

DEAF IMMIGRANTS IN THE NORTHEAST UNITED STATES: INTELLIGIBILITY & THE INTERPERSONAL

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ABSTRACT:

How does being an immigrant shape the experience of being deaf in the United States and vice versa? Drawing from approximately 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in the northeast United States, this research examines the lived experiences of deaf immigrants with a particular attention to their communicative encounters and languaging practices. This article focuses on the collaborative nature of deaf immigrants' languaging to argue that understanding in communicative encounters is co-produced and that intelligibility is achieved relationally. Through ethnographic examples, I emphasize the importance of interpersonal relationships to establishing understanding in deaf immigrant communicative interactions and argue that, in encounters with the United States immigration regime, the social and interpersonal dimensions of communication are at least as significant (if not more so) than the linguistic dimensions to achieving such understanding.

KEYWORDS: deaf; immigrant; language; understanding; intelligibility; interpersonal relations; United States; anthropology

1. Introduction

On a fall day in October of 2019 in a small city in the northeast United States, I sat in a community workshop hosted by a local nonprofit. As a hearing anthropologist interested in exploring the intersections of deafness and migration, I had been attending the workshops to meet more of the local deaf¹ community – in particular a group of deaf immigrants who attended. That day, I listened to a representative from the public transportation office give a brief presentation about using the public transportation system. The presentation was given in spoken English and interpreted into American Sign Language (ASL) by a hearing interpreter for the deaf attendees present. Afterwards, the floor was opened for questions and for participants to enjoy free pizza and socialize. As I was working up the courage to join in on a conversation, I overheard the interpreter say: “she doesn’t know ASL so we’re trying to gesture.”

I looked over and saw that an older deaf woman, Sofia², had approached the presenter to ask a question. However, the hearing interpreter was having difficulty understanding Sofia’s signing. “It’s very different grammatically so we’re trying to gesture,” the interpreter explained. As I watched, an employee from the nonprofit, a U.S.-born deaf woman named Anne, noticed the interaction, and walked over to join the conversation. After some back and forth, a process emerged: Sofia signed, Anne understood her and repeated the information in “standard” American Sign Language to the hearing interpreter, and the hearing interpreter presented the information in spoken English to the public transportation representative. And back and forth it went as Sofia asked about reduced-fare bus passes for people with disabilities.

After the workshop ended, I asked Anne about the encounter. I learned that Sofia is from the Dominican Republic and that Anne has been working with her for a few years. Sofia knows some, but is not fluent in, American Sign Language. She appears

¹ In 1975, hearing linguist James Woodward suggested a distinction be made between those who are “deaf” and those who are “Deaf,” with “Deaf” referring to those who identify as culturally Deaf. This distinction was later adopted by key scholars of early Deaf Studies (Padden & Humphries 1988; Ladd 2003). However, the d/Deaf distinction has since fallen out of favor in academic writing as it was found to have led to discrimination and harmful gatekeeping: “a rigid taxonomy of deaf/Deaf is dangerous, colonizing, and ethnocentric, and it reinforces tautological and spiral debates with no positive construction to the understanding of what it means to be deaf/Deaf” (Woodward 2016, 286). As such, in this article, I utilize the lowercase “deaf.”

² All names are pseudonyms.

to use a mixture of ASL with either Dominican Republic Sign Language (Lengua de Señas Dominicana) or homesign.³ Initially articulated by Goldin-Meadow (2003), homesign has long been the term used in studies of deaf children to describe the “spontaneous gesture systems devised by deaf children for the purpose of communicating with their non-signing peers” (Begby 2017, 693). However, Deaf Studies scholars have increasingly interrogated this term. As discussed by Nyst et al. (2012), the term “homesign” was coined to describe the communicative practices of deaf children born to typically white, middle-class families who were denied access to sign language. Over time, however, the term came to refer to “the signing of deaf people in widely divergent and basically incomparable settings” (Nyst et al. 2012, 272). As Hou (2020) argues, the resulting impreciseness of the term elided the diversity of deaf communicative practices and the variety of sociolinguistic environments in which signing emerges.

Neither Anne nor the hearing interpreter are familiar with Lengua de Señas Dominicanas (LSD), so they were uncertain if that is what Sofia was using. Given her age however (she is in her 60s), it is more likely that Sofia was using homesign or gesture as it has only been recently that the Dominican Republic has had a standardized sign language (Gerner de Garcia 1990; Parks 2010). Sofia also utilized some words in spoken Spanish. Indeed, I overheard her saying “cinco” as she gave the presenter her phone number.

