

PART TWO

# Making Sense



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## Semiotics

In late September 2010, as we waited at the tea shop across the street from the village hall for class to begin, Padma Puri was signing to me about farming. I wrote in my fieldnotes later that I was pretty sure I understood when he made reference to the process of making and weeding terraces. As for what crop he was telling me about, however, I struggled: I “couldn’t figure it out—[I] kept getting stuck on rice vs millet,” two of the major terraced crops in the area, and ones I had watched people plant or participated in planting myself. When Padma continued the conversation with Sagar Karki in the classroom, Sagar immediately understood that Padma was talking about lentils. I expressed frustration with not having been able to understand that, or the ensuing conversation about planting methods. Sagar asked me, “Well, do you habitually plant lentils?” I wrote in my fieldnotes: “Good point, practically and theoretically.”<sup>1</sup>

Here I use Sagar’s comment as an entry into taking seriously the relationship between the capacity to produce and interpret signs and the experience of living in a particular world. As part of this book’s commitment to emancipatory pragmatics (Hanks, Ide, and Katagiri 2009) and to centering deaf epistemologies (Kusters, De Meulder, and O’Brien 2017), I treat his question as arising from embodied and objectifiable knowledge of communicating in natural sign, and not as a misapprehension or mistake. I follow his insight, and natural sign’s practical and theoretical demands, by both holding apart and dissolving the line between linguistic and nonlinguistic conventions, including those that might be described as bodily movements (signing, other actions), social knowledge, pragmatic tendencies, and habit. I explore the interrelated practical and theoretical implications of (thinking about) making and understanding reference being at least partially dependent on

and motivated by nonlinguistic modes of being in and knowing a world—such as familiarity with planting lentils. Focusing on particular examples will hopefully give readers a sense of the materiality of natural sign. Through these examples I develop a semiotic framework for thinking about why “knowing” natural sign is neither sufficient nor exactly necessary for communicating in it.

This framework draws on and further theorizes three key concepts: *conventionality*, *immanence*, and *emergence*. Each of these concepts addresses how a sign means something to someone or, in the language of semiotician Charles Peirce (1955:99), “stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity.” *Conventionality* describes the property of a sign, or a combination of signs, being repeatable and/or shared. Another way of saying this is that conventionality is twofold: how stable signs are within a signer’s repertoire and how shared signs are across signers’ repertoires.<sup>2</sup> Conventional signs are ones that people “know” the way you, as a reader, and I, as a writer, know the words in this sentence and how they relate to one another syntactically. Conventional signs mean something because they’re familiar as signs.

*Immanence* refers to a nonarbitrary relational quality among a sign’s form, the sociomaterial world, and the sign’s referent. In technical terms immanence highlights how signs may be interpreted—whether in conversation or in the context of a scholarly account—iconically (through resemblance or similarity) or indexically (through proximity or association).<sup>3</sup> Put another way, immanent signs materialize and exhibit a not-just-linguistic connection or series of connections between the bodily articulation of a sign and what it stands for. The consequence of this immanence is that such signs are potentially make-able and interpretable in context without prior linguistic conventionality for signer and/or addressee. It is worth noting that particular natural signs might be both conventional and immanent, or conventional to one person and immanent to another. And, crucially, both conventionality and immanence offer affordances or possibilities for people to understand what has been signed, but also limitations.

*Emergence* refers to the way that signs in combination take on meaning in relation to each other. In interpreting signers’ utterances, addressees can draw on some conventional grammatical and pragmatic patterns, but there is also a need for significant inferential work or guesswork. Immanence gets at what is already there *in potentia* but must be brought into being through articulation. Emergence gets at what further elaborative work must be done with what has been provided, with what is happening in real time. Imagistically, I think of immanence as grounded, emergence as growing. In natural sign, making and making sense of utterances requires both.

Both immanence and emergence point to how meaning-making in natural sign involves conventions of various sorts. In the case of immanence, the conventions are twofold: sociomaterial (the way another village is visible across a valley, the height of corn, the motion of a hand tenderly painting dots on a sibling’s forehead)

and modal (the use of pointing to direct an addressee's attention to that village, the use of an arm held in space to indicate height, the use of a hand moving up one's own forehead to stand for an action that in a different context would be performed on another's body). In the case of emergence, the conventions are twofold in a different sense: formal (the recognition that a thumb held up means THE-OLDEST—i.e., a conventional sign) and pragmatic (the recognition that a thumb held up at this moment means 'oldest daughter' but at that moment 'oldest sister').<sup>4</sup> Yet as I show in this chapter, immanence and emergence also demand that signers and addressees make meaning in ways that are not fully captured by the idea of conventionality. I locate the possibility of understanding at least in part in the corporeal fact that people have, and are, bodies and live in particular sociomaterial spaces with others.

#### A FURTHER NOTE ON METHOD AND THEORY

My insistence on the importance of bodies entails recognition of the role that my own experience has played in my efforts to characterize natural sign and its semiotics. What did I learn as a conventional sign? What could I draw on as immanent right away? What became immanent as I spent more time in Maunabudhuk? When I did, or did not, understand someone's signs, was this (lack of) understanding due to my knowledge of the signs as conventions, my sense of their immanence in the world, or both? It is also important to note that these categories were nowhere close to fully fleshed out while I was doing fieldwork, so I did not write fieldnotes using such words, making some of the analytic work of deciphering what I wrote about the processes of my own and others' understanding even more challenging.

In theorizing immanence, I am building on a long tradition of investigating the relationships between form and meaning, sign and signer, community and communication. Scholars have written about signs as decipherable to more and less socially proximate people (Kuschel 1973), as context-dependent (Washaugh, Woodward, and DeSantis 1978), and as context-sensitive (Green 2011), as well as about the role of shared social knowledge in language structure (Padden 2011). The specific semiotic and linguistic devices through which signs are articulated and (at least potentially) understood have been framed as characterizing, constructed action, decipherability, depicted action, iconicity, image, indexicality, pantomime, transparency, and whole body classifiers among other terms (Kendon 1980b; Pizzuto and Volterra 2000; Taub 2001; Liddell 2003; Padden et al. 2013; Cormier, Smith, and Sehyr 2015; Padden et al. 2015; Green 2017; Graif 2018; Hodge, Ferrara, and Anible 2019; Hoffmann-Dilloway 2021; Caselli, Lieberman, and Pyers 2021). Throughout this book, and in this chapter in particular, I both make use of and push against many of these approaches, sometimes at the same moment.

