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Images and/as Language in Nepal's Older and Vulnerable Deaf Person's Project

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Abstract: Drawing on ethnographic research in Nepal's Older and Vulnerable Deaf Person's Project (ODP), this article explores the ways in which engagement with pictorial images in the ODP helped deaf elders cultivate the physical, semiotic, and pragmatic skills that underpin the reception and reproduction of conventionalized Nepali Sign Language (NSL) forms. This pedagogy emerged in part because local understandings of NSL as a named and objectified language have been grounded in pictorial illustrations of signers performing standardized lexical items in sign language dictionaries, posters, and primers. An analysis of an ODP session demonstrates how elders' image-making practices in some cases worked to center their communicative practices on the standard lexical items in which local deaf sociality was grounded; in others cases it worked to exceed the relatively narrow view of NSL that these texts objectified. Analysis of these dynamics, along with my own use of pictorial images as a mode of generating, reflecting, and circulating analyses of language use, helps us consider the semiotic processes through which ideologies of image and language may be mutually constitutive, as well as how such a relationship can be regimented or unsettled.

Keywords: sign languages; graphic anthropology; multimodality; semiotic ideologies

Introduction

On a chilly winter day in 2017, I joined a group of elderly deaf Nepalis for a meeting of the Older and Vulnerable Deaf Person's Project (ODP). This program, hosted by the Kathmandu Association of the Deaf (KAD), provided material, social, and linguistic support to older deaf Nepalis, many of whom had not previously had an opportunity to fully acquire conventional signed or spoken languages. Leaders of the KAD established this program out of a "moral imperative" (Friedner and Kusters 2020: 32) to provide all deaf Nepalis an opportunity to participate in a deaf social life grounded in the use of Nepali Sign Language (NSL) (Hoffmann Dilloway 2016a; Green 2017; Graif 2018).

Though the room was cold enough that many of us wore coats and knit caps, we had been warmed up by a round of hot tea and fried buffalo meat prepared in the KAD's kitchen. As the plates were gathered for washing, the ODP instructor Rohan,[1] a deaf NSL signer, waved to attract our attention to the white board at the front of the room. While we had been eating, he had been drawing a large landscape with erasable markers, the image complete with mountains, a river, a small house, and other details typical of a Nepali village scene (Figure 1). Distributing paper and crayons to our group, he enjoined us to each copy the landscape as accurately as we could. We bent to the task, with Rohan checking our progress and assisting those who needed help. As Figure 1 suggests, the room in which we were gathered provided rather spectacular evidence that the production of pictorial images was a regular ODP activity. The walls were covered in bright drawings—of fruits, household objects, cartoon characters, human faces—created by participants from example templates offered by their instructors. (As I will discuss in more detail below, in producing this article I've also centered my own production of pictorial images, such as that in Figure 1.)

Figure 1. Rohan draws a template landscape on the whiteboard at an ODP meeting. Illustration by the author.

As this paper demonstrates, such image making was understood to help deaf elders cultivate the physical, semiotic, and pragmatic skills underpinning the reception and reproduction of conventionalized NSL forms.[2] This was the case in part because local understandings of NSL as a named and objectified language have largely been grounded in pictorial illustrations of signers performing standardized lexical items in sign language dictionaries, posters, and primers (Figure 2). Visually parsing and physically reproducing the content of these illustrations has thus been an important component of bringing into being a type of deaf sociality grounded in the performance of socially legitimized sign language forms.

Figure 2. An excerpt from a Nepali Sign Language Dictionary. Illustration by Pratigya Shakya.

That said, what does reproducing a drawing of a landscape have to do with engaging the NSL dictionaries? The primary point of such exercises was not to cultivate ODP participants' abilities to effectively depict referents or concepts through drawing. Nor was the activity focused on encouraging the elders to express themselves in a modality free from the constraints that language use is often understood to impose (an aim to which drawing activities may be geared in other social contexts). The goal, rather, was to

encourage participants to create standardized reproductions, with as much formal precision as possible, of a visual prompt. In this sense, the drawing exercises served as scaffolding for subsequent activities in which participants were given the more complicated task of reproducing by signing, with the same focus on formal precision, standardized NSL lexical items modeled by pictorial images of signers and NSL narrative genres modeled in person by Rohan.

The copied forms produced in the ODP—whether pictorial or linguistic—were thus not representations in the sense of, as Parmentier (2015:2) puts it, "standing for or in place of something that is absent." The copied landscapes didn't represent actual mountains and rivers out there in the world as much as they were pictures representing a picture—that is, representing both the token of Rohan's particular prompt and the picture as a general type. Likewise, the focus on the poetics of standard NSL forms in these exercises was not solely about honing the participants' ability to effectively refer or to participate in social interactions. (Indeed, while the elders were framed as relatively language-less compared to signers whose practices were grounded in NSL use, instructors recognized that they were all able to creatively draw on a wide range of semiotic resources to communicate with interlocutors whose linguistic and sensory repertoires differed from theirs). Rather, the aim was to constitute the elders as users of standard NSL signs. In this respect, when executed successfully both the drawings and signs produced in the ODP could be thought of as images in that they became the thing they referred to, "mak[ing] something present" (Parmentier 2015:2) and "blurring and dispensing with the distinction of sign and referent" (Nakassis 2019:2).

Drawing on participant observation conducted in the ODP in 2015 and 2017 (supplemented by long-term research with networks of signers in Nepal ongoing since 1997),[3] the first part of this article explores the semiotic complexities through which ODP pedagogy was structured to help elders refine the distributed, multimodal, and multisensory processes entailed in such mimesis. In so doing, I seek to contribute to an emerging linguistic anthropology of the image, through which scholars attempt to "rethink the relationship between language and image, text and the sensorial, representation and presence through a holistic semiotic framework" (Barker and Nakassis 2020:1). In this article, I take up such scholars' attention to the semiotic processes that underpin and cross-cut the production and interpretation of all types of semiosis (and which, indeed, instantiate the notion of "types" of semiosis), to consider how ideologies of image and language may be mutually constitutive, as well as how that relationship can be regimented or unsettled (Mitchell 2015). I do so both through considering these dynamics in the ethnographic context of the ODP and—as the opening sketch suggests and as I will detail in the next section—through my own use of pictorial images as a mode of generating, reflecting, and circulating analyses of language use (also see Murphy in this issue).

In this context, I am focusing primarily on visual representations poetically centered on some kind of likeness to a referent. The ODP drawing exercises, pictorial representations of NSL lexical items, and aspects of sign language use in practice are all suffused with what are locally recognized as imagistic qualities in this respect. Of course, this understanding of image is situated and partial; images are capaciously multimodal and language in all modalities can be imagistic (e.g., Jakobson 1960; Mitchell 2015; Nakassis 2019; Feld et al. 2020). That said, in many (though certainly not all) ideological framings, linguistic and imagistic properties are defined in opposition to one another, with language associated with speech, abstractness, linearity, segmentability, mediation, and symbolic properties and images associated with visuality, materiality/embodiment, simultaneity, holism, immediacy, and iconic properties (a familiar ideological structure hinging on rhematization, fractal recursions, and erasure [Irvine and Gal 2001; Gal and Irvine 2019]).

Ethnographic contexts centering on deaf signers provide a setting in which the stakes of such an understanding of the relationship between language and image are particularly clear; while signed languages are as fully linguistic as spoken languages, signed modes of communication have been (and in some contexts are still) framed in both scholarly and popular perspectives as non-linguistic on the basis of being considered overly imagistic. For example, Saussure's (1959 [1916]) claims aligning sound with arbitrariness accompanied "deleterious presumptions" about visual signs: "namely, that they are limited to concrete phenomenon and incapable of expressing abstract concepts" (Bauman 2008:44). Thus, sign languages came to be denigrated as "more pictorial, less symbolic… in comparison with verbal symbol systems, lack[ing] precision, subtlety, and flexibility" (Myklebust 1957:241–42).