In this multilingual and multimodal communicative encounter, Anne acted as an informal Deaf Interpreter (DI)⁴ and facilitated the interaction, enabling Sofia to successfully communicate with the hearing presenter. This sort of collaborative communication is a practice I observed repeatedly throughout the course of my ethnographic fieldwork with deaf immigrants in the northeast United States. It was also a practice I participated in as communicative encounters between myself and my interlocutors were often asymmetrical and communication became a collaborative and iterative process. In this article, I examine the significance of such collaborative work for deaf immigrant languaging and argue that interpersonal relationships are critical to the production of understanding in deaf immigrant communicative encounters. Through an extended examination of one interlocutor’s

³ Please see Hou (2020) and Goico & Horton’s (2023) articles for further discussion about the appropriateness and applicability of the term “homesign.”

⁴ Deaf Interpreters or DIs are “Deaf individuals [. . .] who act as interpreters for Deaf members of their own community” (Boudreault 2005, 324).

citizenship story, I highlight the importance that interpersonal relationships have for effective communication in encounters with the U.S. immigration regime.

2. Deaf Immigrants in the United States

There is limited information about deaf immigrants in the United States. The 2021 U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey reports that there are approximately 45 million immigrants in the U.S. and that about 11.6 million Americans have some sort of hearing difficulty.^{5, 6} However, there is no demographic data about those who are both immigrants *and* deaf in the United States.

There are a handful of news articles that report on the challenges deaf immigrants and refugees face in the U.S. such as learning American Sign Language and English, accessing services, and encountering exploitation.⁷ Additionally, there is a small, but growing body of academic work that focuses on deaf immigrants and refugees in both the U.S. and elsewhere. Much of this academic literature aims to answer practical questions about how to accommodate multicultural and multilingual deaf students in schools, but the experiences of *adult* deaf immigrants outside of educational or institutional settings remain underexamined.⁸

A recent study by Duggan and Holström (2022) ethnographically explores the experiences of adult deaf migrants learning Swedish and Swedish Sign Language at a folk high school in Sweden. An important addition to the literature on deaf immigrant lives and language ideologies, Duggan and Holström's work focuses on the experiences of deaf immigrants in an educational setting. This article seeks to add to knowledge about those deaf people for whom institutional support structures are different or altogether nonexistent. The *MobileDeaf* project – a research project spearheaded by a team of deaf multilingual scholars – also investigates deaf mobility through ethnographic studies that explore such topics as deaf refugees in

⁵ In the ACS, the question is: "Is this person deaf or does he/she have serious difficulty hearing?"

⁶ The Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) corroborates the ACS data on hearing disabilities, reporting that approximately 10 million people in the U.S. are hard-of-hearing and around 1 million are functionally deaf. Half of those people are 65 and older (Mitchell 2006).

⁷ See Barrett 2011; Evans 2019; Leovy 1995; Mendoza 2020; Munder 1998; Sari 2016; Smith 2017; Tolan 2015; Weiss 2015.

⁸ See Akamatsu & Cole 2000a, 2000b, 2004; Gerner de Garcia 1995; Hernandez 1999; Jacobs 2021; Leigh 2017; Lurie & Kozulin 1998; Wathum-Ocama & Rose 2002.

Kenya's Kakuma Refugee Camp (le Maire 2018) and deaf labor migrants living in London (Emery and Iyer 2022). However, the *MobileDeaf* project focuses on immigrant/refugee experiences outside of the U.S. Within the U.S. specifically, Lim's recently published (2022) autoethnographic article analyzes her personal experiences as a deaf migrant to the U.S. and includes an analysis of the languaging practices of her multiethnic and multigenerational Filipino deaf, signing family. Unlike Lim, my interlocutors come from hearing, non-signing families and have consequently had different experiences with language access. Taken together, these works explore deaf mobility in a variety of contexts and analyze the multilingual and multimodal nature of everyday deaf languaging practices (see also De Meulder et al. 2019; Kusters 2019; Moriarty & Kusters 2021).

This article builds upon and adds to these works through an ethnographic exploration of adult deaf immigrants in the northeast United States, with a particular focus on their experiences navigating the U.S. immigration and citizenship regime. Through a primary focus on one interlocutor's experience with the U.S. naturalization process, my work ultimately shows that, for deaf immigrants, the social and interpersonal dimensions of communication are at least as significant, if not more so, than the linguistic dimensions for achieving linguistic intelligibility.