While Hanks (1993:152) asks that linguists and linguistic anthropologists—traditionally concerned with spoken language—"see the literal core of language

as already permeated by context,” scholars of gesture and sign have been less able to ignore this quality of permeation.<sup>5</sup> Yet this scholarship has not always given enough attention to the sociomaterial complexities and entanglements of bodies, places, and semiotic processes. In conversation with a linguistic ethnography approach to deaf people’s communication (Kusters and Hou 2020), I draw on Hanks’s practice-based approach in hopes of reanimating, or repeopling, sign linguistics’ long-standing investment in taking form seriously. I seek to emphasize that making and making sense of signs—producing immanent signs, interpreting them, elaborating on a lean utterance with relevant knowledge of events, places, or people—are social actions done by specific people in specific places.

Hanks’s (1990) approach to communication as social practice recognizes that grammatical structures are patterned in systematic ways and that people use language in routine but not predetermined ways. Bringing together practice theory, in particular Pierre Bourdieu’s work (e.g., 1972 [1977]), and phenomenology, especially Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s (1945 [1967]) and Alfred Schütz’s (1970) scholarship, Hanks situates language use in the socially habituated body of culturally situated actors and emphasizes the importance of place as itself comprised of dynamic relationships, a kind of dense accrual (similar to Massey [1994]). In communicative as in other social practices, each iteration—each word, gesture, utterance, conversation—becomes part of the schematic ground from which the next iteration arises. Goodwin (2018) similarly emphasizes the scaffolding and reuse of resources in his approach to communication as cooperative action. People encounter, embody, produce, and remake the habitual forms of practice that characterize their social worlds. This process of (re)production helps explain how language in use is conventional but creative, continuous with the past but always changing, patterned but not determined. Moreover, habit, or *habitus* to use Bourdieu’s term, is implicated in communicative practice not only in the forms employed but also in the orientations and schemas people use to produce actual utterances and to understand each other. These forms, orientations, and schemas do not exist in isolation but are instead part of social and linguistic fields that are in turn mutually embedded in each other (Hanks 1990, 1996).

I turn now to a brief description of Maunabudhuk and Bodhe as sociomaterial fields. The next section further explores conventionality and immanence, while the final section addresses conventionality and emergence.

## FIELDS

Located in the southeastern corner of Dhankuta district in eastern Nepal, Maunabudhuk and Bodhe lay draped across the hills, such that from many vantage points one can see nearby houses and fields, neighboring villages (figure 11), the district’s eponymous headquarters, and, in the cooler, clearer months, the massive white peaks of the Himalayas. Numerous well-trod footpaths curve along the



FIGURE 11. View in July 2010 on the way to Krishna's house from the bazaar: a terraced slope leads down to a bright green river valley from which a series of hills rises implacably. Photograph from the author's archives.

slopes or zigzag up and down them, connecting houses, grazing areas, fruit trees, water taps, fields, gardens, and forests. Several wide dirt roads—leveled by bulldozers—also wind through the villages. Maunabudhuk's bazaar (figure 12) is located on such a road, dusty or muddy with the changing seasons. When I lived there, the government primary school sat at the south end, while the government secondary school, the private primary school, and an open soccer field sat at the north end. In between were the village government offices and health post, along with houses and shops constructed from concrete and wood. Storefronts and boarding houses offered ready-made clothes, medicine, sewing services, umbrellas, beauty supplies, fertilizer, foodstuff, watch repair, a place to stay for the night, and assorted meals, snacks, hot tea, and alcohol.<sup>6</sup>

In 2010 both villages had populations of about three thousand people. In Maunabudhuk, according to its own data that was shared with me, about two-thirds of its residents were Limbu, 17 percent were Bahun or Chhetri, and 6 percent were Dalit, with Rai and other caste/ethnic groups making up the remainder of the population. In Bodhe, according to the 2011 census, 38 percent were Yakkha, Rai, or Yamphu, 25 percent were Bahun and Chhetri, 10 percent were Limbu, and 9 percent were Dalit, with Tamang and other caste/ethnic groups making up the





FIGURE 12. View in May 2010 on the way to Sarawata's house: the bazaar—a clustered row of white, pale teal, and brick-red buildings—contrasts with the surrounding brown fields and dark green foliage. Photograph from the author's archives.

rest. Within Nepal's ethnic/caste system, Limbus, Rais, Yamphus, and Yakkhas—all of whom are grouped together as Kiranti—are, along with Tamangs, classified as *janājāti* 'ethnic' groups. Bahuns, Chhetris, and Dalits, meanwhile, are considered to be *jāt* 'caste' groups, with Bahuns and Chhetris historically considered "high" and Dalits "low" or untouchable. In everyday parlance people use the term *jāt* for both caste and ethnic groups, and in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century legislation, ethnic groups such as Limbus and Rais were placed in a mid-level between high castes and Dalits (Hofēr 2004). While *jāt*-based discrimination is illegal in Nepal, Maunabudhuk, like the rest of Nepal, continues to be shaped by locally-specific relations of hierarchy, discrimination, resistance, affiliation, and intimacy in social, economic, and political spheres (e.g., M. Cameron 1998; Caplan 2000 [1970]; Fisher 2001; Guneratne 2002; Dahal 2003; Green 2022b). The people with whom I interacted on a regular basis—both deaf and hearing—were primarily Limbu, Dalit, Chhetri, and Bahun, reflecting not only the ratio of these groups within the broader population but also their spatial distribution within the villages.

Nepali is the native language of Bahuns, Chhetris, and Dalits, while many Limbu, Rai, Yakkha, and Tamang families speak Nepali as well as Limbu, Rai, Yakkha, or Tamang (these terms may themselves encompass distinct dialects or languages). The 2011 census lists Limbu as the mother language of the entire Limbu population in Maunabudhuk, indexing the salience of mother tongue politics in Nepal but masking the massive language shift toward Nepali among younger generations. Reflecting the history of linguistic, cultural, and economic dominance by "high"-caste Nepali speakers, Nepali is the primary medium in the



local government offices and schools, and in conversations between people from Nepali-speaking and other linguistic backgrounds. I did, however, hear Limbu spoken, not only in homes but in Maunabudhuk's bazaar as well. I have no doubt that other languages such as Rai are also spoken in homes and the bazaar.

Most families in Maunabudhuk, regardless of *jāt*, are primarily farmers. As I learned from observations and conversations, especially with village official Ganga Limbu, the major field crops are corn and millet, mostly used for subsistence purposes. Although many people eat rice for the two major daily meals, few families in Maunabudhuk grow rice, at least in the more elevated areas where my primary interlocutors live, as this higher-up land is not sufficiently irrigated. The two biggest cash crops are *nāspāti* 'Asian pear' and *suntalā* 'orange'; raising pigs and chickens also provides a source of extra income for some. Other livestock include goats (used and sold for meat), cows (milk), and water buffalos (meat or milk). In addition, nearly every household in Maunabudhuk relies on remittances from family members—mostly men—working abroad, especially in the Gulf States or Malaysia. Locally, people earn money working on construction sites, loading trucks, or doing other manual labor, or as teachers and healthcare providers. Some families rent or own the shops mentioned above, offering a place to stay, snacks and meals, school and farming supplies, as well as services like sewing or blacksmithing. These latter occupations are strongly but not strictly correlated with *jāt*. On Saturday mornings farmers from the surrounding area line the street near the village offices with piles of assorted fruits and vegetable; at the other end of the bazaar, near the government primary school, butchers offer chunks of fresh meat, and women sell fermented grain alcohol.

