LAURA HORTON

Seeing Signs: Linguistic Ethnography in the Study of Homesign Systems in Guatemala

Abstract

In Nebaj, Guatemala, deaf residents are born into a community with no established sign language and little contact with the national sign language of Guatemala, Guatemalan Sign Language (GSM). In spite of this, deaf individuals interact with hearing and deaf relatives, friends, and neighbors using their hands. They incorporate both recognizable gestural emblems, used throughout the hearing community, and iconic and deictic signs to engage with others in their communicative ecology. In this article, I explore how Lucia, a deaf woman from Nebaj, mobilizes a genre of interaction, which I refer to as *price-checking,* to facilitate her conversation with a hearing interlocutor. Both deaf and hearing residents of Nebaj share social and embodied experiences, even in the absence of shared linguistic codes. I argue that familiar, recognizable scripts or genres offer a pathway to mutual comprehension as intelligible interlocutors.

IN EARLY WORK on language development, researchers observed that deaf children who were not learning a sign language and could not hear the language spoken around them created manual systems in interactions with their hearing family members, even at very young ages (Lenneberg 1964; Tervoort 1961). Researchers subsequently described these systems as homesigns and, using methods from developmental psychology, elicited and documented semistructured

Laura Horton is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Texas at Austin. Her work focuses on language socialization, language emergence, and education.

play sessions between experimenters and child homesigners (Feldman, Goldin-Meadow, and Gleitman 1978). After analyzing these signs, researchers concluded that homesigns were characterized by systematic correspondences between sign forms and sign meanings——a stable lexicon of signs. They also found many distributional properties that suggested the system was organized into components operating in a combinatorial fashion, akin to a "proto-morphology" (Goldin-Meadow et al. 1995; Goldin-Meadow 2003). This project builds on findings from early studies with young child homesigners, but draws on the methods and theories of linguistic ethnography (LE) to understand homesigns as they are used in interaction. In particular, this analysis focuses on the use of a local genre, inquiring about the price of market goods, as a technique for establishing and building intelligibility between a deaf adult signer and a hearing acquaintance.

I work with deaf children and adults who live in Nebaj, a town in the northwestern highlands of Guatemala. Deaf people who live in Nebaj have limited access to Guatemalan Sign Language (GSM), which is used primarily in Guatemala City and Xela, larger cities six to eight hours away from Nebaj by bus. Medical interventions, such as hearing aids and cochlear implants, as well as early hearing screening for infants, are not common across Guatemala, so deaf residents of Nebaj use homesigns to communicate.

Two features of the larger communicative ecology of Nebaj render the social context of homesigns distinct from the homesigns studied in the United States—the presence of intergenerational deafness in several families and a general propensity for hearing people to interact with deaf people using whatever gestural strategies they can generate spontaneously when they encounter a deaf person. In the United States, hearing people are often somewhat uncomfortable attempting to communicate with deaf people using improvised gestures, so deaf children are unlikely to observe these kinds of interactions between hearing and deaf adults. Further, in the United States, the child homesigners who were studied were the only deaf people in their family and their parents were often explicitly instructed not to sign or gesture with their children to encourage them to learn spoken English (Nyst et al. 2012). Many signers in Nebaj have a deaf relative—a sibling, cousin, parent, or grandparent—or attend a local

school for special education with other deaf students. This means that these signers interact with at least one other deaf signer at home, school, or work. Even outside their homes or school, signers interact with hearing people they encounter on the street, in shops, or in the market. I have observed hearing people willingly engage signers in conversation, using a fairly standard set of gestural emblems, as well as deictic gestures and pantomimed signs. While I do not have extensive data on interactions between signers and hearing acquaintances, qualitatively, these interactions are somewhat more abbreviated than conversations that happen in the home, and typically function to achieve a specific activity, such as making a purchase. The characteristics of signers' communicative ecologies in Nebaj mean that they have regular interactions with both hearing and deaf interlocutors. Signers have rich social lives and regularly navigate conversations in which their communication partner may or may not have experience using their hands and bodies to communicate.

