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Signing and belonging in Nepal by Erika Hoffmann-Dilloway
(review)

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tact only recently. Linguistic evidence for the contact history of both languages, as well as for Warrgamay and Ja:bugay, is discussed in the remainder of the chapter.

The book's final section, Part V, is 'a final adieu' (299) to Dyrirbal and Yidiñ. Dyrirbal is now falling out of use, and only few people still share some knowledge of it, while Yidiñ is no longer spoken. Yidiñ people now try to gain some knowledge of their ancestors' language by consulting the grammar published by D in 1977. Ch. 15 is a sociolinguistic account of the relatively brief history of Yidiñ's decline, with a description of the limited influence of English during the last decades in which this language was spoken. Ch. 16 describes the gradual decline of Dyrirbal, which D has witnessed for some thirty years. The description of the social history of contact between Dyrirbal and English commences with the European invasion and deals with the consequences of genocide, theft, murder, and the abduction of children, but also with subaltern agency and resilience. The core part of this last chapter, however, is about the years during which the author worked on the different varieties of Dyrirbal and interacted with their speakers. As in the author's other contributions on the biographies of the Dyrirbal people he worked with, and his own biography and fieldwork experiences, there is no notion of nostalgia in this chapter. This makes this last section of the book as inspiring to read as the previous ones: it is an enlightened comment on the field itself, very clear about the context in which work on Dyrirbal (and other languages of Australia) has been done and the impact this work may have or will have.

This book has been extraordinarily pleasant to read for a number of reasons. It is written, quite characteristically, in a compelling and lucid style. Furthermore, it is beautifully organized into thematically coherent chapters that, one by one, help the reader to understand the author's thoughts about language and linguistics at large: it is only through an intimate understanding of the sociocultural context of a language (which will only be achieved over decades of interaction with speakers and through having an idea of equality of different ways of knowing) that linguistic features can be adequately analyzed, by prioritizing a semantic analysis. And on such a firm basis an analysis of processes of change and historical entanglements between different languages can fruitfully be attempted. This might not be big news—but being brought forward in such an astute and exemplary way, the author's proposal to take meaning and practice in language seriously is significant at a time when many linguists see the field as a laboratory rather than other people's homes, and look at language history as a history of genomes and population drift. This book is essential reading for every scholar of language and linguistics; it not only offers the reader a collection of inspiring analyses, but also is exemplary in making transparent its author's thinking over an entire scholarly career.

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Signing and belonging in Nepal. By ERIKA HOFFMANN-DILLOWAY. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2016. Pp. 176. ISBN 9781563686641. \$60 (Hb).

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Signing and belonging in Nepal is a touching and authentic reflection on the often-unexpected nuance in the ways deaf people work within particular cultural milieus to find one another, or-

ganize, and advocate for their unique status as a community. Hoffmann-Dilloway's longitudinal perspective reminds us of the powerful factors referencing and reinforcing personhood. In Nepal, these factors include language paradigms, language use, and hierarchical social organization based on religion, gender, lineage, and how these features converge as *jāts*—something the author describes as a 'vast concept' commonly translated as 'castes'. Importantly, readers are reminded not only of the powerful impact of cultural systems, language, and the interaction of these, but also that these influences change throughout time and in response to other complex human phenomena.

The detailed contextualization and analysis of the sociopolitical frameworks of deafness and Nepali Sign Language presented in this book will be of great interest to scholars from an array of fields. Readers, educators, and students in medical anthropology, disabilities studies, and linguistics alike will recognize the anthropological influence in the undercurrent propelling the book: the illustration of how ethnolinguistic frameworks of deafness have different 'meanings and consequences' within and across cultural contexts (3). The depth and breadth of this ethnographic study is of important note; Hoffmann-Dilloway spent nearly two decades (from the late 1990s through 2017) visiting and researching in Nepal. Her intimate ethnographic knowledge of Deaf Nepalis is reflected in the sincerity of her descriptions and the assuredness of her analyses. Furthermore, her repeated visits inform her understanding of the sociopolitical changes in Nepal and how they affected community life among Deaf Nepalis, especially in terms of political negotiations, cultural affiliations, and conceptualization of personhood. The result is a well-developed and perceptive representation of the intricacies of a dynamic Nepalese society and a fascinating linguistic minority community within it. Readers of *Language* will particularly appreciate that 'this book shows how both personas and larger social formations such as ethnolinguistic identity (i.e. Deaf) or nationality (i.e. Nepali) affect and emerge from interactive language use, while closely attending to rather than erasing all of the rich variation that entails' (16).

