

Figure (of Personhood) Drawing: Scaffolding Signing and Signers in Nepal

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how the affordances of pictorial representations of sign language forms (as enacted by illustrated signers) impact institutional processes of enskillment to sign language use. First, I attend to the participation framework roles such images inhabit in processes through which deaf teachers work to socialize novice signers to control the viewpoint reversals fundamental to local signing practices. I then explore how novice signers' participant roles in relation to these images shift as they transition from animating the pictorially represented signs to performing them in ways aimed at yielding identification with the portrayed figures of personhood. Finally, through an analysis of a pictorially illustrated Nepali Sign Language version of Nepal's new national anthem, I show how the particulars of such figures have shifted in response to dramatic political changes following Nepal's Maoist Civil War.

In 2017, a deaf Nepali artist named Pratigya Shakya shared with his online followers a series of videos featuring his illustrations. Addressing himself to a transnational "Deaf World,"¹ Shakya used Nepali Sign Language (NSL)² to

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1. Many signers invoke the concept "Deaf World" to refer to transnational relations based in deaf sociality, rather than to any particular geographical location (Lane et al. 1996). As Friedner and Kusters (2015, xvii) note, however, "it is important to recognize multiplicity and diversity in deaf worlds, to affirm that there can be more than one deaf world and many ways to be deaf" (see also Monaghan et al. 2003).

2. Later in the article I unpack in more detail what I mean by characterizing Shakya's signing with this term.

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sign, “Hello! Namaste! Welcome! Thank you! This place is called Charikot.” After his cameraperson panned over the surrounding mountains, Shakya commented, “I’ve traveled far to be here, you can see the nice view.” Then, followed by the camera, Shakya walked toward the open door of the Bhimeshwor School for Deaf Children in Charikot, Dolakha, noting that the school had been “re-built following the earthquake.” (Nepal experienced a massive earthquake in 2015.) “My responsibility has been painting,” signed Shakya, “come and see.”

Once inside, Shakya was filmed standing before a series of large, colorful murals that he had painted on the walls of the various schoolrooms. In these illustrations, Shakya had created pictorial representations of people performing the sign forms locally understood to be part of the canon of standardized NSL lexical items. Accompanying each rendering were paintings of the signs’ referents and written Nepali and/or English translations of the signs’ referential meanings. For example, Shakya paused before an almost life-size portrayal of a person performing the hand and head motions understood to constitute the standard NSL lexical item *rhinoceros* (see fig. 1). Positioning himself in front of the image, Shakya turned to the camera and performed the sign, then indicated the painted



Figure 1. Shakya before his mural in the Bhimeshwor School for Deaf Children

image of the signer and the Nepali term for *rhinoceros* (गैडा in Devanagari script) that was written on the wall, and finally directed the camera to his painting of a rhino standing in a field of grass; these four (including Shakyas's dynamic performance) representations were clustered together, diagrammatically signaling that they were different modes of representing "the same" thing; other such clusters were separated from this one by blank space on the wall.

While this example contains all the elements commonly included in Shakyas's hybrid representations, sometimes his pictorial portrayals of sign form-as-embodied-by-signer and of referent were collapsed into one image. This most frequently occurred in his portrayals of NSL signs that referred to social types. For example, in portraying the sign *baby*, Shakyas drew and painted a figure interpretable as an infant (large round head, chubby cheeks, scant hair) both performing and embodying the sign, along with the English text "Baby" and the Nepali बच्चा; no separate image to illustrate the referent was required in this and other such cases (see fig. 2).

In addition to making the effort to travel around the country to paint (or repaint, following earthquake damage) such murals on classroom walls, Shakyas has also created representations of NSL forms, signers, referents, and written glosses for dictionaries, posters, and textbooks that are published by Nepali associations of deaf persons and integrated into sign language teachers' lessons in classes for deaf students throughout the country. These materials serve as public



Figure 2. Nepali Sign Language poster featuring the sign *baby*

resources through which students access the canon of lexical items understood to constitute standard NSL; with the support of sign language teachers and peers, students are urged to reproduce and incorporate into their linguistic repertoires the sign forms so depicted by Shakya. These images also function as a tool through which students are encouraged to create boundaries and linkages between a range of linguistic practices, different forms of representation of such practices, and social types.

In this article, I attend to the affordances of such pictorial representations as they emerge in relation to other aspects of local semiotic ecologies. These elements include but are not limited to other elements Shakya's script-code-image "constellations" (Choksi 2015) and embodied, interactive processes of enskillment (Ingold 2000) to sign language use. I also consider the role of such relational affordances in the enregisterment (Agha 2005) of NSL and associated figures of deaf Nepali personhood as ideologically salient objects. Agha (2011, 172–73) defines figures of personhood as "behaviors that convey icons (or images) of personhood to those for whom they function as signs (i.e., those able to infer these personae from these behaviors)." When performed or enacted, such behaviors serve as both "singular indexical icons" of "the persona (or social image) of the one performing them" and may be "detached from their particularizing-indexical aspect when such signs are reevaluated as generic symbols." As Gal notes, such rescaling is a "metasemiotic achievement of interdiscursivity" arising from a "perceived repetition and hence a seeming linkage (across encounters) of forms that are framed, reflexively, as being the 'same thing, again,' or as yet another instantiation of a recognized type in some cultural framework" (2018, 2).

