

## Understanding

One afternoon in May 2010, I walked with Jyoti Limbu, a deaf woman, to one of the communal water taps just off Maunabudhuk's main road. A small group of hearing women, teenage girls, and children were taking turns filling up their plastic and metal containers, and I hung back to watch the interactions between Jyoti and her neighbors. While the hearing people present did not ignore Jyoti or refuse to interact with her, she did not appear to be able to follow the casual spoken banter passing between the waiting women, and no one translated it for her.<sup>1</sup> At one point a teenage girl asked Jyoti about her new *pote* 'bead necklace,' bracelet, and haircut, and another woman—the owner of a shop in the bazaar—also interacted directly with her. Earlier in the day, the same woman had asked me in a very friendly manner if I understood Jyoti's *kurā* 'talk.' I replied that I did in part and asked the same of her; she said some. When I asked the woman at the tap what Jyoti had said, however, she replied with the phrase *ke bhanchha, bhanchha*. This phrase literally means 'she says what she says,' where the Nepali verb *bhannu* 'to say' from which *bhanchha* is derived includes both sign and speech, like the English *to say* in this book.<sup>2</sup>

In the context of writing about "belief" in Nepal, Pigg (1996:181) renders an idiomatic translation of this "dismissive little remark": "What does it matter what [she] says?" The phrase *ke bhanchha, bhanchha*, in other words, has a far more negative connotation than phrases like *bujhdina* 'I don't understand' or *bujhina* 'I didn't understand'—phrases that hearing people sometimes utter in response to a signer's signs, as discussed in chapter 4. To be sure, statements about not-understanding do not necessarily accurately reflect whether someone has in fact understood a signer, as when people say they don't understand and yet respond in sign in a way that shows they did. In the utterances *bujhdina* 'I don't

understand' and *bujhina* 'I didn't understand,' the first-person pronoun (*ma* 'I') is formally dropped but grammatically present through conjugation. Thus, although social responsibility for failed sense-making accrues to signers, not their addressees, when someone states "I don't understand," the grammatical subject "I" at least offers the possibility of tempering that dynamic.

The phrase *ke bhanchha*, *bhanchha* is unambiguously dismissive across multiple possible conveyed meanings. The phrase might indicate that the speaker has not understood what has been signed, in a way that implies that either the signer in particular or sign more generally is not someone or something that can be understood; in this sense it functions similarly to an explicit statement of not-understanding that is not accompanied by any contradicting indication of understanding such as a signed response, but with an ever more derogatory flavor. As a direct response to a question about what had been signed, *ke bhanchha*, *bhanchha* could also imply that while the speaker understood what was said, they did not consider it worth repeating, with the further unspoken suggestion that such was the case for most or all of what that particular signer said more generally. The phrase could also indicate that while the speaker could "make sense" of what had been said on a referential level, it didn't "make sense" in the more colloquial meaning of the English phrase: that is, as something that clearly related to the ongoing context and contributed to the conversation. Without saying so explicitly, the phrase conveys a follow-up question: "If this doesn't make sense, how or why would I respond (or translate)?"

Like the previous chapter, this final chapter analyzes signed interactions among deaf local signers, their hearing families, neighbors, and friends, and Sagar Karki and me. My focus in chapter 4 was on identifying and theorizing ethical orientations, their relationship to how and whether hearing people are willing to engage with deaf signers, and their consequences in interactions. Here I seek to further complicate and nuance what *understanding* means, as both social and analytic processes. What counts as understanding? How do understanding and translation relate to one another? What is the role of misunderstanding? How do misunderstandings simultaneously render deaf signers as intelligible but unreliable? Among other ideas, I suggest that not-understanding may not represent a totalizing state of incomprehension; instead, it can result from an inability to figure out the relations among parts of an utterance that have been understood. Social articulations of not-understanding (that are not contradicted by other signals) may thus conceal partial understanding. And similarly, as when people understand parts and put them together in a way that does not match a signer's intended meaning, stated understanding, responses, or translations may conceal misunderstanding.

Even more than the previous chapters, this chapter portrays some of the difficulties encountered and endured by natural signers in their everyday lives, difficulties that signers did not experience evenly. Some natural signers struggle more than others, and this is true even when they are engaged with people who

try to understand them. While in the field, and while writing this book, I have wrestled a great deal with how to think and write about such differences. How can I account for complex biographical histories of people in their thirties, forties, fifties, and sixties, and for possible corporeal, neurological, and psychiatric differences, let alone their entanglement? I am cognizant here of scholars' arguments that language deprivation and communicative neglect can produce developmental and psychiatric disabilities (e.g., Humphries et al. 2016; Kushalnagar et al. 2020). At the same time, I am wary of making armchair diagnoses and hesitant to assume definitively that if deaf natural signers have additional disabilities, they must have been caused by their communicative situations; I believe such an assumption also risks further stigmatizing deaf people with multiple disabilities. I do not have easy answers; as I wrote in the introduction, I am committed to messiness, uncertainty, and a deeply relational approach to sociality, and that guides me here as well. Later in this chapter, I ask what being treated over and over as if you don't make sense does to a person. My wording is purposefully open-ended; some readers may answer this question in terms of language deprivation, and some may answer it through other concepts, experiences, and frameworks.

Related analytic and ethical issues manifest in what might first seem like highly technical matters. Natural signers have a precarious relationship to language as most people think about and use it. When they talk, with other deaf people and with hearing people, what counts as language and what counts as interaction?<sup>3</sup> In asking this question, I return to the affordances and constraints of natural sign. In chapter 3, I emphasized that in natural sign conversations people must put together parts, the relationships among which are often established by grammar in conventional language conversations. In chapter 4, I analyzed how people's orientations toward signers and signing impact their willingness to do that kind of putting-together work. This chapter analyzes a range of situations to further interrogate how ethics impacts reference, and how reference—whether it is understood, misunderstood, or not-understood, and whether or not it is metalinguistically framed as such—impacts how people orient toward signers. Whereas in the previous chapter, the primary examples highlighted hearing people at least sometimes willfully refusing to understand (by looking away or by not making sense of immanent signs), the examples here also reveal people trying and misunderstanding, coming up with conflicting interpretations, or not-understanding at all. If by definition communicating in natural sign is profoundly contingent, and if in interactions between deaf and hearing people the latter frequently have less experience with natural sign (as it is not their primary mode of communication), how do the people with whom I work, and I as a writer, account for those contingencies and their consequences?

