THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

# PRECARIOUS INTERDEPENDENCE: SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETING IN HÀ NỘI, VIỆT NAM

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BY

ARON S. MARIE

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## ABSTRACT

The slogan “Nothing About Us Without Us,” captures one of the core tenets of disability movements: the right to engage in self-advocacy. Yet for deaf signing people in Việt Nam (and most elsewhere), having a “voice” to engage in self-advocacy requires the use of sign language interpreters. In other words, the very recognition of deaf people can rest in the voice of an interpreter. At the same time, interpreters depend on deaf activists to advocate for the growth of interpreting as it is not recognized as a profession by the Vietnamese state. Given these circumstances, deaf people and interpreters in Hà Nội find themselves in a state of interdependence. While interdependence is often used rhetorically, or discussed as an approach to achieving disability justice, it is rarely studied in practice. Drawing on ten months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2018-2019, as well as a decade-long engagement with deaf people and interpreters in Hà Nội, this dissertation examines how interdependence is conceived of and enacted between deaf people and interpreters in Hà Nội, Việt Nam.

I argue that deaf people and interpreters in Hà Nội, Việt Nam are in a state of precarious interdependence. Precarious interdependence is the idea that precarity does not end at the bounds of the individual, but rather seeps through to those who they are in relationship with, changing forms and creating new types of precarity as it goes. Precarious interdependence is a way to look side by side both at the forms of vulnerability deaf people face, and the forms of vulnerability interpreters experience through their relationship with deaf people, without reducing one into the other. This dissertation traces three forms of precarity at play in the

relationship between deaf people and interpreters: precarious belonging, precarious livelihoods and precarious voice.

I start by examining what motivates hearing people with no prior relationship to the deaf community to become interpreters and enter interdependent relationships with deaf people. I argue that for young hearing women, learning Hà Nội Sign Language and becoming an interpreter provides them with a sense of belonging that entices them both to join, and to stay connected to the deaf community despite difficulties. I then examine how in the absence of state funding for interpreting, both deaf people and interpreters experience financial precarity, and interpreters must grapple with tensions between the moral and financial economies of HNSL interpreters, and the violence of charging deaf people for interpreting. Finally, I examine the ways deaf people and interpreters attempt to advocate for the development of sign language interpreting as a profession. I examine how in order to navigate ideologies of voice that discount sign language as a medium for subjectivity, interpreters are called upon to diminish signs of their own subjectivity. Moreover, I examine how norms of self-advocacy, which are based on models of independent rather than interdependent voicing, preclude interpreters from directly engaging in advocacy work. This ironically increases interpreters' dependence on deaf people, and their desire to shape deaf peoples' speeches, reproducing the very dynamics self-advocacy seeks to avoid. In examining these issues, this dissertation offers both theoretical insights into the nature of voicing and interdependence, while also raising practical questions about how to restructure norms of self-advocacy in ways that empower both deaf people and interpreters.

# INTRODUCTION: PRECARIOUS INTERDEPENDENCE

## The Kosovo Story

In 2010, as a young study abroad student volunteering with the Hà Nội Association of the Deaf (HAD), I was invited to sit in on a training. The board members of HAD gathered in the office of Disabled People of Hà Nội (DP Hà Nội) where a deaf[1] Australian woman shared advocacy techniques used by deaf groups internationally. Most aspects of the training focused on deaf activism, including basic leadership skills, how to join the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD), how the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities applied to deaf people, success stories from deaf activism in other countries, etc. However, this particular day focused on how to grow the field of sign language interpreting. Using International Sign and a PowerPoint in both English and Vietnamese with many pictures and schematics, the Australian woman explained how interpreting was first started in Kosovo (see Hoti & Emerson, 2009 for a published version of the story the trainer told). She explained how, like Việt Nam, Kosovo had recently emerged from war, and nevertheless was able to establish the field of interpreting in a matter of years. The efforts to develop sign language interpreting began with a 2001 survey of deaf people in Kosovo funded by the Finnish Association of the Deaf (FAD) that found that there were no formally trained interpreters in Kosovo at the time. After identifying the need for interpreter training and receiving funding from FAD, a team of individuals from local deaf clubs in Kosovo and WFD went about identifying potential candidates to become

[1] Following recent trends in deaf studies, I use lowercase deaf throughout this dissertation as the D/deaf distinction does not always translate well outside of the Unites States and Europe, and carries with it teleological notions about what is the right way to be culturally deaf (Friedner & Kusters, 2015).

interpreters and screening them to ensure they had sufficient fluency in sign language. The project then provided several rounds of training over the next three years and issued certificates of attendance to the interpreters. Once the project finished, the Kosovar Association of the Deaf successfully lobbied local organizations, including National TV Broadcasting, medical offices, and deaf schools, to pay for sign language interpreters. Meanwhile the newly trained interpreters founded the Kosovo Association of Sign Language Interpreters (est. 2008), wrote a professional code of conduct, and began working to become affiliated with the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI). Perhaps most significantly, the Kosovar Association of the Deaf began lobbying the state, in this case the Ministry of Education, to accredit the interpreters and institute a training program in a local university.

The message of the presentation was clear: Vietnamese deaf leaders should find people who already know sign language, train them in interpreting, and then lobby the government to accredit and provide national legislation for sign language interpreters. Follow these simple steps and you too should be able to have sign language interpreters to access both public and private services. Yet there was much left unsaid about how Kosovo was able to grow the field of interpreting. There were no details about how deaf leaders and interpreters worked with the state, how interpreting was financed, or how the aftermath of the war shaped the political landscape in which deaf leaders and interpreters were working. What sorts of relationships existed between deaf people and interpreters before interpreting became professionalized? How did interpreting change socially, linguistically, economically, and morally as it achieved state recognition? Moreover, the fact that there exists a "Kosovo story," a single, simplified

template for how interpreting *should* develop is problematic. How can there be one set way interpreting should develop where there is so much diversity within and between deaf communities in different national contexts (Friedner & Kusters, 2015b; Monaghan, 2003)? Despite the issues with Kosovo standing as an oversimplified normative model, it nevertheless had a profound impact on deaf leaders in Việt Nam.

The term “deaf leaders” is used locally to refer to deaf people who have taken on active leadership roles in deaf communities, such as through serving on the board of a deaf association (e.g., HAD), serving as a pastor or deacon in Hà Nội’s deaf church, running a sign language interpreting club, or having participated in one of the various non-governmental organization (NGO) funded leadership workshops projects targeted at the deaf community. Even if one did not currently occupy one of these roles but had occupied them in the past, other deaf people still tended to refer to them as deaf leaders. Deaf individuals were often chosen for leadership positions due to their strong networks within Vietnamese deaf communities, ability to communicate with a wide range of deaf and hearing people, passion for promoting change, and willingness to dedicate a significant amount of their time to volunteer activities. On average, deaf leaders have higher levels of education than the general Vietnamese deaf population and tended to be more fluent in Vietnamese Sign Languages (VSLs) as well as written Vietnamese.

In 2010, there were approximately 10 deaf individuals in Hà Nội commonly referred to as deaf leaders. Most of these leaders had attended one of Hà Nội’s two schools for the deaf: Xã Đàn Secondary School (Trung Học Cơ Sở Xã Đàn), which despite the name only offered elementary school education, or Nhân Chính Private School for the Deaf (Trường dân lập dạy

trẻ điếc Nhân Chính Hà Nội). This generation of deaf leaders typically only had a 3rd-5th grade formal education as at the time there were no options for education beyond the 5th grade level for deaf people in Hà Nội. While Xã Đàn and Nhân Chính taught using speech-based (oral) methods at the time and prohibited the use of sign language in the classroom, they had provided an opportunity for deaf students to learn Hà Nội Sign Language (HNSL) from other deaf students, an opportunity which deaf people from other provinces did not necessarily have. Most of these individuals were male with the exception of two women involved in deaf leadership at the time.[2] Deaf leaders can be contrasted with "ordinary" deaf people, who I will discuss in more detail below.[3]

An, a young deaf man in his mid-twenties who at the time was HAD's chair of youth activities, paid particular attention to the Kosovo story. He asked many questions during the PowerPoint presentation and talked to me about it at length afterwards. While other deaf leaders were focused on serving the local deaf community through weekly activities organized by HAD (i.e., games, lectures and written Vietnamese classes), An had a vision to grow the field of sign language interpreting. He envisioned a world where the Vietnamese government would provide deaf people with interpreters to access courts, hospitals, education, plays and even casual social situations. For him, the Kosovo example was a model he could try to replicate and bring his dream to fruition (An, personal communication, 2010, 2013).

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[2] By 2019, deaf leadership had expanded to include about 40 individuals in Hà Nội. These individuals came from slightly more diverse backgrounds and identities; some leaders were migrants to Hà Nội and there were more female deaf leaders. However, these individuals still tended to have higher education levels, literacy levels, and fluency in HNSL than ordinary deaf people.

[3] In this dissertation, when I am writing about deaf people, I am primarily referring to deaf leaders, as these are the individuals who are actually using interpreters and engaging in advocacy work around the development of interpreting. However, I will often use the broader term of "deaf people" as these were the terms commonly used by deaf people and interpreters when describing their work.

At the time, deaf leaders felt that there were three individuals in Hà Nội who were qualified to work as interpreters (Hà Nội Association of the Deaf [HAD] board members, personal communication, 2010). The longest working was Kim, who first entered the deaf community through her affiliation with an evangelical protestant church that ministered to the deaf and work with a local NGO involved with disabled people. Through her work, Kim had attended an American Sign Language (ASL) workshop provided by a local disability organization. At the workshop, Vietnamese deaf leaders in attendance informed her that they didn't use ASL and invited her to spend time with them and learn their signs. As she became more fluent in HNSL, she started being asked by deaf people to interpret. The first time she recalls interpreting was in 1998 when one of her deaf friends asked her to interpret at the hospital. The second interpreter was Yen, the younger sister of one of the deaf leaders, who had begun interpreting in 2006 when deaf leaders came together with other disability activists to found DP Hà Nội. Yen was considered an extremely skilled interpreter because her experience growing up alongside her deaf older sister meant that she was highly fluent in HNSL. The third was Mai, a recent college graduate with a degree in Economics with no prior relationship to deaf people who had been (literally) hand trained by An. An hoped to follow the Kosovo model, training more interpreters like Mai and building a pool of interpreters in Hà Nội that deaf people could work with.

An and another deaf leader, Nam, had recently taken over teaching HNSL classes for what at the time was referred to as the Sign Language Club. The club had been founded in 2006 to help disabled leaders from DP Hà Nội communicate with deaf leaders for the purposes of their shared advocacy work (Giang, personal communication, 2014). According to Vietnamese

law, all community-based or NGOs must be registered with the government. In order to bypass the complex process of being registered as an independent organization, HAD was originally founded in 2010 as a chi hội (sub organization) of a hearing community-based organization. In 2006 when DP Hà Nội was founded, deaf leaders chose to switch to being a chi hội of DP Hà Nội, following international trends that have framed deafness under the larger umbrella category of disability. The hope was that, due to their shared struggles to achieve access, physically disabled leaders and deaf leaders would be able to work together to secure rights (HAD board members, personal communication, 2010). However, the leaders of DP Hà Nội were all physically disabled individuals who did not know HNSL. Thus, the Sign Language Club was founded to facilitate DP Hà Nội leaders learning HNSL. In other words, the original intention of the organization was not to create interpreters, but rather to facilitate direct communication with disability advocates. However, by 2010, there was not a single disabled person taking the class, a fact that served to underscore the increasingly uneasy relationship deaf leaders had with hearing disabled activists in Hà Nội.

Deaf leaders in Hà Nội frequently complain that hearing disability advocates (both from DP Hà Nội and other disability-related NGOs in Hà Nội) do not understand their language, do not make the effort to communicate with them, and do not accurately represent their interests. During my fieldwork, I witnessed many disagreements between deaf leaders and disability advocates. For example, while deaf leaders in Việt Nam have argued that it is important to recognize and respect the linguistic differences between different VSLs, several disability advocates support efforts by researchers from the government-sponsored Việt Nam National Institute of Education Sciences that are trying to unify Vietnamese Sign Languages and make

them conform more closely to written Vietnamese. Indeed, board members of DP Hà Nội felt that unification of VSLs was a necessary prerequisite to establishing formal interpreter training programs in Việt Nam (personal communication, 2019). Such disagreements have had significant consequences for the development of sign language interpreting. Due to HAD's status as a sub association of DP Hà Nội, DP Hà Nội effectively works as a gatekeeper controlling HAD's ability to meet with government officials.

In 2008, Giang, the original deaf teacher of the HNSL club, asked An to take over the Sign Language Club because she had won a scholarship to study aboard in Japan. An then shifted to using the classes to select and train hearing sign language interpreters. Mai was An's first success. She entered the club in 2009, and due to her experience as an emcee for events at her university, was nominated to emcee for the three-year anniversary of the club. She didn't know sufficient HNSL to emcee the event, so An worked with her personally, tutoring her until she was able to give her speeches in both spoken Vietnamese and HNSL. An then began bringing Mai to HAD events and to meet his deaf friends, and she quickly started volunteer interpreting. An would accompany her in her early days of interpreting, teaching her signs she didn't know and advising her on how to make her interpretation clearer.[4] An's aim was to replicate his success in training Mai, growing a pool of interpreters that could serve the deaf community in Hà Nội and throughout Việt Nam.

In the nine years from which I first became involved in the deaf community in Việt Nam, as a young study abroad student in 2010 to later conducting my dissertation field research from

[4] An's work language brokering alongside Mai is what Stone refers to as a "deaf translation norm," the work that deaf people do to interpret even before deaf people are formally recognized as deaf interpreters (Stone, 2009).

2018-2019, I watched deaf leaders and hearing HNSL interpreters work diligently to try to grow the field of interpreting in ways that aligned with the Kosovo story and ways that did not. An and other deaf teachers grew the Sign Language Club into the Sign Language Training Center, offering a series of HNSL classes that deaf teachers use to recruit and train future interpreters. In 2018, they built on their success with the Center by re-establishing the Sign Language Club to help retain hearing students' interest in sign language and the deaf community after the students finished HNSL classes at the Center. In addition to these local community-based efforts to train and recruit sign language interpreters, deaf leaders and interpreters have been involved in two large projects to bring foreign interpreter trainers to Hà Nội. The first of these projects was the International Deaf Education Outreach Project, funded by the Japan Social Development Fund and overseen by the World Bank, which provided training for two cohorts of 30 hearing individuals as sign language interpreters in 2012 and 2013. The second grant from the Danish Deaf Association, colloquially referred to amongst deaf leaders as "the Denmark Project," brought international trainers for two ten-day long training sessions in 2018 and 2019. Deaf leaders and senior interpreters then utilized materials from these training sessions to open an interpreter training class through the Center, which is offered intermittently whenever there are enough skilled students to host a course. Together Deaf leaders and interpreters founded the Hà Nội Association of Sign Language Interpreters (HASLI) in 2015. After news reporters interviewed leaders of HAD for a special interest segment, deaf leaders were able to meet with representatives from Việt Nam Television (VTV) who agreed to fund interpreters on the nightly news. Slowly, after many lengthy conversations about the necessity of interpreters for advocacy work and the importance of paying interpreters, deaf leaders have convinced a

handful of local and international NGOs to pay for sign language interpreters, though many Vietnamese NGOs still balk at the idea of using their limited funding to pay for interpreting services. Deaf leaders who received scholarships to attend international deaf events (such as a WFD Regional Secretariate for Asia Youth Camp) have used these opportunities to tour interpreting companies in other countries (e.g., South Korea). Deaf leader, An, even worked with interpreters to found the first video relay interpreting company in the country, SC Deaf, to be discussed in Chapter Three.

Despite these considerable efforts, the field of sign language interpreting in Hà Nội has remained quite small. In 2009, there were only six hearing individuals who referred to themselves as "professional" HNSL interpreters. While these individuals are recognized by deaf people and each other as interpreters, they are not recognized by the state nor by broader hearing society. They are simply individuals who were dedicated to making HNSL interpreting a profession[5] and derived at least part of their income from interpreting. In 2009, five of these hearing interpreters were members of HASLI, while the sixth had quit HASLI due to disagreements over HASLI's vision. An was also a member of HASLI as his work training and interpreting alongside hearing interpreters had led to him being recognized by hearing interpreters and deaf leaders as a deaf interpreter.[6] In addition to the six "professional" hearing interpreters, there were approximately fifteen hearing individuals who were referred to as "novice" interpreters. These included HNSL students taking an interpreting course, two mothers

[5] See (Timmons, 2011) for a discussion of professionalization.

[6] There are a handful of other deaf individuals in Hà Nội who have the ability to work as deaf interpreters, either working alongside hearing interpreters to ensure that deaf people get interpreting from a native signer, or between HNSL and other sign languages (i.e. American Sign Language, Japanese Sign Language, Korean Sign Language or International Sign). The fact that these individuals are not part of HASLI points to the bias amongst hearing interpreters in Hà Nội to perceive interpreting as something done primarily by hearing individuals.

of deaf children, and two teachers of the deaf who signed well. These individuals often informally interpreted for deaf friends in situations when professional interpreters were not available or worked alongside professional interpreters who were trying to help train them. Together, this small group of approximately 20 professional and novice interpreters is attempting to serve the needs of deaf individuals in a city with over eight million residents, approximately 10,720 (0.13%) of whom have prelingual hearing loss (General Statistics Office of Việt Nam, 2016, 2020).[7] This is a ratio of 1 interpreter per 536 prelingually deaf and hard of hearing individuals. While not all these individuals know HNSL (due to lack of access to education in HNSL), deaf leaders in Hà Nội consider them potential signers and members of the deaf community. In comparison, countries in the European Union have an average ratio of 1 interpreter per 200 deaf individuals, with wealthy Scandinavian countries having even better ratios (Finland 1:8, Denmark 1:13, Sweden 1:13) (Wheatley & Pabsch, 2012).

The field of HNSL interpreting is so small that most deaf people in Hà Nội have never personally used an interpreter. During preliminary fieldwork in 2013-2014, I interviewed 23 deaf individuals, including both deaf individuals considered to be "deaf leaders" and those who were colloquially referred to in HNSL as BÌNH THƯỜNG, "ordinary" deaf individuals. Deaf leaders used interpreters on a regular basis for advocacy work (e.g., attending trainings, conferences, workshops, giving speeches, etc.) and had strong opinions about how interpreters should relate to deaf people, what made a good interpreter, and how to grow the field of sign

[7] The 2016 Việt Nam National Survey on People with Disabilities found a .13% prelingual deafness rate in Hà Nội province. I use "rate of prelingual deafness" as the Vietnamese government has no statistics on the number of deaf HNSL signers. This is likely a conservative measure of deaf people in Hà Nội as individuals who became deaf in early childhood or later in life may still consider themselves deaf and know HNSL.

language interpreting. In contrast, many so-called "ordinary" deaf people had never personally used an interpreter, and often were unclear about what the HNSL sign INTERPRETER even meant. Some of these individuals had seen interpreters on the nightly news, but many of them either worked jobs that prevented them from staying up late enough to watch the interpreted news regularly or had tried watching but were unable to understand due to the formal register of HNSL used by interpreters. When asked to name interpreters, ordinary deaf people often named one of the founders of HAD, Đức, who was highly literate and taught written Vietnamese at HAD meetings.

When I conducted dissertation fieldwork in 2018-2019, more ordinary deaf people had seen interpreters on TV, but there was still a significant divide between deaf leaders and ordinary deaf people when it came to understanding interpreters. For example, in 2019 HAD was invited to host a booth at Bridgefest, a music festival sponsored by Oxfam and the United States Embassy to raise awareness of diversity and "bridge the gap" between different marginalized communities in Hà Nội . I watched as a former president of HAD, Vũ, trained a novice interpreter, Lê, by systematically taking her to each of the booths at the music festival and having her interpret brief conversations with the individuals running the booth about their respective organizations. After each booth, Vũ would correct Lê's HNSL, helping her to rephrase things in a more fluent manner. Vũ and Lê working their way around the booths quickly became a small spectacle as approximately ten deaf individuals who were members of HAD (but not deaf leaders) started following Vũ and Lê, carefully observing what they were doing. I watched as one deaf man in his early 20's turned to a friend and exclaimed in HNSL, "She's an interpreter, she's asking in Vietnamese!" The friend nodded, watched carefully for a bit longer

and then agreed that Lê was indeed asking questions in spoken Vietnamese. I asked the deaf crowd gathered if they could understand Lê's signing, and while they confirmed that they could not, they nevertheless continued watching her with rapt attention. I realized that these individuals were not necessarily following Vũ and Lê to access what was occurring at the booth, but rather trying to ascertain what was an interpreted interaction. Indeed, in the few occasions I saw deaf individuals who were not leaders observing interpreters working, they often spent a significant amount of time talking about what the interpreter was doing, realizing that they were repeating everything that was said in spoken Vietnamese into HNSL and vice versa. Again, this significant divide amongst deaf people with regards to ability to access interpreters and metalinguistic knowledge of how to use interpreters exists in the capitol city of Hà Nội. While deaf leaders in the two major metropolitan areas of Việt Nam, Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City, have relatively high access to interpreters, deaf leaders from other parts of the country–let alone deaf individuals not in leadership roles–have little to no access to interpreters and do not even necessarily know what interpreters are.

Why, despite extensive efforts on the part of deaf leaders and interpreters, has the field of sign language interpreting in Hà Nội, Việt Nam continued to remain so small? Moreover, what does sign language interpreting look like with no legal frameworks, state funding, national accreditation bodies, and professional codes of ethics? What does the relationship between deaf people and interpreters look like, and what draws interpreters into working with deaf people when interpreting is not yet recognized as a profession by the state or the broader hearing public?

In order to answer these questions, it is important to understand the state context in Việt Nam. Unlike the Kosovo story where efforts on behalf of deaf leaders and interpreters have led to state involvement, in Việt Nam, the state has largely been absent in matters of sign language interpreting. The state has neither established nor funded any form of training or accreditation for sign language interpreters nor does it recognize any of the existing training received by sign language interpreters through the Center or with foreign interpreter training as constituting a professional licensure. Similarly, the state does not enforce any laws requiring interpreters in public or private settings. Việt Nam ratified the United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2015 which requires that state entities take "appropriate measures […] to provide forms of live assistance and intermediaries, including guides, readers, and professional sign language interpreters, to facilitate accessibility to buildings and other facilities open to the public" (*Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, 2006, art. 9). However, at the time of this study, no efforts by the Vietnamese state were being made to provide interpreters either for state services or in private institutions open to the public. This is despite ongoing advocacy efforts by deaf leaders to interface with the state.

Part of the challenge for deaf leaders in Việt Nam is navigating within a socialist single party system where "doing politics" (defined as trying to overturn the party) is illegal, and advocates must seek to be "embedded" in the state (Hannah, 2007; Wells-Dang, 2014; Vu, 2019). In this context, holding a protest or engaging in adversarial politics is strictly curtailed. Nevertheless, organizations can and regularly do engage in advocacy work through legal means. For deaf leaders advocating for the growth of sign language interpreting, this has involved

hosting public awareness events (e.g., events in honor of the International Week of Deaf People), interviews with news reporters, participation in pilot projects designed to demonstrate the efficacy of using sign language interpreters (e.g., the Intergenerational Deaf Outreach Program), and participating in invitation-only workshops and conferences attended by government officials where such officials seek out the perspectives of local stakeholders.

The fact that the Vietnamese state has been largely absent in regard to sign language interpreting is not due to a general lack of state attention towards deaf people, a fact evidenced by Việt Nam's considerable efforts to educate its deaf citizens. As a Socialist Democratic Republic, Việt Nam has a long history of funding social services such as public education, healthcare and social welfare pensions. Việt Nam began a concerted effort to educate deaf students shortly after independence with the establishment of multiple deaf schools. These efforts were cemented in a nationalized deaf curriculum during the Đổi Mới, or "reformation" period starting in 1986, where the state implemented a wide range of new policies as part of marketizing the economy (see page 49 for a more in-depth discussion of deaf education). These efforts have been highly contested by deaf signers due to the prevalence of inaccessible speech-based methods which are opposed by many deaf signers. Nevertheless, this history, the investment in deaf education through oral means, stands in stark contrast to the government's lack of involvement in sign language interpreting. Deaf leaders from Hà Nội have generally been unable to even meet with state officials or government officials to discuss the development of sign language interpreting, with notable exceptions during the Intergenerational Deaf Education Outreach (IDEO) Project where deaf leaders met with representatives from the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and during a small

workshop as part of the Denmark Project in 2019, which is further discussed in detail in Chapter Five). Part of the challenge in growing interpreting in Việt Nam today is that since the Đổi Mới, the government has gradually reduced the amount of direct funding it provides for services, instead allowing private providers to enter the social services sector in a policy referred to as "xã hội hóa" (socialization) (Dinh, 1999).

**Precarious Interdependence**

With the absence of the state, deaf people and interpreters have wound up in a state of what I call *precarious interdependence,* which makes it difficult to train or maintain interpreters, let alone grow the field of interpreting as a professional field. Interdependence is a term used by disability activists and scholars to recognize the ways in which disabled and non-disabled people (i.e., family members, caretakers, and interpreters) depend on one another. Interdependence is often used by disability advocates as an explicit way to reframe the idea that there is something wrong with the many forms of dependence in disabled people's lives (e.g., dependence on caretakers, dependence on wheelchairs, dependence on interpreters, etc.) (T. Shakespeare, 2000; T. W. Shakespeare, 2000). Interdependence stresses that all people depend on each other to some degree and that disabled people, too, regularly provide forms of care and assistance to others (Davis, 2007; Nishida, 2016, 2022). Recognizing the ways in which nondisabled people are dependent can be an important rhetorical move, reframing the way we think about disabled people and their relationships with others. Interdependence has also become what Nishida refers to as the "social justice ideology of interdependence," which is the idea that actively recognizing, embracing, and enacting interdependence between disabled and non-disabled people will help bring about disability justice (2022). To be clear, Nishida is not

using the term ideology in a negative way, but simply to point out that in some disability activist circles there is a belief that practicing interdependence will bring about social justice for disabled people.

While interdependence is often used rhetorically or discussed as an approach to achieving disability justice, it is rarely studied in practice (Nishida, 2022, p. 144). This dissertation contributes to the small but growing research on the practices of interdependence as well as the tensions and contradictions within it by examining how interdependence is conceived of and enacted between deaf leaders and interpreters in Hà Nội, Việt Nam. I focus this dissertation almost exclusively on deaf leaders and interpreters, as opposed to the so called "ordinary" deaf individuals, because at the time of my dissertation fieldwork, HNSL interpreters were used almost exclusively by deaf leaders for advocacy purposes rather than by ordinary deaf people looking to access services.

While there is no direct sign for interdependence in HNSL, the concept of interdependence came up frequently in the way that deaf leaders talked (often very poetically) about an exchange between deaf people and interpreters, where they gave interpreters tangible and intangible things, and interpreters give them tangible and intangible things in return. For example, deaf leaders pointed out that deaf people teach interpreters sign language and in return interpreters help deaf people by interpreting. Similarly, deaf people within the Hà Nội deaf community provided interpreters with a community in which they could belong, and in return, interpreters helped deaf people belong to their families and Vietnamese society at large.

Another arena where I often saw the discourse of interdependence occur was with regards to deaf advocacy work. Over the decade I have known An, he has often used a phrase that translates into English as “interpreters are the first that lobbies the government.” The saying is a play on the HNSL sign for LOBBY, the left hand in a one handshape and the right hand in a fist hitting the left. Many times, An explained to me that deaf people needed to lobby the government to get sign language interpreters so that deaf people could access courts, hospitals, education and other public and private institutions. However, without sign language interpreters to translate their signing into speech, deaf leaders would not be able to engage in activism in the first place. Without interpreters, they would have no fist with which to lobby. This saying encapsulates an interdependence of voice; interpreters depend on deaf people to engage in advocacy work so that they can do their jobs, while deaf people depend on interpreters to translate HNSL into Vietnamese, the language recognized by the national government.

*Figure 1: HNSL sign for LOBBY*

On one hand, interdependence was the thing that bound deaf people and interpreters together across asymmetries in sensory ability, communicative privilege, and economic

privilege. The belonging that interpreters gained from being part of the deaf community and the friendships that sign language opened to them, kept interpreters involved despite interpreting not being a career recognized by the state or broader hearing society and despite not having a sustainable livelihood. Moreover, interpreters and deaf people attempted to strategically use their interdependence to work within systems that were not built for them. For example, self-advocacy is a normative approach to disability politics that argues that disabled people should engage in advocacy work on their own behalf. Self-advocacy has posed problems for interpreters advocating for the professionalization of sign language interpreting because, as they tell their own stories, they are perceived to be co-opting deaf peoples' stories or, alternatively, advocating for deaf people. In attempt to strategically use their interdependence to maneuver around this problem, deaf leaders have taken it upon themselves to advocate not only for deaf rights but for the professionalization of sign language interpreting. Similarly, interpreters helped deaf people navigate registers of written and spoken Vietnamese that were largely inaccessible to them.

I will also argue in this dissertation, particularly in situations where there is neglect from the state and society at large, interdependence can be characterized by complex dynamics of precarity. This argument resonates with existing critiques from within disability studies that promoting interdependence on its own may not adequately address the unmet needs of disabled people. For example, Fine and Glendinning (2005) argue:

> The concept of interdependence has significant appeal as a social vision…[It] cannot, however, deal adequately with the problems of inequity…that still need to be addressed. Moreover, [interdependence] pose[s] the issue as interpersonal and effectively preclude[s] the role of the state in managing risk, and regulating resources and behaviors. (p. 611)

My informants noted that, with the absence of the state, interdependence was not always a mutually beneficial relationship. For example, one hearing NGO worker that was involved in several development projects related to the deaf community argued that deaf people and interpreters were in a "symbiotic relationship" because they both groups depended on each other. While symbiosis invokes an ecological metaphor of two organisms whose normal functioning allows the other to flourish, the examples she gave all emphasized how discrimination faced by deaf people impacts interpreters. She explained that, due to absent laws mandating the use of interpreters in specific situations, the provision of sign language interpreters largely depends on the awareness of goodwill part of service providers (i.e., courts, hospitals and non-profit services). This hearing NGO worker (2019) added:

> Current services forget, or a better term would be neglect, deaf people as potential recipients of their services. So that's why they haven't considered using sign language interpreters to allow deaf people access [to their services]. The nature of sign language interpreters is to provide access to information for deaf people, so if [service providers] neglect deaf people as potential beneficiaries, they would, of course, neglect sign language interpreters. (personal interview, spoken Vietnamese)

The idea that the same systems that ignore deaf people can also impact non-deaf people is not unique to Việt Nam. One sign language interpreter who worked with Michele Friedner in India made a similar point: "If deaf people are not respected, how can interpreters be respected?" (Marie & Friedner, 2021).

Disability studies scholars have noted that the dynamics within interdependence can take many forms and are not always characterized by mutual support and warmth. Eli Clare (2017), a disabled activist and scholar, writes:

> The interdependent relationships between disabled people and the people who provide care for us are often messy and fraught with power imbalances…These imbalances frequently cause abuse and neglect for the person receiving care, low wages and

> exploited labor for the person providing care, and harassment flying in multiple directions. And yet interdependence exists whether it's laced with easy banter and mutuality or with struggle, hierarchy, and exploitation. (p. 136)

Drawing on these twin insights, that interdependence does not necessarily negate neglect on the part of the state and that the dynamics within interdependence can look radically different at different times, I argue that we need to nuance our understandings of interdependence. Instead of viewing interdependence as an approach that *will* achieve disability justice, I examine interdependence as a more ambivalent relationship where disabled and non-disabled people, specifically deaf leaders and interpreters, depend on each other. Viewing interdependence outside of what Nishida (2016) refers to as the "social justice ideology of interdependency," opens up room to examine more closely the structural factors that shape interdependence, and dynamics within interdependent relationships.

In this dissertation, I examine one such dynamic which I refer to as *precarious interdependence*. I use precarious interdependence as a lens through which to examine the development of sign language interpreting in Việt Nam and understand the complex relationship between deaf people and interpreters. Precarious interdependence is the idea that precarity does not end at the bounds of the individual, but rather seeps through to those who they are in relationship with, changing forms and creating new types of social, moral, and financial precarity as it goes. For example, interpreters in Việt Nam often join the deaf community because other aspects of their gendered, classed, life trajectories leave them lonely and isolated. Being in this state of precarious belonging is what motivates them to seek community with deaf people. In entering into an interdependent relationship with deaf people, they find their belonging in some ways becomes less precarious—the belonging they gain from

the deaf community easing or replacing other forms of belonging that were failing in their lives. Yet at the same time they become more economically precarious as the economic precarity that deaf people already face means that deaf people cannot afford to interpreters for their work. Moreover, interpreters belonging within the deaf community is precarious, as their acceptance is not built on the ties of sameness that many deaf spaces are built upon (Friedner & Kusters, 2015a), but rather is dependent on maintaining the good graces of deaf community leaders that serve as gatekeepers. By tracking these different forms of precarity, we can understand the relationship between deaf people and interpreters in less procedural black and white terms, but rather examine the fluid ways in which deaf people and interpreters' lives influence each other.

Precarious interdependence is a way to look side-by-side at the forms of vulnerability deaf people face and the forms of vulnerability interpreters experience through their relationship with deaf people without reducing one into the other. It is a way to acknowledge the sensorial, linguistic, and power asymmetries between deaf people and interpreters while also examining how the vulnerability that one group faces effects the other. Finally, precarious interdependence is a framework for thinking about how sign language interpreting can become more livable for both deaf people and interpreters; how can we move from a state of precarious interdependence to a form of interdependence where all parties' needs are met and social, economic, and moral flourishing occurs?

One of the tensions that runs throughout this dissertation is that, while deaf leaders, interpreters, and hearing individuals who worked closely with deaf people (i.e., NGO workers, disability advocates, and business associates of the interpreting company) often talked about

and acknowledged interdependence between deaf people and interpreters in discourse, they didn't always orient to interdependence in practice. Discourses and practices of interdependence operated alongside and existed in tensions with discourses of independence, dependence, and hierarchy.

For example, deaf leaders in Hà Nội often pointed out multiple ways in which interpreters were dependent on deaf people. They emphasized how deaf people gave hearing people the "gift of sign language," how they gave interpreters access to deaf worlds, how without deaf people there would be no paid work for interpreters at all, and how deaf leaders were engaged in advocacy work to provide legal protections for sign language interpreters. Pointing out these forms of dependence was very important to deaf leaders in Hà Nội; it was a way for them to critique the power dynamics that exist between hearing and deaf people, by flipping these power dynamics on their head.[8] Indeed, deaf leaders used these forms of dependence to argue that HNSL interpreters should be BELOW and BEHIND deaf people. According to deaf leaders in Hà Nội, these signs describe what *should* be the normative relationship between deaf people and interpreters in interpreted interactions—deaf people should be in a position of authority, while the interpreter is in the position of an assistant there to support deaf people's ability to convey their authority.

[8] Some scholars have questioned the need to emphasize interdependence as opposed to dependence. For example, Eva Kittay has characterized relationships between disabled people and caregivers as involving multiple nested dependencies (Kittay, 1999). This pushes back on the framework of interdependence by pointing out that while both disabled and non-disabled people provide each other with support, this might not happen in the form of direct or immediate reciprocation and may not result in "equal" forms of dependence between the two groups.

*Figure 2: HNSL signs for BELOW and BEHIND*

These signs BELOW and BEHIND are names for this achieved *relationship*, for this *diagram* of contrast. They involve two A handshapes, which are canonical depictions for persons or entities in HNSL, with the dominant handshape positioned below or behind the non-dominant hand in signing space. The spatial relationship of the two hands emphasizes a power relationship, with the dominant hand in a position of diminished authority. These signs are closely related to other HNSL signs describing hierarchical power relationships, including BOSS, ORGANIZATIONAL-HIERARCHY, ASSISTANT, etc. Thus, to any HNSL signer, the discourse of BELOW and BEHIND are semantically linked to questions of power. As one can see in the iconicity of the signs BELOW and BEHIND, they appeal to a *hierarchical* notion of power and authority.

As normative models of relationality between deaf people and interpreters, BELOW and BEHIND encompassed a wide range of behaviors. As I describe in Chapter Four: Silent Invisible People, BELOW and BEHIND functioned as metaphors for how interpreters should conduct

themselves in interpreted interactions, working to diminish signs of their visual presence so that hearing non-signers would attribute authorship of the message to the deaf signer rather than the interpreter. But BELOW and BEHIND also functioned as a normative model for how interpreters should behave with regards to political activism. As one interpreter, Kim, described it, interpreters could assist deaf people, but they should not do it from a position of equality, from a position of leading, or even from a position of slightly behind. Rather they should stay significantly behind… and work to move further and further behind in the future (see Figure 3). (I further unpack these normative roles for interpreters with regards to advocacy work in Chapter Five: Interpreters As Self-advocates?).

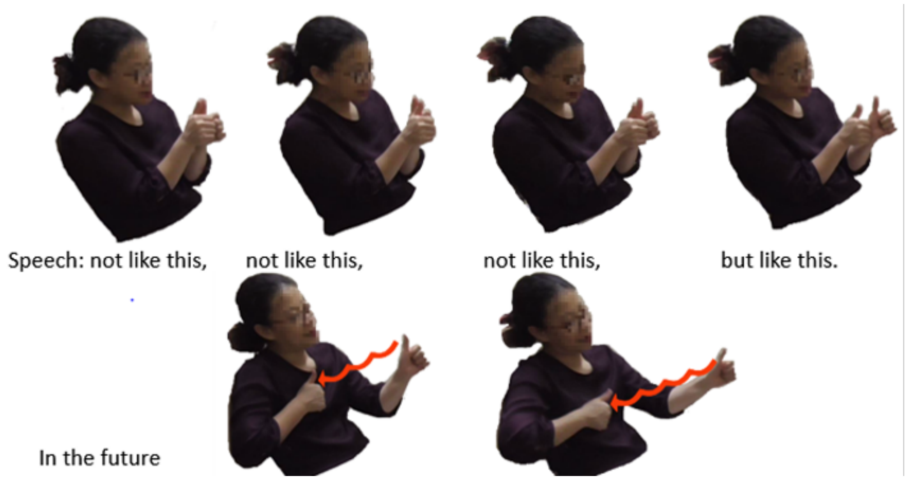


*Figure 3: Normative role of interpreters in deaf advocacy (Interview Kim, 2017, spoken English and HNSL)*[9]

BELOW and BEHIND as normative models of relationality between deaf people and interpreters were hotly debated amongst hearing HNSL interpreters during my fieldwork. When I started researching HNSL interpreting in 2013, all the professional interpreters proudly

[9] In this interview Kim spoke in English, often simultaneously producing signs in HNSL.

professed to adhere to these norms. However, by the time my dissertation research was completed, many interpreters argued that deaf people and interpreters should instead engage with each other as EQUALS. Exactly what was envisioned by a relationship of equality varied from interpreter to interpreter, reflecting the continued unsettled nature of ethical norms in HNSL interpreting and the complicated ambiguous feelings interpreters had about power dynamics between deaf and hearing people. However, it often included being able to engage in advocacy work related to the development of sign language interpreting alongside deaf people and allowing interpreters to inhabit multiple roles within interpreted interactions without hiding these roles from the hearing gaze.

In using the framework of precarious interdependence, I am making the analytical point that deaf people and interpreters mutually depend on each other, regardless of whether this relationship is recognized in terms of interdependence or not. I am not making a normative argument about how deaf people and interpreters *should* relate to each other in Việt Nam as these are ethical questions that can only deaf people and interpreters in Việt Nam can answer. Rather, I am arguing how regardless of whether interdependence is recognized, dynamics of precarious interdependence shape interactions between deaf people and interpreters. In other words, many of the tensions that emerge between interpreters and deaf people are a result of structural conditions, not of deaf peoples' and interpreters' making. Indeed, one of the questions I consider in this dissertation is whether some of the tensions between deaf people and interpreters come from working within systems that are not designed for interdependent parties. I analyze how the practices of below and behind originate form hearing language

ideologies that discount the authority of deaf people, and from models of self-advocacy voicing rooted in norms of *independence*.

**Precarity**

Judith Butler (2009) defines precarity as a "politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (p. ii). Butler's notion of precarity refers to the differential distribution of human vulnerability, paying particular attention to the structural factors and forms of state violence or state inattention that cause such unequal distribution of vulnerability (Butler, 2009). Yet at the same time, Butler also uses precarity to refer to how the affective sense of insecurity "focus[es] on conditions that… appear to be outside of one's control" (Butler, 2009, p. i).

In this dissertation, I loosely follow Butler's sense of precarity in that I focus both on the differential distribution of human vulnerability and the affective sense of instability that stems from this unequal distribution. However, I differ from Butler in that I am not talking about death or physical injury. Rather, I am concerned with more everyday questions of social, political economic, and communicative precarity, which while not resulting directly in injury or death, nevertheless profoundly impact deaf peoples' and interpreters' lives.

Scholars have critiqued precarity for being overly broad, referring to conditions as diverse as economic precarity, risk of violence, and death (Han, 2018). Here I intentionally use precarity for its multiple meanings in order to trace the way these different forms of precarity are connected as they move through interdependent relationships. In particular, I pay attention

to three different forms of precarity in this dissertation: precarious belonging, precarious livelihoods, and precarious voice.

**Precarious Belonging**

The first of these forms of precarity experienced by both deaf people and interpreters in Việt Nam is *precarious belonging*. Tine Gammeltoft (2014) defines belonging as "the ways in which people strive to tie themselves into relationships with others, thereby becoming part of something larger" (p. 9). However, as Gammeloft (2014) points out, belonging is something that must be enacted and achieved, thus "belonging must be understood as an intensely precarious accomplishment, as an uncertain, unstable, and emergent cultural identity" (p. 9). This kind of precarity is a social precarity, a risk of losing social ties to others.

Both deaf people and interpreters in Hà Nội experienced precarious belonging. On one hand, interpreters actively seek out the sense of belonging that comes from being a part of the deaf community, even as this belonging introduces new forms of precarity into their lives, such as the economic precarity that comes from working as an interpreter with no legal protections. On the other hand, interpreting can help to reduce the precarious belonging deaf people experience by increasing opportunities for them to communicate with their families and Vietnamese society at large. In this dissertation, I add to the theorization of precarious belonging by examining how belonging is not something which simply exists in the world, but rather can be intentionally created. I examine how deaf people work to cultivate a sense of belonging for interpreters, drawing them into a community with which they might otherwise not engage.

**Precarious Livelihoods**

The second form of precarity I examine is *precarious livelihoods.* This form of precarity is the most frequently studied, with numerous scholars using the term precarity exclusively to refer to economic forms of vulnerability (see Han, 2018 for a discussion of this literature). Notions of economic precarity are often tied in with concepts of globalization, late-stage capitalism, and new forms of labor such as the gig economy. Economic precarity is not synonymous with poverty, rather it captures the sense of anxiety and loss that comes when opportunities for stable work are uncertain. In *Precarious Japan,* Allison (2013) emphasizes how precarity is deeply entangled with this sense of uncertainty: "Precarity references a particular notion of, and social contract around, work. Work that is secure, work that secures not only income and job but identity and lifestyle, linking capitalism and intimacy in an affective desire for security itself" (p. 5). This sense of uncertainty and lack of stable lifestyle is often perceived as being rooted in the Global North and the loss of a former stable lifestyle. For example, Allison (2013) argues that "precarity marks the loss…of something that only certain countries, at certain historical periods, and certain workers ever had in the first place" (p. 5).

In moving away from a discourse that frames precarity as somehow unique to the Global North and the post-industrialized, neoliberal moment, I suggest that we complicate our understanding of loss. One can feel a loss of stability and security without harkening back to a moment. One can feel a sense of loss simply through comparison with other countries, economies, or careers that provide greater financial stability. For example, I examine how, without financial support from the government, both deaf people and interpreters experience a sense of financial precarity, especially in relation to what they have learned from other deaf

and hearing advocates internationally. Without interpreters to access higher education or communicate with employers, many deaf people in Việt Nam circulate across different jobs, moving to find better working conditions. On one hand, this is a strategy of resilience as deaf people maneuver through inaccessible workplace environments—yet it can also lead to a sense of financial insecurity due to the low paid nature of the work and the frequent shifting between jobs. This sense of financial insecurity is further heightened by the unpredictable nature of needing to pay for interpreters. For interpreters, the sense of precarity comes from choosing a non-traditional life course. While most HNSL interpreters are college educated and easily could have taken a job in the financial, NGO, or other comparatively stable sector, they have made the decision to continue in a career that doesn't provide a stable predictable source of income. There is a sense of loss of a potential future and stable career they could have had, even if they are not harkening back to a specific moment. This sense of precarity is compounded when HNSL interpreters compare their experience to what has ostensibly happened in Kosovo and elsewhere in the world where interpreting is considered more stable. Furthermore, there are also many other forms of (potential) loss which interpreters are trying to manage, such as the fear of losing their belonging to the deaf community (discussed in Chapter Two).

### **Precarious Voice**

The final form of precarity I discuss is *precarious voice*. Voice is a concept layered with rich meanings in countries both inside of and outside of the Global North. In English, the concept of voice is associated with a wide range of idioms: to have a voice, find your inner voice, the voice of a nation, collective voice, to speak truth to power, and to speak up. Part of the anthropology of voice is provincializing Eurocentric notions of voice, and instead, focusing

on the locally defined ideologies associated with voice (Kunreuther, 2014). Vietnamese idioms regarding voice also suggest that there is a connection between speech, subjectivity, collective identity, and political advocacy work—although there are important differences in how voice is imagined to work, particularly in an advocacy context (see Chapter Six: ). In spoken Vietnamese, tiếng nói, or voice, (lit. sound[10]+ speech) is associated with a variety of highly productive metaphors.[11] The first morpheme of the word voice, tiếng, can be combined with morphemes from countries names to produce the name of a language, implying that that language is the "voice" of the people (for example: Tiếng Việt [Vietnamese], Tiếng Pháp [French] and Tiếng Nhật [Japanese]). The concept of voice is also used to invoke a shared, collective, nationalistic identity. For example, Việt Nam's national radio network is called "Voice of Việt Nam," or Đài Tiếng nói Việt Nam (lit: radio+voice+Việt Nam). Similarly, Nhân Dân (lit: citizen), the official newspaper of the Communist Party of Việt Nam, refers to itself as the "tiếng nói của Đảng, Nhà nước và nhân dân Việt Nam," the voice of the Party, the State and the people of Việt Nam.

Self-advocacy is also understood through the metaphor of "nâng cao tiếng nói" (raising voice). The phrase peppers newspaper articles (i.e., "Nâng cao tiếng nói của Việt Nam trong lĩnh vực luật pháp quốc tế" ["raising the voice of Việt Nam in the field of international law"]), and is especially used by NGO's working with minority groups (i.e., Tăng cường sự Tham gia và Tiếng nói của Phụ nữ Dân tộc Thiểu số tại Việt Nam [Enhancing the Participation and Voice of Ethnic Minority Women in Việt Nam]). The phrase nâng cao tiếng nói, when broken down morpheme

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[10] There are two words for sound in Vietnamese: âm thanh and tiêng động. While âm thanh is used mostly to refer to inanimate objects (noise), tiêng động is used more to refer to sound made by animate objects. Tiếng nói combines the words tiêng động + lời nói (speech), specifically referring to the sound produced by spoken language.

[11] The history of the use of voice as a metaphor for political participation and national identity in Việt Nam is a question that deserves future research, particularly given historical changes in political discourse during the French colonial period, early communist era, and the post Đổi Mới era.

by morpheme means elevate + high + sound + speech. This invokes a vertical metaphor of government, where ordinary citizens are on the bottom or beneath, and thus are speaking up to and making their concerns perceivable to the state (or in some cases where Vietnamese officials speak "up" to international agencies). Unlike the English phrase "raising voice," "nâng cao tiếng nói" does not refer to an increase in volume, only the meaning of passing information up a vertical hierarchy of power, so it can receive attention from the proper authorities.

Linguistic anthropologists have argued that sayings like these are not merely idioms, they are in fact *ideologies of voice* that link material embodied practices of speaking with subjectivity and collectively recognized meanings (Weidman, 2014). Specifically, linguistic anthropologists (i.e., Harkness, 2014; Kunreuther, 2014; Agha, 2005; Hill, 1995) have pointed out that voice is often used to refer to both the material textuality of language (i.e., speech) and what Laura Krunther (2014) calls the "*figure of the voice,*" a nexus of metaphors that use voice to "as a sign of intimacy, consciousness...presence…[and] above all, with.. agency" (p. 5). These naturalized associations between speech on the one hand, and subjectivity, intimacy, and collective participation on the other hand, have real world implications for how individuals are (not) recognized as subjects, how they can('t) participate in genres of discourse, and how they are (not) heard by the state.

Paying attention to precarity of voice means attending to how ideologies of voice shape whose communicative practices are more or less likely to be recognized as voices. Voice becomes precarious when the ability to be recognized as having communicative personhood or participate in political discourse is constantly being called into question. By *communicative personhood*, I mean the way in which one's communicative efforts are taken as indexing the

capacity and capability sufficient to be considered a subject and have authority. Communicative personhood is what is achieved when the *material voice* and the *figure of the voice* align in such a way that one is perceived as "having a voice." I use the concept of communicative personhood to call attention to the ableist nature of the way specific forms of normative communication are associated with a person's subjectivity. Deaf signing people in Việt Nam experience a very particular form of precarity that stems from the fact that speech, as opposed to other linguistic modalities like sign, is recognized as the material voice par excellence, and is ideologically connected to questions of personhood, authority, and capacity. Interpreting, through rendering sign language into speech, can help hearing people recognize the connection between deaf people's material (signed) voices and the figure of voice, thus restoring their communicative personhood.

Deaf voices are also rendered precarious through ideologies that the material voice and figure of voice should all be manifested in one singular person, not shared across participants as it is in interpreted interactions. Linguistic anthropologists have pointed out that there are many complex ways that an individual can related to their own utterances. Following Goffman (1981), these are often described as being broken into three different role partials (or "footings") that a speaker/signer may have to a particular utterance: author, animator, and principal. The animator is the one physically producing the utterance, the author is the one who composed a particular utterance, and the principal is the person or group whose position is staked out by the utterance. It is possible for an individual to occupy any combination of these different role partials at the same time (Goffman, 1981). Interpreting poses a problem for recognizing deaf voices, because hearing people generally assume that animator/author/principal, material

voice, and figure of voice should all be manifested in one singular person, not shared across participants as it is in interpreted interactions.

In paying attention to the dynamics of interdependence, I examine how precarity of voice moves through the interdependent relationship between deaf people and interpreters, shaping interpreting practices, and normative interpreting ethics withing Việt Nam. Additionally, I examine how interpreting, through rendering sign language into speech, can provide deaf people with a voice and subsequently help hearing people see their personhood. Hearing people may be inclined to see this personhood as stemming from the interpreter who speaks rather than the deaf person who signs. To counteract this tendency, interpreters strategically manipulate existing ideologies of voice in Việt Nam, working to dimmish signs of their communicative personhood so that deaf people's communicative personhood can be recognized. While this can be a successful tactic for reducing the precarity of deaf people's voices, it also constrains possibilities for interpreters to voice their own needs.