The semiotic processes and modalities through which such figures are materialized, enacted, and circulated vary. While a linguistic anthropology focusing on visual (and nonmodality specific) images is emerging (see, e.g., Ball 2014; Chumley 2016; Meek 2016; Nakassis 2019), little of this work has focused specifically on pictorial representations of linguistic form.³ In doing so in this article, I draw on the concept of "affordances," in order to stress that I center the "total system of bodily orientation" of an organism-person in an environment (Ingold 2000, 261) rather than framing visual perception of Shakya's images as separate from other modes of sensory engagement. Also, while there

3. Though see Jackson (2008) and Keane (2009) for discussions of political cartoons; Perley's (e.g., 2017) cartoons centering linguistic anthropological and indigenous critiques of US language politics; and some historical linguistic analyses of epigraphy.

are objective properties of both Shakya's images and of the bodies of persons' engaging them, I treat their affordances as relationally emergent within particular semiotic ecologies, including the ways signers are socialized to ideologically mediated habits of perception, action, and interpretation (Keane 2018).

Thus, I'll first attend closely to the situated processes through which signers engage Shakya's images; specifically, in most cases, by responding to them through bodily mimesis in the context of NSL lessons. Informed by the literature concerned with imitation (e.g., Lempert 2014), mimesis (e.g., Seizer 1997), copies (e.g., Inoue 2006), and citationality (e.g., Nakassis 2013), among other related analytical terms, I explore local deaf ontologies about what constitutes copying, with particular attention to the salience in this context of managing viewpoint rotation in producing successful copies. Next, I analyze how the encoding of visual viewpoint in Shakya's representations of signing figures is incorporated into the participant frameworks through which skilled signers provide scaffolding to help novice signers control such perspectival shifts. As novices become more skilled, these frameworks are reordered in ways that I argue plays an ideologically mediated role in socializing signers not to just to animate the pictured signs but to perform them in ways aimed at yielding identification with the portrayed figures of personhood.⁴

I also address the (changing) character of these figures. Shakya's images not only convey information about NSL linguistic forms but also contain rich visual details that narrow or widen the social indexicalities deaf leaders seek to bundle together with representations of standard NSL. In my earlier publications (Hoffmann-Dilloway 2008, 2010, 2016), I focused on how deaf institutions worked to narrow and naturalize associations between NSL, middle hills caste Hinduism, and Nepali nationalism. However, drawing on postwar research trips in 2015 and 2017, I conclude this article with a discussion of Shakya's pictorially illustrated NSL version of Nepal's new national anthem. I show how, in response to dramatic political changes following Nepal's Maoist Civil War (1996–2006), deaf Nepali leaders have used Shakya's drawings in attempts to rearrange and widen bundled associations they had not so long ago been working to produce and reinforce. By attending to the shifting political dimensions of these representations, this article responds to calls (such as by Moore et al. [2010]) for analyses of how minoritized languages are impacted by state recognition.

4. See Goffman 1959, 1974, 1981; Silvio 2010; Manning and Gershon 2013; and Barker 2019.

Objectifying NSL

Sign Language Literacies

First, a few words about the various modes and media through which sign languages may be represented. In many settings, distinctive modality specific and formal properties of sign languages are deemed “unwritable.” In such contexts, glosses based on the written forms of spoken languages are often understood as the appropriate means of writing sign languages (with the mediation of what may be considered representations of spoken language forms acknowledged, downplayed, or contested; see, e.g., Bagga-Gupta 2000). However, a range of notation and/or writing systems (e.g., SignWriting, Hamnosys, and Si5s) that systematically represent the formal features of particular signing practices have also been developed, including several that combine imagistic and phonetic representation in fascinating ways.⁵

Additionally, those seeking to encode signing practices in two-dimensional markings often draw on a wide range of representational forms not typically categorized as writing, such as photographs, video stills, and single or sequential drawings, instead of or in concert with writing, yielding hybrid representations (see Rosenthal 2009).⁶ Such practices also intersect with other types of sign language literacies, such as video-recordings of signed performances, which take forms other than two-dimensional markings (Czubek 2006). The video I described in the introduction to this article indeed provides an example of just such a hybrid text in which a variety of types of sign language literacies are combined and nested.

While in this article I am singling out for analytical attention Shakya’s pictorial representations of NSL from the written graphic representations of English and Nepali that also appear in NSL murals, dictionaries, and primers, I should note that I follow scholars who point out that the whether and how drawing and writing are distinguished is ethnographically variable (see Boone 1994; Ingold 2007; Choksi 2015). However, in this particular context, such pictorial representations of linguistic forms were framed as distinct from writing systems designed to represent sound-based languages, even as the murals I’ve described above demonstrate how, in this context, these modes can have both parallel functions as well as distinct affordances. However, while pictures were

5. See, e.g., my research focusing on contexts of use for SignWriting (e.g., Hoffmann-Dilloway 2011b, 2013, 2018).

6. Though of course, as Chun (2017) makes clear, imagined potential purities of representation create the necessary foil for assessing such practices as hybrid.

locally distinguished from writing, Shakya's images were framed specifically as representations of the linguistic forms of NSL.

Objectifying NSL

The set of communicative practices that came to be labeled Nepali Sign Language (NSL) are thought to have emerged with the establishment of Nepali schools for deaf children in 1966 and coalesced with the establishment of associations for deaf persons run by school graduates, starting in the 1980s.⁷ As in many other contexts in which a modernist linguistic monolith (Irvine and Gal 2000; Makoni and Pennycook 2007; Rymes 2014) language ideological frame held sway, in order to make their linguistic practices legible to powerful stakeholders, including the state, international organizations, and the hearing public (who, as Graif [2018] notes, largely did not treat signing practices as language), deaf leaders sought to objectify an NSL through the production of textual objects, such as dictionaries, that could legitimate signing practices as bounded and discrete languages (see Schmaling 2012).

