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### STICKY: Taboo Topics In Deaf Communities

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## CHAPTER 8

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# STICKY: TABOO TOPICS IN DEAF COMMUNITIES

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JAMI N. FISHER, GENE MIRUS,  
AND DONNA JO NAPOLI

### 8.1 INTRODUCTION

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TALKING about taboo in sign languages is tricky fun that can turn *STICKY* fast.<sup>1</sup> Many grammatical aspects of taboo language are of interest to linguists. We have dealt with several of these with respect to the analysis of American Sign Language (ASL) in two other works, focusing attention on the lexicon with regard to phonology and morphology (Mirus et al. 2012) and on syntax (Napoli et al. 2013). Our conclusion is that sign taboo offers a playground for linguistic creativity, just as it does in spoken languages (Napoli and Hoeksema 2009). In this way, taboo in sign languages belongs to a number of genres that promote and relish linguistic innovations, including humor, poetry, and storytelling (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009; Sutton-Spence and Kaneko 2016).

Discussion of taboo in sign languages and deaf communities is also sticky—hence the name of our paper—and far from fun if one looks at what kinds of linguistic behaviors are taboo, including topics of conversation as well as particulars of signing in various contexts. Some taboo behavior involves interactions of deaf<sup>2</sup> with hearing.

<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, words that are written in small capitals indicate a gloss of the sign from American Sign Language. In this case, *STICKY* is a sign used to suggest a touchy—or taboo—subject.

<sup>2</sup> For decades, people in Deaf Studies and a large majority of members in deaf communities used a capital ‘D’ to indicate a sociological affiliation and a lower-case ‘d’ to indicate audiological status only. The sociological affiliation is commonly—and perhaps too loosely—termed Deaf culture. To avoid misunderstanding, we do not use the term *culture*. Like some others in our field, we choose to break from the ‘d/D’ convention to avoid being mired in identity politics and marginalization of deaf people who might not fit squarely into these arbitrary boundaries. Doing so is not a rejection or minimization of the sociocultural tendencies of those in what we refer to below as deaf communities, but rather, is meant to be inclusive of the various and individual ways of being deaf.

Other taboo behavior and topics involve interactions among deaf. Talking about the latter to a non-deaf audience can be like hanging out dirty laundry before a group that was never supposed to see such intimate things. The very discussion is, in a sense, taboo. Yet that is what we are going to do here: open conversations for the sake of inter- and intra-community awareness and parity.

While the matters we discuss are pertinent to the past and the present situation of signers in a world where the majority is hearing and speaking, our observations and conclusions allow for analogies to other oppressed linguistic communities. As such, they may alert scholars to the possibilities of taboos beyond the usual—and perhaps nearly universal—ones involving religion, sex, bodily functions, and death. These less usual taboos are specific to the nature of the oppression the community experiences.

Further, we will point out diversity within deaf communities, where the collective experience of navigating a predominantly hearing world is often central—implicitly or explicitly—to connecting with other community members. Intuitively, these connections center on the use of a sign language, but even those deaf who do not sign have commonalities with deaf people who do. People in deaf communities often seek each other out for social purposes but also for political ones. They rally around issues of sign language rights and against discrimination, working toward parity of access and respect for deaf people everywhere. More recently, deaf communities have become much more open to non-signers, looking to find connections and alliances to further such common goals.

All this is pertinent to linguists and the field of linguistics. Often linguists gather data from a small contingent of a community, where that contingent is educationally elite. Data from a different contingent might lead to (sometimes drastically) different results, with different impact on linguistic theory. Linguists tend to see those data in spoken languages as falling within the purview of sociolinguistics. But in deaf communities those data might be more representative of the majority of signers, so casting a light on the existence of signers other than the elite may help linguists do a better job in describing and analyzing sign languages. Thus, in the spirit of both respect for people and customs in deaf communities and service to our field, we cautiously but frankly mire ourselves in the following rudimentary and crude overview.

## **8.2 OVERLY SIMPLIFIED BUT NECESSARY BACKGROUND**

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People in deaf communities have highly varied linguistic experiences and abilities. Many spent years of frustration learning to vocalize while being denied sign. So sign is dear to them in a way hard for most hearing people to comprehend at first. If a hearing child grows up in a speaking or signing environment, that child will acquire language naturally—without heroic efforts on anyone's part. And if a deaf child grows up in a

signing environment, that child will likewise acquire language naturally—no heroes required. But 96% of deaf children in the USA are born into hearing families (Moore 2001; Mitchell and Karchmer 2004), and it takes heroic efforts for those children to acquire language. Most parents are not initially equipped to provide them accessible language from birth. Furthermore, most parents are not aware of—nor are they provided with—adequate resources for learning a sign language. Lastly, efforts to deter hearing parents from teaching their deaf children to sign are pervasive and coordinated (Mauldin 2016).

In developed countries (such as the USA and Europe) the majority of deaf newborns are given a cochlear implant within the first two years of life. Most times hearing families choose to raise their implanted child orally, to the exclusion of signing, on the advice of medical professionals (Humphries et al. 2017). The majority of these children do not develop a firm foundation in language from only oral input, regardless of how diligent the family is in their rehabilitative exercises. That is, cochlear implants do not make a child hear; what they do is convert auditory input into electrical impulses that go directly to the cochlear nerve. But the human brain did not evolve to interpret such signals as language, so children with cochlear implants must be trained (for long hours, every day, for years) in order to have a chance at distinguishing language among those signals. Many do not succeed, despite excellent care and training. Once the family realizes and accepts that the child is not developing linguistically and cognitively as hoped, they turn to sign, often after the period when the child's brain is most plastic and most ready to acquire language (Humphries et al. 2012 and many others). At this point, families learn to sign (to varying degrees) and, hopefully, bring their deaf children to events where they will have good signing models. The children are latecomers to language and, while they typically adopt signing as their most comfortable means of communication, their signing stands out as distinct from signers who learned during the first few years of life; further, there is evidence that the architecture of the brain is affected by early linguistic deprivation (Pénicaud et al. 2013). So, while for the vast majority of hearing people immediate language acquisition is a given, deaf people often have to struggle for the right to acquire a first language. In turn, most deaf people are aware that immediate and consistent exposure to a first sign language is a gift.