An important theoretical contribution of this book of interest to a variety of readers is the author's explanation of a dyad fundamentally different from that with which most Western readers interested in deaf issues are familiar. The binary most prominent in many US and European contexts is the juxtaposition of biomedical vs. ethnolinguistic framings of deafness. Medicalized approaches define deafness in terms of deficit (the loss of hearing) and/or in terms of illness or disability (something that needs to be fixed or cured). In these contexts, ethnolinguistic frameworks (sometimes referred to as 'culturally Deaf' models—capitalization of the 'D' in *Deaf* is used in many contexts to highlight the cultural/ethnic affiliation upon which this model is based) emerged as a rejection of medicalized approaches and interventions. Ethnolinguistic framings, in turn, emphasize the shared language, experience, and community-based connections among deaf people. *Signing and belonging in Nepal* reminds us that local framings of deafness are often oversimplified and never universal. Like any ideology or assumption, they develop in larger cultural contexts, are subject to interpretation and change, and have the potential for authentic impact on the lives of deaf people and their families.

In Nepal, deafness is associated with karma: the fate resulting from a person's or family's deeds and misdeeds in a previous life. In other words, deafness is fundamentally understood by Nepalis as a spiritual or supernatural issue, rather than primarily a somatic issue understood in biomedical terms (as it might be in contemporary Kansas or Austria, for example). Membership in a *jāt* (caste or kind; see Ch. 2) determines a person's karma—or where people exist on a spectrum from ritual purity to pollution. According to Nepalese karmic ideology, a number of factors contribute to one's membership in a *jāt*: gender, race, religion, occupation, and even tourist status or hearing status. In what H-D describes as an extremely hierarchical and prescriptive society, Nepalis are acutely aware of their own, and others', *jāt* and karmic status. Though it would be difficult to argue that deafness is too often stigmatized in an array of cultural contexts, karmic framings of deafness have the potential to be particularly isolating, in part, H-D explains, because 'the dominant understanding was that deaf people transmitted ritual impurity to hearing people' (7).

One of the primary arguments of the book is that 'both the ethnolinguistic and karmic models drew on the same basic premise: persons and larger social formations are mutually constituted

through interaction' (7). The establishment of a new dyad for deafness (karmic/ethnolinguistic) is valuable for understanding the Nepalese meanings and consequences of deaf frameworks that H-D set out to explore. Similar to medical/ethnolinguistic frameworks, the two components in this duality exist in relational tension; each defines and responds to the other. H-D skillfully delves into this relational dynamic by using ethnographic examples and anthropological analyses to describe how Deaf Nepalis employed local beliefs and politics to produce their own, specifically Nepalese category of deaf ethnolinguistic personhood and group identity.

Ch. 2 gives a detailed description of Nepalese history and how deaf people fit into the contemporary sociopolitical landscape. A deaf person in Nepal was often envisioned as belonging to a deaf *jāt*, one associated with ritual pollution. Thus, the deaf *jāt* had the potential to override more-traditional signifiers like birth networks or gender, at a time when lower-caste *jāts* (including minority groups) regularly experienced social, political, and spiritual alienation. In other words, a deaf person from higher-caste birth lines could be limited to low-status jobs or isolation that resulted from fear of karmic transmission (restrictions and discrimination typically reserved for people from lower-ranking *jāts*). For these reasons, deaf people and their families (historically and particularly in rural areas) often maintained discretion surrounding deaf family members in attempts to avoid stigma. However, the author also describes the 1990s as a turning point in which more public displays of deafness emerged in Nepal. This time was marked by the rise of advocacy marches, where Deaf Nepalis adopted international discourse recognizing the cultural and ethnic unity among deaf people. For example, H-D describes witnessing public declarations claiming 'Nepali Sign Language is the mother tongue of Deaf Nepalis', an ethnolinguistic assertion influenced by international models. Though specific terminology in this comprehensive discourse is continually debated, deaf ethnic and ethnolinguistic orientations may garner global appeal with respect to human rights (including language rights). Importantly, the emergence of a public and culturally Deaf Nepali presence coincided with nationwide minority struggles during the instability surrounding the 'People's War' (1996–2006), a time that left Nepali ethnic minority groups vulnerable in the shadow of Hindu nationalism. Many minority ethnic groups employed a similarly conceived ethnolinguistic advocacy strategy. Through this historical orientation, the author reveals the political significance of a specifically Deaf Nepali ethnolinguistic group identity. Readers also become acutely aware of how ethnolinguistic claims imposed a fascinating and tricky balance: one that called attention to Deaf Nepalis' unique minority status (thus risking discrimination), yet simultaneously aimed to create a public presence and shed the stigma associated with low-ranking *jāts*.