Modeled on already existing sign language dictionaries (e.g., those for American Sign Language brought to Nepal in the early days of the schools for deaf children by US Peace Corps volunteers), these texts have focused on clustering together Nepali and English textual translations of signs' referents with pictorial representations of their forms. Shakya, a member of one of the first cohorts of deaf children to grow up in Nepal signing with peers in deaf institutional spaces and whose artistic abilities were recognized when he was quite young, was recruited to provide the illustrations for the first dictionary (published in 1996 by Nepal's National Federation of Deaf and Hard of Hearing [NDFN] in partnership with the Danish Federation of Hard of Hearing People [LBH]).⁸

Shakya's visual representations of signing practices and deaf interests have not been restricted to dictionaries and primers. Rather, these texts have taken a range of forms and have been designed to have different pragmatic effects. For example, in response to local and global stigma associated with deafness and indifference or hostility to sign language use and deaf sociality, Shakya has produced and circulated online and in deaf schools and associations hundreds of drawings and paintings extolling the virtues of signing. He has produced perhaps as many drawings and paintings portraying experiences of deaf oppression, with

7. See Acharya ([1997] 2004); Sharma (2003); Khanal (2013); Hoffmann-Dilloway (2016); Green (2018); and Graif (2018) for more detailed discussions of and debates surrounding the emergence and development of NSL.

8. The acronym for the National Federation of Deaf and Hard of Hearing was changed from NFDN to NDFN to distinguish this group from Nepal's National Federation of the Disabled (see also Green 2018).

particular focus on critiquing what he sees as the brutality of cochlear implantation. He is also regularly called on by associations for deaf persons to produce very specific instructive illustrations, geared either toward deaf persons (e.g., illustrated instructions related to earthquake safety) or hearing publics (e.g., posts articulating through illustrations why deaf Nepalis should be permitted to apply for drivers licenses).

In addition to designing images with an eye toward creating affective impacts on viewer's future actions, Shakya also creates pictorial texts that call for more immediate corporeal engagement. For example, Shakya and deaf colleagues often design, paint, and distribute hats, buttons, glasses, and masks to be worn and signs to be carried at disability rights marches. Some have featured paper hands affixed to the hats that sway when worn by the marchers, creating a movement that mimics the NSL sign for sign language. Such "haptics of placing" (Edwards 2012, 230) recall other corporeal engagements with artworks in contexts of political protest (e.g., Strassler 2010).

In this article, however, I'll focus primarily on Shakya's pictorial representations of NSL forms that are incorporated into sign language instruction in educational contexts. In such materials, Shakya illustrates only the standard forms ratified by the associations of deaf people, whose stated goal is to "make one Nepali Sign Language which is accepted by all and bring it into use" (NFDH 2003, viii). Further, Shakya is essentially the only person who has been ratified to illustrate these standard forms. Thus, NSL as a named and objectified language and Shakya's illustrations of its forms have always been tightly bundled together.⁹

As I have previously argued (Hoffmann-Dilloway 2008, 2010, 2016), the fact that drawings have been the primary means of representing the formal properties of NSL signs in two-dimensional form affected the formal and ideological thrusts of NSL standardization projects, by encouraging an exclusive formal focus on lexical items (which, given local ideologies about the affordances of drawing, were easier to represent pictorially than the spatial grammatical constructions characterizing longer stretches of discourse) in standardizing efforts. In turn, this narrow formal focus constrained the manner in which the standardization project affected NSL linguistic practice more broadly, by allowing different institutions, like associations for deaf people and schools for deaf students, to promote grammatically distinct forms of signing while still adhering to the same overarching standardization project (an effect that has made conceptions

9. Recently the associations have invested in creating videos featuring signers performing the standard NSL forms, which circulate online. In future work I'll explore how these materials are being drawn into the processes described in this article.

of what constitutes standard NSL more inclusive of the morphological and syntactic variation that typically marks relatively late exposure of deaf children to signing practice and more accommodating of ideological differences across institutions about the nature of NSL).

These images are reproduced and circulated throughout Nepal, with the expectation that recipients of the dictionaries will model their signing on these representations of standard lexical items. There is of course some slippage in terms of whether the images in the books and posters are understood to mimic current signing practice or whether signers' reproductions of the books' forms are understood as the copies. This depends, of course, on the given signer and the degree to which their extant practices overlap with those that the associations of deaf people mined for the forms that became standard. That said, in contexts in which a signer is tasked with reproducing the forms represented in Shakya's images, what does that process entail? Rather than take for granted what locally appropriate copying of the dictionary forms looks like, in the following section I'll follow Lempert's (2014, 385) cue to attend to the "labor that cleaves and closes differentials" by fleshing out ethnographically how novice signers are socialized to reproduce these images.

