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“Sign to me, not the children”: Ideologies of language contamination at a deaf tourist site in Bali

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ABSTRACT

Certain historical processes and sign language ideologies have led to the dissemination of American Sign Language (ASL) signs throughout Southeast Asia via deaf education projects, international development interventions, and tourism, notably in Cambodia and Indonesia. These ideologies normalized attempts to develop standardised sign systems based on national spoken languages and the introduction of signs from foreign sign languages, especially ASL. This history has shaped and mobilized ideas among deaf sign language users about language contact, the spread of hegemonic national sign languages, and the vitality of sign languages outside of the US and western Europe. Some of these ideologies manifest in deaf signers' concerns about the vitality of what are often perceived to be non-hegemonic sign languages (e.g., sign languages that are not ASL, Auslan, or BSL) and language practices. By examining discourses and practices in the context of encounters between deaf tourists and deaf leaders in Bali, this article approaches larger questions about the territorialization of sign languages, linguistic boundaries, language contact, and sign language vitality.

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1. Introduction

It was early morning, and the sun had not yet reached its full tropical intensity. While very warm, the temperature was still comfortable enough to move around. I was in the backseat of a silver Toyota SUV with a dent on the side; the dent was acquired during a trip to Ubud to observe tourists at a royal funeral. Next to me sat a deaf white woman from France who was in her late forties and a solo traveler to Bali. We conversed in a combination of American Sign Language (ASL), which she had learned during an extended tour of the US, and International Sign (IS). An older white man from the UK, also a solo traveler, was in the front seat, conversing with Wahyu, our deaf Indonesian tour guide and driver, in British Sign Language (BSL). BSL is closely related to Australian Sign Language (Auslan), the language that Wahyu uses the most in his tours because the majority of his customers are deaf Australians.

We drove through Denpasar, the capital city of Bali, an island in the Indonesian archipelago known for its white beaches, swaying palm trees and tourists of all stripes. Wahyu turned onto a leafy side street with large houses behind tall walls. He steered the SUV through throngs of chattering schoolchildren in matching uniforms as they crowded the sides of the street on their way to school. We passed a primary school for hearing children and pulled into the driveway of a low-slung cream building. This building housed a small private school for deaf children that has become a popular stop for deaf tourists

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holidaying in Bali. On this particular day, I accompanied two deaf tourists from Europe; however, tourists from all over the world have visited the school. On a previous visit, when I signed the school's visitor's log, I noted that it listed the names and nationalities of tourists, some that I recognized as people from the US deaf community.

After we checked in at the front desk, our escort, one of the three deaf teachers at the school and an active member of the Bali Deaf Association, greeted us. He asked us to sit down for a brief orientation. Using International Sign and some ASL, the teacher taught us a few BISINDO (Indonesian Sign Language) signs, such as the signs for “hello” and “My name is...”, and their fingerspelling system. The teacher told us that if we had questions or comments, we should direct them to him in our own sign language and then he would translate for the students. He said that if we were not using BISINDO, we were not to sign directly to the students in order to prevent confusing them with “wrong” signs. Later, in an interview, the teacher elaborated his reasons for the policy: he said that there had been problems in the past with tourists using inappropriate signs with the children and that he did not want the children at the school to use signs that were not Bali signs. He said, “BISINDO is beautiful, there is no need to sign the same as it is done in Croatia. People that are born here should use this language. There is only one Bali, as there is only one of the other countries. There is no need for everywhere to use International Sign. There is one Bali.”

As in the vignette from a tourist encounter at a deaf school in Bali, statements about the importance of defending language boundaries is often contradicted by everyday languaging practices. A deaf teacher is concerned about his students learning signs from foreign tourists that are not Balinese signs and the potential of contamination; however, the deaf guide leading the tour makes use of a diverse linguistic repertoire that includes ASL, Auslan, and International Sign, as well as spoken Indonesian. Wahyu's accumulation of semiotic resources is an economic benefit as it allows him to communicate with tourists from all over the world. The ability of deaf people to communicate and experience kinship with other deaf people from different backgrounds is celebrated; yet, the veneration of sign language as the basis for the affinity felt by deaf people across geographic and social boundaries uneasily co-exists alongside concerns about the permeability of sign language boundaries and sign language vitality.