Indeed, when deaf Nepalis communicate through visual-manual modalities (whether or not they have acquired conventional NSL), they have been understood by many hearing Nepalis not to be using language, but rather what is locally called "natural sign." Unlike modes of communication locally recognized as linguistic, natural sign is framed as needing "neither history nor community to work…as self-evident, emerging unmediated from (deaf people's) present experiential state" and as "demonstrating neither more nor less than universal human capacities to find meaning in the visual contours of the world" (Graif 2018:17).[4]

Perhaps counter-intuitively, given this common dichotomization of image and language, the production of pictorial images has been a significant component of deaf leaders' efforts to contest this framing of signing, and to seek recognition of NSL as language. Drawings have afforded the objectification of NSL forms in legitimizing texts such as dictionaries. These materials have presented NSL lexical items as discrete conventionalized units, the grammatical concatenation of which is essentially similar to

spoken languages (e.g., Sharma 2003; Khanal 2013). KAD members' perception that the elderly participants in the ODP are relatively language-less compared to fluent signers centers on ODP participants' previous lack of access to, and current relative difficulty controlling, communicative practices characterized by these legitimized qualities. Fluent NSL signers in fact characterize ODP elders' communicative practices as natural sign, a foil against which NSL as language emerges.

However, as the second part of this paper explores, even as the pedagogical goal of ODP instruction is to encourage elders to deploy standardized NSL lexical units, in practice other types of signing are permitted—sometimes even celebrated—in ODP meetings: signing that is richly pantomimic, drawing on the affordances of the visual-manual modality to center both hypoiconicity (resemblance between sign form and referent) and diagrammatic iconicity in the structuring of discourse (Peirce 1998[1903]). While such signing is framed by ODP leaders as "natural" when produced by those who don't command standard NSL forms, these practices are also a part of the repertoires of fluent NSL signers, who build on, decompose, and elaborate on shared conventional sign forms, along with gestures, other actions, and other material resources, to create artful, diagrammatic narratives. However, even as such modes of signing are significant to how deaf Nepalis make meaning together, they exceed the vision of NSL as objectified in dictionaries, and in NSL instruction grounded in the use of such texts.

In past work, I've claimed that the relatively narrow formal focus of such legitimizing texts was in part due to the fact pictorial images did not offer "a ready means to represent and objectify" signing practice beyond discrete lexical items (Hoffmann-Dilloway 2008:193). In so doing, I implied that local ideologies that framed the nature of NSL as being primarily grounded in standardized lexical items stemmed in part from a limitation of imagistic representation. In this article, however, I argue for more careful consideration of how the perceived affordances of pictorial images and linguistic forms emerge relationally within particular sensory, semiotic, and ideological ecologies (e.g., Irvine 1989; Keane 2018; Kroskrity 2018). As this case highlights, such ecologies both emerge from and shape particular biographical trajectories, which include the interactive processes through which people throughout their lifespans shape one another "to and through" (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984) ways of making, interpreting, and distinguishing types of meaningful forms. As the next section of this article addresses, attention to these processes not only provides greater nuance to our understanding of the ethnographic contexts that anthropologists engage, but should also be kept centrally in focus as anthropologists expand the (imagistic) modalities through which we ourselves generate and circulate insights, in so doing drawing on and/or influencing the ideological frames through which our projected audiences are likely to engage such material.

Linguistic Anthropology of the Image and/as Graphic Anthropology

Throughout my career I've analyzed how deaf Nepalis have drawn on affordances of pictorial representations to create complex visual texts that objectify NSL form, reference, indexical connotations, and associated personas; such images have been potent resources in situated efforts to reflect, produce, regiment, or disrupt language ideological positions about the nature of NSL (Hoffmann-Dilloway 2008, 2016a, 2020a). In this article, rather than conventional transcriptions or photographic images, I follow my deaf Nepali interlocutors' lead by using drawing as a tool for generating and communicating my own claims about language and semiosis (which are, of course, also ideological; Kusters and Sahasrabudhe 2018; Kusters et al. 2020). With the exceptions of Figure 2 and 4, all are my own sketches. In so doing, this work considers how the practices of graphic anthropology might inform and be informed by a linguistic anthropology of the image.

Graphic anthropology has been characterized as "an anthropology that embraces all forms of line-making, from handwriting to the drawn sketch, to understand the material world not as being composed of completed objects but rather as part of an unfolding cultural process interwoven with articulating behaviors and actions" (Causey 2016:14; Ingold 2011). Work conducted under this banner has often had a methodological bent, such as that which centers drawing and sketching as tools for initiating and sustaining relationships with interlocutors in fieldsites (e.g., Tondeur 2016; Afonso 2011) and as a means of cultivating new ways of attending to, recording, and interpreting ethnographic data (e.g., Hendrickson 2008; Taussig 2011; Johnson et al. 2012; Causey 2016). Such work also includes publications in formats and genres that center drawn images, such as comic strips (e.g., Perley 2019; Atalay et al. 2019), graphic ethnographies (e.g., Hamdy and Nye 2017; Carrier-Moisan et al. 2020), and other hybrid genres (e.g., Jain 2019; Pigg 2019). I am very enthusiastic about these efforts and have myself been experimenting with the use of sketching and drawing in my fieldwork (Hoffmann-Dilloway 2016b) and publications (Hoffmann-Dilloway 2020b), including the present article.

As is common in work that breaks with the dominant genre expectations of a given field, anthropologists experimenting with the use of drawn images typically provide explicit justification for their choice to do so. Such commentary often sets up both scholarly writing in particular and language in general as the foils against which the desirable qualities of drawings emerge, in so doing drawing on ideologies about the nature of both images and language that sometimes deserve more careful consideration. For example, relative to written texts, drawings and image-based storytelling have been framed as "naturally vulnerable, story-based, creative, and forgiving" (Jacqz et al. 2019) and able to "democratize knowledge" by "fulfilling our ethical responsibilities to share scholarship outside the academy" (Atalay et al. 2019:769). Further, in contrast to the "grammar

constraints and narrative linear that writing presupposes and imposes," drawing has been described as permitting "informality" and "individual freedom" (Azevedo and Ramos 2016:147).

I have no doubt that these accounts capture the legitimate experiences of the authors (and those of many of those who engage their work). Indeed, these comments reflect my own affective experience of the difference between working with writing and drawings. That said, such claims should be very explicitly grounded in the particular ethnographic contexts through which those producing and interpreting these texts have been socialized to differentiate writing and drawing, language and image. Slippage toward making universalizing ontological claims about language or image in such justification threatens to mute, for example, the fact that whether and how drawing and writing are distinguished is ethnographically variable (see Boone 1994; Ingold 2007; Choksi 2017) along with the wide socio-cultural variation in how images are made, interpreted, and connected to particular genres, registers, and pragmatic effects (e.g., Edwards 2012; Nakassis 2020; Stefanoff 2018).

Further, some of these justifications veer toward setting up a "strawman" of language, "narrowly conceived as (an) autonomous, semantico-referentialist 'system' for acts of propositional reference" (Barker and Nakassis 2020). Indeed, while I again note my enthusiasm for the sophisticated work being produced with graphic methods, I've also in some cases uncomfortably noted that justifications for this work, with various degrees of explicitness, can invoke the dichotomous view of language and image outlined above (even as, in some cases, the work itself contravenes this perspective, demonstrating the multimodality and multifunctionality of language and image, along with the fact that these categories are not mutually exclusive). In this respect, a linguistic anthropology of the image could offer graphic anthropologists a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which language use is "always shot through with, and characterizable by, precisely those semiotic grounds (iconicity and indexicality) and aspects (sensuousness, materiality, force) that the (ideological) focus on language as abstract, symbolic representational system obscures" (Nakassis 2020), grounds and aspects which are often framed as the province of images.

