

## Afterword

Across the introduction and five chapters, this book has made a series of interwoven interventions. Chapter 1 centered deaf NSL signers' insights as valuable both empirically and theoretically and documented how NSL signers objectify, name, and characterize natural sign—as a mode of signed communication that has expansive possibilities but also limits. NSL signers' discourse further reveals that communicative vulnerability can—and should—be located in participant configurations, not individuals, and that natural sign conversations are especially vulnerable to the whims of hearing participants. Drawing on NSL signers' perspectives, this book argues that natural sign is a phenomenon in the world, and one that offers particular purchase on the entanglement of language, interaction, and ethics. It shows that language is not only a medium for ethical engagement but also and more foundationally its result.

I have also argued that understanding natural sign requires attending to its particular sociolinguistic and semiotic features. A common idea in sign language studies is that of the critical mass: the number of deaf people necessary for the emergence of a signed language (e.g., Kegl, Senghas, and Coppola 1999), whether in a school or a community such as a village. Numbers are not all that matter; how often people communicate, whether they know each other well, and what kinds of shared backgrounds can be assumed also affect the process and structure of language (Meir et al. 2010; Padden 2011). Sign language scholars interested in the relationship between communities of signers and sign itself often formulate their analyses in relation to forms and features, particular dimensions of linguistic structure, and demographics. I have suggested that underneath these

more technical-seeming issues are existential questions about who understands whom, who gets to take language for granted, and who does not. Do people want to communicate with each other? What other communicative and other demands are being made on them? What kinds of assumptions of intelligibility are overtly and implicitly made? How do deaf and hearing people understand each other, as well as misunderstand and not-understand, and how do they evaluate their interactions? Put another way, language emergence is not only a demographic issue, it is also an ethical one.

In chapter 2, I explored the particular demographics of natural sign in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, arguing that there is evidence of transmission across time (and space), and yet that it is not an emerging sign language. Analyzing deaf demography in Maunabudhuk and Bodhe, I showed that the simultaneous possibilities and precarities of natural sign are linked to the fact that it is widely available and used, but not the primary communicative mode for a dense or tightly connected social group. My analysis lead me to argue that deaf people's presence in the world is much less exceptional than is often implied, and the world far more sign-saturated.

In chapter 3, I theorized natural sign's constraints and affordances in relation to conventionality, immanence, and emergence. I demonstrated how the fact that natural sign does not interpellate its addressees the way conventional grammar does creates time and space in which people may or may not do the work—as NSL signers know. Whether or not people make sense of natural sign depends in many cases on their willingness to do so. In chapters 4 and 5, I offered accounts of interactions within specific contexts. In doing so, I showed how deaf and hearing interlocutors' orientations toward communicating in natural sign has effects on that communication and in turn how repeated difficulties in communication affect people's desires, expectations, and practices. Deaf natural signers creatively shape, and are also shaped by, their communicative circumstances, both in particular interactions and over the course of their lives.

These arguments matter intellectually and they matter socially and politically. Founding assumptions in social and linguistic theory, but also in social life, appear differently when theorized from the perspective of users of signed (and) emergent language. Signed language, whether emergent or not, demands much closer attention to perception, to senses, and to access than scholars outside of sign language studies, deaf studies, and “deaf anthropology” (Friedner and Kusters 2020) often offer—and as I argue in the introduction, *all* language use, even in hypothetical situations, should garner such attention, so as not to naturalize some bodies and erase others. Emergent language in turn demands attention to attention, along with attention to intention, care, apathy, desire, refusal, ethics, and the ways that the boundary between language and everything else is both sharp and porous.