Transnational contact between deaf people of different nationalities is not a new phenomenon (see [Haualand, 2007](#); [Murray, 2008](#)); however, contact between different sign languages has intensified over the last fifteen years because of video technology, social media, and increased deaf mobility, particularly in deaf tourism of different kinds (leisure, educational exchanges, and volunteer). Sign language ideologies in deaf tourism include concerns about the vulnerability of a local sign language to contamination by a foreign sign language. Accompanying deaf mobility, there is a perception that hegemonic sign languages, by which I mean primarily ASL but also some other European sign languages, threaten the vitality of sign languages outside of North America and Europe. Concerns about sign language vitality reflect the power differentials involved in deaf (im)mobility and the movement of certain sign linguistic resources across geographical borders.

It is a familiar refrain that deaf people are more able to quickly learn new sign languages than speakers can learn a new spoken language ([Hiddinga and Crasborn, 2011](#)). Deaf people from disparate backgrounds can and do communicate across national borders and bounded sign languages by using mixtures of national (and sometimes local) sign languages, gesture and International Sign ([Hiddinga and Crasborn, 2011](#); [Kusters and Friedner, 2015](#)). Sign languages are considered integral to the deaf experience and identity ([De Meulder and Murray, 2017](#); [Hiddinga and Crasborn, 2011](#)) and often talked about as a bridge across differences such as nationality, race, class, gender, and sexuality ([Kusters and Friedner, 2015](#)). However, in folk discussions of contact between sign languages, there is a discursive emphasis on the dominance of one sign language over another, naturalizing the idea that certain sign languages (and by extension, deaf people) are especially vulnerable to foreign incursions ([Moriarty Harrelson, 2017b](#)). In this article, I examine what conceptualizations of language are emphasized in theory and practice, by whom, where, and to what end, especially because language ideologies are more often than not a reflection of broader societal struggles and conflicts. An analysis of sign language ideologies offers insight into the strategic sociopolitical assertions of deaf people and groups. In the next section, I contextualize sign languages within a discussion of sign language contact, conduits of foreign influence, and then outline the historical context that has contributed to the ideological work being done in Bali, specifically practices to protect students' language development from contamination by tourists.

2. Contextualizing sign languages

Scholars studying language endangerment noted how transnational movement of people and ideas, as well as increasingly globalized social media, have contributed to situations of accelerated language contact and mixing ([Austin and Sallabank, 2014](#)). Sign language vitality is an increasing concern for many sign language linguists (e.g., [Bickford et al., 2015](#); [Braithwaite, 2019](#); [Webster and Safar, 2019](#)). Researchers have examined language endangerment in a wide continuum ranging from village sign languages (cf. [Nonaka, 2012](#)) to national sign languages (cf. [Johnston, 2004](#); [McKee, 2017](#)). Sign languages are minoritized minority languages ([Krausneker, 2003](#)); they are minority languages because of the number of users and general patterns of transmission, and also minoritized by institutions, research agendas, and policies that disregard sign languages ([De Meulder and Murray, 2017](#):137).

Many sign languages in the world are in a precarious position because of their lower status, smaller number of users (in comparison to most spoken languages), patterns of transmission, which are different from spoken languages because most deaf children are born to hearing non-signing parents, and the more limited availability of resources, such as dictionaries, learning materials, and so forth ([Bickford and McKay-Cody, 2018](#); [Webster and Safar, 2019](#)). The patterns of language shift

manifest differently in sign languages from how they do in spoken languages because of circumstances unique to deaf people, such as smaller number of users, the emphasis on listening and speaking in many educational settings, and medical and genetic interventions to reduce the number of deaf people (Bickford et al., 2015).

Sign languages can appear and disappear quickly, especially in situations of violence, such as war and genocide (Moriarty, 2020). Language shift from smaller, more localized sign languages to another sign language can happen quickly and have a wide impact (Webster and Safar, 2019). This can happen when deaf children from a rural shared signing community attend school in a nearby city and encounter a national sign language, such as in the case of Kata Kolok and Indonesian Sign Language in Bali (De Vos, 2012), or when a foreign sign language is introduced into a school (cf. Parks, 2014). In some circumstances, signs from foreign sign languages are introduced by researchers and tourists, such as in Nicaragua, where deaf people have borrowed signs from other sign languages and then modified them to fit the linguistic rules of Nicaraguan Sign Language (Senghas, 2003).