3. **Fieldsite and Methods**

I am a hearing, non-native signer of ASL who has been engaged with the deaf community in the New England⁹ area since 2014. I hold a deep commitment to the notion of Deaf Gain, which I understand as a reframing of deafness from "loss" to "difference" (Bauman & Murray 2014). With this sensibility in mind, in my overall research and scholarship I understand deafness as a natural part of human diversity with rich insights and perspectives that expand and deepen our overall understanding of the social world writ large.

I have been learning and studying American Sign Language since 2014. I am proficient in the language, but not flawlessly so. As an ethnographer doing research in a language other than my native language and as a researcher from a privileged position doing research with a marginalized community, I am cognizant of the

⁹ In the United States, the area known as New England is comprised of six states: Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont.

communicative burdens typically placed upon deaf individuals. The collaborative communicative practices and efforts to achieve understanding, which I elaborate on in this article, are practices that I, too, took part in as I carried out this fieldwork. Drawing from the framework of “crip linguistics” (Henner & Robinson 2023) and from the work of other hearing ethnographers who study deaf communities (e.g., Green 2014, 2022), I see communication and sense-making between myself and my interlocutors as a collaborative and iterative process. My interlocutors and I often worked together to establish meaning within our interactions. There were many instances when I relied on deaf friends for clarification or repetition or offered clarification and repetition myself. There were, of course, moments of not understanding and misunderstanding, but these moments informed and shaped my theoretical understanding of deaf languaging practices and asymmetrical communicative interactions.

The data for this article was gathered through ethnographic fieldwork conducted between August 2019 and August 2021.¹⁰ I conducted participant observation at both the household and community level among urban and semi-urban areas of New England. Because the deaf community is small and tightknit, to protect the anonymity of my interlocutors, I will not identify specifically which U.S. state or states in which this work was conducted. I conducted participant observation by attending deaf/signing social events around New England¹¹ and through a volunteer position in the Deaf Services department of a local nonprofit organization where I worked alongside the Deaf Services coordinator – the woman named Anne who I speak about in the opening vignette – assisting deaf immigrants navigate the U.S. naturalization process.¹² Alongside Anne, I worked primarily by helping deaf individuals study and prepare for the U.S. naturalization interview and civics exam.

One of the final steps of the citizenship process, the civics exam involves studying a set of 100 questions about U.S. government and history. During the

¹⁰ Fieldwork was interrupted, at times, by the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.

¹¹ I identified these social events through postings in social media groups like the popular “Deaf Night Out” on Facebook or through invitations from deaf friends.

¹² As the Deaf Services coordinator, Anne is responsible for providing various independent living services to approximately 100 deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals living in the region. Born the only deaf person of an all-hearing family, Anne’s first language is English, which she learned to speak and lipread. She later learned Signed Exact English (SEE) in school and, subsequently, American Sign Language as an adult in college. She received her college degree in social work and moved to New England. When I first met Anne in 2019, she had been working at the IL Center for 8 years. She is in her 50s.

exam, an individual is asked 10 of the possible 100 questions. They must get 6 answers correct to pass. While study materials for the exam are available in several written languages, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) does not provide study materials in ASL.¹³ As a number of the deaf individuals I worked with came from countries with minimal or non-existent services for deaf individuals, many either could not read or could only read a little. Consequently, written study materials were not overly useful to them. Alongside Anne, I worked with individuals in tutoring sessions where we interpreted each of the 100 questions into ASL to help them study. In addition to signing in ASL, we also drew upon a larger communicative repertoire, utilizing gestures, pictures, and written materials in our study sessions.

Participant observation was accompanied by a series of semi-structured interviews carried out with deaf immigrants, as well as with selected hearing and deaf individuals who work with or provide services to deaf immigrants.¹⁴ Because of the smallness of the deaf immigrant population in my field area, I chose not to limit my sample to individuals from a single country or region of the world. Given the limited number of deaf immigrants in the study area, the difficulty of identifying and contacting them, and the specificity of the research, although a small sample size, this work constitutes a substantial contribution to extant data about the topic. I formally interviewed eight deaf immigrants and had informal conversations with more through my position at the nonprofit and through attendance at the nonprofit's community events and other deaf social events. Among all my interlocutors, I spent the most time with Isabel, a young mother of three from the Dominican Republic. In addition to helping Isabel prepare for her interview/exam, I was also able to ultimately accompany her to the United States Citizenship and Immigration (USCIS) office in August of 2021 to observe the naturalization interview process.