This chapter necessarily attends closely to the role that fieldwork played in shaping the very dynamics and phenomena I was and am invested in understanding. I study interaction, and I do so through interaction. Reflecting on her work with

signers in Mexico, Hou (2020:667) writes that “the research process itself” plays “a complex role” within the very interactions that researchers analyze. The particularities of my fieldwork—including my presence as a researcher, my imbrication in the NSL class, my ethnographic methods, and my personality traits—are by definition inextricable from what I describe and analyze in this book. Many anthropologists and other scholars have argued that all research—including in disciplines that prize objectivity—shapes the object of study. One of my goals, throughout the book and especially in this chapter, is to recognize and describe that shaping.

I wrote the following passage very early on in my stay in Maunabudhuk: “[Today Parvati] got very upset about a woman she saw walking by and both Sagar and I thought she was saying very clearly that that was her daughter but both yesterday and today a hearing woman insisted that she only has three kids, all sons. It’s strange when the veracity of your statement rests in your neighbor’s hands . . . not testing one [person’s] word against another but more testing one interpretation of those words against another’s ‘facts.’”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, when a signer told me a story about her own marriage (or so I thought), I asked hearing people to help me sort out what (I thought) she had said. On the one hand, asking hearing people what someone had signed was important both socially and methodologically; as someone new to the area, doing otherwise would have been both arrogant (assuming that I could understand better than they) and impractical (ignoring their potential assistance). At the same time, asking for hearing people’s input frequently provided another layer (or two or three) of material to sift through in trying to understand not only the utterances in question but also the broader social dynamics that produced their articulation, reception, and evaluation.

If I received answers that conflicted with what I understood a signer to have said, how might I account for those discrepancies without dismissing deaf signers’ own utterances *or* hearing signers’ competencies and background knowledge (surely greater than my own) *or* the frequent gaps I observed between deaf and hearing signers? What would different approaches entail? The next section addresses these questions directly.

#### JYOTI, AGAIN

In chapter 3, I described how a hearing neighbor of Jyoti Limbu, who is deaf, reported to me that Jyoti told her that she and I had slept together (in the sense of sleeping in the same place; not a euphemism for sex) and that the neighbor told her that was impossible because of a perceived difference in our statuses, expressed in terms of cleanliness. This example served to illustrate the profoundly emergent quality of natural sign as well as important consequences of that quality: addressees are called upon to figure out the relationships among parts and therefore addressees may do so incorrectly. In her description to me of what Jyoti had said, Nani, her neighbor, demonstrated that she had in fact mostly understood

her; she got many of the elements right, but she put them together in a way that did not match what I believe Jyoti actually was trying to get across. I explained that this was an unusual case, because I was familiar with the event to which I thought Jyoti was in fact referring, a recent impromptu evening of eating and dancing in a relative's home where Jyoti sometimes slept, just across the road from my own rented room.

I return to this vignette to make a few further ingressions into the entangled domains of understanding, translation, and fieldwork. First, as implied above, Nani understood at least some of Jyoti's signing and crafted from her own understanding a "tellable" story (Labov 1972, cited in Savolainen 2017; Prasad 2010)—albeit one that was "impossible." Since putting-together may be the default mode through which people make sense of at least some natural sign utterances, this suggests that self-perceived understanding actually may contain, even obscure, misunderstanding and not-understanding. (This certainly includes my own.) Second, Nani was faced with a mismatch between what she understood Jyoti to have said—or what Nani put together such that she could tell a story—and what she understood about how the world works. She resolved this dissonance by assessing her tellable story of what Jyoti had said as impossible, rather than by reevaluating her own understanding, either of what Jyoti had said or of the world. In this sense her comments portrayed Jyoti as an intelligible narrator; you can only say someone has said something impossible if you have understood them, and if you have understood someone, they are by definition understandable, at least in that moment. Saying something impossible or untrue is thus evidence that you are intelligible. Yet to deem what Jyoti said "impossible" was also to portray her as an unreliable narrator—someone who might lie, not understand her own experiences, or say things that don't make sense. The crafting of a tellable story might be considered an act of care, and I consider it such; yet here the tellable story is also evaluated as impossible.

Third, this vignette and its analysis demonstrate that like Jyoti's neighbor, I too made, and continue to make, assumptions and evaluations that produce consequences. I assumed that Jyoti did not, in fact, sign to her neighbor that she and I had slept together; my analysis depends on my first-hand knowledge of an event that occurred but also on my assumption that the neighbor had understood incorrectly. And I told the neighbor what I thought had actually happened. Did my contradiction of the neighbor's interpretation of Jyoti's signing contribute to the neighbor thinking about and experiencing Jyoti as being difficult to understand? How might this be different than the neighbor thinking about her as saying "impossible" things? And here, in this text, I am keenly aware that my analysis positions Jyoti as failing to make sense to her neighbor and potentially as having a less complicated range of intentions than she no doubt had and has. That is to say, what if Jyoti wanted her neighbor to think that we had spent a night in the same home? At the same time, my analysis positions her neighbor as having failed in

her own right. What I experience as acts motivated by the ethical demands of taking deaf signers seriously—acts of conversation and of analysis—have their own potential pitfalls.<sup>5</sup>

#### CAUGHT UP, CAUGHT IN, CAUGHT BY

On a warm June day in 2010, I sat chatting with Parvati and Shrila Khadka, deaf sisters-in-law, on their front porch. Parvati and Shrila lived in a house a fifteen-minute walk from the bazaar past forest and fruit trees. Their front porch faced a river valley and the green hills beyond it. Their gardens were lush with vegetables, and I loved when Shrila took me to look at them. Shrila's brother and mother—Parvati's husband and mother-in-law—had also been part of the household, but both had passed away before 2010. Parvati had three hearing sons, though the eldest was working abroad; his wife lived with the family. On that day in June, Sagar was filming us, and Parvati's second oldest son, Yug, was inside the house. As a participant and later as a repeated viewer of the video, I found our conversation frustrating and at times very painful, due in part to the content, as Parvati described someone hitting her, but also to my inability to fully understand. This scene does not yield a neat analysis or pithy conclusion but instead a chain of entangled questions and concepts, and I have included it to give a sense of the uncertainty of both conversation and analysis.<sup>6</sup>