2.1. Resistance to foreign influences in sign languages

People do not generally talk about sign language change as a natural process of language evolution over time; instead, it is referred to as the “takeover” of a sign language by another sign language (mostly from the global North) or by a spoken language. Resistance to perceived “foreign” influences in sign languages unfolds in different ways, such as in vernacular discourses and practices. Some of these discourses and practices include projects to purge sign languages of unwanted elements, such as in the “demonization” of Eritrean Sign Language (Moges, 2015), as well as community efforts in the US to purge ASL of initialized signs.

Linguistic purism in sign languages includes demands for the codification of a national sign language, prescriptivist ideologies and questions about cultural authenticity. Linguistic purism is the policing of language by classifying certain elements as foreign and as threats to the integrity of the language itself. In fact, sign language policing is so much a part of the deaf experience that on the online channel, *BSL Zone* it is the subject of a sketch about a BSL police officer, played by Jean St. Clair, who corrects people’s signs.

Ideologies of sign language vitality and revitalization depend on the notion of clear and easily defended language boundaries. This is signified by the way that the Balinese teacher in the vignette at the beginning of this paper established himself as a physical (and ideological) boundary between the deaf students and tourists. The perception of foreign elements in a sign language, such as English in ASL, obscures the complex, multi-modal language contact between signed and spoken languages. All signed languages are contact languages in the sense that they coexist alongside other languages, and deaf people rarely live in isolation from hearing people. Signed languages often include elements of spoken languages, such as the use of fingerspelling, the initialization of certain signs and mouthing.

Sign language purification ideologies stigmatize many everyday language practices of deaf people, including translinguaging and other shared communicative practices such as learning and using signs from several sign languages in a transnational situation. Furthermore, sign language ideologies that demand firm language boundaries stigmatize deaf people who may not have had the opportunity to learn a standardized sign language, labeling them as “languageless” deaf people (Moriarty Harrelson, 2017a). Discourses of classification and documentation, however important and necessary they are, almost inevitably draw boundaries that exclude and delegitimize the use of certain sign languages and other languaging practices that occur in transnational deaf encounters. This is not to say that these concepts should be done away with, as they serve an important function in educational, political, and legal contexts (De Meulder et al., 2019). In the next section, I discuss the role of “deaf folklore” about deaf schools in relation to sign language ideologies and the discursive construction of sign language vitality in the context of deaf tourism.

2.2. Deaf schools as conduits for “foreign” influences

The transmission patterns for sign languages are different from those for spoken languages, as most deaf children do not learn it from their parents unless they are from a deaf village like Bengkala in Bali and/or have signing parents. Most deaf people learn sign languages from their peers, teachers, or interpreters at school, deaf clubs, camps, and/or deaf events, or any other circumstance where deaf people come together (De Meulder et al., 2018; Fenlon and Wilkinson, 2015). Other factors in the emergence of sign languages include gatherings of deaf people in some urban centers, the greater presence of genes for hereditary deafness in some rural areas, and multi-generational deaf families (De Meulder et al., 2018; Fenlon and Wilkinson, 2015).

In academic literature and deaf folklore, deaf schools are valorized as the birthplace of sign languages. Historically, deaf communities formed around educational institutions, which have been central to the transmission and maintenance of sign languages but are also seen as being responsible for language shift from some smaller, more localized sign languages to a more dominant sign language. Some sign languages waned because deaf people from a shared signing community, or a rural community where deaf and hearing people both use sign language, migrated to urban centers for schooling, such as Martha’s Vineyard Sign Language (MVSL). The Martha’s Vineyard signing community became dispersed after some deaf people moved to Hartford, Connecticut to attend the American School for the Deaf and then married deaf people they met there, resulting in a more diversified genetic pool (Bickford and McKay-Cody, 2018; Groce, 1985). Similar patterns of attrition have been

identified in Adamarobe (Ghana, [Kusters, 2019](#)); Ban Khor (Thailand, [Nonaka, 2012](#)); and Bengkulu, where deaf children learn BISINDO when they attend secondary school in nearby Singaraja (Indonesia, [Marsaja, 2008](#)).

Deaf schools are also sites where invented communication systems, or visual systems based on the national spoken language and sometimes foreign sign languages, displaced an indigenous sign language. Developing countries were (and are) the targets of prescriptivist modernization programs focused on introducing global North models of deaf education ([Branson and Miller, 1998](#); [Moriarty Harrelson, 2017a](#)). In many parts of the world, national sign languages from the global North were introduced into developing countries through colonialism, missionary work and/or international development projects focused on deaf education ([Braithwaite, 2019](#); [Fenlon and Wilkinson, 2015](#); [Moges, 2015](#); [Moriarty Harrelson, 2017a](#)).