4. Deaf in a Hearing World: Implications for Language Practices

No matter what country they are from, most deaf people are born into a predominantly hearing world surrounded by spoken language and, as such, the

¹³ The USCIS web page that lists the civics exam questions and answers in various languages: <https://www.uscis.gov/citizenship/find-study-materials-and-resources/study-for-the-test>

¹⁴ Please see Appendix for demographic information about the interviewees.

burden of communication typically falls upon them. They must do the work to understand and to make themselves understood. This context shapes deaf language practices in two important ways: 1) deaf people become skilled at using a wide variety of communicative resources and strategies and 2) working collaboratively to achieve understanding becomes normative in deaf socialities.

The term “repertoire” describes the various resources, tools, and strategies available to a person for use in a communicative interaction (Pennycook 2018). For instance, repertoire can include spoken, sign, and written language, but also gestures, body language, pointing, photographs, drawings, emojis, etc. Because the burden of communication disproportionately falls upon the deaf person in a hearing world, deaf individuals have necessarily had to develop varied communicative repertoires. As Wrigley explains:

The years of attempting to communicate ideas to disinterested hearing people provide a vast array of communicative strategies and ad hoc tactics that deaf people share, and know that they share. These fallback techniques serve to prime the pump in moments of lost connections, in establishing shared vocabulary or in regaining a consensual ground (1996, 103).

Ethnographic literature observes that deaf individuals are skilled at using a wide variety of linguistic resources and strategies to understand and to make themselves understood to hearing people (Kusters et al. 2017). Indeed, during my own fieldwork, if communication ever faltered, my deaf interlocutors were quick to pull out a phone, to find a picture, to use Google translate, to write or draw on a piece of paper, to mime or act things out, etc.

The tactics deaf people have relied upon to survive communicatively in a hearing and spoken language-centered world have become “an elaboration of embodied practices, of something that deaf people have (implicitly and explicitly) learned to do on a daily basis throughout their lives” (Crasborn and Hiddinga 2015, 66). These practices can be characterized as translanguaging. Translanguaging deconstructs ideas of languages as discrete objects, rather re-conceptualizing “language” as a unitary meaning-making system in which there exists a repertoire of linguistic features that individuals can draw from (Gumperz and Hymes 1972, 20; Blommaert and Backus 2013; García et al. 2021). As people learn a language, they add features to their repertoire; and “each languager accumulates a unique and constantly changing set of linguistic memories and enacts available choices according to the requirements of specific situations” (Sabino 2018, 37). Individuals then

strategically utilize their multilingual and multimodal communicative resources and abilities based on the context and purposes of the interaction.

Having to create ways to communicate with hearing people has not only diversified deaf people's communicative repertoire and sharpened their translanguaging skills but it has simultaneously cultivated what anthropologist E. Mara Green calls a "mutual moral orientation" (2014). Inspired by Friedner's (2011) writings on deaf "sameness work," the concept of "Deaf Same" (Kusters and Friedner 2015) and drawing upon Hanks' (1996) and Goodwin's (2006) work on orientation, Green describes deaf "mutual moral orientation" as "the socially expected turning of one's corporeal, cognitive, and moral attention towards another" (2014, 446). The notion grew out of Green's fieldwork observing the use of International Sign at a World Federation of the Deaf meeting in Madrid, Spain. Green found that, at board meetings, attendees preferred to communicate directly with each other using International Sign rather than using their native sign language and needing to have their communication mediated through an interpreter. The term International Sign "is used to point at the language used by (deaf) people from different (sign) linguistic backgrounds as they try to communicate with each other and it seems to encompass a continuum of more or less conventionalized language" (Kusters and Friedner 2015, xx). The commitment to direct communication, Green argues, both requires and actively produces a relationality and moral orientation between signers. The privilege of direct communication is part and parcel of a deaf ideology "that what is particular about deaf people is their capacity for connecting across differences, rooted in and materialized through the ability to use sign across language boundaries" (2014, 445). This is not to generalize that *all* deaf people are oriented towards each other in the same way. Indeed, Green acknowledges that this orientation often depends on race, class, geographic location, etc. However, as users of a marginalized language, deaf individuals often have moral, ethical, and political reasons for orienting towards one another. Ethnographic work by anthropologists at other large international meetings of the deaf have affirmed that the communicative capabilities of deaf people prepare them for transnational encounter and for communication *across* language boundaries (Haualand 2007).¹⁵

¹⁵ Others contend that deaf individuals' skill at cross-linguistic communication translates to a comfort with international travel and tourism or cosmopolitanism (Moriarty & Kusters 2021).