Agricultural, domestic, and other labor activities, and the built spaces in which they occur, are embedded in and productive of a dense field of sociality. As in the Nepali village described by Ahearn (2001:13), people in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe spend much of their time outside: on porches, in courtyards, at personal or communal water taps, in fields and grazing areas. Family members perform some and frequently all of their own agricultural labor: cutting grass for fodder, grazing and feeding animals, hauling water, chopping firewood, hoeing and plowing fields, weeding, harvesting, and storing crops. Relatives and neighbors may also work together in turn or hire people for labor. While products such as rice, tea, and sugar are readily available in the bazaar stores, many everyday consumption items—such as millet- and corn-based beer and hard liquor, cornmeal, *achār* 'pickles, hot sauces'—are produced at home.

When home, people nearly always keep their doors open, and someone is often outside, anyway, on the porch or in the garden. In Maunabudhuk's bazaar, the small tea shops and restaurants are open on the street side, allowing interactions between patrons and passersby. People also frequently sit in front of stores to pass time talking together, while kids run between their own and their friends' homes. In the rest of the village, fields surround some houses such that the nearest



FIGURE 13. The hamlet where Sarita lived: several small, thatch-roofed homes, neatly painted with whitewash and clay, nestle between a cornfield and a terraced slope. Photograph from the author's archives.

neighbors are a few minutes' walk away, while other houses are built in clusters or hamlets (figure 13). During most of my visits to people's homes, I met not only members of the household but also other relatives and neighbors, some of whom came to see the foreign anthropologist and the "handsome" deaf Nepali, others of whom were dropping by for social and/or work-related purposes.

People travel not only within the area but also beyond it, with buses carrying people—and goods—between Maunabudhuk and the district headquarters as well as Dharan, at the edge of the plains, both a few hours' drive on winding roads. Along with buses, tractors carrying loads of construction material, an ambulance used to transport serious cases from the local health clinic to a larger hospital, and the occasional motorcycle plied Maunabudhuk's roads, but usually they served as exceptionally broad footpaths for people and livestock.

The conventional greetings people give each other along pathways reflect the salience of movement in everyday life, including noting and acknowledging others' movements. "*Kahā bāṭa ānunubhaeko* 'Where are you coming from?'" "*Kahā jānubhaeko* 'Where are you going?'" Such questions are asked even when the answers are obvious, as when children would sing out, "*O didi, nuhāuna jānubhaeko* 'Hey older sister, are you going to bathe?'" as I walked the hundred meters from my home to the nearest water tap bearing a bucket of laundry, shampoo, and soap.

TABLE 1 The quadrants

Quadrant 1: More conventional, more immanent	Quadrant 2: Less conventional, more immanent
Quadrant 3: More conventional, less immanent	Quadrant 4: Less conventional, less immanent

## CONVENTIONALITY AND IMMANENCE

There are widespread conventions in natural sign. At least some of these conventions are also immanent in the world in which signers live and communicate, and thus possibly, though not necessarily, interpretable without prior knowledge of sign forms as signs. Immanence affords signers and addressees with the ability to make and understand signs even in the absence of (knowledge of) linguistic conventions. While this point might seem to imply that conventionality and immanence are opposites, it is more helpful to think about them as gradient qualities along perpendicular axes.<sup>7</sup> These axes produce four quadrants: more conventional and more immanent signs, less conventional and more immanent signs, more conventional and less immanent signs, and less conventional and less immanent signs (table 1).

Conventional natural signs that are less immanent (quadrant 3) need to be known as signs. In Peircian (1955) terms, such signs are symbolic legisigns. They would not be decipherable (Kuschel 1973) from the relationship between their form and everyday nonlinguistic context (though one might be able to figure out their meaning from the broader utterance or conversation in which they get used). One example of a sign that I experienced as conventional and nonimmanent is shown in figure 14a; I gloss this sign NEG, short for ‘negator,’ because it is used to indicate that something is not true, not available, doesn’t exist, and so forth. Another sign, figure 14b, functions as a general wh-question; I gloss it Q. The people depicted, Surya Kumari Limbu and Padma Puri, are deaf residents of Maunabudhuk and Bodhe who participated in the NSL class.<sup>8</sup>

Other conventional natural signs are also immanent (quadrant 1). As discussed earlier, immanence gets at the potential availability of the sociomaterial world for transformation, articulation, and rendering through bodily movement (including pointing). Affordances are a classic way of thinking about this potential, and in sign language research, affordances are often framed in relation to signing as a modality. I want to think here as well about the affordances of the world and about their convergence with the affordances of signing. The world nudges signers to reach for certain representational devices, as with the circular movement of a fist to represent grinding flour or pointing to the forehead in an upward line to represent a holiday where colored dots are applied to the forehead, discussed in the introduction. Immanence can be grounded not only in bodily routines, but also in



FIGURE 14. (a) Standing in the village hall with other signers, Surya Kumari Limbu signs the negating sign, her open hand held upright and rotating at the wrist. (b) Seated in a field, Padma Puri signs the general *wh*-question sign, one hand with thumb and forefinger extended flipping from palm down to palm up (the sign can also be made two-handed). Illustrations by Nanyi Jiang.

landscapes, in histories, in the way plants grow or animals eat, in the movement of the sun from east to west.<sup>9</sup>

Kendon (1980b, calling on Mandel 1977) refers to what gets drawn on in a sign's articulation as its base. This classification usefully highlights the specificity of sign by distinguishing between related-yet-distinct actions conducted for different purposes—doing a thing versus talking about it, such as making grain alcohol versus referring to it—and grounding the latter in the former. The distinction between the form and base—a distinction that sign language linguistics often collapses—makes it possible to demonstrate *how* the world shows up in signs and not only *that* it does. It reveals how sign forms are immanent in the “routine patterns of experience and interaction through which actors [encounter and] recognize objects, individuals, and events not as mere things but as instances of familiar categories” (Hanks 1990:70, citing Schutz 1970).