Deaf education projects and international development interventions have led to the dissemination of ASL signs in several countries in Africa and throughout Southeast Asia, such as Cambodia ([Moriarty Harrelson, 2017a](#)), Thailand ([Woodward, 2003](#)), the Philippines, and Indonesia ([Palfreyman, 2019](#)). Ideologies that sign languages are visual tools for teaching the national spoken and written languages have normalized attempts to develop standardized sign systems based on national spoken languages and the introduction of signs from foreign sign languages into schools. For example, an NGO in Cambodia imported signs from ASL for use in its schools, with the intent for them to become “Khmerized” over time, based on the belief that Cambodian Sign Language was not developed enough to convey concepts from the national curriculum ([Moriarty Harrelson, 2017a](#)).

According to several sources, ASL has influenced the sign languages used by deaf people in at least seventeen countries in Africa and Asia, including Benin, Ghana and Singapore, and it is a part of a multilingual ecology in many other countries ([Braithwaite, 2014, 2019](#); [Parks, 2014](#)). The geography of hegemonic sign language spread, often piggybacking on other colonial enterprises, includes Auslan in the Pacific, Finnish Sign Language in East Africa ([Moges, 2015](#)) and the Caribbean ([Braithwaite, 2014](#)) and Dutch Sign Language in Surinam ([Braithwaite, 2014, 2019](#)). In many of these contexts, hearing educators use signs from a foreign sign language (but not necessarily fluently), and the deaf community uses a different sign language ([Braithwaite, 2019](#)).

Projects to develop and modernize deaf education in lower-income countries contributed to the mobility of what I call *technologies of deaf education*, by which I mean specialized methods, techniques and pedagogical approaches in deaf education settings, such as invented sign systems to teach deaf students the national spoken languages. For example, Sistem Isyarat Bahasa Indonesia, (SIBI) is a sign system based on spoken Indonesian ([Palfreyman, 2019](#)). These technologies may also include importing signs from foreign sign languages into schools for the deaf as a “tool” for pedagogy ([Moriarty Harrelson, 2017a](#)).

Relatedly, [Brentari and Padden \(2001\)](#) found that many deaf people in the US are suspicious of initialized signs in ASL, tracing this to a 1970s campaign by some educators of the deaf to substitute a large percentage of ASL signs with initialized signs. [Padden \(1990, p. 201\)](#) highlights the role of deaf “folklore” in sign language vitality when she writes, “The collective memory for a language is embodied in the collective memory that is formed in justifications, explanations, the rhetorical organization of accounting for the necessity of the survival of a language such as ASL.” [Mathur and Napoli \(2011, p. 7\)](#) noted that “feelings about language use run fast and deep...lexical choices can indicate alignments that deeply reinforce or, alternatively, seriously threaten the identity of individuals.”

I argue that ideological positioning in deaf tourism encounters, as shown in the deaf teacher's actions at the school in Denpasar and his comments that people in Bali should use BISINDO, not International Sign, is related to the ongoing history of deaf education as the site of ideological contests about languages. In many colonized and postcolonial countries, these ideological contests have also involved what are perceived as foreign sign languages.

2.3. Frances Parsons and Total Communication in Indonesia

Instituting boundaries between languages can serve political ends, as they are used to delineate distinct deaf communities as well as establish differences between deaf and hearing people ([Parks, 2014](#)). Scholars studying spoken languages have shown the ways in which language is the basis of an identity, a means of affiliation and differentiation, and the site of an ideological contest regarding various aspects of social life ([Bucholtz and Hall, 2005](#); [Gal and Irvine, 2019](#); [Irvine and Gal, 2000](#); [Parks, 2014](#)). Statements about languages communicate specific knowledges about social life, and the making of these statements are also social practices embedded in a particular history ([Gal and Irvine, 2019](#)). The historical context of sign language contact in Indonesia includes the use of foreign sign languages in deaf education.