Within their framework of “crip linguistics,” Henner and Robinson (2023) characterize the orienting and commitment to collaborative communication documented by Green and witnessed, as well, in my own fieldwork as “linguistic care work.” Communication, they contest, is a collective practice motivated by care and commitment to access. As part of a project of moral orientation, deaf people take time “in being patient, in supporting and providing semiotic resources, in seeking, expanding, and claiming our own semiotic resources, in calibrating to each other in seeking mutual understanding” (Henner and Robinson 2023, 25). Understanding and, more importantly, working collaboratively to produce understanding becomes an important dimension of deaf sociality.

In a 2016 article, drawing from fieldwork conducted largely among India’s deaf urban community, anthropologist Michele Friedner theorizes the role that understanding – and people’s relationship to understanding – holds in the creation and perpetuation of deaf sociality. Friedner contends that “deaf people’s specific positioning as a minority among hearing people means that deaf people can never take understanding – at least by means of spoken language and at even the most basic, referential level – for granted” (Friedner 2016, 187). For most deaf individuals, their day-to-day life is spent in an environment in which they are not full linguistic participants.¹⁶ As such, in contrast and arguably in response to the numerous experiences in which understanding and inclusion for deaf individuals is not prioritized in interactions with hearing individuals, interactions among deaf individuals are characterized by a continual and purposeful checking for understanding. Indeed, throughout the course of fieldwork, I often observed clarification questions being asked in deaf conversations. As one interlocutor explained, asking for clarification is so common “because we so often miss out on information.” Interlocutors I spoke with lamented that hearing people might interpret this behavior as rude or blunt, because it is, in reality, an important means of existing as a deaf person in a hearing-centric world.

As described in the opening vignette, the type of collaborative communication enacted by Sofia and Anne is common practice for many deaf individuals. Language brokering – or “facilitating communication between two linguistically

¹⁶ While deaf people are not exclusive in being unable to access the dominant language of their daily environment, I argue that their linguistic positionality does set them apart from similarly situated groups (such as hearing immigrants) because of the general unfamiliarity hearing people have with deafness.

and culturally different parties” – has long existed in deaf communities (Bauer 2012, 205).¹⁷ As Adam et al. explain: “for as long as Deaf people have communicated with each other using sign language, they have also acted as language brokers” (2014, 5). Not only have deaf individuals long helped each other with translation, but even at young ages, deaf students help interpret for their classmates when their hearing teachers cannot understand them or when their teachers are unable to communicate effectively themselves (Stone 2009; Adam et al. 2014).¹⁸ Born into a hearing world in which language brokering has necessarily become a familiar practice, we can see in the case of Sofia and Anne that “communicating across sign language boundaries is not such an incredible task” (Crasborn and Hiddinga 2015, 66).

Deaf individuals’ existence within the larger hearing world has shaped their languaging practices, leading to the development of diverse communicative repertoires and an ideological investment in working together to produce understanding. Together, these things enable differently situated signers of different backgrounds to co-produce meaning. Furthermore, my experiences with deaf immigrants have highlighted the important role that interpersonal relationships play in the production of understanding. The importance of social relationships – of having a shared set of references and experiences – for linguistic intelligibility cannot be understated. Critically, for deaf immigrants encountering and navigating the U.S. immigration and citizenship process, interpersonal relationships and the role of those relationships in facilitating linguistic intelligibility become crucial.

5. The Importance of Interpersonal Relationships to Intelligibility

As discussed, for deaf individuals in a hearing world, the potential for not- or misunderstanding is a salient concern, but it can become an acute one for deaf immigrants as they come into contact with government agencies and legal processes. In my fieldwork, I observed that opportunities for collaborative communication could potentially determine whether someone becomes a citizen or

¹⁷ Much of the literature on language brokering examines how children of migrants serve as language brokers for their parents, documenting children’s practices of mediating, negotiating, or facilitating communication between their parents and others (Bauer 2012). For deaf individuals, however, language brokering occurs more often across peers.

¹⁸ See also: Boudreault 2005; Adam, Carty, and Stone 2011; Bienvenu and Colonomos 1992.

not. In this section, through the story of Isabel, I examine how interpersonal relationships become critical to successful communication for deaf immigrants in bureaucratic interactions and how they facilitate understanding in ways that formal interpretation is not always capable of.

