example involves sociality without explicitly linguistic communication. It shows how the two are intimately related, as NSL signers know, and shows the impact of what people assume about others on the potential agency of those others to act.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has demonstrated the complexity and the consequences of hearing people's varying orientations toward sign and signers and the actions they take in conversational settings (summarized in appendix 3). Some people, like Samman, are willing and attentive participants in signed conversations. Others, like the neighbor, are more ambivalent, while still others, like Binita, are largely uninterested in making an effort to understand. Individuals' orientations can and do shift, both within and across interactions, sometimes in contradictory ways. Some of these contradictions no doubt arise from the fact that people are involved in more than one ethical project at a time (Lambek 2010:23; Faubion 2011, cited in Venkat 2017). Relatedly, some seeming contradictions can be resolved by distinguishing between hearing people's general orientations toward signing and signers and their specific orientations toward a particular deaf person or a particular conversation/utterance.

More broadly, I suggest that there is an intricate feedback loop among the affordances and constraints of natural sign, people's accumulated experiences of ease and difficulty using it, and the array of possible orientations and actions they perform during conversation. This loop is a concrete exemplar of the proposition that metapragmatics are also pragmatic and pragmatics are also metapragmatic; that what people think can be done with language affects what can/does get done with it, and what people do with language affects what they think can be done with it (Silverstein 1976; Hanks 2005a:230). And these relationships are complex and not predetermined. The affordances and constraints of natural sign shape experiences that shape orientations that shape actions that shape experiences that shape, and create, affordances and constraints. Put more concisely, the fact that people expect that they may (not) understand affects whether or not they (put in the work to) understand. Willingness plays as important, if not more important, a role as the affordances of conventionality and immanence, yet willingness is not a full guarantee that sense-making will occur. While sometimes hearing people refuse to understand, at other times they try and are unable to do so. At the same time, self-evaluations of not-understanding, perhaps particularly when coupled with evidence that understanding has been reached, reinforce that not-understanding is not only a possible semiotic outcome but also a socially expected and accepted one. They reproduce and naturalize a social field in which natural sign is only sometimes attended to and understood.

The assumptions someone makes about understanding someone else and the social-semiotic process of trying to do so (or not) are inextricably entangled, not only with each other but also with how natural sign's semiotic structure leaves room for, and requires the work of, interpretation. In the language of this and the previous chapter, in many ordinary encounters the demands of immanence and emergence mean that the line between semiotics and ethics vanishes. The affordances and constraints that make natural sign so paradoxical are not only material and semiotic, they are also ethical and interactional. Returning to NSL signers' concerns with the way that deaf people get both thought about and treated, deaf-hearing interactions in natural sign may challenge, upend, or reinforce for hearing people the figure of the deaf person as *lāto*, a person who does not make sense, especially when the hearing person treats them as such in the first place.

By focusing on hearing people's actions, this chapter has run the risk of overstating deaf signers' dependence on hearing people. Deaf people are profoundly agentive in their own lives, as these everyday examples have in fact shown. Krishna addressed his neighbor with signs, the older deaf man was in Maunabudhuk in the first place, Shрила approached a tailor to get a shirt sewn and sought to get her watch fixed. While both hearing and deaf people live in worlds comprised of others, it is important to recognize the asymmetry between the people whose ethical orientations have the most impact and the people most impacted by those orientations. The opening vignette of this book shows that a hearing person not-understanding a deaf person may provoke mild censure from other hearing people, but it is unlikely to have lasting or profound consequences for the person who has not-understood. In Maunabudhuk and Bodhe it is primarily what hearing people do and assume others can do that has concrete effects on deaf people's participation in particular interactions and their overall socially evaluated intelligibility as persons. When hearing people do not engage, the effects range in their immediacy and impact, from failing to provide a deaf customer with service to stymying the potential emergence of a more conventional signed language (as discussed in chapter 2), from refusing to look at someone's invitation to tea to disbelieving what deaf signers report about their own lives (discussed in chapter 5).

This chapter has explored the contradictions of natural sign by analyzing the multiple, often contradictory orientations and actions (hearing) people take with regards to natural sign. Those actions include indications of (not) understanding and translations. The final chapter unpacks more fully what translations as well as evaluations of understanding do, what they entail, what they show, and what they conceal, both in conversation and in analysis. In doing so, I return to the entanglement of fieldwork and analysis, not to disavow empiricism but rather to be as empirical as possible. This final chapter delves into the complications and paradoxes of ethnographic research, accusations of lying, and a peculiar dynamic in which Sagar and hearing village residents were often more suspicious of deaf residents' stories than I was.