A deaf woman from the US, Frances M. Parsons, who was a professor of Art History at Gallaudet University and a proponent of Total Communication, was influential in shaping government policy on sign language in Indonesia. Originally, Total Communication was defined as the use of all methods depending on students' needs, not as speaking and signing simultaneously, which is how Total Communication is commonly practiced. At the time of its emergence, many deaf people in the US supported Total Communication as a symbol of opposition to oralism because it called for the use of signing in education after decades of banishment; however, in practice, it means the use of sign-supported speech that is not accessible to most deaf students ([Johnson et al., 1989](#)). Although she probably would not refer to herself as a tourist, Parsons traveled the world, visiting various developing countries upon the invitation of the national government, hearing educators working in deaf education, or a sympathetic person with influence. In 1971, Parsons traveled to Buenos Aires, Argentina, and there she was inspired to begin “a global campaign to encourage other countries to incorporate sign language into deaf education” ([Parsons, 2005:190](#)).

Parsons' influence on global deaf education expanded in 1974 when she became a Peace Corps consultant. This meant that she had the endorsement of the US government. Two years later, Parsons embarked on a year-long trip through Australia, Asia, and Africa to teach and lecture about Total Communication. Throughout the 1970s and in 1980, she continued to campaign for Total Communication in Asia, Africa, and Europe (Parsons, 2005). According to Parsons, the schools she visited "wanted to incorporate at least 400 to 500 American signs in their own signing vocabularies for the sake of breaking down the communication barriers between countries" (Parsons, 2005:191).

Parsons traveled to Indonesia in June 1980 upon the invitation of Baroness Sutadisastra, the wife of a retired Indonesian diplomat living in the US (Palfreyman, 2019). Parsons and the Baroness met with the Department of Education in Jakarta, and over the course of several years, the Total Communication methodology took root in several schools in Java where ASL signs were introduced (Palfreyman, 2019). In theory, Total Communication is not the same as ASL, and as a technology of deaf education, it can be used with any named sign language. However, sign systems are often taken up and named as ASL, which can also refer to several different things, such as Total Communication, signed English, and variants of ASL in different regions of the world (Moriarty Harrelson, 2017a).

The Indonesian Department of Education and Culture published a SIBI dictionary in 1994; this dictionary included signs from ASL, BSL, and Singapore Sign Language in addition to existing signs used by deaf people in Indonesia and signs created by the Dictionary Compilation Team (Palfreyman, 2019). The SIBI dictionary was an attempt to introduce a standardized sign system following Indonesian syntax into schools for the deaf; at this time, there were indigenous sign language varieties in use across the archipelago, but these had yet to be researched, and there was not an awareness that sign languages are languages (Palfreyman, 2019).

Discourses supporting the achievement of linguistic rights for sign language users through official recognition often clash with the nation-state's emphasis on the importance of a national spoken and written language (Branson and Miller, 1998; Snoddon, 2017). Deaf people in Indonesia are engaged in advocacy work, raising political consciousness regarding the status of signed languages and making demands for the inclusion of BISINDO in national education and service areas, with the exception of Bengkulu, where Kata Kolok is already being used in the village primary school and other areas of civic life. Also, deaf Indonesians in south Bali view Kata Kolok as threatened by BISINDO and International Sign.

There is a long history of deaf people advocating for their right to use what is often framed as "natural" sign languages in educational settings (Branson and Miller, 1998). Deaf people's arguments for their rights to sign language, as well as regarding the perceived negative impact of dominant spoken languages (usually a national spoken language) on sign languages, clash with educators' ideologies and the persistence of manually coded versions of spoken and written languages in many educational settings. Because it can be difficult to explain nuance to policymakers and educators, these sign language recognition campaigns often push for the use of a national, standardized sign language, which in turn, flattens differences and threatens sign language variation.

2.4. *Sign language genealogies and deaf folk beliefs*

The genealogy of different sign languages and the origins of certain signs are seen as a topic of intense interest for many deaf communities. For example, the relationship between Haitian Sign Language and ASL is reported to be a topic of keen discussion among Deaf Haitians (Hochgesang and McAuliff, 2016), as is the relationship between Dominican Republic Sign Language and ASL (Gerner de Garcia, 1994). Among deaf people, there are folk beliefs about how certain signs came to become a part of some sign languages, such as the belief that all initialized signs in ASL are from ASL-English contact in deaf education settings, especially where Signed Exact English was used (Snoddon, 2017).

Complicating matters, many sign languages are under documented or not documented at all. ASL is the most researched sign language in the world (Parks, 2014); however, the field of ASL research has only been in existence since the 1960s. Compared with spoken languages, the documentation of sign languages is still relatively new. Large-scale corpus linguistics and documentation projects were not feasible until recent technological advancements, such as the development of large technological storage capacities and more affordable, portable video-recording equipment (Fenlon and Wilkinson, 2015). Until these technological advancements made corpus linguistics projects possible, sign language documentation projects relied on line drawings and more recently, still photographs.