During my time at the nonprofit, I worked with several deaf immigrants as they prepared for the U.S. naturalization interview and civics exam. Isabel was one of those individuals. She is a young mother of three, born and raised in the Dominican Republic. She is the only deaf member of her family and went to a hearing school without access to sign language until the age of 15. She met her husband, a deaf man named Aaron, and moved to the United States in 2016 after their wedding in the Dominican Republic in 2014.¹⁹ Isabel knows American Sign Language (much of which she has learned since meeting her husband) though she is not fluent in the language. She is also familiar with a small amount of written Spanish and English but is not literate.

As mentioned previously, the USCIS offers study materials for the civics exam in written languages, but for Isabel, who can only read a little, these materials are not useful.²⁰ For individuals who have had no or limited access to sign language growing up (let alone to education and literacy) studying for the civics exam presents an almost ludicrous learning curve. Initially observing and shadowing Anne, but then becoming more directly involved in the tutoring sessions, Anne and I would help Isabel study for the civics exam by presenting all 100 of the questions in ASL. However, our study sessions were characterized by more than simple interpretation. For someone like Isabel, who is not a native signer of ASL, there were many signs she was unfamiliar with. For example, one of the questions of the civics exam asks: “What does the President’s Cabinet do?” Because of her lack of English knowledge, we could not simply fingerspell the word “Cabinet.” Instead, Anne and I utilized signs Isabel is familiar with to explain that the president’s “Cabinet” is a team or group of people who help the President make decisions and who advise him. Anne and I repeated this explanation multiple times and checked with Isabel to ensure that she understood the meaning of “Cabinet.” We also utilized

¹⁹ Isabel’s husband Aaron is also a deaf immigrant. He moved to the U.S. from Cape Verde prior to meeting Isabel and had successfully gone through the naturalization process before I met him.

²⁰ Additionally, as Fagan-Robinson (2019) writes about, the disarticulation between the two-dimensionality of government forms and three-dimensionality of deaf languaging practices presents barriers to even those deaf individuals with strong reading abilities.

pictures to further ensure understanding, using Google to show images of the current U.S. President Joe Biden with the members of his Cabinet. We employed similar explanatory strategies when encountering other unfamiliar English words and phrases like “jury,” “terrorist,” “diplomat,” “pilgrim,” and “founding fathers.”

In August 2021, I was able to accompany Isabel (with Anne as well) to the USCIS office to observe the naturalization interview process directly. This experience foregrounded the critical importance that established interpersonal relationships can have for communicative access for deaf immigrants.

It was a warm summer day, a sunny reprieve after Hurricane Henry had passed through the northeast and I sat at the local USCIS field office briefly celebrating as Isabel had just successfully passed the U.S. civics exam, having answered 6 of 10 questions correctly. However, Isabel’s naturalization interview was not over.

“Can she read or write any English at all?” the immigration officer asked. Deaf individuals can apply to waive the English reading/writing portion of the U.S. naturalization interview by obtaining a note from their doctor that affirms they have a disability (deafness). Unfortunately, Isabel’s doctor had filled out her form incorrectly; and, without the correct form, Isabel would have had to return at a later date to be formally sworn in and receive her citizenship certificate.

With how nightmarish it had been to secure interpreters for the interview, it may have taken months to get another appointment just for the certificate. For this appointment, Isabel had requested both a hearing interpreter and a Certified Deaf Interpreter (CDI). In the last twenty years or so,²¹ the language brokering and translanguaging work that is so common in deaf lives has been codified and professionalized in the role of the Certified Deaf Interpreter (CDI). The CDI is an attempt to regulate and give institutional authority to the kinds of deaf interpreting that has long been happening in deaf communities (e.g., the interpreting work Anne was seen doing in the opening vignette).

A Certified Deaf Interpreter commonly works in tandem with a hearing interpreter to improve communication access. Not unlike the *ad hoc* interpretation work done by Anne in the opening vignette of this chapter: a hearing interpreter will interpret spoken language into sign language, then the CDI (a deaf person with

²¹ The Certified Deaf Interpreter credential has been available through the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf since 1998.

native or near-native fluency in the language) will take that interpretation and further refine and convey the information in a more specific or culturally appropriate way. A CDI draws upon all the arsenal in their communicative repertoire and has “specialized training and/or experience in the use of gesture, mime, props, drawings, and other tools to enhance communication” (RID). Studies by the National Consortium of Interpreter Education have found that “in many situations use of a Deaf Interpreter enables a level of linguistic and cultural bridging that is often not possible when hearing ASL-English interpreters work alone.”²² (NCIEC 2007).

The immigration officer asked if Isabel wanted to attempt the English reading and writing test. If she failed, she would have to get the corrected form and return at a later date to receive her certificate. But, if she passed, she would leave the office that day with her full citizenship. Isabel agreed to try.