Categorizing Homesign, Shared Sign Languages, and Institutional Sign Languages

The term *homesign* was first used by Frishberg (1987) to characterize the idiosyncratic signs created within families with deaf children, prior to their entering schools for the deaf. *Homesign* was later applied to the circumstances of children who were deaf and raised in environments in which their parents followed an oralist educational model, focusing on the acquisition of spoken language. The term has also been used to describe deaf children and adults in rural communities. These children often interact with family and community members using gestures and do not have access to formal schooling and oralist training. Nyst et al. (2012) point out that using the term *homesign* so broadly obscures important distinctions between the two kinds of social experiences or ecologies. They suggest the terms *oral homesign* and *rural homesign* to distinguish these two types of ecologies.

Several criteria are cited when defining the boundaries of homesigns, shared/village sign languages, and national/institutional sign languages. Nyst et al. (2012) suggest that sign languages are shared across a community of users and are transmitted across generations of signers,

while Goldin-Meadow (2012) suggests that homesign systems are not shared between deaf children and their hearing parents, who instead are producing co-speech gestures. Many researchers acknowledge that homesigns are the likely starting point for sign languages (Nyst 2012), whether they are developed in an educational setting—as in Managua, Nicaragua (Kegl et al. 1999)—or in communities with a high incidence of deafness (Nyst 2012). However, it can be difficult to establish explicit criteria for when homesigns transition to sign languages. Nyst (2012) warns against setting up homesigns, shared/village sign languages, and national/institutional sign languages on a developmental cline, arguing instead for an ecological perspective (Mufwene 2001) in which different linguistic features may or may not be present based on differences in the communicative ecology of the system.

I use the term homesign in this work, despite the fact that many deaf people in Nebaj interact with each other, because there is not a national/institutional sign language in use in the community, there does not appear to be a higher than average incidence of deafness, nor is there a distinct deaf community or school setting. Although the local school for special education typically has between four and seven deaf students, there are many hearing students with other disabilities, and there are deaf students in town who do not attend the school for special education, choosing to attend their local schools instead. Thus, the shared homesigns I describe here are most similar to rural homesign, shared sign languages, or the "natural sign" described by Green (2014), that is used by deaf and hearing people in Nepal.

In this paper, I focus on an interaction between Lucia, a deaf adult homesigner who lives in Nebaj, and Marta, one of my hearing friends from Nebaj, who visited Lucia's home with me one afternoon. Lucia's daughter, Sara, is also deaf. At the time of this conversation, Sara was twelve years old. I use methods and theories of linguistic ethnography (LE) in this analysis to show how Lucia establishes herself as an intelligible and reasonable interlocutor in her interaction with Marta, specifically, how Lucia mobilizes a particular genre, which I refer to as "price-checking," to support her conversational moves. Second, I explore why overhearing, or "seeing signs," in this interaction could serve as a significant socializing experience for Sara.

Fieldsite: Nebaj, Guatemala

Nebaj is located in the western region of the Quiche Department of Guatemala. The closest large town is Santa Cruz del Quiche, the capital city of the department. Nebaj is 155 kilometers north of the capital of Guatemala, Guatemala City. The *municipio*[1] has 106,237 inhabitants (INE 2002), with approximately 70 percent of the population living in rural *aldeas,* or hamlets, surrounding the center of town. The remaining population—over 30,000 people—live in Nebaj. Most residents speak Ixil, a Mayan language in the Mam language family. People under age thirty are typically bilingual Ixil-Spanish speakers to some degree, as Spanish is the language used for instruction in the public schools. During the course of my fieldwork, I have met six adults and twelve children who are deaf. I have been told about an additional nine deaf individuals who live in Nebaj or nearby *aldeas.* Two of the adults have deaf relatives—they grew up with a deaf sibling and have a deaf child or grandchild. The other two adults are married to each other and have several children, all hearing. Five of the deaf children have a deaf sibling, and three also have a deaf adult relative, either a parent or grandparent. Two of the children are cousins and attend school with other deaf students, and two are the only deaf people in their families and attend a local school where all of the other students are hearing.

Participants: The Bernal Family

The Bernal family is small, relative to other local families, consisting of Sara and Lucia, introduced above, Abel, Lucia's husband and Sara's father, who is hearing and a monolingual Ixil speaker, as well as Ramon, Lucia's son and Sara's brother, who is hearing and the only bilingual Spanish-Ixil speaker in the home.[2] Both Ramon and Abel appeared to comfortably and fluently sign with Sara and Lucia during visits I have made to their house over the five years that I have known them. As I have discussed elsewhere (Horton 2018), an ecology like the Bernal family—a small family with a relatively high proportion of deaf family members—radically alters the modality of interactions in the home. In a larger household with only one child or adult who is deaf, family members and friends might sign when addressing the person who is deaf, but are unlikely to sign to anyone else.[3]