Furthermore, it is difficult to neatly map the geographic spread of and relationships between sign languages because in general, deaf people and sign languages are understudied, especially in marginalized communities. Histories of sign languages often need to be gleaned from various primary sources, such as in the case of Cambodian Sign Language (see Moriarty, 2020). Patterns and relationships between sign languages cannot be neatly superimposed over patterns of spoken languages (Padden, 2011; Fenlon and Wilkinson, 2015). For instance, spoken Thai and English are unrelated languages, but Thai Sign Language has an ASL influence because a hearing Thai educator who studied at Gallaudet University in the 1950s introduced ASL into Thailand when she established a school for the deaf in Bangkok (Woodward, 2003).

Finally, many deaf people travel and engage with deaf people of different nationalities on social media (Kurz and Cuculick, 2015). There are also deaf people who participate in exchange programs, such as a recent program sponsored by the US government that brought a cohort of deaf leaders from Indonesia to the US. International meetings and festivals, such as Deaf Way in July 1989 when more than 6000 deaf people from around the world met at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC to "celebrate Deaf culture" (Erting et al., 1994). Thus, it is difficult to track the diverse forms of deaf mobilities and gauge the

possible impact of deaf development workers, Peace Corps volunteers, tourists, or long-term deaf expatriates on some national sign languages (cf. Moriarty, 2020).

3. An ethnography of deaf tourist practices in Bali, Indonesia

Over the course of seven months of fieldwork in Indonesia, I accompanied diverse tours with different combinations of deaf people using different national sign languages. I joined tourist groups as they visited both deaf and non-deaf tourist attractions. Many deaf tourists holidaying in Bali used the services of deaf tour guides and visited sites on the global deaf circuit, such as the deaf village, deaf schools, and more recently, Burger King on Sunset Road in Kuta, a fast food restaurant staffed by deaf Indonesians.

Some tours were one-on-one day tours to several attractions in north Bali. Others were group tours with deaf people from different countries who had just met each other on the day of the tour. I also accompanied a large tour group on a ten-day excursion to several islands in the Indonesian archipelago. This group included deaf people from Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, the UK, and the US. My participation and observation of various kinds of tours were combined with several short-term stays in Bengkulu where I observed several deaf and hearing tourist groups as they visited deaf villagers at their homes.

I interviewed guides, tourists, and members of the Bali deaf community, including teachers from one of the deaf schools in Bali that is a popular site for deaf tourists to visit. These interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data also include notes on tour guide narratives, interviews in the car as we traveled from site to site, and the filming of material for an ethnographic film on deaf tourist mobilities. I analyzed interview and conversation transcripts, notes from a field journal, and participant-generated visual materials such as film and photos posted on social media.

On social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, I follow deaf people who travel extensively, as well as participants in deaf travel group discussions, to glean insight regarding the meaning of travel for those who participate in these discussions. For several years, I have followed several hashtags, such as #deaftravel, #deafworld and #deaftours, to observe how deaf travel is talked about on Instagram. I also observed deaf travel influencers from France, Germany, the US, the Philippines, and Hong Kong. Deaf travel influencers are defined as deaf people who create content on social media (e.g. Instagram, Twitter and Facebook) about travel, sign languages and deaf people in the places they visit. I observed deaf travelers who document their year-long tours on social media and deaf people who travel and make videos as part of media projects and who often have sponsorships from businesses marketing to deaf people, such as Joel Barish of *No Barriers* and Calvin Young of *Seek the World* who are both deaf travel influencers from the US.

4. Sign language ideologies and practices in deaf tourism

Various sign language ideologies circulate in deaf tourism. Kusters et al. (2020) define sign language ideologies as beliefs and statements about sign languages, sign language varieties, modalities, and the people who use them. These ideologies and practices include the commodification of sign languages to index socially conscious enterprises supporting people with disabilities, with deaf people subsumed under the category of disabled people. Examples of these enterprises in Cambodia include self-described “inclusive” cafes employing deaf people in Kampot, with menus in Cambodian Sign Language, and Angkor Artisans, a company in Siem Reap that employs deaf artisans to make souvenirs for tourists. Sign languages are also a promotion and marketing strategy for global brands, such as Starbucks, which has stores in Malaysia and Washington, DC that feature deaf employees and sign language on menus, signage, and so forth. The “deaf” Starbucks in Malaysia is a popular stop for deaf tourists, as is the above-mentioned Burger King store in Bali that employs deaf people and features a logo that uses BISINDO fingerspelled handshapes for “B” and “K”.