## Why Hà Nội, Việt Nam?

Studying the relationship between deaf people and interpreters in Hà Nội, Việt Nam is important because it raises questions about what interpreting looks like outside of legal frameworks, state funding, national accreditation bodies, and professional codes of ethics. While this dissertation is focused on Hà Nội, it has broader stakes beyond Việt Nam as well. Most Interpreting studies research has focused on countries in the so called "Global North," where professional interpreting programs, accreditation bodies, and legislation guaranteeing deaf people the right to use interpreters are well established. However, far more countries have no official state recognition for interpreters (*WASLI Country Reports*, 2015). In 2012, a

report conducted by the European Union of the Deaf found that on average EU Member states have an interpreter to deaf sign language user ratio of 1:200 (Wheatley & Pabsch, 2012). In contrast, many countries in the Global South reported having no sign language interpreters or interpreters in the single digits (*WASLI Country Reports*, 2015). Hà Nội's interpreter to deaf individual ratio of 1:536 is much more in line with most countries in the world. It is also important to note that outside of Việt Nam's two major metropolitan centres, Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City, ratios of interpreters would be even worse. Even within EU states, access to sign language interpreters varies widely. While Scandinavian countries have high ratios (e.g., Finland 1:8, Denmark 1:13, Sweden 1:13), countries in Southern and Eastern Europe have lagged significantly behind (e.g., Romania 1:745) (Wheatley & Pabsch, 2012, p. 19). In the largest survey of National Deaf Associations and National Interpreting Associations, including 112 countries, it was found that, in most countries "there are insufficient sign language interpreters to meet the access needs of deaf people" and "the majority of countries did not have a certification or accreditation system for sign language interpreters'' (Allen, 2020, p. 8).

In focusing on interpreting in Hà Nội , Việt Nam, this dissertation emphasizes that questions of interpreting ethics, the relationship between deaf people and interpreters, and the concept of deaf voice cannot be understood as universally as has been the tendency in the Interpreting studies literature, international development programs, and in deaf leaders imaginations such as the Kosovo story with which I started this introduction. Rather, they are shaped by the local context–although I note and examine how activists appeal to universal discourses of deaf and disability rights in making claims on the state (see "Chapter Five: Interpreters As Self-advocates?" for a discussion of local adoption of self-advocacy norms).

More specifically, I examine how notions of interdependence between deaf people and interpreters are shaped by normative understandings of what it means to belong to families and kin networks in Việt Nam. I look at how deaf leaders draw on discourses of filial piety and what Merav Shohet (2021) calls "asymmetrical reciprocity" when thinking about what deaf people and interpreters owe each other. Indeed, precarious interdependence can also be seen as precarious reciprocity. Similarly, I consider how the forms of precarity experienced by interpreters are shaped by their normative life course trajectories, gender norms, and migration patterns in Hà Nội.

I also examine how interpreting in Việt Nam is shaped by local language ideologies and ideologies of voice. Kroskrity (2004) defines language ideologies as "ubiquitous sets of diverse beliefs, however implicit or explicit they may be, used by speakers of all types as models for constructing linguistic evaluations and engaging in communicative activity" (p. 497). Language ideologies are often multiple and competing, as they represent the interests of specific social groups. There is extensive research on language ideologies in Việt Nam. For example, Tran (2022) has examined how Vietnamese, the spoken language of the Kinh or Viet people, is the only national language in Việt Nam despite the fact that there are 54 officially recognized ethnic groups in Việt Nam all with their own distinct languages. Similarly, spoken Vietnamese "has been closely associated with the course of national liberation and discursively constructed as a symbol of patriotism and cultural identity since the early years of new nation-state building" (Tran, 2022, p. 496). Audrey Cooper (2017) has analyzed how these ideologies, combined with a history of French priests introducing manual (sign based) methods to deaf education in Việt Nam, resulted in VSLs being labeled as foreign colonial artifacts. This belief led to the adoption

of oral (speech and lip reading) based methods being used in Việt Nam, and the proliferation of still more ideologies about deaf signing people. Cooper (2014) found that Hồ Chí Minh City Sign Language (HCMC SL) was prohibited and resulted in disciplining while speech was actively rewarded in Hồ Chí Minh City oral schools (p. 323). School principals referred to HCMC SL as ngược (opposite/backwards) because its word order doesn't correspond to Vietnamese and to deaf students as người điếc ngược (lit. person + Deaf +opposite/backwards) (Cooper, 2014, p. 323). Moreover, poor student achievement in Vietnamese oral schools generally has been attributed to perceived cognitive deficit rather than poor instructional methods or limited linguistic access (Woodward et al., 2004).

I build on this literature by exploring an ideology prevalent in my own ethnographic materials that equates having a voice (speaking) with communicative personhood and authority (see Chapter Four). As deaf signers do not speak, their authority and their very personhood is constantly being called into question. I show these ideologies by examining how hearing people react to deaf signers when they don't speak, as well as when they use interpreters.

Similarly, I examine how norms of political voicing constrain the ability of deaf people and interpreters to communicate with the state. Specifically, I examine how the international trend of self-advocacy is taken up and implemented locally in Việt Nam in such a way that interpreters are normatively excluded from advocacy efforts. I also look at how the socialist political system of Việt Nam shapes how citizens' voices are "heard" by the Vietnamese state. In particular, I will examine how deaf leaders try to navigate a context where "doing politics" is illegal and advocates must seek to be "embedded" in the state using forms of voicing that are at odds with deaf norms of communication (Hannah, 2007; Vu, 2019; Wells-Dang, 2014).

In this dissertation, I specifically focus on interpreting in Hà Nội, as opposed to across the entire country for several reasons. The first is that Việt Nam has multiple varieties of sign language (Woodward, 2013), which has meant that sign language interpreters in Việt Nam must work regionally. Việt Nam's first deaf school, Trường Câm-Điếc Lái Thiêu (est. 1886), which used manual (signed) methods, was established just 20 km north of today's present day Hồ Chí Minh City (HCMC) . Although Lái Thiêu was in the far south of Việt Nam, some deaf pupils from Hà Nội did attend the school—however when the country was partitioned in 1954, these pupils were sent back to Hà Nội (former pupil of La Tieu from Hà Nội, personal communication, 2017). This partitioning of the country, along with the subsequent establishment of local oral schools for the deaf (rather than large national deaf institutes), likely shaped the development of multiple varieties of sign language in Việt Nam. While a small elite group of deaf individuals are relatively fluent in multiple VSLs, for many deaf leaders from Hà Nội, let alone deaf people from Hà Nội not in leadership positions, HCMS SL is difficult to follow. When deaf leaders from multiple parts of Việt Nam attend training or conferences across the country, deaf leaders often request one interpreter from Hà Nội and one from HCMC to ensure access for all participants. Thus, sign language interpreting in Việt Nam has largely developed on a regional basis. There are separate interpreting associations for Hà Nội and HCMC; the interpreting business, SC Deaf, which I follow in this dissertation, only operated in Northern and Central Việt Nam. While video technology could have enabled them to work with a larger clientele base, the HNSL interpreters recognized that they were not qualified to work with HCMC SL users.

Second, there are strong differences in how advocacy work is practiced in HCMC and Hà Nội. As Hà Nội is the seat of the national government, it is imagined as a space in which one can

exert more influence on the government, but is also a space where rules and regulations are more tightly and university applied (Hannah, 2007, p. 124). This imagination of Hà Nội as the place where one can influence the government has led to Hà Nội having the largest number of local Vietnamese-run non-governmental organizations (VNGOs) in the country (Hannah, 2007, p. 142). This translates into deaf politics wherein deaf leaders in Hà Nội view themselves as being responsible for advocating on behalf of all Vietnamese people because they are "closest to the government"—although this is fiercely contested by deaf leaders from other parts of the country. However, as Hà Nội is a space where rules and regulations are more tightly and university applied, it may mean that some of the voicing norms encountered by deaf leaders in Hà Nội may be stricter than other parts of the country.

**Interpreting Studies Perspectives**

Most of the research on interpreting comes from Interpreting studies, an interdisciplinary field where many (though not all) researchers are also licensed professional interpreters. Interpreting is distinguished from translation studies in that it focuses on acts of linguistic translation that occur within live interaction, as opposed to the translation of written or recorded texts that occurs outside of the interactional context. Two of the primary tenants of Interpreting studies are the recognition that interpreters shape interpreted interactions (Davidson, 2000; Gavioli & Baraldi, 2012; Roy, 1992; Wadensjö, 1998) and that interpreters are multiply positioned (i.e., relate to participants as co-workers, allies, children, friends) (Orellana, 2009). This research has helped move away from the idea that interpreters can or should be neutral mediators by recognizing that interpreters always shape interactions in one way or another.

Sign language interpreting studies, while paralleling and drawing from Interpreting studies, has formed its own subfield focused specifically on interpretation between deaf signers and hearing non-signers. In sign language interpreting studies, the recognition that interpreters are not neutral mediators but shape interpreted interactions, along with concerns over power dynamics between deaf and hearing people, have fueled debates over how interpreters should relate to deaf people (Cokely, 2005; Roy & Napier, 2015). These debates have been largely centered in the Global North, and have sought to impose ethical norms by creating models of interpreters' role (e.g., "helper," "conduit," "bi-cultural, bi-modal mediator" and "ally") and codes of ethics (Baker-Shenk, 1986; Janzen & Korpiniski, 2005; McIntire & Sanderson, 1995). This literature stresses that interpreters should act as bilingual, bicultural allies who acknowledge their active role in facilitating interaction (Roy, 1992; Wadensjö, 1998), but allow deaf people to take the lead (Witter-Merithew, 1999). This literature engages in a sort of boundary work, that attempts to prescribe and reify boundaries between deaf people and hearing interpreters, creating normative roles which the different parties should inhabit. More recently, Interpreting studies has attempted to move away from such strict definitions of role through developing more abstract principles in codes of ethics through which interpreters can engage in ethical reasoning themselves (Dean & Pollard, 2018). Nevertheless, this still takes on a normative prescriptive nature to how interpreting should occur.

The explicit emphasis on models of interpreters roles and codes of ethics stems from a recognition that, as hearing individuals, interpreters can (unintentionally) perpetuate deaf oppression (Baker-Shenk, 1986; Cokely, 2005; Robinson et al., 2020; Witter-Merithew, 1999). For example, Witter-Merithew (1999) argues that interpreters can take on a paternalistic

attitude towards deaf people, replicating patterns of oppression deaf people encounter in broader society. Similarly, Robinson et al. (2020) argue that interpreters can engage in pathological posturing, using the expertise as interpreters to speak over deaf people's wishes. This literature has emphasized how interpreters can demand gratitude (emotional labor) from deaf people, value their own expertise over deaf people, and even internalize negative beliefs about deaf people and signed languages. This is particularly concerning given that interpreters can act as gatekeepers for access to services (Davidson, 2000), control turns at talk (Roy, 1992) and shape hearing people perceptions of deaf people (Feyne, 2015, 2017).

Such dynamics certainly can and do happen in Việt Nam. For example, one deaf person told me a story about having a teacher of the deaf come interpret for his deaf friend who was arrested by traffic cops. Instead of interpreting what the deaf person was saying, the interpreter spent a long time smoking and talking privately with the cop because he believed that the deaf person was guilty—deaf people had largely stopped using this interpreter by 2010 for exactly this reason (personal communication, 2013). Similarly, a disabled NGO worker who frequently used sign language interpreters when conducting training with deaf leaders talked about how some interpreters would insist that some of the content material was "impossible" for deaf leaders to understand and therefore refused to interpret it (personal communication, 2019). Even highly skilled well-respected interpreters were not free from these dynamics. When reviewing a film of a political speech by An with a "professional" HNSL interpreter, this interpreter admitted that her prejudice about An's low education level (he only had a 5th grade education) had colored her interpretation, making him sound less intelligent than he actually was.

Recognizing that there are power differentials that exist and that hearing sign language interpreters have sensory and linguistic access that deaf people do not have is an important part of understanding the relationship between deaf people and interpreters. Acknowledging the precarious interdependence between deaf people and interpreters does not deny or erase such power dynamics. Rather, paying attention to precarious interdependence adds additional layers to our understanding of power dynamics between deaf people and interpreters, and helps us better understand the friction that can emerge between these groups. Paying attention to precarious interdependence also helps examine the relationship between deaf people and hearing sign language interpreters in ways that are less black and white, more processual, and leaves more room to account for the messiness that occurs when deaf people and interpreters navigate inaccessible systems *together*.

This dissertation shares many of the fundamental themes and concerns that occur in Interpreting studies: questions around ethics, power dynamics, and boundaries between deaf and hearing worlds. However, I depart with the tradition of sign language interpreting studies in two ways. First, I move away from the prescriptive lens adopted in much Interpreting studies literature, and instead, examine how interpreting is currently practiced in Việt Nam. This approach aligns with the linguistic anthropology tradition of "everyday ethics," which studies ethics, not in how they are idealized, but how they are constituted in practice and interaction (Keane, 2010; Venkat, 2017). The strength of everyday ethics is that it can reveal additional dynamics of power by discovering how individuals make decisions in the moment and navigate tensions.

Second, this dissertation builds on a small, but growing literature that thinks about sign language interpreting outside of the Global North. This literature emphasizes that interpreting is not always thought of through the normative lenses of roles and codes of ethics. For example, Mara Green (2015) has analyzed the occurrence of *informal interpreting*, where "the individuals providing…translations are not formally designated interpreters but instead are present in some other capacity, e.g., as board members, organizers, delegates, and/or audience members." In encounters between deaf people from different countries, practices of informal interpreting, as opposed to hiring certified deaf interpreters, can help maintain the sense that there is direct communication between deaf people, contributing to feelings of deaf sameness and solidarity. Similarly, Marie and Friedner (2021) have analyzed how interpreters in India and Việt Nam may inhabit multiple roles (i.e., teacher, social worker, advocate, mother, business woman, editor, networker) in order to receive recognition both from deaf people and from broader society. This literature shows that, when we broaden the geographical scope of Interpreting studies, we can discover other ways of defining, categorizing, and criticizing interpreters, and gain a more nuanced understanding of the power dynamics between deaf people and interpreters.

### Studying Interpreters as Deaf Studies

One of the questions I was often asked in the process of conducting this dissertation is: "Why study sign language interpreters? Why not focus more on deaf politics and deaf lives?" Variations of this question came from deaf people and interpreters, both from the United States and Việt Nam, from those within academia and from those outside of it. Behind these questions is often a genuine fear that in focusing on the interpreter as the object of research,

deaf people's stories are silenced, that their experiences fade into the background. These concerns stem from experiences of scarcity and oppression that have marginalized deaf people both in political and academic arenas. Within the academic context, there is very real concern that applied fields such as interpreting, deaf education, and audiology often receive funding at the expense of deaf studies. As Kusters et al. (2017) have noted, "within the current neoliberal market-driven climate, deaf studies [in the sense of focusing on deaf people's everyday lives, and their communities] is given only very little space, time, and funding to develop (p. 5). Similarly, deaf leaders in Việt Nam pointed out that news reporters often were more interested on reporting on interpreters' stories than deaf people's stories, perhaps because interpreters who spoke Vietnamese were easier to interview.[12]

I recognize these power dynamics as real and valid, both in academia and in activism work. In fact, as I write this dissertation, I am one of four faculty members at the National Institute of the Deaf (NTID) who specifically teaches deaf studies courses, while NTID has an entire department devoted to Interpreting studies. At the same time, I argue that insistence that deaf studies focus exclusively on deaf people come from a model of voicing that views deaf people and interpreters as independent entities competing for scarce resources. Privileging the voices of deaf individuals attempts to be liberatory in focusing exclusively on deaf people who have been traditionally marginalized and excluded as subjects of research. Still, this move simply reproduces hierarchies while inverting them, sidelining interpreters as subjects of research to focus on deaf people. In doing so, it attempts to funnel the interdependent voices

[12] A similar phenomena happens in the United States and Britain where interpreters draw the public eye- particularly when interpreters are used for public service announcements (Lynn Hou & Octavian Robinson, 2020)

of deaf people and interpreters through an independent model of voicing. This is the same sort of voicing model that pits deaf leaders and interpreters against each other in politics in Việt Nam, which I analyze and break down in Chapter Four (see this chapter for a detailed analysis of this voicing model). Instead, drawing from Nishida's (2022) concept of "messy dependencies," I argue that we need to base our academic scholarship on a model of voicing that makes room for messy interdependent voices, for voices that are heterogeneous, discordant, and intertwined. The goal of such a methodology is not to flatten the differences between the perspectives of deaf people and interpreters, but rather to recognize the way in which ones voice already speaks for the other, and by following the threads between voices, gain a deeper more nuanced understanding of power dynamics. Doing so can help contribute both to the fields of deaf studies and Interpreting studies.

As we saw above in the discussion of interpreting literature, examining the relationship between sign language interpreters and deaf people helps illuminate the boundary-making work that constitutes deaf sociality and deaf communities. One of the foundational concepts in deaf studies was the concept of deaf culture, first articulated by Carol Padden (1980) and later popularized in the seminal book *Deaf in America, Voices from a Culture* (1988), which was co-authored with Tom Humphries. More recently, deaf studies has destabilized notions of what it means to be deaf, moving away from static notions of culture to an examination of the "Many Ways to be Deaf," a focus on the heterogeneity within deaf communities (Friedner & Kusters, 2015b; Kusters et al., 2017; Monaghan, 2003). Tom Humphries (2008), himself, has called for scholars to stop examining deaf culture as a static thing, and instead, examine the work that the concept of deaf culture. An important part of denaturalizing deaf communities is to explore the

relationship of hearing people to deaf communities and the ways hearing people are not always outsiders within deaf worlds. What are the many ways to be hearing, and how does one become an interpreter, a very particular kind of hearing person, vis-à-vis deaf people? *What are the many ways to be an interpreter?*

The question of the role(s) of hearing people within deaf communities is simultaneously highly controversial and understudied. Early theoretical work on deaf-hearing relationships attempted to formally define the boundaries of deaf communities and the ways in which hearing people can (conditionally) have membership to deaf communities (see [Napier, 2002] for a discussion of this litterature). As Napier (2002) notes, there is general acceptance in these early theories of "the inevitability that hearing people will be members of the community—up to a point" (p. 142). Baker-Shenk and Cokely (1991) proposed four spheres through which people can belong to the deaf community: audiological status, political support, social contact and linguistic fluency. Under this theory, hearing people are excluded from audiological status, but all other domains permit a form of membership for hearing people. While these early theories are based on static, homogeneous notions of "deaf community" and "deaf culture," they nevertheless emphasize the variety of forms of connection and involvement hearing people can have in deaf people's lives.

More recently, there has been qualitative research that has started to empirically examine the ways hearing people can engage in deaf sociality. One of the first works on this front is by Preston (1995), who analyzed the role of hearing children of deaf adults (CODAs) in the United States. Preston (1995) argued the CODAs inhabit a liminal space between deaf and hearing culture, often navigating and brokering between the two. While CODAs are presumably

some of the people most highly embedded in deaf communities, Preston's (1995) detailed research highlights both the variety of ways CODAs relate to deaf communities and the tensions that crop up due to their hearing status. Other research has focused on what Shifra Kisch (2008) refers to as "shared signing communities," communities with high rates of genetic deafness where both deaf and hearing people use sign language. The most famous of these cases is that of Martha's Vineyard, which Nora Groce (1985) argues had such a high rate of deaf people, that everyone "spoke sign," eliminating social differences between deaf and hearing people. Groce's work, while groundbreaking, was based on oral history conducted after most deaf people had died or left the island, which likely contributed to the overly positive portrayal of such communities. More recent anthropological work in shared signing communities has demonstrated that they are not necessarily utopias for deaf people; often they are characterized by asymmetries in communicative knowledge and access, inequalities in marriage prospects for deaf and hearing people, and deaf people often maintain a sense of shared comradery with other deaf people (Kusters, 2010). Kisch (2008) even argues that communicative asymmetries are crucial for maintaining deaf people's status, as she shows how in Al-Sayyid deaf people's unique access to education and literacy gives them value as they can perform translation work for hearing people. Such works often highlight issues of tension and friction between deaf and hearing people, even as they explore the ways hearing people can belong.

Examining the process of becoming an interpreter and belonging to the deaf community in Hà Nội, Việt Nam expands this literature in two distinct ways. First, it examines the way hearing people with no prior connection with deaf people can come to embrace deaf

sociality. Second, it focuses on sign language interpreters, whose work positions them in very particular ways vis-à-vis deaf people. As previously mentioned, the vast majority of HNSL interpreters start out with no prior relationship with deaf people. This pattern differs significantly from the existing literature on the development of sign language interpreting, which is focused on the United States and Europe where the first interpreters generally have pre-existing relationships with deaf people, either through kinship (CODAs being some of the most common early interpreters) or through professional ties (Stone, 2012).

The reasons most interpreters in Hà Nội have no prior relationship to the deaf community are complicated. Interviews with deaf people in Hà Nội conducted during my Fulbright research in 2013-2014 suggest that the relative lack of CODA interpreters has to do with complex intergenerational family dynamics that prevent CODAs becoming fluent in HNSL. Many hearing parents encourage their deaf children to marry hearing people, diluting the chance that CODAs will be raised signing. When there are two deaf parents, hearing grandparents often insist on raising the CODAs out of fear that the children will not learn spoken Vietnamese. Even when deaf adults do raise their own children, there can be complicated dynamics that prevent these children becoming highly fluent in HNSL or treating their deaf parents with respect. For example, several parents reported being nervous that their children would not learn spoken Vietnamese properly if they signed with them. Other deaf individuals reported that their children didn’t treat them with respect due to their limited educational background. Similarly, deaf interpreter trainers in Hà Nội reported that they avoided recruiting teachers of the deaf to become interpreters due to the prevalence of oralism in Vietnamese deaf schools and many teachers' negative beliefs about sign language (see

[Cooper, 2017] for a discussion of such ideologies). Thus, Việt Nam offers a very different picture of how sign language interpreting can develop and how hearing people can relate to deaf people.

The question of how hearing people with no prior relationship to the deaf community relate to deaf people is of increasing importance globally. As interpreting has professionalized in the Global North, there has been an influx of interpreters with no prior relationship to the deaf people (Cokely, 2005). This has led to fraught relationships between deaf people and interpreters, as deaf people have felt that professional interpreters lack a connection to them (discussed in the United States as a lack of DEAF-HEART) (Cokely, 2005; Colonomos, 2013). Such tensions have carried over into the way interpreting students try to narrate their own positionality and connection to the deaf community. Some interpreting students in the United States have tried to reframe their positionality as NERDA, or "not-even related to deaf adults," emphasizing their *choice* to work with deaf people (Friedner, 2018). Friedner (2018) argues that the NERDA/CODA discourse is a way for interpreting students to "negotiate the complexities of the varying values attached to (idealized forms of) kinship along with the impossibility of becoming a member of the deaf community." While examining such discourses is an important starting point for understanding the tensions in deaf hearing relationships, it leaves many questions unanswered—why do hearing people choose to relate to deaf people? What does the process of trying to belong to deaf society actually look like, and how do hearing people transform in the process? Moreover, while Frieder (2018) examines the impossibility of belonging, I examine the sense that HNSL interpreters have that they can belong to deaf worlds, albeit in a highly tenuous manner.

## History of Deaf Education, Deaf Advocacy and Sign Language Interpreting in Hà Nội

Việt Nam's history of deaf education and deaf political organizing has heavily shaped the development of sign language interpreting in the country. Việt Nam's first deaf school, Trường Câm-Điếc Lái Thiêu (est. 1886), used manual methods. The French priest who founded the school sent Nguyen Van Trung, a young deaf student, to Rodez, France where he studied deaf pedagogical methods (Cooper, 2017). Nguyen taught at the school using what was likely a combination of French and local signs. In the post-war period, the fact that this deaf school was established by French priests, combined with nation building efforts that valorized spoken and written Vietnamese, caused sign languages to become associated with colonialism and backwardness (Cooper, 2017, p. 20). During the early Đổi Mới era (1986-1988), when Việt Nam nationalized the deaf education system, governmental officials attempted to modernize away from this colonial past. They worked closely with a Dutch aid group called Komitee Twee to introduce oral education,[13] which used speech and lip-reading, to all of Việt Nam's deaf schools. Since then, oralism has been used in all Vietnamese deaf elementary schools (Woodward et al., 2004, pp. 235, 253).

As a reaction to this history of education, deaf social organizing has centered around recuperating the use of sign language. As Cooper (2017) has noted, the primary political project of deaf community leaders across Việt Nam is creating a society where sign language is a valid basis for "social inclusion" (p. 327). Vietnamese deaf leaders imagine a world where sign language can be used in any public venue (e.g., courts, hospitals, coffee shops), allowing deaf

[13] Note that this is a specific formulation of oralist ideology and that I personally am not sure about the existence of a universal "oralism".

signers full access to society. It was for these purposes that HAD, the first and longest running deaf association in the country, was founded in 2000 with funding from Pearl S. Buck International. Yet, as Cooper (2014) notes, social inclusion is more of an imagined future than a current reality (p. 327). Not only do most hearing people not know VSLs, many deaf people also do not have access to these sign languages.

As previously discussed, the Vietnamese state provides no infrastructural support for sign language interpreting. There are no policies that specify when and how interpreters must be provided, state recognized training programs for interpreters, licenses for interpreters, or state-mandated systems for compensating interpreters for their work. Without interpreters, deaf leaders cannot engage in advocacy work to the hearing public, and without laws protecting interpreters, interpreters' livelihoods are left unstable. The current stakes of deaf activism in Việt Nam not only affects advocacy for laws that benefit deaf people (e.g., education in VSL's, laws prohibiting employment discrimination, etc.), but their access to interpreters as well.

As interpreters are necessary for deaf signing people to engage in advocacy work with hearing non-signers, the fields of interpreting and deaf advocacy in Hà Nội have grown alongside each other. To meet legally in Việt Nam, all NGOs need to be registered with the government. HAD was first established by a handful of comparatively well-educated deaf people.[14] In the early days of deaf advocacy efforts in Việt Nam, the majority of the work was conducted without interpreters. We recall Đức, one of the founders and first presidents of HAD. He was highly literate as he had been privately tutored by his family, and would write

[14] It was established as a sub association (chi hoi) of a hearing run organization.

letters and speeches on behalf of HAD. In an interview in 2019, Đức recalled, that in the early days of the deaf association, there were no skilled interpreters, only teachers of the deaf who claimed to be interpreters. These individuals were insufficient to accurately translate his speeches into spoken Vietnamese. Therefore, whenever he gave a speech, Đức would write out the speech, giving one copy to the "interpreter" and keeping one copy for himself. He would then translate the speech into HNSL for the deaf audience, while the "interpreter" read the speech out loud for the hearing audience. In 2005, when planning meetings got under way to form DP Hà Nội, Deaf leaders felt that being affiliated with a disabled organization would be a better fit than their previous affiliation. To better represent themselves in the negotiations, as noted earlier, deaf leaders decided to invite Yen, the younger sister of one of the board members of HAD, who was a highly skilled signer. Yen had no formal training in interpreting, but regardless, was brought in to replace the teachers of the deaf who the deaf leaders could not understand.

Deaf advocacy was also the initial impetus for setting up HNSL classes for hearing people. As previously mentioned, the first iteration of "the Sign Language Club" was founded in 2006 to help disabled leaders from DP Hà Nội communicate with deaf leaders for the purposes of their shared advocacy work. The hope was, with the class, disability activists and deaf leaders would be able to communicate directly without interpreters. However, by 2010, there was not a single disabled person taking the class. When An and Nam took over the Sign Language Club in 2008, they embraced the new population of undergraduate students,[15] many of whom were

[15] I do not have details on regarding the colleges or majors from which interpreting students typically came. The deaf teachers generally did not pay too much attention to this background, and simply commented that most students taking the courses were college students.

recent aspirational migrants to the city. An and Nam began selecting from these students to train them as interpreters. In 2010, they rebranded the club as the Sign Language Training Center (the Center), and five years later, registered it with the government as an official training center. While there are occasional classes organized for parents of deaf children or teachers of the deaf (often with teachers from the Center), it is currently the only organization consistently offering paid courses in HNSL for hearing individuals. Since 2010, all interpreters recognized by deaf leaders in Hà Nội have received training at the Center.

The first program that provided training for interpreters was the IDEO Project, run by World Concern Việt Nam,[16] which sought to improve preschool-aged deaf education by providing families with deaf signing mentors and sign language interpreters in addition to the hearing teachers already working in deaf education. As part of the IDEO Project, two cohorts of approximately 30 bilingual hearing individuals from across four different regions of Việt Nam were trained as communication facilitators/interpreters (World Bank, 2015). However, a sizable portion of the individuals who were trained as interpreters from Hà Nội had ceased working as such by 2018, when the primary research for this dissertation was conducted. Although I was unable to track down and interview these former interpreters, my suspicion is that the lack of paid work was one reason they quit. The second program that provided trainings for HNSL interpreters was funded by a grant from a Scandinavian deaf association and brought in trainers from the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at the Rochester Institute of Technology[17] for

[16] World Concern Việt Nam is the local branch of an international non-profit organization based out of the United States, which defines itself as a "Christian relief and development organization working in the poorest, most remote places serving the forgotten" (*World Concern*, 2023)

[17] These trainings were conducted before I became a faculty member at the Rochester Institute of Technology.

two 10-day long trainings in 2018 and 2019. These trainings served as sites where concepts from deaf studies, sign language interpreting studies, and deaf activism circulated, and were actively debated, taken up, and modified by deaf leaders and interpreters in Hà Nội.

**Field Sites and Methodology**

This data in this dissertation is primarily based on ten months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Hà Nội, Việt Nam between November 2018 and August 2019. In addition to this fieldwork, I draw on over a decade long relationship with deaf leaders and interpreters in Hà Nội that began when I was an undergraduate study abroad student in 2010. I had already completed a minor in ASL language studies at the University of California San Diego, so upon arriving in Hà Nội, choose to enroll in the newly formed HNSL classes and volunteer with HAD. I spent five months taking classes at what would become the Center, alongside individuals who would become some of Hà Nội's first professional sign language interpreters. I returned to Việt Nam in 2013 on an IIE Fulbright scholarship, which gave me time to further immerse myself in Hà Nội's deaf signing spaces, continue HNSL classes, and conduct an interview-based research study on HNSL interpreting. I interviewed 23 deaf people about their life histories and communicative practices, and 6 interpreters about their reasons for entering the field and interactions with deaf people. I returned to Hà Nội for two months each in the summers of 2015 and 2017 for my master's research and Vietnamese language training, respectively. I have drawn on interviews and field notes across this long engagement with deaf people and interpreters in Hà Nội in order to give a fuller, more robust picture of how HNSL interpreting has changed over time.

Field sites included in this dissertation fall into four primary categories. First, places where HNSL interpreters were recruited and trained. This included the Center, the Sign Language Club, two 10-day trainings taught by foreign interpret trainers, an HNSL interpreting class taught by professional HNSL interpreters and deaf teachers, and informally hanging out with deaf teachers and novice interpreters after class. Second, interpreted interactions, including business meetings, deaf advocacy meetings, workshops, conferences, festivals, workplace scenarios, and video relay phone-calls. Unfortunately, I was unable to observe interpreting in police interactions due to not having the necessary permissions from authorities. I was also unable to observe interpreting in hospitals or in deaf people's homes when they had important matters to discuss with hearing family members (e.g., regarding marriage, divorce, property inheritance, or childrearing decisions) as these events were typically arranged last minute, and my physical injuries prevented me from attending (see Positionality for a discussion of these injuries). The third category regards deaf advocacy work, including HAD board meetings, general body meetings, leadership trainings for HAD leaders, a hội thảo (workshop) where HAD meet with an NGO activist and state officials, interviews with news reporters, meetings with the United Nations Development Program, and various awareness raising events hosted by deaf leaders, targeted at the general hearing Vietnamese public. The fourth category regards interpreter's workspaces, including SC Deaf, business meetings and workshops attended by members of SC Deaf, and meetings of HASLI. I recorded 28 different interpreted events during my fieldwork (events often included multiple interpreted interactions), a small subsection of which were selected for multimodal linguistic transcriptions. For the transcripts presented in this dissertation, spoken Vietnamese was transcribed and

translated by professional English-Vietnamese interpreters, while I transcribed and translated all HNSL, having consulted with deaf leaders and interpreters involved in the interactions to ensure accuracy.

### Positionality

One of the most important parts of my positionality with regards to this research is that I am hearing. Being a hearing researcher working with deaf interlocutors means working across differences in sensory ability, educational access, power, and privilege. In addressing the asymmetries between myself and my research participants, I sought community approval for all methodologies in addition to traditional vetting by the IRB. All methodologies involved in this study were presented to the board of HAD before I started my fieldwork, where they were extensively debated, modified, and in some cases, vetoed. One of the main stipulations made by deaf leaders was that, like hearing interpreters, I conform to the ethics of BELOW and BEHIND. This meant, when attending HAD board meetings, I physically sat behind deaf leaders to mark my status as an outsider. It meant not participating in advocacy work unless explicitly asked by deaf people and never participating in advocacy work in front of a hearing non-signer's gaze.

Deaf scholars have noted that discourses of deaf-same, combined with linguistic capital and extensive experience translanguaging, can give deaf researchers increased access to deaf communities and open up opportunities for insights into deaf ontologies, even though deaf academics often come from positions of relative privilege compared to their interlocutors (Kusters et al., 2017; Sutherland & Rogers, 2014). Conversely, as a hearing signing researcher, I straddled some of the same fuzzy boundaries that sign language interpreters do—my belonging

within deaf spaces always tenuous and in question. This tenuous belonging was particularly called into question given the subject of my research and the deep tensions between deaf Hanoians and hearing HNSL interpreters. There was often concern that, as a hearing person, I might favor interpreters, or conduct research in a way that deaf people could not monitor due to access issues. While I sought to be as transparent as possible about my research practices, making sure that I always signed while in the presence of deaf people so that they had the ability to monitor what I was saying, there were still tensions. For example, during a training in January 2018 with foreign interpreter trainers, deaf leaders and interpreters were separated into focus groups to provide candid feedback regarding sign language interpreting. I sat in on the focus group session with the hearing interpreters without incident; however, when joining the deaf leaders focus group, which was conducted by a deaf interpreter trainer, I noticed one of the deaf participants cautioning others against criticizing interpreters in my presence lest I share the information with hearing interpreters. We had a discussion on how confidentiality and anonymity worked in research, and I offered to leave the session if the group wanted me to leave. Once the group felt I had explained sufficiently and decided I could stay, we arranged for me to present again at the HAD board's next meeting to ensure that all board members had a chance to ask question about how anonymity worked in research and re-evaluate what events I had access to.

Conversely, my hearing status opened other insights into research. In many ways, this dissertation is a study of what it means to be *hearing*, albeit a very particular type of hearing person vis-à-vis deaf people—a hearing interpreter. I found that, in Hà Nội, there was a productive slippage between being a hearing person that signs and being an interpreter. I found

that walking along that slippery line helped me understand what it meant to be a "good" or "respectful" hearing person according to Vietnamese deaf people. It also helped me understand how the expectations for what it is to be an ethical interpreter in Việt Nam mirrored expectations deaf people had from me as I conducted research.

When working in the United States, my positionality as an unprofessionally trained interpreter is a crucial, despite the fact that, like many hearing signers, I often find myself "friendterpreting,"[18] or informally interpreting when no certified interpreters are available (Green, 2015; Sekine, 2022). In the United States, saying that you are an interpreter is not only a particular type of relationship to deaf people, it is a claim to professional expertise. It implies that you have been attended a professional training program, passed a formal exam, and have been accredited by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID). However, the line between a hearing person who signs and a hearing person who is an interpreter is not as distinct in Việt Nam as it is in countries with professional accreditation systems. I would often tell deaf people and interpreters in Việt Nam that I was not an interpreter, referring to the fact that I am not professionally trained or certified as an interpreter in the United States—although I had taken an introductory interpreter training course at a community college in 2012 in preparation for my Fulbright fieldwork. I did this because I wanted it to be very clear that I did not come with any particular expertise or knowledge about what it means to be an interpreter professionally in the United States.[19] Yet, as one deaf interlocutor schooled me, "keep trying, you can become

[18] Kohl and Lob (2022) define "friendterpreting" as "times when a hearing or deaf signer steps into a spontaneous, informal, or conversational interaction to play some sort of language-facilitating role with another hearing or deaf friend, usually a signer as well."

[19] The question of what interpreting looks like in the United States was one with which my interlocuters, both deaf and hearing, were keenly interested. I tried to connect deaf people and interpreters to resources regarding interpreting in the United States rather than serving as the expert on these topics myself.

an interpreter," I realized that to refuse to be an interpreter was to refuse the ethical obligations and ties that came from belonging to the deaf community as a hearing person. I started being less insistent that I was not an interpreter, opening myself up to learning from within that subject position.

Being perceived through the role of an interpreter gave me insight into the local frameworks through which deaf people evaluate and understand hearing people's actions. Like HNSL interpreters, I too was expected to contribute back to the deaf people for the gifts of HNSL and belonging that I had received. This meant editing English in emails and documents, and at times, interpreting between HNSL and English when no HNSL interpreters fluent in English were available. It meant helping deaf people make connections with my contacts in the United States, and promising that I would work to secure the funding to make my research accessible in HNSL and Vietnamese. Similar to the evaluation of interpreters, deaf leaders judged my actions according to whether I inhabited the roles of BELOW and BEHIND. Did I freely give of my time and volunteer? Did I work to erase sign of my presence and involvement when in the sight of hearing non-signers?

Another important aspect of fieldwork is my gender identity. I identify as queer and trans-masculine (pronouns: he/him). However, the fieldwork for this dissertation was completed before I started my gender transition. At the time of my fieldwork, I still identified as female, and my interlocutors typically used feminine pronouns with me in English (she/her/hers) and Vietnamese (em/chị/cô),[20] a fact which caused me increasing discomfort as

[20] A few deaf leaders and hearing interpreters who were queer and/or trans took delight in in playing with gender norms when referring to me and gave me a male Vietnamese name that rhymed with my English deadname, and referred to me using male pronouns at times.

my fieldwork wore on. Neither ASL nor HNSL use gendered pronouns, which I experienced as a blessed reprieve from being constantly gendered in spoken language. Over the decade I worked with deaf people in Hà Nội, my gender presentation shifted dramatically. When I first came to Việt Nam in 2010, I presented much more femininely, typically wearing women's cut pants and form fitting shirts with scooped necklines. My hair was either cut in a pixie cut or a neck-length bob. While my gendered presentation was not typical of most of the Vietnamese women I met—many of whom regularly wore dresses, skirts and makeup—when taken together with my whiteness, I was consistently read as female in public. Taxi drivers and street vendors would refer to me using feminine pronouns, Vietnamese women would comfortably link arms with me or hold hands in ways that are typical of platonic female friendships, and I would receive catcalls from Vietnamese men out drinking yelling, "đẹp tây" (beautiful foreigner). By the time I was finishing my dissertation fieldwork, I presented much more masculinely, wearing mostly button up shirts or T-shirts and men's cut shorts or pants, with tight sports bras to flatten my chest. My haircut was an undercut with the remaining hair pulled back in a tight ponytail, a fashion that was often read as queer in the United States, but was a popular men's haircut in Việt Nam. In the United States, I was typically read as a butch woman, but in Việt Nam, my presentation was much more ambiguous. Taxi drivers and street vendors were likely to address me using either female or male pronouns. The catcalls stopped, I no longer found women holding my arm, except for women who knew me from before and recognized me as female, and I often overheard street vendors openly debating my gender in spoken Vietnamese when they assumed I couldn't understand them. Within the deaf community, people's perception of my gender also began to shift. During my dissertation fieldwork (2018-2019), there were

several events where both hearing and deaf LGBTQ+ people were involved, including the first deaf booth at Hà Nội Pride. At these events, several deaf people asked me directly if I was a trans man, and while I denied it at the time (I wasn't out to myself yet), I nevertheless found this recognition strangely beautiful and comforting even at the time.

Being assigned female at birth is something I share with the vast majority of HNSL interpreters. Of the six "professional" interpreters and approximately 15 novice interpreters in Hà Nội during my fieldwork, only one interpreter is male. At the time of my fieldwork, none of the interpreters openly identified as trans or gender nonconforming, although one identified as gay and another as bisexual. This demographic fits with international trends in sign language interpreting, where most sign language interpreters are cisgender women. For example, across the European Union, 89% of sign language interpreters are female (Wit, 2016, p. 20). Similarly in the United States, 84.8% of members of the registry of interpreters of the deaf self-identified as female, with 14% identifying as male and only 1% identifying as trans or gender nonconforming (TGNC) (*RID FY2019 Annual Report Plain Text PDF.Pdf [Shared]- Adobe Document Cloud*, n.d.). Authors have argued that this gendered imbalance has to do with interpreting being viewed as a helping profession (akin to nursing or elementary school teachers) and overall low rates of pay (Burch, 2000; Stewart et al., 1998). However, these structural explanations for gender inequalities in sign language interpreting don't explain why hearing women tend to take deaf turns in the first place, or how the decision to become an interpreter and the experience of being an interpreter is shaped by local understandings of gender. In this dissertation, I expand upon this literature by examining how the decision to

become an interpreter fits in with interpreters gendered, classed life course trajectories (see **Error! Reference source not found.**).

My complicated history with gender shaped the way I moved through the field and how I related to deaf people and interpreters. Even though my gender presentation was very different from the sign language interpreters I worked with, the fact that I still identified as a woman at the time meant that they were willing to share parts of their gendered lives in ways they may not have been comfortable sharing with a straight cis man. Interpreters often included me in conversations about romantic lives, shared their concerns over finding husband that would understand their work, and their struggles with interpreting not fitting into the normative ideal of a "stable job" for working women. Moreover, the fact that I still presented (however tenuously) a woman at the time of fieldwork allowed me to move through field sites, which may have been off limits as a cis man. For example, I was able to stay the weekend at an unmarried interpreter's family home in the provinces, a fact which might have caused tensions if I were a cis man. Similarly, in 2017, an interpreter and I were the first non-family members invited to visit another interpreter after she had given birth. I had the privilege of meeting her child and to sit in on a discussion about how she was worried about being able to raise a child while working as an interpreter as both hours and pay from work were highly unpredictable.

Finally, my fieldwork was impacted by an injury acquired during my fieldwork. Two months into my dissertation fieldwork, I was hit by a speeding motorbike while crossing the street in front of my apartment. The accident, while thankfully not resulting in any broken bones, left me with a case of full body whiplash that caused 11 months of chronic pain and muscle spasms. Having been repeatedly told by medical professionals that recovery was

imminent, I chose to stay in the field rather than put my fieldwork on pause. Being injured had a significant impact on the shape of my fieldwork. I was banned from riding on a motorbike by my physical therapist due to muscles in my neck being too weak from having been in a neck brace to support the weight of a helmet. Dependent on taxis and walking to navigate the city, I lost much of the spontaneity of movement that, as a normally able-bodied person, I was used to relying upon to conduct fieldwork. This limited which events were most accessible for me. Interpreted interactions and formal meetings were the most accessible as they had addresses I could give to taxi drivers and set times, which allowed me to manage my energy and pain levels. I am incredibly grateful to the interpreters and deaf leaders who kept me informed of all happenings related to interpreting and worked with me to prioritize which events were the most relevant to my fieldwork, including details of when I could skip meetings to rest and recover. More spontaneous methodologies, like following deaf people in their daily lives as they communicated without interpreters, had to be put on hold for future fieldwork (see [Kusters, 2017] for an example of this methodology). Similarly, I had to cut most of my fieldwork plans outside of Hà Nội, as there are far fewer taxis outside of major metropolitan areas, and only in the last month of fieldwork, was I cleared to travel via motorbike. I had planned to visit multiple interpreters and deaf people's hometowns but had to reduce this to one weekend trip with an interpreter and one weekend trip to visit a deaf person who lived outside of Hà Nội. Without their investment in this work, I would not have been able to continue fieldwork with my embodied capacities at the time. My injuries also limited my ability to turn my neck quickly meaning that, depending on the physical setup of the space, I could not always keep all signers in a conversation within my frame of view. Whenever I had permission to film, I used video

cameras as an access tool, relying on my peripheral vision to catch interesting interactions in the moment and jotting down the timestamps from the camera in my notebook so I could write full fieldnotes while viewing the videos later. While some videos were selected for full transcription and in-depth analysis, often I simply used the videos to allow me to generate narrative fieldnotes in settings where I could not keep all participants inside of my narrowed visual range.

Being injured also gave me a taste of how difficult it was for interpreters to manage the ethical demands that came with belonging to the deaf community. My injuries meant that I could only spend a few hours per day in signing spaces before triggering debilitating muscle spasms. As I was forced to turn down invitations to deaf events, I noticed some deaf people started to engage with me as though I didn't HAVE-HEART and were less likely to invite me places. They likely assumed that the fact that I declined invitations was due to disinterest in deaf people, as opposed to physical incapacity. Thankfully, several deaf leaders had known me since 2010, and had insight into just how badly injured I was despite the relative invisibility of my condition to the untrained eye.

**Notes about Terminology**

Given the small size of the community and concerns on the parts of both deaf leaders and interpreters regarding anonymity, there are times in this dissertation where I have been intentionally vague about who said what and in what circumstances. All individuals are referred to using pseudonyms. At times, I have changed the gender or other details about an individual in order to help protect their identity. There are strong gendered dynamics between deaf leaders and interpreters; while most HNSL interpreters are female, the majority of HAD board

have been male, though the percentage of female identified deaf leaders has increased over time. I have erred on the side of caution by changing participants gender to conform to these norms in order to protect anonymity, while recognizing that this risks reproducing gender essentialism and reifying gendered stereotypes. I have also used pseudonyms for a handful of local Vietnamese Non-Governmental Organizations (VNGOs) that worked with HAD, given the political sensitivity of conducting advocacy work in Việt Nam. HAD, HASLI, DP Hà Nội, SC Deaf and the Center all agreed to let me use their actual organization names in this dissertation. For a list of abbreviations for organizations see Appendix A.

Throughout this dissertation, I quote interlocutors using a variety of languages including HNSL, spoken and written Vietnamese, spoken and written English, and ASL. I also quote interlocutors using what is colloquially known as "điệu bộ" (gesture). In many ways, điệu bộ is akin to what is variously known as "natural-sign" in Nepal (Green, 2014b) or home sign in some sign language literature (Goico & Horton, 2023). At times interlocutors also used International Sign when communicating with foreign deaf individuals (see Green, 2014a, 2015 for a discussion of International Sign). These different communicative resources were often combined or used in quick succession. HNSL interpreters were likely to codeswitch between languages, or at times combine a spoken language and sign language together in a practice called simultaneous communication (sim com). In text, I use capitalized glosses to denote HNSL signs. In interviews and casual conversations with interpreters, I did not require them to stick with a particular language, instead following their lead as they switched between different communicative resources and occasionally asking how they would refer to something in HNSL or spoken Vietnamese. I have attempted to note throughout this dissertation which languages

individuals were using in a particular moment, although at some points, where there was significant code switching and I am not working from a video recording, I only have my on-the-fly translation into English fieldnotes and lost the nuance of which languages an individual was using. When full transcripts are provided, please refer to Appendix B for instructions on reading glossed transcripts.

There are several terms used throughout this dissertation which have recently come under scrutiny in deaf studies, including the use of D/deaf, deaf community, and deaf culture. The use of "Deaf" in print was originally conceived of by James Woodward (2013) as a way of emphasizing that deaf people are a cultural and linguistic minority group. This has subsequently been taken up by deaf people in the United Stated and Europe to distinguish between medical and social models of deafness, and often differentiates between deaf people (individuals who do not sign and do not necessarily identify as culturally deaf) and Deaf people (who do sign and view themselves as culturally deaf). Recently, deaf studies has begun to move away from the d/Deaf distinction to avoid the teleological notions about what is the right way to be deaf as are implied by the distinctions and recognize that the D/deaf distinction does not always translate well in other countries (Friedner & Kusters, 2015).

The use of capitalized Deaf in Việt Nam has a somewhat unique history. James Woodward was one of the co-founders of the first higher education deaf school in Việt Nam (taught in HCMC SL). This history led to the adoption of a capitalized Người Điếc (lit: Deaf Person) by many deaf leaders in Việt Nam. Unlike in the United States and Europe, deaf leaders in Việt Nam use Người Điếc to refer all deaf people in Việt Nam, regardless of whether they know a VSL or communicate primarily through điệu bộ (gesture). The claim by deaf leaders is

that all such individuals are, or should be, culturally deaf. However, capitalized Người Điếc is not widely used by deaf individuals outside of this elite circle. In this dissertation, I have chosen to use lowercase deaf to avoid confusion with the problematic way the D/deaf distinction has been used within deaf studies to differentiate between deaf people, and out of recognition that only a small elite group of deaf people in Việt Nam adhere to the practice of capitalizing Deaf.

Deaf people in Việt Nam often use the terms DEAF-COMMUNITY and DEAF-CULTURE. While these terms were foundational in deaf studies, they have been critiqued recently in deaf studies for being teleological in nature, implying that there is one unified deaf community and one static bound deaf culture (Friedner & Kusters, 2015a; Kusters et al., 2017). I use these terms in the dissertation, not as analytical concepts, but rather as emic terminology that is regularly used by both deaf people in and out of leadership roles in Hà Nội. Additionally, I note that these terms are especially interesting in Việt Nam where, as I point out, most "ordinary" deaf people do not attend deaf events or clubs. This means that the concepts of DEAF-COMMUNITY and DEAF-CULTURE have moved outside of deaf clubs and into more colloquial use.

## Chapter Outlines

In Chapter Two, I examine what motivates hearing people to become interpreters and enter interdependent relationships with deaf people. I argue that, for young hearing women, learning HNSL and becoming an interpreter provides them with a sense of belonging that both entices them to take deaf turns (Bechter, 2008; Friedner, 2015), and to stay connected to the deaf community despite the difficulties that come from following such a highly non-normative life path. To be clear, these hearing HNSL students do not come seeking belonging with deaf

people intentionally. Rather, different aspects of their gendered, classed life trajectories leave them seeking a general sense of connection and community, a gap which HNSL classes and the deaf community are poised to fill. Building on Tine Gammeloft's (2014) theorization of belonging, I examine how a sense of belonging is carefully crafted through the use of ritual forms, such as songs and games, by deaf leaders in the spaces in which hearing interpreters circulate. By using the lens of belonging, I move away from static notions of a deaf community constituted through identity politics and notions of DEAF-DEAF-SAME (Friedner & Kusters, 2015b), instead examining how deaf people and interpreters are bound together through ties of precarious interdependence. At the same time, I examine how belonging to the deaf creates other forms of precarity in interpreters' lives as they struggle to maintain belonging with both their families and the deaf community.

In Chapter Three, I begin to examine the dynamics of precarious interdependence by focusing on the economics of sign language interpreting outside of state funding. More specifically, I examine tensions between the moral and financial economics of sign language interpreting encapsulated in the idealized distinction of interpreters who HAVE-HEART and interpreters who EAT-TO-LIVE. Under the moral economy of having HEART, interpreters are expected to interpret for no money, but in exchange for being taught sign language by deaf people and being offered a sense of belonging. However, under the broader post-socialist market-based economy in which they live, sign language interpreters need to EAT-TO-LIVE and argue that they need to receive payment for their interpreting services in order to continue working with the deaf community. The chapter examines how multiple forms of precarity—the precarious belonging of interpreters to the deaf community, precarious belonging of deaf

people to their families and society at large, and the financial precarity of both deaf people and interpreters—reinforce and sit in tensions with one another due to the absence of state support.