Methodology: Linguistic Ethnography

In an overview of LE and its use in the study of sign languages, Hou and Kusters (2020) describe the preferred methods of LE as "including long-term fieldwork in which researchers know or learn the sign language(s) they are investigating, do participant observation, and regularly interact with people in their language(s). Videorecording is essential to many of these works" (341). Beyond the study of sign languages, LE focuses on the study of language in use, rather than the grammatical structure of language (Copland and Creese 2017), and incorporates methods from applied linguistics and sociolinguistics with an ethnographic orientation. This perspective emphasizes the dynamic and interactive role of context and the inherently indexical nature of language (Rampton et al. 2015, 26). Specifically, LE theorists aim to "'tie ethnography down' through pushing for more precise, falsifiable analyses of local language processes, " they also seek to " 'open linguistics up' through stressing the importance of reflexive sensitivity in the production of linguistic claims" (Maybin and Tusting 2011, 517).

I have worked in Nebaj since 2013. I was introduced to the town by an anthropologist, María Luz García, who had been engaged in the area for over ten years and worked with a substantial network of women who were members of a community organization, founded in the aftermath of the Guatemalan civil war (García 2012, 2014). I typically spend three to six weeks in Nebaj each summer and have also visited during the (American) winter months. I collect video data, both naturalistic and elicited, from participants, and I conduct participant observation as a volunteer at the local school for special education, working in classrooms with deaf students. Many of my interactions with signers were initially shaped by elicitation tasks that led to a particular way of communicating with each other, grounded in structured communication tasks. As I have become more familiar with each of my participants and their families, and with their homesign systems, I have become more comfortable soliciting their opinions about these tasks.

In terms of my positionality as a researcher, I am a white hearing woman from the United States. When I first visited Nebaj in 2013, I benefited from the connections that my fieldsite collaborator, María Luz García, had already established with the local community. I interact with hearing people in Nebaj using Spanish, and I worked

with the local collective of women to identify families that had deaf members who might be interested in participating in my study. I also connected with teachers at the local school for special education to arrange to volunteer my time in classrooms.

I typically visit people in their homes, usually in the company of a female friend from the collective. Initially, I used gestures to communicate with deaf participants and introduced them to my equipment—primarily toys and books for the children and video cameras. I explained, in Spanish, to hearing family members that I was a researcher from the United States interested in people who were deaf and how they communicated. Most of the people I met were very willing to participate. If they seemed unclear about the project, a hearing family member who knew the deaf person's homesign system would explain further. I often began conversations with adults using a small book of photos to elicit descriptions of the photos. This had the benefit of giving participants something explicit to talk about and giving me a clearer sense of what they were signing about; it also established a particular style of interacting. On later visits, participants expected the conversation to be fairly structured like this initial task. I would also request their permission to record before and after elicitation sessions, while we would have coffee and snacks. During these less formal exchanges, I was able to capture more naturalistic interactions as well as structured elicitations. The conversation analyzed in this article comes from one of these recordings.

I gradually got to know families, their relatives, and neighbors over repeated visits and this helped me to understand their homesign systems when they signed with me, as they would refer to things that had happened in previous sessions or to local events, such as when a helicopter crashed nearby. This increasing familiarity, both with signers themselves and with local events, gradually made their signing more accessible to me.

Linguistic Ethnography and Homesign

LE is an important theoretical and methodological perspective for homesign research because it extends the object of study beyond isolated sign forms, or sign forms in sequence, to the ways in which signers are received and interpreted by their interlocutors and the

strategies that the signers use to build reciprocity, cohesion, and intelligibility with these interlocutors. LE also pushes research on homesign to explore beliefs about signed communication held by both signers and their communication partners, and to consider how these beliefs interact with the ways in which signers and their interlocutors communicate with each other, a topic explored in detail for deaf people using natural sign in Nepal (Green 2014) and Nepali Sign Language (Graif 2018). Lastly, LE refocuses central questions motivating the study of homesign. While early research centered on the role of the individual child in the creation of homesigns "de novo," LE encourages a turn to the role of a signer's interactions with others, whether hearing or deaf, in the creation of homesigns. This adjustment reframes the project to consider the impact of a signer's past social experiences on the strategies that they ultimately use to engage with others in conversations in the future.