It is within this framework that the varieties of taboos we address have arisen. Many, if not all, of these taboos center on one type of privilege or another.

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### 8.3 DEAF IN A HEARING WORLD

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Sticky matters arise between hearing and deaf people at the community and individual level. Topics here in Section 8.3 center on the interface of deaf and hearing people, with attention to the effects of power dynamics, including oppression and marginalization of deaf people by the hearing.

### 8.3.1 Linguistic and cultural appropriation

When a hearing person learns to speak a second language, such as an American English speaker learning Japanese, the situations in which they will use Japanese are generally limited; unless they find themselves talking with a Japanese speaker or go to Japan, they are unlikely to speak Japanese much outside the L2 classroom (although resourceful students might find some outlets, Benson and Reinders 2011). Even when language students go abroad to the country where the L2 is spoken, they often do not use it on a daily basis (Tanaka 2007). In particular, the chances of them becoming bold enough to assume the role of teaching Japanese to others are low to nil unless they explicitly train to do that. They might think of telling a Japanese person that the pronunciation of the word they had learned for a particular meaning was different from the one that the Japanese speaker was using, but they would never do it in a way that suggested the Japanese speaker might be wrong. And it is ludicrous to think that they might present themselves as an authority on Japanese haiku or the traditional Japanese Kabuki or Noh theater or even on contemporary Japanese rap without extensive study.

Not so when a hearing person learns to sign. Students of sign languages often communicate to varying degrees in the sign language outside of the L2 classroom, and they do it in public. Signing has advantages that spoken languages lack—such as being able to communicate without others noticing, across a room, in a quiet space such as a library, with taboo messages without fear of reprisal, and so on. This is an interesting linguistic situation. New signers often feel empowered quickly, even though, in fact, ASL students are only moderately good at assessing their own competence in signing (Stauffer 2012). That empowerment leads them to doing the very sorts of things mentioned above that they probably would not do when studying a spoken language, raising the hackles of deaf people.

An ASL student teaching another hearing person how to sign something—and incorrectly as often as correctly—is commonplace. Often these ASL students do not hesitate to do this in front of deaf signers, sometimes even looking for congratulations on what amounts to garbled signing. If they do not know a sign, they might make one up. And, while, yes, signs are coined largely using iconicity (see Napoli 2017 for an overview), there are so many different factors in the sense of a lexical item that offer a jumping point for iconicity that the lexicons of different sign languages are neither predictable nor mutually intelligible. So these guesses are likely to be wrong. This kind of behavior can be taken as annoying disrespect for sign languages in general, since no one would simply make up a word in Japanese (or any other spoken language) if they didn't know the correct word.

But perhaps not as annoying as one of the most common taboos between hearing sign language learners and deaf signers: telling a deaf person, 'That's not how I was taught to make that sign,' and then making the sign as if the deaf person should receive it with interest, if not gratitude. If you told a speaker from Tokyo that you pronounce the word *arigato* differently from how she pronounces it, she might write you off as a fool, but would probably not be offended. But doing the same to a deaf person is sharply offensive

as it is an immediate reminder that a deaf person's linguistic and social legitimacy and autonomy have historically been, and still are, regularly scrutinized, challenged, and suppressed by hearing people.

But hearing people sometimes go beyond gaffes. They can become enamored of signing and of deaf communities. This is understandable; learning a second language can give the sense that one has a different identity, a different soul even, in that other language, and that can be thrilling (Wilson 2013). ASL students can fall in love with this new world and their new self in that world, and this can lead to people appropriating deaf-community tendencies in a way that stings. As Zarrilli (2005: 91) observes when talking about acting:

Experiencing an 'other' can lead to a profound (re)consideration of one's own paradigms and models of drama as well as performance practice; however, as Edward Said (1978) has shown, it can also lead to an equally profound and disturbing form of colonial appropriation of techniques and/or misrepresentation of another culture.

This appropriation is common on the Internet today, where, for example, many hearing people have chosen to perform a sign version of a popular song. While some say they do it with the hopes of conveying the beauty of signing, they are missing the point that signing is not a form of performance art, but real language (Solomon and Miller 2014). They wouldn't perform a song in Spanish before an audience unless they were fluent in Spanish, so why are they doing this in a sign language? They are misrepresenting and, at times, fetishizing the language, and the frustrating—perhaps infuriating—part is that their audience doesn't know that. So while we might laugh at someone who sings a song in Spanish with a grating American accent (which we might detect even if we don't know Spanish), we might admire and even mimic someone who signs a song in ASL with who-knows-what kind of pronunciation. What might be appropriate for people to do in their dorms behind closed doors is different from what is appropriate for people to do before an audience—particularly the unlimited and unsuspecting audience one can reach on the Internet.

Another case of linguistic and cultural appropriation is when a non-fluent signer from outside deaf communities uses bits of signing for self-promotion and profit. Such cases of cherry-picking language and presenting oneself as a teacher-expert of the language is taboo, particularly when that language is of an oppressed minority community and one is not a member of that community. The site known as Dirty Signs with Kristin, for example, teaches obscene signs that are often inaccurate, and can come off as derogatory and exploitative of deaf people and deaf community members (Powell 2012; TrueBizMe 2012). In 2012, the site's creator, Kristin Henson, published a book of obscene signs, financially profiting from her inappropriate behavior. Widespread public outcry from deaf communities arose against her videos and the book, with assertions that they showed, at best, extreme cultural insensitivity while appropriating sign language and exploiting deaf people in the process (Permenter 2012; TrueBizMe 2012). In contrast to Henson's site is a recent video of deaf people demonstrating and explaining

various profanities (Taylor 2017). Some signers in this video carefully point out how English profanities aren't necessarily open to verbatim translation (although at least one of the signs presented is more a joke sign than an everyday taboo sign: BULLSHIT). This video is a particularly important contrast to Henson's, as it features deaf signers giving their own perspectives on, and examples of, taboo signs that they see and use in everyday conversations. These authentic, deaf-community insights reveal taboo without exploitation.