The way that signers actually materialize this immanence—in the directions their fingers point, the shapes they trace, the actions they pantomime—makes use of two key bodily and semiotic strategies. First, they make use of the capacity of the body to draw attention to features of the environment that are sensorially accessible to their addressees (Hanks 1990; Edwards 2015). In Peirce's terminology these are indexical signs; in Kendon's these are pointing and presenting signs. For example, someone might point at a person or grasp a necklace. Second, signers make use of the capacity of the body to enact similitude to movements, qualities, or features; these signs would be known as iconic, in Peirce's terms, and as characterizing or enacting, in Kendon's. For example, someone could hold one hand as if gripping a bundle of grass, the other making a slashing motion underneath it as if cutting fodder. Many signs (not just natural signs, and not just signs in the sense of signing practices) make use of both of these strategies simultaneously (Peirce



FIGURE 15. (a) Sarawata Limbu squats in her kitchen, squeezing the liquid of fermenting millet and corn from her hands back into a container. (b) Jyoti Limbu stands in the village hall, signing “GRAIN-ALCOHOL,” her fingers squeezing into loose fists as the hands move toward each other. Illustrations by Nanyi Jiang.

1955). For example, placing one’s hand at the height of a child could be interpreted as both iconic and indexical.

In the case of the sign GRAIN-ALCOHOL, the base is the motion that someone makes as she squeezes liquid from a handful of fermenting grains, as Sarawata Limbu is doing in figure 15a. The form of the sign reproduces that squeezing movement, as shown by Jyoti Limbu in figure 15b.<sup>10</sup> The sign, in other words, is immanent in the bodily process of making alcohol. Many other signs used in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe are similarly articulated with a “movement pattern . . . consist[ing] of a selection from elements of action that would be performed if the action sequence or pattern being characterized were actually being carried out” (Kendon 1980b:87).

Continuing to think with Kendon (1980b), signs have not only bases and forms but also referents. A referent has one of multiple possible relationships to its base, depending on the specific utterance (Kendon 1980b:85, 89–97). In an utterance where the referent is the alcohol itself, then the representation of the process stands for the product; in an utterance where the referent is the making of grain alcohol, the representation of the process stands for the process. Recognizing these kinds of standing-for relationships enables a precise accounting of the complex semiotics involved that moves beyond labeling signs as iconic/indexical, or even as more or less iconic/indexical.

As another example, the sign in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe for GIRL/WOMAN involves taking one hand, with fingers separated and loosely bent, and brushing it a few times through one's hair on the side of the head above the ear, or, if the signer is bald, through the space where hair would be. The relationship between the sign form (what the hands do) and the base (the actual act of combing hair) might be described as characterizing (the hand takes on the characteristics of a brush or comb) and enacting (making a brushing motion), to use Kendon's terms; or, the base could be thought of as having hair long enough to comb, in which case the relationship of form to base would be characterizing or indicating the length of hair via its combability. The base-referent relationship, as per Kendon, could be said to involve an action standing for a person (the kind of person typified as brushing hair) or a trait standing for a person (the kind of person typified as having long hair). Signers and addressees know, of course, that men and boys comb their hair too; and that men and boys may have long hair, and women and girls may have short hair. Nevertheless, the association of women and girls with longer hair and more elaborate hair care routines than their male counterparts is a social fact. In this sense, the sign, while conventional, is also immanent in the sense that it draws on bodily practices interpreted through a "cultural stock[s] of conventional typifications" (Enfield 2006:408, citing Schutz 1970; note also Hanks 1990 and Green 2022b).

The signs just analyzed—GRAIN-ALCOHOL, GIRL/WOMAN—are examples of signs that are both conventional and immanent (quadrant 1). Kendon (1980b:83) cautions that "the modes of signification" he analyzes "do not necessarily play a part in the process by which a sign serves to convey its meaning to its recipient."<sup>11</sup> At the same time, he argues that "there is no doubt that the potential for visual iconicity available in gesturing is widely exploited by signers. Signers will resort to a variety of devices of direct visual expression whenever they are confronted with the need to say something for which no ready-made sign exists" (Kendon 1980b:82–83). Once, for example, Jyoti Limbu, an older deaf woman, was "trying to tell me something," as I wrote in my fieldnotes. She touched my then-partner's red bangles, "mimed eating something handful-sized, then made a sort of scrunching gesture with one hand in the palm of the other."

Perhaps these latter movements are what Kendon calls a "ready-made sign," but it was not one I understood, so Jyoti got up to find and show me a discarded pomegranate rind. My partner asked what we were talking about, and when I told her "pomegranates," she said that she had in fact understood, because Jyoti had shown that she was talking about a fruit, pointed to the red bracelets, and "made a sweet face"—which, when I asked, turned out to be a conventional but apparently also quite decipherable sign.<sup>12</sup> It is interesting that my partner understood before I did, even though I had far more experience communicating in natural sign; the immanent relations, one might say, clicked into place for her more quickly. This example illustrates several different strategies Jyoti uses and, more broadly,



shows how the immanence of signs in the world makes communication possible even in the absence of conventionally shared signs—although it may take a while, even when the addressee is doing her best.

From a methodological perspective this example indicates that I am not necessarily able to distinguish between the existence of conventional signs and people's knowledge thereof that enables them to produce and interpret such signs, on the one hand, and the existence of social and bodily conventions and people's knowledge thereof that enables them to produce and interpret immanent signs, on the other. What Jyoti first signed to refer to a pomegranate may in fact have been a conventional sign; it also may have been easily interpretable by another person, even if it wasn't conventional to them. Relatedly, I recall seeing a hearing signer in Bodhe trace the shape of a long beard and then hold out his hand as if begging to indicate a *yogi* 'holy mendicant,' which his deaf neighbor seemed to understand, as apparently I did, but I am not sure how conventional this sign was.

What matters here is that not all signs have to be conventional to be produced and/or understood, because of the quality of immanence. My argument here merges Kendon's approach with a practice theory framework. What Hanks (1990:150, parentheses in original) describes as "the process [of typification] whereby actors represent (and therefore understand) themselves and their world" applies both to communicative and other social practices and is grounded in and reproductive of bodily habitus. From this perspective recognition of a sign on the basis of prior familiarity with the sign and recognition on the basis of prior familiarity with the base, the referent, and the world in which both exist are less different than they might seem. Both signers and addressees can use their worldly, corporeal knowledge to produce and interpret movements that may or may not be conventional signs. Put another way, certain forms are immanent in conventional bodily dispositions shared across persons. And in the case of the articulation of immanent, less conventional signs (quadrant 2), signers and addressees work to actualize semiotic relationships that would otherwise remain latent. Moreover, what quadrant a sign belongs to may shift according to the people involved, as with signs that might be immanent for residents but not for me, or conventional and immanent for hearing people who talk regularly with signers while nonconventional but immanent for hearing people who do so infrequently, similar to Kuschel's (1973) analysis of decipherability.