In Chapter Four, Five, and Six, I move to matters of precarity in and out of voice, and the interdependence of deaf people and interpreter's voices. I start Chapter Four by examining interdependent voicing at the level of everyday interpreted interactions. I look at how interpreters are asked to diminish their presence in interpreted interactions, a process which they refer to as "silence" and "invisibility." I argue that practices of silence and invisibility are built upon ideologies of voice commonly held amongst hearing people in Việt Nam that conflate speaking and being seen with communicative personhood. These ideologies are particularly damaging to deaf people who do not speak. While interpreting can provide deaf people with a voice, and therefore help hearing people see their personhood, hearing people may also be inclined to see this personhood as stemming from the interpreter rather than the deaf person. Consequently, deaf people and interpreters attempt to mitigate these effects by hiding interpreters' visual presence. I explore how, by leaving these language ideologies intact, practices of silence and invisibility create a zero-sum game between deaf people and interpreters, transforming the communicative precarity deaf people experience into a new form of communicative precarity for interpreters—and this actually results in a misrecognition and refusal of interdependence.

In Chapter Five, I move to examining communicative precarity and the interdependence of voice by focusing on the politics of self-advocacy in Việt Nam. Self-advocacy, as a clearly articulated normative approach to disability politics, traces its roots primarily to liberal

democratic countries in the Global North. However, like all so-called “global” movements, it is taken up, practiced, and constituted at the local level. Self-advocacy developed as an explicit corrective to a long history of non-disabled people speaking on behalf of disabled people, often without concern for what disabled people themselves want (Charlton, 1998). On an international level, deaf people and interpreters have attempted to make their interdependent voices work within the norms of self-advocacy by having deaf and interpreting organizations conduct advocacy work in parallel, both on behalf of “their own” interests. However, the central voicing norm of self-advocacy—the idea that one should speak only for oneself–has caused difficulty for HNSL interpreters whose stories often involve deaf people. The ironic result of trying to adhere to the norms of self-advocacy is that deaf people in Việt Nam wind up speaking not only on behalf of themselves, but on behalf of interpreters, who in turn are normatively excluded from engaging in self-activism. This has direct consequences for interpreters who have limited opportunities to speak up about how they would like to see the field of interpreting develop. Moreover, because interpreters are not generally able to advocate on their own behalf under the voicing norms of self-advocacy, they are *dependent* on deaf leaders to engage in advocacy work, meaning that the barriers and discrimination deaf people face in conducting self-advocacy work also impact interpreters.

In Chapter Six, I deviate from the focus on sign language interpreters to unpack the voicing structures that render deaf advocacy efforts in Việt Nam precarious. Self-advocacy requires having two different forms of addressivity: one that is *internally facing* and helps build the collective “we” on which the self-advocate speaks and one that is *externally facing* towards the government or another organization that grants recognition/support to the self-advocate

and their community. For deaf leaders to “raise voice” to an external addressee (i.e., the government), deaf people must first enact a politics of denotational inclusion, not only for deaf people who have access to HNSL, but for all deaf people.  At the same time, deaf leaders, like all advocates in Việt Nam, must work to distance themselves from grassroots democracy trying to “engage in politics,” which is defined as an illegal attempt to try to overturn the party (Wells-Dang, 2014, p. 174). In reaching these two different addressees, deaf leaders must utilize two different registers: a RÕ (clear) voice designed to be accessible to all deaf people regardless of their linguistic background and technocratic voicing which is designed to help depoliticize Vietnamese advocacy work. However, rather than to recognize that deaf leaders were negotiating two different addressees, hearing NGO workers took the slightest deviations from technocratic voicing as evidence that deaf people did not have the communicative capacity necessary to engage in independent self-advocacy work. This, in turn, justified further “capacity trainings” for deaf leaders and postponing HAD’s ability to become an independent organization. This lack of status as an independent organization has been one of the biggest barriers to deaf leaders conducting advocacy work on behalf of HNSL interpreters.

The conclusion asks, how do we move from a state of precarious interdependence to a form of interdependence where both deaf people and interpreter’s needs are met? It discusses how recognizing the dynamics of precarious interdependence and re-thinking voice in a way that acknowledges interdependence may ease some of the tensions and allow both groups to thrive.

## CHAPTER TWO: BELONGING TO THE DEAF

### Finding Community

On my first day back in the field in 2019, I observed as Hương, a hearing woman in her early thirties, interpreted at the Hà Nội Pride festival. Although Hà Nội Pride was founded in 2012, this was the first time the event had an interpreter. Hương was the cofounder of SC Deaf, the first ever sign language interpreting company in Việt Nam, which had been founded through a startup grant from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). Hương's contact at the UNDP had invited SC Deaf to participate in Pride and helped them arrange a small booth at the festival. The presence of the booth at Pride had been widely advertised amongst deaf social networks in Hà Nội, at the weekly Hà Nội Association of the Deaf (HAD) meeting, on HAD's Facebook page, on SC Deaf's Facebook page, texted and reposted by members of Hà Nội's new deaf middle school and high school program, and even announced at the local evangelical deaf church[21]. Nearly 60 deaf people showed up, some straight deaf people who were simply excited to see a hearing event be "integrated" by including sign language, and other deaf people who shyly admitted to me that the identified as bi or gay but had never been able to attend a queer event before. Hương's contacts at the UNPD had reached out to her last minute, so although they had secured a booth at the event, they had not had time to negotiate having an interpreter onstage for mainstage performances that happened in the evening. Nevertheless, Hương wanted to ensure that deaf people got to experience the whole event. So, she situated herself at the back of the hearing crowd, about 25

[21] I was not present for this announcement and therefore do not know why church leaders chose to advertise Pride.

meters away from the mainstage, and stood on a chair so deaf people in the audience could see her interpret. She solo interpreted this way for nearly three hours, only subbing out for a brief period when she asked a mother of a deaf child who signed to try to interpret for 15 minutes so she could rest her legs.

Hương's efforts made a significant difference for deaf queer[22] Hanoians. As one gay deaf man, Hao, told me, it was the first time he really felt like he was a part of the LGBTQ community because he could watch the interpreter and understand what was going on. Moreover, he was excited that many straight deaf Hanoians were present and were learning about the LGBTQ issues. He hoped deaf people would become more open-minded about LGBTQ issues, and that this would in turn make deaf spaces more welcoming for LGBTQ deaf people like himself. When we think about interpreting and belonging, we often think about how it allows deaf people to belong to mainstream hearing society. Occasionally we think of interpreting allowing individuals with intersectional identities like Hao to feel a greater sense of belonging as they are able to connect with minority groups that they share intersectional identities with, or the way that access to information on diversity can help make deaf spaces more inclusive for multiple marginalized individuals. Yet, interpreting does not only allow deaf people to belong to hearing worlds. It also allows hearing interpreters to belong, however tenuously, to deaf worlds.

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[22] I use English terms here to refer to sexual orientation and identity not to claim that these terms are understood in the same way by deaf people in Hà Nội, but rather because this was a moment of intense change in the meaning of sexual orientation and gender identity for deaf Hanoians. While hearing queer communities in Việt Nam have developed their own understandings and terminology for sexual orientation and gender identity (Burke, 2011, p. 138), deaf Hanoians have not always had access to this terminology.

Deaf leaders had worked with a handful of deaf queer individuals the day before Pride to come up with updated more politically correct HNSL signs for sexual orientation and gender identity. Moreover, as this was one of the first queer events with interpretation available in Hà Nội, deaf Hanoians spent much of the event trying to understand what different identity terms meant and how they personally identified.

I sat next to Hương during her brief 15-minute break when the hearing mother interpreted, and Hương started asking me questions in HNSL about my own queer identity and experience coming out and becoming involved in the queer community in college. "I bet it felt amazing finding your community,"[23] commented Hương in HNSL. She said that she and one of the other professional interpreters were always talking about what it meant to be a part of a community. "How before we found the deaf community (cộng đồng), we were very lonely, but when we started taking the sign classes, we became a part of a community for the first time." A bit later I asked Hương, "Aren't you tired?" Hương had been interpreting for nearly three hours with very few breaks. "No, I was tired before I got here, but once I started signing with people, I stopped feeling tired." Then she joked: "If I ever stop signing, that will be the day I die."

This was not the first time I had seen an interpreter make such a statement. HNSL interpreters like Hương frequently referred to a deaf community (cộng đồng) that they desired to belong to even though they do not fit within traditional notions of deaf community rooted in sameness or identity politics as imagined in much of deaf studies (See Friedner & Kusters, 2015 for a discussion and critique of this literature). In fact, Hương had virtually no connection to deaf people before she started learning HNSL. She had a distant deaf cousin who lived in Europe and had visited her once growing up, but she had never (knowingly) met a Vietnamese deaf person. It was only when Hương moved to Hà Nội for college that she decided to take HNSL classes. Frustrated with her college major, feeling out of place in such a large metropolitan area, and inspired by the memory of her distant cousin, Hương searched the

[23] The full conversation was in HNSL. These quotes are in the moment English translations from fieldnotes. I have not provided HNSL glosses, as I was unable to record them in the moment.

internet for sign language classes. Her search led her to the newly formed classes at the Sign Language Training Center (the Center)—a series of HNSL night classes taught by prominent leaders of the deaf community. She signed up for the classes and quickly became heavily involved in the deaf community in Hà Nội.

By 2019 nearly all Hương's life revolved around the deaf community. She was the co-founder of the first sign language interpreting company in Việt Nam, SC Deaf, and when she wasn't actively interpreting, spent her weekdays working long hours in the SC Deaf office trying to secure grants to keep the fledgling company afloat financially. In the evenings she donned heavy stage makeup and went to interpret on Việt Nam Television (VTV) for the evening news. On weekends she often attended meetings of the Hà Nội Association of the Deaf (HAD), standing in the back and chatting with deaf leaders and deaf friends. Sometimes she was called in to substitute teach for an English class for deaf children that was run at the same time as HAD. Hương also tried her best to attend every special event and festival that was hosted by deaf people or involved deaf participants. When she got a break, she would unwind by hanging out with deaf people in one of Hà Nội's many coffee shops or grab dinner with her deaf friends.

Yet as much as Hương valued being a part of the deaf community in Hà Nội, her involvement had not come without sacrifice. Her decade-long involvement with the deaf community meant that her life had followed a highly non-normative course for a hearing Vietnamese woman. Like most of the professional sign language interpreters, Hương had almost no hearing friends. By the time Hương and I became acquainted in 2013 just two years after she had graduated college, Hương had already lost touch with most of her hearing college friends. Similarly, although the average age of first marriage in Việt Nam in 2018 was 27.6 years

for men and 23.3 years for women (General Statistics Office of Việt Nam, 2020, p. 135), Hương was 30 and still unmarried. She had previously been with a long-term boyfriend who treated her well, but whom she broke up with over his lack of ambition, and more importantly his lack of interest in learning sign language and becoming part of her world.

Hương's situation was typical for professional interpreters in Hà Nội. Four of the six professional HNSL interpreters had never been married, despite being over the age of 28. Of the remaining two, one was happily married to a deaf man, and the other had recently divorced her hearing husband. When I hung out with HNSL interpreters, they spent a lot of time talking about their romantic lives (or rather lack thereof) and worrying about becoming ế (old maids). Finding a partner, either deaf or hearing, and getting married as an interpreter was difficult. While several interpreters expressed interest in marrying a deaf man, they struggled to find a deaf partner with comparable levels of education to them (a factor which many of the interpreters felt was important in a life partner). Hương also reported that their parents were uncomfortable with the idea of them marrying a deaf person. Conversely, interpreters struggled to find hearing men to date both because they didn't have what was considered a "stable job" (công việc làm ổn định) fitting of a married middle-class woman. The concept of a stable job, which many interpreters felt pressured to seek out, is a gendered, classed ideal work environment that is predictable and allows women to balance work with gendered familial duties like taking care of children, caretaking for elderly relatives, preparing food, attending to ancestral shrines, and participating in the spiritual practices of the family. As interpreting was both highly demanding and unpredictable in terms of schedule and payment, it was the opposite of a stable job, and thus interpreters like Hương worried that no hearing man would

be willing to marry them. Interpreters also complained that it was hard to find a hearing partner willing to learn sign language or become involved in the deaf community.

Even Hương's relationship with her family was strained. Hương was a migrant from a province about 60 km outside of Hà Nội. As part of a growing trend of upwardly mobile female migrants moving to urban centers in Việt Nam for education, Hương's role typically would have been to rise above the class status of her entire family, to secure a well-paying stable job, and to marry a man with a similarly reputable middle-class career (Earl, 2014). Yet interpreting brought neither financial security nor prestige, causing her parents to worry about her marriage prospects. While Hương grappled with the way working as an interpreter strained other forms of belonging in her life, she nevertheless continued to emphasize just how much belonging to the deaf community meant to her.

Deaf Turns for Hearing People

Hương's experience reflects one of the primary themes in almost all of the HNSL interpreters' stories: the experience of becoming part of a community they had little or no prior connection to. Of the 6 professional sign language interpreters, 2 former sign language interpreters, and approximately 15 novice interpreters/sign language students I interacted with over the course of my fieldwork, only 3 had family ties to the deaf community. Two were mothers of deaf children (including the mother who subbed in for Hương at the festival), and one was the younger sister of a deaf woman. This pattern differs significantly from existing literature on the development of sign language interpreting, which is focused on the global north where the first individuals identified as interpreters typically had pre-existing relationships with deaf people, either through kinship (e.g. Children of Deaf Adults [CODAS]) or

professional ties (e.g. teachers or ministers) (Stone, 2012). In Việt Nam, deaf people have eschewed using teachers for the deaf due to the prevalence of speech-based instruction in deaf schools, and many CODAs have not been taught sign by their parents or have been raised by hearing grandparents. Instead, deaf leaders have taken it upon themselves to run a series of classes in Hà Nội Sign Language (HNSL) at the Sign Language Training Center (the Center) and use these classes to hand select potential interpreters.

But what does it mean to be a part of a "deaf community" as a hearing sign language interpreter, and why do hearing people with no prior connection to deaf people decide to become interpreters? Becoming an HNSL interpreter requires hearing people to *completely* reorient their lives, learning a new language and embracing deaf ways of being. This process is described by deaf people in HNSL as OPENING-[their]-MINDS to deaf ways of being—having their worldview and social world radically change to be oriented around deaf norms. The process is completely transformational. Not only do interpreters learn a new language, their perspectives on sign language and deaf people fundamentally change, along with their entire social lives. Belonging to the deaf community is not a process that hearing interpreters can do half-way; it demands completely re-orienting their lives towards deaf people. As a consequence, many interpreters like Hương wind up drifting away from their hearing friends and instead spend their time attending deaf community events and socializing with deaf people.

One of the most striking aspects of the discourse of opening minds is the way that it mirrors the processes deaf people undergo as they themselves orient towards deaf sociality and deaf ways of being. One of the cornerstones in deaf studies research has been examining

the socialization practices that bring deaf people to learn sign language and engage with deaf signing people (see Friedner & Kusters, 2015, for a review of this literature). Frank Bechter (2008, p. 431) observed: "When one looks at the signing community in the abstract, one thing seems central: most signers are not born to signers. One might say, therefore, that the deaf community is a community of 'converts.' " Similarly, while refusing to look at "deaf culture" as a static bounded thing, Michele Friedner has examined the way deaf people in India take "deaf turns," dis-orienting from their families of origin and re-orienting towards deaf sociality and signing (Friedner, 2015). In Hà Nội, deaf people undergo a similar process of reorientation. Most deaf people in Việt Nam do not grow up with access to standard Vietnamese Sign Languages (VSLs). While Việt Nam set up a national deaf education system in the early Đổi Mới era (1986-1988), the government chose to use speech-based instruction in Vietnamese and prohibited the use of sign languages in classrooms (Cooper, 2017). Moreover, most deaf people's families do not learn VSLs. Thus, for many deaf people in Việt Nam, the process of becoming part of deaf sociality is something that happens later in life as an adult.

The process hearing Hanoians are asked to engage in as they become interpreters is a similar process of re-orienting towards deaf sociality. In fact, the HNSL sign OPEN-[your]-MIND is used both to describe both the process of deaf people converting to deaf sociality, and of hearing people converting to deaf sociality and becoming interpreters.[24] However, considering the process of becoming an interpreter as one of re-orienting to deaf social norms raises

[24] There are of course important differences in these processes, even though they are described in the same way. While both deaf and hearing Hanoians need to learn HNSL, hearing individuals have to take the additional step of disorienting from negative beliefs about deaf people and sign language they may have internalized as part of growing up hearing.

important questions: What does it mean to take a deaf turn as a hearing person? What entices hearing people, especially those with no prior relationship to deaf people, to take deaf turns, opening their hearts and minds to deaf communities and deaf ways of being? Moreover, what are hearing people dis-orienting from as they become enmeshed in deaf sociality? What are the costs of taking such a non-normative life path?

*Figure 4: HNSL for OPEN-[your]-MIND (Marie 2020, p. 136)*

I argue that for young hearing women, learning HNSL and becoming an interpreter provides them with a sense of belonging that both entices them to take deaf turns in the first place and to stay connected to the deaf community despite the difficulties that come from following such a highly non-normative life path. In theorizing belonging, I turn to Tine Gammeltoft's theory of belonging (2014, 2018), which defines belonging as "the ways in which people strive to tie themselves into relationships with others, thereby becoming part of something larger" (2014, p. 9). For sign language interpreters, this entails both becoming part of the deaf community in terms of being welcomed into deaf spaces and social networks, and becoming part of deaf people's political project to create a world where sign language can be used in all aspects of social life (see Cooper, 2014, for a discussion of deaf political projects in Việt Nam). On one hand, belonging is an emotional affect; it is a "sense of attachment" that

people describe as binding them to others (Gammeltoft, 2014, p. 20). Yet belonging is also an intensely precarious personal project, something that must be enacted and achieved through demonstrating love and commitment to others (Gammeltoft, 2018, p. 9). This kind of precarity is a social precarity, a risk of losing social ties to others.

To be clear, these hearing HNSL students do not come seeking belonging with deaf people in particular. Rather, various aspects of their gendered, classed life trajectories leave them seeking a general sense of connection and community. While there are many different activities and communities which hearing individuals could turn to in order to fill that gap, deaf teachers at the Center and in the sign language club went to considerable lengths to create a sense of belonging, making the deaf community a particularly suitable space for hearing students seeking community. In particular, I examine how deaf leaders use songs, games and other activities, taking advantage of their ritual semiotic nature in order to explicitly create a sense of belonging and community.[25] This adds to theorization of belonging by showing how belonging is not something that simply exists in the world, but rather is intentionally crafted and created. For novice interpreters, belonging generated in deaf spaces helps them cope with feelings of loneliness or isolation that have emerged through other aspects of their life trajectories (e.g., being a migrant to a new city, having wealthy friends leave to study internationally). For deaf people, the sense of belonging cultivated in these spaces provides the affective environment necessary to change hearing students' perspectives on sign language and deaf people, while also ensuring that they have a supply of interpreters in the first place.

[25] These rituals also created/reinforced specific conceptions of deafness, notions of deaf culture, the role(s) of hearing people in deaf spaces, ideologies about sign language etc.

Yet belonging to the deaf community also creates new forms of precarity for hearing interpreters. While interpreters are invited into the deaf community through affective relationships characterized by joy, warmth and connection, at the same time they are reminded that deaf leaders are gatekeepers to the community, at times even kicking hearing interpreters out entirely. These moments of gatekeeping render interpreters' sense of belonging precarious, while at the same time turning belonging into something rare and valuable that interpreters desire to maintain. As the most senior interpreter Kim characterized her relationship with deaf people:

> When I joined the deaf community by knowing them and learning the language, I discovered a lot of different things, different from the hearing world that I knew. So, like I shared with you the other day, I really love the community, I really love the language so now I define myself as like an in-law in the community so that I can be in the family. I cannot make myself become deaf but I can become an in-law like I'm married to the community. (Kim, personal communication, English, 2017)

Interestingly, Kim draws a metaphor here between being a woman marrying into a family, and an interpreter entering the deaf community. The form of precarious belonging maintained through gatekeeping draws clear parallels with normative forms of precarious belonging in Vietnamese kinship relationships. Gammeltoft bases her theory of precarious belonging on the quests of Vietnamese women to belong to their husbands' families through childbirth. In Hà Nội, given normative understandings of kinship, a woman's belonging in her husband's family is a fragile and precarious kind of belonging, particularly in moments of childbirth, where the woman is seeking to secure her position in the family by producing a healthy heir. This precarity must be mitigated through everyday quotidian forms of care and sacrifice (Gammeltoft, 2014; Shohet, 2021). If we understand the interpreter's belonging in this

way, we see that what interpreters are being socialized to is not an identity in a community, but a relationship founded of forms of inclusion that are always simultaneously forms of exclusion—an exact reversal of the feeling of disaffection from mainstream life and the joy of inclusion in a new world. The interpreter, thus, is socialized to that precarity, that partial inclusiveness, the asymmetrical relationship with the deaf community.

The precarity of belonging to the deaf community also sits in tension with and reinforces other forms of precarious belonging in interpreters' lives. Belonging to the deaf community comes with ties and expectations typical of asymmetrical interdependent relationships in Việt Nam: the expectation to sacrifice and contribute back to the community. These expectations push up against the other forms of belonging in interpreters' lives, such as relations with friends, family, and lovers, and work both to isolate interpreters from those non-deaf worlds and thus to increase their dependence within the world of the deaf.

### Gaps in Belonging: Gender, Classes, and Religious Migration

Understanding why hearing people, especially those with no prior relationship to deaf people, choose to take deaf turns requires situating interpreting within the broader gendered, classed, and religious life projects of HNSL students. The majority of HNSL students who take classes at the Center are college-aged women, generally upwardly mobile individuals who are seeking to become part of Việt Nam's emerging new middle class. These interpreters are part of a broader trend of "feminization of migration" within Việt Nam (General Statistics Office, 2016), as women are seen as being more likely to send remittances home to their families and not spend money earned in urban areas on drinking or other leisure pursuits (Earl, 2014). Many of these women are part of what ethnographer Catharine Earl refers to as "aspirational migrants":

young women from well off rural families who are sent to one of Việt Nam's major urban areas for higher education and career opportunities (2014). According to data from the Việt Nam General Statistics Office, Hà Nội has the highest rate in the country of such aspirational migrants, accounting for 46.7% of all migrants to the city (General Statistics Office, 2016, p. 3). Unlike lower class seasonal migrants who come to the city to work in markets or as street vendors, aspirational migrants plan on staying in the city long term in order to pursue careers that can raise their class standing (Earl, 2014, p. 13).

For such young migrants who were used to living in intergenerational family homes and now find themselves either living in dorms or with distant relatives, finding new forms of belonging in the city is particularly important. The 2015 National Internal Migration Survey found that migrants often struggle to learn about their new environment, taking considerable time to find social and community activities to participate in (General Statistics Office, 2016, p. 6). Previous research has examined different strategies migrants use to cultivate a sense of belonging in their new environment. For example, Catherine Earl found that young female aspirational migrants in Hồ Chí Minh City often seek forms of belonging through leisure activities, like eating out in the neighborhood's street vendors where they can cultivate connections with people across class and geographic backgrounds (2014). For such young migrants, the belonging provided by first participating in structured sign language classes and eventually becoming part of the deaf community is particularly poignant.

Hương was an example of such an aspirational migrant. As previously mentioned, She was the second child of a family from a province about 60 km north west of Hà Nội. Her mother was a secondary school teacher and her father owned a small charter bus repair shop, so while

they were comfortable, they were not particularly well off, especially as her father's health started to fail and he couldn't perform as much physical labor. While her older brother stayed in her hometown, worked as a policeman, and was responsible for caring for her parents as they aged, Hương was encouraged by her parents from a young age to pursue higher education. She said there was also a lot of social pressure because she saw all the other students trying to get into college. As she put it: "I thought that if I didn't study, I didn't have a future" (Hương, personal interview, Spoken English, 2023). In the countryside, getting a government job (the most stable jobs) required having relatives or connections, while in the city a college degree could open up more career possibilities, increasing Hương's chance at upward social mobility. She explained that her parents didn't want her to go to Hà Nội, but they wanted her to go to a good university, and all of the good universities were in major metropolitan areas, and at least Hà Nội was closer than Hồ Chí Minh City. She mused that her parents were probably particularly invested in her leaving the countryside because she was a second child, and therefore wasn't responsible for caring for them as they aged. There also may well have been a gendered component to her migration, as aspirational migrants are more likely to be women than men. Unlike many aspirational migrants from the countryside, Hương was not expected to send financial remittances back to her family,[26] but her parents made it clear to her that they expected her to find a "stable" job and rise above their own class background.

Eventually Hương passed the college entrance exam and moved to the city to pursue an education. She had applied to an Economics degree because she didn't have any clear picture

[26] See Earl, 2014, for a discussion of remittances.

of what she wanted to do, but her parents told her a degree in economics would give her many employment opportunities to choose from. However, Hương quickly found herself highly dissatisfied with her college major in Economics. This left her feeling isolated and compounded the feelings of loneliness that came from leaving her family and moving to a new city. The Vietnamese education system requires students to decide upon majors before they take the university entrance exam, and switching majors requires re-taking the university entrance exam and starting college over. The feeling of being stuck in an uninteresting college major was an isolating experience, especially for students from the provinces who did not have strong social networks in Hà Nội. Therefore, inspired by memories of her distant European cousin who was deaf, Hương searched online and found videos of hearing students in the sign language club performing songs and skits in HNSL. Through the videos she was able to find classes at the Center and began attending regularly. The classes provided a gateway into the deaf community and she soon found herself meeting up with deaf teachers and other deaf people to drink tea and chat. The classes also broadened her network of hearing friends. She discovered that one of the other students in the classes, Lan Anh, who had been taking HNSL longer than her, lived in the same building as her. The two became fast friends and started attending different deaf events together, like the ten-year anniversary of the HAD, where Hương and I met for the first time. Eventually Hương and Lan Anh became roommates, their shared love of sign language drawing them together. Hương recalled that one time while they were both in college, Lan Anh was laying on her bed and exclaimed, “Older sister, I love sign language so much!” Lan Anh wound up studying abroad in France and becoming a French Sign Language interpreter, while Hương stayed in Hà Nội becoming one of the first people to make their living off of HNSL

interpreting. Several HNSL interpreters had similar stories as Hương, where moving from the provinces and being stuck in an unfulfilling major caused them to seek out new forms of belonging. These interpreters talked both about finding community with deaf people and also finding a unique sense of connection with the handful of other hearing people who were also heavily involved in deaf worlds.

While not every interpreter was an aspirational migrant, they all shared a desire to find a new sense of community. For Kim, the need for community came from being kicked out of her family's home in the provinces due to being an Evangelical Christian. Evangelical Christianity, referred to as Tin lành (lit. "gospel" or "good news"), is one of six legally recognized religions in Việt Nam. However, while Evangelical Christianity is officially recognized, it has been met with considerable government scrutiny by the Vietnamese government due to historical trends of anti-communism amongst Christianity and anti-Christian legacies of communism (Ngo, 2016). In particular, there has been a strong government concern about the growth of Evangelical Christianity amongst ethnic minorities in the highlands, and suspicions about the connections between Christianity and anti-government efforts (Lewis, 2002; Ngo, 2016). While Kim is from the ethnic majority in Việt Nam (kinh), her family was nevertheless afraid of government intervention and kicked her out of the household. She moved to Hà Nội in the 1990s where she joined a Christian-run international NGO that worked with people with disabilities. Through her job she heard of opportunities to take an American Sign Language class, where she met deaf leaders from HAD, who informed her that this was not the sign language they actually used. She then started spending time with deaf people, learning HNSL, and enjoying the newfound sense of community. For example, she shared about back when she had recently moved from the city

and was relatively poor due to having been excommunicated from her family. She had to get around the city by bicycle as she couldn't afford a motorbike, so her deaf friends who had motorbikes would often give her rides. She recalled how sometimes they would get pulled over by traffic cops, and her deaf friends would have her pretend to be deaf as well so they could get off without a ticket. Normally a fairly rule abiding person, Kim recalled with glee the sense of being included, and the joy of tricking the cops alongside her deaf friends.

Even for interpreters who grew up in Hà Nội, interpreting provided them a sense of community when their social networks were ruptured. For example, Ngọc was born and raised in Hà Nội. In high school Ngọc had been a highly social person, but as her affluent friends left to study abroad, she found herself bored, lonely, and depressed. Like many students with family in Hà Nội, Ngọc lived in her family home while attending college and had a social support network to fall back on. However, she lacked the same upward social mobility that her wealthier friends had, and thus found herself without a peer group. Ngọc's experiences fit with broader social trends in Việt Nam. Relative to Việt Nam's GDP, Việt Nam has incredibly high rates of students studying abroad. Since Việt Nam became a lower middle-income country in 2008, it has consistently had higher rates of students studying abroad compared to other countries in its income bracket, as well as amongst other countries in South East Asia (*UIS Statistics*, n.d.). In 2014, nearly 40% of Vietnamese study abroad students were entirely privately funded by parents, meaning that students studying abroad were more likely to come from wealthier regions like Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City ("Nearly All Vietnamese Study Abroad with Private Funds," 2014). Ngọc's response to losing her social network was to join the newly formed HNSL

classes, which she heard about through a classmate,[27] and she quickly found that it changed her outlook on life. As she described, "All morning and afternoon in [university] class would be boring, but the evening [HNSL classes] would be filled with joy. In the morning and afternoon, I would be frowning but by evening I would always be smiling." As her signing improved, Ngọc quickly found herself getting increasingly involved in the deaf community. She started going to tea with deaf friends, attending HAD meetings where she was deeply moved by the way deaf leaders taught other deaf people about national heroes (like Hồ Chí Minh), and would frequently drive to the edge of the city to play with deaf students at a local elementary school along with other HNSL students.

In many ways Hương, Kim, and Ngọc are quite different from each other. They come from different geographic, economic, and religious backgrounds. Yet what ties their stories together is the desire to find community. All three of these women found their lives influenced by broader social trends and cleavages in Việt Nam, patterns of gendered, classed, and religiously motivated migration that ruptured their sense of community and left them desiring a sense of connection.

## A Strange and Beautiful Sign Language

Yet while future interpreters were seeking community, they were not necessarily seeking community with deaf people specifically. For many future interpreters, sign language was a sort of "hobby" through which they could meet other people. Since the privatization of the economy under Đổi Mới, Việt Nam has seen increasing social stratification, and the re-

[27] I do not know how the classmate found out about the classes. Classes were primarily advertised through Facebook and word of mouth, with college students inviting their friends to take classes.

emergence of a middle class that is concentrated in Việt Nam's major metropolitan areas (Bélanger et al., 2012). This new middle class has sought to craft a "cosmopolitan" lifestyle through structured hobbies such as learning a new language to present themselves as well-rounded and educated (Bélanger et al., 2012; Earl, 2014; Van Van, 2010), and sign language has become one of these potential hobbies.

For example, Lê started taking HNSL classes as a young college student in 2010. She described how she had tried taking multiple other classes and activities such as music and drawing before settling on sign language as her hobby of choice.

> When I think back to 2010, I was just simply enjoying learning sign language. I didn't think about helping the deaf community and so forth. It was simply about learning… for me, I started **learning sign language for myself first.** My love for sign language developed before the love for the deaf community. It is a beautiful language so I just wanted to learn it. (Lê, personal communication, Vietnamese, 2019)

What Lê is describing here reflects the way hearing students start their journeys not being oriented towards deaf people or deaf ways of being. When Lê first started learning sign, she had no prior relationships with any deaf people besides her deaf teachers, so she was not oriented towards deaf people in her learning. Thus, as she puts it, "love for sign language developed before the love for the deaf community." This experience is shared with the majority of HNSL interpreters who reported learning HNSL out of "curiosity" or "personal interest." For upwardly mobile college students like Lê, HNSL classes were simply a form of leisure that marked their aspirations to become part of the middle class (Bélanger et al., 2012; Earl, 2014).

Student like Lê who were interested in learning sign language as a hobby enrolled in classes at The Sign Language Training Center (the Center)—a series of HNSL night classes taught by prominent leaders of the deaf community. While the Center changed in size and location

over the years, moving between various rented or borrowed elementary school or college classrooms to keep costs low, the basic format of the classes has stayed relatively stable. The teachers work from the black board (or recently, a projector) writing out the lesson in Vietnamese. After discussing translations for Vietnamese vocabulary words in HNSL (often based on a theme such as "introductions" or "fruit"), the teachers then teach a pre-scripted dialogue written in Vietnamese, emphasizing how the word order is changed to adhere to HNSL grammar. Students are asked to copy the signed vocabulary and dialogues, receive feedback, and are later tested on their ability to recite the dialogues from memory.

Yet while the lessons were rote, hearing students reported feeling deeply moved by the classes. When I asked interpreters to describe their memories of taking classes at the Center, they dwelt extensively on the beauty of sign language and the way this beauty made them feel. Interpreters recalled experiencing sign language using words like strange (lạ), beautiful (đẹp) interesting (hay), and attractive (VISUALLY ATTRACTIVE).

For example, Lê described her experience in the following way:

> At the beginning, it was purely for recreation, I didn't think that I would come to love it or develop a passion for it. After 2-3 months, the more I learned, the more I liked sign language. It was different from when I was learning music or drawing with which I got bored relatively fast. With sign language, I would be sad when I missed a single lesson. Sign language was like water, slowly, slowly seeping into me. I came to appreciate its beauty (đẹp), the beauty that took months to fully appreciate that was veiled from the eyes of a beginner. Every lesson with An and Nam was filled with a laid-back atmosphere in which we could talk and have fun and learn at the same time. (Lê, personal communication, Vietnamese, 2019).

Similarly, Ngọc, one of the professional interpreters, described her experience in the following way:

> Sign language was so strange (LẠ[28]), it opened my mind. [The teacher's] signs were so interesting (HAY), the gestures (ĐIỆU BỘ), vocabulary, jokes, were all so [visually] attractive I would always remember them. All morning and afternoon in [university] would be boring, but the evening [during sign language class] would be filled with joy. (Ngọc, interview, HNSL, 2019)

Ngọc's and Lê's accounts both emphasize a sense of wonder and joy that emerges from hearing Hanoian's first encounters with sign language. There is an exoticism and a sense of rapture that emerges, particularly in Lê's account. She refers to the beauty of sign language as hidden by a veil, something that required time and study to come to fully appreciate. Indeed, deaf people often reported that when they used signs around hearing non-signers, they were asked if they were foreigners. This tendency to see sign language as exotic likely stems from language ideologies that frame Việt Nam as a monolingual society despite the presence of linguistic diversity within the country. Việt Nam has 54 officially recognized ethnic groups in the country that speak approximately 100 different spoken languages (Lavoie, 2011). However, ethnic Vietnamese (kinh) account for 87% of the population, and Vietnamese (the language of the kinh) has been the official national language since 1945. Spoken Vietnamese has a long history of being associated with nation building and anti-colonial resistance. This history has been reinforced by explicit government efforts in the post reunification era "not only as an embodiment of tradition and culture but also as a medium of communication able to meet the requirements of global integration" (T. T. Tran, 2022, p. 496). This history has created a linguistic landscape akin to Silverstein's "monoglot standard," where, despite clear linguistic

[28] I have provided glosses for some HNSL signs in Vietnamese as these signs are closely associated with Vietnamese words that do not translate as clearly into English.

diversity, there is a strong ideology that Vietnamese people should be seen and see themselves as fundamentally monolingual (Silverstein, 1998).

Against this background learning HNSL was a way to show off one's cosmopolitan identity, to engage in a worldly hobby. This use of sign language to perform a cosmopolitan middle-class identity is not distinct to Việt Nam. Erika Hoffman-Dilloway has also analyzed how patronizing restaurants that use sign language help hearing Nepalis perform an enlightened cosmopolitan identity (2011). What is unique to the deaf community in Hà Nội is the way that deaf leaders are able to turn learning HNSL "for oneself" to perform an enlightened cosmopolitan middle-class identity into a deeper commitment to belong to the deaf community.

## Cultivating Belonging

In order to turn learning HNSL "for oneself" to perform an enlightened cosmopolitan middle-class identity and/or to combat boredom and find community into a deeper commitment to the deaf community, deaf leaders began to actively cultivate a sense of belonging for interpreters. One way this happened was through actively inviting hearing people to join deaf people, whether to casually hang out over snacks, attend a deaf event, or join them for a special event or holiday. Indeed, during fieldwork, I often attended birthday parties, holiday parties, and even weddings of deaf people alongside interpreters. Often interpreters were the only hearing people invited, or when hearing family members were invited, there was a stark contrast between the way interpreters sat with the deaf people and signed fluently with them, while hearing non-signing family talked primarily to each other. Moreover, interpreters

were often chosen for intimate roles, typically reserved for close family and friends. For example, during my Fulbright research in 2014, myself and three hearing interpreters (Hương, Yen and Thư) were chosen by two prominent deaf leaders to bear gifts in their engagement ceremony (lễ ăn hỏi). We were the only hearing non-family members present at the event. The two other gift bearers were deaf, the photographer was deaf, and even the makeup artist was deaf. After the gift giving ceremony, while elders from the two hearing families gave formal speeches in spoken Vietnamese and discussed arrangements for the wedding, the newly engaged couple chatted with their deaf and interpreter friends ignoring the goings on of the hearing family.

Being invited and placed in special roles had the intended effect of making interpreters feel included, a fact which nearly every interpreter emphasized in their interviews. While they might not be deaf, deaf people had actively chosen them to be a part of the community. One interpreter, Mai, described with great pride the way she was treated by deaf people: "On special occasions, I always receive a lot of flowers, well wishes, and text messages from the deaf community. And when they hang out or when they have a party, the first non-deaf person they think of inviting is me, the interpreter."

These types of informal invitations to coffee, tea, or to participate in a family event were how the older generation of professional interpreters like Hương came to feel a sense of belonging towards the deaf community. Yet as the pool of interpreting started to grow, deaf people became even more proactive about cultivating and cementing this sense of belonging. There was real concern amongst deaf teachers of sign language that many hearing students did not stick with sign language classes long enough to feel a sense of belonging that tied them to

the deaf community. Thus, during my fieldwork, some of the deaf teachers and more senior interpreters decided to establish The Sign Language Club as a space to maintain hearing people's interest in the deaf community. Thao, a vice president of HAD, teacher at the Center and co-founder of the sign language club explained: "The purpose of the club is that before with the Center we were training students to become interpreters, but they all went away before they were ready to interpret. So, we established the club as a place where they could stay, become more integrated with deaf people, learn the culture of the deaf and improve their signing." This highly cultivated space intentionally geared to produce feelings of belonging was where the new cohort of novice interpreters found themselves becoming a part of the deaf community.

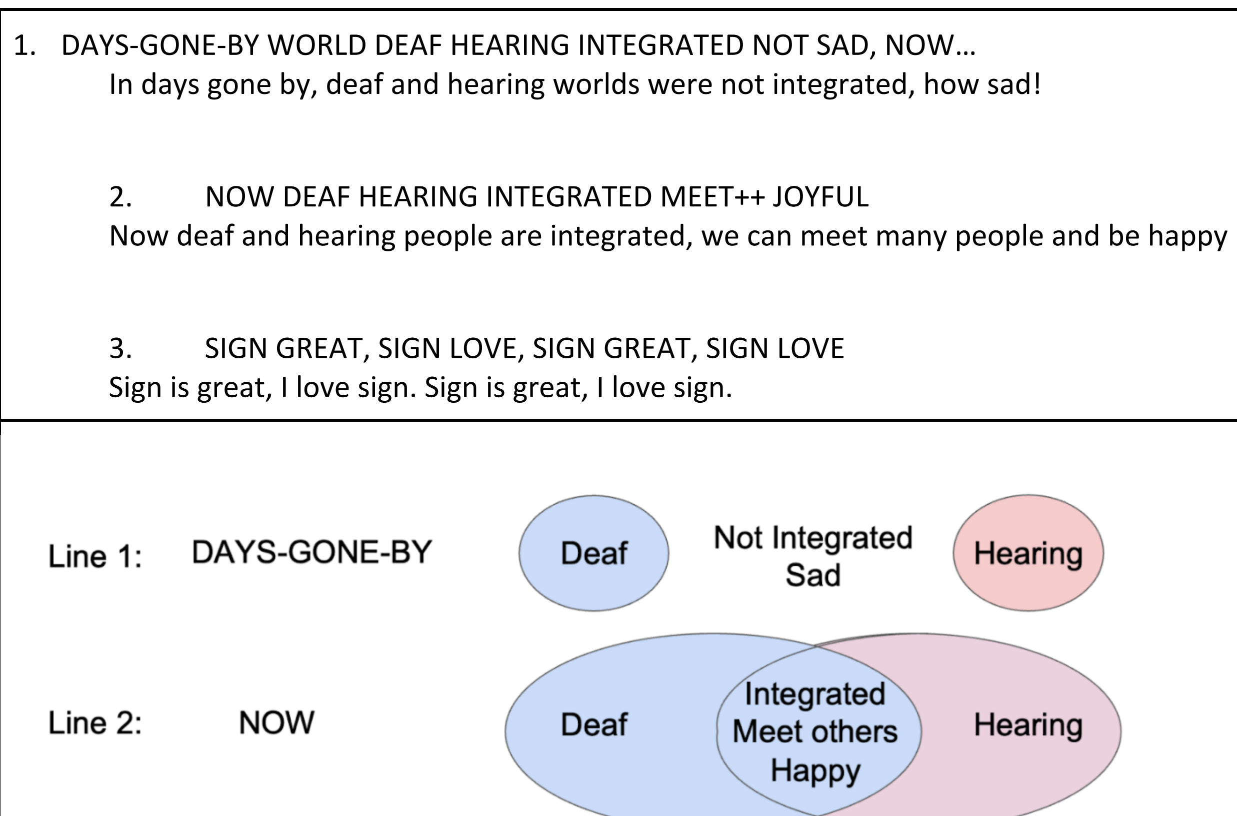
The sign language club met on a monthly basis and included both hearing HNSL students and deaf people from throughout Hà Nội. Typical meetings involved around 30 members, who were grouped into teams of hearing and deaf people. Each meeting there were fun games and activities designed and coordinated by one of the teams[29] (with feedback from the club organizers) intended to foster people's sign language skills, teach about deaf culture, and crucially create a sense of comradery between deaf and hearing people. These activities contained elements of ritualization in that they involved "exceptionally dense representation of spatiotemporally wider categories and principles in an interactional here-now" (Stasch, 2011, p. 160). Following the theorization of Silverstein, many anthropologists argue that the dense

[29] These activities were often pulled from activities participants had witnessed in leadership trainings, workshops or awareness raising events. For example, I witnessed similar activities in a workshop on LGBT issues attended by deaf leaders. These games are part of a genre of games used in social advocacy work and are intended to motivate change through creating a particular kind of affect and connection between people.

representational nature of rituals creates a *diagrammatic icon*, which means that different parts of the ritual map out how those coordinating the ritual wish to see the world (Stasch, 2011). In the sign language club, this meant creating a diagrammatic icon of a world integrated through sign language where deaf and hearing singers could belong to a shared community.

For example, one day the activities of the sign language club involved all of us learning a song in HNSL, which had been composed by the group leading the week's activities. The group leading the song stood in two rows to demonstrate. They started signing, swaying back and forth with the movement of each sign, signing three short lines.

*Figure 5: HNSL Integration Song*



While the lyrics of the song appear straightforward in English, in HNSL they are rich with spatial poetics. The song involves a complex rocking motion fueled by the linguistic structure of HNSL. In line one, signers first rock back by exaggerating the internal movement of the sign DAYS-GONE-BY, then forward following the internal movement of the sign WORLD. Then they rock to the left to establish the deaf world and right to establish the hearing world, using the spatial grammar of HNSL to contrast these two ways of being. The rest of the line is completed in a central area between the deaf and hearing world. Line two starts in the Center by repeating the sign NOW from line 1, then repeats the side-to-side rocking motion of DEAF(left), HEARING(right) with the rest of the line signed in the middle.

The diagrammatic icon that emerges from this motion contrasts two images of society: the past (located physically behind the signers through the iconic rocking movement) where the deaf and hearing worlds were separate and people were isolated, and the present (located in standard signing space) where the two worlds are integrated. While the separate worlds are associated with sadness, the integrated world is characterized as allowing people to meet and be happy. The message is that learning sign language provides new forms of sociality for both deaf and hearing people—the chance to meet others and experience the joy of these new relationships, the chance to belong. Indeed, in the last line, signers are invoked as part of this new integrated society by stating in first person singular,[30] "sign is great, I love sign."

As they finished, there was a round of applause, and the leader of the group, a deaf woman in her early twenties, instructed us to join in. We all gathered around in a circle, deaf

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[30] There is often a first-person pronoun drop in HNSL. The line is literally SIGN GREAT, LOVE SIGN. However, as pronoun drop is only permissible in first person sentences (or in quoted speech) this sentence is clearly in first person.

and hearing standing side by side, and swayed together in unison as we sang the song together, watching the leaders. While the song was new for us, and our HNSL skill level varied, through repetition and maintaining eye contact in the circle, we were all able to sign in unison. Again, the iconicity of us all standing in one large circle of deaf and hearing people, signing about being integrated created rich layers of representation that brought together the microcosm of this space with the macrocosmic view of an integrated world. We were creating the world we sang about, a world where deaf and hearing signers could be integrated and meet each other, sharing joy through our signed song.

Then Thao, one of the co-founders of the sign language club, said someone should go in the middle. She nominated herself and sang a round turning as she went to sing to the whole group. Then she declared that the main signer should choose another person, alternating deaf and hearing to sign. She chose me next, and I went into the middle of the circle only to temporarily panic—while I am fluent in HNSL and signing along to the song was easy, leading a song I had learned just minutes before was far more difficult. The song was deceptively simple. While there were only a few lyrics, you also needed to remember the rocking motions that gave the song its poetic nature. Panicked that I would not be able to remember the full song, I looked around for support. My eyes locked on the deaf woman who had led the song, and suddenly my panic subsided. I could copy her. I started "leading" the song, by drawing on the abilities of those around me. I could do this, I could belong, even if I was not deaf, even if my signing was not perfect.

As I finished my round of signing, I called up another signer and the process repeated. Some of the hearing signers struggled more than others, a few failing altogether to figure out

the secret of how to rely on others. Yet most were able to successfully lead the song, and there was a moment where you could see the relief spread across their faces as they locked eyes with a skilled deaf signer and realized they could rely on others for support. At one point Lê took the lead with the song, initially frowning as she struggled with the song, then smiling broadly. It was just one of the many moments in the sign language club where the ritual semiotics created a space where hearing people could experience the joy and relief of belonging. It was the feeling of knowing even though they weren't deaf, even if they couldn't sign perfectly, there was a community of people that would support them in their journey of becoming a hearing signer, and hopefully a hearing interpreter.

Other activities similarly aimed to produce this sense of belonging. For example, one night we ended the sign language club with a "sharing" activity. The leaders of the club brought out a yellow ball of yarn and instructed everyone to sit in a circle. One person started off with the ball of yarn and shared a story about their day, then threw the ball to another person in the circle who had to share. The things shared ranged from the mundane (e.g., being happy to be at the sign language club) to more serious matters (witnessing a motorbike accident that morning, feeling frustrated at work because their hearing boss didn't sign, etc.). Yet all stories, mundane or serious, carried an emotional valence, and as more and more people shared the string provided a physical instantiation of the emotional ties that bound us all together. Again, the activity created a diagrammatic icon, an image of us all woven together by a string where signing facilitated our ability to be connected to one another.

*Figure 6: Sharing thread activity at the sign language club*

<u>Gatekeeping and Precarious Belonging</u>

However, desiring to belong to the deaf community is not enough to become an interpreter; deaf people also have to *want* a particular hearing person to belong to the community as an interpreter. Teachers at the Center as well as other prominent deaf leaders act as gatekeepers determining which hearing people can become interpreters, and at times even forcing interpreters who have wronged them out of the community entirely. Gatekeeping serves an important purpose in balancing the power dynamic between deaf people and interpreters. As mentioned in the introduction, interpreting studies literature has emphasized that interpreters can be paternalistic, demand gratitude from deaf people, valuing their own professional expertise over deaf peoples' lived experience, and even adopting negative stereotypes about sign language and deaf signers (Baker-Shenk, 1986, 1991; Cokely, 2005;

Robinson et al., 2020; Witter-Merithew, 1999). Moreover, interpreters can shape the way deaf people are perceived by hearing interlocutors, rendering deaf people interactionally vulnerable (Feyne, 2017; Young et al., 2019). Internationally, gatekeeping has been used informally by deaf communities (Cokely, 2005) and in professional interpreter training programs (Hunt & Nicodemus, 2014) to help balance these power dynamics. Building on this literature, I show that gatekeeping also radically shapes what it means to belong to the deaf community, simultaneously rendering belonging precarious and making belonging to the deaf community feel like something special that has to be earned and maintained.

Gatekeeping for interpreters started as deaf leaders and senior interpreters at the Center searched for students with the right attitude to become sign language interpreters. The primary characteristic that deaf teachers and senior interpreters looked for was the ability for hearing HNSL students to OPEN-[their]-MINDS to deaf culture and beliefs about sign language (Marie, 2020). As previously mentioned, most students at the Center had little to no prior relationship with deaf people and were motivated to learn sign language "for themselves," as part of finding belonging during a challenging time in their lives or cultivating a cosmopolitan middle-class identity. Thus, students, despite their interest in sign language, often came in with negative beliefs about sign language and deaf people. For example, one of the professional interpreters recalled holding such negative beliefs when she started learning sign language: "Previously, I thought deaf people where stupid—they could not learn well. That in sign language the conversations were just average, not advanced. Those were my beliefs. Later, through work and collaboration, my mind was opened, and I changed my beliefs."

While negative beliefs about deaf people and sign language were common, some students were willing to do the self-work to change their beliefs and attitudes, re-orienting towards deaf ways of seeing the world, while others were not. For example, one hearing student insisted on continuing to use the word khiếm thính (lit: hearing impaired) even after An and two interpreters spent nearly 20 minutes explaining why deaf people preferred using the word Điếc (lit: deaf) to refer to themselves. The choice of vocabulary carried significant weight because deaf people believed it indexed students' *language ideologies* about sign language. Language ideologies are "ubiquitous sets of diverse beliefs, however implicit or explicit they may be, used by speakers of all types as models for constructing linguistic evaluations and engaging in communicative activity" (Kroskrity, 2004, p. 497). Cooper and Nguyễn have analyzed how khiếm thính indexes ideologies that deafness is a stigmatized medical condition that needed to be referred to via euphemism, while Điếc indexes ideologies that deaf people are part of a community with a shared language and culture (Cooper, 2014; Cooper & Nguyễn, 2015). By continuing to use the term khiếm thính, this student showed she remained oriented to hearing ideologies and refused to reorient to deaf peoples' ideologies. As this student refused to reorient, the deaf teachers passed her over when inviting students to attend deaf events and eventually she lost interest and stopped taking HNSL classes.

Conversely, future sign language interpreters showed they had the potential to re-orient towards ways of being through changing their vocabulary to use Điếc, adopting embodied norms of communication viewed to be particularly deaf (e.g., using facial expression the way deaf people did), and treating deaf people as authority figures by asking them questions about sign language and deaf culture (Marie, 2020). Being able to make such small changes was

viewed by deaf people as proof that interpreting students were willing to change their views about deaf people and could continue to do so in the future. In linguistic anthropology terms, they were indexes of conversion. Deaf teachers at the Center would actively invite such students to attend deaf events or have coffee with themselves or more experienced interpreters, slowly drawing them into deaf sociality. In other words, deaf leaders sought interpreting students who could transform themselves, and would continue transforming themselves, changing their relationship to the deaf community and sign language as they grew and developed in their interpreting practice.