Early in the video I ask Parvati some simple questions about her life in order to get us talking in front of the camera (lines 1–5 in the transcript in appendix 5). She tells me that her late husband had walked with a pronounced limp and that she had given birth to three sons (lines 6–8). Then Parvati launches into a story involving herself, Shrila, someone referred to as *JETHĀ* 'OLDEST,' a location downhill, and a man, perhaps associated with that location. Parvati also says that she was hit, and that a house fell apart (lines 10–16). In the moments between lines 16 and 17, Sagar and I briefly talk in NSL about the filming process; then the conversation between Parvati and me continues. I question her about what happened downhill, and Parvati says again that she was hit. Shrila tries to get my attention and emphasizes in both speech and sign that what happened was "over there." Parvati signs "GRAIN-ALCOHOL DRINK GRAIN-ALCOHOL DRINK HIT-self HIT-self" (line 22 part i) and then grabs Shrila and makes a shoving motion downward and to the side (line 22 part ii). The first part of her utterance unambiguously means that someone hit her. The directionality of the verb (Padden 1981), palm toward herself and hand moving inward, clearly indicates this; had she hit someone else, she would have turned her hand the other way and struck outward. There is, however, some ambiguity as to the phrase "GRAIN-ALCOHOL DRINK." GRAIN-ALCOHOL, as well as GRAIN-ALCOHOL DRINK, can refer to (drinking) alcohol, the effects of alcohol (drunkenness), or (a person from) a *jāt* 'caste/ethnic group' typified as alcohol drinkers (Green 2022b).<sup>7</sup>

In the second part, when Parvati uses Shrila's body as a stand-in for another body, grabbing her and shoving her, it is less clear whether Parvati means "he grabbed and shoved me" or "I grabbed and shoved him." (It is also possible but less likely that Shrila's body represents Shrila herself; neither she nor Parvati indicated in any way that Shrila had been hurt during the narrated incident.) In line 25, I ask Parvati, "Point-Parvati MAN Point-Parvati?" and she confirms, yet it is not unambiguous what I was asking and therefore what she was answering. Literally, what I signed means something like "You(r) man?" Given pragmatic patterns, Parvati reasonably could have interpreted what I signed to mean "You're talking about a man?" or "This story is about you and a man?" or "Your man (i.e., your husband)?" In my next question I use the natural sign MARRIAGE, indicating that I am talking about her husband (line 27). Parvati responds quickly, "Point-self MAN WALKS-LIKE-THIS," moves her hand as if releasing or throwing something (a sign I cannot interpret in this context), signs "MAN" again, touches the porch on which she is sitting, and then signs "HOUSE, MAN *JETHĀ* 'OLDEST' Point-location HOUSE HIT HIT" (line 32). My best translation of this long utterance is: "My husband walked with a limp. [Utterance I don't know how to translate.] The oldest was here at the house. There was hitting."

The sign *JETHĀ* used in line 32 introduces additional ambiguity. Parvati regularly used this term to refer to both her husband, who was the oldest son in his family, and to her own oldest son; as discussed in chapter 3, birth-order terms are commonly used to refer to relatives, friends, and neighbors in both spoken Nepali and local sign. Concerned that Parvati was describing a scene of domestic violence, I ask, "Point-Parvati MAN *JETHĀ*?" and Parvati specifies that whether *jethā* is husband or son, he is not the person who hit her: "Point-self *JETHĀ* HIT-self NEG 'my *jethā* doesn't/didn't hit me' (lines 33–34). Knowing that Parvati had talked in class before about being unhappy at home, I ask, "Does your second-oldest hit you?" Parvati again insists: "The person from downhill, the alcohol drinker/person drinking alcohol, hit and shoved me!" (lines 37–38). Although she clearly separates her family members from the hitting, it remains unclear what the person referred to as *JETHĀ* is doing in this narrative. At this point Shrila takes a turn trying to explain the story to me, with Parvati chiming in (these turns are not in the appended transcript).

The video recording shows—and I remember—that I was able to follow and understand some parts of Parvati's story, but that I did not fully understand how the parts fit together. Who exactly had hit Parvati? What was the relationship between the hitting (lines 12, 14, 18, 22, 32, and 38) and the house falling apart (lines 16 and possibly 32)? How did "the oldest" fit in? I was troubled by Parvati's emotionally charged description of violence and wanted to understand more clearly. I also wanted to know whether someone more familiar with Parvati and her communication would understand what she was saying. I asked her son, Yug, to join us to help translate, and he agreed. With four of us now on camera, we settle



onto the porch in a new configuration. I reinitiate conversation by asking Parvati about the alcohol-drinking person downhill (line 42). Parvati takes up the question immediately, and over the course of the next few turns (lines 43, 45, and 47) she repeats each of the elements raised in the initial narrative (lines 10–41), except for the alcohol drinker, whom I have just mentioned with Yug present and who is thus referentially present among this larger group of conversational participants. Parvati adds several more elements: the house was uphill, there was an earthquake, there were four relevant locations, and someone carried something on their back, and she directs a curse downhill with potent emotion.<sup>8</sup>

As Parvati finishes her turn, I direct my attention to Yug, tilting my head upward in a conventional questioning motion, but Yug shakes his head, laughing quietly (lines 48–49). Shrila at this point tries again to help us understand the story, pointing downhill and saying in Nepali “*yahā* ‘here’” (pragmatically, “there”) and several other words that I am unable to understand (line 50). Yug directs his question to his mother, though, asking in Nepali, “*ke bhayo* ‘what happened?’” and using the conventional Q sign and corresponding questioning head movement (line 51). Parvati responds, again mentioning the earthquake and something falling apart, and adding a new detail: the height, and by conventional extension the age, of someone small and young (line 52). Yug again indicates that he hasn’t understood (line 53).

Following Yug’s second disavowal of understanding, I raise the topic of the man again, while Parvati simultaneously continues with her narrative, saying that she was pregnant with Yug (lines 54–55). “And the oldest male person?” I ask. “The oldest?” Parvati confirms. “The oldest male person,” I repeat. To which Parvati replies with two signs: “EARTHQUAKE PUT-ON-BACK ‘during the earthquake I put him on my back’” (lines 57–60). Sagar, Yug, and I each indicate that we have understood Parvati’s most recent utterances: I respond with a nod (line 61) and in a mix of NSL and natural sign tell Sagar, who has sought my attention from off camera and presumably repeated what Parvati said, that yes, I understand she was pregnant with Yug (lines 61–63); and Yug begins to translate for the first time since I asked for his assistance. After making sure that I understand the Nepali words for earthquake, Yug explains, “*bhuichālā āūdākheri dājulāi bokhera lāgeko kahā lānubhaera bhanuhunchha* ‘She says when the earthquake came she picked up my older brother and carried him off [to safety]’” (lines 64–69).