LE methods enrich the study of homesigns because they push us to think more broadly about the interactional realities of signers' lives. LE arose partly as a reaction to the tradition of structural linguistics, with its focus on the "autonomy" of grammatical patterns apart from situations of referring. Contemporary studies of homesigns and emerging sign languages that use LE (e.g., Hou 2016), therefore shift the focus of study from elicited data from individual signers, and the patterns that can be discerned in these data, to conversational data and strategies for the co-construction of meaning in interactions. These methods also promote a more sustained engagement with signers, as well as their friends and family, and an effort to understand their lived experiences from the perspectives of the signers themselves.

A Local Genre: Price-Checking

During a recent trip to Nebaj, I attended a meeting of the *Grupo de Mujeres y Hombres Por la Paz,* the collective of local women to whom I was introduced by my field collaborator. After arriving at the house where the meeting was to take place, I sat down on the stoop next to the other early attendee, María, a woman in her late fifties. We greeted each other, and then she noticed my bag, which was made by a friend out of a used *güipil,* a traditional blouse woven on a back-strap loom. She complimented the bag, then immediately asked me how much

I had paid for it. I offered her an estimate of the price, she nodded knowingly, and we proceeded with other greetings. Ten minutes later, another woman arrived, wearing a güipil and elaborate woven *su't,* or shawl, over her right shoulder. I heard my original companion greet the third woman, and both commenced with a lengthy discussion about the price of the su't, depending on the skill of the weaver and where it was bought or sold.

The cost of goods, particularly handmade items such as weavings, is a frequent topic of conversation at any social gathering. Women know which weavers are considered most skilled and who will command the highest prices for their products. As Tax (1953) noted, decades ago based on fieldwork in Panajachel, a *municipio* at the edge of Lake Atitlán in Guatemala, prices for some commodities—chickens, fruits, vegetables—are almost always negotiated (and hence frequently discussed and compared) because no two items are identical in quality and size, and the price is partially contingent on the prices offered by other local vendors with similar items. In my experience, "price-checking," the practice of comparing what one has paid for an item, coexists with the bargaining occurring in the market itself, as a strategy for monitoring the expected price of commodities that vary day to day.

Though there is debate about the value of the term *genre* within linguistic anthropology (Macaulay 2002), I use it here as Bauman (2012) does in his ethnography of Mexican market calls (2002), to mean a conventionalized set of expectations for a particular type of social activity, rather than as a typological tool for classifying discourse. Bauman notes that genre, or "generic frameworks," are not deterministic—all interactions are shaped by locally contingent factors of context, social relationships, and prior discourse. However, the expectations established by an identifiable genre frame the possible inferences interlocutors might make, and the communicative moves typically brought to bear, to accomplish social ends (Bauman 2002; Rampton et al. 2015).

"Price-checking" as a component of a greeting, or initiation to social engagement, qualifies as a genre that establishes expectations about topic and structure and the social agenda at hand. It serves to accomplish social goals; specifically, "price-checking" can be affiliative,

but also competitive, setting up the participants in the exchange as members of a shared social category—shoppers or customers—trying to maximize their resources and avoid being exploited or conned. The second objective in many of these exchanges is basic information gathering to monitor both the cost of goods and the skill and relationships of the interlocutor as a negotiator.

In addition to framing an exchange, with expectations about the pragmatics of the exchange, "price-checking" also may afford a script that is accessible to both deaf signers and their hearing interlocutors. Thus, interlocutors can participate in a conversation equally, with greater access to the content, strictly because the turns in the exchange are predictable once the genre is established. In the following example, I explore how Lucia mobilizes this genre to engage Marta in conversation.

Genre in Homesign

One day at Sara and Lucia's house after filming outside on the patio we moved inside the house for coffee and *b'oxhb'ol*.[4] As I sat with Lucia and Marta around the stove (see figure 1), Lucia asked Marta about her güipil and su't.

The transcription is presented in segments, interspersed with a narrative description of the signing. Table 1 presents the transcription conventions.

Figure 1. View of Lucia's kitchen, position of Lucia, Marta, Sara, and the author around the stove.