At the same time, the work of graphic anthropologists suggests ways in which linguistic anthropologists may more effectively experiment with generating and communicating insights (also see Murphy in this issue). Modern linguistics emerged from the objectification of language through writing, in a context in which alphabetic writing was seen as the fullest realization of the "modernist desire to make writing closer to speech" (Cody 2009:289; Bauman and Briggs 2003). Consequently, aspects of language production not well captured by such writing systems, such as pitch, volume, gesture, eye

gaze, or facial expressions—and, of course, sign languages—have often been ideologically erased from linguistic analyses (Tedlock 1983; Farnell 1995). In (linguistic) anthropology, as Mark Sicoli (2020:4) points out, "traditional print formats for ethnographies have effected a similar reduction," in that "books and articles expect the written word and privilege representations of human action that can easily be spelled out in the single dimension of a text line."

Such "technologically mediated habits of representation" (Sicoli 2020:4) have impacted which aspects of linguistic practices have been predominantly analyzed and represented by linguistic anthropologists,[5] even as the sub-discipline's theoretical commitment to understanding the pragmatics and semiotics of embodied, contextualized, language-use would seem undermined by these limitations. In addition to this theoretical motivation for exploring the potential of working in additional formats, linguistic anthropologists' scholarship has often been seen as impenetrable and siloed. While I want to temper the notion that drawn formats are always or inherently more accessible than written formats, I also recognize that adding to the range of modalities and genres through which we communicate can provide more opportunities for others to engage our work.

In that spirit, then, in producing drawings for this article, I haven't attempted to "go beyond" language but rather to highlight the complexities of situated language use. This might seem like an easier prospect for a researcher whose work focuses on signed rather than spoken language, due to the fact that such languages are often framed as "visual" languages.[6] However, representing in two dimensions the complex movements entailed in signing practice poses significant challenges. Here, I've chosen to create sequential images to represent the details of sign forms and to depict movement. I did so by working from video-recordings, and still images derived from these recordings, made during ODP sessions in order to ground my depiction in realistic representations of signing. While researchers often directly reproduce such screen grabs as part of transcripts, as Murphy (this issue) notes, these are "often blurry and incoherent, which can result in a transcript that includes visual images with no compelling connection to what's being described." Murphy further notes that choosing still frames to depict moving phenomena in a principled way can be difficult.

Creating drawings based on a series of frames, however, allowed me to represent a series of moments both within and across images. The conventions of reading comics, with which most readers will be at least somewhat familiar, will ideally allow readers to supply the transitions between these moments, making the movement that is central to signing more clearly salient to those engaging the transcription. This approach required that I repeatedly draw iterations of the same figures in the same scene. This was time (and page-space) consuming, but helped me highlight variations in temporality and

segmentability that characterized the different types of narratives produced in the ODP session. Further, the resulting images allowed me to stress, in a holistic way, the socially distributed and deeply affective nature of the interactions. Further, my hope is that choosing a comic-strip style, which indexes both artistry and humor, will highlight for readers the presence of both of those qualities in the narratives.[7]

The process of making the drawings not only reflected but also helped inform my analysis. In order to represent the sign forms in motion, I found it necessary not only to carefully study the video-recordings and field sketches on which the comics are based, but also to myself repeatedly physically perform the movements I was trying to depict. This was because it was much easier for me to parse and reproduce movements of which I had a corporeal as well as visual understanding. Further, because I made these images on an Ipad, using an Apple Pencil and the Procreate program, I was able to draw and re-draw each frame repeatedly (without anxiety about wasting materials). As a result of redrawing and editing until I was satisfied with how the images appeared, the motions entailed in drawing them likewise began to feel intimately known. These processes, which I would have not experienced had I opted to simply share video stills, helped me recognize and appreciate the ODP's pedagogical focus on the felt experience of reproducing the visual prompts, which I discuss in greater detail below.

First, however, the next section provides background about how Nepali Sign Language and institutions like the Kathmandu Association of the Deaf emerged, as well as the reasons why many deaf Nepalis, such as the ODP members, did not encounter sign language-based sociality until late in life.

Legitimation of and Access to Nepali Sign Language

The Kathmandu Association of the Deaf (KAD), which hosts the ODP, was formed in 1980. From that time on, the KAD served as a space from which signers could gather to socialize and to advocate for the recognition of signing as language. In 1995, the National Federation of the Deaf Nepal (NDFN)[8] was established as an umbrella institution to organize what had grown to be 44 partner associations of deaf people across the country (NDFN 2019). The NDFN has overseen the collection and standardization of Nepali Sign Language (NSL) lexical items, and reinforces the use of these signs through their publication in dictionaries, posters, and primers. As in many other contexts in which the ideological frame of a modernist linguistic monolith dominates (Irvine and Gal 2000; Makoni and Pennycook 2007), the production of such textual objects aimed to legitimate signing practices as a collection of bounded and discrete words, making them legible to powerful stakeholders like the state, international organizations, and the hearing public (see Schmaling 2012; De Meulder 2015).

Pratigya Shakya, a deaf Nepali artist, was recruited to provide these illustrations. Shakya's approach was modeled on extant sign language dictionaries, such as American Sign Language dictionaries brought to Nepal by US Peace Corps volunteers, and was organized around pictorial representations of signers performing individual lexical items, clustered together with textual translations in Nepali and English, and sometimes pictorial representation of signs' referents. These materials were distributed to schools and associations for deaf people throughout the country. Robust NSL-mediated networks of deaf sociality have emerged from these institutional sites of reproduction, and legal and social recognition of NSL as one of Nepal's national languages has steadily increased since the publication of these materials.

Thus, though local signing practice is characterized by complexity and variation far more capacious than what is presented in the standardized NSL illustrated dictionaries (Green 2014; Hoffmann-Dilloway 2016), such texts have offered a "convenient fiction" to the extent that they have provided an effective way to advocate for recognition of NSL as a language (Kusters and Sahasrabudhe 2018:61, citing Makoni and Pennycook 2006:27). At the same time, such constructions can also be "inconvenient fictions to the extent that they produce particular and limiting views on how language operates in the world" (Kusters and Sahasrabudhe 2018:61). Among the inconveniences produced by an ontology of NSL grounded in the NSL dictionaries has been the ways in which the communicative practices of deaf persons who do not use recognized, conventionalized sign forms may be "marginalized" by constructing their communicative practices as "'not language' or as 'in-between' forms of communication" (Kusters and Sahasrabudhe 2018:47; also see Green 2014).

As Moriarty Harrelson (2017:2) points out, this framing can lead to inaccurate assumptions that it is "impossible" for such deaf persons to "engage in mutual sense-making with other people." This is a form of what Duque and Lashewicz (2018:1) call "compulsory fluency," through which "forms of articulation that [are] standardized and idealized [are] imposed on all speakers including those whose speech is less conventional." Such ideologies often equate "languagelessness" or dysfluency with lack of personhood (see also Reno 2012; Wolf-Meyer 2020). Research and activism focusing on the semiotic practices of unconventional communicators disrupts such assumptions (Baggs 2007; Friedner and Block 2017; Duque and Lashewicz 2018; Goodwin 2018), arguing compellingly, for example, for recognition of "the competence, creativity, and even artistry of deaf people who do not acquire a conventional sign language early on (or ever)" (Friedner and Kusters 2020:38; also see Green 2014; Moriarty Harrelson 2017; Hou 2018; Graif 2018; Goico 2019).[9]

When the ODP was formed in 2008, it represented a response by younger signers to both the "vulnerabilities and competencies" (Friedner and Kusters 2020:38) of older deaf Nepalis who had, due to a range of social and geographical factors, not had the opportunity to learn to sign. These factors included the fact that, because most deaf people are born into hearing families and due to the social stigma that may be associated with deafness, deaf people did not necessarily have the chance to encounter one another (Acharya 1997; Hoffmann-Dilloway 2016; Green 2017; Graif 2018; Snodden 2019). Further, the first school for deaf students in Nepal wasn't established until the 1960s. Thus, while some deaf Nepalis are currently able attend a sign language medium school from an early age,[10] older deaf Nepalis had no such opportunity. These circumstances made elders vulnerable not only to the effects of restricted access to conventionalized language, but also to the ways in which lack of access to language restricted their access to a wide range of social, educational, and economic resources and roles. The aim of the ODP was to provide the rich sign language-based socialization and support that the elders had thus missed. Given that the social life of the KAD had been grounded in the use of standardized NSL forms, these efforts centered on language instruction. The next section closely details such an ODP session, exploring the role that engagement with pictorial images plays in the ODP's language pedagogy.