Thus, only a handful of HNSL students were invited by deaf leaders to become interpreters. Being picked to interpret was often something interpreters recalled with pride. For example, one day I observed one of the professional interpreters Chi on an interpreting job where Australian study abroad students visited a local deaf haircutting salon to learn about what it was like to be a disabled business owner in Việt Nam. After the students finished interviewing the deaf business owner, one of the professors asked Chi how she started interpreting. Chi responded, simultaneously signing in HNSL and speaking English (sim comming) that she had started out by taking sign language classes, and deaf people had chosen her because she had potential. Chi's face and tone of voice was full of a subtle but clear pride as she recalled being one of the few HNSL students selected to interpret. The deaf business owner who had been watching the conversation unfold cut in asking Chi, "Who chose you?" Chi responded that An had chosen her, and that she had been mentored by two of the more senior interpreters. At the mention of An's name, the deaf business owner instantly warmed and nodded in approval. An was a highly respected leader in the deaf community, known for

training and selecting quality interpreters. Being chosen by An served as what Michael Silverstein refers to as a "baptismal moment," where the interpreter is performatively constituted as a particular kind of person, in this case as belonging to the deaf community as an interpreter (Silverstein, 2005). Checking the name of the person who chose Chi served to validate that she had become part of the deaf community in the proper way, by being selected by a person with the proper authority (a deaf community leader).

Yet while gatekeeping served to confer interpreters with legitimacy and a sense of pride in being chosen to belong to a highly selective community, discussion about gatekeeping also served to remind interpreters that their belonging to the deaf community required active work on their part to maintain. Interpreters know that their belonging to the deaf community is conditional and can be revoked at any time, either because they have witnessed others getting kicked out or because they have explicitly been told that they can get kicked out.

Consider for example how Lê was first asked to become an interpreter after participating in the Christmas-themed art competition hosted by Listening to the Deaf (a community organization whose mission is to raise awareness of deaf culture through visual arts). After the competition wrapped up, I spied a group of some of Hà Nội's most well-known deaf people intently talking to Lê about her experience learning sign language. I arrived just in time to see Son, one of the former presidents of HAD, invite Lê to participate in an upcoming interpreter training program which would be taught by two American interpreter trainers. Son explained to Lê, "we want you to participate, so long as your purpose is truly deaf people. We want you to participate, but if you just want to play around (đi chơi) we will kick you out."

We can read this moment as one of interpolation, where Son hails Lê as a future interpreter, inviting her to participate in an interpreter training program. Yet at the same time as Lê is invited in, the conditions of her belonging are clearly laid out. Son explicitly frames the conditions of gatekeeping when he says "we want you to participate, so long as your purpose is truly deaf people… but if you just want to play around (đi chơi) we will kick you out." In Việt Nam, đi chơi (lit. to play) is the common phrase used to refer to leisure activities, like riding motorbikes, visiting cafes and eating out with friends (A. L. Tran, 2012). Interestingly, Lê's initial interest in learning sign language "for herself" would be considered a form of đi chơi, a pastime or hobby one pursues as part inhabiting the role of an-upwardly mobile middle class college student. Yet in being hailed as an interpreter, Lê is asked to turn away from this early orientation to signing as a form of leisure, and instead view signing and interpreting as part of the obligations of belonging to the deaf community. In contrasting "signing for deaf people" with "signing to đi chơi," Son is calling on familiar discourses in Việt Nam that frame leisure in contrast to enacting proper forms of obligation and belonging. While đi chơi can be an important part of cementing relationships with friends and colleagues, playing too much is interpreted as abandoning one's responsibilities and obligations to relationships (Tran 2012, p. 203). Thus, interpreters are reminded that to belong to the deaf community, they must fulfill their obligations and not play around. While I will expand more on these obligations in the next chapter, one of the most important was spending time with deaf people, beyond time spent interpreting, as part of demonstrating commitment to the deaf community.

While migration status and middle-class aspirations are aspects of interpreters' backgrounds that draw them into the deaf community in the first place, their experience of

belonging to the deaf community is highly shaped by gendered norms of how Vietnamese women are socialized to enact belonging. Scholars examining gendered family dynamics have emphasized how Vietnamese subjectivity is one that is inherently enmeshed in relationships with others (Gammeloft, 2014; Rydstrom, 2003; Shohet 2021). Family dynamics are characterized by hiếu (filial piety), where younger generations are expected to feel ơn (boundless gratitude) for the life and care they have received, and which they express through honoring their superiors (Sohet 2021, p. 72-73). Merav Shohet argues that such relationships are a form of bidirectional asymmetrical reciprocity which requires "subjects across different generations learn to value and aspire to participate in mutual relations of moral debt and obligation" articulated through the twin concepts of tình cảm (feelings of care and love that motivate material provisioning) and hy sinh (everyday quotidian sacrifice) (ibid. 72). Yet while everyone within the family participates in asymmetrical reciprocity, the expectation to engage in everyday forms of sacrifice normatively is particularly associated with women who are expected to demonstrate their love and care through "anticipat[ing] and fulfill[ing] the needs and wants of others 'intuitively' by sanguinely forgoing certain comforts and freedoms" (ibid. 76).

Such normative gender roles are mapped onto the relationship between deaf leaders and interpreters, as interpreters are drawn into relationships of fictive kinship with deaf people. There is a significant gender contrast between deaf leadership, which is predominantly comprised of men, and interpreting, which is predominantly comprised of women. Male deaf leaders gets submitted in for patriarchal heads of families. Conversely, normative gender roles for women enable interpreters to easily fit into relationships of asymmetrical reciprocity with

deaf people, enacting their love and gratitude for being included in the deaf community through spending time with deaf people and interpreting.

The fact that interpreters take on normative gender roles in both deaf communities and their natal families also creates challenges for interpreters as they seek to balance multiple forms of belonging and different forms of sacrifice. The work of belonging to these multiple spaces is thus a constant struggle with which interpreters must grapple. It is these struggles to which I now turn.

## Strains on Other Forms of Belonging

The obligations of belonging to the deaf community were considerable enough that they were understood as competing with other forms of belonging young Vietnamese women engaged in. Often when interpreters were first starting out, the tensions between multiple forms of belonging were lighter. College students generally entered HNSL classes "for themselves" and only as they came to spend more time with the deaf community and moved down the path of becoming an interpreter saw the expectations of reciprocity grow. Yet at the same time as obligations to the deaf community grew, interpreters progressed along their life courses, facing increasing demands of belonging in other parts of their lives. Interpreters moved from unmarried college students, with minimal familial obligations, into the role of young professional women who faced new expectation from their families of origin. Belonging to the deaf community thus became a totalizing project, one that came into tension and pushed up against other forms of belonging young Vietnamese women were engaged in. To illustrate these tensions, I return to Hương's story. As a 30-year-old woman from the provinces,

who had been working with the deaf community for nearly a decade, the tensions between different forms of belonging were highly visible in Hương's life.

It was a warm Friday afternoon when I waited for Hương at Giáp Bát bus station, a large inter-regional bus station in Hà Nội. The plan was for Hương and I to take a bus to Hương's hometown, about 60 km outside of Hà Nội, both so I could meet deaf people outside of Hà Nội, and to learn more about Hương's life outside of work. Like many young female migrants in Việt Nam, Hương attempted to maintain close ties with her natal family despite differences in educational status, perspectives on gender, and cosmopolitan experience that marked her as different from her family of origin (Earl, 2014). Hương typically aimed to go back to visit her mother, older brother, sister-in-law, and eight-year-old niece about once a month, but with her many responsibilities to the deaf community (being the head of Hanoi Association of Sign Language Interpreters [HASLI], a co-founder of Hà Nội's first interpreting company SC Deaf, attending meetings of the Hà Nội Association of the Deaf, helping coordinate the sign language club, and spending time with deaf people and novice interpreters), she frequently found herself putting off visits.

Ever since I had told her I wanted to meet deaf people outside of the city, and Hương had invited me to come stay with her family, Hương had been talking wistfully about getting out of Hà Nội. She was often the last one working at the SC Deaf office, staying late to finish grant applications that would keep SC Deaf afloat, or working on some event that would be organized with deaf community leaders. In those moments, when it was just me and her alone in the office, she would tell me about how she missed the countryside and talk wistfully about her next trip home.

Despite her enthusiasm for the trip, Hương was running late. Hương was a habitually tardy person, her many responsibilities pulling her in different directions and meaning that she never arrived or left anywhere at the time she planned. Today she was caught up writing grants to keep SC Deaf afloat. She arrived 45 minutes later than planned, and we hastily bought our tickets. As the guard took our tickets, and it became clear we would indeed make our bus in time, she linked her arm in mine[31] and announced "I'm going home!" with a huge grin on her face. We settled into our seats and the bus headed out of Hà Nội, the density of the city giving way to small towns and rice paddies.

Leaving the city seemed to prompt Hương to become particularly reflective about her work, its impact on her personal life and her relationship to the deaf community. As the bus wound its way through the countryside, Hương explained some of the tensions between what her family expected of her and deaf community norms. As Hương put it, her family "didn't understand" her job. At the heart of this conflict was the gendered, classed, expectations that her family had for her. Hương's family was of average means: comfortable, but not well off. Her mom was a retired secondary teacher and her dad had owned his own auto repair shop before he passed away due to a heart condition. While working as a school teacher was a government job, and thus considered an appropriate stable job for a woman raising a family, it was not a particularly well paying. Therefore, Hương's mother often had to take on odd jobs to make ends meet, particularly when Hương's father had started ailing and wasn't able to perform as much physical labor. Despite these financial struggles, Hương's family's house had four stories

[31] At the time of research, I still presented as female, so linking arms with a female friend of the same age was socially acceptable.

with spacious rooms, nice carved wooden furniture in the living room, and even a small countertop dishwasher that Hương had saved for in order to help her mother out with the dishes while she was away in the city. In Hà Nội, such a house would have marked Hương's family as upper middle class, but in the countryside the cost of living was lower, so such houses were far more common.

Hương's parents had sought to raise the status of their family by raising funds to send Hương, their second child, to the city to receive a college education. The hope was Hương would be able to rise above her class background, securing a less financially precarious livelihood than her parents. In particular, Hương's mother hoped that Hương would find a "stable job" that would allow Hương to be financially comfortable, while simultaneously being flexible enough and not too demanding so that she would have time to get married and raise children of her own. This concept of a stable job was a gendered, classed expectation that many of the interpreters who came from middle class backgrounds, either from the countryside or the city, reported that their parents held. Interpreting confused Hương's parents, at least initially, because it didn't fit into the model of a stable job. Hương told me that initially her parents thought interpreting was simply volunteering or doing charity work, and therefore wasn't a "real job." She said that her dad was more supportive, allowing her to take sign language classes and not placing strong financial pressure on her to contribute back to the family the way other children in some other families were. However, her mother constantly worried about how she would be able to support herself, how she would be able to find a husband without a stable or easily understood career. As Hương put it, her mother felt the weight of social pressure more than her father. Her mother was constantly being asked by

acquaintances “What is your daughter doing?”—and wanted to respond with something that was socially acceptable.

Eventually when Hương landed her first interpreting job on TV, her dad saw her on the evening news broadcast, and started bragging to friends that that was his daughter on national television. The legitimacy of the national television network, combined with receiving a regular income (although not sufficient to live on full time), helped him accept what she was doing and be proud of her. Sadly, Hương’s father passed away at a young age from a heart condition, and without her husband there to convince her otherwise, Hương’s mother took much longer to make peace with Hương’s unusual career choice. Hương’s mother often commented that she would have preferred Hương to have a different job like an accountant or a teacher. She worried that interpreting was too difficult of a job, and often told Hương that “You should work in an office with an air conditioner.” Eventually Hương brought some of her deaf friends home, and over time her mom began to accept the job because she realized that Hương was helping people who were socially disadvantaged. Yet Hương confided in me that she felt like her mother never fully accepted her work.

In particular, Hương’s mother continued to worry about the impact of interpreting on Hương’s marriage prospects. The second day of our visit to the countryside, I had lunch with Hương’s family and after everyone else left, Hương and I lingered, eating fresh lychee and dragon fruit and chatting. Hương shared with me, “My mom said last night she had a dream she was at my wedding, she woke up, and wanted to keep sleeping.” Hương was well past the national average of marriage (the average age of first marriage in Việt Nam is 27.2 years for men and 23.1 years for women) (The 2015 National Internal Migration Survey, p. 3). Many of

the factors that caused young female migrants to delay marriage applied to Hương—a desire to focus on education and career coupled with difficulties in finding a Vietnamese man who accepted her unconventional views on gender (Earl, 2014). Yet interpreters like Hương faced an additional layer of barriers to finding a husband: finding a Vietnamese man who understood their work with the deaf community and would support their life choices. Hương explained that her mother was particularly afraid of her marrying a deaf man, and being unable to communicate with him. As Hương put it, her mother was afraid of being different, and having other people perceive her family differently. These many tensions between Hương and her family, over her not meeting gendered classed expectations for an appropriate career and not being able to find a husband, put strains on her sense of belonging. Although Hương had been looking forward to returning home for ages, by the time we returned to Hà Nội two days later, Hương confessed she was relieved to return to Hà Nội.

However, it was not simply that interpreting and belonging to the deaf community conflicted with her parents normative expectations for her. Hương's connections to the deaf community also meant that she had new expectations for her family. She hoped to bridge the distance between the deaf community and her family, helping them understand and communicate with each other so that it would in turn be easier for her to belong to both worlds. For example, Hương was particularly fond of her eight-year-old niece who was bright and inquisitive. Hương's first order of business upon returning home was to get a tour of her niece's latest drawings and an update on her school work. However, as Hương explained to me, she had tried to teach her niece to sign, but her niece would always forget the signs by the next visit, because Hương was gone too long working in the city. Hương wondered aloud to me how

she could bridge her work with the deaf community and her relationship with her family if she couldn't even teach her niece to sign. Similarly, Hương complained about her mother not understanding her work as an interpreter. As Hương put it, if she couldn't even have her own mother understand her work, was she really bridging deaf and hearing communities the way an interpreter was supposed to?

Hương's obligations to the deaf community also impinged on the time she had to spend with her family. As excited as Hương was to be home and escape the city and the constant work of running SC Deaf, her weekend did not prove to be an escape. Hương spent over half of our two-day visit hard at work on the ancient computer in the garage, coordinating with one of the novice interpreters at SC Deaf to get a grant in that was due Monday. While I spent the day getting shown around the city by a deaf man who was an acquaintance of Hương's, Hương remained tethered to the computer and her phone, fighting the slow internet and processor to get the grant in on time. When I returned from my tour around the city, Hương pondered how her life had come to be the way it was. She told me how she missed the "golden days" when she first learned sign language and could just spend time with deaf people as friends and didn't have to work for the deaf community carrying that broader weight on her shoulders. In other words, Hương wanted to belong to both the deaf community and her family, but wished that the expectations of the deaf community would become less intense so that she could belong to both more easily.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I've laid out how different gendered, classes aspects of hearing Vietnamese women's life course trajectories left them searching for a sense of community and

belonging. While the exact circumstances of why these women were seeking community was varied, learning sign language and becoming part of deaf community, however tenuously, filled that gap. In other words, becoming part of deaf worlds was an attempt to shore up precarious belonging that existed in other parts of interpreters' lives. Deaf leaders contributed to this feeling of belonging by inviting potential interpreters to deaf events and important occasions like engagement ceremonies, making them feel special. They also used activities that functioned as ritual practices to foster and create an intentional sense of belonging within deaf communities.

Yet ironically, in seeking to join deaf communities and combat the social precarity that existed in their lives, interpreters found themselves experiencing new forms of social precarity. As much as they could seek to belong to deaf worlds, and were often included within deaf worlds, their acceptance was always conditional, depending on the good grace of deaf leaders who served as gatekeepers to the community. While interpreter's experience of opening their minds and converting to deaf sociality mirrored deaf people's to a point, it diverged in that there was always the potential of no longer being accepted. Moreover, the expectations of belonging to the deaf community pushed up against normative expectations of belonging from their families of origin, causing interpreters to struggle to balance competing expectations.

One way in which interpreters sought to cement their belonging to the deaf community despite their hearing status was by interpreting or otherwise volunteering their labor for free. This was why Hương, even on her short, long-anticipated trip to her hometown, had worked long hours trying to secure a grant for SC Deaf. Her volunteered time was a way of showing that she cared and that she wanted to belong. Yet in interpreting for free, interpreters found

themselves caught choosing between social and financial precarity. It is to this conflict which I now turn.

# CHAPTER THREE: EATING TO LIVE OR WORKING FROM THE HEART

One evening at the Center in 2017, I found An leaning on the railing of the breezeway outside the classrooms staring pensively at the courtyard. After working with An for 7 years, I recognized this as his favorite spot for worrying about the future. In 2015 An had stood at this same railing the week the intergenerational Deaf Education Outreach (IDEO) Project had ended. The IDEO project was an NGO pilot project funded through the world bank designed to prove the efficacy of providing deaf preschool aged children and their parents with instruction in HNSL from deaf mentors. The program had employed deaf leaders from across the country, as well as all the HNSL interpreters working in Hà Nội at the time. The goal of the project was to get the Ministry of Education to adopt the program, however the Vietnamese government was unwilling to continue the project without continued international funding. When the IDEO project ended, all of the deaf leaders (including An), as well as all of the HNSL interpreters lost their primary source of income overnight. That night An expressed his concern about what would happen to the growth of sign language interpreting and deaf politics without sources of funding. Judging by the brooding look on his face, I guessed that this conversation would take on the same tone.

An asked if I knew that Thư, one of the six professional HNSL interpreters, had quit volunteering her time to interpret at the Center. I was quite surprised Thư had quit. Thư's story very closely mirrored that of Hương's story. Like Hương, Thư found a sense of belonging through interpreting at a time in her life when she was searching for community. As a young college student from the provinces bored with her major, and inspired by memories of a deaf neighbor growing up, Thư had begun taking classes at the Center, and quickly became involved

in the deaf community. An had personally trained her as an interpreter, and she began working as a paid interpreter for the IDEO project and interpreting on TV for the nightly news. But Thư did not only interpret for money; she had always reserved time to volunteer at the Center, interpreting classroom instructions into spoken Vietnamese for new HNSL students and managing the Center's social media presence. When the IDEO project ended in 2015, Thư had to find another source of income through a part time job as a personal fitness trainer, but she had continued volunteering at the Center for nearly two years (2015-2017) after she lost her income from IDEO.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, being involved in the deaf community provided interpreters with a sense of belonging that was otherwise absent in their lives. Yet, interpreters' belonging to the deaf community is a precarious project. As hearing individuals, they are not bound to the deaf community by ties of sameness, but in the words of one HNSL interpreter, are more like "in laws" to the community. One of the key ways that interpreters were expected to maintain their belonging to the deaf community was through what deaf people referred to as HAVE-HEART; loving and actively demonstrating their love for deaf people.

Since I first began working with deaf people and interpreters in Việt Nam in 2010, one of the primary aspects (indexes) of enacting love has been interpreting for free, or volunteering. While this association between working for free and HAVE-HEART has begun to be questioned by interpreters in the last several years (~2017 onwards), it is still a perspective held by many deaf people. Deaf people have generally accepted interpreters receiving payment to interpret when hearing people were paying (i.e., on television for the nightly news, or for NGO meetings). However, under HAVE-HEART, interpreters were expected to volunteer their time

interpreting for any situation where deaf people would have to pay (i.e., at the Center, at HAD events, and for individual deaf clients). This had been what Thư was doing at the Center; demonstrating her love for deaf people by volunteering her time. Indeed, in previous interviews with Thư, she had spoken proudly about her work at the Center, explaining how a good interpreter had to spend time with deaf people outside of paid work. She also talked to me with pride about passing on her experience through mentoring new interpreters at the Center, so that the new generation of interpreters would not have to struggle to learn HNSL and interpret on their own the way she had. She saw this effort of helping grow the field of HNSL interpreting as a sign of her commitment to the deaf community.

I asked An why Thư had quit, but An said he didn't know. An continued, now frustrated; "She's busy with work, she's been doing her exercise business, teaching cycling. She's just focused on EAT-(to)-LIVE (eating-to-live). I don't say anything to her. I just respect it." The phrase "I just respect it" is often used by deaf people in Hà Nội to denote when they do not agree with someone, but will let them carry on with their course of action anyways. What An was implying was that if Thư really cared she could have kept volunteering at the Center, even while working to support herself.

An speculated that the reason Thư quit was because she was focused on EAT-(to)-LIVE. The phrase EAT-(to)-LIVE is unique to HNSL (there is no direct translation to spoken Vietnamese) and literally combines the sign EAT and LIVE (see: Figure 6). EAT-(to)-LIVE is invoked in two very distinct ways within the deaf community in Hà Nội. When people refer to themselves as needing to EAT-(to)-LIVE, it is a commentary about how they do not have the

economic stability or privilege to volunteer for free or engage in leisure activities; they must receive compensation so they can EAT-(to)-LIVE.

*Figure 7: HNSL signs for HAVE-HEART vs. EAT-(to)-LIVE*

Deaf people in Việt Nam are highly familiar with the economic insecurity glossed in the phrase EAT-(to)-LIVE. The majority of jobs for deaf people in Hà Nội are so called "low-skilled" jobs, consisting mainly of tailoring, working in service industries (cafes, hotels, bakeries), street vending, or haircutting. Such jobs are low pay, demanding that deaf people work significant hours to earn a living. Moreover, as I observed during my fieldwork, deaf people circulated between jobs and workplaces in Hà Nội, due to frequent communication breakdowns with their hearing non-signing bosses. Even more highly skilled deaf leaders often found themselves scrambling to EAT-(to)-LIVE. For example, An, like most deaf leaders of HAD, had worked for the IDEO project as teachers for preschool aged deaf children. However, when the funding dried up for the project, he moved between many different jobs, including working as a tour guide for

international deaf travelers, and raising the prices of HNSL classes at the Center so he could increase the salaries for himself and the other deaf teachers.

Given this shared experience of financial insecurity, why was An so dismissive of interpreters like Thư's need to EAT-(to)-LIVE? My suspicion was that An meant something different in using the phrase EAT-(to)-LIVE. I asked by fingerspelling if An was referring to the spoken Vietnamese slang for working "kiếm ăn" which literally means "to forage/look for food." An agreed that this was what he meant. Kiếm ăn reduces work to its most basal form, invoking the image of an animal focused solely on sustenance and survival. In invoking this animalistic image, kiếm ăn strips work of its moral and social obligations, and focuses simply on the need to work to survive. Deaf leaders often drew a clear contrast between focusing on EAT-(to)-LIVE and HAVE-HEART; they would discuss how one interpreter HAD-HEART and was willing to work for free, while others only cared about EAT-(to)-LIVE, their own financial needs. In saying that Thư was focused on EAT-(to)-LIVE, An was implying that Thư did not HAVE-HEART; she did not care about the deaf community or the future of interpreting, she only cared about her own economic gain.

An's sense that Thư could have continued volunteering her time for free at the Center was informed by his own experience as a deaf leader who was intimately familiar with balancing financial insecurity with volunteering for the deaf community. Whenever I talked with deaf leaders about interpreters' financial difficulties, they were quick to point out that deaf people were just as financially unstable (often more financially unstable) than interpreters and yet they still found time to volunteer for the deaf community. An and the other leaders of HAD spent a large portion of the time they weren't working serving the deaf community, often

devoting their entire weekends and multiple weeknights to HAD meetings and other advocacy related activities. I often saw deaf leaders refer to their advocacy work as a form of sacrifice. I first saw deaf leaders begin to refer to their work as a form of sacrifice in 2013. After a new president of HAD was elected, deaf leaders from across northern Việt Nam convened at a coffee shop to discuss deaf advocacy work. There was a lengthy discussion about the concept of "hy sinh" (sacrifice). The leaders spent time considering potential translations for hy sinh in HNSL and discussed how working in deaf leadership was an important form of sacrifice for the community. Deaf leaders explicitly compared sacrificing for the deaf community with sacrificing for their country or their family (see Shohet, 2021 for a discussion of how wonen's labor in Việt Nam, such as child rearing and organizing rituals is discussed through the rhetoric of sacrifice). In other words, deaf leaders were drawing on common rhetoric of fictive kinship in Việt Nam, that imagined the country, and an individual's obligations to it through the lenses of family. Deaf leaders then extended this metaphor to apply to the deaf community as yet another family to which it's members must sacrifice.

Deaf labor and activism, like women's labor,  while glorified as "sacrifice" often goes unnoticed and undervalued by broader society, and crucially in this circumstance, by hearing interpreters. Deaf leaders were quick to point out that their sacrifice for the deaf community not only benefited deaf people – it helped grow the field of interpreting. There is a logic of gift giving here; deaf people sacrifice for interpreters in doing advocacy for the development of sign language interpreting, and in return interpreters sacrifice for deaf people by interpreting their advocacy. It was against this background that An felt that interpreters could and should

continue volunteering for the deaf community -- after all weren't they all working for a future where there would be more jobs for both deaf people and interpreters?

Deaf leaders assumed that if they could contribute to deaf activism, interpreters could also contribute their time.  However, this ignores some of the differences in competing demands on deaf people and interpreters' time. Deaf leaders may have had more time to contribute to deaf activism then hearing interpreters because deaf people did not necessarily have the same financial, social and ritual obligations to their families. Hearing family members often assumed deaf people were not capable of fulfilling these obligations, and exempted them from these obligations. Yet this also came with a cost as deaf people were often also denied the privileges that went along with these obligations. For example, one hard of hearing woman explained how she went through a divorce because her ex-husband's family felt that she would not be able to fulfill the ritual obligations required of the wife of an eldest son due to her lack of hearing.

Moreover, hopes for the future can not necessarily sustain one in the moment or fulfill all of the social obligations to which interpreters are subject. Interpreters gradually began to push back on the logic that loving deaf people and belonging to the deaf community required them to work for free. Thu's decision to quit volunteering at the Center was one such moment. When I returned to the field in 2019 for my dissertation work, I tracked Thư down to find out why she quit working at the Center. I hadn't seen Thư at any deaf events or interpreting gigs, so I asked her out for coffee.  We both settled in and caught up with each other's lives chatting in HNSL (while we both knew HNSL, Vietnamese, and English, we could most easily converse in

HNSL in which we shared similar levels of fluency). Thư quickly turned the conversation to what had happened in 2017.

Thư explained in HNSL; "I love signing, I want to keep interpreting. But I only get paid a little bit." She said after the IDEO project ended, she could interpret for occasional NGO meetings and television, but that the pay was insufficient. Thư came from a family that had been impacted by poverty, drug addiction and untimely deaths, so she didn't have an economic cushion or strong familial support system to fall back on. She took on a part time job, but that made the situation worse. Her job as an exercise instructor didn't offer her much flexibility in terms of schedule, effectively limiting the possibilities for her to spend time with deaf people. As Thư explained when deaf people invited her to hangout, she would often have to tell them she was busy. Thư speculated that this caused deaf people to think she didn't HAVE-HEART, because in their eyes she didn't *want* to spend time with deaf people. She soon stopped getting as many calls to do freelance interpreting for NGO meetings, or invitations for paid work at deaf people's weddings. Even her volunteer work at the Center didn't curry favor with the broader deaf community. The Center was composed of hearing students and only a handful of Deaf teachers, so her enactment of love was not seen by many deaf people. As Thư explained, "I really love signing, so I wanted to encourage signing. I didn't interpret as much because I was focused on the sign language center, so deaf people didn't like me as much."

Eventually the pressure became too much, and Thư was forced to reduce her time interpreting altogether. Thu explained, "I couldn't keep two goals at once. So, I switched to focusing on the exercise classes so I could have a salary." Thư was vague about what precisely those two goals were. Perhaps she simply meant interpreting and working at the exercise

center. But I suspect she was referring to something bigger: the goals of belonging to the deaf community and making a living. Thư's next comment suggests that this was the conflict she was talking about: "Now I just focus on working for the exercise company, and I interpret for free when I can, but it's hard because I'm busy. Mostly I work, go home and eat and watch movies with my lover. That's enough. That's happiness enough." Here Thư used the HNSL sign for FAMILIAL-HAPPINESS the affective sense that is supposed to come from belonging to a family. Embedded in Thư's comment that she found "happiness enough" with her lover was a sense of the happiness she had lost; the happiness that came from truly feeling like she belonged in the deaf community. Thư was hoping that one form of belonging could compensate for the other form of belonging that was slowly diminishing in her life.

## EAT-(to)-LIVE vs. HAVE-HEART:

As mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, interpreting in Việt Nam has largely developed in the absence of state support. In countries in the so-called "Global North," governments have taken it upon themselves to either directly fund sign language interpreters, or to mandate private businesses and service providers to provide interpreters. Yet in the Global South, government involvement in the economics of sign language interpreting is far less common. On a policy level, the United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) specifies that states should provide professional sign language interpreters (UNCRPD, 2006, art. 9). However, the question of how interpreting services are to be funded is left vague. UNCRPD Article 9:h specifies that accessible information and communications technologies and systems should be "accessible at minimum cost," but leaves

questions of who should pay for interpreting, and what counts as “minimal cost” to the states (UNCRPD, 2006, art. 9h). This lack of specification of funding is reflected in the number of countries that provide no financial support for sign language interpreters. In a 2008 survey of 93 countries outside of North America and Western Europe, commissioned by the World Federation of the Deaf, only 32 reported that their governments take some responsibility for funding sign language interpreters (Haualand & Allen, 2009). This means that in most countries outside of Europe and North America, deaf people and interpreters are left to work out questions of how to fund (or not fund) interpreting on the market economy. Many deaf communities are clearly grappling with this question. In March of 2019 I attended a United Nations Development Program (UNDP) funded business startup competition that brought together social entrepreneurs from across the Asia-pacific region. There were three deaf business teams in the competition, and all of their business plans were attempting to fund sign language interpreting.

Even in the so called “Global North,” government involvement in funding sign language interpreting is far from perfect.  In the United States for example, the Americans with Disabilities Act functions as an “unfunded mandate” and doctors offices’ routinely engage in cost-benefit analysis and refuse to provide interpreters, even if they might eventually be sued (Stein & Teplin, 2010). Nevertheless, there is a stark difference between countries where interpreting is government funded (or mandated), and countries like Việt Nam where deaf people and interpreters must try to figure out how to make interpreting a livable practice in the absence of state support.

The story of Thư quitting working at the Center illustrates the negotiations that deaf people and sign language interpreters in Việt Nam experience as they try to make interpreting a livable practice outside of state support.  On one hand, deaf people like An are exposed to economic precarity. Limited educational opportunities in HNSL and employment discrimination by hearing bosses mean that deaf people are more likely to have limited income. On the other hand, interpreters like Thư find themselves caught between two competing forms of precarity: they can either HAVE-HEART, interpret for free and maintain their precarious belonging to the deaf community; or they can EAT-(to)-LIVE focusing on their financial stability but sacrificing their belonging to the deaf community. If interpreters attempt to resolve their financial precarity by charging deaf people for interpreting services, they wind up abandoning the moral economy of HAVE-HEART, and the dubious moral position of asking deaf people who are already experiencing financial precarity to pay for basic communication access.

In this chapter I examine the tensions between HAVE-HEART and EAT-(to)-LIVE as two different forms of economies. HAVE-HEART is a moral economy, which Aihwa Ong defines a moral economy as “a web of unequal relationships of exchange based on a morality of reciprocity, mutual obligation, and protection” (Ong, 2006, p. 199). Deaf communities can have unique moral economies of their own, such as the moral economy of “deaf development” that Friedner has documented amongst deaf people in India, where “deaf people share news and information, teach each other sign language and help each other to develop” (Friedner 2015a, p. 1). Within these moral economies, social hierarchies between deaf people exist (i.e., between deaf leaders, and deaf organization members) but are relatively fluid, as deaf people

gain more access to education and resources, they work to assist those lower in the hierarchy (Friedner, 2015a).

The moral economy of HNSL interpreting is different from moral economies within deaf communities, as it occurs between two groups of people that have been defined as inhabiting fundamentally different subject positions; deaf people and interpreters. In the moral economy of HNSL interpreting, deaf people give sign language and belonging to interpreters, and in return interpreters demonstrate their love for deaf people through interpreting for free, and spending time with deaf people outside of paid labor. This is a form of interdependence, albeit one characterized by hierarchy and multiple asymmetries. In this moral economy, deaf people and hearing interpreters are fundamentally unequal as it is deaf people who give interpreters the gift of sign language, initiating the gift giving cycle. Moreover, like other moral economies the gift of sign language entails forms of reciprocity, as interpreters must give interpreting back to deaf people. As I show in this chapter, many HNSL interpreters have – at least initially - embraced HAVE-HEART for the ways it allows them to belong to deaf communities. Part of the value of HAVE-HEART is that it recognizes the value of deaf communities and spaces outside of financial terms. Thus, interpreters are expected to spend time with deaf people, demonstrating their commitment to and love for deaf people, even if this time might not be financially beneficial to them.

However, while many interpreters valued HAVE-HEART it came into tensions with an interpreter's desire to make interpreting a livable profession, free from financial precarity. With no government support for interpreting, interpreters had to find a way to make a living in Việt Nam's post Đổi Mới "kinh tế thị trường định hướng xã hội chủ nghĩa" (socialist-oriented market

economy). As I will show in this chapter, this tension is further exacerbated by normative ideas about what it means to be an upwardly mobile woman in Vietnamese society and the financial futures that interpreter's families imagine for their daughters.

I explore the multiple ways in which HNSL interpreters have attempted to reconcile the moral and financial economies of HNSL interpreting and make interpreting a livable practice for both deaf people and interpreters. In particular, I examine three strategies interpreters used to attempt to make interpreting into a stable job: 1) accepting payment from outside of the community; 2) taking a side job; and 3) accepting payment from deaf people. I also examine an attempt led by deaf leaders to reconcile these tensions. Specifically, the founding of SC Deaf, the first sign language interpreting business in Việt Nam, which attempted to reconcile moral and financial economies of interpreting by having this business owned by a deaf man. Yet having the profits of an interpreting company go to a single deaf person, while capturing some of the sense of reciprocity in HAVE-HEART, is not the same as the idea that interpreters owe a debt to deaf people as a collective. As I show, in this chapter none of these options explored by deaf leaders and interpreters fully resolves the tensions between moral and financial economies, or addresses the violence and absurdity of charging individual deaf people for interpreting services.

## HAVE-HEART: The Moral Economy of interpreting

For the first several years I worked in Việt Nam (approximately 2010-2017) interpreting in Việt Nam primarily operated through a moral economy encompassed by the phrase HAVE-HEART. As I discussed in the first chapter, HNSL interpreters enter the deaf community because different aspects of their gendered, classed life trajectories leave them seeking a general sense

of connection and community, a gap which HNSL classes and the deaf community is poised to fill. To maintain this belonging, interpreters are expected to engage in forms of asymmetrical reciprocity with deaf people. In the normative forms of belonging Gammeloft and Shohet analyze in Vietnamese families, asymmetrical reciprocity is motivated through the moral debt children incur for the life and care they have received, which causes younger generations to feel ơn (boundless gratitude) which they express through honoring their superiors (Gammeltoft, 2014; Shohet, 2021, pp. 72–73). Yet what forces motivate a sense of asymmetrical reciprocity between deaf people and sign language interpreters?

From the perspective of deaf leaders in Hà Nội, the source of such asymmetrical reciprocity was clear; deaf people taught hearing people sign language allowing them to belong to the deaf community in the first place, and in return hearing interpreters owed them a debt of gratitude which could be repaid through spending time with deaf people and interpreting. Yet for novice sign language interpreters, the source of this debt and gratitude might not be as clear. Thus, in classes at the Center, deaf leaders went to great lengths to ensure that hearing people understood how asymmetrical reciprocity worked between deaf people and hearing people.

For example, one evening in the advanced sign language class at the Center, the deaf teacher Thao announced they were going to take a break from learning vocabulary to discuss văn hóa (deaf culture). She led the class in a discussion in HNSL about where sign language comes from asking "Do hearing people use sign? For example, can a cop sign like a deaf person?" One of the students responded that the cop wouldn't be able to sign… they would have to call an interpreter. "Right!" said Thao. "Sign belongs to the deaf" (See Figure 7 for

HNSL). The student looked puzzled; her brows furrowed. The other deaf teacher Nam, turned to me and in an excited sign whisper said "she doesn't understand," cuing me in that this was going to be one of those lessons where deaf people took delight in schooling hearing people, and flipping the normative societal assumption that deaf people didn't know things on its head.

Thao elaborated, "Sign belongs to the deaf first. It is the mother tongue[32] of deaf people because they are born deaf-mute." She explained that if a deaf child needed to ask their mother for a drink of water, then they would pantomime drinking from a cup. "Are the parents teaching the child?" she asked rhetorically, "No... The child is teaching the parents how to sign, even if just a little bit". Thus, Thao grounded her claim that deaf people "owned" sign language in the fact that deaf kids invented their own signs. This claim was woven throughout the next month of lessons at the Center, as Thao discussed examples of how deaf kids had invented sign: Abbe de l'Épée, the hearing French founder of the first public school for the deaf in 1760, had seen deaf kids signing and had decided to use sign language as a form of instruction; deaf students from Martha's Vineyard in the United States had created their very own sign language. In each case, the role of hearing people in influencing or co-constructing sign language was erased so that deaf people could be the ultimate creators, and therefore owners of, sign languages.

The phrase that Thao centered her lesson on which I have translated into English as "sign belongs to the deaf" was composed of three signs, NGÔN NGỮ KÝ HIỆU + DIEC + CUA or SIGN + DEAF + POSSESSIVE-MARKER (Figure 7). It was a phrase I saw used frequently by the

[32] Thao literally signed MOM TONGUE, followed by fingerspelling mẹ đẻ to ensure her hearing students understood what she meant.

deaf teachers at the Center, as well as by deaf leaders throughout Hà Nội. In using this phrase deaf leaders alternated between foregrounding its two potential meanings 1) that deaf people have their own language, distinct from hearing people 2) and that sign language belonged to deaf people or was "owned" by them.

As linguistic anthropologists point out, language ideologies "underlie attempts to use language as the site at which to promote, protect, and legitimate those interests" (Kroskrity 2005, 501). Indeed, the claim that deaf people owned sign language had hallmarks of a classic language ideology. It was predicated on *erasure*, which Irvine and Gal argue is one of the primary semiotic processes through which ideology works (2009), in this case the erasure of the role of hearing people in contributing to or co-constructing sign languages. Moreover, this claim about sign language was *interested*, it was often directed specifically at hearing HNSL students, who deaf leaders hoped would become interpreters, but who were at risk of not recognizing the moral obligations and asymmetrical reciprocity that came with learning sign language. Deaf leaders spent significant time working to ensure that these hearing students understood this claim, as Thao did in her first lesson with the new advanced class.

*Figure 8: HNSL phrase "sign belongs to the deaf"*

| NGÔN NGỮ KÝ HIỆU/ SIGN | DIEC/DEAF | CUA/ Possessive marker[33] |
|---|---|---|

The ideology that deaf people owned sign language did crucial work in terms of justifying the asymmetrical reciprocity between deaf people and interpreters. In an interview, An took time to make sure I clearly understood the moral obligations between deaf people and interpreters, laying out how deaf people's ownership of sign language meant that interpreters owed them a debt of gratitude.

> My opinion is that, sign language -- sign itself -- is deaf. It belongs to the deaf, to the community. And when deaf people teach hearing people and they become good [signers] then they should interpret and help. Interpreting itself belongs to the deaf. Interpreters should be grateful to the deaf for giving them interpreting. It's important that there is an exchange, that deaf people teach interpreters sign, and these hearing [interpreters] help them talk with their parents and families... I cannot speak. I sign, and that is what I teach to the interpreters. Sign is given from the deaf to the hearing, and those hearing people help give interpreting back to the deaf, for their parents and their families. (An, personal communication, HNSL, 2017)

In this explanation, An is drawing clear parallels between the way asymmetrical reciprocity works in normative Vietnamese kinship structures, and asymmetrical reciprocity in deaf-interpreter relationships. Like explanations of filial piety, An starts with an explanation of

[33] The HNSL sign CUA can translate into English as either a 1st, 2nd or 3rd person single or plural possessive depending on context. In this specific example pictured the translation would be SIGN DEAF THEIRS.

what those in the superior position on the hierarchy (elders, or deaf people), give to those in subordinate positions (children, hearing people). In this case deaf people give *their* sign language, which *they* own, to hearing interpreters. Similar to explanations of filial piety that emphasize the labor involved in raising children, An emphasizes the labor of teaching hearing people and helping them develop into “good signers”. This in turn engenders a moral debt on the part of interpreters, which is experienced through a feeling of gratitude, similar to the ơn (boundless gratitude) which children feel towards their parents.

Of course, elided in An’s example are crucial differences between normative Vietnamese kinship and relationships between deaf people and interpreters. In particular, ownership does not work the same way in Vietnamese families as it does in this example. Unlike the family example where property is eventually passed down to the next generation, here the ownership of sign language remains in deaf hands. Deaf leaders called on discourses of kinship and asymmetrical reciprocity when discussing their relationship with interpreters, in order to creating a sense of fictive kinship between deaf people and interpreters and further cement the interpreters’ sense of belonging. However, fictive kinship between deaf people and interpreters is fundamentally different because interpreters can never move into a position of authority the way that children in a family eventually age and become elders who now are owed gratitude.

Gratitude was not the only feeling deaf people expect interpreters to feel towards deaf people. Continuing with the analogy of asymmetrical reciprocity in familial relationships, interpreters are expected to feel love towards deaf people. Over the 10 years I interacted with deaf people in Hà Nội, the one thing that was always consistent was that they expected

interpreters to love deaf people, which they expressed through the sign HAVE-HEART (Figure 6). Spoken Vietnamese and HNSL both have multiple words for love: tình cảm (care), tình yêu (passion), and tình thương (affection/pity). HAVE-HEART is a fourth word for love, which deaf people, such as an HNSL teacher Nam, defined as combining the multiple senses of love into one intense emotion:

> “It's a sentiment interpreters have towards the Deaf community. If they TRÁI TIM (have a heart) it's like they YÊU THƯƠNG love the Deaf community. They TÌNH CẢM (care) for deaf people. It's like TÌNH THƯƠNG (sympathy)... if they see deaf people are unable to communicate, interpreters step up and help” (Nam, personal communication, HNSL, 2015)

By combining three dimensions of love, tình cảm, tình yêu, and tình thương, the deaf conception of HAVE-HEART is imagined as a deeply intense affective bond. The one other place where all three of these sentiments are regularly combined in Việt Nam are in the family where tình cảm, tình yêu, and tình thương combine together to form bonds of reciprocal care (Shohet, 2017). Indeed, deaf people would use the HNSL sign HAVE-HEART to describe the way a mother loved her child and cared for them growing up, or the way an adult child cared for their parents as they aged. In keeping with the discourses of fictive kinship, deaf people would describe deaf leaders as HAVE-HEART when they did things on behalf of the community (like organizing events).

Like the affective bonds of love that hold normative Vietnamese kinship structures together, it is not enough for interpreters to feel a sense of love for deaf people, they must *enact* it. Gammeloft argues that while belonging is felt effectively as love, this love must be enacted to maintain belonging; it requires that individuals “demonstrate moral commitments to others” (Gammeltoft, 2014, p. 232). In the kinships networks Gameloft examines, belonging

is enacted through everyday displays of care, making food together, raising children, and tending to ancestor's graves. Similarly, interpreter's love for deaf people was supposed to translate into concrete acts. As Nam highlighted, interpreters' love motivates them to "step up and help" deaf people when they are unable to communicate by providing interpretation. Enacting HAVE-HEART did not simply stop at interpreting though, it entailed a deep form of sociality; it required "being friends" with deaf people, and spending time with them over and beyond interpreting. Nam elaborated on this expectation as well:

> "Suppose I ask an interpreter if they can come interpret... After the event is over, they cannot ignore deaf people, it's inappropriate. They must have a heart (HAVE-HEART). They must love (YÊU THƯƠNG[34]) and support deaf people, and be willing to meet with many different deaf people. Socializing with deaf people, that's having a heart (HAVE-HEART). " (Nam, personal communication, HNSL, 2015)

Showing that they loved deaf people through spending time with deaf people, and interpreting as an act of care helped solidify the precarious bonds that tied interpreters to the deaf community, and ensured they would keep being invited by deaf people over and over again.

## Interpreting from the Heart:

What did participation in the moral economy feel like for interpreters? While at times interpreters questioned this logic (an issue I will discuss later in the chapter), many interpreters internalized the idea that they owed a debt to deaf people. One interpreter, Yen, described this to me using the metaphor of deaf people giving her the key (sign language) to their world,

[34] HNSL gloss provided in Vietnamese as there are multiple HNSL signs that correspond to the English word love.

which she then had to repay through interpreting and otherwise giving back to the deaf community.

For interpreters that internalized this way of thinking about their relationship with deaf people, receiving payment for these services, or even being offered payment ruptured this sense of mutual obligation and belonging, making many interpreters deeply uncomfortable. For example, Ngọc, one of the six professional interpreters in HASLI, recounted how she felt upon receiving payment for her very first interpreting experience (or job). At the time Ngọc was a young college student who had never formally interpreted before - although she had spent a significant amount of time taking HNSL classes, attending deaf events, and playing with deaf children at a local elementary school. One of her deaf friends asked her to come interpret and take care of her in the hospital and Ngọc agreed. Ngọc got her parents' permission to stay overnight in the hospital with the deaf woman.

She arrived at the hospital terrified that that the deaf woman was gravely ill and was relieved to find out that the woman was simply getting breast augmentation; "The deaf woman let me know very last minute about the hospital stay, and then I had all these thoughts about what a hospital stay would be like thinking it would be dangerous and such, but then it was just normal. I just watched and helped her ask questions [by interpreting], and helped out [with caretaking]." While Ngọc felt greatly relieved that it was a less serious medical procedure than she feared, and glad that she could help out her friend, she found herself in an uncomfortable position the next morning when the deaf woman's friend (who was also deaf) tried to pay her.

> I had finished watching [the deaf woman], and the next morning [the deaf woman's friend] gave me payment, and I didn't want to accept it. I was shy. I thought 'my signing was good, that's all…I didn't help that much'. They kept trying to give me the money, I felt uncomfortable, I wasn't used to it at all. I thought that this was equivalent to helping

> a friend. I thought I was just helping, that's all. They kept trying to hand me money, and I kept handing it back, until finally they shoved it in my pocket. I just kept the money, saved it as a keepsake of the experience. I kept it for a long time before I finally used it (Ngọc, personal communication, HNSL, 2019)

For Ngọc, the thought of being paid for interpreting and providing physical care for this deaf woman after her surgery was unthinkable. This had been something that she did for a friend, not for compensation. The framing of friendship was one of the ways interpreters emphasized their belonging in the deaf community, and obligations to deaf people. By framing interpreting as something you would do for a friend, interpreters like Ngọc linked interpreting to an ethics of mutual responsibility up in an ever-unfolding reciprocal relationship. Deaf people taught them sign language, and gave them a space to belong in the deaf community. In return interpreters would express their love by helping and interpreting for free.

Part of this framing of interpreting as part of friendship was prefigured by the activities Ngọc was being asked to perform. In Vietnamese hospitals, family members or close friends are responsible for many nursing activities (i.e., physically caring for the person, watching them throughout the night, and bringing food). As the deaf woman was asking her not only to interpret, but also to perform these caretaking duties, Ngọc was already being placed into the role of a caring friend or family member. While this framing was particularly salient in a hospital setting, it was also common for interpreters' beginning experiences interpreting. They were often asked to interpret at restaurants placing orders the way friends and family members would order for each other. More broadly, interpreting is often embedded in other forms of volunteering or coming along for an exciting experience. For example, HNSL students would volunteer at diversity fairs alongside their deaf friends, or join deaf people on a trip outside of

Hà Nội to meet deaf children at an orphanage. By embedding interpreting in these other activities, interpreting did not feel like work, but rather just another thing you did when spending time with friends, or as part of an eye opening and meaningful experience

When the deaf woman's friend insisted on paying Ngọc, it ruptured this framing of interpreting as part of a relationship of long-term asymmetrical reciprocity between deaf people and interpreters, forcibly putting interpreting into the category of work. It ruptured Ngọc's sense of belonging to the deaf community by reframing the deaf woman not as Ngọc's friend, but as her client. Ngọc experienced these ruptures as an acute sense of embarrassment. If this was being treated as "work," had she really done anything worthy of payment? She was left feeling guilty and protested that she "didn't help that much." Payment ruptured the constantly unfolding reciprocal relationship, framing interpreting as a one-time stand-alone event which required payment. Moreover, when interpreters were paid for interpreting, they lost the ability to maintain their side of the reciprocal relationship. Deaf people invited them and opened up their world for them, but what were they doing in return? In fact, Ngọc was so resistant to the idea of either her linguistic or caretaking labor being part of a commoditized exchange that she kept the money for a long time as a keepsake or memento of the experience. In doing so she symbolically moved the act of interpreting out of the realm of financial economic exchange, and back into the moral economy of asymmetrical reciprocity and belonging with deaf people—even if the deaf woman tried to do otherwise (note that we do not know the deaf woman's motivation for paying her).

EAT-(to)-LIVE: The Financial Economy of HNSL Interpreting

Although many interpreters were firmly committed to the moral economy of HAVE-HEART, they still lived in Việt Nam's post Đổi Mới socialist-oriented market economy and needed to make a living. Many interpreters started off like Ngọc seeing interpreting as part of belonging to the deaf community. The interpreters hand trained by An were generally college students with ample free time. Yet as they graduated the life course pressure shifted; interpreters needed to make a living, either through interpreting or another profession. This is the point in their lives where interpreters began to feel the tensions between HAVE-HEART and EAT-(to)-LIVE.

It is hard to sort out precisely what level of financial pressure different interpreters in Việt Nam face. The moral and financial economies of sign language interpreting were such controversial issues withing Hà Nội's deaf/interpreting community that no interpreters were willing to go on the record about exactly how much they made[35]. Part of the issue was that under the moral economy of HAVE-HEART any amount of money made off of interpreting was suspect. Another part of the problem was that at the time of my dissertation, fieldwork interpreters were in intense fights with local NGOs, including NGOs that focused on disability, over what constituted reasonable pay, and interpreters feared any numbers I published would be used to establish inflexible cost norms. It was only when I started shifting my questions to *why* funding interpreting was so controversial that I started to get interpreters to talk candidly about their financial situations.

[35] Although I did have a few interpreters tell me on the condition that I did not publish any number, even under a pseudonym.

What can be said about interpreter's financial circumstances is that they varied considerably. Some interpreters like Thư came from a family that had been impacted by poverty, drug addiction and/or untimely deaths, so they didn't have an economic cushion or strong familial support system to fall back on. For these interpreters, making money from interpreting was a financial necessity, a requirement for them to be able to spend time with deaf people in the first place.

However, for other interpreters, part of the financial precarity they felt came not just from EATING-TO-LIVE, but from a desire to do much more than eat to live. In *Precarious Japan,* Anne Allison emphasizes how the sense of financial precarity is deeply entangled with a sense of lost class identity and lifestyle: "Precarity references a particular notion of, and social contract around, work. Work that is secure; work that secures not only income and job but identity and lifestyle, linking capitalism and intimacy in an affective desire for security itself" (Allison, 2013, p. 5). As mentioned in the previous chapter, many interpreters were upwardly mobile individuals whose families had invested in their education in the hopes of them rising above their class standing. Interpreter's families had many expectations of them, and hopes for their children's financial futures. For example, as discussed in the previous chapter Hương was a migrant from the countryside, who came from a family that was comfortable, but not well off. Her parents who had worked as a secondary school teacher and an auto mechanic, hoped that given a college education Hương would be able to land a more financially lucrative career. Her parents also expected that her career itself would conform to the trappings of an upper middle-class lifestyle. As Hương 's mother frequently told her, "you should work in an office with an air

conditioner[36].” Yet in choosing a non-traditional life course of interpreting, interpreters found these expectations became increasingly difficult to obtain.