“Citizens can vote.” The officer verbally stated the sentence he intended for Isabel to write down on a piece of paper.

The hearing interpreter and CDI didn’t immediately relay the sentence to Isabel, but instead paused and turned to each other. I watched as they discussed how they’d sign the word “citizen.” Sometimes it is fingerspelled. However, as the interpreters discussed, in a test of writing, fingerspelling would be “like cheating.” I waved my hand to get their attention.

“She knows this sign.” I demonstrated one of the signs for “citizen” that Anne and I had used with Isabel during her studies.

“This sign?” The deaf interpreter repeated the sign, looking from me to Anne.

“Yes,” Anne signed. “That or this sign.” Anne demonstrated another sign we’d used with Isabel. This sign resembles a person taking an oath with their left hand placed palm down in front of them (as if placed on a book) and the other hand raised upwards.

The hearing interpreter turned to the officer who was looking at all of us quizzically:

“They work closely together so she can understand her better,” she explained.

Then, using both signs for *citizen* that Anne and I offered, the deaf interpreter signed the sentence “citizens can vote” to Isabel. Slowly and deliberately, Isabel wrote the

²² Situations in which a deaf interpreter might be used include: “when a client uses his or her own signs or home signs; uses a foreign sign language; is deaf-blind or has limited vision; uses signs particular to a region or to an ethnic or age group not known to the non-DI; or is in a mental state that makes ordinary interpreted conversation difficult (Napier et al., 2006)” (Adam et al. 2014, 6).

sentence on a piece of paper. She successfully passed the English reading and writing test and became a citizen of the United States that day.

Without having worked with Isabel for nearly a year, Anne and I would not have been able to inform the interpreting team about what signs for *citizen* she is familiar with. When we first encountered the word in one of our early study sessions, both Anne and I had traditionally fingerspelled it. In her attempt to explain to Isabel what citizen meant, Anne mimed someone taking the oath, which became the sign we often used for it.



Figure 1. Drawing of sign OATH done by author

Later, the three of us searched online for the ASL sign for *citizen* and found the sign that uses the “C” handshape on the chest.



Figure 2. Drawing of sign CITIZEN done by author

The three of us, collaboratively, established that, from that point forward, whenever we encountered the word *citizen*, we would use both signs.

This incident is just a small example of the role that interpersonal relations can play in facilitating communication and establishing understanding. As the hearing interpreter pointed out to the immigration officer: because Anne and I had worked

closely with Isabel for an extended period, we knew her and her communicative repertoire better. The literature about deaf people's communication with their hearing, non-signing family members emphasizes that close interpersonal relationships are key to the production of understanding. As Carol Padden explains:

When interacting with relatives, there is a great deal of shared information, but not so when interacting with unknown individuals. When signers are with relatives and members of the same village or community, the context for language is shared, and a common history develops over time (2011, 24).

In contrast, “in the case of strangers, communication needs to be more explicit, and shared knowledge cannot always be assumed” (Padden 2011, 24). In her study of deaf-hearing interactions in Mumbai, India, Kusters similarly found that “after getting acquainted, the time and effort communication required diminished: they know what they can expect and a certain schema is in place” (2017, 299). Because Anne and I had spent so much time with Isabel, we had developed a shared context for language. We had a shared set of references and experiences. As exemplified by Isabel's case, having a team of interpreters was important for communicative access, but Isabel had never met the interpreters prior to the day of her appointment. As such, having two advocates with established interpersonal relationships present was also a factor in achieving successful communication for Isabel. This example asks us to consider how interpersonal relationships can complement formal interpretation to ensure that understanding is achieved – particularly in contexts where the stakes for effective communication are so high.

Although under the Americans with Disability Act of 1990 the USCIS is legally required to arrange interpreters for deaf individuals' appointments, I heard of several instances in which family members or friends were allowed to interpret for applicants. As an USCIS employee explained to me: “we do occasionally have people bring their own interpreter.” Indeed, over the course of my fieldwork, I became good friends with a deaf woman, Alixandra, who was born and raised in Russia. She moved to the U.S. when she married an American deaf man. When Alixandra went for her naturalization interview, her hearing friend, Belle, accompanied her and served as her interpreter. Belle is neither a certified interpreter nor a native signer. She is currently enrolled in ASL classes. Belle and Alixandra originally met as coworkers and Belle began learning ASL to better communicate with Alixandra in the workplace. Over time they became good friends and,

eventually, roommates when Alixandra went through a difficult divorce. Alixandra grew up using Russian Sign Language, but learned American Sign Language and English when she moved to the U.S. Even though Belle is not fully fluent in ASL and ASL is also not Alixandra's native language, the two are able to understand each other fully. This understanding is bred from the close social relationship they have, the time they have spent together, and the experiences they have shared.