Engagement with Images in ODP Standard NSL Instruction

As mentioned in the introduction, ODP sessions included drawing activities in which participants were asked to reproduce pictorial prompts provided by the instructor. In some ways these exercises resembled art therapy activities incorporated into support programs that figure "art as potentially therapeutic or helpful" to people with dementia and their caregivers (Selberg 2015:475). In many such programs, it is thought that modes of expression that don't depend on language per se might ease frustrations caused by communication difficulties between interlocutors whose linguistic repertoires may not align, in so doing "fostering positive feelings and the lessening of anxiety, enabling community and socialization" (Selberg 2015:475).

Similarly, when I discussed the ODP's pedagogical approach with Sachika, one of the directors, she cited the participants' relative lack of experience with conventional language as part of the rationale for including drawing activities. For example, she noted that while many of the elders had not had an opportunity to learn to read or produce written texts, they were able to interpret representational drawings. That said, ODP classes differed from art therapy programs, in which drawing and painting were included in order to allow participants to express themselves relatively freely, ostensibly unbound by conventional constraints, including those imposed by language use. (Note the echo here of the way some graphic anthropologists have characterized a distinction between

writing and drawing.) Rather, as mentioned in the introduction, in the ODP the elders were encouraged to copy the images instructors produced as precisely as possible.

This approach to drawing instruction was not unusual in Nepal, where artistic practices often center on upholding "prescribed conventions regarding measurements or iconometry, color, and composition" (Hopper 2019).[11] Art lessons in primary schools also typically involve providing visual prompts for children to copy. This practice was the norm in Kathmandu's Central Secondary School for the Deaf, where volunteer teachers from the US, who often understood drawing as a means of cultivating individual creativity, sometimes balked at this approach. For example, blogger Franz K, a deaf American who volunteered at the school, wrote in 2008 that when teaching art classes, he had tried to encourage the children to "use their imaginations" in producing their own variations of an image of a dog he had produced. "Meanwhile," he remarked, "the kids were dutifully copying my drawing exactly as I'd made it, holding up their notepads and asking for my approval."[12]

Because the achievement of formal precision was the goal of the drawing exercises in the ODP, instructors recognized that even as images were more accessible to the elders than writing, copying drawings was nevertheless an activity to which participants needed to be socialized (to which, indeed, they would have been socialized if they had had the opportunity to attend a school for deaf students). The processes through which people parse and produce representational drawings are mediated by local convention and entail complex learned linkages between visual and motoric systems. For example, perceiving a drawn image does not necessarily entail knowing the production script through which the physical act of creating a conventionally interpretable drawing unfolds temporally. In the ODP, as in many other pedagogical approaches to teaching art, participants learned such schemas and production scripts through "imitation of external graphic sources" (Cohn 2012:179), supplemented by assistance from Rohan.

Figure 3. Rohan's pictorial prompt reproduced by the author.

To return to the afternoon I've been describing, once our snack break was over, Rohan asked us to copy the landscape drawing I have reproduced (from my reproduction that afternoon) in Figure 3. While most ODP members copied the template images with alacrity on the afternoon in question, others required significant support. For example, Dilip, having stalled out after making a few lines, waited for Rohan's attention. Once Rohan finished checking on other participants' progress, he sat beside Dilip and, taking his right hand in his own, led him through the movements entailed in drawing out the scene. In so doing, he provided Dilip with both visual and motor feedback about the production script for drawing relevant in this context (e.g., when drawing the sun, begin by making the circle, only afterwards adding the lines representing beams). Through the repetition of such activities, over time, many participants who initially struggled with this task gained increased facility with copying artwork.

Parlaying Copying Drawings into Copying Movements Depicted in Drawings

Sachika commented that that most of the elders enjoyed in the drawing activities, making these exercises valuable in and of themselves. At the same time, however, copying drawings was understood to scaffold skills involved in visually parsing drawings and calibrating one's movements to reproduce images. Consequently, while in some therapeutic contexts, art-based activities are framed as an accessible *alternative* to language use, copying drawings in the ODP was instead a strategy for helping elders develop facility with reproducing the conventionalized visual forms enshrined in Shakya's images. For example, on the day I've been describing, once we completed the landscape exercise, Rohan instructed us to turn to a dictionary chapter listing standard signs whose equivalent Nepali terms began with the Devanagari letter *Ka* (क) and requested that we

each take a turn performing the signs represented therein. An excerpt from the relevant page is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. An excerpt from a Nepali Sign Language Primer. Illustrations by Pratigya Shakya.

As when reproducing the landscape drawing, participants had to learn the sequenced movement scripts through which the represented sign could be produced; in both cases, what was at issue was not just the visual iconic form, but also the temporally unfolding movements through which the form could be composed. That said, the exercise focused on copying the landscape was treated as scaffolding for the exercises focused on reproducing signed lexical items because of the significant additional complexities entailed in copying a drawing by enacting the movements that it depicts, rather than reproducing its form on paper with a marker. Among these challenges was the necessity to transform a static two-dimensional image into four-dimensional movements. This type of imitation hinged on parsing the details of the pictorial representations, which could require significant interpretive work (Schmaling 2012). For example, for illustrations of signs that have distinct starting and ending positions (as is the case for the signs here pictured for कमिला 'ant' or कराई 'cooking vessel'), how did a viewer know which handshape and position comes first? Shakya had numbered the first and second components of the signs; Rohan counseled participants to look for and remember the significance of those symbols. Participants also needed to be socialized to read the significance of the arrows through which Shakya has indicated the direction and manner

of movement involved in a given sign (for example, via the short zig zag arrows that demonstrate the “writing” movement in the sign for कलम ‘pen’). (Shakya does not always indicate the process through which a signer should transition from the first to second position in a two-part sign, sometimes assuming that this movement will be intuitive.)

Transposing visual prompts into physical action did not only hinge on parsing the pictorial representations but also required that participants calibrate their proprioceptive sense of their own bodily position and movement through space to this visual target. After all, signers typically do not look at their own bodies when performing signs, and thus must learn not only how a sign should look to others, but also how it should feel to perform the required movements. Unsurprisingly, signs made up of actions that resembled an activity with which signers were familiar were often easiest to both parse visually and to physically perform (as I had occasion to recall when drawing for this article). For example, Rohan was able to invoke the recent action of the drawing exercise to ground participants’ performance of the sign for कलम ‘pen’.

On the afternoon in question, Rohan gave us each time to independently attempt to parse the images and transpose them into movement, and then checked to see if our signs were well formed. Rohan noticed that Samir was having some difficulty parsing the representation of the sign for कछुवा ‘turtle’, using his entire right hand, rather than just his thumb, to represent the turtle’s head peeking out of its shell. As shown in Figure 5, Rohan knelt before Samir, so that Rohan and the pictorially depicted model signer were aligned in facing him. Rohan then repeatedly performed the target sign himself, with more formal precision, 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 co-present dynamically moving model.