This book does not claim that if only people would try, they would always understand each other across sensory, linguistic, and other differences. Sometimes

people try and fail. Sometimes people have other labor they need to do: caring for children, earning a living. What this book does claim, and demonstrate, is that even in the absence of the resources of conventional language that most people in the world take for granted, people can draw on linguistic conventions, however lean, social and corporeal knowledge and routines, and a shared desire to communicate, to take up the world's nudges, wrest immanent signs into actuality, and work to understand each other. The existence of natural sign, the ways people communicate in it, and the observations NSL signers make together suggest that deaf-centered sociality and access to conventional signed languages are critical for deaf children and adults. Yet these same things also suggest that communication among deaf people and between deaf and hearing people that does not involve conventional language, that makes use of other available resources, can and does produce connection, communication, and communicative sociality.<sup>1</sup> While different from shared sign languages and deaf community sign languages, natural sign makes communication among deaf people, and between deaf and hearing people, eminently possible. And to return to the tensions described in the introduction, natural signers' communicative vulnerability also demands acknowledgment, as is so powerfully laid out by NSL signers' discourse.

Translation is also a key theme across multiple of these chapters. It is present in a variety of contexts: in conversations within natural sign or NSL, between natural sign and NSL, between signing and speaking, and among signing, speaking, and writing. As the final chapter shows, translating can transform something that is partially understood into something that is socially rendered as fully understood, misunderstood, or not understood at all. Even with the best translations, translating is a complicated endeavor; in the contexts written about here, translation can render a person both intelligible (you have been understood well enough to be translated) and unintelligible (you are a person who requires translation). I have sometimes thought of translation, especially of lean utterances into more elaborated ones, as an act of love, care, or responsibility. But love itself is complicated and fraught. Love can overstep. Love, like translation, can get things wrong, misdirect, change things in unintended ways. I am thinking here of how NSL signers would frequently facilitate conversations with NEW NSL signers whom I had just met, translating and often adding to what had been said. At times I found this mediation helpful, even necessary. Other times I found myself asking them to let the other person and I communicate directly, together, even if we struggled. My instinct is that my conversational partners also experienced translations and augmentations as sometimes relieving and other times frustrating.

In certain respects, then, this book is about translation; and it is also a practice of translation. Translation is present in the literal translations I have made from natural sign, NSL, and Nepali to English, and in the more figurative translations I have made from fieldwork experiences to ethnographic text, from countless hours of interactions to the pages you are reading. While these translations have been for

me an act of love, I recognize the ambivalence of love, the ways I have undoubtedly misunderstood and not-understood. And (but?) there are forms of love and relationality that sidestep translation altogether. Once again, I turn to my interlocutors to make sense.

On May 24, 2010, I recorded in my fieldnotes an interaction between Parvati Kadgha and myself into which I drew Padma Puri and Sagar Karki, asking them to help me understand what she had said. Parvati was telling me about a *pujā* ‘ceremony, ritual’; she also mentioned her sons. Sagar and Padma were able to understand more than I had, explaining to me that the *pujā* involved ghee and a sacrificial goat, though neither of them was able to pinpoint exactly who would be there and when it would happen. Padma described for me in detail how the goat’s throat was cut, and then its blood spread and its head offered up, and said that the temple in question was located in the Tarai, the plains to our south. Sagar turned his attention back to Parvati, teasing her about the ghee. He depicted her waiting until no one else was around, then opening a bottle of the rich food and scooping handfuls into her mouth, all the while keeping watch to make sure no one was coming. Parvati, along with everyone else, laughed at the scene he created. Unsurprisingly, I wanted to know who, when, why, and for how long.

None of us, in other words, seemed to fully understand what Parvati was telling us. While I indicated directly that I had not understood, Sagar and Padma were more equivocal. Neither of them translated or reworded what she had said, nor did they say that they could not do so. Instead, each of them took up a thread from her signing and wove it into something new. Padma responded by sharing his own knowledge and experiences, while Sagar focused on one dimension of the story that he had fully understood—the ghee—and created a different kind of communicative event, teasing Parvati in a recognizable, socially appropriate way. Both Padma and Sagar’s actions indicated that they had, at least in part, understood her. By expanding on what Parvati had signed, and in Sagar’s case directly addressing her, they rendered her at that moment intelligible as a signer, a participant in multiparty conversation and communicative sociality. Whether or not they fully made sense of what she said, they made her into someone who made sense.