While Belle was capable of interpreting for Alixandra during her interview, this type of informal interpreting is not without problems. There is a risk that a family member or friend does not have the skills to properly interpret or that they might interpret incorrectly. For instance, in one humorous example, Belle and Alixandra recount to me how, during her naturalization interview, Alixandra was asked "If necessary, would you be willing to defend the United States in a war?" As a deaf person, Alixandra is unable to serve in the military. Based on this knowledge, Alixandra answered "no." Belle didn't voice Alixandra's immediate answer because she knew Alixandra's answer to the question *should be* "yes." She told Alixandra, "you need to say yes." Alixandra, confused, reiterated that she can't serve in the military. Alixandra and Belle bickered back and forth in front of the immigration officer until finally Alixandra acquiesced and said "yes", and Belle relayed her answer to the officer. Though a humorous example, it highlights concerns about professionalism and transparency when it comes to family members or friends interpreting.

In a conversation with the field office director at the local USCIS field office, they explained that their general policy is not to allow family members or highly interested parties to interpret, "but [in cases with a deaf person] where it's hard to set up, we allow it." They went on to say that it is "much less of a burden to us to let a family member do it" and that they try to "just get it done when we can." The employee stated, "I would think they would have folks they communicate with that would do a better job for them [than a certified interpreter]." This reveals an ideology about the way close social relationships can facilitate and produce understanding. Moreover, this reveals that there is also a pragmatic and bureaucratic impetus to utilize informal interpreting. As outlined, interpreting invites an intimacy that brings complications, but also brings other kinds of knowledge that can be essential to establishing understanding. Certified Deaf Interpreters are a marked improvement in communicative access for individuals

like deaf immigrants, but they are not a communicative panacea. Isabel's case highlights the role that advocates might play and demonstrates how informal interpreting can complement the work of formal interpreters to ensure that understanding takes place.

6. Conclusion

For deaf immigrants, the affordances of sign language can facilitate communication across language boundaries. As sign language linguist Wendy Sandler states: "the use of the body, intricately orchestrated in similar ways across established sign languages, together with similar strategies for iconic symbolization, provide an envelope for understanding" (2018, 13). In addition, histories of deaf languaging practices within a predominantly hearing world have produced a deaf commitment to working collaboratively to produce understanding. For deaf immigrants, in sites where the stakes for effective communication are high – like in encounters with the U.S. immigration regime – they must navigate a complicated layering of multiple languages and modalities. Isabel's case reveals the importance of interpersonal relationships to collaborative communication and to the co-production of linguistic intelligibility. In such instances, linguistic intelligibility emerges from a shared desire and commitment to establishing understanding. Isabel's case reveals not only how exclusionary the U.S. citizenship process is, particularly for deaf individuals who arrive to the U.S. from countries with limited or nonexistent services for the deaf, but also foregrounds how understanding is co-produced and intelligibility is achieved relationally. While provision of formal interpretation as required under United States law is a critical step towards improved language access for deaf individuals, informal interpreting has emerged as a critical resource that affords deaf immigrants additional agency in a fundamentally uneven power dynamic. In collaboration with formal interpretation, informal interpreting helps deaf immigrants to better navigate a naturalization process that I argue is fundamentally designed for them to fail.

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Appendix

Demographic information of interviewees

	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Country of origin</i>	<i>Languages (in order learned)</i>	<i>Interview type</i>	<i>Recording method</i>
1	Isabel	40s	Dominican Republic	Spanish, ASL	In-person, ASL	Written notes
2	Sofia	60s	Dominican Republic	Spanish, ASL	Videophone, ASL	Written notes
3	Danielys	60s	Dominican Republic	Spanish, ASL	Videophone, ASL	Written notes
4	Jikku	50s	India	Marathi, English, ASL, some Indian Sign Language	Zoom, ASL	Video-recorded
5	Meera	60s	India	English, ASL, some Gujarati	Zoom, ASL	Video-recorded
6	Aleena	60s	India	English, ASL	Zoom, ASL	Video-recorded
7	Alixandra	40s	Russia	Russian Sign Language, Russian, ASL, English	In-person, ASL	Written notes
8	Susan	60s	Portugal, Canada	English, ASL, some Portuguese	Phone, ASL & English	Audio-recorded

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