In deaf tourism, sign language ideologies and practices are expressed in different ways. The following are some examples:

- A tourist declares that he refuses to use ASL in countries where it is considered to be non-native (Moriarty Harrelson, 2017b);
- A deaf Indonesian teacher insisting that tourists visiting a school for the deaf sign directly to him, and not the children, as in the vignette in the beginning of this article; and
- A deaf Australian volunteer learns BISINDO in a restaurant with members of the Balinese deaf community to avoid bringing Auslan into the school.

Sign language ideologies in tourism appear in social media videos crowdsourcing the “right” sign for a tourist destination, such as when a deaf tourist from Germany posted a video on Instagram asking for the sign for Yangon, Myanmar (the video is no longer available, as it was posted as an Instagram Story, which expire after 24 h).

Metalinguistic awareness among deaf people (teachers, tourists and community members) has led to the diffusion of certain language ideologies into popular deaf discourse; specifically, the notion of sign languages as linguistically territorialized entities with defensible boundaries. In other words, sign languages are explicitly linked to geographical locations and it is seen as a moral responsibility to use the “right” signs for (and in) a geographic location. It is useful to consider how such

ideologies emerge in different perspectives in social media and tourism; for example, who is positioned as the arbiters of “right signs” and based on what authority?

5. Deaf travel influencers, metalinguistics, and comparison videos

Over the past ten years, there has been a sharp increase of deaf travel influencers on social media who post about their travel experiences and make videos in sign language, often highlighting “local” deaf people, their sociopolitical issues, and their homes, schools and businesses. As mentioned above, deaf travel influencers have posted videos on Instagram crowdsourcing the “correct” signs for cities and countries in different parts of the world, and my digital ethnography shows a proliferation of sign language comparison videos. These videos involve two people demonstrating signs from their respective national or village sign languages for various concepts and categories, such as mother and father, and/or the fingerspelled alphabet. Examples include videos that deaf tourists post on social media, as well as a video by a deaf person from Bengkulu of himself fingerspelling in what seems to be the one-handed ASL alphabet alongside a white man from Australia who is fingerspelling using the Auslan two-handed alphabet.

Comparing sign languages is of particular fascination for deaf tourists (and their hosts). Many deaf tourists, especially if they are of different language backgrounds and participating in a multinational, multilingual deaf tourist group, engage in metalinguistic discussions about the status of sign languages in their respective countries and compare signs for different concepts and objects. Metalinguistic discussions regarding the origins and taxonomic classification of certain signs are an important part of deaf sociality (see Braithwaite, 2019; Gerner de Garcia, 1994; Hochgesang and McAuliff, 2016; Kusters, this issue; Padden, 1990; Parks, 2014).

Language is intertwined with categories of sameness and differences; deaf (and hearing) people claim that they essentially differ from other groups of deaf people based on the use of specific sign languages (Parks, 2014). Deaf identities are strongly associated with sign languages, and metalinguistic discussions reinforce a sense of deaf sociality across language and cultural boundaries. Sign languages are visual languages with culture-specific iconicity (Green, 2014), and signers take pleasure in exploring the origins of these signs precisely because iconicity is culturally specific; in other words, understanding the iconicity in another sign language is experienced as gaining insight into another culture.

The use of foreign signs at home or in videos on social media can be viewed by deaf tourists or by other signers from the tourist's home country as a signifier of cosmopolitanism and worldliness. However, while the use of foreign signs by deaf tourists is accepted, and even celebrated, some tourists view the use of foreign signs by “local” deaf people with alarm. Sign language influences and other forms of linguistic change are talked about by researchers, deaf tourists, and some hosts as a unilateral case of a dominant sign language (usually ASL) contaminating the local sign language.

Anxiety about the vitality of sign languages appears in the idealization of an untouched, pristine national or village sign language that must be protected from tourists. The sedimentation of certain ideologies, such as the ideology that all sign languages can and should be distinguished and classified in a systematic way, has led to perceptions of sign languages as bounded systems that must be protected and maintained by their “owners,” e.g., a deaf community (Moriarty Harrelson, 2017b). This ideology also leads to the perception that tourists have a responsibility not to influence local sign languages during their visits.