Copying Signs from Copresent and Pictorially Represented Interlocutors

In so doing, I'll focus on practices in the Older Deaf Persons (ODP) program. This project (begun in 2008, hosted by the Kathmandu Association of the Deaf, and originally funded by the British NGO Deafway) was designed to support elderly deaf people in Kathmandu and the neighboring city of Kirtipur. In addition to offering participants material and social support, in the form of meals and companionship, this typically three-day-a-week program also focused on assisting participants in developing, to whatever degree possible, competence in NSL. Because, as I mentioned earlier, communicative practices locally understood to constitute NSL developed primarily in the context of schools and associations for deaf people that were not established until the 1960s and 1980s respectively, the elderly participants in the program were not afforded an opportunity to acquire these practices in childhood or adolescence.¹⁰

10. Those born later are also not necessarily afforded this access either. While the percentage of d/Deaf Nepalis born to hearing parents is not known, it is most likely at least as high as the 90 percent to 97 percent cited for the United States (Ross and Karchmer 2004). It is very rare that hearing parents learn to sign, and Devkota (2003) estimated in 2003 that only one percent of d/Deaf children had received any schooling through which they could have been regularly exposed to NSL.

Many thus spent the bulk of their lives communicating primarily via gestural/signing systems that range in complexity and are relatively idiosyncratic, though they often overlap with widespread cospeech gestures. While these systems are referred to locally as “natural sign systems” (see Green 2018), I’ll refer to them here using the term more often used in the literature, *homesigns*. I do so because I see this term as more clearly indicating an understanding (shared with my Nepali deaf interlocutors) that such systems are grounded in relatively circumscribed relational interactions rather than being asocial, as the term *natural* may imply to readers. (Indeed, as Graif [2018] shows, the term *natural sign* reflects and reproduces many hearing Nepalis’ understanding that the practices so referenced are natural in an asocial, ahistorical way).

The ODP participants’ late exposure to NSL (and in the case of many of the participants, to any fully accessible language) has meant that their control of these signing practices has developed much more slowly than that of younger novice signers. Despite that, the processes through which ODP members are socialized to engage with Shakyas’ depictions of standard forms are structured similarly to pedagogical practices aimed at younger novice signers, though they may be enacted more slowly and repetitively.

Viewpoint Rotation in “Signing Along”

Specifically, in this section I focus on how novice participants are taught to copy the movements and bodily positions portrayed in Shakyas’ illustrations of NSL forms. Such imitation hinges not only on parsing the details of the movements depicted in the pictorial representations (which, as Schmaling [2012] notes, requires interpretive work) but also in managing issues of viewpoint rotation involved in reproducing the movements depicted from the position of the depicted signer. Such copying with viewpoint rotation is part of a broader practice whereby novice signers learn to reproduce the sign forms modeled by their face-to-face interlocutors.

For example, throughout my fieldwork with deaf and hearing signers across my projects in Nepal, Germany (2013), and Malta (2018) I’ve often observed novice signers (including when I, as a hearing person, was learning to sign in these places) encouraged to “sign along” with their interlocutors. This practice entails a novice signer animating (in Goffmann’s [1974] sense) the linguistic content produced by a skilled interlocutor in as tightly synchronized a way as possible, combining entrainment (“the process whereby our body is ‘captured’ . . . by an external cycle with a rhythm”) with “the conspicuous citationality of reported speech” (Lempert 2014, 384; Sidnell 2006; Mannheim 2018). This

practice can be characterized by its phatic-indexicalism (Nozawa 2015), in that it provides visual evidence of indexical triggering and relationality afforded by open communicative channels (which often cannot be taken for granted by deaf persons).

Signing along can also be part of a process of enskillment (Ingold 2000) into signing practices more broadly. Signers typically do not visually monitor their own signing but, rather, visually attend to their interlocutors' movements. Skill in calibrating the interoceptive and proprioceptive sensations of producing signing with the visual targets provided by other signers¹¹ is thus a vital part of learning to sign (for sighted signers). These processes are mutually reinforcing in that mastering the motions that characterize the production of particular signs can make them easier to parse visually when observing others producing them or attempting to parse a pictorial representation of them: "what our bodies know how to do is also what they are able to see" (Streeck 2015, 422).

Producing and parsing sign languages, however, involves calibrating a range of viewpoints (including the situated, embodied viewpoints of the signers and any other viewpoints enacted in signed narratives, such as more global viewpoints [Dudis 2004]). In many signing practices, skilled signers treat as unmarked what can be described as relative, egocentric frames of reference (Levinson 2003) when grammaticalizing the use of space. That is, signers by default parse sign forms from the embodied visual perspective of the person producing them. In such cases, signing along face to face requires that novices make a 180-degree spatial rotation when, for example, attempting to copy bilaterally asymmetrical movements.

To provide an example of the distinction between copying (with such rotation) versus mirroring (without such rotation) that may be familiar to nonsigners, such readers may have participated in a dance or exercise classes in which the participants copy the movements of their instructor in as tightly synchronized a way as they can manage (rather, in this sense, like signing along). Participants in such classes are sometimes discombobulated when the instructor shifts from facing the same direction as the participants (the front of the room, where there is often a mirror reflecting everyone's coordinated movements), to facing the class. Reproducing the instructors' movements when dancing face to face requires that the participants make a 180-degree spatial rotation when attempting to copy bilaterally asymmetrical movements figured according to a right-left spatial axis. Dancers, or long-term group exercise class attendees can

11. See Harkness (2017) on related processes of calibration for hearing signers.

typically make this shift seamlessly. But for many less frequent participants it can be more difficult to copy the instructor's movements when dancing face to face. Consequently, some mirror them instead—for example, moving to the left when the instructor moves to the right, as if the instructor were their own mirror image, while more experienced students are able to continue to copy the instructor and move to the right. I speak from experience in noting that, in a crowded class, this can result in people crashing into one another.