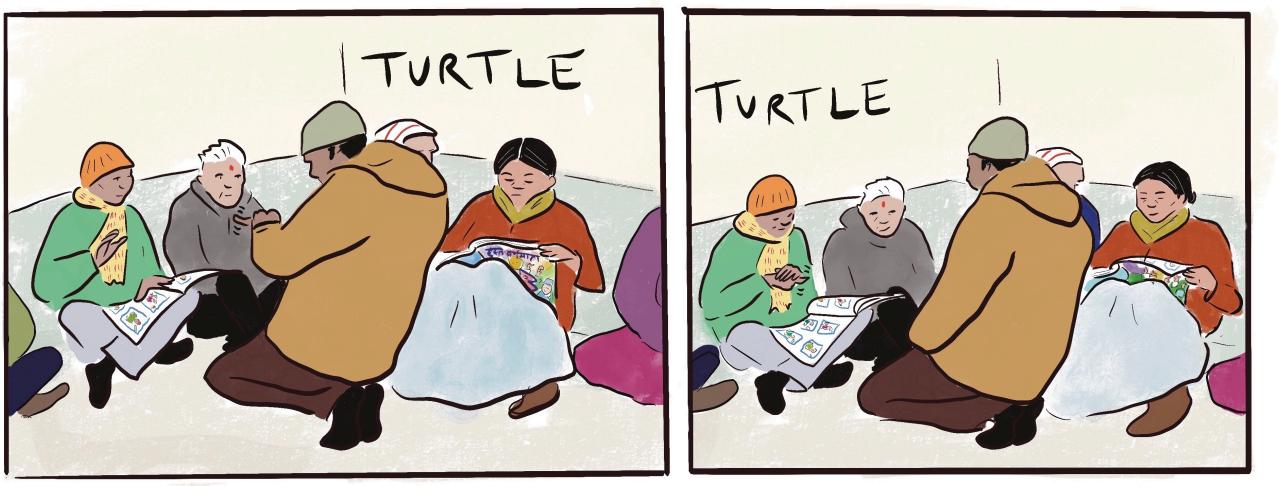

Figure 5. Rohan prompts Samir. Illustrations by the author.

Exercises centered on the NSL primers required another skill not involved in the drawing activities: facility with deictic shifts involved in the viewpoint rotation required to reproduce the movements illustrated in the dictionaries from the position of the depicted signer. While reproducing the landscape, we were positioned as viewing the scene from a particular vantage point throughout the process. Shakya's pictorial depictions of signers were portrayed facing the viewer, framing those reading the primer as face-to-face addressees of the figures (a positioning typified as the default for signed conversations, though in practice other physical positionings occur). However, to properly reproduce the signs, we needed to not face but rather embody the portrayed figure. Consequently, performing these signs required an 180° spatial rotation when, for example, attempting to copy a sign featuring bilaterally asymmetrical movements. As I've discussed in more detail in previous work (Hoffmann-Dilloway 2020a), instruction in the ODP thus often focuses on helping participants manage these viewpoint rotations, which are challenging for many non-fluent signers (see also Hoffmann-Dilloway 2018).

For example, on the afternoon I've been describing, while some ODP members easily reproduced the signs from the primer from the perspective of the depicted signer, others struggled with this task. For example, Rohan noticed that Prakash was mirroring rather than copying from the primer. Consequently, Rohan recruited Bina (a young, fluent signer assisting that day) to sit next to Prakash and perform the sign in question in concert with Rohan. With 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)—Prakash had a well-supported opportunity to practice making the target form correctly. My observations of ODP classes over a period of two years suggest, and Rohan and Sachika confirmed, that through these pedagogical interventions, elderly participants who initially struggled significantly with viewpoint rotation eventually became more comfortable with the processes involved in copying rather than mirroring prompts offered by face-to-face interlocutors (whether pictorial or in person).

Copying NSL Narratives

In the final part of the meeting, Rohan stood before the group and modeled a brief narrative, which participants were expected to reproduce (the copying of which, as he faced the class to provide the prompt, also required viewpoint rotation). A relatively small handful of such template narratives were cycled through in ODP classes (i.e., participants were not expected to progress in a linear fashion through a set of narratives that increased in difficulty or complexity, but rather had the opportunity to repeat increasingly familiar narrative templates). These narratives drew exclusively on standard NSL lexical items, performed in a linear concatenation.

For example, on the afternoon I've been describing, Rohan performed a brief "morning routine" NSL narrative, describing the actions he took on waking that morning. I've translated his signing as, "After waking up, I go use the bathroom, wash my face, and brush my teeth. Then it's time to drink tea, after which I cook. Then I work." A simple gloss of his signs is as follows: "SLEEP WAKE-UP, GO USE-BATHROOM, WASH-FACE, BRUSH-TEETH. TIME TEA-DRINK, FINISH, COOK. WORK." (Each space in this gloss represents the boundary of a lexeme, each comma represents a phrase, and each period a sentence boundary. The glosses all represent standard NSL signs that appear in the association-produced dictionaries.

Rohan then turned to the first participant, Radha, and signed: "YOUR-OWN. USE SIGN-LANGUAGE." That is, he asked Radha to give an account of her morning activities. By signing, "USE SIGN-LANGUAGE" Rohan meant that she should use standard NSL signs rather than any other communicative resources that might be available to her (such as homesign, gesture, voice, etc.). Figure 6 illustrates the beginning of Radha's response.

Figure 6. Radha's narrative. Illustrations by the author.

Radha's reply represented a target response, in the sense that she exclusively used NSL signs (including those initially modeled by Rohan and when she provided additional signs related to the specifics of her morning). Further, she produced them in the same grammatical fashion modeled by Rohan. My experience drawing Figure 6's comic strip

representation of Radha's turn highlighted her precision in reproducing the dictionary citational forms of the signs (other than the tense modification on brush, wash-face, and urinate); I was able to adopt Shakya's approach to representing movement and numbering starting and ending positions for these signs, since her movements so carefully cleaved to his depictions of them. Because I was representing an unfolding temporal process via a series of static, but sequential, images, I had to make decisions about where to break up the narrative into different panels (not only an issue with drawing, of course, but also with film stills and other modes of representing signs in print). Since Radha performed each sign discretely, taking roughly the same amount of time to perform each lexical item, it was quite straightforward to portray the narrative with one sign occupying each panel. Indeed, because of the extent to which the formal properties Radha's performance had been shaped by NSL pedagogies grounded in the dictionary's mode of visualizing NSL, her narrative was relatively pre-adapted to being represented by this type of pictorial depiction.

While Rohan is not visible in my comic-strip rendering of the interaction, he was just out of frame in the video recording upon which my illustration is based, facing Radha, ready to supply target forms if she hesitated in her signing. However, for most of her turn Radha did not require such assistance. Following the short excerpt represented in the comic, she went on to describe, using standard NSL lexical items, the process of cooking a morning meal, then taking a rest. She then stopped signing, seeming to have concluded. At this point, however, Rohan began to prompt Radha to describe a few more events: walking from her home to the KAD to enjoy learning NSL. This prompting took the form of Rohan signing from Radha's perspective (signing "YOU TEACH-ME SIGN-LANGAUGE, I ENJOY"), while she copied his prompts in real time. He then broke this frame by signing from his own perspective, addressing the other students: "I TEACH YOU-ALL SIGN-LANGUAGE." He then faced the next participant, signed the initial "morning routine" prompt again, and asked him to take his turn.

Radha's ability to copy the template relatively independently (in the sense of not needing to copy Rohan in real time, though of course she was reproducing both a temporally proximate narrative model and lexical forms enshrined in the dictionaries and primers) is a target goal in the ODP.[13] This series of activities, starting from the reproduction of pictorial images and culminating in the reproduction of signed narratives, characterizes the ODP approach to NSL pedagogy that I observed. All of these exercises entailed various types of remodalization/transduction of an initial prompt, whether via the movements of hands holding crayons that left enduring marks on paper, or through relatively more evanescent bodily movement through space. These real-time indexical traces allowed Rohan to intervene when necessary to calibrate the elders' performance to poetically align with conventionalized target forms.

ODP pedagogy takes into account the fact that elders' relative ease or difficulties with these tasks indexes the extent to which the target forms align with those elders have had experience parsing and producing in the past. At the same time, this pedagogy creates a context in which elders can cultivate greater experience with visually interpreting and physically reproducing these conventional forms, experience that later, more successful, performances may index in the future. Indeed, ODP leaders claimed (and my observations across field visits supported this claim) that many elders have made steady progress toward controlling conventional NSL forms through participation in these classes, therefore coming to be increasingly characterized by association members as language users (as opposed to natural signers).