TABLE 1. Transcription Conventions

Type of Sign	Transcription Convention	Example
Signs with an iconic form	form glossed in all caps	four fingers raised = FOUR
Signs that resemble gestural emblems	form glossed in all caps	gestural emblem for money = MONEY
Deictic signs (produced with hand or lips)	IX: *referent indicated by the point*	index finger point to stove = IX: stove
Non-manual signs	subscript on the manual sign with which they co-occur	eyebrows raised while making a sign with two fingers raised = TWO$_{\text{BROW RAISE}}$
Signs that involve physically manipulating an object, e.g., tugging at an article of clothing	form glossed in lower case (form is considered to be the item that the signer manipulated)	signer tugs at shirt = güipil
Non-manual signs produced in isolation (no co-occuring manual sign)	form described in lower case	signer nods their head = head nod

Signs are glossed individually, directly under the transcription, then a gloss for the whole utterance is provided in italics below. If a sign is repeated, this is indicated with a +

a. MONEY b. IX: MARTA (lip point) c. CHEST (SU'T) d. FOUR

FIGURE 2. Signs used by Lucia during the conversation, including: MONEY, SU'T, and FOUR, as well as a deictic sign toward Marta.

Lucia initiates the interaction with a sign resembling a common gestural emblem for money, produced by rubbing the thumb against the other fingers, bunched together (see figure 2a). This gesture is likely recognizable to hearing people from Nebaj, even those who do not know any deaf people. I have observed hearing people use this gesture to suggest that something is expensive, or simply when talking about the cost of something. Lucia thus grounds her first conversational turn in a form that is accessible to Marta, and she establishes the topic—namely money or price. Lucia then points to Marta with her finger to indicate that she wants to ask about her güipil, though it is not yet clear what she wants to ask Marta about specifically, based on this first deictic sign. Lucia repeats the sign for money, reiterating that she is interested in the price. She then reaches towards her own güipil.[5] Lucia follows this sign by quickly pointing towards Marta with her index finger extended. She then physically tugs at her own güipil.

Up to this point, Marta has made eye contact with Lucia but has not responded to her. Marta now gestures towards her own güipil, while looking at Lucia, who points towards Marta with her lips (see figure 2b). Lucia then repeats this sign, pointing towards Marta with her lips, but raises her eyebrows and tilts her head forward. Marta now repeats Lucia's sign for money.

(1) Lucia | MONEY | IX: Marta | MONEY | WEAVE/IX: güipil | IX: Marta | güipil
| | cost/price | your güipil | cost/price | güipil | yours | güipil
| | *how much did your güipil cost?* | | | | |

(2) Marta | IX: Marta güipil
| | Mine
| | *My güipil?*

(3) Lucia   IX: Marta (overlapping with Marta)
            yours
            your güipil
(4) Lucia   IX: Marta~BROWS RAISED~
            yours?
            your güipil?
(5) Marta   MONEY (overlapping with Lucia)
            cost/price
            how much did it cost?

It is becoming clearer to Marta what Lucia is asking, but Lucia, seeing Marta make the sign for money, points at Marta again with her lips and raises her hand with three fingers.[6] To reiterate her question and clarify that she is asking about the cost of the güipil, Lucia suggests an estimate of what Marta's güipil would cost. Marta clarifies, raising her hand with four fingers extended to indicate that the güipil cost four hundred quetzales, to which Lucia nods, raising her eyebrows.

(6) Lucia   IX: Marta   THREE
            Yours   three
            Did your güipil cost three hundred quetzales?
(7) Marta   FOUR
            four
            My güipil cost four hundred quetzales
(8) Lucia   head nod~BROWS RAISED~
            okay
            ah?

After Marta has recognized that Lucia is asking about the price of her güipil, Lucia goes on to clarify her question. She indicates her own güipil again, emphasizing this by sweeping her hand across her blouse with her eyebrows lowered (see figure 2c). She then waves her hand out to the side, flipping it over so that her palm is oriented down. This sign resembles a gesture in Nebaj that often means "nothing else" or "that's all." It is formed with a flat B handshape, palm-down, starting at the midline of the body and moving out. I have seen it used as a co-speech gesture, for example, when purchasing something at a store and, having taken my items to the counter, the clerk inquires "*Solamente?*" or "that's everything?" It is also similar to a sign that Mesh and Hou (2018) have described in a Chatino community (PALM-DOWN), used primarily by deaf signers to indicate the termination of an activity or an intensive negation. Here, Lucia wants to clarify

whether Marta referred to her güipil or her woven su't when she gave the price of four hundred. She again indicates her güipil by sweeping her hand across the collar of her blouse, and raises her hand with four fingers extended (see figure 2d), referencing the price that Marta gave her, followed by the sign for "that's it" or "that's all" (glossed as SOLAMENTE below). As she repeats this sequence, Marta nods her head to reply that the güipil was four hundred quetzales.