In many sign languages, such spatial rotations are operationalized semantically, are grammaticalized, and have particular pragmatic effects; controlling these reversals is thus a central skill (Shield and Meier 2012). However, in all of the ethnographic contexts of sign language-based deaf sociality in which I've participated, some novice signers struggled with this kind of viewpoint rotation. Further, in each of these contexts teachers and other fluent signers have commented to me that they understood mirroring as indexing difficulty on the part of the mirroring signer in acquiring fluent signing skills. Indeed, while signing along can function as a set of real time phatic traces indicative of contact and attention, mirroring as opposed to copying can be taken as a function of a trace of prior absence of contact, as (in my fieldwork) those who most consistently and persistently mirrored were either the newest signers or those signers who were not engaged in accessible interactive language use until very late in life, such as many of the ODP participants.

In some cases, I've observed that when such "errors" would result in semantic confusion or when the stakes of formal correctness in orientation are high, fluent interlocutors sometimes draw on their own rather virtuosic control of spatial rotations to transform their own signing practices into a mirror image of what they would typically look like, so that the novice mirroring them begins to, in so doing, produce referentially or poetically correct forms. For example, I wrote about such an event taking place during an interview I recorded between an elderly homesigner, Madhu,¹² who persistently mirrored, and a fluent signer, Amita (Hoffmann-Dilloway 2011a, 2016).

Over the course of their conversation, Amita reversed the perspective of her signing so that Madhu's mirroring of her signs took on the "correct" NSL forms for a right-handed signer. In other cases, interlocutors may arrange their bodies side by side, rather than face to face, so that perspectival rotations are less necessary (see also Ochs and Solomon 2010; Shield and Meier 2012). These examples, in which skilled signers provide various types of scaffolding (Wood and

12. Other than Shakya, I refer to all other ethnographic interlocutors with pseudonyms.

Wood 1996) for novice signers, recall Downey's (2008, 205) claim (based on a study of learning in capoeira) that "we imitate well because we typically do not imitate indifferent models." Further, the efforts of these "more capable peers" (Vygotsky 1978, 86) illustrate that sociocentric frames of reference encompass and create pathways for learning to control egocentric uses of signing space, supporting Hanks's (2005) assertion that deictic space is socially achieved, and that the self-other mappings and perspectival manipulation involved in producing and parsing signed languages need not be an individual cognitive task but can be distributed among participants via the realignment of signing bodies. This point is further illustrated by the classroom examples that follow.

Viewpoint Alignment and Shakya's Figures

Instruction in the ODP thus often focuses on working closely with participants to help them manage the viewpoint rotations involved in copying Shakya's illustrations, in which signing figures are portrayed as facing the viewer. For example, one afternoon on a 2017 visit to the ODP, I joined the group of twelve participants as we sat on cushions arranged in a ring around the room, each with a copy of one of Shakya's illustrated NSL primers. Rohan, the instructor, chose a page from the text (on this day, one featuring the standardized NSL signs for various fruits) and tasked the participants with practicing copying the forms there illustrated. Rohan then moved around the circle, working individually with each participant, to check whether students' copies were formally correct (the relevant form at issue including proper viewpoint rotation).

Some participants struggled with this task. For example, Rohan deemed Samir's copies ill formed. Consequently, Rohan placed the primer on the floor against his own knees, so that the pictorially depicted model signer and Rohan were aligned in facing Samir. Rohan then repeatedly performed the target sign himself, occasionally pausing to direct Samir's attention back and forth between Rohan's and the primer's example. Thus, Samir was encouraged to relate the static (illustrated) model with a copresent dynamically moving model. However, while this approach to scaffolding helped ODP participants parse out the representations of movement featured in the illustrations, it did not specifically address challenges related to viewpoint rotation (as the illustration and Rohan were both face to face with the novice).

Indeed, as Samir required such support, Rohan recruited Bina (a young, fluent signer assisting that day) to sit next to Samir and perform the signs in concert with Rohan. Thus, Samir now had three models scaffolding his performance of the sign; a detailed static drawing, a dynamic face-to-face model, and a

dynamic side-by-side model (the copying of which did not require viewpoint rotation). This consistent support appeared to make a significant difference in the signing practices of the late language learners among the ODP participants. In fact, Madhu, mentioned above, whom I observed consistently mirror rather than copy interlocutors' NSL signs over a period of about ten years of informal participation in deaf social spaces, began more consistently copying rather than mirroring when signing along following such intensive training in the ODP.

As we've seen, then, novices are first socialized to treat Shakya's pictorial images as an interlocutor addressing them, performing signs the novices should copy. As in other contexts of signing along, novice signers' actions are framed in such interactions as animation of another person's or, in the case of the pictorial representations, a staged figure's (Goffman 1974) signs. However, I observed that as students became more experienced signers, they were encouraged not to see themselves as addressed by the illustrations but rather to frame themselves as embodiments—natural figures (Goffman 1974)—of the imagistic exemplars to be copied. However, as Hastings and Manning (2004) point out, acts of mimesis do not in and of themselves necessarily yield identification between copied and copiers; depending on how participant roles are distributed, they may rather function to create alterity. Thus, in the remainder of this section I explore the processes through which identification is encouraged.