As in the previous chapter, Yug’s spoken translation serves both a referential function in its restatement of what has been said and a metalinguistic function in its rendering of sign as something that can be translated into speech (Jakobson 1959). Even though I was the only one who could fully hear what he had said, the fact of his speaking, and the expository facial expression that accompanied it—quite distinct from his expression of puzzlement—would most likely have also indicated to the deaf persons present that he had understood. At this point, his translation clearly accounted for some of the elements that Parvati had put into



play: Parvati's and Jetha's presences, someone small and young (since Parvati's oldest son had been very young), someone carrying something (someone) on their back, and the earthquake itself. Indirectly, Yug's one-sentence story also accounted for Shrila's presence, as a member of the family, and for the house falling apart, as earthquakes destroy homes. It is also possible that one of the four locations was the house itself. The fact that Parvati was pregnant with Yug during the earthquake was not accounted for by Yug's translation, but it didn't need to be, as both Sagar and I had indicated our understanding of that element. In contrast, Yug's story did not account for Parvati getting hit, the alcohol drinker, the downhill location and/or person, and at least two remaining locations. Yet within the conversational unfolding, Yug's facial expression and translation had just marked Parvati as understood.

For better or worse, I wanted to know more and I kept asking questions. In other words, my determination to more fully understand Parvati inadvertently reintroduced the specter of not-understanding that had been socially if not referentially resolved in lines 61–69. In lines 70 and 71, I address Yug in spoken Nepali while Parvati continues her own train of thought, using Yug's physically present body as a stand-in for his physically absent older brother's much-younger narrativized body. I ask Parvati again about having been hit by a man, and she reiterates two elements: that this man was related to the downhill location and that he was a particular caste/ethnic group (lines 76–84). This time in addition to the local sign phrase GRAIN-ALCOHOL DRINK, she uses the NSL sign for a particular caste/ethnic group, which shows no resemblance to grain alcohol or drinking, thus resolving the prior ambiguity of the reference—or rather, resolving it in part, as she could have been indicating both that he was from a group typified as alcohol-drinking *and* that he was drinking or drunk. I ask, “And he hit you?” to which Parvati answers, “He hit me. My face was swollen like this” (lines 85–86). Yug watches her sign but ultimately concludes “*khoi thāhā bhaena*,” literally, “Huh I don't know,” or more idiomatically, “I have no idea” (line 87).

As in the previous chapter, when Binita said she did not understand Shrila, I wonder whether Yug “really” did not understand what his mother said in lines 84 and 86. Comparing the lines that Yug did translate (lines 58 and 60) with those he did not translate (84 and 86), the two sequences are very similar. *JETHĀ* (line 58) and GRAIN-ALCOHOL (line 84) are conventional signs, while PUT-ON-BACK (line 60) and SWOLLEN-LIKE-THIS (line 86) are immanent and transparent in context. The sign TO-HIT (line 86) is both conventional and immanent in the corporeal act of hitting. In lines 58 and 60 there is a setting (the earthquake), an object (the oldest son), and an action (put on back); the subject (Parvati) is implied. In lines 84 and 86 there is again an object (Parvati), an action (hit), and an implied subject (the man). In terms of a setting for the latter sequence, perhaps the location mentioned in line 77—downhill—could serve as one, although my sense is that it was meant more as a social identifier of the man—someone from downhill. More likely the earthquake or the period of time of the earthquake is the setting,

given that in line 43, just after I asked about the man, Parvati's reply included the sign EARTHQUAKE, and the two stories were told together. Closely comparing the elements of these two sequences shows no obvious differences in terms of the conventionality and immanence or decipherability of signs nor in terms of information structure.

One option is that Yug robustly understood Parvati's story and decided not to translate. Perhaps he felt embarrassed or angry on behalf of himself or his mother. Another option is that he did not understand. My instinct is that the truth lies somewhere in between.<sup>9</sup> Despite the immanence of at least some of the signs Parvati produced, this is a more complicated situation than the one with Binita and Shrila. For one, Yug indicated that he understood Parvati at times; he translated the part of the story when Parvati talked about carrying his brother to safety, and he translated several other times during our filmed interactions that day, including a story about when his brother broke his arm while gathering fodder and a description of Parvati and her own brother as children. In addition, Yug was responding to a request from me for translation, which is a different cognitive and social (t)ask than being signed to with the expectation of a nontranslational response, as with Binita and Shrila.

My sense is that Yug understood individual elements of what Parvati had said, even when he did not translate—as did I. I can summarize in words the different moments what Parvati expressed something that Yug did not translate: she talked about being hit by a man downhill; told a story related to her natal home, perhaps involving cows; told another story about a relative in the police force and someone else, perhaps Parvati's mother-in-law; and discussed some relatives' family structure and place of residence. Whatever Yug was able to understand on a referential level of the unaccounted-for elements did not, it seems, make up a story that he experienced as or considered tellable—similar to how I have not been able to actually robustly *tell* the stories that I have just *mentioned*. Perhaps the story of how his mother picked up his brother during the earthquake was already familiar to Yug from previous tellings. Indeed, it is possible that not only his mother and aunt but also his hearing grandmother, who had only recently passed away, and other relatives had told it to him over and over in Nepali. In other words, perhaps what enabled Yug to translate the utterance in lines 58 and 60, “JEṬHĀ ‘OLDEST’? EARTHQUAKE PUT-ON-BACK” was the connection of its referent to an event that Yug already knew about and that had already been rendered by others into a meaningful narrative.

I am not claiming that in natural sign, only already-known information can be communicated; many examples throughout the book make clear that such a claim would be insupportable. Indeed it is quite possible that Yug understood Parvati to say that a man had hit her (as did I, if not all the details), but did not want to say so, whether or not this was a story he had been told by her before. It is also possible that Yug understood bits and pieces—perhaps that there was a man and

that someone was hit—but could not connect the parts to make a coherent story. Therefore I wonder if he had not already known the story about his mother carrying his brother, might he have understood the individual referents of her signs in lines 58 and 60 and yet been unable to figure out how they related to one another and thus translate them for me? The exigencies of emergent language, of tellability, of translation, and of what people feel comfortable saying in specific situations merge here in complex ways.

Moreover, understanding and translating begin to collapse into each other, in part due to my fieldwork practices. As suggested in chapter 4, interlocutors might understand and translate, understand and not translate, or not understand and not translate; this example indicates that someone might also partly understand and translate or partly understand and not translate. As discussed earlier, translating is a common practice within and across modalities in Maunabudhuk. However, requests for translation produce consequences, instigating implicit or explicit assessments of understanding and not-understanding. Yug did not provide a translation, and said aloud, “I don’t know.” And while understanding and not-understanding are definitionally in relation to the addressed person, *assessments* of understanding/not-understanding, including those conveyed by translations or their absences, accrue to the signer and their perceived intelligibility.