(9) Lucia   IX:Lucia güipil+   SOLAMENTE   IX:Lucia güipil   FOUR   SOLAMENTE
            güipil   that's it   güipil   four   that's it
            just the güipil cost four hundred quetzales?

            IX: Lucia güipil   FOUR
            güipil   four
            just the güipil cost four hundred quetzales?

(10) Marta head nod (overlapping with Lucia)
            yes
            yes, just the güipil was four hundred.

After Marta nods, confirming that the güipil cost four hundred, Lucia again repeats the amount, pointing first to Marta, then giving the sign for four. Marta again nods to confirm, as does Lucia.

This brief exchange illustrates how Lucia sets up an expectation about the interaction that gives Marta an explicit framework for participating in the conversation. As a first task, Lucia needs to establish that she is asking a question and that she wants to ask about the price of Marta's güipil. Marta takes up the question but repeats it back to Lucia to clarify. When Lucia affirms that Marta has understood her correctly, Marta provides a response to Lucia's question about the cost of the güipil.

The interaction is characterized by a significant amount of repetition and checks for clarification from Lucia. Lucia contributes the majority of the signs in the interaction—Marta provides just four conversational turns (lines 2, 5, 7, 11), each with only one gesture. Lucia, in contrast, contributes six conversational turns (lines 1, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9), with one to six signs per turn. Lucia's longer utterances are characterized by extensive repetition within the turn. For example, to establish that she wants to ask about Marta's güipil (line 1), Lucia repeats the sequence of (1) setting the topic, "money" or "price," (2) pointing to Marta, and (3) then pointing to her own güipil to refer

to Marta's güipil. When Marta takes up this inquiry, pointing to her own güipil (line 2), Lucia reiterates her request with a new strategy, suggesting a potential price for the güipil (line 6). After Marta corrects Lucia, giving the actual price of the güipil, Lucia presents a lengthy clarification (line 9), inquiring whether just the güipil cost four hundred, or the su't (shawl) as well. Marta replies to the clarification by interjecting while Lucia emphasizes her own güipil, nodding to assert that the price she gave was for the güipil.

Discussion

In this conversation, Lucia has effectively used the genre of "price-checking" to make it possible for Marta to participate in the interaction. The existence of this genre, and the script that it provides, renders the interaction, and Lucia, intelligible to Marta even though the topic—the price of the güipil—is decontextualized. In the physical context of a marketplace, for example, buyers and vendors have explicit expectations about what kinds of social interactions will occur and that the topic will likely be price or quantity or a similar negotiation. In a detailed study of deaf-hearing interactions in an Indian marketplace, for example, Kusters (2017) describes the wide array of resources that deaf people use to make themselves clear to hearing customers or hearing vendors, including holding objects, pointing, and repeating gestures. The conversation between Lucia and Marta, however, does not occur in a market but around a stove in Lucia's kitchen. Some aspects of the exchange are supported by the physical context—specifically, the presence of the güipils that both Lucia and Marta are wearing—but Lucia must indicate that she wants to ask a question about a topic that is not particularly salient. To achieve this, she depends on Marta's familiarity with the genre of "price-checking"—in particular, inquiries about the cost of weavings.

Silverstein (1987) identifies three "functions" of language—referential function and two types of pragmatic function. The referential function of linguistic forms refers to what has been said or signed, the denotational values of these forms—the non-linguistic things that these forms "stand for" (19). In the conversation between Lucia and Marta, this would be the inquiry about the price of the güipil, the price of the güipil, and the clarification about the price. The pragmatic

function of language, in contrast to what is "said," refers to what is "done," socially, in the course of the use of language.

The exchange between Lucia and Marta serves both referential and pragmatic functions. In terms of its pragmatic function, the conversation places Lucia in the social category of women in Nebaj who are interested in and concerned about the cost of goods, especially weavings. It signals to Marta that Lucia is a consumer and is aware of this genre of talk, and it provides Marta with a template for communicating with Lucia, even with a very limited repertoire of gestures. Lastly, the interaction serves the same purpose that this genre always serves, which is gathering information about the cost of goods for an artisanal, subsistence, cash-market where prices are neither posted nor standardized, but where the stability of pricing is ensured by constant price-checking and the circulation of reports of "who bought what for how much where". As Friedner discusses in her study of deaf people's epistemologies in India and the United States, emphasis on access to information, and understanding, are core parts of deaf people's lived experiences (2016, 186).