The financial pressure interpreters felt also came from gendered norms about the types of careers acceptable for a middle-class woman. All of the interpreters I talked to agreed that there was a normative expectation that when Vietnamese middleclass women reached marrying age, they should obtain a công việc làm ổn định (stable job). As opposed to men, where there is more emphasis on success and high income, the notion of a stable job for women emphasizes balancing work with the time and energy necessary to maintain belonging with their in-law’s family through everyday acts of care and sacrifice, like taking care of children, caretaking for elderly relatives, preparing food, attending to ancestral shrines, and participating in the spiritual practices of the family. The interpreters described an ideal stable job as providing both consistent income and good benefits without being too demanding while raising a family, caretaking for relatives or participating in the ritual life of their kin network. Yet how could interpreting from the heart fit within the framework of a stable job? I examine three strategies interpreters used to attempt to make interpreting into a stable job; accepting payment from outside of the community, taking a side job, and accepting payment from deaf people. However, as I show none of these options fully resolved the tensions between moral and financial economies.

[36] Air conditioning in Việt Nam is a high-class luxury good. Many lower-class jobs such as street vendors or factory workers have no access to air conditioning, while a career in the NGO sector or finance sector would mean working indoors with an air conditioner.

## Payment from Outside of the Community

One way in which interpreters attempted to reconcile HAVE-HEART and EATING-TO-LIVE was by seeking payment for interpreting services from outside of the deaf community. This was typically accepted by deaf people as compatible with “interpreting from the heart”. So long as interpreters continued to volunteer their time interpreting for any situation where deaf people would have had to foot the bill (i.e., at the Center, at HAD events, and for individual deaf clients), accepting payment from hearing people was considered acceptable by deaf leaders (i.e., on television for the nightly news, or for NGO meetings). Yet these various forms of employment either offered insufficient pay and hours to sustain a significant number of interpreters full time or were highly unstable, contributing to interpreter’s sense of financial precarity.

The oldest and most stable form of employment for sign language interpreters in Hà Nội is interpreting on national television. Since 2011, Việt Nam Television (VTV) has employed three HNSL interpreters on a part time basis, to interpret the nightly news, and one television show that specifically focuses on people with disabilities. VTV pays interpreters 550.000 VND (~23.7 USD) for each nightly 45-minute news session.  With an average of ten sessions per month per interpreter, take home pay is approximately 5.000.000 VND (~$217.54USD) after tax. Interpreters generally agreed that the payment for television interpreting was reasonable as it closely aligned with cost norms for equitable payment for interpreters. Under UN-EU cost norms, which were developed to ensure equitable payment in development projects conducted in Việt Nam, a staff interpreter with 2-5 years of relevant experience can make up to 16.5000.000 VND ($718 USD)/ month (*EU-UN Cost Norms*, 2017). In other words, interpreting

for television provides a stable reliable source of income for interpreters. However, the take home pay is that of a part time job for someone with the level of experience and specialized skills interpreters have, and requires supplementing with additional income. Moreover, television interpreting does not provide sufficient jobs for interpreters. At the time of my fieldwork, there were six people in Hà Nội who self-identified as "professional sign language interpreters", as well as approximately 15 novice interpreters who interpreted on occasion, so there were a total of 21 people competing for interpreting jobs. However, VTV had not hired any new interpreters, keeping the number of jobs limited to three individuals. While VTV could easily expand the number of programs that are interpreted beyond the nightly news, opening up additional jobs for hearing interpreters, as of 2019 they had no plans to do so.

After television interpreting, the next place HNSL interpreters worked was for events and meetings hosted by NGOs and other organizations. For example, Disabled People of Hà Nội, Việt Nam Education for All and other local NGOs that worked with disabled people would employ interpreters whenever there was an event or meeting that deaf people (typically deaf leaders) were invited to attend. However, relying on NGOs to fund interpreting is inherently unstable. In order to get paid by NGOs, sign language interpreters had to convince hearing organizations to pay them. Often organizations providing services to deaf people expect interpreters to work for free or discounted rates because their interest in helping deaf people aligned with interpreters' interest. For example, interpreters reported that one disabled organization in Hà Nội regularly asked them to interpret for free when they hosted leadership training for deaf people because they saw the training as "helping" deaf people the same way interpreters were "helping" the deaf.

Even when hearing organizations could be convinced to pay for interpreters, working for NGOs was inherently an uncertain endeavor. China Scherz has analyzed how NGO projects that focus on disability and development, frequently fill gaps in state provision of resources and must conform to the logic of “sustainability”. These projects are short term and local actors are expected to maintain them after international funds dry up (Scherz, 2017). As Scherz points out “this preplanned exit strategy, and its opposition to any action that might create dependency on external institutions, has led to programming decisions which favor capacity building and nonmaterial interventions” (Scherz, 2017, p. 51). Interpreting in Việt Nam directly felt the impact of this sustainability logic. For example, during 2011-2016, World Concern Việt Nam received a $3.00 million USD grant from the World Bank to host a trial project on early intervention for preschool aged deaf children. This project called the “Intergenerational Deaf Education Project” provided training and steady employment for all of the sign language interpreters in Hà Nội and a large number of deaf leaders from 2013-2015. The explicit goal of the project was to demonstrate the effectiveness of early education for deaf children in sign language, and ultimately to get the program adopted by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), thereby freeing external funders from the cost of running the program. However, when the project failed to be adopted by the state in 2015, all of these newly trained interpreters and deaf leaders were left unemployed overnight.

Taking a Side Job

Funding from interpretation jobs at NGOs, television stations and other sources outside of the community was often insufficient to make interpreting a livable profession, so interpreters sought other sources of income. One way that interpreters attempted to maintain

their moral personhood and their belonging to the deaf community was by finding a part time job outside of the deaf community, while continuing to interpret and volunteer their time with deaf people for free (such as through working at the Center, or helping with various grant projects). This was often a strategy that interpreters took on when different aspects of their gendered, classed life courses made the limited income gleaned from interpreting for NGOs or TV felt particularly financially precarious. For example, Hương took a job as a staff member at an NGO (not just as an interpreter for events hosted by the NGO) when she thought that she and her boyfriend were nearing discussions of marriage. However, Hương chose an NGO that had experience working with the deaf community, and that would allow her the flexibly to shift her working hours so she could still volunteer to interpret for deaf people. Hương explained the reason she accepted employment at the NGO was because she felt for her to have a successful engagement with her boyfriend, she needed a stable job. However, as soon as she separated from her boyfriend, she returned to interpreting which she described as her "true calling." Even after Hương and her boyfriend split, Hương's mother continued to worry that interpreting would not provide her with the type of job that would attract a future mate.

The strategy of taking a side job outside of interpreting strained interpreter's ability to enact belonging with the deaf community.  Working part time jobs limited interpreter's ability to have a flexible schedule, making it difficult to request time-off for last minute interpreting gigs. Hương's job at the NGO was one of the only side jobs that offered this flexibility, yet as she noted even with an understanding boss, she still had to regularly turn down interpreting jobs. More importantly, this limited the time they could spend casually socializing with deaf people or attending deaf events, which aside from interpreting for free, was a crucial dimension

of enacting their love for deaf people. Thus, when interpreters decided to take part time work outside of interpreting, it often resulted in deep misunderstanding with deaf people, and a resulting loss of their reputation.

This is the conundrum that Thư found herself in when she took a job as a cycling instructor. Thư had intentionally taken a part time job so that she could financially sustain interpreting for free, demonstrating her love and belonging to the deaf community. However even though her position was part time, her shifts were rigid, meaning that she couldn't accept last minute interpreting gigs, and didn't have as much time to casually hang out with deaf people. Her inability to accept last minute requests for volunteer interpreting set off a vicious cycle. Deaf people assumed that she was turning down requests to volunteer interpret because she had lost heart. This in turn meant that deaf leaders were less likely to request her when an NGO held a meeting with them, so she made less income from interpreting. Therefore, she had to spend more time at the exercise center to make ends meet. And as Thư began to lose the support of the deaf community she lost the sense of belonging that came with interpreting for free; deaf people stopped inviting her places as frequently. Her comment that spending time with her partner was "happiness enough" underscores her sense of loss. In invoking the sign for FAMILIAL-HAPPINESS Thư foregrounded that what she had lost was a sense of familial happiness coming from belonging to the deaf community.

### Accepting Payment from Deaf People

As interpreters grappled with how to make interpreting a livable profession, they first attempted to resolve the problem by leaving the moral economy of HAVE-HEART intact and seeking income from outside of the deaf community. However, accepting payment for

interpreting from outside of the deaf community was insufficient to reduce the financial precarity experienced by interpreters, and taking side jobs constrained interpreter's time such that it appeared that they didn't HAVE-HEART. Separately, at different points in time, interpreters began to start charging individual deaf people for services. Interpreters began charging deaf people haltingly, depending on their own life circumstances, age and economic need. Some of the more senior interpreters, who had already graduated from college and had no other source of income started charging individual deaf people as early as 2012[37], while other younger interpreters began charging deaf individuals only after the IDEO project which had provided a stable source of external employment ended in 2015.

Yet accepting payment from deaf people was morally fraught, not only due to breaking from the moral economy of HAVE-HEART, but also because deaf people faced their own forms of financial precarity. Like many disabled people in Việt Nam, deaf people have faced significant economic discrimination, and are more likely to be poor or low income (Palmer et. al 2015, Mont and Cung 2011). The 2016 National Survey on People with Disabilities found that nationally 19.4 % of households with disabled members experienced poverty[38], as opposed to 8.9% of households without disabilities, and that individuals with hearing-related disabilities were more likely to live in poverty than non-disabled individuals (General Statistics Office of Việt Nam, 2016, pp. 121, 130).

[37] How interpreters approached the topic of payment, convinced deaf people to pay, and negotiated rates with deaf people, is a topic that deserves further research as it could illuminate how relationships between deaf people and interpreters are understood and negotiated in the moment of interaction.

[38] Poverty was defined on a multidimensional scale including that involved a combination of 1) falling below either the poverty line (in rural area it is 700.000 VND per person per month, in urban area it is 900.000 VND per person per month) or the near poverty line (1.000.000 VND per person per month in rural area and 1.300.000 VND per person per month in urban area) and 2) access to basic social services (General Statistics Office of Việt Nam, 2016, p. 118)

Unfortunately, there is very little economic data specifically on the lives of deaf signing people in Việt Nam. The Vietnamese government does not differentiate in its statistics between deaf individuals who do and don't use VSLs as their primary means of communication. However, it is likely that poverty rates amongst deaf signing individuals are particularly high given that poverty amongst disabled people in Việt Nam is highly correlated with educational attainment (General Statistics Office of Việt Nam, 2016), and there are limited opportunities for quality education in Vietnamese Sign Languages (Cooper, 2017; Hoa & Woodward, 2019). In 2013, there was one focus group on economic barriers that involved eight deaf signing people from Hà Nội [39] (Palmer et al., 2015). This focus group identified multiple financial barriers for deaf individuals including, difficulty accessing information about job postings, lack of access to education and training required for jobs, and discrimination by employers against hiring deaf candidates. The report noted that many deaf people displayed resilience by take employment in informal sectors (such as street vending or tailoring), which did not require working for a hearing employer (Palmer et al., 2015). My own ethnographic research largely dovetails with the finding of this focus group, although I also found that deaf people who did work for hearing bosses, often in service industries (i.e., cafes, hotels, bakeries), frequently circulated between jobs. This circulation, while necessitated by discrimination and communication breakdowns with hearing bosses was also a form of resiliency for deaf people as they sought workplaces where they would receive better treatment and they could further develop their work skills (see Friedner, 2015b for a discussion of similar circulation tactics by deaf people in India).

[39] The group including 5 deaf men and 3 deaf women. Questions were asked by a hearing researcher and translated by an HNSL interpreter.

One of the factors that significantly influences deaf people's financial precarity is the lack of state support for deaf people. The 2013 focus group (Palmer et al., 2015) noted that unlike other disability categories in Việt Nam, deaf people did not qualify for government subsidized health insurance or disability based supplemental social security income. This is because deafness was classified as a "minor" disability by the government on the assumption that deafness does not significantly impact an individual's ability to work and earn a living[40]. Without these sources of state support, and given the low income and instability of informal sector jobs, many deaf people experienced periods of financial hardship and had to choose between relying on friends and family for temporary loans (often in the range of 2-3milion VND or $85-127 USD) or cutting their own spending rather than depend on hearing family members for loans (Palmer et al., 2015). In my own ethnographic fieldwork, deaf leaders and HNSL interpreters reported that some deaf people's families were able to secure social security income by falsely claiming that their deaf family members had cognitive disabilities in addition to deafness. In 2019, some deaf people in Hà Nội began to report that they had managed to receive supplemental social security income on the basis of deafness, however deaf leaders were still trying to determine if this reflected an actual change in policy or simply a few sympathetic government bureaucrats taking a particularly lenient approach. Regardless of whether deaf people were able to receive supplemental social security income or not, the majority of deaf people in Hà Nội were still considered low income.

[40] Deafness does not in and of itself impact an individual's ability to work. However, when deaf individuals have limited access to education, face employment discrimination and don't have the right to use interpreters on the job, this can severely limit their employment opportunities.

The financial precarity of deaf people was something interpreters grappled with when they made decisions about whether to charge deaf people for their services. For example, Ngọc explained how she became deeply conflicted ethically when other interpreters began accepting payment, and she tried asking for payment herself.

> When I transitioned from working for free to asking for money, there started to be misunderstandings. [Deaf people] thought I was greedy, that I had to have money… Deaf people would think 'what do you need money for?" It was as though interpreters were just [hearing] friends helping the deaf… like a normal friend. What do you need money for? So, I considered it. I thought I could work for free, but other interpreters told me "you have to take money for work; interpreting is work". I felt unsure about that. I questioned "Did I need money? Was it unnecessary?"… I thought about how deaf people don't receive a disability stipend at all. Deaf people must constantly pay for themselves. (Ngọc, personal communication, HNSL, 2019)

For Ngọc, there was a real ethical dilemma in taking money, she was still a college student therefore did not personally need the money at that point in time and she felt wrong taking money from deaf people who did not receive any stipend from the government for their disability. She still saw interpreting as an act she did for a friend, as part of the moral economy of HAVE-HEART. However, other interpreters told her that "interpreting is work," introducing the logic of professionalism into interpreting. If interpreting was a profession, then it was only natural to receive compensation for it. Ngọc was left morally conflicted because she had to weigh the discourse of professionalism against the financial precarity of deaf people.

Yet, her thinking began to change as she saw the consequences of her not taking money on other interpreters.

> When deaf people perceive you as looking for money, they freak out. Previously Yen when she was young and had just started out as a young interpreter, she would be always helping out for free, she would go with her [deaf] older sister to help her out. But then with real work like speeches, film, or news broadcasting you need money. That means that it's work, it's your profession, so you can get monetary compensation for

> your effort. But deaf people would see Yen asking for payment and think she was greedy. And with myself Hương and Thư just getting involved and interpreting for free, we suddenly got swamped with work, because Yen was asking for money. But that wasn't the case, we were also entering the profession. Now we are all peers. [The four of us], we are all professionals together. Receiving payment is normal… For example, if there are two people, and I am not taking money, but the other interpreter is taking money, we are the same, we are both interpreters. So, the deaf person will look at me, and think the other interpreter is greedy. But that's not the case, it's work. It's a misunderstanding. It's not that they are greedy and I am helping them because I have intestines [LÒNG[41]]and heart [HAVE-HEART]. That's why I really didn't know what to do. (Ngọc, personal communication, HNSL, 2019)

Here Ngọc examines the conflict that began to unfold between two different logics for why interpreters should or shouldn't receive payment; professionalization and the moral economy of HAVE-HEART. Ngọc discusses how the decisions made to accept or not accept payment by four different interpreters (herself, Thư, Hương and Yen) were guided not by the moral economy of HAVE-HEART, but by professionalization. When these interpreters were new to the field, they would interpret for free, helping out and gaining experience. However, as they began to do so called "real work" like "interpreting for speeches, film or news broadcasting" this work began to define them as professionals who deserved compensation. Ngọc notes that Yen entered the field far earlier than herself Hương and Thư. So, while she Hương and Thư were still novices working for free, Yen was a professional who deserved to earn money. However, from the perspective of deaf people, who still adhered to the moral economy of HAVE-HEART the fact that Yen required payment while Ngọc and Thư did not was perceived very differently. The decision to accept or not accept payment was taken by deaf people as a

[41] Ngọc uses the HNSL sign LÒNG (intestines) to invoke the Vietnamese conception of the intestines as the seat of emotions. By combining the sign for LÒNG and HAVE-HEART Ngọc is drawing together discourses of love from both spoken Vietnamese and HNSL.

sign of their moral personhood, an interpreter who worked for free was seen as HAVE-HEART, while one who required payment was greedy.

These two competing interpretations left Ngọc confused and unsure of how to proceed. Should she stick with the moral economy of HAVE-HEART, or recognize the harm that HAVE-HEART was causing by framing some interpreters as greedy, and other interpreters as morally upright. Eventually Ngọc wound up deciding to accept payment, not because of her own financial precarity (she was still a college student at the time) but because of the logic of professionalization- she was now doing work that was professional. Moreover, she realized that if she didn't accept payment it would have consequences for other professional interpreters whose decision to accept payment would be interpreted as greedy in comparison to her. As she explained to me later, she realized that even if she didn't need money at that point in time, other interpreters did. In other words, she wound up weighing not just her own financial precarity, but the collective financial precarity of all interpreters against that of the financial precarity of deaf people. She eventually decided that she had to charge for interpreting, because otherwise other interpreters would be unable to continue interpreting and the pool of interpreters would dwindle.

Ngọc still remained conflicted about charging deaf people for interpreting at all. She reported that she tried to get around this moral dilemma by charging deaf people based on their individual financial circumstances and the necessity of the interpreting. For example, she would offer lower rates for a low-income deaf person who needed to access medical care, and higher rates for deaf people who were getting married and whose families wanted to hire interpreters for the services. However, Ngọc explained that news about interpreting rates

traveled fast in the deaf community, and if one person got a lower rate for an interpreting service due to financial hardship then other deaf people expected the same rate. Giving discounted rates could also result in tensions between interpreters as interpreters who did not offer the same discounted rate were accused of being greedy. Moreover, this practice put interpreters in the position of adjudicating who is worthy of reduced rates; which is another complicated form of moral/ethical work.

These ethical dilemmas over what constituted fair rates and resulting tensions between interpreters came to a head in 2015 when the IDEO project ended, and interpreters lost their primary source of external funding. Six interpreters banded together and formed the Hà Nội Association of Sign Language Interpreters (HASLI) in an attempt to standardize rates and divide up the now significantly reduced number of jobs as equitably as possible. The hope was that if all interpreters charged the same rates at least they would not be compared with each other morally. Yet HASLI proved to be rife with tensions, as deaf people often preferred particular interpreters due to their signing skills, personal familiarity with them, or the attitudes of interpreters towards deaf people. This conflicted with interpreter's attempts to divide up jobs equitably amongst themselves. Moreover, some interpreters felt that interpreters should get priority to interpret based on their experience; the six members of HASLI members ranged significantly in interpreting experience from the newest interpreters having only 2 years of experience to the most senior having nearly 20 years. On top of these many issues between the interpreters, members of HASLI continued to face resistance from deaf people who felt that they should not pay for interpreting in the first place, no matter what the cost.

## Forming an Interpreting Company: An Experiment in Deaf Owned Interpreting

Given deaf leaders long-standing commitment to the moral economy of HAVE-HEART, I was highly surprised when I returned to the field in the Summer of 2017 to find deaf leaders involved in plans to found the first sign language interpreting company in Việt Nam. I argue that the deaf leaders' willingness to allow interpreting to become a paid profession stemmed from multiple factors including: the deaf leaders loss of jobs after the IDEO project ended; an increased need to make money from HNSL students; and a recognition of the interdependence between interpreting and deaf activism. Yet deaf leaders were not content to give up on the moral economy of HAVE-HEART altogether. For deaf leaders, having a *deaf owned* interpreting company was a way to attempt to meld together the moral and financial economies of HNSL interpreting, allowing interpreters to EAT-TO-LIVE, but maintaining a moral hierarchy and sense of reciprocity between deaf and interpreters by having the proceeds of the interpreting company wind up in the hands of deaf leaders (and also through increased profits for deaf HNSL teachers).

As I discussed earlier, much had changed between my trips to the field in 2015 and 2017 due to the IDEO project closing. Deaf leaders who had been employed by IDEO, had received specialized training in early deaf education, and had even experienced respect from hearing parents of deaf preschoolers they tutored. With this experience, returning to less prestigious jobs was deeply unsatisfactory. Several of these former IDEO teachers worked at the Center along with An, and hoped that the Center could be a place where they could continue using their newfound job skills teaching hearing people sign language. However, the Center was also in serious financial trouble. Once again in 2017, I found An leaning on the

railing of the breezeway of the Center, a pensive look on his face. I leaned on the railing next to An and chucked my chin at him, prompting him to tell me what was up. An explained that the classes at the Center were shrinking dramatically; "The problem is after [the students] finish studying what they will do? We don't have any certificates, we don't have jobs, so the classes dwindle." He continued, "I've been thinking hard about what changes I can make for 2017." "Like what?" I prompted. "I think it will change if I develop the video interpreting company[42]. If the company develops well, the Center will develop well, if the company doesn't develop well, the Center will dwindle. The two are related." I nodded and sighed.

A few minutes later Quyen wandered in. In 2015 Quyen was the student who had been An's top choice to become an interpreter because her skill with facial expression suggested that she was willing to "open her mind" to deaf culture (see Marie, 2020 for Quynh's story). He had somewhat jokingly asked her to "come, work as an interpreter; work for free." Although Quynh told me she would have liked to become an interpreter, she repeatedly turned down An's requests as she had a stable job in a bank that, despite constantly complaining about the hours and drudgery of, she was unwilling to give up. While An continued to joke with her about working for free, it was a dark form of humor that only thinly masked An's frustration with the whole situation. On one hand, An was implying that to work as an interpreter would be to be free from work itself, free from the drudgery of the bank. Yet on the other hand there was a bitter poeticism to the phrase; the HNSL signs for "interpreter" and "free" rhyme, both using the same handshape. With this turn of phrase, An acknowledged that under current conditions working as interpreter required being willing to work without pay.

[42] This is before SC Deaf was established, so it was not yet named.

An explained to me later in an interview that he was particularly concerned about his inability to recruit new interpreters like Quynh because he recognized the interdependence between interpreters and deaf advocacy. He reminded me that "interpreters are the fist that lobbies the government." An elaborated, explaining that his ability to engage in activism work -- to collaborate with hearing leaders of NGOs, to get the government to recognize the deaf association as an independent organization, to engage in public awareness campaigns -- were all tied to having a reliable pool of interpreters.

Faced with the dwindling size of HNSL classes at the Center which represented both limited income for deaf teachers, and the prospect of being unable to recruit new interpreters to continue engaging in deaf advocacy work, An began to develop the idea of founding a deaf owned interpreting company. An had toured a deaf owned interpreting company when he had attended a deaf leadership training in South Korean. Since then, An had been in contact with the South Korean interpreting company, who had offered to lease An their proprietary video relay software so that An could start the first interpreting business in Việt Nam. Video relay interpreting is a service where deaf people call into the interpreting office via video phone, and are then paired with an interpreter who places a call to the hearing party over the phone and proceeds to interpret the call between the two parties.

An decided to gauge the support of other deaf leaders in Hà Nội for the Video Relay interpreting company, by scheduling a meeting with other deaf teachers from the Center immediately after he had meet with his Korean business associates. We gathered in Cộng Cà Phê, a trendy café in the old quarter that featured nostalgic paraphernalia from Việt Nam's pre Đổi Mới communist era. An set the stage for pitching the interpreting company by discussing

deaf leaders' frustrations about the amount of control interpreters had over the field of interpreting. HASLI was a controversial organization amongst deaf leaders because it was run by interpreters, not deaf people, and thus did not conform to the moral economy of HAVE-HEART. An and the other leaders reflected on whether interpreters were really contributing back to the deaf community if they had their own organization and were charging for interpreting services. As one deaf leader complained "the problem with HASLI is that the interpreters benefit, deaf people don't benefit." An then pitched his business proposal, explaining that because the company was deaf owned, any profits from interpreting would be (at least symbolically) returning to the deaf community. An explained just as deaf people "owned" sign language, now they would "own" interpreting services. Moreover, An argued that making interpreting into a business would give back to the deaf community, because as interpreting became a livable profession more hearing students would want to take sign languages classes, and the profits would go back to deaf teachers.

An's argument to the deaf teachers at the Center was an attempt to combine the moral and financial economies of HNSL interpreting. While interpreters would be paid for their services and therefor be able to EAT-TO-LIVE, deaf people would continue to own sign language through owning the interpreting company. By combining these disparate logics, and arguing that the increased interest in HNSL classes would also help solve deaf leaders financial precarity (allowing them to EAT-TO-LIVE) An convinced deaf leaders in Hà Nội to let him establish a deaf run interpreting business. The same deaf people who judged interpreters who insisted on receiving payment for their work suddenly were willing to support establishing an interpreting business. While interpreters justified getting paid for their work in terms of professionalization,

deaf leaders had decided to support the foundation of an interpreting business in order to maintain deaf ownership of sign language. These two different logics had temporarily aligned, but had not necessarily resolved their differences.

Of course, not all deaf leaders agreed with An's logic. That same month at another event with deaf leaders,  An got into a debate with a former president of HAD who felt that interpreting should be financed by the Vietnamese government, so that deaf people did not have to pay for interpreting. An countered that if the government funded interpreting, deaf people would not be controlling interpreting, which he argued went against the ideology that "sign belongs to the deaf". An also argued that waiting for the government to finance sign language interpreting was impossible, because deaf leaders needed interpreters to be able to lobby the government for interpreting services. In other words, having a privately owned interpreting business was a necessary step on the way to getting government funding for interpreters. These fights between deaf leaders lingered unresolved as An looked for ways to finance the startup costs of his interpreting business.

In fall of 2017,  An entered a business competition hosted by the United Nations Development Program designed to foster start-up companies that incorporated elements of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. An worked closely with the president of HASLI, Hương and his South Korean business contacts who helped him hone his business plan. An proposed that the company's primary service would be video relay interpreting, where deaf people call SC Deaf via video phone, and are then paired with an interpreter who places a call to the hearing party over the phone and proceeds to interpret the call between the two parties.

Hương helped An co-write and practice his speech, as well as interpret all of his speeches in the business competition. Together the two were able to win the competition and received seed money and coaching to successfully found SC Deaf, the first sign language interpreting company in Việt Nam. An was the registered business owner of the company, and employed three full time sign language interpreters (all members of HASLI), who interpreted for the video relay calls.

## Reclaiming Heart: The Problem of Combining a Moral and Financial Economy

Although many deaf leaders had come around to the idea that that SC Deaf could successfully combine the moral and financial economies of HNSL interpreting by having the company be deaf owned, it was unclear how deaf people outside of this small leadership circle would react. Part of the problem is that when moral economies are turned into financial economies, this can create fractures in deaf socialities (Friedner, 2015b). The moral economy of HAVE-HEART shifted in fundamental ways when it was combined with financial motives in SC Deaf. In the original formulation of HAVE-HEART, it is an imagined collective deaf community that gives their sign language, which they own, to hearing interpreters. This in turn engenders a moral debt on the part of interpreters, which is experienced through a feeling of gratitude and love, that motivates interpreters to give interpreting back to the deaf community for free. Under SC Deaf, it was no longer the collective community that could expect free interpreting in return for having shared their sign language (which they owned) with hearing interpreters. Instead, one deaf man stood in for the entire deaf community. The fact that a deaf business owner profited from the interpreting business (alongside the deaf teachers who would

theoretically profit from the increased interest in HNSL classes) was now supposed to satisfy the moral debt that interpreters owed to the deaf community.

In transforming the moral economy in this way, SC Deaf also sought to capitalize on forms of deaf sociality. An recruited potential customers from his extensive networks as a deaf leader, visiting deaf clubs in nearby provinces and offering free demo calls to deaf people to entice them to sign up for the service. Originally, SC Deaf required consumers to buy subscription packages, which allowed the deaf person to place unlimited interpreted calls during a set time prior (3, 6 or 12 months). However, eventually due to few people signing up for the expensive subscriptions, they switched over to a system where deaf consumers could pay for the time they used interpreters. Rates in 2022 were 50.000 VND ($2.18 USD) /15 minutes. This use of deaf networks to promote the interpreting service mirrors the way multi-level marketing companies in India sought to capitalize on deaf sociality, appealing to notions of deaf development and helping other deaf people (M. Friedner, 2015b). Indeed, when I attended one of the early pitches for SC Deaf at the HAD in the summer of 2017 (before SC Deaf officially received seed funding), I talked with several members of HAD who expressed enthusiasm for supporting a deaf owned business because they felt that it was important to “help” other deaf people. However, these same deaf individuals informed me that they probably would not personally be paying for subscriptions because they didn’t feel that it was “right” for deaf people to pay for interpreting. SC Deaf attempted to get around the moral conundrum of asking deaf people to pay for interpreting services by telling deaf people to ask their hearing families to pay for the services, but as one of the SC Deaf interpreters pointed out to me, An had the social capital to reach deaf people, not their hearing families.

Despite the fact that SC Deaf was deaf owned, it still found itself in the morally dubious position of charging deaf people, who were already financially precarious, for sign language interpreting. SC Deaf found itself grappling with two distinct problems 1) allowing non deaf people (hearing interpreters) to profit off of deaf people and 2) deaf people having to pay for sign language interpreting. These twin problems meant that SC Deaf began to face the same accusations that their paid hearing interpreters were just focused on EATING-TO-LIVE, rather than HAVE-HEART. To address these problems, SC Deaf released a video on their Facebook page titled "Good interpreter, Bad interpreter" that attempted to push back on the logic that HAVE-HEART required interpreting for free. The video exaggeratedly contrasted two interpreters-one Child of Deaf Adult (CODA) who charges the deaf person an exorbitant amount, and another from SC Deaf who charges the deaf person a modest fee due to HAVE-HEART for deaf people.

*Transcript 1: Good Interpreter, Bad Interpreter*

*The film was in HNSL and was posted on SC Deaf's facebook page, which was primarily followed by deaf people at the time. This suggests that the target audience for the film was potential deaf customers of interpreting services.*

<Scene 1>

1. Interpreter: What's wrong? What's the problem?
2. Deaf person: The problem is my parents saw me get arrested, and I'm very scared, I want to run away. I've been thinking about it nonstop. I need an interpreter to help me, but where can I get an interpreter? It's so difficult.
3. Interpreter: You are in luck! My parents are deaf, so I grew up signing, and I'm a VERY skilled interpreter. I understand you.
4. Deaf person: Your parents are deaf? You are the child of deaf parents? Really?
5. Interpreter: Yes, I've interpreted for so many people, everyone requests me and thinks I'm great!
6. Deaf Person: You can help interpret for me? How fortunate. Thank you so much. Come, let's go and you can help interpret.

*Transcript 1: Continued*

<Scene 2>

1. Deaf person: Ah! I feel so much better.
2. Interpreter: Hey! Was that good?
3. Deaf person: Great! Yes, thank you for your heart.
4. Interpreter: Hey, what about the payment? Payment?
5. Deaf person: What payment? I thought it was from your heart...
6. Interpreter: No no no... I had to pay the police bribe for you, then I had to interpret for such a long time, and then I had to motorbike all the way there in the hot sun! All together that's 15.000.000 VND ($640 USD).
7. Deaf person: 15 million? That's so expensive! I was thinking around 2 or 3 million ($85-128). You don't think so?
8. <interpreter holds up hand, and the deaf person reluctantly pays the money>

<Scene 3>

9. SC Deaf Owner: I would like to introduce you to an excellent new service
10. Deaf person: Great! A new service-that's great! How interesting!
11. SC Deaf Owner: It's excellent. It's a company that helps [deaf people]. The interpreters are honest (clean), their fees are cheap, and they truly help from their hearts. Let me introduce it to you
12. Deaf person: Interpreters?... let me see
    <SC Deaf owner demos the video relay service>
    <phone rings>
13. SC Deaf interpreter: Hi! I'm from SC Deaf. What can I help you with?
14. SC Deaf Owner: I need to resolve a problem with the police. Can you assist with that problem?
15. Deaf person: Excellent! It looks excellent!
16. SC Deaf Owner: As you saw, this is the real deal. The interpreters are professional, they have lots of experience, they have official licenses. SC Deaf truly helps [the deaf]. Because of their heart [love] they give people a very affordable price and deaf people are very satisfied.

In the first scene of the video, a deaf person is portrayed as facing difficulties with the police and being unsure of how to resolve them. The "bad interpreter" appears to the deaf person dramatically backlit against a window, with an image of a superhero superimposed on the screen (see Figure 9). The interpreter informs the helpless deaf person that they are a

skilled interpreter, and claims belonging to the deaf community through kinship since they are a child of deaf adults. Based on these assurances the deaf person agrees to have the interpreter assist them by interpreting at the police station. It's only in the second scene when the "bad interpreter" and the deaf person return from the police station that the conflict occurs. The "bad interpreter" demands payment, to which the deaf person responds that they thought the interpreting was "from the heart". In this scene we see the conflict between the moral and financial economies of HNSL interpreting playing out. While the bad interpreter emphasizes the financial resources and labor that they put into interpreting (interpreting all day, transportation to and from the police station and covering the police bribe), the deaf person is appealing to the logic that interpreters owe deaf people a debt and will interpret for free out of love. To add insult to injury, the interpreter then demands an exorbitant amount 15.000.000 VND ($640 USD), or approximately 1.5 times what someone living at the urban poverty level in Việt Nam would make annually (General Statistics Office of Việt Nam, 2016). The deaf person responds with a more reasonable amount of 2- 3 million VND ($85-128 USD), approximately what a HNSL interpreter would be paid for a full day of labor by an NGO following the 2017 UN-EU cost norms ($100USD/day) (*EU-UN Cost Norms*, 2017). This conflict is contrasted with scene three where the same deaf person meets with the owner of SC Deaf. The owner of SC Deaf informs the hapless deaf person that the interpreters employed by SC Deaf are "honest, their fees are cheap, and they truly help from their hearts." After demonstrating the interpreting service by placing a video call, the owner of SC Deaf reiterates "SC Deaf truly helps [the deaf]. Because of their heart [love] they give people a very affordable price and deaf people are very satisfied."

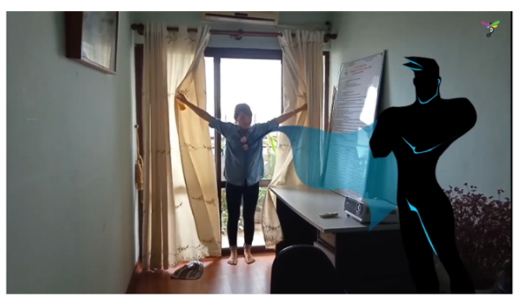

*Figure 9: Screenshots of bad interpreter (left) vs. good interpreter (right)*

In this film video, we see SC Deaf attempting to reframe what it means for interpreters to HAVE-HEART. While in previous formations of the moral economy of HNSL interpreters were expected to interpret for free, in this video SC Deaf employees are presented as being motivated by their love for deaf people to charge low rates. That these rates are in fact low is established through the hypothetical contrast with the bad interpreter, who ironically (and perhaps intentionally) in this video has deaf family. According to one SC Deaf interpreter the inspiration for this video came from a real HNSL interpreter who was a CODA who charged deaf people exorbitant rates for divorce proceedings.

CODAs are figures that occupy a complicated role with relation to deaf communities. Theoretically they should be more closely tied to deaf communities due to ties of kinship, and should have grown up signing. However, Preston (1995), who analyzed the role of CODAs in the United States found that CODAS vary significantly in their fluency in sign language, with some CODAS internalizing ideologies that spoken languages are superior. In Việt Nam, this pattern is even more significant, as many CODAs have not been taught sign by their parents, and in many cases have been entirely raised by hearing grandparents. CODAs also occupy a dubious moral position in the eyes of hearing HNSL interpreters. Hearing HNSL interpreters felt that CODAs did not properly respect deaf adults. They reasoned that perhaps because many CODAs grew up

with deaf parents who had low paying jobs, and were not respected by broader hearing society, CODAs came to internalize negative views of deaf people. Again, these are stereotypes about CODAs that do not necessarily reflect reality[43]. But it was what hearing HNSL interpreters who were not CODAs told themselves about CODAs to justify how their fictive kinship to the deaf community was more morally upright than the actual kinship of CODAs.

In contrasting these two figures of the "good" and "bad" interpreters, the video attempts to reframe HAVE-HEART as the amount of money charged, not working for free. The video also challenges the literal kinship occupied by CODAs, arguing that the fictive kinship occupied by hearing interpreters is more valuable as they are tied to the community by affective ties through HAVE-HEART. But at the same time as it attempts to assert hearing interpreters as HAVE-HEART is also tries to reframe what HAVE-HEART entails, from interpreting for free to interpreting for low rates.

Even as SC Deaf employees tried to redefine the moral economy of HAVE-HEART, their employees still grappled with the moral question of charging deaf people who were in a financially precarious position for their work. During downtime at a social entrepreneurship conference attended by members of SC Deaf, I watched Ngọc, who was employed by SC Deaf, and An discuss whether it made sense to have a privately funded interpreting business. Ngọc told An that she had been reflecting on how throughout the conference the speakers had emphasized that social entrepreneurship was supposed to bring together social and economic goals:

[43] While I was able to interview one Vietnamese CODA in 2013, I was unable to track down and convince any CODAs to give interviews in 2019.

> I was thinking that for [social enterprises] there is supposed to be both a social point and an economic point, and you are supposed to maintain both those goals in tandem. But I think that we should be working only for a social goal, because an economic goal is difficult because the deaf community doesn't have money. That is the responsibility of the government, to pay for interpreting and things like that. That should be the responsibility of the government. Should we be for profit? I feel uncomfortable about that. I think having a policy is better. I think having a policy is better, and we must ask the government to do that." (Ngọc, personal communication, HNSL, 2019)

In discussing economic and social goals, Ngọc is referring to the way that SC Deaf attempted to bring the moral and financial economies of HNSL interpreting together, providing interpreting for deaf people, and ensuring that interpreting is a livable profession. However, as Ngọc points out, trying to earn financial profit from interpreting "is difficult because the deaf community doesn't have money." Here Ngọc is noticing still another shift that has occurred as SC Deaf has entered the capitalist business system; it is not only expected to provide money (income) for interpreters, it is also supposed to turn a profit. While SC Deaf being owned by An means that some of the profit is going to a deaf individual, there is also the concern that when SC Deaf becomes profitable it will have to give profits to hearing investors who provide capital to fund SC Deaf[44].

Ngọc continued, arguing to An that interpreting should function like other government subsidized services, such as Việt Nam's hospital services:

> For example, when I go to the hospital, they receive a payment that goes into their general funds. That comes from the government, the national government. They take funds from citizens in the form of taxes and redistribute those to hospitals. If you set up a hospital as a company it would be unsuitable. The patients would come and pay fees for exams, but it wouldn't be sufficient to generate revenue as a for profit company, it's

[44] At the time this was more of a hypothetical concern than a reality, as SC Deaf was unsuccessful in attracting capital investment outside of grants and startup funds from NGOs like UNDP Việt Nam which were by definition not for profit.

> unsuitable. That is a social responsibility; it's a matter of policy. (Ngọc, personal communication, HNSL, 2019)

In drawing a parallel between state subsidized hospital services and sign language interpreting, and using the language of "social responsibility" Ngọc was appealing to the logic of social justice enshrined in the Vietnamese national constitution. She was arguing that as a socialist country, Việt Nam should provide for the needs of deaf citizens, the same way it subsidized public health. Yet another tension that SC Deaf was navigating was Việt Nam's post Đổi Mới economy, and the complicated stance towards private business and socialist services. As a socialist country, Việt Nam has historically funded a wide variety of social services, including hospitals, schools and social security. By calling interpreting a "social responsibility" Ngọc was arguing that interpreting should become one of these government funded social services. However since the start of Đổi Mới in 1986 the government has gradually reduced the amount of direct funding it provides for services, instead allowing private providers to enter the social services sector in a policy referred to as "xã hội hóa" (socialization) (Dinh, 1999). Social enterprises were one of the business models pushed by the Vietnamese government to try to ensure that social needs were attended to by the private sector. In fact, 2019 was declared the "year of the startup" by the Vietnamese government. This was one of the reasons UNDP Việt Nam had hosted a competition for social enterprise startups in the first place, to help ensure that new social enterprises incorporated the Sustainable Development Goals in their mission statements. SC Deaf, in serving deaf communities was envisioned to be the perfect social enterprise; a for profit business with a clear social benefit to the deaf community. However, as Ngọc pointed out, the for-profit goals and social goals did not always align.

An agreed with Ngọc saying “you are right. I see this and I feel conflicted just like you. I see how the economic goal is appropriate for the Center and for interpreting on the news. But the rest [interpreting for individual deaf people] is a social issue, and that should be a matter of policy, it’s more suitable. I’m going to have to think through it all again.” In other words, even though An had hoped that having a company owned by a deaf person would resolve the tensions between the moral and financial economies of HNSL interpreting, after two years of running a private interpreting company he couldn’t ignore the fact that charging deaf people for interpreting was still, for him, morally wrong. At the end of the day the SC Deaf staff did not really want to be a company, they simply wanted to make interpreting into a livable profession that benefited both deaf people and interpreters.

## Conclusion: Impossible Traps

In this chapter I have examined the tensions between the moral and financial economies of HNSL interpreting that emerge in the absence of state funding for sign language interpreting. With the absence of the state funding, both deaf people and HNSL interpreters are left in financially precarious positions as they attempt to sort out an equitable way to make interpreting a livable practice. Whatever ways deaf people and interpreters attempt to resolve these tensions, accepting payment from outside of the community, taking a side job, charging deaf people directly either through HASLI or through a deaf owned interpreting company, the tensions re-emerge. At the root of these tensions is the structural violence and absurdity of charging deaf people for interpreting services. Why should deaf people, who face significant financial precarity have to bear the additional burden of paying for interpreting services? Even

if deaf people achieved full economic equality with hearing people in Việt Nam, why should anyone have to pay for the basic need to communicate; a right that is essential to access social services, obtain an education, apply for employment, and belong to their hearing families? Yet at the same time why should HNSL interpreters bear the financial burden of working without pay?

Without financial support from the government or other entities/institutions both deaf people and interpreters experience a sense of financial precarity. Their interdependence is shot through with precarity, with deaf people and interpreters having to make impossible choices between different forms of precarity. Interpreters had to choose between HAVE-HEART and maintaining precarious belonging to the deaf community, or EATING-TO-LIVE and reducing their own financial precarity. They had to choose between attending to their own financial precarity, or attending to the financial needs of deaf people and the moral injustice of charging for interpreting in the first place. Deaf leaders had to choose between the political precarity of losing their pool of interpreters for deaf advocacy work, and allowing interpreters to charge deaf people for interpreting services thereby contributing to the financial precarity of the deaf community.

These many impossible choices led deaf people and interpreters to increasingly turn towards the Vietnamese government. The hope was that through advocacy work they could convince the government to directly fund HNSL interpreting. Yet in working together to lobby the government for HNSL interpreting services, deaf people and interpreters encountered still new forms of precarity; the precarity of voice. It is to this form of precarity which I now turn.

# CHAPTER FOUR: SILENT INVISIBLE PEOPLE

## A Film about Interpreting with No Interpreters:

In the spring of 2019, I watched as the staff of SC Deaf, Hanoi's first sign language interpreting company (discussed in Chapter Three), worked together to create a promotional video for their business that showcased satisfied deaf and hearing customers. SC Deaf had been struggling to stay solvent, because many deaf people lacked the financial resources necessary to sign up for a video relay interpreting subscription. The employees at SC Deaf were therefore trying to broaden their customer base by convincing hearing businesses that employed deaf workers to subscribe to SC Deaf's interpreting service. The team wound up filming a short promotional video featuring a testimonial from one of their existing business customers, an electrical repair company that had both deaf and hearing employees.

The plan was to post the video to SC Deaf's Facebook and YouTube accounts, as well as use it in presentations and pitches to potential clients and investors. However, the promotional film was never made in its intended form. A few short video segments from the filming that day were combined with footage taken from other of SC Deaf clients. When I asked the SC Deaf team why they did not use the film segments as intended, they could not remember. Nevertheless, in this chapter I analyze how the SC Deaf employees thought about filming and how they planned to use the film, as both processes center the ideologies and ethical norms they were working within.

SC Deaf is run by An, the same deaf man who also ran the Center, hand trained interpreters, and was the president of HAD at the time. That SC Deaf is deaf-run is of great importance to the company's reputation—both within the deaf community and with hearing

investors. Amongst deaf people, having the interpreting agency run by a deaf man demonstrated that even though interpreters were now paid for their work, they still respected deaf people and worked BELOW them—inhabiting the normative positions of BELOW and BEHIND. It also demonstrated that SC Deaf was a company firmly rooted within the deaf community and under deaf control. For investors, supporting a business owned by a disabled person was important for building the ethical reputation of their brands. SC Deaf received its initial seed funding from the United Nations Development Project (UNDP) that was looking to fund startups that supported its sustainable development goals. One of these goals was supporting the rights of disabled people, which SC Deaf could claim to do both through providing interpreting services and demonstrating that they were a deaf-owned business.

Other potential business investors that SC Deaf encountered at business competitions seemed to treat the fact that SC Deaf was deaf-run as a significant positive. For example, the fact that SC Deaf was deaf-run drew the attention of the founder of KOTO, a well-known local social enterprise for street children, who provided SC Deaf with training and a business retreat to help develop the company.[45] Similarly, SC Deaf have been invited to collaborate on a variety of projects, such as creating accessible videos on women's health. Even Hatch, the business incubator that had been assigned to SC Deaf as part of winning seed funding from UNDP, acknowledged that having a deaf CEO "works to [SC Deaf's] advantage in a way." The business incubator representative commented that "working with SC Deaf…can be leveraged" (presumably to increase the reputation of the business incubator). Although he insisted that they strove to treat SC Deaf as "normally" as possible and cautioned that the fact that SC Deaf

[45] This retreat occurred the week after my fieldwork ended, so I was unable to attend.

was deaf-run should not distract investors from the fundamental question of whether they had a viable business model, it was clear that being deaf-run mattered.

During An's tenure as the director of SC Deaf, he valued treating the interpreters on staff as part of a team and gave them considerable leeway to develop projects and shape the development of SC Deaf as they saw fit. Besides, between representing SC Deaf at various business competitions and social development initiatives, managing customer relations with deaf clients (who often did not understand the rates or structure of the video interpreting subscriptions), and serving as the president of HAD, An was extremely busy. Thus, one of the staff interpreters, Ngọc, took the lead in developing the promotional films for SC Deaf. Ngọc was the logical choice for the project as she had a university degree in filmmaking. The week leading up to the filming, Ngọc did nearly all of the work on the promotional video project, with only occasional input from the rest of the SC Deaf team. She selected the client whose testimonials they would feature, contacted the client, wrote a script for the opening and closing of the promotional video and even drafted a series of interview questions designed to elicit the testimonial. Within the privacy of the SC Deaf office, away from any hearing non-signers, everyone was more than comfortable acknowledging that Ngọc was in charge of the promotional video project.

However, when in front of hearing non-signers, An and the interpreters were highly concerned that all of the work done by SC Deaf would be primarily attributed to An. They feared that, as a deaf man, An would not be taken as seriously as the CEO of a company—and sadly their fears were not unfounded. When away from An and the SC Deaf interpreters, I often experienced hearing non-signers express to me their belief that perhaps An was not fully

capable of running a business and perhaps the interpreters were doing lots of the work for him. Therefore, when it came to the actual day of filming the promotional video, where hearing non-signing clients would be present, Ngọc worked extremely hard to hide her involvement in the project.

We filmed the promotional video onsite at an electrical repair company that utilized SC Deaf's services. When we arrived, it was An who greeted Cuc, the hearing manager of the company, rather than Ngọc. An explained the purpose of the interview, and Ngọc "simply" interpreted for him. When they interviewed Cuc for her testimonial, An conducted the interview, while Ngọc manned the camera and interpreted. These acts were forms of erasure, helping to shore up An's authority as the head of a company. While a hearing CEO would likely not have to explain their decision to delegate tasks to one of their employees, for An, as a deaf businessman whose ability to run a company was often doubted, any sense that the interpreters were doing things that he could have done was seen as potentially threatening to his, and thus the larger company's, image.

Yet Ngọc's attempt to hide her own presence did not stop at hiding her involvement in developing the script for the promotional video—she also sought to minimize her presence while interpreting. In theory, interpreting should not have been threatening to An's image: many businesses' CEOs in Việt Nam regularly use spoken language English to Vietnamese interpreters to conduct business with international companies and NGOs.[46] Yet Ngọc was just as careful about hiding her presence while interpreting as she was with hiding the involvement

[46] An also at times required HNSL to English training. Fortunately, four of the six "professional" HNSL interpreters were fluent in English and could provide this service.

in directing the film. Indeed, as they moved into the interview, I was struck by the unusual seating arrangement that Ngọc chose. Instead of sitting next to Cuc and An, Ngọc was seated on her own, nearly two meters away. The position meant that if Cuc wanted to maintain eye contact with An she was unable to see Ngọc except in her peripheral vision. In other words, the seating arrangement hid the interpreter from the hearing person's gaze. Hiding her own presence was so important to Ngọc in fact that she was willing to sacrifice clear communication, which is the presumed goal of interpreting. In order for An to see the interpreting and know what Cuc was saying, he had to break eye contact with her and look at Ngọc, a fact he worked to minimize by keeping his face oriented towards Cuc and only looking at Ngọc out of the corner of his eyes.

*Figure 10: Seating Arrangement for the Interview (Left: An, Middle: Cuc, Right: Ngọc)*

When I showed Ngọc the picture of the seating arrangement during the filmed interview and asked her why she chose to sit so far away, she explained that she not only wanted to stay out of Cuc's view, she also wanted to stay out of the view of the camera. She did not want her image to appear on the final video where many hearing non-signers would see her. She told me

that she wanted the hearing viewers of the film to focus on An and not her. Indeed, if you look closely at the image of the seating arrangements of the interview, you can see that Ngọc is entirely cut out of the camera's viewfinder.

The ironic result of this seating arrangement was that even though the film was a promotional video for interpreting services, no hearing HNSL interpreters appeared in the film clips shot that day. Although the film was arguing for the need for interpreters in mixed deaf and hearing work settings, on the film clips it appears as though An and Cuc can magically understand each other without an interpreter. Keeping the interpreter off camera undermined the marketing potential of the film, because if deaf and hearing people can understand each other without interpreters (as the film made it appear), why would employers need to hire interpreters to communicate with their deaf employees? From the deaf community's perspective, however, Ngọc's efforts to erase her presence made perfect sense. They were a way to shore up the precarious voice of the deaf person, helping hearing non-signers recognize deaf people as subjects with communicative abilities equal to anyone else.