One could argue that understanding is not necessarily what is at stake in situations like these—that something else, like attention or time spent interacting together, is more important.<sup>10</sup> But the effort that Parvati put into repeating her story for us indicates that she wanted us to understand. Shrila too tried to help Yug and me understand. In fact, her input raises a serious question about how to analyze local signing practices as well as translation. She seemed to understand Parvati’s story: if not every specific utterance Parvati made, then at least the event to which she was referring. Yet what Shrila said did not enable me to grasp the story, and Yug focused only on his mother. Jakobson (1959:261) writes that for both “linguists and . . . ordinary word-users, the meaning of any linguistic sign is its translation into some further, alternative sign,” whether through rewording (into the same language), translation proper (into another language), or transmutation (into a nonlinguistic semiotic system).<sup>11</sup>

Was Shrila rewording (translating within a language) or was she responding with further comments or elaboration? Either way, the story felt caught—caught not so much in natural sign, as in the minds of Parvati and Shrila, as well as in the space between them. It is this conversation that I think of when arguing Saussure’s model of the talking head should not be dismissed. As per the introduction, in this model, Person A thinks something and voices it; upon hearing what Person A says, what Person A thought appears in Person B’s mind. Understanding is achieved! Obviously, the model does not account for people who communicate through sign, tactile language, or writing. But that is not generally the criticism people level at Saussure; rather they focus on the model’s simplicity. And as this

chapter shows, it is overly simple; understanding is a multilayered, ongoing dance of multiple processes, simultaneously cognitive and corporeal, interactional and ethical. Yet the model also captures something real; and that realness becomes especially clear, and painful, when it fails. I could not get into my own mind what Parvati, and Shrila, had in theirs and deeply, urgently wanted to convey to me, wanted me to understand.

#### UNRELIABILITY, LIES, AND GRAMMAR

In mid-September I encountered Jyoti carrying a load of firewood, one of the jobs she did for pay and meals. She had a swollen eye and told me that her brother and sister-in-law had been yelling at her. I asked her about her swollen eye. At first I thought she was saying someone had hit her, but through further questions and her responses, I understood that she had gotten hurt while cutting firewood. And, as I wrote in my fieldnotes, some hearing people present “elaborated for me when I asked her in front of [them], and they explained that the wood itself had hit her.” The following morning Krishna Gajmer and Sagar, who had been talking with Jyoti while drinking tea before class, said that Jyoti had attributed her swollen eye to a hornet or wasp sting, though when I asked her she repeated that a piece of wood had bounced up and struck her eye. Both Sagar and Krishna appeared frustrated, and Sagar said that the particular quality of the swelling looked like it had been caused by a bite not a blow.<sup>12</sup>

While in this case neither Sagar nor Krishna directly accused Jyoti of lying, I did observe people explicitly say that a signer had lied. In late October I ran into Parvati’s middle son’s best friend while out walking. I asked if Parvati had gone to her *māitighar* ‘natal home’ for Dasai, a holiday that fell during mid-October in 2010, and he said yes. We talked about how long she had stayed there during her last visit at Tij, a holiday that fell during mid-September in 2010. He said that she had only been there a couple days, and I said no, it was much longer than that, around two weeks. When I said this, he replied, “*malāi dāṭnubhayo* ‘she lied to me.’” I offered, “Maybe she meant two weeks,” but he said, “No, she said two days.” He showed what she had said, holding up two fingers, and I again suggested that perhaps she had meant two weeks. Later, when writing down fieldnotes, however, I realized that Parvati never expressed time in terms of weeks (nor did any local signers so far as I saw). It occurred to me that perhaps she was not lying so much as answering a different question, one that she had understood but that he hadn’t asked.<sup>13</sup>

It is easy to imagine how such a conversation would have proceeded. He might have pointed to her natal village and then formed the Q sign, meaning, “How long were you there?” She might easily—and not incorrectly—have interpreted his question to mean something like “Tell me about your trip.” Perhaps her reported reply, “Two,” meant, in her internal script, something like “My sister-in-law and I

both went.” But he, following the ongoing script in his head, assumed she meant “I was there for two days.” The plausibility of this imagined scenario is supported by the exchange between Krishna’s older brother Samman and Sagar, described in chapter 3, during which Samman asked Sagar where he lived, but Sagar thought he was asking if his home was similar to Samman’s and Krishna’s. When utterances are lean, it seems, people may elaborate them mentally in different ways, leading to miscommunication.

What strikes me about my conversation with Parvati’s son’s best friend is that he did not assume that he might have misunderstood Parvati, that she might have misunderstood him, or for that matter that I might be wrong or lying. Instead, he assumed she was purposefully misleading him and telling him things that were not true. Fricker (2017) might call this an instance of “epistemic injustice,” which Kidd, Medina, and Pohlhaus Jr. (2017:1) define as “forms of unfair treatment that relate to issues of knowledge, understanding, and participation in communicative practices.” Parvati’s son’s best friend was not the only one who assumed that she lied, and Parvati was not the only person who was disbelieved. Several people told me directly that both Parvati’s and Shrila’s claims that a relative hit them should not be believed. Jyoti’s claim that her younger brother hit her was also disputed. In one case a woman in the bazaar responded to Shrila by telling her to “hit . . . back.” I asked if she believed what Shrila said, and the woman said, “No, not at all, it’s just what she says,” so she gives her a reply. On another occasion, Parvati made the same complaint, and a hearing man angrily signed “*CHHIH* ‘TO-HECK-WITH-YOU’” at her and then told her, in speech, to stop telling lies. The other hearing men gathered nearby agreed that she was lying. However, a worker at the health post told me that they were not treated well by their family.<sup>14</sup>

There are several possibilities here. One very real possibility is that they were telling the truth. Violence among people who live together is well-documented, and people who are multiply marginalized, such as deaf and disabled women, may experience heightened levels of violence.<sup>15</sup> In this case families and neighbors doubting their stories inflicts additional emotional violence and leaves them with little social recourse. I do want to note, however, that Jyoti frequently spent time away from her home, demonstrating agency over her body and movement. It is also possible that some or all of Shrila’s, Parvati’s, and Jyoti’s claims were lies or exaggerations; to state otherwise would deny that deaf natural signers can inhabit the same range of subject positions and communicative stances that NSL signers and hearing speakers can. A third, not-mutually-exclusive possibility is this: What if these women’s relatives had *threatened* to hit them or had raised a hand *as if* threatening to hit them, as a way of indicating anger, and what if the signers were referring to such an instance but were understood as describing a completed action? Related to this possibility, what if certain actions metonymically represent emotional states, but not all addressees recognize this?