The interaction between Lucia and Marta is additionally significant because Sara, her daughter, was able to over-"see" this interaction. Sara was standing across the room from the stove where Lucia and Marta were sitting, with a clear view of Lucia and Marta as they signed to each other (see figure 1). As M. Kusters (2017) notes, deaf adults are often uniquely qualified to socialize deaf children because of their shared experiences with "sign-impaired" hearing people (257). Because Marta did not speak while she gestured, the entire exchange was visual, giving Sara full access to the conversation. There is an extensive literature demonstrating that children learn language not just when it is directly addressed to them, but also when they attend to multiparty conversations that they are able to observe (Akhtar 2005). Being present for the conversation between Lucia and Marta, Sara has observed that prices or cost—price-checking—is something that people talk about, and her mother has demonstrated how a deaf person can engage this genre to talk with a nonsigning hearing person.

Using methods and theories from Linguistic Ethnography, this analysis expands the study of homesign beyond the individual. LE emphasizes that the study of language must be about more than just

the linguistic code. The example described here demonstrates how meaning and intelligibility in homesign-hearing interactions are coconstructed, as in all conversations. But as Green (2014), Friedner (2016), and Graif (2018) have noted, in deaf-hearing interactions, the burden of making the message clear, and rendering the deaf signer intelligible, often falls on the deaf person. One strategy that signers use when initiating a topic less supported by prior discourse and context, as illustrated in the conversation between Lucia and Marta, is to bootstrap the topic into a familiar frame for talking—a genre—that enables a hearing interlocutor to access and engage with the conversation.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. A municipio is an administrative unit, roughly equivalent to a county in the United States.

2. It is also significant that deaf and hearing signers are divided along gender lines in the Bernal family, but I do not address this in detail here. Based on my experiences in Nebaj, gender has a strong influence on the frequency and type of interaction between people in Nebaj—women are more likely to talk with other women and sometimes children (of either gender), and men are more likely to talk with other men.

3. Though this point is true, broadly speaking, I have observed conversations in Nebaj between two hearing people that consisted of only gestures—when it proved impractical or inconvenient to talk; one time I observed two men have a conversation like this from opposite sides of a crowded room at a visitation just before a funeral procession.

4. Traditional food made by wrapping *guiskil* leaves around a lump of masa and then boiling.

5. Lucia's hands are partially blocked in the video at this point, so it is unclear whether she is pointing to her own güipil or producing her iconic sign for weaving, which is made by moving the hand inward towards the body, resembling the movement made while using a backstrap loom.

6. In my experience, it is common to refer to the price of weavings by a single digit number, knowing that this refers to how many hundred quetzales the weaving will cost.

References

Akhtar, N. 2005. The Robustness of Learning through Overhearing. *Developmental Science* 8 (2): 199–209.

Bauman, R. 2002. The Ethnography of Genre in a Mexican Market: Form, Function, Variation. In *Style and Sociolinguistic Variation,* ed. P. Eckert and J. Rickford, 57–77. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Copland, F., and A. Creese. 2017. Linguistic Ethnography. In *Linguistic Ethnography: Collecting, Analyzing and Presenting Data,* ed. F. Copland and A. Creese, 12–28. London: Sage.

Feldman, H., S. Goldin-Meadow, and L. Gleitman. 1978. Beyond Herodotus: The Creation of Language by Linguistically Deprived Deaf Children. In *Action, Symbol, and Gesture: The Emergence of Language,* ed. A. Lock, 351–413. New York: Academic Press.

Friedner, M. 2016. Understanding and Not-Understanding: What Do Epistemologies and Ontologies Do in Deaf Worlds? *Sign Language Studies* 16 (2): 184–203.

Frishberg, N. 1987. Home Sign. In *Gallaudet Encyclopedia of Deaf People and Deafness,* vol. 3, ed. J. Van Cleve, 128–31. New York: McGraw Hill.

García, M. L. 2012. Discourse, social cohesion and the politics of historical memory in the Ixhil Maya region of Guatemala. PhD diss., The University of Texas at Austin.

———. 2014. The Long Count of Historical Memory: Ixhil Maya Ceremonial Speech in Guatemala. *American Ethnologist* 41 (4): 664–80.