There is a well-known disinhibiting effect on the Internet, which has been pointed to as a factor in why people will reveal online intimate and often damaging information about themselves and others (Suler 2004). Further, language and topics that are taboo in one's own linguistic community can seem less taboo in another language, as though the other language somehow disembodies us (Gawinkowska et al. 2013). Finally, interest in the obscenities of other languages is high (as any language teacher can verify; some promote discussing taboo language in the L2 classroom, see Mercury 1995). Nevertheless, when it comes to sign languages, something goes beyond this general tendency regarding the Internet and general interest in obscenities in L2. Perhaps the highly visual nature of sign languages creates an allure—a voyeuristic relish in the graphic nature of sign taboo. This is where the offense comes in: dirty signs, like off-color jokes and jokes that deal with a community's prejudices, are in poor taste, and that poor taste belongs to the community, not to outsiders (Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2009). Most, if not all, of us have things we would say to someone in our community that we would never dream of saying to someone outside; outsiders might not understand those things in the way we intend them.

The Internet has been a tremendously useful tool for deaf communities. In fact, deaf communities have become more globally connected via the Internet. Individuals who never had a voice before can now exercise one to great extent and reach an audience of followers to gain momentum to effect significant change within and outside their respective groups. But the Internet has also been a tool of exposure and marginalization (Saunders 2016), where those with hearing privilege can appropriate sign languages and deaf-community norms for personal gain or power at the expense of deaf people and communities, stomping further and harder on an oppressed minority.

### 8.3.2 Issues involving identity

In a conversation involving deaf people it is important to reveal your auditory status right away. A hearing person who enters a sign conversation and is taken to be deaf but later is discovered to be hearing can engender a sense of violation among the deaf signers. That hearing person was putting herself in the position of potentially taking part in in-group language and behavior—thus taking part in matters critical to the identity of the deaf conversation participants (Tropp and Wright 2001). Further, a hearing person who allows herself to be taken as deaf can be perceived as taking unfair advantage of being able to sign—she can pretend to be deaf, while a deaf person cannot pretend to be

hearing. She assaults the identity of the deaf people she has fooled, an identity as part of an in-group that is important to self-esteem (see Bat-Chava 1994).

Signing and deaf-community tendencies have become so popular in the past couple of decades that we now find deaf groupies and even deaf wannabes, with a website for group interaction (Deaf-Wannabee, founded in 2000) and blogs by individual wannabes (such as that by Marie, started in 2007: <http://makemedead.blogspot.com.au/search?updated-max=2007-11-17T14:23:00Z>). The interlopers are hearing people who adopt deaf ways of being and sometimes even mutilate their bodies so that they lose their hearing (for a discussion of one such person, see Veale 2006). The number of deaf wannabes has grown sharply; they are now recognized as having a pathology that the medical profession needs to find a coherent way to manage (Davey and Phillips 2013).

The whole idea that hearing people would want to become deaf can be offensive to deaf communities. Deaf people, particularly those with hearing aids or cochlear implants, have to work hard in a hearing environment, straining to understand even a minimal amount. Other deaf people are simply left out in a hearing environment. Choosing to deafen oneself is tantamount to a slap in the face to deaf people, whose work in a hearing environment is not recognized and who would love to have the chance to simply relax, with the effortless access to speech hearing people have (Carter 2008). This is not to say that deaf people do not appreciate being deaf. Many do, particularly signers, and they explain to others the benefits of deafhood (as in videos, such as that by Ella Mae Lentz (2014) and others done for the Deafhood Foundation or independently). As I. King Jordan, former President of Gallaudet University, answered in 1990 when he was asked if he'd rather be hearing, 'That's almost like asking a black person if he would rather be white... I don't think of myself as missing something or as incomplete.... It's a common fallacy if you don't know deaf people or deaf issues. You think it's a limitation' (Fine and Fine 1990). That said, there is still no sense in which the deaf proselytize for deafness among the hearing. Rather, the idea is that a healthy identity involves accepting oneself and embracing one's experiences as a deaf person. Deaf groupies and wannabes do not ingratiate themselves with deaf communities. Further, there are hearing people new to the whole idea of deaf communities who police the boundaries of deaf identity more fiercely than deaf people do. They want to toe the line so much that they wind up excluding many deaf people based on arbitrary notions of deaf ideals.

Another identity matter relevant to our discussion arises with the terms *disability*, *disabled*, *handicap*, and the like. Certainly, not all functional diversity is looked at the same way by everyone; even among communities of people who have been labeled 'disabled' there are significant differences in attitudes (Deal 2003, among many). Further, today people are moving away from a dysfunctional model toward a diversity model with respect to (nearly) everything previously gathered under the disability aegis. But that movement is old hat for members of deaf communities. For decades there have been those who said that deafness is not a disability, but simply an auditory status (Lane 2002). And in places where the incidence of deafness is high (as with village sign languages), being deaf or not is simply one more trait a person has, like hair color or



height (Lane et al. 2000). Deaf cannot hear; beyond that, *DEAF CAN*, a phrase used in deaf communities to indicate that deaf people's hearing status is not a limitation. Deaf people are represented across the professions, where many are famous (e.g., see Start ASL 2008–17). Many other deaf people have simply lived and are living without fame in satisfaction and success (see articles in Longmore and Umansky 2001). And the areas in which they find satisfaction and success can surprise hearing people. For example, deaf can produce music that enthral, whether they were deafened in late childhood (as with Evelyn Glennie; Glennie 2003) or prelingually deaf (as with Sean Forbes; NPR staff 2010). Likewise, deaf can appreciate music (as with the fans of the Grateful Dead known as Deafheads, Jurgensen 2015). Deaf can dance with grace and rhythm (see Nyle & Peta's freestyle to 'The sounds of silence' 2016), even if vision is cut off (as in Nyle & Peta's tango to 'Unsteady' 2016). Nevertheless, deaf people are quick to note their rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and to call for an interpreter when the situation requires one. Thus the label of *disabled* is not one deaf apply to themselves; but, in fact, deaf recognize that situations can effectively cut off their ability to communicate, thus situationally disabling them. This is one of those instances in which the purpose of using the label determines whether or not it is taboo.