## Shoring up Deaf Personhood through Silence and Invisibility

Ngọc's attempts to diminish her presence while interpreting is a common practice amongst HNSL interpreters. When speaking with me, HNSL interpreters referred to these practices using the Vietnamese words for "silent" (thầm lặng) and "invisible" (either as a loan word from English, or in the Vietnamese phrase "ít xuất hiện," which literally means less visible). Of course, Ngọc was in no way silent during this interaction. She used her voice to interpret everything An signed into spoken Vietnamese. Indeed, during interpreted

interactions, most of the practices referred to as "silent" and "invisible" actually involve manipulation of the interpreter's physical presence, rather than changes in their speech. And yet, neither was Ngọc truly invisible. Interpreting is an embodied practice that requires the interpreter's body to be visibly accessible to the deaf signer—and thus co-present with the hearing addressee—as they interpret into sign language. The best interpreters can do, thus, is move outside of hearing people's gaze, as Ngọc did in this interaction. Yet a simple turn of the head on the part of the hearing person was all that was required for them to see the interpreter's embodied presence. Why, then, did sign language interpreters refer to themselves as "silent" and "invisible"? And more importantly, what work does silence and invisibility do? Why did interpreters like Ngọc work so hard to erase their presence to the point that it resulted in communication difficulties and produced films about interpreters with no interpreters present?

I argue that what Ngọc and other HNSL interpreters mean when they refer to themselves as "silent" and "invisible" is not literal silence and invisibility (that is, not being seen or heard), but rather a set of communicative practices designed to diminish the way hearing people perceive interpreters. This in turn allows hearing people to recognize the communicative personhood, authority, and capability of deaf people.[47] Such practices *require* that interpreters be heard and seen, but heard and seen in a particular way, that is, *as* "silent" and "invisible," both effaced and secondary in relation to a deaf people's primary and fully-realized communicative personhood. Practices of silence and invisibility are built upon

[47] I use scare quotes around the words silence and invisibility to emphasize that I am not referring to literal silence and invisibility but rather to emic terms of practices aimed at diminishing one's presence during interactions.

ideologies of voice commonly held amongst hearing people in Việt Nam that conflate speaking and being seen with communicative personhood. By communicative personhood I mean the way in which one's communicative efforts are taken as indexing sufficient capacity and capability in order to be considered a valuable person and have authority. In other words, communicative personhood is what is achieved when one is perceived as having a voice, when the medium of the voice and the figure of the voice align. I use the concept of communicative personhood to call attention to the ableist nature of how specific forms of normative communication are used to adjudicate someone's personhood. In this chapter I examine how deaf people and interpreters negotiate these normative ideologies of voice, in an attempt to mitigate their effects on deaf people. I also explore the way these practices shape the relationship and power dynamics between deaf people and interpreters.

In examining the promotional video, we can see that questions of communicative personhood were central motivations to how Ngọc conducted herself. It was the fear that An would not be seen as an authoritative business owner that motivated Ngọc to hide her involvement in the filming process. By diminishing her own presence, she hoped that An's authority as a business owner would become more visible and respected. "Silence" and "invisibility," thus, are names for this achieved *relationship*—for this *diagram* of contrast—where the hearing interpreter is backgrounded while the agentive deaf person is moved into the foreground. Diminishing her presence during the interpreted interaction follows this same logic of trying to keep hearing people's attention on the deaf person and not on the interpreter. Yet, while it is easy to understand why Ngọc's involvement in the filmmaking project might

threaten An's authority, the fact that her mere presence while interpreting would threaten An's authority is a bit more puzzling.

That these practices referred to as "silence" and "invisibility" are actually an achieved diagram of contrast can be seen in the fact that in HNSL the signs used to refer to interpreters' diminished presence are BELOW and BEHIND. These signs for BELOW and BEHIND involve two A handshapes, which are canonical depictions for persons or entities in HNSL, with the dominant handshape positioned below or behind the non-dominant hand in signing space. The spatial relationship of the two hands emphasizes a power relationship, with the dominant hand in a position of diminished authority. These signs are closely related to other HNSL signs describing hierarchical power relationships, including BOSS, ORGANIZATIONAL-HIERARCHY, and ASSISTANT. Thus, to any HNSL signer, the discourse of BELOW and BEHIND are semantically linked to questions of power. According to deaf leaders in Hanoi, these signs describe what *should* be the normative relationship between deaf people and interpreters in interpreted interactions; deaf people should be in a position of authority, while the interpreter is in the position of an assistant, there to support deaf people's ability to convey their authority. As one can see in the iconicity of the signs BELOW and BEHIND, they appeal to a *hierarchical* notion of power and authority.

But why is deaf people's authority questioned in the first place? Why does an interpreter's embodied presence in interpreted interactions pose a threat to deaf people's authority and communicative personhood? And why are interpreters' practices of diminishing their visual presence referred to not only as "invisibility," but as "silence"? What is the

relationship between "silence" and "invisibility"? And how are "silence" and "invisibility" related to communicative personhood?

## Deafness, Interpreting, and Ideologies of Voice

To address these questions, I examine different scenarios where deaf people and interpreters are present, paying close attention to how deaf people and interpreters are treated by hearing non-signers. There is extensive research looking into the way that the use of interpreters shapes how minority language users are viewed in interaction.[48] Researchers have shown that interpreters are not merely animators of texts; they are conversation participants and co-authors in their own right (Davidson, 2000; Pöchhacker, 2012; Roy, 1992; Wadensjö, 1998). However, hearing non-signers often struggle to determine who is responsible for an interpreted message. In the United States, for instance, researchers have found that the linguistic choices of the interpreter (referring to parts of the interpreted utterance that are authored by the interpreter) are generally attributed to the signer, not the interpreter, in ways that can negatively impact perceptions of signers' authority and competence (Feyne, 2017). In studying deaf museum docents, Feyne found that interpreters' vocabulary choices, their use of role shift/ "constructed dialogue,"[49] and filler words inserted by the interpreters as they worked to translate the message, all served to create an impression amongst hearing evaluators that deaf docents were not presenting in an appropriately professional register (2017). In this chapter I build on this research, by examining how interpreters shape hearing

[48] The same could be said of majority language users. However, research typically focuses on the impact of interpreting on the minority language user, as these individuals are more likely to be negatively perceived given existing ideologies about minority languages.
[49] Role shift, or "constructed action," allows signers to "report someone else's utterance or thought…or describe physical actions performed by someone else" (Aristodemo et al., 2022, pp. 2–3).

people's perceptions of deaf people. However, instead of focusing on the linguistic choices of the interpreter, I look at the effect of the interpreter's embodied presence in the interaction.

I argue that at the heart of the problem are what linguistic anthropologists call *ideologies of voice* (Weidman, 2014). Like language ideologies, ideologies of voice are a series of beliefs that inform how people think about the voice and thus how they interact with others. There has been considerable work undertaken on language ideologies in Việt Nam. For example, Tran has examined how Vietnamese, the spoken language of the Kinh or Viet people, is the only national language in Việt Nam, despite the fact that there are 54 officially recognized ethnic groups in Việt Nam, all with their own distinct languages (2022). Similarly, spoken Vietnamese "has been closely associated with the course of national liberation and discursively constructed as a symbol of patriotism and cultural identity since the early years of new nation-state building" (Tran, 2022, p. 496). I build on this literature by exploring an ideology prevalent in Việt Nam that equates having a voice (i.e., speaking) with communicative personhood and authority. As deaf signers do not speak, their authority, and even their very personhood, is constantly being called into question. For example, hearing people often refuse to interact with deaf people, even when the context makes the deaf person's attempts to communicate abundantly clear (see E. M. Green, 2014 for a discussion of refusal). I reveal these ideologies by examining how hearing people react to deaf signers when they do not speak, as well as when they use interpreters.

Given these ideologies, the use of HNSL interpreters does more than simply allow for communication to take place; it is also supposed to provide deaf people with a voice, helping hearing people recognize deaf people's communicative personhood. However, the presence of

another embodied human being means that there is the potential for hearing people to attribute the voice, and its subsequent communicative personhood, to the *interpreter* rather than the deaf person. Therefore, interpreters attempt to hide their embodied presence to keep hearing people's attention on the deaf person. This demonstrates that ideologies of voice are not simply about sound. They are also about vision, and the way people connect bodies and voices together.

Again, one can see evidence that embodied presence is linked with ideologies of voice by examining the HNSL signs BELOW and BEHIND. The signs of BELOW and BEHIND also map onto the way bodies are normatively arranged in Vietnamese society to denote power and authority. For example, Shohet has examined how before Vietnamese children are able to produce words they are socialized into corporeal notions of hierarchy by learning to lower themselves to their elders through bowing (2013). Such practices, though they originate in broader Vietnamese society, are also accessible to deaf signers. For example, one deaf leader Chau joked that if interpreters truly respected deaf people and embodied this respect through being BELOW they should crawl, the way he had seen servants depicted in old paintings of the Vietnamese imperial court. Similarly, when An and I were at a business competition that SC Deaf was competing in, he pointed out how staff members would stand slightly behind their CEOs, and enter rooms after them. Thus, he linked the sign BEHIND to corporal performances of deference to authority he witnessed in broader society. An, among other deaf leaders, has argued that interpreters should similarly enter rooms after deaf people—and stand behind them— in order to recognize deaf people's authority. These examples suggest that in Việt Nam,

communicative personhood is not only determined through how one speaks, but how one physically positions oneself in relation to others.

On one hand, “silence” and “invisibility” are a form of communicative interdependence that attempts to bolster deaf people’s precarious voices. Deaf people like Ngọc and An work together, strategically placing their bodies in such a way that hearing people reorient their attention away from the interpreter and onto the deaf person. The hope is that such practices will be liberatory for deaf people by helping hearing people recognize a deaf person’s communicative personhood. However, on the other hand, there are limits to the liberation this can achieve, as the practices of “silence” and “invisibility” leave the underlying ideologies untouched. They do not fundamentally challenge the link between speech and communicative personhood. They simply attempt to borrow speech from the interpreter, conferring communicative personhood in that moment. In order to do this, they utilize existing ideologies that link corporeal orientation with communicative personhood to temporarily override hearing people’s ideologies that link speech with voice.

Moreover, they do not challenge hearing people’s assumption that only one person in an interpreted interaction—the interpreter or the deaf person—possess communicative personhood. These practices are not liberatory for interpreters, as they reinforce a zero-sum game between deaf people and interpreters, where only one party can be recognized as agentive at a time. Thus, interpreters wind up experiencing a precarity of voice alongside deaf people. Rather than liberation, in a certain way the interdependence created by interpretation distributes the precarity of voice *between* deaf and interpreting subjects, and also hides the communicative interdependence (the way deaf people and interpreters are working together

to produce the background/foreground contrast) from the hearing gaze. In the next chapter I will delve more deeply into the political consequences of this doubled precarity.

## Ideologies of Voice and Communicative Personhood

In order to understand the interactional practices of diminishing presence referred to as "silence" and "invisibility," it is first important to understand how ideologies of voice influence how deaf people and interpreters are perceived by the hearing non-signing public in Việt Nam.

As novice hearing interpreters begin to spend time with deaf people, they quickly begin to realize that members of the general hearing public treat them very differently than their deaf friends. For example, Linh was a novice interpreter at the time of my research study. She had started learning HNSL when she was hired at a local bakery that employed many deaf people, and she wanted to communicate better with her deaf colleagues. She signed up for classes at the Center in 2015 and finished all the levels of HNSL available at the time. As Linh became more fluent in HNSL, she began to interpret first for her colleagues at work and eventually for her deaf friends outside of work. In 2019, Linh was spotted at a party by one of the professional interpreters who recognized how good her HNSL was and invited her to start officially training as an interpreter, attending the same interpreter training hosted by a group of Americans that Lê in Chapter One was invited to attend.

One afternoon in 2019, Linh went to interpret for a deaf friend Ha (who was also her former colleague from the bakery) at the hospital. As usual, there was a long line at the hospital, so Linh and Ha went outside of the hospital to eat nem (fresh spring rolls assembled by the customer) from a local street vendor. The street vendor, after hearing Linh place the

order in spoken Vietnamese and then noticing the two young women signing, started talking exclusively to Linh, asking her if she was Ha's teacher. The event caused Linh to reflect on how differently deaf people and hearing interpreters are treated while out in public. In an interview later that afternoon Linh told me:

> When [hearing] people see me with a deaf person or a person with a disability, they usually think that I am a teacher, that I am taking care of them and therefore, responsible for them. For example, at the nem place, [the vendor] asked if I was her teacher even though we are the same age...I said that I was simply her friend and that we were simply there to make nem [rolls] together. So, I think [hearing] people always default to [thinking] that deaf people are unable to take care of themselves; that I'm someone taking care of or responsible for them. (Linh, personal communication, Vietnamese 2019)

Why did the hearing vendor assume that Linh was Ha's teacher? The vendor started to treat Linh as Ha's teacher simply on the basis that Linh spoke, and Ha signed. While both Linh and Ha were communicating, they used different modalities: the more normative modality of speech, and the less normative modality of sign. This suggests that the vendor's actions were guided by an *ideology of voice*.

Linguistic anthropologists such as Amanda Weidman (2014), Nicholas Harkness (2014), and Laura Kunreuther (2014) have pointed out that voice is often used to refer to both the material textuality of language (i.e., speech) and what Kunreuther calls the "*figure of the voice*": a nexus of metaphors that use voice "as a sign of intimacy, consciousness,...presence…[and] above all,...agency" (2014, 5).[50] Within such ideologies, the material voice and figure of the

[50] Understandings of agency are significantly different in Việt Nam given understandings of the self being enmeshed in relationships of hierarchical interdependence (Shohet, 2021). To avoid confusion between these different concepts of agency, I instead focus on how people's communicative personhood, authority, and capacity is linked to speech and embodiment.

voice must align for communicative personhood to be recognized. Of course, there is nothing in particular about the material nature of speech that makes it more closely linked to communicative personhood than any other communicative form. We could just easily associate any other communicative modality—signing, writing, gesturing, braille, etc.—with communicative personhood. In fact, in some contexts, the lack of communication—say, the choice to remain silent—is actually seen as highly authoritative (Basso, 1970; Hunter, 1982). Nevertheless, the human voice is often linked to communicative personhood by locally-specific beliefs. I unpack some of these locally-specific beliefs that tie these voices together—that is, that connect the material nature of the voice with the figure of the voice—not only through speech, but through corporeal orientation.

In Việt Nam, we can see ideologies of voice in common metaphors for political representation. For example, one of the metaphors used by hearing Vietnamese people to describe representation and advocacy work is *nâng cao tiếng nói* (raising voice). The phrase peppers newspaper articles (i.e., "Nâng cao tiếng nói của Việt Nam trong lĩnh vực luật pháp quốc tế" ["Raising the voice of Việt Nam in the field of international law"]), and is used frequently by NGO's working with minority groups (i.e., "Tăng cường sự Tham gia và Tiếng nói của Phụ nữ Dân tộc Thiểu số tại Việt Nam,"["Enhancing the Participation and Voice of Ethnic Minority Women in Việt Nam"]). In these metaphors, voice refers to taking action, participating,

and expressing one's viewpoint. In short, it is at once a metaphor for actively communicating, participating, and conveying authority.[51] [52]

Ideologies of voice influence how deaf people and interpreters are treated by members of the hearing public, because these ideologies are not simply metaphors. They are beliefs that shape how people interact with one another. When only oral speech is associated with communicative personhood, it has consequences particularly for individuals who cannot or choose not to speak, such as deaf signing individuals. If we return to the example of the street vendor, we can see that the connection between speech and communicative personhood caused the hearing street vendor to treat Linh and Ha so differently. While Linh's speech was recognized as a marker of personhood, Ha's signing was not recognized by the vendor as a form of agentive communication—or even communication in general. The difference in modality of Linh and Ha's communication was significant enough to have the hearing street vendor assume that Linh was Ha's teacher, despite clear evidence to the contrary given the two were the same age. In other words, ideologies of voice are so influential that rather than assuming deaf people have communicative personhood, hearing people often default to ascribing authority to the hearing people around deaf people, ultimately seeing them as caretakers of or teachers for the deaf. Deaf people in Việt Nam constantly have their capability called into question. This impacts their lives in a variety of ways both big and small. From rumors that An was not fully capable of running a business, to causal assumptions that interpreters are deaf people's teachers, to deaf

[51] Historical research on the genealogy of voicing in Việt Nam would help illuminate whether these notions of voicing emerge alongside French colonization or whether they draw on more longstanding Vietnamese concepts.
[52] In the next two chapters I go into more detail about how ideologies of voice in Việt Nam determine which voices are heard and not heard, and how voices are used to advocate in Việt Nam's post doi-moi (literally, "renovation" or "restoration") socialist political system.

teachers' authority being disrespected in the classroom. In this environment, deaf people use interpreters not only to communicate with hearing people, but to try to counteract ideologies of voice that discount their personhood.

### Attempting to Convey Communicative Personhood Without Interpreters

When speech is so closely associated with communicative personhood, how can hearing people come to recognize the communicative personhood of deaf people who do not speak? Often times deaf people rely on a variety of strategies to convey their capacity for communicative personhood without interpreters. Deaf people in Việt Nam and elsewhere are highly experienced in communicating with hearing people who do not know sign languages (Graif, 2018; Green, 2014; Horton, 2020). They often combine a multitude of communicative resources (i.e., writing, gesture, mouthing) to make themselves understood, in a process referred to as translanguaging (De Meulder et al., 2019; Kusters, 2017, 2019). Yet, while translanguaging is an effective form of communication, language ideologies in general—and ideologies of voice in particular—may limit how hearing people perceive deaf people when utilizing communicative modalities besides speech (See Green et al., 2020 for a broader discussion of how language ideologies impact deaf signers).

To understand how deaf people attempt to navigate hearing ideologies of voice without interpreters, let us turn to the intermediate HNSL class at the Center, which I observed for two months in 2017. The class was taught by Nam, a deaf leader in his early 40s, who was highly respected within the deaf community for his extensive knowledge of both Vietnamese and HNSL grammar. While Nam only had a 5th grade education, he had attended numerous trainings on analyzing and teaching HNSL grammar through the Dong Nai Deaf Education

Project, as well as through the IDEO project. In addition to this formal training, he had over eight years of classroom experience teaching hearing students at a variety of levels.

While Nam was highly experienced, this experience was not necessarily recognized by the hearing HNSL students. As discussed in Chapter One, students at the Center generally had little-to-no prior relationship with deaf people. Despite their interest in sign language, students often came in with negative beliefs about sign language and deaf people. Thư, one of the interpreting assistants at the Center (see Chapter Three for Thư's story), had once held such negative beliefs herself. As she shared with me in an interview: "previously, I thought deaf people were stupid. They could not learn well…that in sign language the conversations were just average, not advanced. Those were my beliefs. Later, through work and collaboration, my mind was opened, and I changed my beliefs" (Thư interview, 2015).

The students' ideologies of voice shaped the way they interacted with Nam in the classroom. Even though teachers in Việt Nam are highly respected, and the students reported enjoying Nam's class, in many ways they ignored Nam's authority. They repeatedly spoke out loud in class, despite Nam's constant requests that they not speak, both for the sake of their own learning and because the students' side conversations were inaccessible to him. Students often laughed when he made spelling or grammatical errors in written Vietnamese, not recognizing that Nam's struggles with written Vietnamese were due to the limited educational opportunities available to him in Việt Nam's oral education system. Some students even went as far as to outright argue with Nam about how HNSL should work, such as one student who tried to insist that facial expression could not be an integral part of sign language communication (see Marie, 2020 for a more detailed analysis of these interactions). Nam bore

these constant signs of disrespect with quiet endurance, telling me in an interview that he "just ignored" students' disrespect in the moment but kept it in mind when considering which students would make good interpreters. He also frequently used visual humor to make the classes lively, exaggerating signs and interjecting games of signed charades to hold students' attention and stop them from talking in class.

The challenge for deaf teachers like Nam is not only teaching students HNSL, but getting students to disorient from their ideologies of voice, a necessary step in having them recognize the deaf person's authority as a teacher. Complicating this problem was that the students, who had only taken eight weeks of HNSL classes (sixteen 1.5-hour lessons) so far, could not yet understand complex instructions in HNSL. Nam often lectured about grammatical rules, the role of classifiers in HNSL, the use of facial expression, and phonological components of signs, such as handshape, palm orientation, and movement. However, the language required for these lessons was beyond the students' comprehension, meaning that without intervention, students would not have been able to recognize that Nam was in fact extremely knowledgeable about HNSL linguistics.

There were of course other modalities through which Nam could have taught these linguistic principles; yet each of these modalities had ramifications for how students perceived Nam. Nam could and did communicate with students through Vietnamese writing, yet—as already mentioned—this often backfired as students fixated on Nam's spelling mistakes and grammatical errors, thereby causing students to laugh, tease Nam about his poor written Vietnamese, and otherwise disrupt the lesson. This parallels research within the special education system in Việt Nam that has found that deaf students' poor literacy skills are often

taken as signs of cognitive deficits or "backwardness" rather than as the product of limited linguistic access and poor schooling (Cooper, 2017; Woodward et al., 2004).

Similarly, Nam could and did communicate with students through what is colloquially known as "điệu bộ," or gesture/pantomime. Whenever there was a sign that students did not understand (and the interpreter was not present), Nam would go into a lengthy explanation in điệu bộ until the students successfully guessed and confirmed by fingerspelling that they understood what the sign meant. Điệu bộ encompasses a wide range of improvisational communicative practices used by deaf people both when communicating with non-signing hearing people and with deaf people who do not know much standard HNSL.

However, the use of điệu bộ also opened up Nam to forms of interactional vulnerability that could lessen his authority in the classroom. Điệu bộ is similar to what is refered to in Nepal as *natural sign*, "a limited repertoire of signs shared by deaf and hearing people" (E. M. Green, 2014, p. 1). Peter Graif in his research with deaf Nepalis finds that while natural sign is effective in conveying meaning to hearing people, often results in hearing people seeing deaf people as "lacking sense" and "lacking voice" (2018). This is because to get their meaning across, deaf people must make their signing radically transparent—limiting themselves to signs most easily understood by hearing interlocutors. This burden of transparency falls entirely on the deaf signer: they must make their signing appear easy, natural, and clear, erasing all of the work that deaf people do to foreground meaning, thereby erasing the evidence of deaf people's intelligence. Thus, điệu bộ was not necessarily an effective method for Nam to demonstrate his expertise to hearing students, nor dispel their negative ideologies about deaf people. While deaf people have a wide variety of communicative modalities available to them when

communicating with hearing people, both writing and điệu bộ pose challenges in terms of conveying authority. Therefore, deaf people turn to the use of interpreters to attempt to navigate these constraints.

### Conveying Communicative Personhood Through Interpreters: The Two Body Problem

In this context sign language interpreting—in addition to being a way for deaf people and hearing signers to communicate together—can have the added benefit of providing deaf people with an acceptable-to-others voice, allowing them to gain communicative personhood that is associated with speaking. To understand how this plays out in practice, let us look at what happened at HNSL classes at the Center when interpreters were present. When I first began doing research in the summer of 2015, three different sign language interpreters volunteered at the Center doing a variety of activities. While the center was deaf-run, and employed all deaf teachers, interpreters (who had themselves graduated from the Center) were integral to its functioning. They were responsible for crafting and maintaining the public image of the Center through maintaining the Facebook page and corresponding with potential students about the classes. They also helped keep the Center financially solvent by applying for grants to rent rooms and supplement the teachers' salaries. Within the classroom setting, interpreters were responsible for interpreting instructions for hearing students and sharing their own experiences as interpreters with students to encourage them to become interpreters. These interpreters were volunteers and were not always able to make all class sessions. Thư was primarily responsible for interpreting for Nam's class, but sometimes could not make it due to her own work commitments or because she was asked to fill in for an

interpreter assigned to another class. While the previous section focused on sessions of Nam's class when Thư was not present, this section focuses on sessions when she was there.

As an attempt to both communicate effectively and convey his expertise, Nam had Thư interpret for the classes. Nam would write on the board and sign in HNSL while Thư would interpret Nam's signs, stopping voicing when Nam quizzed students on vocabulary. The use of an interpreter allowed Nam to discuss complex issues of grammar like word order or facial expression using quick succinct explanations in HNSL terms that would otherwise be above the student's linguistic competency. In other words, Thư was there to help smooth communication between Nam and the hearing students, rendering Nam's signing into a voice that could easily be recognized by hearing people.

In some ways the interpreter in these scenarios acts similarly to a vocal prosthesis. To be clear, I am not arguing that interpreters are prosthetics, as prosthesis metaphors can be highly problematic (Dolezal, 2020). Rather, comparing how interpreters work with the way vocal prosthetics work can help illuminate some of the complex ways ideologies of voice influence interpreting practices. Jonathan Sterne, a scholar and professor with a vocal impairment, has analyzed his own use of a vocal prosthetic, which he dubs the "dork-o-phone," noting how it shapes his interactions in the world (Sterne, 2021). Due to the nature of his impairment, Sterne's voice is too soft to be perceived in most social settings, leading him to use a portable amplification system. The dork-o-phone consists of a small head-mounted microphone and a speaker worn in a pouch on a faux-leather lanyard that hangs around his neck. His material voice—the sonic waves that emanate from his body—thus come not from his mouth but from his mid chest where the speaker sits. While such an arrangement can result in

awkwardness (such as with people staring at his chest or asking what the device is), Sterne notes that fairly quickly people begin to associate the sonic voice emanating from his chest with the normative place a voice should come from. Sterne refers to this as "social magnetism," explaining that "my voice climbs back up to my face for those who see and hear me speak" (2021, p. 54). Social magnetism happens in a variety of situations where there is a disconnect between material voices and bodies. For example, when listening to a television we assign the voices to the characters on screen even though they emanate from the speakers and not from wherever the characters' mouths happen to be on screen.

Theoretically, the use of a sign language interpreter could work the same way as a dork-o-phone. In an interpreted interaction the deaf person's signed voice (communication) is rendered into a material voice (speech) through the interpreter's vocal cords and mouth. The interpreter's speech should be socially magnetized back to the deaf person's body, reuniting the material voice with the physical body. When interpreting is successful it reunites a *material voice* (of the interpreter) with the *figure of voice* (of the deaf signer), allowing hearing people to recognize deaf people as agentive.

However, interpreters are fundamentally different from vocal prosthetics. They are not pieces of technology. They are humans with fleshy bodies with their own lips and mouths and most importantly with their own voices and their own communicative personhood. Thus the use of an interpreter introduces new problems for interaction that the use of a vocal prosthetic does not. When the interpreter is visible to the hearing gaze, there are two potential bodies from which the voice could emanate. The question is: which body, in the eyes of the hearing

non signer, is responsible for a particular utterance and thus who is credited with the communicative personhood associated with that utterance?

Part of this confusion comes from the complex ways in which an individual can relate to a particular utterance. Following Goffman, these are often described as being broken into three different roles (or "footings" as Goffman (1981) calls them) that a speaker/signer may have to a particular utterance: author, animator, or principal. The animator is the one physically producing the utterance; the author is the one who composed a particular utterance; the principal is the person or group whose position is staked out by the utterance. It is possible for an individual to occupy any combination of these different role partials at the same time (Goffman, 1981). While these roles are often collapsed into one person (a speaker), they are complicated under the citational framework of interpreting. Researchers studying interpreting have argued that the principal of an interpreted utterance is the minority language user (in this case the deaf person), as they are the one whose behalf both the original and interpreted utterance is made. However, interpreters are in fact co-authors, because as they participate in the interaction and translate speech into another language they make decisions that affect the final shape of the re-animated utterance (Wadensjö, 1998). n other words, interpreting is an interdependent act in which a deaf person and an interpreter work together to construct an interpreted utterance. Yet this is not necessarily how interpreting is perceived by hearing non-signers.

Part of the power in using Goffmanian role partials in analysis comes not from analyzing the absolute relationship that an individual has to an utterance (i.e., whether or not an individual composed a particular utterance and is therefore its author), but rather as part of

understanding achieved effects or relationships between an individual and an utterance. In other words what is at stake is to what extent, and under what circumstances, an individual is *perceived* as being the author/animator/principal of a particular utterance. Interpreting poses a problem because hearing people generally assume that animator and author-principal—and the material voice and the figure of voice—should all be manifested in a singular person, not shared across participants as it is in interpreted interactions. Given the pre-existing bias hearing people have to associating the material voice (speech) with the figure of voice (communicative personhood), they may be biased to also attribute author, animator, and principal to the hearing interpreter. In an attempt to counteract this tendency, reconnect the deaf person's material voice and figure of the voice, and thereby restore communicative personhood, interpreters attempt to be seen only as re-animators of a particular utterance (a literal instantiation of Goffman's concept of the animator as talking machine).

How does an interpreter's embodied presence shape how interpreted interactions with their complex role partials and citational framework are perceived by hearing individuals? When interpreters are visible to the hearing gaze, hearing people often default to assigning the voice, and thus the communicative personhood associated with it, to the hearing interpreter. However, when the interpreter is not directly visible to the hearing gaze, it is easier for hearing people to magnetize the interpreter's voice onto the deaf person's body. To illustrate this, let us take a closer look at Thư's involvement in the HNSL classes. When I first started observing at the Center, Thư's embodied presence was highly visible. I would arrive at class a few minutes late, perpetually underestimating Hà Nội's formidable traffic. The first thing I would see when entering the room was Thư seated at the teacher's desk, her body angled to the side so she

could see both Nam, who was writing on the board, and the students in their rows of desks. While Nam paced back and forth on the teacher's dais, writing on the blackboard and lecturing in HNSL, Thư sat comfortably at the desk and addressed the students in speech. From a purely visual perspective, it was hard to determine who was the teacher and who was the assistant; it almost appeared as if there were two teachers working together.

Thư's physical presence in the classroom was a highly ambiguous sign. Although Thư was using her voice to interpret for Nam, it would have been easy to see Thư as giving a lesson *alongside* Nam (as an author, animator, and principal in her own right). Further complicating this problem was the fact that at times Thư did more than simply interpret what Nam said. She would sometimes interject to give brief explanations about grammar or to talk about what it was like to work as an interpreter. For example, when An was giving the introductory lesson to a new class of beginning HNSL students, one of the hearing students got in an argument with An over whether deaf people should be called người Điếc (lit:Deaf people) or khiếm thính (lit: hearing impaired) (see Cooper 2014, p. 313; Cooper and Nguyen 2015, p. 112–13 and Marie 2020 for further discussion of these terms). Thư and the other interpreter took turns interpreting as they joined An next to the white board sharing their perspectives on why using người Điếc was correct. In this scenario Thư and the other interpreter asked An's permission before joining in the conversations, demonstrating that they recognized An's authority within the classroom. Nevertheless, they assumed the physical position of a teacher, sharing knowledge from the front of the classroom next to the blackboard.

These multiple roles—along with the physical orientation of the classroom—encouraged the students to orient to Thư as a second teacher. For example, one day when the class was

reviewing for a test, a student had a question about a grammatical structure in one of the dialogues they had to memorize. Instead of going and getting Nam, who had stepped out of the room to converse with another instructor, the student asked Thư, who decided to give an impromptu lesson about HNSL grammar, moving from her usual perch sitting on the edge of the teacher's desk to writing on the board just like an actual teacher.

If we return to the comparison between sign language interpreters and vocal prosthetics, we can see why interpreters' embodied presence can be a threat to deaf people's authority. With the dork-o-phone, all that must occur for the figure of the voice and the material of the voice to be reconnected in a normative manner is for the listener to magnetize the sound waves up to the speaker's mouth. However, with sign language interpreters an additional step must occur. Before the material voice can be magnetized onto the deaf person's body it must be first *unmoored* from the interpreter's body. Part of the problem is that the dork-o-phone is not a full person, while an interpreter—by being a speaking subject—is. Hence, to NOT be a threat is for their own personhood to be diminished, by speaking but by not being an author/principal if they can avoid it. They partition speaking and thus distribute some quantum of their personhood to the deaf signer.

Again, this points to the fact that ideologies of voice work not only through hearing, but through vision. One does not simply hear a voice and assign agency to it; one sees the whole interactional space and attempts to assign the voice to a *body*. As Sterne points out: "the body often functions as a point of identification in social life" (2021, p. 46). Yet the reliance of ideologies of voice on vision opens up room for voices to be discounted as "these identifications are often misattributed and mixed" (ibid). In particular with sign language

interpreters, there is a risk that the voice will be misattributed to the hearing interpreter rather than the deaf person, because as the hearing speaking individual they are more likely to be seen as in possession of a voice than a non-speaking deaf individual.

In the case of Thư interpreting for Nam, several factors made it difficult to unmoor the voice from her body and magnetize it onto Nam's body. First: the physical arrangement of the classroom influenced how the hearing students perceived both Thư and Nam. Theories of performance and interaction tell us that the way we perceive a particular interaction is not solely determined by the language used in an interaction; the physical setting, and how people stand within it, contributes to how an interaction is perceived (Duranti, 1992; Goodwin, 2000, 2013). In this case, the classroom—with its clear distinction between the raised teacher's dais and the pupils' small wooden desks—is already densely inscribed with meanings. Therefore when Thư appears seated at the teacher's desk on the raised teacher's dais it is easy to read this as an indexical sign that she is a co-teacher rather than an interpreter.

The second factor that made it difficult to unmoor Thư's voice from her body was that as a speaking person, Thư represented another source of potential authority within the classroom. The students often perceived Thư' as being a/the teacher when she stepped outside of the normative role of an interpreter as described in interpreting studies literature (simply interpreting between two languages), instead talking about her experiences as an interpreter or explaining points about HNSL grammar. Thư stepping outside of the typical interpreting role meant that at times she was an author, animator, and principal of her own utterances. This should not necessarily have threatened Nam's authority, as teachers often have class assistants or teacher's aids contribute to teaching. But rather than recognize that both Thư and Nam

contribute to the lesson, the students started orienting more to Thư. Questions about HNSL grammar and deaf culture, which Nam had greater expertise in, started getting directed to Thư. The students seemed to default to the idea that Thư was the teacher, even though Nam lead the majority of the lessons.

It might have been particularly easy for students to orient to Thư as a teacher because unlike the deaf teachers, Thư already possessed a voice. In other words, by the mere fact of speaking, interpreters already have markers of communicative personhood that deaf people do not possess. Thư was not the only interpreter who had hearing people ask her questions that could have been asked to a deaf person, either. Every HNSL interpreter I spoke with reported hearing people asking them questions or attempting to speak with them directly as opposed to addressing the deaf person in the interaction, even when the latter in fact had more knowledge about the subject than the interpreter.

## Making the Interpreter Silent and Invisible

The tendency for hearing people to orient towards interpreters is the reason why practices of silence and invisibility developed. The Center was one of the places where I first saw deaf leaders explicitly ask interpreters to use practices of silence and invisibility, as these were the tools they used to counter normative ideologies.

When I first began observing at the Center, the deaf teachers were largely unconcerned about the interpreters' embodied presence in the classroom. As I discussed during the previous chapter, volunteering at the Center was one of the ways interpreters demonstrated HAVE-HEART, enacting their love for deaf people. In fact, the unique authority and experience of

interpreters was highly valued in the classroom. Interpreting for free in the classrooms was a sign of heart, but even better was interpreters using their experience to help recruit, screen, and mentor potential interpreters. An explained that he valued having interpreters in the classrooms because whenever he found a potential interpreting student, he could pair them up with one of the interpreters at the Center to talk to them about what it was like to become an interpreter. Oftentimes these discussions would take place right at the Center itself after class in the breezeway or during class when An would ask an interpreter to go chat with a particularly gifted student at the back of the room.

Yet over time the deaf teachers came to be more and more concerned about interpreters' role in the classroom. In a staff meetings where Thư was not present the deaf teachers discussed how they were concerned about the way the hearing students seemed to be treating the interpreters as teachers, asking the interpreter questions instead of asking the deaf teacher directly. While some of the interpreters would redirect students' questions, telling them to ask the teacher directly, Thư in particular had a tendency to simply answer students' questions. While the deaf teachers were comfortable with the interpreter answering questions about their experience as interpreters, they were frustrated that questions about topics like grammar or deaf culture, on which the teachers felt deaf people should be the ultimate authority, were not directed to them. The deaf teachers were concerned that students were not taking them seriously as teachers because they were deaf and they both felt and knew that hearing people did not tend to see deaf people as authority figures.

The deaf teachers decided that from now on they would ask interpreters to sit in the back of the classroom, behind the students rather than at the teacher's desk. Moving the

interpreters to the back of the room was a form of erasure, making their presence effectively invisible to the hearing students in the classroom. While the students were seated in fixed rows of desks all facing the teacher's dais, the interpreter would be behind them out of their sight lines and appearing to be a disembodied voice. With the voice effectively unmoored from the interpreter's body, it could now be successfully magnetized onto the deaf person's body, serving as an index of their communicative personhood. Most importantly for the deaf teachers the interpreters would not be at the front of the classroom, where standing on the raised dais or sitting at the teacher's desk serves as an indexical sign that authorized the interpreter as a potential instructor. The fact that deaf teachers changed the policy on interpreting emphasizes the tensions between interpreters HAVE-HEART and having voice. While deaf people wanted interpreters to HAVE-HEART, they did not want hearing people to perceive interpreters as having voice.

We can see from this example that "invisibility" is an attempt to strategically diminish signs of interpreters' presence such that the figure of the voice can be successfully projected through them—rather than anchored in and by their speaking subjectivity—and thus assigned to the deaf person as its ultimate source. The practices of "silence" and "invisibility" thus rely on the same ideologies of voice that hearing people already hold. They rely on the fact that being seen is how the figure of voice gets attributed to a person in the first place; or rather that to be a full person is to *be* a figure of voice, even when one does not materialize that figure in one's own body alone. When the interpreter is not directly visible to the hearing gaze it is easier for hearing people to magnetize the interpreter's voice onto the deaf person's body. Where such practices differ from mainstream ideologies of voice is in the openness that allows

animator and author-principal, material voice, and figure of voice to be *distributed* across persons *and* that being a full person is not reducible to, or diminished by, the lack of capacity to orally speak. In short: it ensures that the deaf are full, autonomous communicative persons, too, in their use of sign language.

We can also now see why interpreters referred to the practice of diminishing their visual presence as *silence and invisibility*, rather than merely invisibility. When the co-presence of the voice and the body work together to form one figure of voice, erasing one's visual presence results in diminishing one's agency and authority. In other words it results in diminishing one's voice and thus itself *constitutes* the visibility and hearability of deaf *voices* in what we see is a complex economy of (partible, distributed) personhood.

## Interdependent Voices

In this chapter I have shown how ideologies of voice that link together speech with agency and authority result in hearing people discounting deaf people's authority and agency. This makes deaf people particularly vulnerable in interaction. Deaf people thus attempt to mitigate this interactional vulnerability by manipulating their relationship with interpreters in interactions. They ask interpreters to diminish signs of their visual presence so that their material voices, and the sense of communicative personhood that comes with them, can more easily be magnetized to deaf people.

Practices of "silence" and "invisibility" are a form of interdependent voicing between deaf people and interpreters that works to mitigate the precarity of voice deaf people experience. Deaf people and interpreters collaboratively navigate around local ideologies that

privilege speech as the *material voice par excellence* and connect speech to communicative personhood. Interpreting through rendering sign language into speech can help hearing people recognize the connection between deaf people's material (signed) voices and the figure of voice, thus restoring their communicative personhood in the eyes of the hearing interlocutor. However, the presence of interpreters' fleshy bodies and their use of acoustic speech represents an alternative source of communicative personhood, given ideologies that associate corporeal embodiment with the figure of the voice. To magnetize the material sonic voice to the deaf signer requires first de-magnetizing the voice from the hearing interpreter. This becomes problematized by the aforementioned ideologies that encourage hearing interlocutors to be already biased towards seeing the speaking interpreter as in possession of communicative agency and not the signing deaf person. Further complicating this problem is the ideology that animator and author-principal, material voice, and figure of voice should all be manifested in a singular person, not shared across participants as it is in interpreted interactions. Hearing interlocutors are thus orienting to interpreted contexts as a zero-sum game, where either the deaf person or the interpreter has communicative personhood, but not both.

The trick of "silence" and "invisibility" is to turn these multiple ideologies against each other, tipping the scale of the zero-sum game so that hearing interlocutors recognize deaf people's personhood. Interpreters must speak in order to render the deaf signer's utterance into a modality recognized by hearing interlocutors, but they distance themselves from the communicative personhood associated with that speech by standing in locations that diagrammatically contrast them with the deaf person, signaling them as *not* being in a position of authority (a component of communicative personhood). What emerges is a sort of liminality

(as a betweenness) of the interpreter[53] that is the product of having to stand under multiple, (potentially) contradictory metapragmatic dicta that leads to double-voiced, citational practices. The interpreter is both perceived as having a material voice and yet actively works to negate their own figure of voice, distributing part of their personhood to the deaf signer.

Practices of “silence” and “invisibility” are a form of resilient interdependent voicing between deaf people that successfully mitigates the precarity of voice deaf people experience in communicative interactions with hearing people. Yet what is the impact of this interdependent practice on interpreters? Practices of silence and invisibility do not alter ideologies of voice directly; rather, they change their dimensions in such a way that the deaf person can also be recognized as having a voice. It is possible that over time, as hearing people become accustomed to connecting interpreters' voices with deaf people’s signing, their ideologies of voice will begin to expand to include signing, such that the interactional erasure of interpreting (i.e., where deaf people can have a voice through interpreters) might give way to the ontological erasure of the difference in communicative modality (i.e., where deaf people can be seen and treated as communicative persons period). However, in the short term while ideologies of voice stay unchanged, “silence” and “invisibility” treat interpreted interactions as a zero-sum game where either the deaf person is recognized as agentive or the interpreter is, but not both. Yet what is a zero-sum game ideologically also appears ethnographically at the level of actual practices as a constant negotiation and tenuous balancing act. Within the sight of hearing people interpreters must constantly erase their visual presence lest agency accidentally be assigned to them.

[53] See Nakassis, 2016 for a theorization of liminality.

If we return to the example from the start of this chapter of SC Deaf's promotional video, we can see the consequences of this zero-sum logic on interpreters' political precarity. Recall that SC Deaf was making a promotional video for its *interpreting services* to try to mitigate the financial precarity interpreters experience. The film Ngọc envisioned was supposed to demonstrate how interpreters allowed hearing and deaf people to work together seamlessly in workplace settings to entice other businesses that employed deaf people to subscribe to SC Deaf's services. However, because Ngọc was so concerned about shoring up deaf people's communicative personhood, she erased her visual presence from the film entirely. As a result, it appeared that An and Cuc could communicate with each other seamlessly—without the use of an interpreter.

The careful attention paid to mitigating deaf people's interactional vulnerability thus actively comes into tension with the broader political project of promoting and growing the field of HNSL interpreting and making interpreting into a livable profession. In working to reduce the precariousness of voice deaf people experience, interpreters wind up also experiencing precarious voice on a political scale. One of the conundrums of "silence" and "invisibility" is that they work to decrease precarity along a singular axis: deaf vs. hearing. Yet this practice is laminated on top of other existing hierarchies. As previously mentioned, there are strong gendered dynamics in HNSL interpreting. The vast majority of HNSL interpreters are women, while most deaf leaders (though not all) are men. Interpreters sometimes commented on the discomfort of enacting practices of "silence" and "invisibility" and inhabiting roles of BELOW and BEHIND given the way this reinforced normative gender roles.

For example, although Hương was instrumental in founding SC Deaf (by developing the business plan with An, helping An plan his speeches, and convincing other interpreters to join the company), at least initially she stuck to the ethics of "silence" and "invisibility" to erase her corporeal presence in interpreted interactions and to hide the fact that she had any role in SC Deaf's operation besides strictly interpreting (the same way Ngọc hid her role in making the promotional video). The stakes of Hương hiding her involvement in SC Deaf were twofold: 1) it shored up An's communicative personhood so that he could represent the business to hearing investors; and 2) it made sure that SC Deaf was perceived as deaf-owned, which was crucial for adhering to the moral economy of HAVE-HEART and protecting the interpreters' reputations within the deaf community. However, as SC Deaf moved within business and venture capital circles in Việt Nam looking for potential investors, more and more hearing people began telling Hương that the gendered dynamics of her relationship with An were unacceptable. Several foreign investors saw through the illusion of "silence" and "invisibility" and recognized how central Hương was to SC Deaf's functioning. Eventually—at least in the business world—Hương began pushing back on the single axis model of precarity imbedded in silence and invisibility, presenting herself as a co-founder of SC Deaf and arguing that it mattered that she was recognized as a "businesswoman" to use her words.

In the next chapter, I explore the consequences of this zero-sum logic of silence and invisibility on interpreters' political precarity. I examine the way these tensions play out in political advocacy contexts by attending to how interpreters either adhere to or deviate from norms of silence and invisibility as they work alongside deaf people advocating for the growth of sign language interpreting.

## CHAPTER FIVE: INTERPRETERS AS SELF-ADVOCATES?

### Who can speak for whom?

One afternoon I got an excited call from Ngọc telling me that she had a particularly interesting interpreting situation for me to observe. An and a former leader of HAD named Hiếu were being interviewed for a news segment on barriers that deaf people face. However, this was no ordinary interview with a standard news agency. It was an interview for Truyền Hình Quốc Hội (Việt Nam National Assembly Television), a news agency closely affiliated with the National Assembly, the highest representative legislative body in Việt Nam. Hiếu's aunt worked for the news agency, and, after meeting her nephew on a family vacation and realizing he was deaf, decided to produce a short news segment on policy barriers facing deaf people. The interview was a rare opportunity to have the attention of the state as not just of an ordinary news reporter but of someone who could potentially influence policy makers.

As discussed in the introduction, because the Vietnamese state provides no infrastructural support for sign language interpreting, both deaf people and interpreters in Việt Nam have a need to lobby the government. There are no policies that specify when and how interpreters must be provided, no state recognized training programs for interpreters, no licenses for interpreters, and no state mandated system for compensating interpreters for their work. Without interpreters deaf people cannot engage in advocacy work to the hearing public; and, without laws protecting interpreters, interpreters' livelihoods are left precarious. Currently, deaf activism in Việt Nam includes both advocating for access to interpreters and for laws that specifically benefit deaf people (i.e., education in VSL's or laws prohibiting employment discrimination). Therefore, the advocacy interests of deaf people and interpreters

are highly interdependent. However, the way in which deaf people and interpreters engaged in advocacy work—at least in front of the hearing, non-signing gaze—did not fully reflect this interdependence. While deaf people regularly spoke on behalf of sign language interpreters, the reverse was not the case.

This dichotomy played out as Ngọc and An interacted with the news reporter. Beginning with a long information-gathering interview with the deaf leaders, we spent about four hours in total working with the news reporters. Then, formal interviews were filmed for television with each of the deaf leaders. During the filmed interview, the reporter asked An, "So with the interpreting profession, how is it playing an important role, and how do you want this career to be taken care of?" Speaking not only from his position as the head of a deaf organization (HAD) or the founder of an interpreting company (SC Deaf) but also as a deaf person, An responded that interpreters were necessary.

> *Transcript 2: Interview of An for Việt Nam National Assembly Television Excerpt 1:*[54]
>
> An: INTERPRET IMPORTANT MUST. INTERPRETER WE NEED++. REASON DEAF (LEFT SIDE) BARRIERS+++. INTERPRETER NONE PT(left). (right side) MUST I THINK TEACH CONTINUE INTERPRETER INCREASE-KNOWLEDGE PROFESSIONAL SATISFACTORY EXPAND GOOD SUPPORT PT (left side). (left side) CL(AA: go together) BARRIER OVERCOME, HEARING DEAF RESOLVE BETTER PT(left).
>
> *Interpreters are very important. We need interpreters because deaf people face lots of barriers without interpreters. I think we need to increase the number of interpreters with full professional training so they can support deaf people in overcoming barriers and resolve difficulties between deaf and hearing people.*

In this statement, "WE" refers to the collective group of deaf people in Việt Nam, which, through his identity as a deaf man and his position as the President of HAD, An frequently

[54] See Appendix A for instructions on reading HNSL glossed transcripts.

represents. Deaf leaders in Việt Nam often discussed interpreting in this way: from their position as deaf people who needed access to interpreting services. With this statement, An is taking on the role of a self-advocate speaking as a member of a marginalized group about barriers facing members of that group. However, because An is advocating for the use of sign language interpreters, a group of people in an interdependent relationship with deaf people, the line between self-advocacy and speaking on behalf of another group of people quickly becomes blurry.

For example, when addressing the second part of the question "how do you want this career to be taken care of?" An switched to discussing interpreters in a very different way.

*Transcript 3: Interview of An for Việt Nam National Assembly Television Excerpt 2*

1. PT(forward) WHAT HOW STUDY FINISH LICENSE CL(55 palms up- don't have).
   *[The problem is] when interpreters finish studying they don't receive any licenses.*
2. INTERPRETER RS(wiggle side to side) SO-SO. PT(self) BARRIERS HOW LICENSE NONE. INTERPRETER LICENSE NONE.
   *That leaves the interpreter on shaky footing; it is a real barrier for interpreters.*
3. EXAMPLE POLICE ENCOUNTER QUESTION DEAF CL:(11 interpreter joins), STAMP LICENSE WHERE.
   *For example, if a cop is questioning a deaf person and an interpreter attempts to join the conversation, the police will ask to see a stamped license.*
4. (Shifts torso back) PT(self) CL(55 empty handed) EARS-GO-DOWN. STAMP CL (55 empty handed) I WHO EQUAL.
   *But I [the interpreter] won't have a license so I [they] will be humiliated. Without a license how can they know who I am [they are]?*
5. (shifts torso forward) PT(self) THINK MUST POLICY GOVERNMENT IMPORTANT PT(government policy).
   *I think that must be a matter of government policy; it's very important.*

Here, An is talking about the problems facing interpreters rather than problems facing deaf people. He argues that because authority figures (like cops) will be unwilling to let them interpret without credentials, not having a license is a barrier for interpreters. In this statement, rather than simply saying that interpreters don't receive licenses, in lines 2 and 4 An uses what

is referred to in sign language literature as a “role shift” or “constructed action,” which allows signers to “report someone else’s utterance or thought… or describe physical actions performed by someone else” (Aristodemo et al., 2022, pp. 2-3). This change in perspective is marked by non-manual markers such as shifts in a signer’s torso orientation, eye gaze, or facial expression. In line 2, An first signs INTERPRETER, indicating the interpreter is the subject of the sentence, he then proceeds to wiggle his body side to side while signing INTERPRET SO-SO. In effect, he is quoting on his body the discomfort an interpreter would feel when interpreting without a license. In line 3, An takes the position of an external narrator, describing a hypothetical scenario where a cop is questioning a deaf person and an interpreter offers to interpret. An then moves back into role shift in line 4 (marked by a very slight shift back of his torso), pointing to himself and signing “EMPTY-HANDED EARS-GO-DOWN,” a HNSL slang for being humiliated. In doing so, An portrays himself as an interpreter whose hands are literally empty because they do not have a license to show to the cop: it voices their internal state as being humiliated. Finally in line 5, An shifts slightly forward marking the end of the role shift. The point to himself here corresponds to a first-person I, as he gives his personal opinion that licensing interpreters should be a matter of government policy. In effect, An bookends indirect quotes from an interpreter with his own opinion.

The effect that emerges across this signed text is that An—*as a deaf person*—is speaking on behalf of hearing interpreters.[55] He is pointing out the precarity interpreters face

[55] While An worked as a deaf interpreter and thus could have been included in the category of interpreter, the hearing reporter was asking An about hearing interpreters. Moreover, I saw many deaf leaders who did not work as deaf interpreters make similar statements.

by explaining that without licenses interpreters lack the authority necessary to do their work.[56] This type of speech was common amongst deaf leaders in Hà Nội. While deaf leaders ascribed to the norms of self-advocacy, arguing that deaf people, not hearing people or other disabled people, should be the ones advocating on behalf of the deaf community, they also felt that it was their responsibility to speak on behalf of sign language interpreters. However, as previously stated, the reverse was not the case. In fact, interpreters went to great lengths not only to avoid speaking on behalf of deaf people, but also to avoid engaging in public-facing advocacy work for themselves. The ethics of "silence" and "invisibility" discussed in Chapter Four extended not only to interpreting interactions but to all instances where deaf people and interpreters engaged in public advocacy efforts while addressing wider publics.