This shift occurred in part via explicit metapragmatic framing, as Rohan praised a student for signing correctly and explicitly began to encourage other students to copy that student. Rearrangement in the spatial positioning and orientation of classroom participants also reflected and produced changes in the participation framework (Goodwin and Goodwin 1992); as students became more skilled, they were no longer asked to face an NSL poster or dictionary and copy the movements of the depicted figures but rather to produce the signs standing in front of the class, facing the other students, with the NSL posters to their back. Consequently, they were oriented in the same direction as Shakya's figures, literally "standing in" for these exemplars. Indeed, on the afternoon described above, after checking on each ODP participant's face-to-face engagement with the primer, Rohan asked several members to stand at the front of the room, before Shakya's posters, and do just this. These transitions in viewpoint alignment with the pictured signers aimed at a concurrent shift for novices from animation to performance of the figures, with the sense of identification with them this latter term is usually taken to imply. That is, with this shift, these pictorial figures, like the discursively enacted figures more typically analyzed by linguistic anthropologists, could function as "external images" of "idealized

selves” that may come to be embodied by given signers through repeated acts of mimesis (Silvio 2010, 426; Butler 1990).¹³

But identification with which elements of Shakya’s images? Signing practice often entails some degree of enactment of characteristics of a referent, whether lexically (e.g., the sign *rhino* mentioned in the opening of this article entails the signer using a hand to place a rhino’s horned snout over their own nose) or via polycomponential sign formulation and constructed action whereby nonlexical resources are drawn on as signers “become the object” they refer to (Quinto-Pozos 2007), in order to describe its characteristics or movements (e.g., if a signer drew on a range of embodied resources to nonlexically convey details about a rhino’s path through a grassy field). However, I’m not suggesting that pedagogical practices such as those described above encourage identification with the rhino, which, whether in sign form and pictorial depiction is represented in the sense of “to stand for or in place of something that is absent” (Parmentier 2015, 2).

Indeed, as figure 1 shows, in many of Shakya’s illustrations he portrays a signer producing the standard form adjacent to but separate from the pictorial representation of its referent. However, as also mentioned above, in illustrations of sign forms referring to social types, Shakya typically collapsed the images of signer and referent into one depiction. As novice signers were encouraged to identify, through classroom learning, with the pictorial figures of NSL signers, in such cases there was slippage between the first sense of representing and another, “to make something present” (Parmentier 2015, 2). The next section examines in more detail the content of such figures of personhood with which novices are encouraged to spatially and socially identify.

Shifting Figures of Deaf Nepali Personhood

Figures of Nepali Deaf Personhood during the Maoist Civil War

Shakya’s images of signers encode “relatively explicit iconic-indexical connections between NSL forms and types/personas of signers (Agha 2005, 43). As sign language teachers use these images to encourage novice signers to inhabit the role of skilled signers, the images work to provide social information about what type of person a skilled signer is. During the period of the Maoist Civil War, Shakya typically portrayed signers wearing simple solid-color T-shirts. While

13. Butler relates these claims to Lacan’s “mirror stage”; however, the mirror metaphor is of course not quite the right one for this case.

this choice served to background the details of the signing figures, it was not socially “neutral”—such clothing was typically marked as “Western” and/or “modern.” However, when representation of signer and referent were combined, in signs referring to social types, the majority of the figures were portrayed, mostly via their dress, as caste Hindu. This representational practice made these images an important resource for associating and naturalizing, via rhematization (Irvine and Gal 2000; Gal 2016), standard NSL lexical items with the middle hills caste Hinduism in which Nepali nationalism was very explicitly grounded prior to 2006.

Such affiliations helped signers attempt to refute entrenched social assumptions that linked deafness and other types of perceived disability to low-caste status. Also, during the fraught period of the Maoist Civil War, deaf leaders’ work to position themselves as a marginalized ethnolinguistic group was risky, given that the monarchy was arrayed against a rebel army seeking, among other things, to advance the rights of marginalized ethnolinguistic groups. Deaf schools and associations were typically based in urban areas controlled by the monarchy. Explicitly linking NSL and deaf personhood to the caste Hinduism in which the monarchy’s nationalism was based helped associations of deaf people avoid the persecution other associations of marginalized groups faced in these areas in this period.

The selection of particular signs as standard did some of this work, as many of the standard forms in and of themselves functioned (for particularly situated interpreters) as emblematic of caste Hindu personas. For example, standard NSL kinship terms provide a good example of both the ways in which the standard sign forms potentially indexed such persona and the ways in which Shakya’s pictorial images in dictionaries and primers were drawn on to further regiment such associations. To return to an example I’ve analyzed in previous work (Hoffmann-Dilloway 2008, 2010, 2016), the standard sign *mother*, which takes the form of a crooked finger at the side of the nose, was understood by the committee who selected this sign as standard to resemble a nose ring or stud, which could in turn index those social groups in which women wore this style of jewelry (including caste Hindus but erasing from identification with this figure, for example, Newars or Sherpas, two major ethnic groups in Nepal). However, not all deaf signers interpreted the social connotations of the sign form in the same way; some novice signers took the form as arbitrary, while others furnished their own iconic-indexical motivations. Shakya’s pictorial illustrations, however, worked to both make more explicit such connections and naturalize them through repetition. For example, I’ve pointed out how this association was

elaborated through Shakya's illustrations of the form, which depicted a woman both performing and embodying the sign who was identifiable to most as caste Hindu because of her clothing and jewelry.