One issue of identity involves the signs that a signing hearing person knows. Let us use place names as an example. In an introductory ASL course, typically one learns the sign names for some countries and cities, but also for many towns and institutions in the local area. The local deaf school, for example, is of primary importance to the local deaf community. And cities where there are influential deaf schools and deaf institutions are as central to knowledge about deaf life in the USA as the sprawling cities of New York, Los Angeles, and Miami are to knowledge about hearing life in the USA. If you don't learn these, and, worse, if you are an interpreter and you don't learn these, you are showing disrespect to the community (Suggs 2012).

Some hearing people who become hard-of-hearing refuse to wear a hearing aid and, instead, insist that everyone speak loudly with them or simply don't understand the communication around them (although they might pretend to). This behavior can be taken as an affront to deaf people, as though being identified as deaf is so much to be avoided that it's better not to be part of communication. Deaf people are not wrong to see such behavior as suspect; in the USA, only 14% of people over age fifty with hearing loss use a hearing aid—due to a range of reasons, but one of them is that 'hearing aids still carry a stigma' (Seliger 2012).

Hearing people often take months or even years of knowing each other before they reveal crucial parts of their history to each other. Deaf signers, instead, often learn a lot about each other at a first meeting—including not just where they were born, raised, educated, and family situation, but whether this is their third marriage and how they feel about the new president. As Swinbourne (2013) says, 'Why was your mother-in-law imprisoned in Cambodia on that family holiday? We need to know.' The example is humorous, but there's a truth behind it. When a deaf person opens up to a hearing person and there is no reciprocity, the very act of playing one's cards close to the chest can feel like casting aspersions on the deaf way of relating, and thus on deaf identity.

Another taboo offense is to make assumptions based solely on the fact that someone is deaf. Just as not all sign languages are the same, not all deaf people are—intellectually, politically, or otherwise. And most of all, not all deaf people sign and not all deaf people want to help hearing people practice their signing. Just the same as it would be for hearing people, treating deaf people as a monolith is bound to result in mischaracterizations and, in turn, offense.

### 8.3.3 Hearing privilege

Hearing privilege is vitally important to address when discussing taboo in deaf communities and deaf-hearing interactions. Such privilege—conscious or not, intentional or not—is central to the continued oppression of deaf people. Inattention to this privilege, especially for those hearing who work with or otherwise participate in deaf-community activities, is frowned upon; intentional use of this privilege is oppressive and obviously taboo. In any case, it is imperative to be self-aware and deliberate in avoiding exerting hearing privilege in deaf-hearing interactions and engaging with deaf communities.

If you are in a sign conversation and a hearing person comes along, it is taboo to talk with that third person without finding a way to include the deaf person. Some deaf people find simultaneous communication (signing and speaking at the same time) an acceptable way to be included, though this method can still be limiting, for it is not really possible to equally represent spoken and sign languages simultaneously despite the fact that the different modalities physically allow for simultaneous articulation. This taboo is interesting linguistically because if an Italian friend of yours passed and you spoke Italian, you might turn away from a hearing person you were speaking English with to talk with your friend in Italian for a moment without bothering to translate the Italian into English. What makes the situation with a deaf person different is the role of privilege in such encounters. A hearing person could, in principle, learn any spoken language. However, a deaf person is excluded from accessing a spoken language on the basis of biology. Thus, the hearing person in this scenario has a privilege—and ultimately, power—to choose to include or exclude the deaf person. But speaking any oral language is not automatically exclusive of other hearing people. Perhaps your hearing friend would consider you rude if you interrupted your communication with a quick exchange in Italian. In contrast, your deaf friend might wonder if you were truly friends.

Another privilege that hearing people enjoy is incidental information in everyday contexts. Hearing people are bombarded with informative content via speech, whether or not it is directed at them and whether or not they put effort into listening to it. In contrast, deaf people are typically not bombarded with information via sign. Instead, deaf people frequently find themselves in contexts where the norm is oral-aural communication. In such environments, following one stream of information without a

sign language mediator expends significant effort and is quickly tiring with little informational reward. Attending to multiple streams is disorienting and likely counterproductive. Hearing people have the privilege of skipping from conversation stream to conversation stream at their own whim; instead, deaf people in a hearing context would need a non-verbal cue that another conversation might be of interest to attend to. This goes for signing deaf people as well as deaf people with cochlear implants; too much spoken information overloads the interlocutor and minimizes information access. In fact, turn taking and attention to visual cues is deeply ingrained into the conversational habits of deaf communities; each person has an equal opportunity to contribute and attend to the immediate conversation.

Even in a signing environment, deaf people must actively attend in order to pick up information. A hearing person can turn their back on a speaker or shut their eyes and still get information; a deaf person cannot. In fact, doing so is a serious affront to the other participant(s) in the conversation (Centre for Deaf Studies University of Bristol 1997). This difference in types of attention is well recognized in the literature on educating deaf children (such as Gregory 1998 on mathematics and Winston 1994 more generally), and on the quotidian medical knowledge that adults have (such as Job 2004 on sexually transmitted diseases and Allen et al. 2002 on end-of-life matters). When a deaf person misses out on some event everyone else knew about but for which the information was passed in some way that left the deaf person out, it is, at best, frustrating; it's another example in which hearing privilege and speech being the exclusive means for information dissemination adversely affect deaf people. If this happens once, it might be oversight or insensitivity; if a hearing person does this to a deaf friend repeatedly, that could cause the end of the friendship.

Correcting a deaf person's pronunciation of a word they have voiced can also be taboo. If the deaf person hasn't asked for such feedback, it shouldn't be given, as it suggests that perfect speech and hearing are more important than the content of the message. It also sends a signal that the hearing person has more power and spoken language has more value in the conversational dyad.

As mentioned above, breaking eye contact while talking to a deaf person, whether speaking or signing, is rude. It's not just part of deaf interaction to make eye contact during conversation (except when the eyes are drawn elsewhere for grammatical reasons, such as following a classifier predicate), it's crucial to a deaf person's understanding of the conversation. If one person in the conversation—deaf or hearing—looks away or closes their eyes, that action indicates a usurpation of conversational power. If a person actually turns their head away, that cuts off intelligibility; it's a halt to communication and a signal to the other participant that their co-equal footing has been taken away. These conversational norms are, again, engrained in deaf communities. Hearing people, however, often have the privilege or cultural expectation not to maintain eye contact during a conversation, so it can be difficult to remember to maintain eye contact when conversing with deaf. However, it is imperative to try, in order to avoid confusion, distraction, or insult.