At the end of the interviews with deaf leaders, one of the news reporters, a young woman in her late 20s turned her attention to Ngọc, the interpreter, asking, "[Can] I ask you about something, about the policy problems facing interpreters?" (Em hỏi chị về cái mà, cái vấn đề chính sách cho người phiên dịch). Ngọc readily agreed. However, when it became clear that the news reporter was asking for a formal filmed interview as opposed to simply asking Ngọc for background information, Ngọc politely turned down the interview saying, "Me, interview me? No, no, no, Mr. An spoke already, that's not necessary" (Em, phỏng vấn em á? Thôi thôi thôi, anh An nói rồi mà, không cần đâu). With the reduplication of the pronoun *"em" (me)* in "Me, interview me?" (**Em**, phỏng vấn **em** á?), Ngọc makes it clear that the issue is not with the

[56] An's comments on interpreter's lack of authority bring up interesting resonances with the previous chapter which focuses on deaf people's lack of authority. Both deaf people and interpreters experience a lack of authority in hearing spaces, albeit for different reasons and on very different scales. However, the practice of silence and invisibility focuses solely on deaf people's lack of authority rather than interpreters.

subject matter of the questions but rather with the inappropriate choice of herself as an interview subject. This is indicated by the fronted, focal “Me,” which implies that the act is unnecessary even though she is an explicitly ratified addressee, because the reporter already interviewed the deaf owner of the company. Note that even when it comes to how government policy impacts interpreters' lives and livelihoods, Ngọc is arguing that the reporter should interview a deaf person.

The news reporter then orients to this problem, arguing that it is in fact appropriate to interview an interpreter by stating that interpreters deserve the same acknowledgments as deaf people. The parallelism in the news reporter’s phrase “Người điếc thì phải nhờ, người phiên dịch nhờ” ([Just as we] must thank deaf people, we [must] thank interpreters) casts deaf people and interpreters as separate but equal parties, both of whom must be acknowledged (lit. thanked). The news reporter is orienting to a vision where both interpreters and deaf people can advocate for themselves and each other and where both should be recognized and acknowledged by the state. As a reporter for a television channel closely affiliated with the Communist Party, she is quite literally offering a chance for both deaf people and interpreters to have their voices heard by the state.

Yet, Ngọc maintains a different orientation to what having both deaf people and interpreters interviewed on the same TV news segment would do. Ngọc counters the reporter’s suggestion that both deaf people and interpreters should be recognized by arguing, “Yes, but it is also to give deaf people voice, deaf people raise voice, then it will be better.” The implication of this statement is that if the interpreter speaks it will diminish the opportunities for deaf people to have their voices heard by the state. When the news reporter concedes, therefore,

that it is best to interview the interpreter privately, Ngọc emphasizes this point stating, "If done in private it should be completely private so it is not mixed together indiscriminately." In using the common construction "làm ____ thì nó _____ hẳn hoi" "If X then it [should be] completely X," Ngọc is making it clear that she doesn't want a separate (private) interview; she wants her comments to be *completely* private, meaning off the record. The rationale that she gives for wanting to be completely off the record is that otherwise it would mix the two groups together "lung tung" (indiscriminately). Ngọc's comment reflects the fact that due to ideologies of voice hearing people are more likely to pay attention to hearing speaking interpreters than deaf people who do not speak for themselves. Thus, even in a political context where Ngọc is being invited to engage in self-advocacy for herself and other interpreters, she sticks to the practice of "silence" and "invisibility," leaving deaf people to advocate on behalf of both deaf people and interpreters.[57] As noted in the last chapter, there is a sort-of odd parallel that emerges

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[57] The politics surrounding interpreters being quoted in print were slightly different than the politics of interpreters appearing on television. When interpreters were quoted in a print medium, it was less likely to be noticed by deaf people as few deaf people in Hà Nội had the literacy levels necessary to read newspapers and monitor whether interpreters were speaking on their own behalf or on the behalf of deaf people. Several interpreters remarked that they were uncomfortable being quoted in a medium where not all deaf people could monitor what they were saying. Filmed media is generally more accessible to deaf participants in Việt Nam regardless of education level. However, as several interpreters noted in interviews, the varying levels of literacy and lack of captions or HNSL interpreting on many television shows contributed to misunderstandings around interpreters' engagement in advocacy work.

Before my Fulbright research in 2013, interpreters were occasionally interviewed by newscasters. These interviews would then be included in broadcasts without HNSL interpreting. Sometimes they featured Vietnamese captions, sometimes not. Depending on the presence of captions and the literacy level of deaf viewers, the denotational content of the interpreters' remarks may not be accessible. When the denotational content of their remarks is not accessible to deaf people, deaf people often took the mere presence of the interpreter's body on film speaking in an interview as evidence that interpreters were engaged in advocating on behalf of deaf people. This had ruined some former interpreters' reputations within the deaf

between situations that deaf people and interpreters commonly find themselves in. Interpreters actively silence themselves just as deaf people are silenced by hearing others who refuse to recognize sign as conferring communicative personhood. Thus, even as the practices referred to as "silence" and "invisibility" attempts to differentiate interpreters from deaf people, the fact that both groups experience silencing in these situations indicates a strong similarity between them.

*Transcript 4: Conversation between Ngọc and TV Reporter*

| | |
|---|---|
| 11:24<br>News Reporter | Chị đang làm, công tác ở đâu?<br>YOU(OLDER-SISTER) IS WORK, EMPLOYED AT WHERE?<br>Where do you work? |
| 11:26<br>Ngọc | Em làm ở SC Deaf ạ, cùng với anh An<br>I (YOUNGER-SISTER) WORK AT SC DEAF POLITENESS-PARTICLE, ALSO WITH HIM(OLDER-BROTHER) AN<br>I work at SC Deaf with Mr. An. |
| 11:28<br>News Reporter | Phiên dịch à?<br>INTERPRETER YES?<br>[You're] an interpreter? |
| Ngọc | Vâng ạ<br>YES POLITENESS-PARTICLE.<br>Yes. |
| 11:30<br>News Reporter | Em hỏi chị về cái mà, cái vấn đề chính sách cho người phiên dịch<br>I(YOUNGER-SISTER) ASK YOU(OLDER-SISTER) ABOUT THING THAT, THING PROBLEM POLICY FOR PERSON INTERPRETER<br>[Can] I ask you about something? About the problems of policies for interpreters? |
| 11:33<br>Ngọc | Vâng vâng ạ<br>YES YES POLITENESS-PARTICLE.<br>Yes, yes. |

community. This meant that interpreters were particularly wary of being interviewed in the media because deaf people did not always have the means to accurately judge who they were speaking on behalf of.

*Transcript 4: Continued*

| | |
|---|---|
| 11:34 News Reporter | Thế thì cho em hỏi cái<br>SO THEN FOR ME (YOUNGER-SISTER) QUESTION THING.<br>So then let me ask you some questions. |
| 11:37 Ngọc | Em, phỏng vấn em á? Thôi thôi thôi, anh An nói rồi mà, không cần đâu<br>ME, INTERVIEW ME POLITENESS-PARTICLE? NO NO NO, HIM(OLDER-BROTHER) AN SPOKE ALREADY THAT(CONJUNCTION), NOT NEED WHERE.<br>Me, Interview me? No, no, no. Mr. An spoke already. That's not necessary |
| 11:41 News Reporter | Người điếc thì phải nhờ, người phiên dịch nhờ<br>PEOPLE DEAF THEN MUST THANK PEOPLE INTERPRETER THANK.<br>[Just as we] must thank deaf people, we [must] thank interpreters. |
| 11:43 Ngọc | Thôi nhưng mà cũng để cho người điếc nói, người điếc lên tiếng nói, thì nó sẽ tốt hơn<br>YES BUT THAT ALSO TO GIVE PEOPLE DEAF VOICE, PEOPLE DEAF RAISE VOICE, THEN IT WILL BETTER.<br>Yes, but it is also to give deaf people voice. Deaf people raise voice, then it will be better. |
| News Reporter | Vâng ạ, thế làm riêng đi<br>YES THEN WORK PRIVATELY GO.<br>Yes, then [we] should work privately. |
| 11:50 News Reporter | Thì nhân tiện thì mình<br>THEN FIRST HERE THEN ME.<br>This is my first time. |
| 11:52 Ngọc | Thôi ạ, làm riêng thì nó riêng hẳn hoi chứ nó không mix lung tung<br>YES POLITENESS-PARTICLE, DO PRIVATE THEN IT PRIVATE COMPLETELY OF-COURSE IT NOT MIX INDISCRIMINATELY.<br>Yes. If done in private, it should be completely private so it is not mixed together indiscriminately. |

In An and Ngọc's response to interviews we can see a clear linguistic division of labor between deaf people and interpreters when it comes to advocacy work: deaf leaders like An advocate for the growth of sign language interpreting, while interpreters like Ngọc interpret for deaf leaders without directly engaging in public-facing advocacy work. Interpreters regularly engaged in non-public facing advocacy work such as editing deaf leaders' PowerPoint presentations, placing phone calls, and even helping deaf leaders prepare speeches (for

detailed analysis of interpreters' non-public facing advocacy work see Marie & Friedner, 2021). However, in front of hearing non-signers interpreters avoided doing anything that would be perceived as advocacy work. Ngọc's initial assent to answer questions about interpreting, followed by her subsequent refusal to be formally interviewed marks the blurry boundary of the hearing gaze and what constitutes a self-advocacy context. To speak off the record to a reporter could be considered behind-the-scenes advocacy work, while in a formal interview the strict rules of self-advocacy voicing still applies[58].

This division of labor had been in place since I first began working with deaf people and interpreters in Hà Nội in 2010. Indeed, when speaking with deaf leaders and interpreters, they could recall only three times an HNSL interpreter had given a public speech about interpreting. The first of these was a presentation given when the IDEO project ended in 2015, advocating for the government to continue funding interpreting. The second was at a business competition where SC Deaf was a finalist. The third was at a workshop with disability activists and government officials which I will analyze in this chapter. When I asked deaf leaders why deaf people should advocate not for interpreters themselves but for the growth of interpreting, they invariably appealed to an ethos of self-advocacy, the idea that disabled people should control advocacy movements and *speak for themselves* (Charlton, 1998). They assumed that advocacy for interpreters *was* advocacy of the deaf. For example, as one deaf leader explained in a personal interview with me, deaf people should be responsible for all advocacy work related to

[58] Like private public distinctions, the rules of self-advocacy works on a logic of fractal recursivity (Gal, 2002).

sign language interpreting because “after all, we are the disabled ones. Without deaf people there would be no need for interpreters” (personal communication, 2019, HNSL).

***

The previous chapter examined how interpreters in everyday interactions strive to diminish signs of their visual presence in order to strategically work within hearing Vietnamese people’s ideologies of voice, a strategy that causes hearing people to focus on deaf signers. As we can see in the way Ngọc turned down the reporter's request to be interviewed, many of these same language ideologies and practices also occur in advocacy work. However, when engaged in political advocacy work, deaf people and interpreters encounter other ideologies of voice that are embedded in self-advocacy. Self-advocacy as a clearly articulated normative approach to disability politics traces its roots primarily to liberal democratic countries in the Global North. At its heart, self-advocacy specifies that it should be disabled people engaging in advocacy work, and not non-disabled people engaging in advocacy work on their behalf. Because deaf people are understood as fitting under the larger umbrella category of disability, all deaf advocacy work in Việt Nam is judged according to whether it adheres to self-advocacy norms, with advocacy work that adheres to the norms of self-advocacy carrying additional ethical weight. In the rest of this chapter, I examine the effects of self-advocacy on the development of sign language interpreting in Việt Nam, paying particular attention to how self-advocacy is practiced and understood locally.

Like all so-called "international" movements, self-advocacy is taken up, practiced, and constituted at the local level.[59] The way self-advocacy is practiced in Việt Nam is shaped by local ideologies of voice, and what is considered acceptable politics. One of the primary differences between how self-advocacy is practiced on an international scale (i.e., through organizations like the World Federation of the Deaf and the United Nations) and locally in Việt Nam is the question of whether interpreters can normatively engage in advocacy efforts. On an international scale, deaf people and interpreters both engage in advocacy efforts, albeit with considerable tensions. For example, a survey of 112 national deaf associations belonging to WFD reports that 39% of countries responded, "Sign language interpreters or leaders are speaking on the behalf of deaf community and they should not" (Allen, 2020, p. 55). This demonstrates that there is considerable concern internationally about the role interpreters play in deaf politics.[60] Despite these tensions, interpreters engaging in advocacy work on their own behalf is accepted by people engaged in international deaf advocacy, at least to a degree. There is an international organization that advocates for and represents interpreters: the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI). WASLI was founded in 2003 during the 14th World Congress of the World Federation of the Deaf in Montreal, Quebec. According to the WASLI website, the aim of WASLI is "to advance the profession of sign language interpreting worldwide" (*Mission & Objectives - WASLI*, 2012). In a joint agreement between WASLI and WFD, the two organizations agree that, with regards to representation, WFD takes primacy in

[59] See Instagad and Whyte (2007) for a discussion of how the local and global are not static things but rather co-produce and co-contextualize each other.

[60] What is unanswered by this survey is which specific activities and speech acts are counted as "speaking on behalf of the deaf community."

matters of “human rights, cultural rights, and sign language rights of deaf people throughout the world” while WASLI takes primacy in “all matters related to the development of sign language interpreting” (WASLI & WFD, 2017). Interpreters in Việt Nam have attempted to parallel this model. In 2015, interpreters in Việt Nam formed the Hà Nội Association of Sign Language Interpreters (HASLI) to advocate for the growth of sign language interpreting after HNSL interpreters lost a significant source of job security with the closing of the IDEO project.

However, as I will show through analyzing one of the rare occasions where the head of HASLI gave an advocacy speech, the question of interpreters engaging in public-facing self-advocacy is much more fraught. This tension comes from a particular interpretation of the voicing norms at the heart of self-advocacy in Hà Nội: namely, that a speaker may only advocate for themselves or on behalf of a group of people with a similar identity. Of course, one of the great ironies of self-advocacy as an approach to disability politics is that it ignores the rich interdependent relationships disabled people are involved in. What does it mean to speak only “for yourself” or for a group of people with a similar identity when one is involved in interdependent relationships that move across identity categories? For deaf people and interpreters in Việt Nam, the model of speaking only for oneself is like fitting a square peg in a round hole, trying to turn their interdependence into something that can be voiced independent of each other.

The ironic result of trying to adhere to the norms of self-advocacy is that deaf people in Việt Nam wind up speaking not only on behalf of themselves, but on behalf of interpreters, who in turn are normatively excluded from engaging in self activism. This has direct consequences for interpreters who have limited opportunities to speak up about how they would like to see

the field of interpreting develop. Moreover, because interpreters are not generally able to advocate on their own behalf under the voicing norms of self-advocacy, they are *dependent* on deaf leaders to engage in advocacy work, meaning that the barriers and discrimination deaf people face in conducting self-advocacy work also impact interpreters.

In this chapter, I attend to how the voicing structure of self-advocacy constrains the possibilities for interpreters to engage in political speech by examining one of the rare occasions where an interpreter gave a political advocacy speech. In the next chapter, I consider the consequences of interpreters not being able to engage in self-advocacy work. When interpreters cannot engage in self-advocacy work on their own, they must rely on deaf people to advocate on their own behalf. However, local ideologies of political voicing also constrain the ability of deaf leaders to engage in advocacy work, which impinges on the ability of deaf leaders to advocate on behalf of interpreters.

## Self-Advocacy

If we define self-advocacy work simply as disabled people advocating for their own needs, then we can say that self-advocacy work has likely been occurring under the radar and without being termed as such. For example, deaf people in Việt Nam often advocate for their communicative needs by asking hearing people to gesture, write, or point to communicate. However, self-advocacy as a clearly articulated normative approach to disability politics traces its roots primarily to liberal democratic countries in the Global North and borrows tactics from other movements, such as the Civil Rights Movement in the United States (Charlton, 1998; Walmsley & Team, 2014). Self-advocacy developed as an explicit corrective to a long history of

non-disabled people speaking on behalf of disabled people, often without concern for what disabled people themselves want (Charlton, 1998). Because such people have normatively been seen as unable to advocate for themselves, self-advocacy is sometimes used specifically to refer to intellectually disabled people directly engaging in advocacy work on their own behalf, especially because people with intellectual disabilities have historically had uneasy relationships with organizations run by parents or with other disability organizations not centered on intellectual disability (Carey et al., 2020; Simplican, 2015). Here, I use the term to refer to the broader idea that disabled people should control advocacy movements.

While the origins of self-advocacy are rooted in the Global North, the concept has been widely adopted internationally. Most notably, self-advocacy is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD). For example, Article 29 protects the right of disabled people to participate in political life through "forming and joining organizations of persons with disabilities to represent persons with disabilities at international, national, regional and local levels" (UNCRPD, 2006, art. 29i). The language here specifies organizations *of* disabled people rather than organizations *for* disabled people. This means that such organizations are presumed to work according to a self-advocacy model. Article 33 also requires states to involve organizations of disabled people in the implementation and monitoring of the UNCRPD (UNCRPD, 2006, art. 33). Furthermore, being a self-advocacy-based organization is required to participate in some international organizations. For example, to become an ordinary member of the Word Federation of the Deaf, organizations must be recognized as an official entity by their respective government and be composed of a majority of deaf persons (World Federation of the Deaf, 2016). Việt Nam, however, is not currently a

member of the WFD, because WFD membership requires the existence of a national deaf association recognized by the Vietnamese state (a milestone which deaf advocates have been unable to achieve due to issues outlined in Chapter Six). Therefore, as Vietnamese deaf leaders sought assistance from WFD representatives in establishing a national deaf association, they strove to align themselves as closely as possible with WFD practices of self-advocacy.

Yet, deaf leaders in Việt Nam align with self-advocacy for other reasons beyond political expediency. In Việt Nam, self-advocacy has a particular resonance for many deaf and disabled leaders due to the long history of non-disabled people hosting charity events on behalf of disabled people. For example, Audrey Cooper examined how deaf people in Hồ Chí Minh City are frequently asked to attend events they described as "từ thiện" (charity) on holidays and other special occasions where the host organizations distribute small gifts and sums of cash (3-5 USD). Deaf leaders reject such efforts because they do not provide opportunities for deaf people to express themselves, and therefore don't provide cause for hearing people to reconsider their perspectives on deaf people and VSLs (Cooper, 2014).

One of the complicated parts of self-advocacy politics in Việt Nam is that organizations run by disabled people operate alongside organizations run by non-disabled people. Charity organizations such as orphanages for disabled children operate alongside organizations like HAD or Disabled People of Hà Nội whose bylaws specify that all leadership roles must be held by disabled individuals. There are also parent organizations, such as an organization of parents of deaf children in Hà Nội founded by one of the novice interpreters who had a deaf daughter. Further complicating matters are NGOs who, although they were run by non-disabled individuals, aimed to *promote* self-advocacy amongst deaf and disabled people (by providing

leadership trainings, access to education, or legal advice to disabled people). These organizations attempt to orient themselves with norms of self-advocacy even if they are not run by disabled people. Indeed, by visiting several such organizations that collaborated with HAD, I noticed that many of these organizations had the slogan of the international disability self-advocacy movement, “Nothing About Us Without Us,” printed in large font on banners, booklets, buttons, and other paraphernalia. Although I sometimes heard the phrase quoted in spoken Vietnamese, the phrase generally appeared in written English, which, since it is the language associated with the international discourse of human rights, thus conferred legitimacy to organizations using the English slogan.

This plethora of organizations creates a complicated ethical landscape in which disability advocacy work occurs. While disabled people appealed to the ethos of self-advocacy to make their voices heard, hearing people running NGOs attempted to speak based on their technical expertise in running projects and, at times, attempted to co-opt the ethics of self-advocacy by arguing that their work would promote future self-advocacy. The tensions between these different organizations created an atmosphere of suspicion where disabled leaders judged and guarded against individuals and organizations that were speaking outside of the self-advocacy model. Moreover, non-disabled people who worked in disability advocacy attempted to avoid accusations of speaking for or over disabled people by carefully controlling what types of events they spoke at. Being featured in a public-facing speech event, such as an engagement with news reporters, carried far more weight as a self-advocacy context than being involved in drafting a grant proposal behind the scenes. Like private/public distinctions, the rules of self-advocacy work on a logic of fractal recursivity (Gal, 2002). Irvine and Gal define fractal

recursivity as the "projection of an opposition, salient at some level of a relationship onto some other level" (Irvine & Gal, 2009, p. 38). In this case, the rules of self-advocacy hinge on whether the events are public or private and whether they are designed to address a non-disabled/hearing audience or other disabled/deaf individuals.

**Interpreters as Self-Advocates?**

How does this local history of self-advocacy and ideologies of voicing shape the political feasibility of HNSL interpreters engaging in self-advocacy? Although none of the professional HNSL interpreters working in Hà Nội at the time of my study had any form of disability that I was aware of, all of them firmly supported the right of deaf people to engage in self-advocacy.[61] However, does supporting the rights of deaf people to engage in self-advocacy preclude *interpreters* from engaging in self-advocacy? Theoretically, interpreters could engage in self-advocacy advocating on behalf of interpreters as a collective group, as they do on an international level with WASLI. However, as I will demonstrate by analyzing one of the rare scenarios where the president of HASLI gave a public speech, the voicing norms of self-advocacy as they are understood and practiced in Việt Nam are exceedingly difficult for interpreters to adhere to, given their interdependence with deaf people.

[61] One of the novice interpreters was hard-of-hearing and had limited vision. Because she could perceive signs without difficulty in decent lighting, she passed as sighted in signing spaces. Several other of the novice interpreters commented that they didn't believe she had limited vision until they saw her using a cane to navigate poorly lit streets at night. This shows that the divide between deaf people as disabled, and interpreters as non-disabled is not as straightforward as it might seem.

There are two main issues with the voicing model of self-advocacy. The first is the subject position of self-advocacy. While self-advocacy can theoretically work for any collective group of people, NGO activists in Việt Nam understood it as only applying to particular kinds of selves, that is, individuals that fit into a clearly defined category of marginalized person (i.e., people with disabilities, women, sexual minorities, etc.). Interpreters, by the structural fact of their relationship to deaf persons, who under this model qualify as marginalized, do not easily fit into the same category. This becomes clear if we examine the structural features of the relationship between deaf people and interpreters. This relationship involves two parties: 1) a marginal population understood as disabled and 2) interpreters, who, by contrast, are implicitly understood as non-marginal and abled. As many NGO officials, disability leaders, and deaf leaders pointed out to me, interpreters are not disabled. Interpreters are not marginalized or made precarious through a particular aspect of their identity. Rather, they experience precarity through their interdependence with deaf people, an interdependence itself forged as a function of deaf people's marginalization. This situation has made it difficult for interpreters to self-advocate. The other issue with the voicing model is that self-advocacy as a concept and practice is designed to prevent others from speaking on behalf of disabled people. However, the relationship fostered between deaf people and interpreters in various communication situations hinges on how interpreters gives voice in the role of an animator (the person that produces a particular utterance). This itself brings interpreters uncomfortably close to speaking *on behalf of* rather than being *a medium for*. And this situation produces precisely the set of dynamics (ideologies and practices) that concern this chapter. How can interpreters tell a story

without it appearing that they are co-opting deaf people's stories? What does it mean to speak only for oneself when one is involved in highly interdependent relationships?

As previously noted, HNSL interpreters like Ngọc generally avoided being perceived by hearing people as engaging in advocacy work. Behind the scenes, interpreters were highly involved in advocacy work, they helped deaf leaders edit PowerPoints, ghost-wrote emails, coached deaf leaders on their speeches, and assisted in planning events (see Marie & Friedner, 2021 for an analysis of these multiple roles). But, in front of the hearing gaze, interpreters conformed to the norms of silence and invisibility, leaving deaf people to advocate on *their own* behalf. However, during my fieldwork, frustration about financial precarity and the lack of legal protection for interpreters grew so much that the head of HASLI decided to give an advocacy speech at a workshop with local NGOs and government officials. In addition to the issues of deaf people expecting interpreters to work for free out of love for deaf people (see Chapter Two), interpreters were struggling to receive what they viewed as adequate payment from various disability-related NGOs they had worked with. HNSL interpreters often requested that NGOs pay them according to a document called "UN-EU Cost Norms," which was designed to standardize rates paid by all development-related projects sponsored by the United Nations or European Union. While the norms must be followed by UN and EU affiliated organizations, interpreters and other contractors frequently use these cost norms as a starting price in negotiating salaries with local NGOs in Hà Nội. Rates for HNSL interpreters interpreting between spoken Vietnamese and HNSL are listed at 100 USD per day, a mere one-sixth of what spoken Vietnamese-English interpreters are paid. Yet, despite this significant difference in cost, organizations often tried to negotiate for lower rates with sign language interpreters. Many

NGOs that worked with HAD claimed that they had limited funds and therefore couldn't afford to pay interpreters $100 a day; or, they argued that because they were disability organizations who were working to support deaf people, interpreters should be willing to volunteer their time.

As the interpreters became increasingly fed up with constantly fighting with NGOs to get paid at a decent rate, they came up with the idea of giving a public speech about the barriers interpreters faced. Hương, the president of HASLI, proposed giving a speech at a "hội thảo" (workshop) hosted by a local NGO I refer to as Disability Futures. Hội Thảos are a standard way to engage in advocacy work in Việt Nam. They are closed-door, invitation-only events that are hosted by local NGOs and through which advocates speak with representatives from the state and other NGOs. This hội thảo was focused on barriers facing deaf people and would feature a speech by, An, the president of HAD, as well as speeches by various other NGOs, deaf educators, and one local government bureaucrat whose administrative duties dealt with deaf people. Hương proposed that HASLI could present after HAD, complimenting the deaf advocates' speech with a perspective from interpreters.

Having interpreters present at the hội thảo was highly controversial amongst both deaf people and local disability advocates. Bich, the hearing and disabled project manager at Disability Futures, wanted to keep the workshop tightly focused on deaf people's rights. She told the interpreters that there was "already enough focus on sign language interpreters," implying that the two ten-day sign language interpreter training programs overseen by Disability Futures was all the attention interpreters needed and that they had no need to engage in advocacy work to advance their profession. We can read Bich's dismissal as one

which does not fully recognize interpreters as precarious subjects. For Bich and other disabled activists accustomed to self-advocacy (including some deaf advocates), the point of the workshop was to have disabled people speak with the government not people who provide services to disabled people.

As the organizers of the event, Disability Futures had final say in who was allowed to present at the workshop; thus, Bich's sense that it was inappropriate for interpreters to present almost resulted in HASLI being excluded from the meeting. The reason Disability Futures was hosting this particular hội thảo had to do with the legal status of HAD. The Danish Deaf Association had designed a grant to improve the leadership skills of HAD. However, because HAD lacked legal status, they had to work with an organization with a legal status to oversee the grant. As part of the grant, Disability Futures oversaw providing opportunities for deaf leaders to meet with members of the state, which it was doing through arranging this hội thảo.

Due to deaf leaders lobbying Disability Futures, interpreters were eventually allowed to present at the workshop. The deaf project assistant at Disability Futures, Đuc, was good friends with many of the interpreters. He came to recognize how interpreters were constantly fighting to get funding and how, without the growth of interpreting, deaf advocacy efforts would be stunted. Although Đuc was not on the board of HAD, he frequently attended HAD meetings to help coordinate the way the grant was managed between Disability Futures and HAD. Đuc first discussed the issue with the board of HAD, reminding them that the growth of interpreting would make it easier for deaf leaders to engage in advocacy work. In other words, he argued that interpreters engaging in self-advocacy work was acceptable because it would increase deaf self-advocacy. He also pointed out the financial hardships that interpreters faced, but this

justification for interpreters speaking was not embraced by leaders of HAD as enthusiastically as the idea that interpreters presenting would enable future deaf self-advocacy.

With the backing of HAD leaders secured, Đuc then persuaded Bich to allow interpreters to present at the workshop alongside deaf leaders. Interestingly, Hương's and Đuc's work securing a spot for HASLI to give a speech at the hội thảo was not strictly considered self-advocacy work as it was not externally facing; that is, it was not directed towards government officials or the broader hearing Vietnamese public. As discussed in Chapter Four, there is an ethical distinction between what is considered acceptable behavior for interpreters when it is in front of the hearing gaze and when it is conducted only amongst deaf people. This points to the fact that what is at stake is not simply whether interpreters can engage in self-advocacy work but to the way in which interpreters engaging in self-advocacy work reflects back on the question of whether deaf people are perceived as competent speakers.

While interpreters had succeeded at getting a slot to speak at the hội thảo, Hương knew that winning over the audience would be an uphill battle. Amongst the audience would be several disabled advocates representing NGOs with better connections to government officials than HAD had. As Hương shared with me when planning for the speech, she was nervous because she knew that many of these disabled advocates held similar views to Bich; they felt that self-advocacy should be restricted to disabled people. Therefore, Hương spent a considerable amount of her speech addressing the way in which interpreters do not fit the normative subject position of a self-advocate. She started her speech by voicing the concerns that many of the NGO and government delegates likely have with interpreters engaging in self-advocacy. The speech was given in spoken Vietnamese, with a fellow interpreter translating

into HNSL. I have included excerpts of the speech translated into English in the text, however a full Vietnamese transcript of the speech can be found in Appendix C. I have numbered each of the excerpts independently for the sake of analysis, as the full speech is over ten minutes long, and is not broken into lines.

*Transcript 5: Hương HASLI Advocacy Speech Excerpt 1*

1. We are hearing people, speaking people, [who] have many doors are open [to us].
2. Why did we choose the interpreting profession?
3. It's a question that many people ask when we are working as interpreters
4. I think that each of the interpreters with us here today might have had different reasons that led to their work.
5. Why, although we are hearing, speaking people with many opportunities to work in an office perhaps sitting in air conditioning eight hours everyday.
6. But no.
7. We have chosen a line of work that is not even considered a real profession,
8. Specifically, the job of sign language interpretation.

In line 1, Hương figures the hearing subject as a privileged individual to whom all doors are open; in other words, not a subject of self-advocacy. In lines 2-3 Hương shifts and fills out the “we” of line 1 as those who have chosen to go into the interpreting profession (contra being “hearing, speaking people” per se). Here, Hương voices the hearing delegates of the conference (who had been watching interpreters work all day) as wondering why such a privileged subject would be a sign language interpreter, which implicitly frames interpreting work as a downward move in mobility (i.e., if you have such privileges, why would you go into this kind of field?). Hương goes on to address why such privileged individuals would choose this line of work by telling a story of how witnessing the inequality and suffering faced by deaf people motivated her to become an interpreter (a story which I will analyze more in depth in the next section- see Transcript 7: Hương Speech Excerpt 3).

In Hương's speech, precarious interdependence is framed as a matter of choice that is not economically driven. Indeed, it is detrimental (as she presupposes earlier): interpreters are made financially precarious through their choice to work with deaf people. In contrast to the hyper-consuming, non-environmentally conscious figure of the office worker, the figure of the sign language interpreter is framed as an inherently moral one. Having set up interpreters as privileged, but moral subjects, Hương goes on to recount the conditions through which they are rendered financially precarious.

*Transcript 6: Hương HASLI Advocacy Speech Excerpt 2*

1. When we get a [job] offer to something—for example, conferences—we frequently get told
2. "We don't have any budget" or "we only have very limited financial resources."
3. Of course, our aim is to help deaf people and to ensure their rights of accessibility.
4. But we are also human-beings (con người) after all. We need to sustain our life.
5. So, we can see, if there's no policy supporting SLI, how could we make ends meet to pursue our passion?

Once again, Hương voices the delegates in the audience, specifically NGO organizers present who have told interpreters "we don't have any budget." Hương reasserts interpreters' morality (line 2) stating that their "aim is to help deaf people." But, she then refers to interpreters as "con người," a marked word for a human being, which combines the classifier for an animal *con*, with the word *người* for person. By using con người, Hương strips interpreters from their status as relatively privileged hearing subjects down to the level of animalistic beings that need to sustain their livings. In doing so, she re-asserts interpreters as a potential subject of human rights—as a human who has a right to sustenance, even if their financial precarity only emerges through their passion for working with deaf people. Of course, more is at stake than interpreters' financial precarity; it is also their political precarity, their ability to have a political

voice. These different forms pf precarity are closely intertwined. However, in this speech, Hương never directly addresses interpreters' political precarity, choosing instead to stick solely to their financial precarity. While I did not ask Hương why she did not address interpreters' political precarity, my suspicion is that she avoided the topic because interpreters engaging in political advocacy is already so highly controversial.

**Speaking (only) for oneself**

Asserting that interpreters were a potential subject of human rights and therefore appropriate subjects for self-advocacy was only one part of the controversy Hương had to carefully work around in her speech. The second issue Hương had to contend with was the voicing structure of self-advocacy itself. Self-advocacy specifies a speaker may only advocate for themselves or on behalf of a group of people with similar identities. While this may appear a straightforward idea to those of us accustomed to human rights discourse and identity politics, the notion of speaking "only for oneself" is a complex one linguistically. Linguistic anthropologists have examined the ways we construct ourselves in and through directly or indirectly quoting (voicing) others and aligning or distancing ourselves with such voices (Hill, 1995; Irvine, 1996; Keane, 1999; Weidman, 2014). For example, in Jane Hill's famous analysis of Don Gabriel's storytelling, she looks at how Don Gabriel invokes eighteen different voices, including his son, daughter-in-law, villagers, and his own in order to set himself up as a particular type of peasant who is resistant to capitalist ideologies (Hill, 1995). Since every time we speak we are always already speaking with/for other, and because it is unclear whether our

selves are ever so unified such that we could speak *only* for *one's* self, the multitude of voices we invoke on a regular basis calls into question what it even means to "speak only for oneself."

The norms of self-advocacy place constraints on the way presenters can use voicing. A speaker may only advocate for themselves or on behalf of a group of people with similar identities. This constraint is easiest to understand in terms of Goffmanian role partials. Goffmanian role partials describe different relationships (or "footings" as Goffman, 1981 calls them) a speaker/signer may have to a particular utterance. The animator is the one physically producing the utterance, the author is the one who composed a particular utterance, and the principal is the person or group whose position is staked out by the utterance and who is often taken as responsible for the utterance. It is possible for an individual to occupy any combination of these different role partials at the same time (Goffman, 1981). However, under the norms of self-advocacy, presenters may only author and animate texts to which they themselves are the principals; or, alternatively, they may re-animate texts originating from another individual within their identity category as defined by human rights discourse.

This situation poses problems for interpreters, given their highly interdependent relationship with deaf people. Interpreters can attempt to stay within the role partials defined by self-advocacy by separating their voices from deaf peoples'. For this workshop, deaf advocates and interpreters attempted this by having An, the president of the Hà Nội Association of the Deaf, give a speech about deaf rights, while Hương gave a speech advocating for the professionalization of sign language interpreting. Similar to the way WFD and WASLI divide up issues of representation (WASLI & WFD, 2017), the goal was for interpreters and deaf people to each speak from their own perspective about sign language interpreting. It's

important to note that Hương was only able to speak at the event because she was authorized by An as the president of HAD. In other words, there is a structure of footing behind the footing as it were with An as a shadow voice within Hương's own speech. Yet, the work of separating deaf people and interpreters' voices is exceedingly difficult. Hương and An spent the evening before the workshop writing their speeches together. Ironically, ensuring that the principles of their speeches did not unduly overlap was such difficult labor that it required both speeches to be co-authored by deaf people and interpreters, which defies one of the principles of self-advocacy. As Hương watched An practice his speech, which covered many reasons deaf people need access to interpreters, Hương kept on rhetorically asking, "But what is there for me to say?"

After careful planning, Hương was able to successfully perform many of the conventions of an advocacy speech in Việt Nam; she used appropriate registers, she adhered to norms of professionalism, and she mobilized statistics to create a depoliticized technocratic voice (See Chapter Six for a detailed analysis of the constrains of political voicing in Việt Nam). As a college-educated hearing woman, these speech registers and norms were far more accessible to her than they were for deaf activists like An. However, she struggled with one of the hallmarks of self-advocacy: the mobilization of personal stories to make human rights claims. Hương shared one such story, about the moment she decided to make sign language interpreting her profession (as opposed to something she simply did).

*Transcript 7: Hương HASLI Advocacy Speech Excerpt 3*

1. Learning SL opened our eyes to a new world.
2. "Oh, it turns out that there are many different people around us, and they are more disadvantaged than us."

3. I have a friend; she's deaf.
4. Her parents cannot communicate with her even though she's their own child.
5. One day, she asked me to interpret for her family because they couldn't talk to each other.
6. She was married, and the couple was trying to have a baby to no avail.
7. After a long conversation, the mom finally said, "It's because you are deaf you do not have a job and you cannot raise a child."
8. And so, the parents had decided to have her ovaries removed.
9. And so, when she realized that she couldn't be a mother, she couldn't fulfil her God-given responsibility.
10. She kept on continuously. She kept on signing and signing aging to me, for me to speak with her family, and to ask her family why the parents hadn't told her.
11. The rights of people are the rights to know about and determine their life decisions.
12. Of course, her parents and I were silent because we understood that nobody could explain why.
13. So that was one of the many stories that led me to choose this job.
14. Unfortunately, it's not recognized as a profession yet.

Here Hương recounts how a young deaf woman was struggling to conceive a child and calls Hương to interpret between her and her hearing family. Over the course of the discussion, they discover that the parents removed the deaf woman's ovaries because they didn't believe that she was capable of raising a child. Hương tells this story as a personal narrative (after all she was present at the event) and uses this story to explain why she decided to become a sign language interpreter and why, therefore, she chose to step into a position of precarious interdependence. We can see in lines 1-2 and 13-14 how Hương frames this story as the moment in which her eyes were opened to the suffering of others, and thus motivated her to choose a job that is "unfortunately… not recognized as a profession yet." This is the sort of story which in a different context would have been seen by deaf people as evidence of Hương opening her mind to deaf culture and HAVE-HEART for deaf people. However, within an advocacy context the story is perceived very differently.

The issue with Hương relaying this story in a self-advocacy context is that by definition any personal story told by an interpreter about an interpreted scenario is also the story of a deaf person. If one were to remove the opening and closing framing devices (lines 1-2, and 13-1), one is left with the story of a deaf woman who has experienced a drastic human rights violation which conceivably could have been avoided with earlier access to sign language interpreters. This is precisely the type of story which under the strict voicing structure of self-advocacy should be animated by a deaf person. If we analyze this from a linguistic anthropological perspective, Hương uses a narrative framework to re-contextualize a moment of interpretation. In this moment of interpreting, she was re-animating the story of a deaf person so that it could be rendered intelligible to the deaf person's family. While an interpreter re-animating a deaf person's utterance under the authorizing citation frame of "interpreting" is acceptable, because it enables the deaf person to communicate their own desires, re-animating a deaf person's utterance under the citational framework of self-advocacy is unacceptable because it is considered "speaking for" a deaf person. Hương is attempting to laminate these two citational frames on top of one another, embedding the citational frame of interpreting within the narrative framework of self-advocacy and, thus, attempting to safely confine the act of reanimation in a socially acceptable framework. In other words, she is attempting to make it clear that she is not telling the story of a deaf person; she is giving her narrative perspective on what was an authorized act of reanimation (interpreting).

However, when citational frames are laminated on top of each other, it is easy for them to bleed into one another. Indeed, I spoke to several deaf leaders who felt that in the speech Hương had re-animated a deaf person's story in the context of self-advocacy. These deaf

leaders were frustrated that Hương animated the speech rather than a deaf person, which, in their eyes, broke the rules of self-advocacy. These were some of the same deaf leaders who had supported interpreters giving a speech in the first place and whose support had helped convince Bich to let interpreters present at the hội thảo. While these leaders had been supportive of interpreters engaging in advocating work in theory, when they saw it happen in practice, they were dissatisfied with the way deaf people's stories were re-presenced. They concluded that the speech was not purely self-advocacy on the part of interpreters; interpreters had crossed the line by advocating on behalf of deaf people.

**Relying of Deaf Advocates**

In this chapter I have laid out the effects of the voicing structure of self-advocacy on the advocacy efforts of HNSL interpreters. Based on the challenges faced by Hương, the president of HASLI, I have identified the following constraints of self-advocacy that pose a challenge to interpreters acting as self-advocates. First, self-advocates must fit into a normative subject position of a marginalized person as understood through human rights frameworks. As interpreters are hearing and not deaf, they do not fit into this normative subject position. Moreover, this subject position does not make room for recognizing the forms of precarity that move through interdependent relationships. Second, self-advocacy specifies a speaker may only advocate for themselves or on behalf of a group of people with similar identities. This entails a normative voicing structure (ideology) where presenters may only author and animate texts to which they themselves are the principals. Or, alternatively, they may re-animate texts originating from another individual within their identity category as defined by human rights

discourse. However, the relationship between deaf people and interpreters specifically turns on giving voice in the mode of being an animator. This itself brings interpreters uncomfortably close to speaking on behalf of rather than being a medium for, a line which is rendered further precarious when moments of interpretation are re-contextualizing within a narrative framework. Thus, the interdependent voicing structure of interpreting (laid out in Chapter Four) does not easily fit within the independent voicing structure of self-advocacy. How can interpreters speak purely for themselves when their voices are already so highly intertwined with deaf people's?

Moreover, the stakes of interpreters being perceived as speaking for deaf people is particularly high, given the language ideologies laid out in Chapter Four that render deaf people's communicative personhood precarious. What is at stake is not simply whether interpreters can engage in self-advocacy work but the way in which interpreters engaging in self-advocacy work reflects back on the question of whether deaf people are perceived as competent speakers. This is why with the exceptions of three occasions—in 2015 when the IDEO project ended, in 2019 at a business competition where SC Deaf was a finalist, and in 2019 at the workshop analyzed in this chapter—interpreters did not directly engage in self-advocacy.

The counterintuitive result of interpreters not fitting into the voicing structure of self-advocacy has been that deaf people must advocate on behalf of interpreters under the guise of deaf people self-advocating for their own right to use interpreters. Technically this is a deviation from the from the voicing structure of self-advocacy (only (re)animating texts to which they or someone within their shared identity category are the principals of). However, because deaf leaders fit within the normative subject of a marginalized person as understood

through human rights frameworks, they were given this leeway. So long as deaf people were animating texts which they were the principals of, they could smuggle in interpreters as a secondary principal the way An did when he spoke with the news reporter from Việt Nam National Assembly Television (in the introduction to this chapter).

In contrast to the original intention of self-advocacy, which was to help even the imbalance of power in disability development efforts by differentiating and privileging the voices of disabled individuals, the inability of interpreters to directly engage in self-advocacy has resulted in the further entanglement of deaf people's and interpreters' voices. With interpreters unable to engage in their own self-advocacy, the stakes of deaf leaders' speeches become heightened for them; interpreters *depended* on deaf advocates to advocate for them and to get the advocacy work right. This increased interpreters' involvement in planning, ghost-writing, and editing deaf people's speeches because the only way they could have a political voice was through deaf people. In my many hours spent observing interpreters at SC Deaf office, I realized that the majority of interpreters' time was not spent on video relay interpreting (as the company struggled to get deaf people to pay for interpreting services). Rather, SC Deaf functioned as a "one-stop shop" where deaf-leaders could bring a range of editing, counseling, and representation projects to work on with interpreters. This could be seen as overbearing and maternalistic by encroaching on deaf people's abilities to independently engage in advocacy work. Indeed, although it was welcomed here, this is precisely the type of behavior frequently cited as oppressive in interpreting studies literature (Baker-Shenk, 1986, 1991; Cokely, 2005; Robinson et al., 2020; Witter-Merithew, 1999). Yet,

with the norms of self-advocacy not allowing for the expression of interpreters' interdependent voices, what other choice did interpreters have?

# CHAPTER SIX: RAISING VOICE

## Deaf Self-Advocacy

In this last chapter of the dissertation, I deviate from the focus on sign language interpreters to unpack the voicing problems deaf leaders in Hà Nội encounter when engaging in self-advocacy, since this is essential context and further provides insights into the complexities discussed in the previous chapter. As a reader you might be wondering: why have an entire chapter in a dissertation about sign language interpreters focused on *deaf* self-advocacy? On one hand, we can answer this question simply by examining the structural interdependence between interpreters and deaf people; if deaf people's access to interpreters is not provided/protected by the state, interpreters' livelihoods are left precarious. Yet the deep enmeshment of deaf people and interpreters voices, the *dependence* of interpreters on deaf people to engage in self-advocacy, is (ironically) reinforced by the voicing norms of self-advocacy rooted in *independence*. As laid out in Chapter Five, the close interdependence of deaf people and interpreters makes it look as though when interpreters engage in self-advocacy, they are in fact violating the rules of self-advocacy and speaking *on behalf* of deaf people.

With HNSL interpreters unable to easily fit the voicing norms of self-advocacy, the public-facing work of advocating for the growth of sign language interpreters has primarily been the responsibility of deaf people. Theoretically, deaf people should be better positioned to engage in self-advocacy work than interpreters, as they fit within the clearly defined category of marginalization (i.e., disabled people). However, deaf people often found

themselves denied the opportunity to advocate on their own behalf, even by other disabled advocates and groups that claimed to support deaf people's right to engage in self-advocacy.

As I have started to pull apart over the last two chapters, engaging in self-advocacy is a multi-layered, complicated act. First, for self-advocacy to be effective, an individual must first be recognized as a speaker who is capable of self-representation. This is the communicative personhood which deaf people are often assumed not to have due to their not using oral speech to communicate. While the use of interpreters can help hearing people recognize deaf people's signed utterances as equivalent to spoken language (and hence as a material voice), as I explored in Chapter Four, interpreters' embodied presence represents an alternative—and seemingly more authoritative—source of communicative personhood. Thus, hearing people are likely to see them as authors, rather than simply re-animators, of a particular utterance. Second, presenters may only author and animate texts to which they themselves are the principals, or alternatively, the may re-animate texts originating from another individual within their identity category as defined by human rights discourse. This is the problem I examine in Chapter Five, which makes it particularly difficult for sign language interpreters to engage in self-advocacy.

However, there is still a third constraint on self-advocacy, as it is practiced in Việt Nam, that impacts deaf leaders in Hà Nội. In order to engage in self-advocacy politics, one must have a legally recognized collective group by which one is represented in advocacy work. While the need to conduct advocacy work on behalf of a collective is often left implicit in discourses of disability self-advocacy emanating from the global north, in Việt Nam it is a legal requirement.

This has to do with the highly sensitive nature of engaging in political advocacy in Việt Nam. While Việt Nam has seen significant reforms since the introduction of a market economy in 1986 under Đổi Mới (renovation), political participation is still highly constrained. Protests are banned, and any form of organizing which is seen as trying to overturn the party is referred to as "engaging in politics" and strictly prohibited and repressed. Given the restricted political climate, one of the primary ways Vietnamese citizens engage in advocacy work is through non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which must be registered with the state (Hannah, 2007; Vu, 2019). Through a registered NGO, Vietnamese citizens may engage in self-advocacy, referred to through the local metaphor of "nâng cao tiếng nói" (raising voice). "Raising voice" invokes a vertical metaphor of government, where ordinary citizens are on the bottom or beneath, and thus are speaking up to and making perceivable to the state (although crucially not in a adversarial mode of politics). But what sort of voice emerges from the process of "raising voice"? Who is it addressed to? What ideologies and voicing norms must it conform to if it is to be heard?

## Two Forms of Deaf Voice

I argue that "raising voice" has two forms of addressivity. Addressivity is a term initially coined by Mikhail Bakhtin, which emphasizes that an essential feature of language is that it is always addressed to an addressee (often understood in speech centric norms as a listener). The first form of addressivity in "raising voice" is *internally facing* and helps build the collective "we" on which the self-advocate speaks. The second form of addressivity in "raising voice" is *externally facing* towards the government or other organization that need grant recognition or

support to the self-advocate and their community. Yet working with two addressees requires navigating two sets of voicing norms, which at times conflict. In the case of deaf leaders in Hà Nội the two categories of addressees are 1) deaf people in Hà Nội and the surrounding region and 2) the Vietnamese state. These two different addressees required deaf leaders to conform to radically different voicing norms.

Audrey Cooper has noted that the primary political project of deaf community leaders across Việt Nam is creating a society where sign language is a valid basis for "social inclusion" (Cooper 2014, 327). Deaf leaders imagine a world where sign language can be used in any public venue—courts, hospitals, coffee shops—allowing deaf signers full access to society. Following this norm, the leaders of HAD often refer to HNSL as the "mẹ đẻ," or mother-tongue, of the deaf community. Yet given educational policies that have prohibited the use of Vietnamese Sign Languages (VSLs) in schools (see P. 49), deaf people in Việt Nam have limited fluency in HNSL and other VSLs. We can understand the deaf political project as one of of imagining and therein *making* sign language the mother tongue, or "voice" of the deaf community. This adds an extra layer and set of ethical norms to "raising voice"; deaf leaders must not only represent their interests to the state, they must also attempt to make sign language the shared voice of the deaf community. Part of the ethical orientation of this project is making sure that all deaf people, regardless of their educational backgrounds, can learn to sign and (to the extent possible) participate in all activities held by deaf organizations, even in advocacy work directed at the state. To do this, deaf leaders use a variety of innovative communicative practices, utilizing điệu bộ (gesture), improvisational plays, and humorous jokes, to craft what they refer to as a RÕ (clear) "voice" this is accessible to all deaf people.

When addressing the state, deaf leaders, like all other NGO actors, must conform to voicing norms designed to distance them from grassroots democracy and consciously depoliticize their work. Since Tiananmen Square and the fall of Soviet Bloc, "civil society" organization have been associated with grassroots democracy and attempts to overturn single party rule (Vu, 2019, p. 422). Indeed, the words "civil society" (xã hội dân sự), which emerged in Việt Nam as loan words through international aid efforts, are not even used in official state discourse because the topic is so highly controversial (Wells-Dang, 2014, p. 170). There are frequent debates within the party that play out in the Vietnamese press over whether Vietnamese Non-Governmental Organizations (VNGOs) are forces of grassroots democracy trying to "engage in politics," defined as illegally attempting to overturn the party, or whether they are apolitical organizations helping best implement state policies (Wells-Dang, 2014, p. 174). Even though in many countries disability is viewed as an apolitical "feel good form of diversity" (Friedner, 2017), in Việt Nam the fact that disability advocacy has to occur through NGOs means that it is subject to the same suspicion of being political in nature as other NGOs. VNGOs depoliticize their work through engaging in "embedded politics." Scholars of Vietnamese politics use this term to refer to the strategies adopted by successful VNGOs that include adopting a non-confrontational approach regard to state policy, generating formal and informal ties with state officials, and carefully networking with other NGOs and strategic partners to build consensus (Vu, 2019; Wells-Dang, 2014).

The process of depoliticizing NGO work is a semiotic one characterized by what I call *technocratic voicing*. In identifying technocratic voicing, I build on the work of Joseph Hannah, who did extensive fieldwork in VNGOs. According to Hannah, NGOs frame all advocacy work in

terms of “administrative reform” and other *technical* problems, to be dealt with by professional development workers with *technical* expertise, allowing the myth of non-political interventions to proceed (Hannah, 2007, p. 236). Moreover, NGO workers seek to cast themselves as “professionals.” Hannah writes, “[Vietnamese] NGOs see reflected in their non-political stance a strong and deep form of ‘professionalism.’ They are not “rabble-rousers” or dissidents; they are rational, law-abiding, constructive citizens, working for the betterment of their nation” (Hannah, 2007, p. 243). Achieving this technocratic professionalism requires the utilization of specific forms of communication (e.g., reports, records, speeches, PowerPoints, letters, etc.) and formal language (vocabulary, forms of address). In other words, technocratic voicing is a set of genres with a particular kind of register.