However, not all ODP members made progress along this target trajectory. For example, the next participant on the afternoon I've been describing was Dhriti, a relatively quiet member of the group, who required that Rohan "feed" her each sign in order to perform the NSL narrative, despite long-term participation in the program. As I've argued in past work (Hoffmann-Dilloway 2016a), through a range of interactional and ideological strategies—including porous and partible notions of personhood (Marriott 1976) and recognition of language use as, to use Goodwin's (2018:59) words, a "distributed multiparty system organized through co-operative action"—such real-time face-to-face copying could locally "count" as NSL use, thereby grounding the individual's social status as a signer. Before the establishment of the ODP, opportunities to be positioned as NSL signers through such copying were more "catch as catch can," largely dependent on unstructured encounters with fluent signers willing to help scaffold their production of NSL (which such signers were not always willing to do so). The ODP, however, provided a context in which this type of socially distributed linguistic competence could be performed regularly, allowing participants to be simultaneously framed as relatively languageless and yet still recognized as NSL users.

In addition to the ideological and interactional factors mentioned above, the stress on the poetics of sign forms helped in so constituting ODP members, as formally correct performance allowed participants to represent and embody the figure of "signer" that Shakya portrays (and which as Rohan himself, in providing the prompts, also represents and embodies). Thus, the imagistic qualities of NSL signs participated in the complex web of processes through which elders who might otherwise have been excluded from a deaf sociality grounded in NSL could be positioned as producing the language. Such processes highlight the fact that the conventionality treated as a fundamental characteristic of language always hinges on such imagistic poetics, undermining simple attempts to dichotomize language and image.

Non-standard Meaning Making in the ODP

In Figure 6 we can see that the classmates seated around Radha attended sporadically to her efforts during her turn at reproducing Rohan's narrative, also engaging in cross-talk with others. In my experience this was typical. Because opportunities for ODP members to perform NSL narratives had become relatively ritualized and less fleeting than in the past, participants were not always riveted by one another's performances. Some elders were content to have only Rohan's sustained attention during their turn, while others occasionally stopped their narrative and refused to go on until cross-talk ceased and they had regained their classmates' focus. However, the narrative efforts of Madhu, thought to be the oldest ODP participant, almost always held the full attention of the group.

When I first met Madhu in 2004, I was told that he was 76 years old (by a signer extrapolating his age from Madhu's recollection, frequently conveyed through rich pantomimic narrative, that he was six years old when a major earthquake struck Kathmandu in 1934).[14] I had been drinking tea with friends at the KAD when I saw Madhu enter the courtyard and commence to give *ṭikā* to members sitting on chairs out in the sun. (Giving *ṭikā* entails smearing a bit of paste, often sandalwood or vermillion, on the forehead of a recipient as a blessing. To this day I have never seen Madhu without a vermillion *ṭikā*.) I was told that Madhu lived near the Pashupatinath temple, the most important Hindu temple complex in Kathmandu. Most days he walked through the city carrying mud from the sacred Bagmati river on a leaf, which he used to offer *ṭikā* to passersby, who typically offered him a small financial reward in return. A few years earlier, my friends recounted, a young deaf woman named Nanu had encountered him in the city, recognized his deafness, and encouraged him to stop daily at the KAD to offer *ṭikā* and socialize.

Of his early home life, Madhu had reported that he communicated with his family using only natural sign. KAD members believed that his first encounter with an accessible conventional language occurred following his meeting with Nanu, when he was in his early 70s. During research conducted between 2004–2006, I observed that despite signers' efforts to teach Madhu NSL, he continued to exclusively use natural sign in deaf social spaces (Hoffmann-Dilloway 2016a). While some persistent natural sign users were scolded or disparaged for their failure to use standard signs,[15] Madhu never encountered such treatment, possibly because of the respect he commanded by virtue of his advanced age. Rather, his unusually evocative natural sign performances, which blended pantomimic action and more lexicalized emblematic gestures, were encouraged, solicited, and enjoyed by members for their engaging artistry.

While his skill in telling such narratives was widely appreciated, deaf association members also recognized that Madhu's repertoire appeared rather inflexible, not easily incorporating

new forms or genres (he cycled through a relatively small repertoire of narratives, focusing on topics such as his experience in the 1934 earthquake or his struggles with poverty [see also Green 2017]). When it was socially desirable that Madhu participate in a linguistic interaction outside the purview of his repertoire, he would sometimes be assisted in so doing by a younger signer, who would scaffold his participation by feeding him signs (as Rohan is above described doing for Dhriti).[16] In the ODP, however, while Madhu was encouraged and supported in performing NSL signs during some activities (such as reciting signs from the NSL primer), there was no expectation that Madhu would "USE SIGNS" when responding to Rohan's narrative prompts. Rather, once it was Madhu's turn, Rohan and the others leaned forward with eagerness, ready to enjoy another rendition of Madhu's amusing and artful narrative performance.

By the afternoon in 2017 I've been describing (when he would have been 89 years old, if the age I was given on meeting him in 2004 was correct), the "morning routine" story had firmly become part of Madhu's narrative repertoire. ODP members had seen a great number of his renditions, as evidenced in part by their excitement when they knew I was about to witness one for the first time in 2015. "WATCH, WATCH!" I was instructed gleefully. Green's (2017) insightful analysis of one of his tellings, recorded in 2010, also attests to the frequency with which he performed this narrative. Since my first viewing I have had many more opportunities to see Madhu's performance, and have video-recorded four renditions, including the 2017 recording on which the transcript below is based.

Figure 7. Madhu's narrative. Illustrations by the author.

As mentioned above, Madhu's natural sign repertoire includes lexicalized forms, as well as more pantomimic, diagrammatic discourse practices. While his narratives often included both types of forms (again, see Green 2017), the excerpt I have chosen to discuss here is highly pantomimic, focused on "showing" rather than simply "telling" (Sutton-Spence and Boyce Braem 2013). In a recent lecture, Michael Silverstein (2019) opens with a discussion of pantomime, noting that a mime's actions immerse mime and onlookers in "a gradually thickening and dense context that the spectators need to project or supply as the counterpart, the complement, of the body movements to make a whole interpretation… the 'text' (as we might call it) of bodily movement thus projects the surround of 'context'; 'context' comes reciprocally to frame performer and addressees as in a compatibly same or similar social space of interpretation."

The sort of mimes Silverstein describes typically begin relatively "from scratch." The audience transitions from feeling at sea in an initially opaque scene to finding the context come into focus through the mime's artful actions, this being a part of the pleasure of viewing such performances. Madhu and his audience, on the other hand, were already operating in an interpretive context grounded by the genre and topic supplied by the ODP routines. That said, relative to Radha's "telling," in Madhu's "showing" a structure also "emerges over the interval of performed bodily narrative in a space gradually dimensionalized with volumes, planes, lines, and points within, as well as with projectively imagined people and things that, reciprocally, renders the mime's narrative coherent for the audience" (Silverstein 2019). For example, in this brief excerpt Madhu gradually established certain contours for the space in which he did his morning ablutions, including the location of a sink/water tap, shelf, and mirror.

It was more challenging for me to represent this narrative in comic format than Radha's. Modelled on previous ODP pedagogy and the visual poetics of the NSL dictionary, Radha performed a series of discrete signs, each of which took approximately the same amount of time to perform. Thus, as discussed above, it was simple to divide her actions among discrete comic panels, and the implication that each panel represented a moment of roughly equal length was more or less appropriate. The signs Radha performed, though in some cases iconically motivated, were relatively "governed by the logic of signs and their combinations," while in Madhu's narrative, actions were performed, "in accordance with the spatial and temporal logic of the actions they represent" (Green 2017:349). That is, while in Rahda's narrative the poetic focus centered on producing signs that resembled, sufficiently to instantiate, conventional signs, in Madhu's narrative the poetic focus centered on resemblance to the referenced activities. For example, the motions Madhu performed to evoke the acts of washing his hands, brushing his teeth, and rinsing his mouth took roughly the amount of time as it would take to actually execute these tasks. Rather than try to capture this difference by providing the precise time code of each

component of the narrative, I've tried to evoke relative differences in timing by extending the length of panels containing the relevant movements, and including within them the more complex set of actions entailed.