My goal in this book is not always to state with certainty exactly *how* conventional or immanent a particular sign is to a particular person or community. In fact, I have not attempted here to quantify the region's conventional natural signs, though I am confident that there are far fewer than in, say, NSL or Nepali.<sup>13</sup> Instead, I have argued *that* natural sign involves both conventionality (whether immanent or not) and immanence (whether conventional or not) and that these features are critical to its possibilities and vulnerabilities. I seek both to acknowledge and to trouble the line between kinds of knowing—of linguistic convention,



bodily convention, shared histories and landscapes—as well as to acknowledge the limits of analytic knowability.<sup>14</sup>

It is also important to recognize that both conventionality and immanence involve affordances and constraints. When signs are conventionally known as linguistic signs, they offer the affordances of all conventional grammatical forms: they are readily available for production and they are easily interpreted. At the same time, signs that are conventional but not immanent must be learned at some point, a kind of constraint based on familiarity, exposure, and indeed willingness to learn. Moreover, the relatively low degree of conventionality in natural sign can itself be a constraint for signers and addressees. Immanence, meanwhile, offers possibilities for both producing and interpreting meaningful signs in the absence of linguistic conventions, but it is also a constraint in that effort is required.

Producing and interpreting immanent signs may not be experienced as “obligate and automatic,” Levinson’s (2006) description of how users of conventional language experience understanding. Wrestling a sign from its immanence in the world to articulate it with the body, or interpreting such a sign, requires work, work that—as detailed in chapter 4—people may or may not be willing to do. While forms motivated by shared experiences of the world need not have been previously encoded in linguistic conventions to be potentially available and recognizable, immanent forms are only articulable and interpretable if you are disposed to experiencing them as such. I am using the concept of disposition here to encompass socialized familiarity and naturalization: a kind of tendency toward acting in a particular way, and the sense that doing so is right, likely, inevitable, one might even say “natural.”<sup>15</sup> Doing the work to bring immanent forms into actuality and to understand them both requires, and produces, dispositions/embodied habits.

While explored further in the following chapter, it is worth emphasizing that signing is itself a kind of convention. There are conventional signs; there are conventional combinations of signs; and, critically, there is the convention of signing in the first place. Linguist Michael Morgan (pers. comm.) refers to some places as being more “gesture prone” than others, a phrase I take to include the use of co-speech gesture as well as natural sign and related practices. How do hearing people tend to react when they realize a customer, teammate, neighbor, or stranger cannot hear? What kinds of bodily, affective, cultural, and social habits push people toward using their hands, or toward panicking or ignoring or dismissing someone? In the introduction I wrote about Nonaka’s (2007) concept of moral habitus and how it coemerges with shared signed languages as well as Friedner’s (2005) analysis of deaf sociality as productive of and produced by the desire to understand and help others understand sign. Sites of emergence and use are thus linked to sites of willingness and desire. How does this play out in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe? I examine in chapters 4 and 5 how a more ambivalent and fragmentary habitus both produces and is produced by a social world in which understanding natural signers is possible, not doing so is also possible, and not trying gets naturalized; the

fact that sometimes people can try and still fail to understand further complicates, and reinforces, these dynamics.

### CONVENTIONALITY AND EMERGENCE

Meaning is emergent in actual instances—that is to say, through the articulation and reception of particular utterances in particular contexts. Even communicative practices involving conventional language require some labor. Yet more emergent forms of language require additional labor because the schematic grammatical structures (Hanks 1990) and pragmatic patterns that make meaning-making feel effortless are less established, elaborated, or fully shared than in conventional language (Green 2022a).

Some of the hearing people with whom I talked in Maunabudhuk described their sense-making practices in natural sign as “guessing.” In July 2010, for example, I had a conversation with one of the local school’s headmaster as well as Ganga Limbu, a village official. I wrote:

The headmaster asked me if the [deaf NSL class] students were now using “standard” (his word) sign language, and I said no, not really, and he said oh they’re using the “local” (his word) sign language, and I said yes, and he asked if I understand it and I said some, not completely, and asked if he can, and he said somewhat, that he “guesses” at what they might be saying. I said Ganga understands it well, and Ganga said no, he does the same thing, guesses at what they might be saying, that all the villagers do the same thing.<sup>16</sup>

As with conventionality and immanence, it is impossible for me to say with certainty whether hearing interlocutors like Ganga or the headmaster experienced all signed interactions in the same way, or whether they experienced some interactions as smooth and certain and others as involving more guesswork. Based both on my own experiences of natural sign interactions and on my observations of other people’s, I would say that the latter is far more likely—that sometimes natural sign feels like conventional language and other times it does not. I also want to emphasize that deaf signers also have to guess or figure out what hearing signers say—and perhaps even more so, as most hearing signers have much less practice than deaf signers in using natural sign.

From the perspective of linguistic analysis, natural sign utterances at times pattern like utterances in conventional language and are conventional and emergent in similar ways. For example, in everyday usage in Maunabudhuk, the actual referents of natural sign lexical items like OLD-PERSON, BOY/MAN, GIRL/WOMAN, and birth-order terms like *JETHĀ* ‘OLDEST’ or *SĀILĀ* ‘THIRD-OLDEST’ are underspecified.<sup>17</sup> (I use the slash between words to indicate that the glossed sign has a conventional meaning that is represented in English with distinct words.) The sign OLD-PERSON often gets used to talk about a spouse,

parent, or parent-in-law; BOY/MAN and GIRL/WOMAN often are employed to refer to specific people; and birth-order terms may refer to a variety of people. In practice, therefore, the addressee must resolve reference on the basis both of the particular context of the utterance and the signer's usual meaning. When Sarawata Limbu signed OLD-PERSON, she almost always was referring to her mother-in-law or father-in-law, while Padma Puri usually was talking about his mother, and Sanu Kumari Limbu about her husband. Jyoti, meanwhile, invariably referred to Sagar with—and only with—the sign BOY/MAN, while when she signed *KĀNCHI* 'YOUNGEST,' she usually meant the sister-in-law with whom she lived, who was the youngest by virtue of her marriage to Jyoti's youngest brother. She would also refer to her niece, however, with the sign *KĀNCHI* in combination with the sign CHILD. At least for birth-order terms, this kind of pragmatic narrowing-down also applies to Nepali as it is spoken in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe.

Natural sign conventions also exist on the level of what might be thought of as syntax, pragmatics, or both. By *syntax* I mean the way that multiple signs together produce a meaning greater, or different, than the sum of their parts because of grammatical relationships; by *pragmatics* I mean the way that multiple signs together produce a meaning greater, or different, than the sum of their parts because of patterns in usage that are not analyzable through grammar but are nevertheless predictable. Whether a specific configuration should be considered syntactic or pragmatic, I leave to other people's analyses. Sign combinations include both sequential and simultaneous articulations, and speech is also sometimes articulated simultaneously during signing, whether sporadically or for long stretches. Descriptions of the grammars of signed languages often emphasize their simultaneous, diagrammatic, and/or spatial properties in contrast to the sequentiality of spoken languages, but it is important to remember that signing also occurs sequentially in time, and speech also involves simultaneity.