One day, Parvati told me that she had cried when her son, Yug, returned to his job abroad. Her daughter-in-law (Yug's sister-in-law) said that no one had cried. Assuming that Parvati was not referring to having cried in private, perhaps she used the sign CRY to describe her emotions; perhaps CRY can also mean "sad" or "anguished." Similarly, perhaps HIT also means "angry." Signs for physical confrontation did sometimes seem to stand in for verbal confrontations. For example, when Bal Limbu complained that his employer did not pay him properly, Sanu Kumari Limbu told Bal that he should refuse to work and that he was being cheated because he's deaf. Krishna chimed in that Sanu Kumari should go tell the owner that herself, and imitated rolling up his sleeves for a confrontation. I do not think that he was actually suggesting that Sanu Kumari, an elderly woman, was going to physically tussle with Bal's employer, though he could have been suggesting an imagined fight humorously.<sup>16</sup>

And even if signs like CRY and HIT do not conventionally—for particular signers or across signers—mean anything other than "cry" and "hit," perhaps Parvati, Shрила, and Jyoti were using the available signs to express profound dissatisfaction with their lives; perhaps they were doing their best to say that they felt abused, mistreated, or sad, even if they had not literally cried or been hit—and again, I am not claiming that they were not but instead trying to think about the entanglement of accusations and disbelief with natural sign as a communicative practice. With these examples, along with instances when Sagar or I, or both of us, guessed what someone had meant incorrectly or at least incompatibly with each other, I noticed a pattern.<sup>17</sup>

Many instances of misunderstanding involve two linguistic domains: mood and action-based metaphors. By mood, I mean the grammatical encoding of the relationship of an action (e.g., hitting something) to reality. That is to say, actions do not only or merely occur. They may be what in English I can describe as threatened, portended, possible, impossible, likely, unlikely, desired, feared, or about to happen; the exact articulation of these kinds of relationships is language-specific. By action-based metaphors, I mean the rhetorical mention of an action to stand not for itself but for something related to it—for example, hitting for anger, or crying for sadness. While metaphor and mood are seldom discussed together in linguistics (Taverniers 2006 is an exception), the two are united in that in each case a reported action may or may not have actually happened (where "actually" is relative; in this framework a kiss between fictional characters in a story would be actual—so long as within the narrative, it happened between them and not in a daydream).

Returning to another vignette from chapter 3, recall that one morning in May 2010, Jyoti and I had a conversation about how her sister-in-law had drunkenly spilled water on the previous afternoon. Following our conversation, Jyoti and I entered the NSL classroom where Sagar told me that the day prior she had said

something to him about a fight, or about slapping someone or getting slapped. He wondered if she was “tricking” him. I relayed the story she had just told me, and then asked Jyoti directly about whether slapping had been involved. I understood her to reply that she had rolled up her sleeves, threatening to hit her sister-in-law for being drunk while carrying water.<sup>18</sup>

What if Jyoti had, on the previous day, described to Sagar her reaction to her sister-in-law’s drunken mishaps, and Sagar had interpreted her as narrating an actual event, while Jyoti had depicted herself as being angry, threatening her sister-in-law, or perhaps wanting to hit her, whether in the moment or when telling the story? Another instance supports this interpretation, and emphasizes that I was as likely as anyone else to misunderstand (here, unsurprisingly, in the process of trying to establish further certainty). On the morning of October 1, Jyoti repeatedly talked about her sister-in-law getting her wrists and ankles tied together and hauled off to jail by the police. Although I intuited that she meant that she wanted this to happen, or predicted that it would happen, I nevertheless tried to find out if perhaps it had happened, by asking (or trying to ask), “Did this already happen? Is your *buhāri* ‘sister-in-law’ at home?” It is difficult to say whether I actually communicated these meanings with my utterances, but I interpreted her answers—an affirmative to the first and negative to the second—in relation to what I knew I wanted to say (i.e., to my internal script of our ongoing conversation). Jyoti then went to talk to Uma Didi, the owner of the tea shop where we all frequently ate, who told me that Jyoti “was saying that she was telling her *buhāri* that she’d get hauled off to jail.”<sup>19</sup>

In the hitting case, the distinction between a threat or desire and an occurrence caused confusion. In the arresting case, the distinction between a prediction or warning and an occurrence caused confusion. Other instances of possible misunderstanding, recorded in my fieldnotes or inscribed in my memory, center on similar distinctions. I remember, for example, multiple times when Shrila told Sagar and me that her daughter-in-law had thrown Shrila’s notebook in the toilet and then showed up the following day with said notebook. I wonder if the daughter-in-law had actually threatened to throw the notebook away (e.g., by holding the notebook near the toilet) or had signed that she would throw it away (e.g., by pointing to the toilet and to the notebook and making a throwing sign), and if in fact Shrila was actually telling us that and we misinterpreted her. Similarly, Sagar and I once understood Parvati to be claiming that a relative was pregnant by a man who was not her husband. Later she criticized the woman’s inappropriate behaviors without mentioning the pregnancy.<sup>20</sup> In retrospect, I wonder whether Parvati was telling us that the relative could get pregnant, that she was worried about such an eventuality, or perhaps that she had told her relative that she could get pregnant.

On a different occasion, Padma Puri, Krishna, Sagar, and I had a conversation about cross-caste practices revolving around the acceptance or refusal by domi-



nant (“high” or *thulo* ‘large’) castes of food and water from members of marginalized (“low,” “untouchable,” or *saño* ‘small’) castes. The topic came up because we were talking about going to Padma’s later that day, and Krishna said that Sagar and I had come to his house. Padma asked if we had eaten there and I said no but that we had had water. Padma seemed somewhat surprised that I would accept water from Krishna or at Krishna’s home. I asked if Padma would accept food and water from Krishna (question 1). At first I thought that he answered no, and Sagar seemed to think that as well, because he reminded Padma of his Maoist sensibilities. (While at that time none of the major political parties were advocating for relegalizing caste discrimination, the Maoists were the biggest party most explicitly fighting against ongoing caste- and ethnicity-based oppression.) Padma then pointed out that at the tea shop, he willingly drinks water that Krishna pours for him. I wondered “aloud” in sign if maybe the rules were different at someone’s home, and asked again if Padma would eat if Krishna cooked him food and offered it to him (question 2).<sup>21</sup>