Of course, my argument is not that signers were encouraged to identify with every aspect of the intersectional identities signaled by each of Shakya's illustrations (e.g., signers were not expected to identify with the baby in fig. 1 regardless of age, nor were signers expected to identify as mothers regardless of gender identification). Rather, the repetition of "modern" and "caste Hindu" indexical markers across the collection of standard signs for social types (e.g., all of the standard kinship signs appearing in the dictionaries and posters) collectively signaled the broader social categories to which the figures of fluent signers were framed as belonging.¹⁴ Further, these images were taken up in processes of explicit and implicit metasemiotic regimentation that I've analyzed elsewhere, including institutional projection of fractally recursive contrasts between this cluster of practices, qualities, and affiliations with an opposed cluster that could serve as their foil. Thus, this broader project also involved enregistering nonstandard signs as, typically, linked to non-caste Hindu practices and qualities, in so doing replicating the hegemonic discourses of the state, and reproducing its internal hierarchies, including those that erased or problematized many signers' simultaneous affiliation with non-middle hills caste Hindu groups (such as *ādivāsi janajāti* [indigenous] groups, Dalit, or Madhesi families) and deaf networks (see Hoffmann-Dilloway 2016 for examples).

The state was in many ways the most high stakes audience to which these ideological framings were aimed during the war. However, individual signers socialized to inhabit or identify with a deaf personhood grounded in NSL through Shakya's images were not unaffected by the bundled associations encoded in his drawings. As I've also previously argued, these processes of enregisterment could make it complicated for deaf signers born into ethnic groups so erased to identify both with an NSL linked to such figures of personhood and homesigns based in the particularities of their birth kin network practices; such signers had to navigate the potential gaps between "actor and role" (Manning and Gershon 2013, 109) that performance of these figures could highlight. (In fact, while recently reviewing some of my wartime video data in which *ādivāsi janajāti* signers discussed this tension, I noticed that some signers performed homesigns that they saw as potentially in conflict with their roles as NSL signers as a mirror image of

14. Shulist and colleagues (2016) also point out a similar cumulative naturalization in their critique of the *Oxford Dictionary's* frequent use of sexist tropes in example sentences for word definitions.

their typical orientation, possibly to mitigate the sense that in performing these signs they were identifying with figures of personhood at odds with institutional framing of Nepali deafness.)

Postwar Shifts in Figures of Nepali Deaf Personhood

Since the end of the war in 2006, as the formerly Hindu kingdom was transformed into a secular republic, Nepali nationalism has ceased to be overtly grounded in caste Hinduism (though entrenched structural inequalities favoring caste Hindus persist; see, e.g., Hangen 2007; Rai 2013). The postwar context thus provides a setting to explore how groups that had been marginalized, excluded, or assimilated by state institutions may now be drawn into projects of liberal “multicultural citizenship,” through the use of linguistic and cultural forms, including “emblems of indigeneity” (Hansen 2018, 138; Limerick 2018).

One obvious example of this type of change was the 2006 appointment of a new national anthem for the secular republic. The lyrics of “*Sayaun Thunga Phool Ka*” (Made of hundreds of flowers) are widely understood to signal a commitment to a form of nationalism that is explicitly multicultural and multiethnic. Similar to Rodriguez’s (2016) description of the translation of Venezuela’s national anthem into indigenous languages, Nepal’s new national anthem can be seen as an attempt to create an indexical icon that can performatively call forth a new political landscape, one characterized by the inclusion that marginalized groups had struggled for in the war.

In this postwar context, then, attempts to link standard NSL forms with caste Hinduism have become a less necessary and effective way to align with explicit symbols of nationalism. Shakya has consequently been called on by the leaders of the national association of deaf people to create new representations of both NSL and Nepali signers that highlight alignment with this new multiethnic form of nationalism, such as those that appear in the text he created to represent the NSL version of the new national anthem (see fig. 3).

The fact that the text includes so many signs provides an opportunity to portray many iterations of a signing body or multiple signing bodies.¹⁵ In order to recapitulate the national anthem’s claim that Nepali nationalism is now widely inclusive, the collected figures represent a range of types of social (in terms of

15. As I have indicated before, it is rare that such pictorial representations of NSL represent a longer text, rather than individual lexical items; I should note that Shakya’s text here does not highlight the grammatical and morphological practices that characterize much NSL signing by deaf adults but, rather, maps pictorial representations of signers performing NSL lexical items onto the grammatical structure of the Nepali language song.



Figure 3. The Nepali national anthem rendered in Nepali Sign Language

caste and ethnicity) and geographic variation. Here then, the inclusiveness referred to metalinguistically by the anthem is materialized in the figures shown performing the signs. Further, the previous erasure of ethnically marked deaf personas is undone, unveiling the ethnic diversity of deaf figures (or, we might say, swapping out a dicentized association [Ball 2014] for a more properly indexical set of associations).

Of course, the types of social indexicalities viewers derive from these images will vary depending on their particular interdiscursive experiences (see Hoffmann-Dilloway 2008). My discussion here is based on my familiarity with broadly circulating hegemonic discourses that the images reproduce (or disrupt), and discussions with Nepali friends and colleagues about their interpretations of the figures. First, drawing on dress as the primary semiotic resource, the images represent ethnic figures associated with the three primary regions of Nepal (high mountains, middle hills, and lowlands—including a range of figures from marginalized groups). As my Nepali colleague Janak Rai pointed out, “these drawings carefully avoid the perceived bodily distinctions (e.g., nose shapes, differentiated skin color) commonly used in everyday communication to mark various caste and ethnic groups.”¹⁶ However, gender distinctions are clearly made through both dress and bodily features. Figures associated with several major religious groups (Hindu, Buddhist, syncretic Newar traditions and Muslim) are included—though there appear to be no figures associated with Christianity or animism. Children appear exclusively in school uniforms or “modern” dress—none are marked with any explicit markers of caste or ethnic distinctions.