Conversation analysis frames sequentiality as expressing a relevance relation across turns (Hanks 2004). In local natural sign sequentiality does this not only across turns but also within them; temporal proximity becomes a primary means of expressing a relevance relationship between two or more referents. To ask who someone is, for example, a signer points at the person and then signs the general wh-question sign Q; these signs are accompanied by a questioning facial expression. It is the sequence of signs, along with the simultaneous facial expression, that makes it clear that a question is being asked and that the question is about the person. *From* whom or *to* whom a relationship might be calculated or named is left implicit and underspecified; an answer might center the original speaker, the addressee, someone else, or no one in particular ("That person is my teacher," "That person lives near your uncle," "That person is married to the woman down the hill," or "That person comes from the village across the valley"). To point at two people in a row, followed by the same question sign Q and accompanied by a questioning facial expression, also enquires about who someone is, or rather who two someones

are. Here, however, the sequentiality produces a more specified focal relationship. It is between the two people; the question is who they are *to each other*.

These examples show that conventions exist and that they are more than additive. Pointing at two people in turn followed by the question sign means something different from, though certainly related to, pointing at one person followed by the question sign. It is also conventional that the sign Q follows articulation of the object or relationship being thematized or asked about. Similarly, negatives follow what they negate. Relatedly, reported communication or action is indicated by signing what someone said or did and then pointing to the person who said or did it. In most cases in my video data, the sayer/doer was physically present. In one instance a signer was reporting the utterances of an absent person, and in that case the signer had already established the person as a topic of conversation. She then signed his utterance, followed by a lexical item referring to the person. In neither case—reporting the speech of someone present or absent—does the relationship between what is said and who said it get identified with a lexical item meaning ‘say.’ Instead the relationship is given by their sequence, with the subject coming second.

The following example exhibits several of the just-described conventions. The signer is a hearing neighbor of Sarawata Limbu and her husband, both deaf. Joking about people getting married or running off with other people, as in this example, is a common local genre in both speech and sign. Of particular note is the neighbor’s use of the term *JETHI* ‘OLDEST’ along with the sign GIRL/WOMAN to make reference to Sarawata; as the oldest son in his family, Sarawata’s husband is known as *jethā*, so Sarawata, his wife, can be referred to as *jethi*. Also relevant are the use of what seem to be a hypothetical quoted utterance and a hypothetical reported action, with the attributed utterance/action followed by a point to the person to whom it is attributed, who is also the addressee. The hypothetical utterance is also prefaced by a point, so there is some ambiguity in the point’s functionality: engaging with the addressee, referring to him, and/or attributing utterance/action. Line breaks are for ease of reading, and the slash between GLOSSES/*italics* indicates simultaneous articulation of sign and speech; note that in this example, the neighbor’s spoken words either double what she signs (e.g., pointing at someone to get his attention while saying in Nepali “*yatā* ‘this way,’” pointing at someone to refer to him while saying in Nepali “*u* ‘he’”) or refer to what has been signed (signing “ELOPE” and saying in Nepali “*yaso* ‘that’”). While in line 4 it is the woman’s spoken intonation that tips me slightly toward marking it as a question rather than a statement (“You are going to . . .”), the versions function more or less equivalently in this context. Finally, a sign followed by the plus sign + indicates repetition of that sign.

- 1 Point-husband/*yatā*  
**Hey** (in speech: **this way**)
- 2 Point-Sagar/*u* ELOPE/*yaso*  
**Sagar’s going to elope** (in speech: **he, that**)

- 3 Point-husband *JETHI* WOMAN GO-TOGETHER Point-outward,  
**with your wife, they're going to run off together.**
- 4 Point-husband COME+/āune Point-husband, CRY/rune Point-husband?  
**Are you going to say, "Come back, come back," and cry?** (in speech: **come, cry**)<sup>18</sup>

#### GUESSING PART 1: HOOKS AND FILTERS

The process of "guessing" described by several hearing people was frequently imperceptible to me. I could only observe people's actions and sometimes learn more about the situation later. One day, for example, I saw Ram Aryal, a hearing man, ask Bal Limbu, a deaf man, a question that consisted of holding up two fingers, making the conventional sign MONEY (the first finger rubs quickly against the thumb of a loosely closed hand), and putting that same hand into a pocket. This last action Kendon (1980b) would call a "characterizing enactment," and I would call a sign immanent in the relationship of bodies, clothing, and money. I interpreted Ram's utterance as a question, which would have been due to a conventional facial expression or head movement, the use of the conventional Q sign, or some combination of these. I had a general sense of the topic, but it wasn't until the following day that I had the opportunity to find out more: the question referred to Bal's two nephews, who had stolen a thousand rupees and run away.

In his utterance Ram did not specify what the number two was quantifying; generally, natural signers use numbers to quantify and refer to persons, animals, days, years, physical objects, and other things. Here, Bal had to figure out that TWO was enumerating people. Those two people were linked with an action through sequential articulation. The action had to be interpreted not as (only) the literal placing of money in a pocket but also as taking money surreptitiously. To understand his neighbor's question, Bal had to connect the directly stated parts of the utterance (TWO, MONEY, PUT-IN-POCKET) to each other and also elaborate on them; doing so would have required familiarity with signing (which he of course had as a deaf signer), with the kinds of elisions made in natural sign, and with the kinds of questions people ask of one another, as well as familiarity with the state of affairs or type thereof (past, present, or future, real or hypothetical) to which Ram might plausibly be referring.

Natural sign is not unique in the way that signers require their addressees to do sense-making labor beyond the uttered signs/words; it is easy to imagine someone saying in English, for example, "Those two, and the money, huh?" But this sort of leanness is typical for natural sign, even in cases where a topic is being raised for the first time, and it is a feature connected to the way that natural sign utterances—and ultimately natural sign itself—are so emergent. The signs act as potential hooks, reaching out into the world. If the addressee chooses, they can participate in what Goodwin (2018) calls "cooperative action"; they can gather those things

up and put them together in a way that works. The signs can also be thought of as performing a filtering or narrowing function; here, once the pieces are brought together, through their temporal adjacency, the TWO narrows the possibilities for which money the landlord might be talking about, and the MONEY getting PUT-IN-POCKET narrows the possibility for which TWO the landlord might be talking about. Note that a later sign may narrow an earlier sign's possibilities just as much as an earlier one may narrow a later one's.