Metalinguistic awareness shapes and mobilizes ideas among deaf signers about language contact, the spread of what are perceived as hegemonic national sign languages, and the perceived robust vitality of sign languages outside of North America (e.g., Canada and the US) and western Europe; however, this is not to say that sign languages in North America and Europe are indeed more robust, as they face their own challenges. These beliefs manifest in specific sign language practices in tourism, such as a group of faculty members and students learning Costa Rican sign language before traveling there as a part of an academic study abroad program, so as to not bring an ASL influence.

6. Conclusion

In the ethnographic example at the beginning of this article, the deaf teacher at the school positioned himself as a literal barrier to the possible contamination of the children's sign language—a barrier to ensure the purity of BISINDO. This teacher's statement to the tourists also served as a reminder of their foreignness and its inherent risks to sign language in Bali. The sign language in the school was constructed as in danger of being contaminated by foreign deaf tourists, and indeed this is a legitimate concern, given the ways certain sign languages have traveled throughout the world and the power imbalances between languages, both spoken and signed.

Ideologies of linguistic purism in sign languages are essentially a desire to maintain language vitality by establishing boundaries (cf. Woolard and Schieffelin, 1994; Kroskrity, 2010). This is done through the separation and excision of perceived foreign elements, such as initialized signs in ASL in the US and ASL signs from International Sign in European settings (see Kusters, this issue). It is possible that these desires to control and manage signed languages emerge from common deaf community knowledges of the spread of hegemonic sign languages through colonial projects, the suppression of sign languages in deaf education, and the long-standing narratives regarding the 1880 Millan conference which proscribed the use of sign language in deaf education. Many struggles about language are not just about the language itself: they are often linked to other political struggles, such as the advocacy for deaf people's right to learn and use sign language (De Meulder and Murray, 2017).

Language boundaries are naturalized by the global circulation of different sign language ideologies and the growing influence of discourses regarding the vitality of sign languages. Many of these ideologies gloss over the reality of language contact and change; however, in some contexts, such as in postcolonial settings and/or post-conflict countries, there are high stakes involved because of ongoing sign language documentation and recognition processes, especially where national linguistic policies regarding sign languages are still being defined (Moriarty, 2020). In these settings, some non-signing educators and government officials believe that it would be easier and faster to import foreign sign languages for use in the schools, such as in the case of Cambodia (Moriarty Harrelson, 2017a). Additionally, it continues to be an uphill struggle to include sign languages in early intervention and education programs for deaf children (Snoddon and Underwood, 2017); the rhetoric of inclusion is predominant in development interventions and global disability discourses, such as the outline of the rights of children in United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, however, there remains a significant gap between the ideal of inclusion and how it is actually implemented for deaf children (Snoddon and Underwood, 2017).

Contemporary discourses about the vitality of minority sign languages in tourism settings emerge from a very specific historical and political context. There is anxiety about the vitality of signed languages, especially in light of social changes over the past fifteen years, such as technological change and the influence of systematic medical discourses on deaf lives (Mauldin, 2016); however, it is important to note that in addition to discourses of sign language endangerment, there are also arguments about the resiliency of sign languages to replacement by spoken languages (Padden, 1990; Webster and Safar, 2019).

As cultural and historical products, languages are always in the process of changing. Some languages, such as sign languages, change more quickly than others since, as minorized minority languages, they face more pressure because they are not often protected by powerful social institutions, such as the government and schools. The proliferation of social media as a way for deaf people to meet and interact through the sharing of sign language videos and the increased affordability of air travel have opened up new avenues for sign language contact. As more deaf people travel and use social media, they become increasingly multilingual. People who sign and their linguistic resources are mobile; many deaf people travel with the desire to meet “local” deaf people and learn particular signs (and languages). As a consequence, bits of sign languages circulate throughout the world, making their ways into individuals’ linguistic repertoires, sometimes as souvenirs of their travels and signifiers of their worldliness. Like people, languages are continually evolving as people continually add to their linguistic repertoires.

In general, concerns about the vitality of sign languages, especially smaller sign languages that are perceived to have fewer users, are warranted; however, language variation and multilingualism are a natural part of sign language ecologies throughout the world. I suggest that the path forward lies in the understanding of sign languages as contextually endangered, focusing on the context of the particular sign language, and instead of policing individuals’ language use, it may be more productive to focus on upholding individual and collective expansion of language resources to include the fullest possible repertoire of languages and modalities while also being mindful of the vulnerabilities specific to sign languages.

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