### 8.3.4 Exploitation

In Section 8.3.1 we mentioned the website *Dirty Signs with Kristen* as a recent example of exploitation of deaf people and sign language. However, there is—most unfortunately—a long history of exploitation of deaf people for hearing benefit. Repeated and continued incidences of exploitation have resulted in a particular sensitivity and heightened awareness of hearing people's motivations for becoming involved with deaf people. This subsection gives common scenarios in which hearing people engage deaf people and communities for professional ends. We highlight these scenarios to bring awareness to the inherent—and often uneven—power dynamics between two constituent groups who are most typically represented as hearing professionals working in and with deaf individuals or community groups. While we do not suggest that all hearing people working in deaf communities are exploitative, we raise the issue of working with deaf communities to show that the risk for exploitation of deaf people for personal (hearing) benefit is high unless deaf people are included in the consultation and development of all aspects of the professional endeavor at hand.

Many hearing people interact with deaf communities to give services that result in their own financial and/or professional advantage. These include audiologists, interpreters, linguists, and teachers for the deaf. The relationship between deaf communities and hearing members of these aforementioned groups is complex. On the one hand, they may rely on them—particularly interpreters and teachers. On the other hand, they may resent feeling under their control or power. For example, when interpreters try to make up signs or impose their own ways of rendering a deaf person's message, deaf can feel oppressed by the very people who are supposed to be serving them (Baker-Shenk 1986). Further, when interpreters get the spotlight or earn money based on their creative presentation of sign language instead of the deaf people from whom the signs originated, the ire of deaf communities is raised, and for good reason (Zola 2015). And, of course, there may be further resentment or even distrust at the fact that these other groups financially or professionally benefit from their association with deaf communities. Certainly, coming in to study the community, then walking away with some article or book that promotes your career and never returning to that community because you've already gotten your benefit smacks of exploitation and is taboo.

Since our readers are (probably) mostly linguists, it's important to realize that there are a number of deaf-friendly behaviors that should be adopted in doing linguistic analysis of sign languages and deaf communities (Singleton et al. 2015). Not adopting these behaviors is unethical and increasingly recognized as taboo behavior by deaf communities. For one, deaf communities should be regarded as hosts, and, appropriately, involved in every aspect of the project (Harris et al. 2009). Deaf participants in the research should be fully informed of their rights. Full informed consent here means researchers should use the participants' preferred method of communication, usually sign language, rather than asking them to read a consent form (Singleton et al. 2014). Researchers should be aware of the potential insecurities (linguistic and otherwise) of their deaf consultants and be careful to put consultants at ease and not enter into a

power relationship fed by those insecurities. Researchers should give back to the community via disseminating their results in linguistically accessible materials—in sign as well as print. All participants should be appropriately acknowledged and remunerated in the work itself. There are many other guidelines one should follow in order to help assure gathering of correct data; here we have touched on only those that have an ethical aspect to them.

### 8.3.5 Sensitivity to taboos among hearing people

In general, sign interactions can come across as more forthright about sexual matters and bodily functions than spoken interactions because of the visually explicit nature of signing. But this is only apparent. In fact, the range of attitudes toward sexual matters and the sense of privacy about bodily functions vary among deaf as among hearing. So hearing people can sometimes feel they have closer intimacy with a deaf person than, in fact, they do—simply based on the visual clarity of signs—and they can, in turn, behave inappropriately.

Where we do find differences between what is politically correct among hearing and what is politically correct among deaf is in labeling. While hearing people frequently change the socially acceptable term for referring to something (such as an ethnic group) and the whole matter can be rife with emotion, deaf communities have been slower to adopt this kind of censorship—although college-educated deaf are more likely to adopt such taboos than undereducated deaf.

## 8.4 DEAF WITHIN DEAF COMMUNITIES

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Taboos within deaf communities largely involve social hierarchies. In general, the larger deaf community is characterized by a strong feeling of camaraderie, not surprisingly since many deaf find in deaf communities important things denied them at home; this community is a kind of surrogate family (Lane 2005). In fact, about 90% of deaf marry other deaf (Schein 1989).

Deaf communities typically present themselves to outsiders (hearing) as inclusive communities that welcome all deaf—a united front. That means that discussing hierarchy within these communities is walking in a minefield—taboo territory. We repeat: we do not intend this as a gratuitous assault. We do this with respect for the communities and with an eye toward furthering knowledge of taboo in general and toward improving (by expansion) the corpora that linguists consider when analyzing sign languages.

Deaf communities are complex from auditory, linguistic, and cultural points of view (Leigh 2009). The prevalence of cochlear implants has confounded the situation. Additionally, this complexity is exaggerated by the fact that sometimes deafness is

coupled with blindness and sometimes deafness is part of a larger syndrome that affects cognitive reasoning and/or emotional abilities. This heterogeneity means that the possibilities for offending are multiple. And it means that an article like ours cannot hope to be comprehensive. We do the best we can here and hope that others will follow up with refinements.

#### 8.4.1 Auditory status, facility with signing, and cochlear implants

Some deaf children are born into deaf families and begin acquiring sign language from birth. But deaf parents can have hearing children, as well, who also begin acquiring sign language from birth. 90% of children born to deaf parents are hearing (Schein 1989). And often, a deaf child in a hearing family can have a younger sibling who is hearing. That younger sibling might acquire both a spoken language and a sign language from birth. Thus there are native signers who are deaf and native signers who are hearing.

As we said in Section 8.1, however, nearly all deaf children are the only deaf people in their family. They might have well-informed parents who immediately start learning a sign language and bring them into contact with signing deaf people. Or they might not. So some of these deaf people learn to sign early and some learn later. If a child receives a cochlear implant and is in a family following a zero-tolerance-to-alternative-approaches protocol (thus excluding sign), that child might not be introduced to sign until much later—as an adolescent or adult.