Goldin-Meadow, S. 2012. Homesign: Gesture to Language. In *Sign Language: An International Handbook,* ed. R. Pfau, M. Steinbach, and B. Woll, 601–25, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.

———, C. Mylander, and C. Butcher. 1995. The Resilience of Combinatorial Structure at the Word Level: Morphology in Self-Styled Gesture Systems. *Cognition* 56:195–262.

Graif, P. 2018. *Being and Hearing: Making Intelligible Worlds in Deaf Kathmandu.* Chicago: HAU Books.

Green, E. M. 2014. The Nature of Signs: Nepal's Deaf Society, Local Sign, and the Production of Communicative Sociality. PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley.

Horton, L. 2018. Conventionalization of Shared Homesign Systems in Guatemala: Social, Lexical, and Morphophonological Dimensions. PhD diss., University of Chicago.

Hou, L. Y.-S. 2016. "Making Hands": Family Sign Languages in the San Juan Quiahije Community. PhD diss., The University of Texas at Austin.

Hou, L., and A. Kusters. 2020. Sign Languages. In *The Routledge Handbook of Linguistic Ethnography,* ed. K. Tusting, 340–55. New York: Routledge.

INE, Instituto Nacional de Estadistica. (2002). *Estimaciones y Proyecciones de Población, con base en los Censos Nacionales XI de Población y VI de Habitación 2002.*

Kegl, J., A. Senghas, and M. Coppola, M. 1999. Creation through Contact: Sign Language Emergence and Sign Language Change in Nicaragua. In *Language Creation and Language Change: Creolization, Diachrony, and Development,* ed. M. DeGraff, 179–237. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Kusters, A. 2017. Gesture-Based Customer Interactions: Deaf and Hearing Mumbaikars' Multimodal and Metrolingual Practices. *International Journal of Multilingualism* 14 (3): 283–302.

Kusters, A., M. Spotti, R. Swanwick, and E. Tapio. 2017. Beyond Languages, Beyond Modalities: Transforming the Study of Semiotic Repertoires. *International Journal of Multilingualism* 14 (3): 219–32.

Kusters, M. 2017. Intergenerational Responsibility in Deaf Pedagogies. In *Innovations in Deaf Studies: The Role of Deaf Scholars,* ed. A. Kusters, M. De Meulder, and D. O'Brien, 241–62. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lenneberg, E. 1964. Capacity for Language Acquisition. In *The Structure of Language: Readings in the Philosophy of Language,* ed. J. Fodor and J. Katz, 579–603. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Macaulay, R. 2002. The Question of Genre. In *Style and Sociolinguistic Variation,* ed. P. Eckert and J. Rickford, 78–82. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Maybin, J., and K. Tusting. 2011. Linguistic Ethnography. In *The Routledge Handbook of Applied Linguistics,* ed. J. Simpson, 515–28. New York: Routledge.

Mesh, K., and L. Hou. 2018. Negation in San Juan Quiahije Chatino Sign Language: The Integration and Adaptation of Negative Emblems. *Gesture* 17 (3): 330–74.

Mufwene, S. 2001. *The Ecology of Language Evolution.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nonaka, A. 2011. Language Socialization and Language Endangerment. In *The Handbook of Language Socialization,* ed. A. Duranti, E. Ochs, and B. Schieffelin, 610–30. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Nyst, V. 2012. Shared Sign Languages. In *Sign Language: An International Handbook,* ed. R. Pfau, M. Steinbach, and B. Woll, 552–73. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.

———, K. Sylla, and M. Magassouba. 2012. Deaf Signers in Douentza, a Rural Area in Mali. In *Sign Languages in Village Communities,* ed. U. Zeshan and C. de Vos, 251–76. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.

Rampton, B., J. Maybin, and C. Roberts. 2015. Theory and Method in Linguistic Ethnography. In *Linguistic Ethnography: Interdisciplinary Explorations,* ed. J. Snell, S. Shaw, and F. Copland, 14–50. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Silverstein, M. 1987. The Three Faces of "Function": Preliminaries to a Psychology of Language. In *Social and Functional Approaches to Language and Thought,* ed. M. Hickmann, 17–38. New York: Academic Press.

Tax, S. 1953. *Penny Capitalism: A Guatemalan Indian Economy.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tervoort, B. 1961. Esoteric Symbolism in the Communication Behavior of Young Deaf Children. *American Annals of the Deaf* 106: 436–80.