Occasionally I was able to observe more directly the process of putting together that I have just imagined for Bal. For example, I witnessed a conversation in which Parvati Khadka, a deaf woman, relayed a series of details: fingerprints, many houses, on the other side of the river. Her son Yug and his best friend, both hearing, together figured out in spoken Nepali that Parvati was talking about going to get her youngest son's citizenship card in Dhankuta headquarters; the fingerprints proved to be the most important key or "clue" as I wrote in my fieldnotes.<sup>19</sup> Another form of guessing, one that requires work from both addressee and signer, involves back-and-forth exchanges to reach clarity. For example, on the road outside the NSL class on a late May morning, Jyoti told me that her younger brother's wife had been drunk while carrying water in a *ḍoko* 'woven basket worn on the back, supported by a strap around the forehead' and had fallen, spilling water everywhere. She used speech accompanied by signs, including a signed depiction of liquid spilling and spreading. I asked using spoken Nepali and signs if this event had happened yesterday or today. I thought she said today, so I indicated a very early morning time by using a flat, extended forearm to point very low in the eastern sky, a conventional way of indicating time. Jyoti corrected me, showing a late afternoon position. Since it was still morning, I realized the event must have happened the day prior to our conversation.<sup>20</sup>

#### ZONES OF RELEVANCE AND THEIR ABANDONMENT

In several of these examples the signs both create and call the addressees' attention to what Schutz (1970:111) refers to as a "zone of relevance." Paying attention to zones of relevance is an important dimension of understanding natural signers: what domains of life are significant to the utterance at hand? Yet one must also be willing to abandon zones of relevance, or rather, abandon one zone of relevance for another; sticking too closely to one zone can itself impede understanding. For example, one day in NSL class we were going over a chart of illustrated NSL vocabulary that includes many different birds along with a bat. At one point Jyoti grabbed her elbow/forearm with the other hand, made a loose flapping gesture, and then signed "COLD." I began to try to figure out what she was saying in relation to birds and bats, partly because of what we had just been signing and partly because the form of Jyoti's sign resembled, in my mind, a beating wing. Both Sanu Kumari, another deaf natural signer, and Sagar, the deaf NSL teacher, however,

immediately understood that Jyoti was talking about something completely different. As Sagar said: “Oh, she’s sore in the morning.”<sup>21</sup>

Sanu Kumari and Sagar were able to make sense of what Jyoti signed, while I could not, for at least two reasons. First, to them the movement of Jyoti’s arms resembled not a beating wing but rather how a person moves around to loosen up stiff joints. Here, resemblance is literally in the eye, and perhaps the muscle memory or mirror neurons, of the beholder. I grew up in subtropical Florida, went to a college with overheated dorms in the northeastern United States, and then lived in temperate Oregon and Northern California prior to doing fieldwork in Nepal; Sanu Kumari and Sagar were both from the area and thus deeply familiar with how local residents feel and move their bodies on cold mornings in unheated houses. Key here are both their experience of the environment obliquely invoked and the fact that movements like stretching are themselves culturally specific and learned (Mauß 1973 [1936]).<sup>22</sup>

Second, both Sagar and Sanu Kumari were willing and able to let go of a close relationship between the referents of the signs we had been making and the signs Jyoti then made, whereas I assumed there must be one. Whether their familiarity with the referent of Jyoti’s movements enabled them to abandon the zone of creatures that fly or whether the abandonment of creatures that fly enabled them to recognize what she meant is an unanswered, perhaps unanswerable, question. And what would have happened if Jyoti’s signing had no formal similarities, put one way, or perceived resemblances, put another, to the previous signs’ forms and referents (birds and bats)? Perhaps if I had not perceived any linkage, I would have been more likely to leave the zone of flying creatures entirely and try to enter into a new one. However, if there had been no such linkage, perhaps Jyoti would not have made her comment in the first place. My instinct is that Jyoti *felt* a similarity in her body between the forms the lesson asked us to make and the movements she would make on chilly mornings to ease her aching joints.

## GUESSING PART 2: MISTAKES

In the earlier examples of Bal’s nephews and Parvati’s citizenship card, I cannot say for sure what the signer intended, but the addressees seemed to figure it out. In the following three examples, in contrast, I had some access to what the signer meant to communicate to the addressee: in the first two examples, because a hearing signer also (probably) spoke aloud in Nepali, and in the third example, because I was independently familiar with the event to which (I believe) the signer was referring. And in each of these examples, some kind of miscommunication occurred, at least from my perspective. The use of two examples where a deaf signer misunderstands and one where a hearing person does is not intended as iconic of the demographics of (mis)understanding. Rather, it reflects that signers who speak at the same time often express the same thing in both modalities, thus making it unambiguous, from a methodological perspective, what was meant.<sup>23</sup>



Krishna Gajmer's hearing older brother, Samman, and Sagar generally communicated well, even toward the beginning of their acquaintance, but there were occasional hiccups. On one occasion in June 2010, Samman asked Sagar where he lived; Sagar, however, thought that he was asking if their homes were similar. As a practice, I would only have made a firm declaration (in my fieldnotes or to Sagar—both of which I did) about what Samman said if I had a definitive way of knowing. In this case, reading back in my notes, I assume that Samman, who frequently used sign and speech at the same time, signed something like “HOME Q?” and simultaneously spoke in Nepali something like “*ghar kahā tapāiko* ‘where is your home?’” In this instance the misunderstanding seems to be located in the broadness of the question. The general wh-question sign in natural local sign is underspecified. The question as signed could be translated into English as something like “What about your home?” or “and your home?” Here, Samman clearly intended it to mean “where,” as he uses the Nepali *kahā* ‘where.’ It is possible that among local signers that would have been the default meaning when paired with the sign HOME; recall from chapter 1 that Sagar told me that he had asked Krishna, who happens to be Samman's deaf brother, “Where do you live?” with the signs “HOME Q?” For whatever reason, in this instance Sagar interpreted Samman's query not with regards to location but rather as a request for an evaluation of his home's likeness or difference from the home in which we were currently situated.<sup>24</sup>

The Q sign is also implicated in a second example. As discussed earlier, pointing to someone followed by the Q sign means “Who is this person?” while pointing to two people in turn followed by the Q sign means “How are these people related?” During a video-recorded conversation between Padma Puri, a deaf man, and two hearing teenage girls, Shanti and Charu, the following exchanges took place. Here the lines indicate turn-taking, a slash between uppercase gloss and lowercase italics indicates simultaneous sign and speech, and a slash between glosses indicates polysemy or ambiguity. The parentheticals describe nods, pauses, or when I have had trouble hearing the recording, and a verb followed by a place (such as COME-here) indicates the path of motion of the verb. In the translation for line 10, I have written both what the girl seems to have meant, based on her spoken words, and what Padma seems to have understood.