Beginning in Ch. 3, the book traces a less-obvious and more context-specific strategy Deaf Nepalis employed while creating and managing their public image. H-D uses various ethnographic examples, including the work by the Kathmandu Association of the Deaf (KAD) to standardize Nepali Sign Language (NSL). For example, the NSL sign corresponding to 'Friday' in English had two variations, one of which referenced the NSL sign for 'call', which some members believed harkened to Friday as the day of the week when Deaf Nepalis gathered socially at KAD headquarters. However, KAD's leaders prioritized a sign described as having a likeness to the sign corresponding to 'Krishna', a Hindu divinity. Though the author admits uncertainty as to whether this was a conscious or unconscious effort by KAD leadership, she attributes the validation of a sign aligned with Hindu symbolism to 'Sanskritization': the process of adopting practices associated with higher castes as a ploy to improve group status (55). In other words, Deaf Nepalis appear to have distinguished themselves from other politically active indigenous groups, who were often opposed by the Hindu national state. By doing so, they might have guarded against the association between deafness and ritual impurity that other non-Hindu minority groups suffered. This begs the question of how these minority groups coped with a troubling incongruity of political strategy that publicly exposed ethnolinguistic groups, thereby putting them at risk of further discrimination and oppression.

Toward the end of the book, readers find themselves in a place quite different from earlier historical context, when karma reigned as the most prominent social governance system. Ch. 5 begins with description of a 2008 television commercial for Bakery Café, a popular Nepali restaurant chain. The author points to the commercial as both evidence and outcome of Deaf Nepalis' public image during the country's push toward modernity and development. The commercial featured a

waiter using NSL signs for menu items such as *momos* ‘dumplings’, coffee, pizza, and burgers. H-D explains how, for Nepalis, dining at Bakery Café and accepting food from Deaf Nepali servers was a conspicuous way of conveying modernity, wealth status, and acceptance of social structures seen as more modern, secular, and less encumbered by Nepal’s history of underdevelopment and rural tradition. Important in light of the book’s context, the presence and popularity of Bakery Café’s hallmark Deaf Nepali servers complicated traditional karmic frameworks because food was a medium well known for transmitting ritual impurity. Therefore restaurant diners, by accepting food from employees with a ritual status beneath them (i.e. from a deaf *jāti*), were able to distance themselves from traditionally held karma-based beliefs. Thus, the interaction between hearing patrons and Deaf Nepali servers is a fascinating embodiment of the concept of *bikāsi* ‘development’ as representative of the collective desire of Nepalis to distance themselves from old-fashioned traditional ideas often seen as backward in contemporary, urban Nepal. H-D’s *bikāsi* theory complements Michele Friedner’s themes of development among deaf people in urban India in her 2015 book. Deaf Nepalis—in an unspoken partnership with hearing restaurant patrons—helped propel the contemporary social agenda, where modernity and development frameworks were increasingly valued as contemporary social qualities.

H-D makes a point of explaining her decision to write this book with a nonspecialist audience in mind. The appeal of the author’s first-person narrative observations, her personal investment in the community, and user-friendly explanations of theoretical concepts make this monograph accessible to nonacademic readers. Nonetheless, the potentially broad appeal of this text should not be mistaken for minimization of the quality and importance of the academic contributions this research makes. Furthermore, researchers working in deaf communities abide by an unwritten code of ethics, one that obligates us to make our research accessible to deaf people, who inevitably have varying access to dominant written languages, those most valued in academic circles. Indeed, international deaf communities have expressed the idea of involving deaf people in research in democratic ways that prioritize language accessibility as collective protocol (see De Clerck 2010, Ladd 2005, Pollard 1992, 2002, for example).

At the heart of *Signing and belonging in Nepal* is rich ethnographic detail illustrating the results of language ideology for deaf individuals and communities. H-D’s intimate knowledge of Nepali culture and decades of experience lend particular credibility and intimacy to her ethnographic writing. She humbly offers us insight into her own self-awareness, mapping her personal and professional discoveries alongside the growing pains of a nation experiencing significant sociopolitical transformation. I highly recommend this book for students and scholars of anthropology, linguistics, and deaf studies. The lasting impression this investigation creates should encourage other researchers to develop questions that also trace the consequences of beliefs and practices routinely impacting deaf people and their families.

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