Madhu does not simply reenact such motions without artistic license. For example, in a component of this routine that does not appear in the excerpt I transcribed, Madhu portrays the act of cooking his morning rice. As Green (2017) describes, while Madhu enacts waiting for the rice to cook for what feels like a shockingly long time in the context of storytelling (roughly 5 minutes), fascinating and amusing his audience with the extent to which he was willing to push the boundaries of this genre, he had nevertheless compressed the enactment significantly down from the 20–30 minutes it takes to actually cook rice. Similarly, regarding the segment of the narrative transcribed above, Madhu joked to me after class that his lengthy rendition of tooth-brushing wasn't a true reflection of his activities that morning, opening his mouth wide to reveal that he hadn't teeth left to brush at his advanced age.

Madhu's artistic prowess is further revealed when comparing a series of his "morning routine" narratives. While he followed a more or less set template each time (indeed, the basic structure modeled by Rohan), in each version he tweaked specific details, in order to keep his audience engaged. Moments in the transcribed excerpt which evoked the strongest audience reaction included when Madhu carried on enacting brushing his teeth just until audience members were simultaneously amused by how long he was dragging it out but also about to lose focus, then shifted to portray studying his visage in a mirror … but then(!) briefly resumed brushing, eliciting laughs and groans from his classmates. In this and other instances, the poetics of Madhu's extended embodied repetitions—along with his attunement to and ability to play with audience expectations about temporality and pace—intensified the affective impact of his narrative.

The others also reacted strongly to Madhu's decision to portray efforts to remove phlegm from his throat and nose. Such clearing of the passages can be a typical component of a Nepali morning routine. For example, when I first began to spend time in Nepal in 1997, when staying in rural areas I commonly awoke early in the morning to the sound of my neighbors standing in their windows making noisy efforts to expel excess mucus onto the street below. While these urban dwellers were perhaps less likely to have included such efforts in their own morning rituals, Madhu's actions were conventionally recognizable and amusing in their specificity and (to some participants' sensibilities) grossness; as the comic strip shows, Jeevan turns away in mock horror, Rohan glances back at my reaction, and one participant, Bhimal, copies Madhu's nose-blowing action, while dissolving in laughter.

Following this point in the narrative, Madhu continued to describe styling his hair, worshipping, and preparing his meal. When he concluded, and after we all applauded (shaking our hands in the air using the silent mode of applause common in many deaf social contexts), Rohan indicated that next participant, Jagadeep, should take his turn. Once again, however, Rohan instructed Jagadeep to USE SIGNS. The remainder of the narratives adhered to the format described above for Radha and Dhriti's turns.

I've never witnessed any elderly participants other than Madhu permitted to produce such pantomimic narratives in the context of this ODP exercise; after all, the focus of ODP language instruction was explicitly to increase participants' facility with standard NSL forms, from which such a narrative as Madhu's diverges significantly. In this respect, part of the pleasure that onlookers derived from Madhu's performances stemmed from the fact that he was not beholden to the same standards applied to others in the NSL lessons. He was exempted from these rules in large part because of the deference others showed him due to his advanced age. Additionally, as Rohan confided to me, even as the ODP was premised on the idea that it was not too late for the elders to learn NSL, in some cases the instructors felt that a given participant's communicative practices were unlikely to be significantly malleable.

That said, even as Madhu's approach to the narrative exercise broke the rules imposed in the context of a formal NSL class, aspects of his narrative strategies resembled those of fluent signers. That is, signing which artfully centers on poetic reproduction of that which is referenced rather than on reproduction of conventionalized form per se is a part of the repertoire of many signers recognized as fluent users of NSL. For example, Pratigya Shakya, the artist who created the pictorial representations of NSL for the dictionaries and primers discussed in this paper, often drew on his skill in producing complex images, out of forms that included but were not limited standard NSL lexical items, in his signing practices. I have observed him do so both in face-to-face contexts and in videos he posts to platforms such as Facebook. For example, in July 2020, Shakya posted a video discussing Nepali basket weaving and use.[17] The video opened with close up shots of his hands working on a detailed painting of a woven basket (he often posted videos in which he painted and drew before the camera, inviting engagement with his images as temporally unfolding processes created through embodied practice). After the camera pulled back to show Shakya's full upper body, he began to sign.

This signing was initially lexico-syntactic, centered on standardized forms, but then transitioned into more pantomimic signing, something akin to vivid reenactment or demonstration in direct reported discourse. For example, via what Cuxac and Sallandre (2008) would call "transfer of person," Shakya behaved as someone handling dried stalks and weaving them together. Then, via "transfer of size and form" he transformed his

fingers into the dried stalks and began to interlace them with remarkable flexibility in a pattern that mimicked the weave of the basket. Finally, with one hand he held his completed painting of a basket against his chest and, using his other hand, began to sign about the uses a basket might have, treating the painted image as a ground for his signing hand's actions (e.g., positioning his hand signing "PUT IN" at the mouth of the painted basket). The wide range of semiotic resources he drew on in creating a compelling video characterizes, in my experience, his signing practice more broadly.

Shakya was present at the ODP meeting I've been describing, having taken over filming in order to free me up to participate (visitors are often asked to take part in the activities, including copying drawings and signing their own narratives in response to Rohan's prompting). However, at other sessions of the ODP, I was able to observe as he himself took part. Further, he has posted video of his ODP morning routine narrative to his Facebook page, on which the brief transcript below is based. On these occasions, rather than producing an account grounded in the use of standardized NSL signs, which he would of course have been quite capable of doing, Shakya launched into a pantomimic narrative in a style very similar to Madhu's. A brief comic strip transcript of the opening of this narrative is found in Figure 8, in which Shakya enacts slowly stretching awake, glancing out the window at the dawn, and washing his face.

Figure 8. Pratiga Shakhya's Morning Routine Narrative. Illustrations by the author.

While Shakya's and Madhu's approaches to pantomimic narrative converged in this context, they diverged in others. The differences between their typical performances relate to those described by Sutton-Spence and Boyce Braem (2013) in a comparison of the performances of hearing mimes and deaf signing poets.[18] The point of these scholars' comparison most relevant to this discussion is that the hearing mimes almost exclusively relied on transfer of person in crafting their enactments, mapping the characters they portrayed onto their full bodies, rather than intermixing this strategy with the other types of transfer deaf signers often employ. For example, if the mimes were characterizing an elephant they "used their own legs to show the elephant's legs," never, for example, transforming their forearms or fingers into elephant legs as signers might do (Sutton-Spence and Boyce Braem 2013:260). Additionally, when the agent they portrayed in this manner interacted with other objects, the properties of the latter were typically revealed via handling actions, while the deaf poets used a much wider range of strategies to convey the properties and motions of other objects and agents.

Sutton-Spence and Boyce Braem suggest that this variation may derive from the different audiences to whom hearing mimes and signing poets typically address themselves. That is, non-signing hearing audiences are mostly likely to be able to parse and interpret a performer's movements when their actions relate to those with which the audience has embodied experience (Pietrandrea and Russo 2007). (Recall the point made above that it was easier for ODP members to parse and perform a new sign that resembled an action that they were accustomed to performing.) As Streeck (2015:422) notes, "what our bodies know how to do is also what they are able to see." Non-signers will generally have experience with whole body actions and handling motions, though they may not have personally performed the other types of gestures employed by deaf signing poets.