- 1 Shanti: Point-self Q? Point-Padma Point-self Q?  
**Who am I? What's our relationship?**
- 2 Padma: Point-self? (hesitates)  
**Me?**
- 3 Shanti: (affirmative nod)  
**Yes**
- 4 Padma: (hesitates) Point-left COME-here COME-here  
**I came here from over there**
- 5 Shanti: (hard to hear) *ke bhaneko?*  
**What'd he say?**

- 6 Charu: (hard to hear) *ke bhayo?*  
**What happened?**
- 7 Shanti: “*mero ke parne?*” *bhaneko* (more that I can’t hear)  
**I said, “Who are you to me?”**
- 8 Charu: uncle bhannu na . . . uncle, uncle  
**Say he’s your uncle**
- 9 Padma: *KĀNCHHĀ* ‘YOUNGEST’ ONE COME  
***Kānchhā* comes/came this way**
- 10 Shanti: (gets Padma’s attention) Point-self ALRIGHT/FINISHED?  
 What she meant: **Who am I?**  
 What Padma seems to have understood: **Am I alright?**
- 11 Padma: (affirmative head tilt) Point-self, ALRIGHT/FINISHED, Point-Shanti  
**Yes, I am/we are alright**
- 12 Shanti: Point-self Q/*ma ko ho?*  
**Who am I?**
- 13 Padma: ALRIGHT Point-Shanti (affirmative head tilt)  
**You’re alright**

I want to make two observations. First, Shanti did not secure Padma’s referential understanding. From her spoken Nepali renderings, it is apparent that she wanted to ask Padma how he would characterize their relationship. Charu articulates a possible answer: he is Shanti’s *uncle*, a term of kinship borrowed from English (Turin 2002) that can be applied to people who live in proximity to each other, including of different caste groups, as in this case. Second, despite the misunderstanding, communicative sociality has been achieved and maintained, a topic to which I return in chapters 4 and 5.<sup>25</sup>

Why didn’t Padma understand? On the one hand, Shanti’s utterance could be said to pattern with the local convention for asking who someone is. As discussed earlier, pointing at someone then articulating Q typically means “Who is this person?” And pointing at two people in turn followed by Q typically means “What is their relationship?” On the other hand, I do not recall seeing any other instances in natural sign of a person pointing to themselves followed by the sign Q or to themselves and their addressee followed by the sign Q as Shanti does here. In other words, the meaning that she intended, while patterning with natural sign practices, was nevertheless pragmatically unusual, since she was asking about her and Padma’s relationship rather than about another person or persons. Padma seemed to interpret her questions, first as asking about himself and what he had been up to (a reasonable interpretation of line 1, albeit one that ignored Shanti pointing to herself, and of lines 2 and 3); and later as asking if she, or the two of them, were alright (another reasonable interpretation of the signs in the second half of line 10).

The third example of misunderstanding is quite different. In late May, Jyoti led Sagar and me to the small house she shared with her youngest brother, his wife, and their two children, a minute or two's walk west from the bazaar. No one was home, so Jyoti walked over to the house next door, where we met her neighbors. During the ensuing conversation, the neighbor's eldest daughter, Nani, told me: "Jyoti said she slept with you the other night, and I told her that was impossible; you're smelly and your teacher is clean." ("To sleep with" here is not a euphemism for sex. I was often asked to sleep at people's houses, even if they lived very close to my own room, as an expression of hospitality and affection. Local residents frequently told me that they were dirty compared to me; in other words, people said this about themselves, not only about other people.) As I discuss more in the following chapters, the kind of evaluation Nani makes ("that was impossible") was not unusual for a hearing person (or a deaf person) to make of (their understanding of) what a deaf natural signer had said. But whereas often the topic of discussion was something about which I could have no independent knowledge, in this instance I was directly involved in the reported event, even if it had happened somewhat differently than Nani was explaining.

Ten days earlier, Jyoti and I had spent time together in the late evening at the home of her *buhāri* 'son's or younger brother's wife.' Jyoti, her *buhāri*, her *buhāri*'s daughter, her daughter's friend, and I had snacked on *kāphal* berries, sweet hard peaches, and Coke, and held an impromptu dance party. Afterward I walked back up a short path and just across the broad dirt road to the house where I rented a room; Jyoti stayed at her *buhāri*'s, as she frequently did. I said as much to Nani: "No, she didn't sleep with me, but we did meet up at *buhāri*'s house. And where I live is close to that."<sup>26</sup>

There are several ways to analyze Nani's evaluation of what Jyoti had said; each one presents different analytic and ethical implications, which I discuss in chapter 5. Here I focus on what I consider to be the most likely scenario: that Nani misunderstood Jyoti and that Jyoti had actually said something about us sleeping in close proximity that night (i.e., in houses across the street from each other), or perhaps that we had been together in the place where she then slept. Both of these possible utterances, along with Nani's version, consist of the same elements: Jyoti; signs such as NIGHT and/or SLEEP; spatial proximity; and me, to whom she probably would have referred with some combination of signs such as FAT, FAIR-SKINNED, and GIRL/WOMAN, and perhaps a sign like SCHOOL, invoking the NSL class, and/or a point toward the community hall where class was held. Nani also correctly placed the narrated event in the very recent past.

In other words, while Nani ultimately misconstrued the story Jyoti told her, she had grasped many of its essential parts. She had, as other hearing villagers described their attempts to understand sign, "guessed" at the relationships among the parts, perhaps even guessed at some of the parts themselves. Perhaps another

person might have understood more accurately what Jyoti signed—whether because they were more familiar with signing conventions, with the convention of having to guess, with Jyoti herself, with the event to which Jyoti was referring, or some combination. What I want to emphasize is that the emergent nature of natural sign left room for Nani to do the work of making sense of what Jyoti had said, and in this case Nani was willing to do that work; but the emergent nature of natural sign also left room for the work to go awry.

### CONCLUSION

This chapter has answered the previous chapter's call for specificity. Through concrete examples of signs and utterances, it has offered readers a sense of what natural sign is like in this time and place: available and fragmentary, understandable and misunderstandable. In theorizing the concepts of immanence, conventionality, and emergence, I have shown how natural signers produce and interpret signs and utterances that require work. Immanence in particular both complements and complicates chapter 2's account of natural sign's paradoxes, as it highlights how conventionality is itself multifaceted, implicating people's experiences of shared sign forms and communicative practices but also of other kinds of bodily routines and social habits. This account resonates with deaf NSL signers' insistence that communication in natural sign is very much possible, even if limited.

The moments of understanding, misunderstanding, and not-understanding analyzed here provide a scaffold for the final two chapters. As chapter 3 has shown, natural sign offers avenues for meaning-making that do not depend on conventional linguistic conventions. At the same time, making sense of immanent and radically emergent utterances requires more—more attention, more labor, more commitment—than making sense of utterances produced in conventional languages, and this renders natural signers vulnerable in ways that are distinct from users of marginalized but conventional languages. Chapter 4 builds on NSL signers' theories by analyzing the communicative practices of deaf and hearing people using natural sign with a particular focus on attention, willingness, and refusal; chapter 5 further unpacks (mis)understanding as a complex social and analytic phenomenon.