This mixed situation raises interesting issues for linguists when gathering data from signers, and the standards used are relevant to our discussion here because they tie in to some of the stickiest taboos in deaf communities. Some have taken the position that someone must be at least a second-generation, deaf-of-deaf signer in order to serve as a linguistic consultant (Neville et al. 1997; Petitto et al. 2000; MacSweeney et al. 2002). Generally this is the position taken by those doing studies of the architecture of the brain with respect to language. Others, particularly those more interested in grammar, have taken the position that (1) exposure to sign by the age of three, (2) ability to judge a sentence's grammaticality with ease, and (3) daily contact with the deaf community for more than ten years, together assure a consultant's reliability (Mathur and Rathmann 2006). Still others have loosened the requirements because there simply aren't enough deaf signers who meet such strict requirements to do reliable studies on a given linguistic community. So a researcher might gather data from all signers, noting such characteristics as hearing status, family hearing status, age when first exposed to a sign language, and length of exposure to a sign language, and then see whether those with certain characteristics turn out to give different data from the others, allowing one or more of these characteristics to be singled out as relevant for defining competence with respect to the particular matters investigated (Costello et al. 2006). In studies that are more about usage of language, particularly in creative endeavors, even that list of

characteristics might not play a role. Rather, deaf for whom signing is their primary and preferred mode of communication might serve perfectly well (as in Napoli and Mirus 2015).

All of this ties into our discussion of taboo because the questions linguists ask about language exposure when they gather data raise, once more, the specter of not being an adequate signer—and, therefore, often of not being linguistically adequate in any language. The questions themselves can shake a deaf person's confidence in their identity, so the way in which they are posed needs to be culturally sensitive.

#### 8.4.2 Hierarchies and tension within deaf communities

Identity politics within deaf communities is, likewise, largely, but not entirely, a matter of a linguistic model being superimposed from the outside (Davis 2002). Though we do not wish to referee the boundaries and hierarchies within the larger deaf community, we examine these identity politics here because they are rarely discussed explicitly. We offer a broad overview of some of the more salient social groups among deaf communities and highlight some of the tensions among and within these groups.

As early as 1976 a detailed study of the communication network among deaf in the USA concluded 'not only that the deaf are increasingly leading and managing their own affairs but also that those deaf from birth or infancy, those with deaf parents, and those who began signing with others early in life are emerging as leaders in this society (Stokoe et al. 1976: 208). This makes perfect sense in that the celebration of sign language is an affirmation of the deaf identity as distinct in a hearing world (Lane 2005); these deaf leaders are those with the most confirmed deaf identities.

The deaf elite are, by and large, deaf-of-deaf, relatively well-educated (college degree), hold middle-class or better jobs, and actively participate in local and national associations for deaf advocacy and outreach (Holcomb 2013). They are distinguished from others—whether they be oral deaf, deaf who did not have a chance to learn to sign (well), or what is termed grassroots deaf (Burdiss 2016)—all of whom occupy a different social stratum and wield significantly less power within deaf communities. The deaf elite have demonstrated power politically and are afforded privilege within deaf communities. They were the leaders of the successful Deaf President Now! Movement of 1988 that led to I. King Jordan being appointed as the first deaf president of Gallaudet University (Kensicki 2001). Within Gallaudet, an institution that draws deaf (and some hearing) people of various backgrounds, educational experiences, and sign language experience, members of the deaf elite can be found at all levels of the institution, including fraternities that tacitly accept only members of their own elite status. Historically, employment also gave a deaf person stature, as though being seen as valuable by hearing people was confirmation of one's worth. Those deaf who begged were decried by organizations such as the National Fraternal Society for the Deaf as being vagrants; the elite deaf urged police to arrest them (Burch 2004).

Interestingly these demarcations of a deaf elite seem to be a relatively new and, perhaps, American phenomenon. We hypothesize that the parameters for being part of the deaf elite come from linguistic research priorities that infiltrated the ethos of deaf communities. More specifically, over the past fifty years in sign language linguistics, researchers have prioritized deaf-of-deaf experiences for linguistic authenticity. Such priorities may have created a notion of preference or even superiority of the deaf-of-deaf experience within deaf communities. The reality that the deaf-of-deaf are statistically fewer than five percent of the deaf community makes the possibility of being part of this elite rare and likely reinforces the elite status.

The hierarchy of—and power dynamics within—deaf communities beyond the deaf elite is far too complicated to delineate here. Furthermore, we wish not to valorize such hierarchies, though we do simultaneously recognize their unstated effect on inner-community dynamics. In turn, we now touch on a few of the subgroups that comprise deaf communities. While we deliberately intend to be inclusive of as many groups as we are able, particularly groups that have been hitherto marginalized by those with power within deaf communities, we recognize that with so many varied and individual deaf experiences, it is not possible to account for the exact experience of all deaf people, so we focus on those that are linguistically based. Again, we raise these issues and discuss these group dynamics in order to contextualize the historically taboo nature of power structures internal to deaf communities.

The most obviously marginalized group within deaf communities is oral deaf. They are sometimes accused of being hearing wannabes and then, at the same time, deaf wannabes (Horejes 2012). They are sometimes rural deaf who never had the opportunity to learn sign due to lack of sign models or they are born to families who actively choose—often at the insistence of physicians and other therapists—not to expose their children to sign languages so they could integrate as much as possible into the hearing world. Though sentiments within deaf communities are changing to become more accepting of them, historically, non-signing deaf have been pushed to the periphery of deaf communities, sometimes mocked and often excluded. One example demonstrates this point: the name sign for the Clarke Schools for Hearing and Speech (preferred for the oral deaf) is an insult sign that pokes fun at the entirely oral philosophy of the school and its students. Perhaps even more marked within deaf communities are oral deaf with cochlear implants; they not only do not use sign, they are visually identified by surgery scars that those with hearing aids do not have (Hollins 2000).