While this group of figures collectively indexes a social persona of “diverse Nepali,” Rai and other interpreters noted potential iconic-indexical connections between particular figures and the concepts for which they are shown signing associated lexical items.¹⁷ For example, Pahade (middle hills) men are shown to represent both *bravery* (*bir haru*) and *self-determined* (*atal*)—building on widely circulated indexical associations between this social category and these qualities. The figure performing the sign *nation* (*rastra*) appears in the *dura survival* typically worn by government officials and the state representatives. While a Hindu priest performs the sign *Nepali*, indexing the former construal of Nepal as a Hindu nation, a Muslim man signs *motherland* (*matrabhumi*), representing Nepal’s status as a formerly Hindu nation which can now be represented

16. Personal communication with Janak Rai, 2018.

17. I thank Janak Rai for having initially helped identify such potential associations to explore further with other interlocutors.

by a Muslim citizen, loosening previously tightly enregistered associations between religious identity and the nation.

While this rendering of the anthem thus highlights the types of diversity that “citizens are being encouraged to appreciate,” as in Cole’s (2010, 2) analysis of voicings of national diversity in performances of Indonesian poetry, “the particular figure of personhood being entextualized is neither a single persona nor multiple singular personae, but a plural persona that to be successfully indexed semiotically requires the performance of shifting alignments with multiple voices.” In what ways do the “plural persona” pictorially represented in such texts complicate signers’ animation or performance of these figures? In some analytical framings, performance and animation are distinguished by “the ratio of creator(s) to character(s)” (Silvio 2010, 428; Kaplin 2001). Silvio notes, further that, “in performance, whether it be theatrical performance, the performance of ritual, or the performance of self in everyday life, one body can only inhabit one role at a time” (Silvio 2010, 428), while, on the other hand, “animation does not involve a one-on-one relationship between character and actor, social persona and (true) self” (Manning and Gershon 2013, 109).

However, the ethnographic material I present here suggests that the distinction between animation and performance (and the relationship of this distinction to that between “introjected role models” and “psychically projected objects of desire” [Silvio 2010, 429]) does not hinge on the multiplicity of roles but, again, on the particular participant frameworks through which they are organized. Deaf students gather in NSL class meetings to sign the anthem before copies of this particular entextualization of a range of figures of personhood, some facing the figures to copy their movements, others facing away, addressing or embodying, and thus animating or performing, to these relative degrees, the figures in their performance. The latter embody not one but a rapidly shifting series of pictorial representations of these diverse figures. Following Cole (2010, 10), Goebel (2008), and Bucholtz and Hall (2004), I suggest that these practices may have an effect of “adequation,” “emphasizing sameness despite differences,” an embodied practice structured to encourage individual viewers/signers of the posters to align and identify themselves with a variety of social types, in an effort to denaturalize previously iconized/rhematized associations between NSL and figures of personhood grounded in middle hills caste Hinduism exclusively. In performatively, “aligning themselves with the transcendent national construct” of a diverse “New Nepal” (Cole 2010, 1), such signers embody the figure of a “diverse (deaf) Nepali,” blurring the distinction between introjection and projected desire.

Conclusion

The representational shifts I've described recall other contexts in which previously stigmatized minoritized linguistic practices are increasingly valorized in public space. As Shulist (2018), Meek (2007), and others have pointed out, such valorization can have a range of effects (including, in some cases, to discourage everyday use of minoritized forms). The processes of adequation described above can also have a range of effects, including, potentially, participating in a broader enregisterment of a pan-indigenous/*adivasi* identity that may erase as much as valorize certain forms of distinction. In my future work in Nepal, I'll explore whether and how these processes of adequation complicate the oppositions on which the fractally recursive elements of ideological constructions of NSL and skilled signers have been based.

In approaching this question, it is important to note that the rearrangement of these clustered oppositions is partial; while Shakya's illustrations of signing persons now appear in dress that indexes other ethnic identities previously framed as the foils against which a deaf persona was grounded, the sign forms portrayed remain those chosen as the standard NSL lexical items and not forms culled from the homesigns that continue to be framed as their foil. However, while deenregistering a tight association between NSL and caste Hinduism and stressing adequation among ethnic types of signers does not break down the fractal recursions through which NSL is framed as a discrete and bounded object through contrast to other named communicative practices, it may perhaps begin to yield less "fixed, exclusionary categories" and rather those more amenable to "perspectivally shifting reiteration of poles of opposition" (Gal 2016, 104). This process may itself cause these poles of opposition to shed current or accrue new qualities, shifting the set of relations yet further. As Gal (2016, 96) notes, "such axes of differentiation are contingent and open-ended, arising out of the historical experience of the group that presupposes them, and changing accordingly."

As I further develop this ongoing, long-term project, I'll continue to closely attend to how Shakya's artwork both reflects and affects changing perspectives about both the nature of NSL and associated deaf personas. Shakya's images are "inherently multimodal, unstable total semiotic facts" (Nakassis 2015, 331; see also Silverstein 1985). Consequently, that attention will continue extend not only to the content of the images he produces but, as in this article, also to the situated, interactive, discursive, ideologically mediated, and embodied processes in which they are embedded and through which they are co-constituted.

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