Madhu developed his communicative strategies over a lifetime almost entirely spent interacting solely with non-signers, while Shakya grew up immersed in a signing network. It's perhaps unsurprising, then, that Madhu's pantomimic strategies indeed align with those the authors attribute to the mimes who performed largely for hearing audiences, while Shakya's align with the wider complement of strategies, such as transfer of size and form, employed by the poets who usually address audiences of signers. Yet when addressing the ODP, a group understood to have spent most of their lives with and as non-signers, Shakya's narrative strategies closely resembled Madhu's (in centering on transfer of person and handling classifiers).

Indeed, even as ODP pedagogy encouraged elders to use standardized NSL forms, Rohan, Shakya, and other instructors recognized (from their own experiences communicating with non-signing interlocutors) that, rather than being unmediated and a-historical, elders' "natural sign" strategies were grounded in predictions about what kinds

of conventional experience would likely be shared by the interlocutors they wished to address. Drawing on such overlapping experience allowed for performance of “telling by showing” (Green 2017; Sutton-Spence and Boyce Braem 2013) that would be interpretable in context.

Attention to this dynamic has the potential to both underscore and complicate the difference posited between signing that is “structured in accordance with the spatial and temporal logic of the actions they represent” and that which is “governed by the logic of signs and their combination” (Green 2017:349). Sign making is, indeed, a type of action. And, while addressees are best positioned to parse visual actions they have had experience enacting, such experience is not static, but always accumulating. ODP pedagogy, then, creates a setting in which elders are given an opportunity to accumulate embodied experience of parsing and producing standard NSL forms, as objectified in Shakya’s images, such that mutual engagement with these lexical items can increasingly be drawn into the “natural” signing strategy of drawing on shared experience to make meaning.

Conclusion

Most, likely all, deaf Nepalis share the experience of having to bear the “burden of transparency” (Graif 2018:23), engaging in the perspective taking that allows them to predict which actions will be most interpretable to those with whom they don’t share a common linguistic code. When successful, such interactions are often mistaken as evidence that signing is not language but emerges from the “visual contours of the world” (Graif 2018:17). This misinterpretation both reflects and reproduces a common ideological practice of dichotomizing image and language, and clustering each with a series of essentialized qualities, likewise taken to stand in mutual opposition with one another (Irvine and Gal 2000). It was against this background that deaf leaders identified an imperative to legitimize NSL *as* language. Shakya’s illustrations have provided a focal point around which these efforts have been organized, even as the dictionaries in which these images appear objectify only a narrow segment of the linguistic practices that characterize fluent signers’ meaning-making practices.

Despite my earlier assumptions, the narrow focus of these texts can’t be attributed to the limitations of pictorial representation. Certainly, if I could represent longer stretches of signed discourse through drawings (to the extent that I’ve been successful in doing so in this article), then the vastly more skilled Shakya could also do so. My assumption, I fear, sprang from my failure to be sufficiently aware of the effect that pervasive discourses dichotomizing language and image were having on my analysis. Rather, deaf leaders’ choice to narrowly focus on lexical items in the dictionaries stemmed more significantly from other factors, including the economics of printing and the need to make NSL legible

as language to a range of powerful stakeholders (such as the Nepali state and international organizations of deaf people) by producing recognizable legitimizing text objects. For such audiences, NSL was in this sense presenced by the formal poetics and language ideologies according to which dictionaries were constituted.

However, as much as Nepali signers consider it a "moral imperative" (Friedner and Kusters 2020:32) to provide all deaf Nepalis access to the standard forms and the networks of sociality organized around their use, as the second half of this article suggests, this does not mean that other forms of meaning making are denigrated in the ODP. Indeed, they were in some cases encouraged and valorized. By incorporating pictorial image-making into my methods for analyzing ODP narratives, to better understand how NSL pedagogy articulates with elders' modes of "natural signing," I've tried to respond to what Sicoli (2020:214) likewise describes as a "moral obligation" of researchers who aim "to represent and understand language": namely, that we should seek to "represent the actual elements and arrangements that enter into the ontologies of human communication and not to privilege one mode of language." Expanding the modalities and genres through which we represent embodied, situated instances of language use—while always carefully attending the ideological framings that mediate their affordances—can help linguistic anthropologists better meet that obligation.

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Endnotes

1. Names for which I provide only a given name are pseudonyms. When I provide a given name and surname, I am using a person's real name.↩

2. These skills are not separate but complexly imbricated with one another.↩

3. I am a hearing person who has, over long periods of research in Nepal, became a fluent NSL signer. ↩

4. Hearing Nepalis are, of course, not alone in making such erroneous assumptions about signing. See, for example, Bauman 2008 on similar perspectives in Europe and the US.↩

5. There are, of course, important exceptions to this general rule (e.g., Goodwin et. al. 2012; Kusters 2015; Manning 2016; Goodwin 2018; Perley 2019).↩

6. However, such framing downplays the multimodality of both signed and spoken languages (e.g., Friedner and Helmreich 2012; Sicoli 2020).↩

7. I shared these images with the ODP prior to including them in this article, to make sure that participants deemed them appropriate.↩

8. This organization was initially called The National Federation of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.↩

9. Such research, however, must be squared with the burgeoning literature on the harms of linguistic deprivation that can occur when deaf children are only permitted access to partially accessible spoken language forms during the critical period for language acquisition (Humphries et al. 2014).↩

10. Access issues persist, despite the fact that (1) Nepali activists and linguists have worked to assert that NSL is a language on par with spoken languages and (2) deaf children's right to sign-language-medium education should be guaranteed by both the 2015 Nepali Constitution's affirmation of the right to mother-tongue education (which includes NSL, as well as languages associated with other minoritized groups) and the 2015 Nepali Rights of Individuals with Disabilities Act (Hoffmann-Dilloway 2016a; Snoddon 2019).↩

11. Hopper's discussion of Himalayan Buddhist art in the context of Bhutan applies in many ways to artistic practices in Nepal.↩

12. Franz K, "Teaching at the Naxal School," 10 November 2008, *deaf Nepal*. https://deafnepal.blogspot.com/2008/12/111008-today-i-began-my-second-week-of.html, last accessed January 1, 2021. ↩

13. According to KAD leaders, Radha's facility with this task reflects not only her long-term affiliation with the KAD (relative to many of the other ODP participants) but also the fact that she appears to have been post-lingually deafened; that is, she is thought to have been able to acquire some conventional language

before having been deafened, evidenced by the fact that she regularly mouths and even sometimes voices spoken Nepali words.↩

14. Green (2017:76) reports being told that the same man was 76 years old in 2009. While the exact particulars of his age are thus perhaps unclear, the central point—that he was quite elderly at the time of both Green's and my engagement with him and that he was thought to have been already in old age before first being exposed to NSL—is undisputed.↩

15. See Moriarty Harrelson 2017 for an account of similar dynamics in another context in which a deaf social space is organized around use of a standardized national sign language. ↩

16. To be more specific, I observed that Madhu typically mirrored rather than copied the signs of his interlocutors (that is, he did not perform the viewpoint rotations discussed above). However, after years of participation in the ODP, in 2015 and 2017 I observed that while Madhu, like Dhriti, usually required that Rohan feed him NSL signs, he had begun to copy rather than mirror these forms (see Hoffmann-Dilloway 2020).↩

17. In his video, Pratigya was addressing a broad "Deaf World" audience (the term referring to transnational relationships based in deaf sociality). In his posts he often endeavored to describe particulars of NEPALI CULTURE for deaf viewers watching from other geographical locations. ↩

18. In mounting such a project Sutton-Spence and Boyce Braem (2013:248) acknowledge that "the comparison of sign language with mime is a sensitive issue that must not be seen as an attack on all that has been achieved over the past few decades to demonstrate that sign languages are 'real' languages and are not 'just mime or pantomime'" but argue that, "unless we take time to examine what mime is and what sign languages can be, we limit our understanding of both and of their potential for enhancing each other." ↩

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