This time Padma said yes. At the time of the conversation, I thought he was changing his mind, but that evening when I recorded the conversation in my field-notes, another possibility occurred to me. In asking Padma if he would accept food from Krishna, I probably signed something like “Point-Krishna COOK EAT DRINK?” with a questioning head tilt during the articulation of EAT and DRINK. Critically, this utterance could also be used to ask about past events. Thus, while I meant “Would you accept food from Krishna?” Padma may well have understood me to mean “Have you accepted food from Krishna?” In the language of this chapter, the scripts we were following in the first instance may have diverged in our minds without doing so in our signs. The second time I asked the question, it seems that we were both in the hypothetical mode.<sup>22</sup>

There are several ways to account for these domains of increased potential misunderstanding. I could claim that:

1. Natural sign as used in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe does not have grammatical or pragmatic conventions to express certain moods or to distinguish between action as description versus action as metaphor.
2. These grammatical or pragmatic conventions do exist, but only some signers use them.
3. These grammatical or pragmatic conventions do exist, but only some addressees understand them.

In fact I did see signers differentiate between HIT and RAISE-ONE’S-HAND, although it could be unclear if the latter meant “to be about to hit” or “to raise one’s hand as if about to hit but only to express anger.” And if conventions exist, but not everyone uses them (and those people who do not, don’t have a different convention), what kind of conventionality is that—or rather, what to make of an uneven distribution of conventions, both among deaf people and across deaf and

hearing people? How might I differentiate among natural sign, its usage, and its users, and what are the analytic and ethical stakes of different means of doing so?

If some signers and not others command certain forms or expressions, do I say that some are less competent than others? To do so seems highly problematic given that signers never seemed to be in doubt about what they themselves were saying. Or should I say that there are as many sets of conventions as there are signers and that different sets have different features? While this option is tempting, it dismisses conventions across signers and the ways in which those conventions matter for communication. It also displaces questions of difference from actual practices to abstract systems, a move that could be generative in its focus on form yet incomplete in its erasure of context-specific use. And where in this are addressees? If natural sign scaffolds on nonlinguistic knowledge, and if addressees must put together parts of utterances, then would it not be the *addressees'* conventions and competences on which I should focus my attention? Yet even if I do so, when *no* addressee can understand, or when, as in the case of the extended example with Parvati and Shrila, another deaf local signer understands but understanding is not achieved between deaf local signers and others, the locus of not-understanding does not feel like it matters nearly so much as the not-understanding itself.

### SUSPICION

Another way of thinking about issues of understanding and misunderstanding was suggested by Tok Bahadur Pradhan, a hearing man who in 2010 had been teaching deaf students for sixteen years. In late September 2010, Sagar, who was his former student, and I went to visit him at the deaf school in Mulghat, and then Tok returned with us to Maunabudhuk to talk to the parents of several deaf children about sending their kids to school. He also sat in on the NSL class, where Shrila upon meeting him immediately said, “My *buhāri* ‘daughter-in-law’ yells at me, come talk to her [on my behalf].” He did. Without accusing the younger hearing woman of yelling or mistreating the older deaf women, he said that deaf people are often very suspicious, because they so often miss what’s going on around them. Therefore, he said, it is important to be especially clear about what one is doing; for example, if you ask them not to eat some sweets, tell them that no one is allowed to eat the sweets.<sup>23</sup>

While cautious about a generalization as broad as “deaf people are suspicious,” I nevertheless want to take seriously what Tok Bahadur said. I did not record the Nepali word that Tok Bahadur used, but I want to be clear that I use the word *suspicion* here descriptively: to characterize how people may encounter the world and other people in that world as unjust, deceitful, or withholding of information. In Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, deaf people—even the ones whose families most actively communicate with them—are so frequently in situations where hearing people speak and do not translate what they say into sign. In spaces where there

were deaf people present, I witnessed spoken, untranslated discussions about bus schedules, casual conversations about what the children in the family were up to that day, news about a neighboring family, and reminiscences about working in the Gulf States. I have no evidence that these kinds of things *can't* be said in local sign—on the contrary—but frequently they *aren't*.<sup>24</sup>

Deaf signers may be able to understand spoken interaction to varying degrees, including by tracking bodily movements and postures and their integration with visible activities. For example, Sagar once informed me that Sanu Kumari was telling me something in speech about tomorrow; he had inferred this from a particular forward thrust of the chin.<sup>25</sup> But when speech carries the majority of referential content, deaf signers are made to miss a great deal (De Meulder et al. 2019). Deaf people who lip-read also point out the labor entailed in doing so and the impossibility of getting everything (e.g., Kolb 2013). Kushalnagar et al. (2020) describe this kind of failure to ensure that deaf family members are able to access conversations around them as a form of communicative neglect. In the context of DeafBlind signers in the United States, Edwards (2014: 107–108) describes the frustration of a DeafBlind woman who would put her hands on signers to perceive their conversation—and the signers would “freeze.” Using Goffman’s (1981) framework, being an overhearer and/or a ratified but unaddressed recipient is as important a participant role as speaker/signer and addressee.

I understand Tok Bahadur to have been saying that deaf people are suspicious because hearing people frequently say things in speech without signing, and therefore deaf people may not have the same perspective on events that they would if they had been able to see to what had been said—or, to invoke NSL signers, if the hearing people had bothered to sign with and around them. Using Tok Bahadur’s example of sweets, a deaf person told directly, “Don’t eat that,” might not know that everyone else was told the same thing, or that the plan—said aloud but not signed—was for everyone to eat the sweets together that evening. In this scenario there are two key propositions: first, that the deaf person in question has not actually been mistreated but only thinks they have been; and second, that their assumptions nevertheless make sense because of asymmetrical access to information. Interestingly, when spending time in deaf society, I found that deaf NSL signers themselves are sometimes skeptical of natural signers’ tales of hardships.<sup>26</sup> NSL signers also frequently report that they have been lied to or cheated by hearing people. Hearing people absolutely take advantage of and mistreat deaf people (and other hearing people). I am also familiar with cases where, at least from my perspective, more robust mutual understanding on a referential level might have changed both parties’ perspectives. Although Tok Bahadur did not say so, hearing people are also frequently skeptical about what signers say, or what they think signers say, as this chapter shows.