There are extremely diverse representations of hearing levels within deaf communities, and ability to sign is often crucial to their acceptance. For example, hard-of-hearing who sign have a better chance of being accepted somewhat (Davis 2002), while hard-of-hearing who do not sign are often treated as outsiders. Carly Rush reports the following interview with an oral hard-of-hearing Gallaudet student:

You're a stranger in a strange land. You're either Deaf or Hearing, and when you're in the middle ground it's like either being black or white, or mixed, you don't really have an identity. There is no point in coming here [Gallaudet] when you're kind of



an unwanted here. Like all the hearing kids, 'Oh you're hearing, you're an interpreting major; or you're Deaf, you're a legacy. Oh you're Hard-of-Hearing? Well why are you here?' 'Well, I play football.' 'Oh of course you're here to play football, you're here to play basketball, you're here to do something.' It's just like you kind of... just [SHRUGS SHOULDERS]. We're the labor force. Like you have X amount of Deaf people, and you have X amount of Hearing people, you got to have something that fills the void. You have to put Hard-of-Hearing kids in the middle, and when you do that it gives you someone to hate, I guess. I don't know. You know what I mean? Everyone needs a scapegoat, every community has a scapegoat.

Rush 2014—transcription hers

These sentiments reveal tensions on identity and community acceptance; with sign ability as an indicator of being in or out, being inbetween can ostensibly amount to being stuck between two worlds with neither place an exact and comfortable fit.

Alison Aubrecht, a mental health counselor at Michigan School for the Deaf, was raised in a hearing family and mainstreamed throughout primary and secondary school. In an interview (Eckhardt 2002) Aubrecht talks about the sense she had growing up that she didn't belong anywhere and how difficult it was for her to be deemed an outsider by deaf people she met. She offers outreach videos on the Internet for people who feel like she used to; one addresses isolation and the need for love and family during stressful times (Aubrecht 2017). Aubrecht's testimonies witness the anguish many have felt and still feel, caused by language access and matters of fluency.

Yet this whole seemingly linguistically-based hierarchy is clouded by the fact that CODAs, hearing Children Of Deaf Adults, have access to, but are not among the elite even though they are commonly linguistically as competent as deaf-of-deaf and often self-identify as part of deaf communities (Miller 2004; see also Todesco 2012; Patterson 2015; and multiple others on the Internet, as well as many interviewed in Preston 1994). This may seem puzzling unless one recognizes that language and auditory status factor into the social hierarchy of deaf communities. CODAs are intimate viewers of deaf communities, but they have not suffered the same oppression that deaf have suffered directly. Furthermore, they enjoy the hearing privilege that deaf are not afforded. These two factors combine in the eyes of some to preclude their identity as firmly fixed in deaf (Davis 2007) and relegates their membership as peripheral within deaf communities despite typically having sign languages as their first languages and immersion in deaf-centered households (Bull 1998; Bishop and Hicks 2005; and others). Being insiders and outsiders at the same time (Singleton and Tittle 2000), CODAs have unique needs that are not fully met by all-hearing or all-deaf groups and communities. Indeed, they have had their own international organization since 1983 (Children of Deaf Adults, Inc.; Brother 2017) that serves as a forum for sharing common CODA experiences. They are linguistically complex and often at least bilingual—using a sign language natively, the ambient spoken language natively (although some experience a bumpy start), and even commonly a blend of the two in CODA-talk (Preston 1994, among many) that is only fully conceptually (and maybe linguistically) accessible by CODAs themselves. But they

are of-deaf not deaf-of-deaf, which makes their ultimate position within deaf communities less central than they may personally feel considering they've been a part of this world from birth.

Nevertheless—and at odds with this whole picture—there are ways in which elitism within deaf communities is defined in terms of being more like hearing people: that is, there is audism (Humphries 1977), a term indicating a belief that hearing ways of being are superior to deaf. Education, particularly English-language literacy, has been an important factor in attaining elite status within deaf communities since the beginnings of American deaf communities (Robinson 2010). The notion of spoken language superiority was so deeply internalized that historically even deaf-of-deaf believed that signing with an English influence was more refined than the use of ASL (see Benjamin Bahan's anecdote in the film 'Through Deaf Eyes' in Hott and Garey 2007, 59:09–1:00:24). One of the authors of this work recalls her hearing grandmother tell a story about visiting Gallaudet with her deaf son; (hearing) administrators assured the parents they would be using high sign language in instruction, that is, sign language that had significant influence from spoken English, rather than the low sign language known currently as ASL.

From the time that hearing educators dictated that education of deaf people must follow an oralist methodology in Milan, Italy in 1880, spoken language and its derivative manually encoded forms emerged in educational settings. One example of manually encoded forms of English used for the purposes of instruction was the Rochester Method, wherein deaf students were educated through the fingerspelled alphabet on the grounds that this would promote print literacy; other signing was disallowed (Musselman 2000). Perhaps because of the Rochester method, or perhaps because of similar alignments of fingerspelling with print literacy, ASL today has a high rate of fingerspelling compared with many other sign languages (Morford and MacFarlane 2003). Certainly, print literacy opens opportunities in mainstream society and allows sociological and economic opportunities; at earlier points in history, the lack of print literacy exposed one to accusations of being mentally feeble (Burch and Joyner 2007). However, education via fingerspelling letter-by-letter is maddeningly slow and inefficient in instruction; as such, the Rochester Method amounted to little more than a philosophical edict on deaf people's assimilation into hearing-ness and hearing society.

As we mentioned earlier, within deaf communities there are members known as grassroots deaf. They often have not had an opportunity to go to or finish college and perhaps do not travel as much as more advantaged deaf people might do. In some communities, grassroots and elite deaf are integrated and socialize together, and in others, they are not (Holcomb 2013). Some deaf claim that grassroots deaf are the 'true carriers of ASL' (Krieger 2007). Grassroots deaf network amongst one another and tend to be close-knit (Holcomb 2013; Krieger 2007). Interaction between grassroots and elite can be minimal. A similar grassroots versus elite situation for users of British Sign Language was described by Ladd (2003). Recently, grassroots deaf have joined together to gain greater visibility in fighting discrimination, improving their economic potential, and improving communication access. They marched on state capitals in May 2016 to bring awareness on the state legislative level of the needs of some community members

(Burdiss 2016), though the continued action and legislative follow-up to these marches have not been, at present writing, actualized.

### 8.4.3 Gender and race diversity within deaf communities

While deaf-of-deaf and fluently signing deaf are presumed to be the elite within deaf communities, this status is truer for white males than for others (Robinson 2010, 2012). As Burch and Sutherland (2006: 141) say, 'Since its origin, America's deaf communities have presented as a highly unified society, bonded through a common language, but also sharing common cultural values. Closer study, however, shows that, among many factors, race, class, gender, and disability caused considerable fissures within the Deaf-World' (see also Lane 2005). We raise these topics here not because it is taboo to be a member of these subcommunities within the larger deaf community, but because until recently, the specific lived experiences of these groups have been overshadowed by white male deaf experiences seemingly without challenge and discussion. Yet, these subgroups within deaf communities have, of course, always existed. In the spirit of working toward inclusive Deaf Studies, we take this opportunity to briefly highlight individuals and subgroups of the larger deaf community that have, until rather recently, been marginalized from within.

More recently, intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989)—that is to say, how overlapping identities interface with social systems to inform a person's sense of self—has come into sharp focus and deaf people are not excluded from these introspective explorations. Such discussions reveal that despite a purported primacy of deafness in identity formation, deaf people's individual identities are as much about the many groups with which one can be affiliated—whether it be gender, race, locality, and so on—as they are about being deaf. The interface of all these allegiances informs the nuanced identities of deaf individuals as they relate to one another as well as society at large (e.g., Johnson 2015). Thus, while we focus here on specific subgroups within the larger deaf community, the reality is that deaf people do not experience life in such discrete terms; every deaf person's identity is uniquely informed by their own personal journey.

In the past, ultraconservative attitudes toward women led to appreciation of them as physical but not intellectual beings (Brueggemann and Burch 2006), resulting in their not rising to high status within the larger deaf community. Deaf women's social and economic statuses lag behind that of deaf men (Sheridan 2001), but outreach organizations such as Deaf Women United (Deaf Women United 2016) work to mitigate such disparities through increasing accessibility and awareness of opportunities for deaf women in the USA.

Black deaf communities have been documented by linguistic as well as educational terms for decades. Racial segregation in the south led to black deaf schools (Aramburo 1994), with black varieties of ASL (McCaskill et al. 2011), some of which were not mutually intelligible with white ASL (such as Raleigh Signs, see Burch and Joyner 2007). Black varieties of ASL, along with their signers, were looked down on by white deaf. Racially

segregated deaf clubs persisted for years (Padden and Humphries 1988), which meant little social interaction between black and white, though the decline of deaf clubs may make the issue moot today (Padden 2008). In a 1996 survey, 78% of the deaf African Americans identified themselves as black before identifying themselves as deaf (Lane et al. 1996). A more recent study put the figure at 87% (Mindess 2006). These are remarkable findings, given the centrality of language in defining identity (Joseph 2004), and they might suggest that the differences between black and white ASL along with the history of racism in America overshadowed the fact that the people involved were all deaf. Black deaf report feeling discriminated against by both hearing blacks and deaf whites (Valentine 1996).

Academic studies of diverse racial groups within deaf communities beyond black and white are only relatively recently being explored. (For a list of some studies, see Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center 2015, as well as Foster and Kinuthia 2003.) This work dispels the lingering myth that there is one deaf community made of people who discard all identities beyond their deafness.

Just as there are resonances of audism in deaf society hierarchy, there are resonances of ableism (Robinson 2010). At one point in history the deaf fought to have deaf schools renamed, so that none would be called asylums—avoiding any possibility of deaf being associated with mentally or physically disabled (Fox 1880). This attitude ‘shaped deaf activism throughout the twentieth century’ (Robinson 2010: 17–18). While many deaf children who have multiple disabilities are educated in the mainstream classroom, the interaction between them and other deaf children is minimal. Today even among adults, those whose deafness is part of a larger syndrome are often considered inferior—or, at best, are overlooked—by the majority of able-bodied deaf.

DeafBlind and DeafDisabled, or those who are sometimes referred to from within deaf communities as DEAF-PLUS, have historically been cast aside and, at times, intentionally excluded as a rhetorical strategy to challenge social constructions of deafness as disability, as part of the longtime rhetoric from the mainstream deaf that they are not disabled. The definition of the mainstream in deaf communities as being deaf, but otherwise just like hearing, marginalized deaf people with other functional diversities and precluded them from what would be seen as normal deaf experiences. Furthermore, choosing only one aspect—deafness—of a complex, interconnected functionally diverse identity serves to minimize and even erase what is essential to individual deaf experiences. Meredith Burke, a former Gallaudet graduate student sums up the effects of feeling forced to choose between equally integral aspects of her identity:

[Am I] Deaf or Disabled, Deaf and Disabled, or DeafDisabled? Ever since I came to Gallaudet it has been a struggle because people at Gallaudet, especially those who are culturally Deaf, made and still make me feel that I have to choose between Deaf or Disabled. I cannot do that. My disability is and always will be part of me... As I am approaching graduation with my Masters in Deaf Cultural Studies, I have won the championship game by reclaiming my identity as Meredith Burke who is DeafDisabled. Both identities go hand-in-hand, together and equal.

Burke 2013

More recently, there is a deliberate effort to be inclusive of the needs of deaf people from all backgrounds and with a range of functional diversities (Bauman 2009), though the reality that there is a fully united deaf community is still far from realized.

## 8.5 CONCLUSION

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Taboo topics in deaf communities include the full gamut of taboo topics among hearing people. However, there are special topics particular to the experience of being deaf, some of which center on infelicitous exchanges between deaf and hearing and some centering on clashes among deaf fueled by power, privilege, and cultural differences. Recognizing that these latter taboos exist can be of benefit to linguists, as they give depth to and contextualize the environment in which sign languages are used and proliferate. Communities of hearing people that are oppressed or marginalized, and of which only a small, privileged group interacts with the majority culture, may well have analogous taboos that are yet unstudied or understudied. Further, the very act of studying some particular linguistic group to the exclusion of others (in fact, the majority) may act to elevate that group's status within the community and engender tensions, certainly an ethically undesirable result. Instead, studying the variation in language within deaf communities can broaden linguists' insight into the scope of variation in language in general. The repercussions and importance of studying a wider range of data on any language, offered by a more diverse group of linguistic informants is, of course, beneficial. Overall, we believe the sign language and deaf community taboos discussed here broaden our academic understanding of the tendencies of some deaf communities, which ultimately contributes to a more informed discussion of languages and language communities as a whole.