In considering hearing people’s skepticism toward deaf signers and deaf people’s skepticism toward hearing people and sometimes other deaf people, both in

Maunabudhuk and beyond, I want to take seriously the possibility that frequent misunderstandings are fertile ground for the cultivation of an epistemological stance of suspicion. In the case of deaf people, suspicion can be one possible consequence of communicative neglect, and in the case of both deaf and hearing people, of repeated misunderstandings. Anthropologists have similarly documented how rumors flourish in particular settings and environments (e.g., Das 2007). I want to state again that I am not claiming that Jyoti's, Parvati's, and Shrila's complaints were untrue or based on misunderstandings or on missed information that if they had had access to would have prompted them to feel and experience things differently. Nevertheless, Tok Bahadur's point that deaf people may very reasonably encounter the world with suspicion is worth considering, especially in concert with NSL signers' insistence that it is within hearing people's capacities to communicate with deaf people, and yet hearing people often choose not to.

### CONCLUSION

It might be argued that the kinds of communicative situations described in this chapter are widely familiar; all modes of communication involve the potential for partial understanding, misunderstanding, gaps, accusations, and dismissals. What is particular about natural signers? It is helpful to return again to the experiences of Nepali Sign Language signers. NSL signers sometimes easily interact with hearing people who do not know NSL, using natural sign and/or resources from spoken or written language, but they are not strangers to finding themselves made unintelligible by hearing people. And natural signers sometimes communicate easefully with hearing people. Critically, however, the experiences of NSL signers and (some) natural signers have different temporal and social horizons. For an NSL user a moment or even repeated moments of frustrated, frustrating, or failed communication with hearing people contrast with a remembered past and anticipated future of intelligible interactions with other NSL signers. For (some) natural signers, however, the juxtaposition between making sense and not making sense is typical; there is no other way. Put differently, the unpredictable ubiquity of both intelligible and unintelligible interactions is not just *a* norm—as it can be for NSL signers as well in their interactions outside of deaf society—it is for (some) natural signers *the* norm.

When analyzing statements that get socially evaluated as to truthfulness—whether they concern drinking and eating, relationships with kin, violence, or affection—there are various possible approaches. From one perspective the truth-value may not matter; what matters more is that they are utterances with affective meaning beyond referential facticity. From another perspective the truth-value very much matters, because its evaluation has social consequences; that is to say, when people frequently disbelieve other people, the fabric of sociality is affected. These options might be applied in any situation where people are thought to have

lied. I am haunted, however, by the degree to which, in Maunabudhuk, for these particular signers, questions of truth are inextricably entangled in the social and semiotic limits and possibilities of the communicative mode.

Through a series of conversations among deaf residents of Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, their hearing families, Sagar, and me, I have also considered whether at times my insistence on a certain kind of understanding rendered people more vulnerable to being regarded as unintelligible. Several times hearing signers told me a deaf signer was lying, when I thought the former had misunderstood the latter. In one sense, calling someone a liar in these circumstances entrenches them in a kind of nonintelligibility, yet in another sense, assuming that one has understood properly, even if what one has understood is a lie, is definitionally assuming that the other is understandable. Conversely, by assuming that deaf people are not (necessarily) lying, I have also had to assume that hearing people have not properly made sense of deaf signers—which as I argued in chapter 1 definitionally means that the signers did not make sense to their addressees. Sagar was frequently far more suspicious of local signers' stories (especially those that involved complaints or violence), sometimes asking me if they were lying or tricking him. And yet by asking this question, he also assumed that sense-making had occurred.

For the most part, the people whom I found the hardest to understand were also generally treated by their co-residents as people who lied, were not “with it” or worth engaging in conversation, or of whom might one say “*ke bhanchha, bhanchha*.” Jyoti, Parvati, and Shrila were generally evaluated as making less sense, being more likely to lie, and so forth than the other natural signers with whom I worked closely in these villages. While recognizing that I do not and cannot know these women's histories or subjective experiences, I keep coming back to this: intelligibility requires a presumption of intelligibility for it to be achieved interactively; thus the absence of such a presumption perpetuates unintelligibility. Are people hard to understand because they are hard to understand or because (since they are [assumed to be] hard to understand) others have not tried very hard to understand them? What, over time, does a failure to be attended to, responded to fully or in part, believed, engaged with, understood, or taken seriously, produce in a person's communicative and social habits and practices? How does getting treated over and over as if you make no sense seep into your very bones?

Moreover, negative evaluations, which I think of as the residue of iterative miscommunications, accrue not only to specific people but also more generally to the fact of being deaf and communicating in sign. Even the most communicatively adept and socially respected deaf persons are not unfailingly understood, and negative assumptions about particular people leak into broader understandings of what it is to be deaf or a signer. In the summer of 2012, I returned to Maunabudhuk, almost two years after I had last been there. I spent my first night in the bazaar with plans to visit the hamlets where most of my deaf friends and acquaintances lived in the following days. Although my hearing friends and acquaintances in

the bazaar all immediately recognized me, several hearing people expressed doubt that the deaf people—with whom I had spent even more time—would remember me. I sensed that this potential forgetfulness was being attributed to some quality of deaf persons or deafness. One of the hearing people later named this association directly. Plying me with hot tea and freshly fried snacks, she wondered aloud if the deaf people would remember me, then moved her hands in the air as if signing and said, “*hāt chalāūdāi* ‘they move their hands [like this].’”<sup>27</sup>

In doing so, she located the source of their projected forgetfulness in signing, the communicative modality characteristic of deaf people. She did not identify any particular deaf people, and it is unclear to me if she was thinking specifically about the women focused on in this chapter—that is to say, the women who lived closest to the bazaar and who therefore were most likely to regularly interact with bazaar residents. But why would deaf people, including these particular deaf people, have forgotten me? While these women were more likely to encounter communicative difficulties than hearing people, and than many other local signers, none of them experienced memory loss or had trouble recognizing faces. So why were other residents wondering if they would know who I was?

Here I harken back to the figure of the deaf or *lāto* person as discussed in chapter 1 and to the kinds of assumptions and expectations sutured to it. If being made *lāto* is a relational process, it is critical to name the elements involved. I have argued that grammar does ethical labor, and that in natural sign, less elaborated, less conventional, and less shared grammar means that people have to do more work than in conventional languages. In other words, the relational process of (un)intelligibility includes both the communicative material and its speakers/signers and addressees. The lean quality of natural sign is both a constraint and an affordance, in that it leaves room for people to engage in sense-making—and room for them to choose to do so or not. Moreover, the consequences of those choices are not bound to specific interactional moments but extend beyond them into the broader fabric of communicative sociality between and among deaf and hearing signers.

Perhaps it is unnecessary to do so, but I nevertheless note here that not a single deaf person failed to know exactly who I was.