On the surface, the two forms of voicing used by deaf advocates (to internal and external addresses) do not seem inherently contradictory. However, as deaf leaders moved between (and at times attempted to work simultaneously within) these two sets of addressees, conflicts emerged. The điệu bộ (gesture), improvisational plays, and humorous jokes, so central to the projects of *creating* an accessible deaf voice, were read as unprofessional by hearing Vietnamese NGO workers, who served as gatekeepers that could choose whether to funnel deaf voices up to the state (raising them up the hierarchy). On the other hand, not attempting to create an accessible voice and only focusing on addressing the government would have created a situation in which there would be no public, no deaf collectivity for which deaf leaders could advocate. Indeed, the problem of meeting both of these voicing norms simultaneously was so difficult for deaf activists in Việt Nam to navigate that at the time of my research, no deaf organizations in Việt Nam had achieved status as an independent

organization legally recognized by the state. In the logic of "raising voice," deaf leaders did not have a "voice" (organization) through which to speak.

HAD defines itself on its Facebook page as "an independent, representative voice for the Deaf community in Hà Nội and Việt Nam" ("Một tổ chức độc lập, đại diện tiếng nói cho cộng đồng người Điếc ở Hà Nội và VN") (HAD Facebook profile). But legally, HAD is *not* an independent organization. It has tenuous legal status only as a chi hội (sub-association) of Disabled People of Hà Nội (DP Hà Nội), even though HAD was established six years before DP Hà Nội was founded.[62] Being a chi hội severely constrains deaf leaders' ability to engage in self-advocacy. Deaf leaders cannot meet with government officials without DP Hà Nội's approval, they cannot host an event without DP Hà Nội signing off on the plans, and they cannot apply for grants without DP Hà Nội acting as an intermediary. As deaf leaders are quick to point out, none of the leaders DP Hà Nội know sign language, and they do not adequately represent deaf peoples' interests. As An, the president of HAD, explained, "There is no independence in the work. The Blind Association has its own association, but DP Hà Nội is a very general association, [so as long as we are a sub-association] we don't have a right, or power that is, to make our own decisions. With no legal entity, nothing can be done."

Why was HAD unable to become its own organization and participate in advocacy work? As a disability-related organization, HAD would be required to fill out the appropriate paperwork to the Ministry of Labor Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA). However, this process was convoluted and bureaucratic, and therefore not fully accessible to deaf leaders who had

[62] Prior to this time, HAD functioned as the chi hội of another hearing-run organization.

limited formal education. There were several hearing-run NGOs with which HAD collaborated that could have assisted HAD in navigating this process. However, these were the same organizations that misread HAD's attempts at *creating an accessible deaf voice* as unprofessional and incompatible with technocratic voicing. Instead of recognizing this as a conflict between different registers of voice, these hearing leaders assumed that deaf leaders currently lacked the communicative skills necessary to run an independent organization. As one disabled NGO advocate bluntly put it, "Their [deaf people's] capabilities are severely restricted, especially in terms of managing an organization" (personal Interview, 2019). Therefore, instead of helping HAD apply to be an independent organization, these hearing-run NGOs provided HAD with a series of "capacity enhancement trainings," geared toward helping them more closely conform to the norms of technocratic voicing, in the hope that in the future, HAD would be able to become an independent organization. These trainings were often funded through grants that the local VNGOs applied for, and provided money that helped cover those NGOs' operating costs[63] .

## Creating Deaf Voice

What does the project of creating an accessible deaf voice look like? As previously mentioned, the primary political project of deaf community leaders across Việt Nam is creating a society where sign language is a valid basis for "social inclusion" (Cooper 2014, 327)—a vision where deaf people can navigate all aspects of life as signing individuals. Yet not only do most hearing people not know Vietnamese sign languages (VSLs), many deaf people also do not have

[63] The fact that providing capacity enhancement trainings to HAD brought in grant funding that covered these hearing VNGO's operating costs provided significant motivation to keep offering such trainings.

access to VSLs. As noted earlier, much of this uneven distribution of sign language knowledge has to do with the history of the Vietnamese education system and language ideologies around sign language. Since Việt Nam nationalized the deaf education system in the early Đổi Mới, oral education, which uses speech and lip-reading, has been the norm in all of Việt Nam's deaf schools (Woodward, Nguyen, and Nguyen 2004, 253). While deaf education is limited throughout the country, it is not evenly geographically distributed. Deaf people in the two major metropolitan areas (Hà Nội and Hồ Chí MinhCity) have access to secondary education in VSLs through the Dong Nai Deaf Education Project, and a similar project in Hà Nội. However, many deaf people in the countryside have no access to formal education in VSLs. Moreover, while oral schools do offer opportunities to sign with peers (when the hearing teacher is not looking), not all parents choose to send their kids to elementary school (Cooper 2017, 6), a pattern which, according to my deaf informants, is higher in rural provinces than in the major cities.

To see how deaf leaders addressed this linguistic diversity and sought to include all deaf people in deaf advocacy, I examine a typical meeting of HAD. Many of the members of HAD are migrants from the surrounding countryside and have varying levels of fluency in HNSL. Thus, many of the weekly activities were geared towards scaffolding these deaf individuals' language acquisition. After playing a series of games that emphasized deaf people's ability to attend to visual communication, the leaders of HAD turned to a discussion of the weekly news. That week the news was particularly engaging, as Kim Jung Un and Donald Trump had met in Hà Nội to discuss matters of nuclear disarmament. Đuc, a highly literate former president of the deaf association, gave a lecture on the news. He projected a picture of the two leaders shaking

hands in front of their respective flags. He pointed to the two flags and asked: “Does everyone know the United States and North Korea?” There was a chorus of yeses. “But do you know why they came to Hà Nội?” Most of the audience said that they didn’t, so Đuc explained how North Korea decided to build missiles to increase its international standing, but the United States got upset and asked the United Nations and other countries to impose strict trade barriers. He explained that the two countries were coming to Việt Nam to try to agree to reduce the number of nuclear missiles in exchange for a reduction in the embargo. As he finished, there were lots of blank stares, so An, the president of HAD, came to the front and asked, “Did you understand? Was he clear [RÕ]?”

The question of whether something was RÕ (clear) was asked after almost every single presentation at HAD. The sign RÕ is an initialized abbreviation of the fingerspelling of the Vietnamese word rõ ràng, combining the r handshape with the movement for the tone in rõ. Making things clear to all deaf people, regardless of their language background, was a central ethos of the deaf association meetings. Indeed, when many people in the audience responded that they hadn’t understood Đuc’s presentation, An directed Đuc, “Explain again, but this time you need to use more điệu bộ (gesture).”

In addition to using HNSL or one of Việt Nam’s other sign languages, deaf people also communicate through what is colloquially known as “điệu bộ” or “gesture.” In many ways, điệu bộ is akin to what is variously known as “natural-sign” in Nepal (Green, 2014), or homesign in some sign language literature (Goico & Horton, 2023). Điệu bộ encompasses a wide range of improvisational communicative practices used by deaf people when communicating with non-

signing hearing people, with foreign deaf people (although this practice is also called international sign), and with deaf people who do not know much standard HNSL. Điệu bộ is at once considered separate from, and a central part of, HNSL. It is simultaneously the word that deaf people use to refer to what are known in sign language linguistics as "classifiers" or "depicting constructions," and as something used instead of sign when a communicative partner does not know standard signs. By asking Đuc to explain the week's news in điệu bộ, An was ensuring that the lesson would not only be accessible to fluent HNSL signers, but all deaf people present.

As Đuc launched into his second attempt at an explanation, Ni, a young deaf leader in her mid-twenties, started chatting with me. She explained how the use of điệu bộ served as a sort of bridge to help deaf people learn sign (see Hoffmann-Dilloway, 2011 for analysis of a similar situation in Nepal). Ni herself had learned HNSL later in life. Ni had grown up in an orphanage on the outskirts of Hà Nội. While her parents were alive, they were poor and felt they were unable to raise a deaf child, so they sent her to an orphanage for Agent Orange victims and other disabled people. Until age 17 Ni had no formal schooling, and didn't know standard HNSL. Rather she communicated primarily through "điệu bộ" and a smattering of HNSL signs that other deaf children at the orphanage knew. After deaf leaders and interpreters visited the orphanage where Ni grew up, she was eventually able (with the help of HNSL interpreters) to persuade her parents to allow her to leave the orphanage to attend HAD meetings and eventually enroll in a deaf school. Ni explained how "when I first came to HAD, I didn't know a sufficient number of signs. I couldn't even follow all of the activities. If there was điệu bộ, I could understand, but if there was just signing, I didn't understand. I had to keep

asking questions, and as people explained, gradually my mind opened." Ni then pointed to a friend she had brought with her to the deaf association, who had been one of the many people who said they didn't understand Đuc's initial explanation. "It's like her. I want to encourage her to WAKE-UP and understand things. Now she KNOWS-NOTHING."

Ni's story highlights what voice means to deaf advocates in Hà Nội. Deaf leaders are trying to create a shared voice for the deaf community. This requires making communication as clear [RÕ] as possible so that all deaf people can participate and learn sign. What deaf leaders are trying to do here is not just about a (political) voice, it's also about creating an atmosphere of political inclusion through denotational inclusion in whatever modality and code (e.g., by gesture or sign). This ethical norm is essential to the project of deaf advocacy because the hallmark of political exclusion for deaf people is Việt Nam is *not understanding*, whether rooted in not having access to spoken language, or in having limited access to any form of language. In order to raise voice to an external addressee—here the government—deaf people must first enact a politics of denotational inclusion not only for deaf people who have access to HNSL, but for all deaf people.

## Genres and Registers of Internal Addressivity

How is this politics of inclusion enacted? What do the genres and registers employed to create a clear [RÕ] voice, accessible to all deaf people, look like? To examine these registers, I analyze a HAD meeting where deaf leaders explained the process of taking a "deaf census" to HAD members. This census was crucial to the external addressivity of HAD's advocacy work, because it would provide statistical data on deaf people in Hà Nội, and would be part of the

case for HAD becoming an independent organization. As discussed earlier, many of the members of HAD have an elementary school education and had never participated in a survey of any kind before. Therefore, the HAD leadership devoted an entire three-hour meeting to explaining the purpose of taking a census, as well as going through the different questions on the census and explaining what they meant. For the purposes of this chapter, I focus on a brief section of the meeting (2 minutes, 45 seconds) where deaf leaders explained the purpose of taking a census. The full transcript for this meeting segment can be found in Appendix D.

In this presentation, we see An, the president of HAD, accompanied by Bao, the secretary of HAD (who oversees the census project), presenting to HAD about the importance of taking the census. The presentation is broken into three different sections where An takes slightly different approaches to explaining the purpose of taking the census. In the first section (Lines 1-4) An explains that the census records will be brought to the People's Committee of Hà Nội, which will apply statistical methods to the survey data in order to estimate social welfare indicators amongst the broader deaf population in Hà Nội. (The survey questions dealt with rates of employment, poverty and social security benefits.) The next two sections of the presentation are hypothetical examples designed to illustrate why having accurate census records is important. Section two (lines 5-11) covers a hypothetical scenario where HAD doesn't have any census records, while section three (lines 12-36) covers a hypothetical scenario where HAD has census records but the records are insufficient and patchy. In both sections two and three, HAD requests for assistance from the government are denied due to having inadequate records.

How is this complex topic made accessible to all deaf people in the audience? One of the ways is that nearly the entire presentation is conducted in điệu bộ (gesture.) There are, of course, lexical signs used in this skit, but the vocabulary is highly constrained. There are a total of 50 distinct lexical items used in this skit (see

), the vast majority of which would be accessible to a deaf Hanoian with little to no formal education in HNSL. Only four words in the entire skit, BARRIERS, CALCULATE, GOVERNMENT and REGISTRATION, are more technical terms which might not be accessible to all of the people in the room, but which are made understandable through the robust scaffolding provided by the broader context of the skit.

In order to communicate without a shared code, Peter Graif argues that deaf signers rely on a process of deictic calibration, where deaf signers first work to establish a shared set of references (deictic field) for everyone in the conversation to understand, and then build the conversation on top of this shared ground (Graif, 2018). We see this occurring in the first section of the section of the presentation (lines 1-4) where An says:

*Transcript 8: HAD Government Skit: lines 1-4, translation from HNSL/ điệu bộ*

1. There is one People's Committee for all of Hà Nội. One for the whole area.
2. So that is part of the government, and Bao and I will bring those records to the People's Committee.
3. After that, they will ask to examine the records
4. They will use the records from all the deaf people, from all of you, to make estimates.

In this section, the president of HAD, the secretary of HAD, the People's Committee, and the census records are all established through the presence of either the literal physical objects in question (the binder, An, and Bao are all present in the singing space), or through prior elaboration. For example, immediately prior to this discussion, the HAD leaders had explained the concept of the People's Committee (which had taken several minutes), and then refer to it in lines 1-4 by pointing to a written Vietnamese phrase on the chalkboard. This establishes a

shared communicative space where the deictic field and semantic field have been similarly aligned for all present, despite differing levels of educational access.

In the second section (lines 5-11), An produces a hypothetical example explaining what would happen if HAD were to attempt to approach the government without collecting any census records:

*Transcript 9: HAD Government Skit: lines 5-11, translation from HNSL/ điệu bộ*

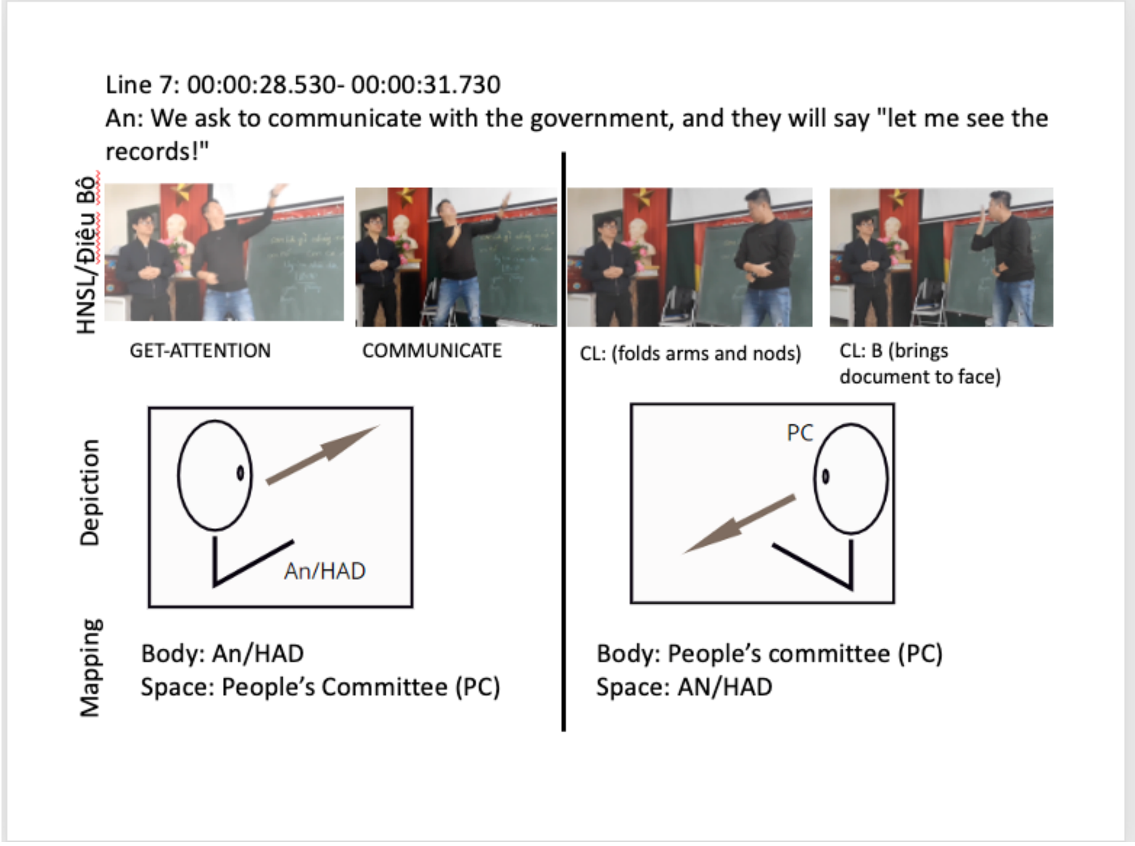
5. [Takes record book from Bao and sets it aside on a chair]
6. So come on, you and I are going [to the government]. I have nothing. He has no papers; I have no papers.
7. We ask to communicate with the government, and they will say, "Let me see the records!"
8. I will go back to Bao and say, "How are we going to do this? We don't have any records!
9. They will say sorry, go away.
10. It's like a slap in the face; our ears will go down like a dog's.
11. Because you [HAD members] didn’t support us, you see?

An is able to communicate this using minimal lexical signs, both through the use of the pre-established deictic ground from the previous 4 lines (the binder, An’s and Bao’s bodies, and words on the chalkboard) as well as the use of roleshifting. *Roleshift*, or what is sometimes referred to as *constructed action* in sign language linguistics, allows signers to “report someone else’s utterance or thought… or describe physical actions performed by someone else” (Aristodemo et al., 2022, pp. 2–3). This change in perspective is marked by non-manual markers such as shifts in a signer's torso orientation, eye gaze, or facial expression.

Although roleshifting is highly conventionalized in standardized sign languages like HNSL and ASL, research has shown that roleshift is difficult to follow, especially for non-fluent signers

(Aristodemo et al., 2022). An therefore exaggerates the iconic nature of roleshifting by not simply shifting his shoulders side to side [as would be done in standard HNSL], but by literally stepping several feet back and forth each time he is reporting the sign of a different person. Through this back-and-forth movement, An produces a multicomponent depiction whereby the signer's body and blank space alternate in their deictic function. For example, in line 7 (Figure 11), An produces two distinct depictions, which play between the body and space in different ways. In the first depiction, "GET-ATTENTION COMMUNICATE," when An is standing stage left, his body represents himself as the President of HAD. His eye gaze is looking up, marking the blank space to the right of him which represents the government. For the next depiction, a representative of the government saying "let me see your records," An steps a meter to the right so he is standing on the other side of the chalkboard. His body now represents the People's Committee of Hà Nội, while the blank space where he was just standing represents HAD. This rapid shifting through different depictions continues throughout this section of the presentation as An recounts hypothetical interactions with the government.

*Figure 11: Roleshift in HAD Government Skit*

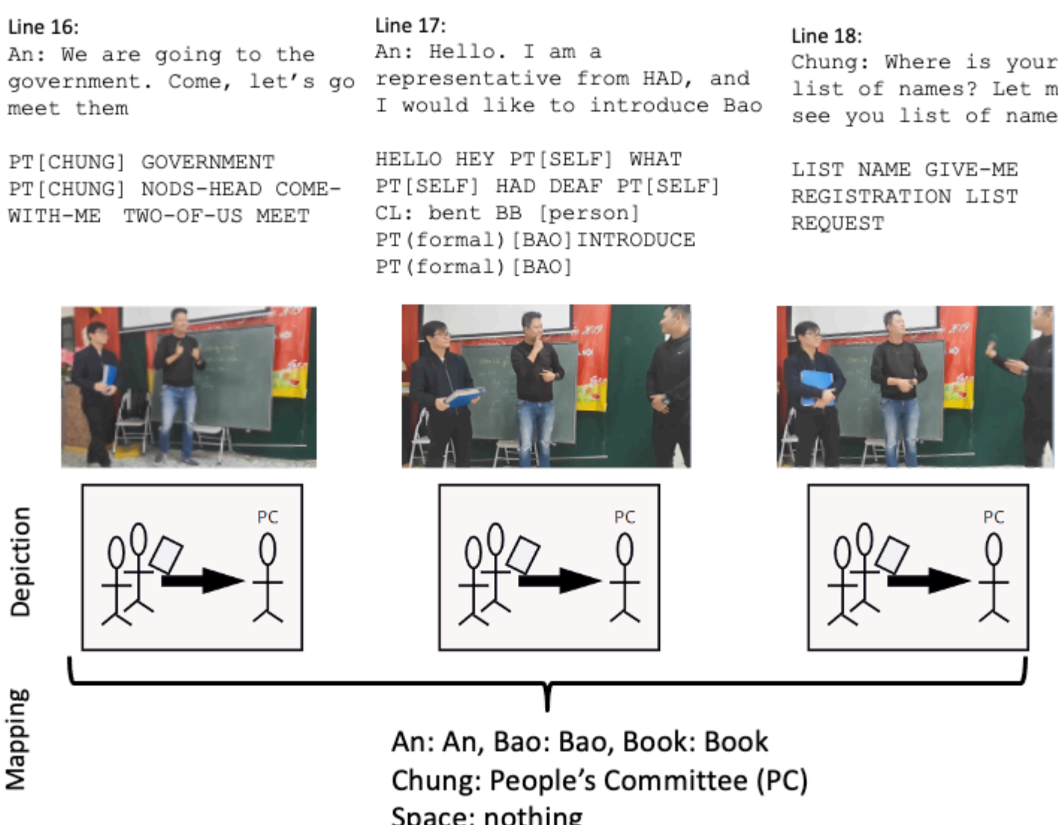



*This figure shows the depictions that emerge in this line of roleshift.*

Through this conventionalized use of space, An is able to quickly and concisely convey a conversation between himself and the government, using minimal lexical signs, while making the explanation more accessible to semi-fluent signers. However, following this example requires being able to quickly remap deictic relationships between the signer's body and referential objects in the world. Therefore, in the third section (lines 12-36), An deviates even farther from typical HNSL in order to make the presentation even more clear [RÕ] to non-fluent HNSL signers. Rather than using roleshift to report the speech of others, An literally recruits other signers to sign these parts for him. He asks Cung, the vice president of HAD, to come to the front to play the role of the People's Committee. In line 15 An says "So he (Cung) is the

handsome government, I am the president of HAD, and Bao is with me. I ask the People's Committee, can we meet?" An metapragmatically frames the deictic field by stating that Cung is the government, that he is playing himself as the president of HAD, and that Bao (as the secretary of HAD) is with him. In line 16 ("We are going to the government. Come, let's go meet them"), An and Bao stand on the left side of the chalkboard where HAD had been situated in the previous example, while Cung stands on the right side of the chalkboard where the government was in the previous example. In the next several lines, we see a play unfold in which each character signs their own lines, rather than roleshifting to quote others.

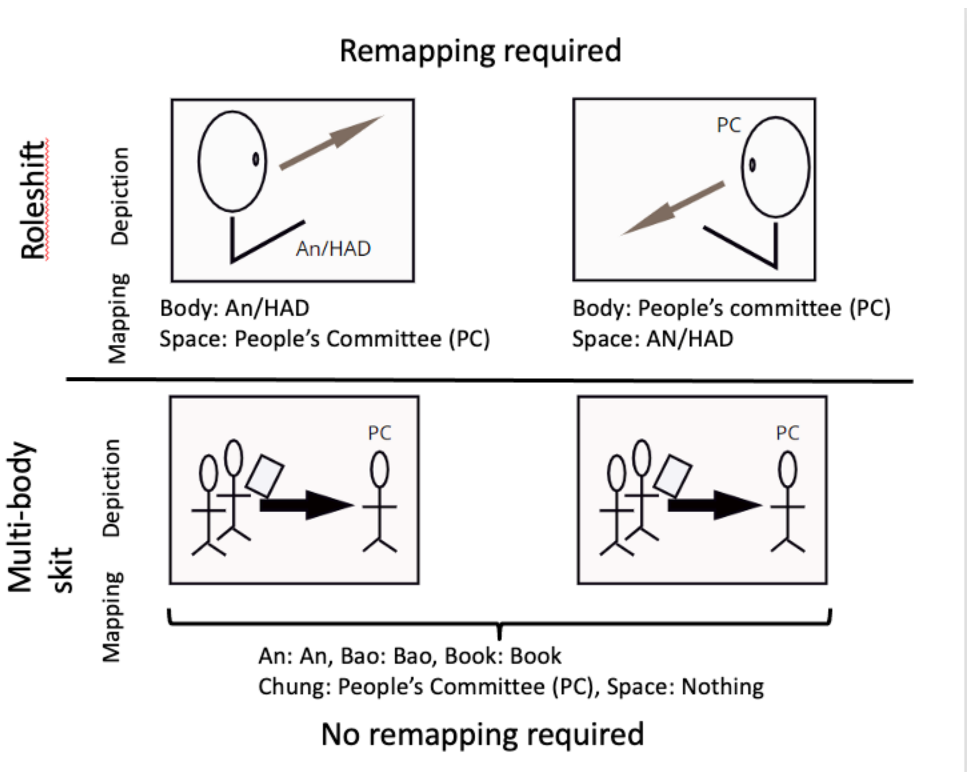
*Figure 12: HAD Government Skit Lines 16-18*




This second section is essentially a repetition of the entire explanation, but in a different format that is more accessible to less fluent signers. Part of what RÕ means is using structured repetition to tie together different explanations that might be more accessible to different individuals. In contrast to line 7 (Figure 11), where roleshifting strung together multiple depictions, what we see emerge across lines 16-18 is a large multi-body depiction. Remapping is eliminated in this multi-person depiction. In line 7 (Figure 11) an observer would have to know that each time An roleshifted his body and the blank space next to him shift deictic origos. However, in this new example (Figure 12) , the deictic relationships between the signers bodies and the things they represent stays stable across the entire skit (Figure 13). Moreover, in this depiction, there is minimal mapping required at all. An's body represents *his body* as the

actual president of HAD, and everything he signs can be understood as emanating from the president of HAD. Similarly, Bao is representing *himself*, the literal secretary of HAD. The blue binder is indeed the binder that hosts HAD's currently incomplete census records. The only mapping that needs to occur at all is that Cung is not playing himself as the vice president of HAD, but is playing the government. In other words, through careful mediation, avoiding the use of complicated lexical signs, carefully scaffolding the deictic field, and then voicing the skit with three bodies so as to ease the referential mapping an observer must do, HAD leaders attempt to make the meaning of the skit as clear [RÕ] as possible.

*Figure 13: Roleshift vs. Multi-body skit*




Finally, to make complex topics accessible, deaf leaders employ humor to keep the audience engaged and emphasize crucial points. In the final section of the presentation (line 11-

36), where An uses a multi-person skit to discuss what would happen if HAD submitted incomplete partial records to the government, humor is used liberally. After An and Bao submit their records to the government (played by Cung), they return back home to wait. While Cung acts out inspecting the records by flipping through the record book, An asks Bao, "Do you think [the records] are good? Do you think they will approve it, or not?" (lines 24-25). An then produces a humorously exaggerated điệu bộ depiction of himself praying that the government accepts HAD's records. He rubs his hand together in fervent anticipation, his brows furrowed, then dutifully holds his hands together at his temples in prayer, before pinching his fingers together as if holding a stick of incense and waiving it in a large circle in front of his face. As he starts doing this, the deaf audience cracks up in laughter at the exaggerated act of praying, the humorous contrast of the technical bureaucratic process of submitting a census with the intimate familial act of prayer, and An's rather comically exaggerated facial expression. Egged on by seeing the laughter, An repeats the whole prayer sequence another time, as the deaf audience continues to lap up the visual comedy.

*Figure 14: Use of humor in HAD government skit*

```
Line 25: 00:02:05.480 - 00:02:11.630
An:    We are praying, waving incense, praying and waving
incense
   PT 2 HANDED[ CHUNG+SELF] CL[RUBBING HANDS TOGETHER IN
ANTICIPATION] CL[PRAYING]   PT[SELF]      CL:99[WAVING
INSCENSE]     CL[PRAYING]   CL[WAVING-INSCENCE]
```

An's use of humor in this skit highlights several things about the meaning of deaf voice for deaf leaders. First and foremost, An's exaggerated use of điệu bộ and facial expression are celebration of deaf norms of communication—of a visual world shared by deaf people regardless of their familiarity with HNSL. Many of the activities at HAD, from games where people can only use điệu bộ to activities copying facial expressions, are designed to cultivate and celebrate exactly this potential. The project of creating deaf voice as the mother tongue of deaf people centers on the celebration of deaf norms of communication, a celebration best appreciated through laughter and joy. Second, punctuating a long technical discussion about how to communicate with the government with a humorous điệu bộ sequence is part of HAD's leaders' commitment to creating an accessible voice for the deaf community. Deaf people who might have been struggling to follow a complicated narrative about the government are

rewarded for their attention with such moments of humor, which deaf leaders pepper throughout their discussions of any complicated topic.

Humor in HAD meetings not only takes the form of exaggerated use of điệu bộ, but also interpersonal drama that is baked into the format of the multi-person skit itself. When An goes to choose a person to play the government (line 13), An spends a full 20 seconds scratching his head and pondering who to pick. In the audience, deaf people were hiding behind their friends, trying to avoid being picked, while other people were deviously pushing their friends forward to be nominated. Nobody wants to be picked to come to the front for one of these skits, because they know they are likely to be made the center of a sort of slapstick comedy of errors. Finally, An picks his protégé, a young deaf man named Cung, who is the vice president of HAD but infamously nervous about presenting in front of crowds. Cung, a book smart college student from the provinces, is painfully socially awkward, and he thus sought out An to help him develop his social skills and leadership abilities. An, in turn, has been a sort of tough love mentor, who has both taken Cung under his wing and constantly pushed Cung out of his comfort zone, resulting in often-humorous blunders on Cung's part. This dynamic is well-understood by members of HAD, many of whom start gossiping in anticipation as Cung reluctantly comes to the front to perform the skit. The format of the multi-person skit makes such blunders particularly likely, because the skit is improvised. An, as both an actor and director of the skit, is the only one who knows what the plot is supposed to be, and so he can lead others in such a way that they take the improv in the "wrong" direction.

At first, Cung plays his role of a government official adequately. When An and Bao approach him, Cung stands stoically, a caricature of a stern government official, and demands

their list of records (line 18, 20). However, when An returns to see if the government has approved of their records, Cung "flubs" his lines. Note that the improvisation works because it is explicitly built upon, and set in contrast to, the previous sections of An's presentation, most notably section 2 (lines 5-11, the hypothetical example where HAD's request for assistance is turned down due to a complete lack of records). In contrast, in this skit, An has handed Cung the literal book of records. Given this context, Cung makes an educated guess that the point of the skit is to demonstrate that with records, HAD's plea to the government will be heard. When An asks Cung if the records are good (line 26), Cung responds confidently in a stern governmental tone of authority, "I approve!" (line 27). But this skit does not follow the rules of American improv, where actors must respond "yes, and," accepting the contributions of each actor and building upon them. Here, the power dynamic in the skit is distinctly hierarchical, with An, as the president of HAD and the primary presenter of the skit, having the power to call the directorial shots. Thus, when An asks Cung, with a quizzical look on his face, "You approve?" (line 28), Cung starts to repeat, "I approve!" but stops mid-sign as he interprets An's comment as an indication that he has messed up the plot of the skit. Cung quickly reorients to a different plot. He realizes that An is not trying to contrast with the previous skit and show what happens when HAD has records as opposed to when they do not have records; rather, An is trying to demonstrate what happens when HAD has *insufficient* records. Cung then corrects himself, saying, "These are insufficient. It is not at all clear" (line 27), embarrassment flushing across his cheeks. There is laughter from the crowd, as Cung has fallen into An's trap and embarrassed himself by flubbing a line. This laughter serves an important purpose for An in that it reveals that the crowd has been following the skit, and thus provides evidence that RÕ is in

fact being achieved. Cung quickly recovers, explaining in detail why HAD's records are insufficient. But as the skit ends, Cung's friends in the audience immediately start teasing him, to which Cung embarrassedly protests, "He[An] made me do it again! That's what he told me. [Holds forehead in hand in shame]" (line 33-34).

As I have shown in this detailed analysis of this skit, the registers and genres involved in creating a RÕ (clear) deaf voice are quite complex. They involve the use of điệu bộ, careful scaffolding of the deictic field, the use and deconstruction of roleshift, and ample use of visual and interpersonal humor. That deaf leaders were able to translate government processes (of presenting census date to the People's Committee) illustrates that deaf leaders were skilled in shifting between different registers of voicing.

## Technocratic Voicing

What does deaf self-advocacy look like when it is geared to external addressees (i.e., the Vietnamese government and hearing NGOs)? Like all NGOs actors in Việt Nam, when deaf self-advocates address the state, they have to be careful to depoliticize their work by adhering to the norms of *technocratic voicing*. As already noted, technocratic voicing requires that NGOs phrase all advocacy work in terms of *technical* problems, to be dealt with by *professional* development workers (Hannah, 2007). In doing so, NGO workers distance themselves from so-called "rabble-rousers" who seek to engage in politics (overthrow the party. Instead they present themselves as "rational, law-abiding, constructive citizens, working for the betterment of their nation" (Hannah, 2007, p. 243). Achieving this technocratic professionalism utilizes particular genres and registers of formal language (vocabulary, forms of address) and other forms of communication (e.g., reports, records, speeches, PowerPoints, letters, etc.).

To illustrate the shibboleths and genres of this particular register, I analyze one of the many capacity enhancement trainings where deaf leaders were explicitly coached in technocratic voicing. This particular leadership training was funded by the Danish Association of the Deaf and run by a local Vietnamese NGO I call Disability Futures. These weekly all-day trainings were a significant time burden for deaf leaders, who already had to balance full-time jobs with weekly general body and board meetings of HAD. The topic of this meeting was "Kỹ năng quản lý văn phòng" (Office Management Skills). The lesson started off with Bich, the hearing disabled office manager of Disability Futures, discussing what "công tác văn phòng" (office work) meant. Throughout the workshop, Bich spoke Vietnamese, and an interpreter translated into HNSL for the deaf attendees[64]. Bich invited the two deaf project interns at Disability Futures to list the various types of activities they performed, from sending emails to writing reports, buying supplies, and keeping receipts). As the deaf interns listed their duties, Bich wrote them up on the board, sometimes substituting her own categories or asking the interns to add things.

One term she asked them to add to the list was "record keeping" (lưu trữ tai liệu). Bich asked if HAD had a good collection of records. The most senior leader of HAD (who had been on the board over a decade) explained that he had some boxes and that the president of HAD had some, but that they had gotten rid of many over the years because they had gotten so cumbersome. As the younger leaders started to tease him for not keeping the records, he protested, "We don't have an office, so we've had to move them many times. Also, nobody

[64] English translations are from my fieldnotes. I was asked not to video record this workshop, so I do not have a transcript of the spoken Vietnamese from this event.

taught us what to do with them, so we didn't know what they were for." Bich joked, "You probably got lots of things from DP Hà Nội and thought, what do we do with this?" She then mentioned that she thought this was a real problem for HAD and moved to a formal discussion. "What is the importance of record keeping?" Bich asked. The group began listing various functions, from having evidence to show their activities when asked about them by government officials to being able to learn from the past. Bich added that one of the important features of keeping records was "minh bạch taì chính" (transparency). Bich asked if the group had a sign for the word, and when they said they didn't, she gave an explanation, describing it as having the evidence so that when others had to believe you, they could see from that evidence that you were telling the truth. "It's about having very clear records,'' summarized Bich. As the discussion on recording keeping wrapped up, Binh said, "In my opinion, you need to do all these types of record keeping before you can become an official organization." She explained that right now, they could tell government officials that they had 19 years of activities and experience, but because they had no records, they had no evidence for that. She challenged any of the deaf leaders to debate her on this point, but no one did.

From this vignette, we can see several things about how technocratic voice is understood in Việt Nam. For hearing Vietnamese NGO workers like Bich, one of the goals of the goal of technocratic voice is to be "transparent" (minh bạch taì chính). Whether NGOs are keeping records or producing scientific research briefs, the goal is to produce transparent evidence which cannot be argued with. Transparency is designed to erase the people who produced the materials, leaving a (supposedly) unmediated view between the audience (the

state) and "the facts," which are understood to be concrete objects existing in the world prior to the VNGOs' work.

The transparency expected by hearing advocates is very different from the clarity [RÕ] used by deaf advocates. While clarity [RÕ] attempts to make the content as accessible as possible *within* the deaf community, transparency require multiple complex processes of mediation in communicating *to potential outsider auditors/audiences*. In order to produce a "transparent" record or "fact," VNGO workers must carefully produce and curate records in such a way that the facts can become decontextualized and self-referential, making both their own subjectivity, as well as the voices of individual citizens who are involved in the report, disappear. From the way Bich approached the lesson, it was clear that she felt that deaf people didn't understand the concept of transparency, and they therefore were not ready to run their own independent organization.

Another way in which VNGOs work to depoliticize the process of raising voice is through the careful construction of their own voices as *professional*. For example, in the same Office Management Skills training, Bich spent the afternoon discussing professional writing. Again, Bich spoke in Vietnamese, with an interpreter translating into HNSL. Bich started the lesson by writing the word "văn phong" (style) on the board in Vietnamese. She explained that style can be seen in the way that "if you say something and I say something, the attitude will be different because our voices are different."[65] She explained how style is something you can have in speaking, signing, and also writing. After going over various polite and impolite examples, and

[65] English translations are from my fieldnotes. I was asked not to video record, so I do not have a transcript of the spoken Vietnamese from this event.

correcting past examples of deaf leaders contacting her via text or email that were not deemed professional enough, Bich turned to the question of style when writing to the government. She stated, “If you write to the government, you must be very careful and respectful,” and urged deaf leaders to “write politely.” In discussing style with the deaf leaders, Bich emphasized the importance of using a professional voice characterized as “respectful,” “careful,” and “polite” when communicating with the government.

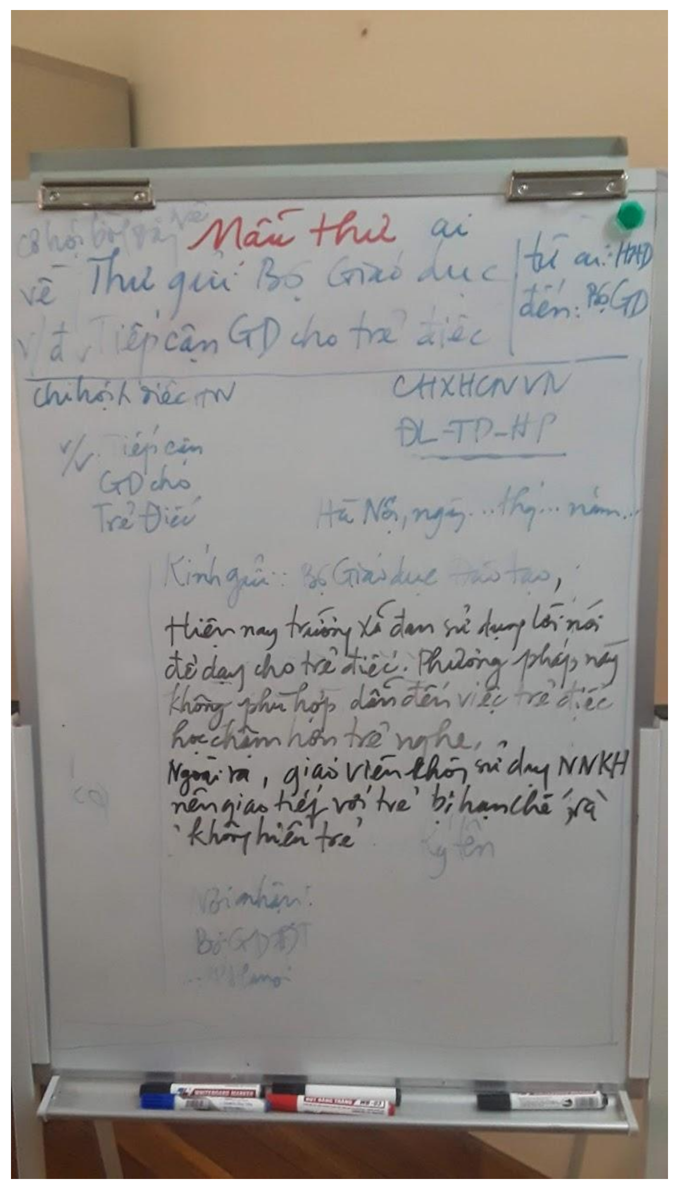
Bich went on to illustrate exactly what she meant by a polite professional voice by discussing first the format and then the content of a letter to the government. On the chalkboard she wrote a model letter to the government. In the model she included many standard components of a formal letter, including where to write “từ ai” (from) and “đến” (to), v/đ (the appropriate abbreviation for regarding), and the date, written out in full words rather than numbers. She showed them how to start the letter with “kính gửi” (Dear), and how to sign the letter with their printed name and signature. These elements, while common to letters sent to non-governmental recipients, are all part of creating a polite, deferential stance towards the government.

Beyond using the form of letter writing used for writing to any person one respects, VNGO activists use additional formatting components to help craft a depoliticized professional voice. Bich took care to tell the deaf leaders that when addressing the government, they must include the formal name of the government “CỘNG HÒA XÃ HỘI CHỦ NGHĨA VIỆT NAM” (SOCALIST REPUBLIC OF VIỆT NAM) in all caps, followed by the government slogan “Độc lập–Tự do–Hạnh phúc” (Independence - Freedom - Happiness) in the upper right-hand corner of the

document. This style mirrors the format of official government documents and decrees. By mirroring the style of the government, VNGO leaders helped demonstrate that their voice was actively aligned with the state's.

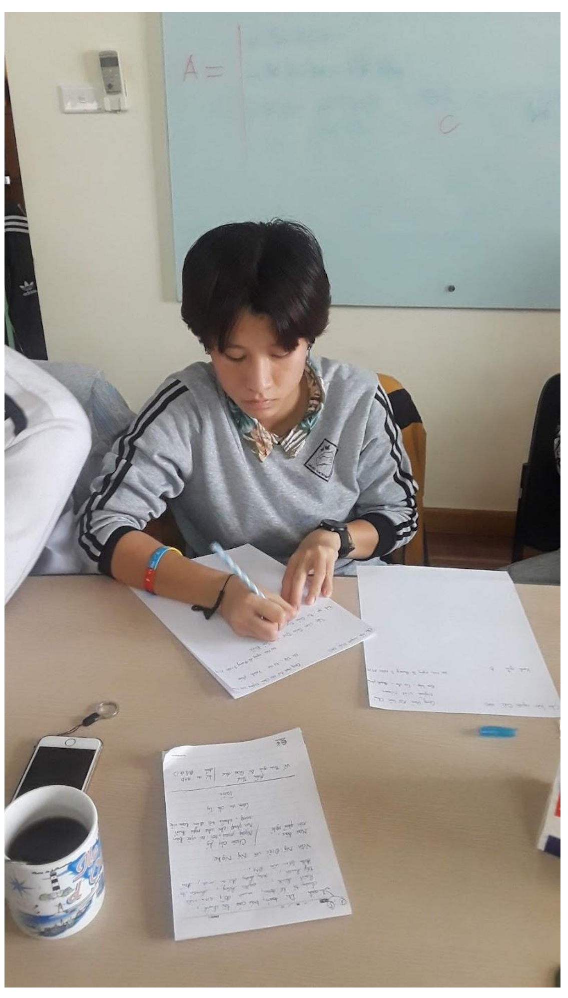
After discussing the format of the letters, Bich moved on to a discussion of the content of letters to the government. She instructed the deaf leaders that, "When writing to the government, you must frame one specific problem. Then you must either share your perspective about the problem, and or ask for the government's assistance in resolving the problem." She then sent the deaf leaders off to practice writing their own individual draft letters to the Ministry of Education, asking them to improve the quality of deaf education. As the deaf leaders finished their drafts, Bich inspected them each individually. To one of the deaf leaders, Bich suggested that she change the order of the points she had listed because "you don't want it to look like you are criticizing [the government's] practice." Bich suggested that by re-ordering the points, the deaf leader could make it sound less like it was the fault of the government that deaf children were not succeeding in school. She encouraged the deaf leader to simply state that deaf children were not succeeding in school, cite research that deaf children learn better through sign language, and then ask the government to resolve this problem (presumably through allowing for the teaching of sign language). The tactic Bich advocated for in writing a formal letter is an example of technocratic voicing. Although the deaf leaders were being taught to voice their concerns to the government, they were taught to do so by presenting multiple neutral facts before asking the government "to resolve their problems." In such a way, deaf leaders could be seen not as criticizing the government, but simply as presenting government actors with facts and asking for their aid.

*Figure 15: "Model letter" for writing to the government*




Note the abbreviated phrases in the upper right-hand corner: "CHXHCNVN" for "CỘNG HÒA XÃ HỘI CHỦ NGHĨA VIỆT NAM" (SOCALIST REPUBLIC OF VIỆT NAM) and "ĐT–TD–HP" for "Độc lập–Tự do–Hạnh phúc" (Independence - Freedom - Happiness)

*Figure 16: A young deaf leader practices letter writing in a "professional" voice*



## Hearing NGOs' Perception of Deaf Registers and Genres

When addressing external audiences, deaf leaders worked hard to emulate the genre and register shibboleths of technocratic voicing. At times, they even made the difficult decision to sacrifice the internal addressivity of deaf advocacy in order to conform as tightly as possible

to the norms of technocratic voicing. However, the slightest deviations from technocratic voicing and the small places where register shibboleths from RÕ (clear) voicing snuck into deaf advocacy work were taken by hearing NGO workers as evidence that deaf people did not have the communicative capacity necessary to engage in independent self-advocacy work.

For example, in November 2019, HAD held a general assembly to mark the transition to new leadership within the organization. The event was carefully modeled after the Communist Party's national assemblies, with a formal report on activities and progress since the last assembly by the incoming president, and speeches by former leaders of HAD and the president of the organizing committee for the Vietnamese National Federation of the Deaf. While ostensibly an event to demonstrate legitimacy and accountability to the deaf members of the organization, the general assembly actually served as an opportunity to perform a technocratic, professional voice to the hearing VNGO members present, who could advocate on HAD's behalf to the Hà Nội People's Committee as they navigated the process of becoming an independent organization. While deaf people crammed into the back of the room, overspilling the folding chairs into standing-room-only space, the VNGO representatives were seated at tables with cushioned chairs, where they received folders emblazoned with HAD's logo, printed versions of the slides, pens to take notes, water bottles, and trays of carefully arranged fruit. Moreover, the format of the event was a far cry from a typical HAD event. Rather than focusing on creating an accessible shared signed voice, the event was geared towards making HAD an independent representative organization through the projection of a technocratic professional voice. There were speeches with graphs and PowerPoints (designed to enact a technocratic voice), a performance of the official designated HNSL translation of the Vietnamese national

anthem in language that was inaccessible to deaf people, and extended discussion of HAD's bylaws, which HAD leaders told the deaf members that they would discuss in HNSL another day. Throughout the entire event, điệu bộ was entirely absent. There were no skits to make the content of the speeches understandable to an average deaf person, nor games or performances that celebrated sign language as the mother tongue of the deaf. In other words, the event was entirely about creating a deaf voice to perform to hearing people, not creating a deaf voice for the deaf community itself.

Yet despite the best efforts of the HAD leaders to project a technocratic professional voice, their efforts were perceived by the hearing VNGO staff as falling short. At the HAD board meeting the next week, the deaf leaders received an email from Bich detailing all of the issues with their presentation at the general body meeting, to help them prepare for submitting their application to become an independent organization to the People's Committee of Hà Nội. Bich informed HAD that they failed to present an accounting of their financial data since the last general assembly, and the next five-year budget for HAD. These pieces were part of creating a technocratic voice, and demonstrating "transparency" through clear record keeping. Bich's other point had to do with creating a professional voice for HAD. One of the HAD leaders read from Bich's email, translating into HNSL, "She says that at the General Assembly, several of the presenters were being humorous. It's inappropriate; they should be professional." One of the deaf leaders, Thao, commented exasperatedly, "They want us to be professional all the time? Deaf culture is different!" While some of the deaf leaders complained that Bich was being overly picky, An cited his experience observing the World Federation of the Deaf and deaf events in other countries that adopted a similarly serious tone in front of hearing audiences. He

concluded, “We need to tell everyone when it’s just deaf people we can be fun and silly, but when it’s an important event for hearing people we need to be di(polite) and professional, agreed?”

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have laid out the voicing structures that render deaf advocacy efforts in Việt Nam precarious. Self-advocacy requires having two different forms of addressivity: one that is *internally facing* and helps build the collective “we” on which the self-advocate speaks, and one that is *externally facing* towards the government or other organization that grants recognition or support to the self-advocate and their community. In order for deaf leaders to “raise voice” to an external addressee, the government, deaf people must first enact a politics of denotational inclusion not only for deaf people who have access to HNSL, but for all deaf people. This ethical norm is essential to the project of deaf advocacy, because the hallmark of political exclusion for deaf people is Việt Nam is *not understanding*, whether rooted in not having access to spoken language, or in having limited access to any form of language. This in turn entails working within specific registers and genres, which deaf leaders refer to as RÕ (clarity). Shibboleths of RÕ involve utilizing điệu bộ, careful scaffolding of the deictic field, the use (and deconstruction of) roleshift, and ample use of visual and interpersonal humor. Conversely, like all NGO actors in Việt Nam, when deaf self-advocates address the state they have to be careful to depoliticize their work by adhering to the norms of *technocratic voicing*. Technocratic voicing requires NGOs phrase all advocacy work in terms of *technical* problems to be dealt with by *professionals.* Technocratic voicing include the use specific genres, records, scientific research briefs, PowerPoints, etc. designed to produce “transparent” (minh bạch tài

chính) evidence which cannot be argued with. Shibboleths of technocratic voicing include professional language such as formal terms of address and mirroring style used in government communication to demonstrate that their voice is actively aligned with the state's. However, rather than recognize that deaf leaders were negotiating two different addressees, hearing NGO workers took the slightest deviations from technocratic voicing as evidence that deaf people did not have the communicative capacity necessary to engage in independent self-advocacy work. This, in turn, justified further "capacity trainings" for deaf leaders, and postponing HAD becoming an independent organization. At the time of my field research, HAD, while it had had meetings with the local People's Committee to discuss steps necessary to become an independent organization, had not yet formally submitted its application, because leaders had been repeatedly told by local disability NGOs that they lacked sufficient capacity to apply.

In returning to the subject of HNSL interpreters, the result of this conflict was that deaf advocates struggled to even get an audience with government officials to advocate on interpreters' behalf. Without legal status as an independent organization, deaf leaders must work through DP Hà Nội to meet with government officials, schedule a "hội thảo" (workshop), or secure grant funding to conduct a survey of deaf signing people. Working through DP Hà Nội was a significant barrier for deaf people, given many tensions and disagreements between deaf and disabled activists over language policy, priorities, and approach to politics (see introduction for further discussion). Without deaf people having an independent organization, they lacked a "voice" to "raise" either on behalf of themselves or interpreters.

# EPILOGUE

## Burning out, Continuing on:

In fall of 2022, as I was in the final weeks of writing my dissertation, I reconnected with An over facetime for the first time since my fieldwork. While I had kept in touch with a few of the interpreters over Facebook messenger, occasionally messaged deaf people, and sent copies of my research publications to HAD and HASLI, I had not called any of my deaf informants over video chat since leaving the field. In addition to needing time to recover from the physical and emotional trauma of being hit by a motorbike while in the field, I had also come out as trans and transitioned since I left the field. My own fear of being rejected, the sense that I might lose whatever tenuous belonging I had with deaf people in **Hà Nội** kept me from reaching out. I realized that like interpreters and deaf people in this dissertation, I too desired belonging to this community, and the precariousness of that tie scared me. What finally got me over my fear of reconnecting was one of the interpreters telling me that SC Deaf had closed. I asked why, and she encouraged me to speak to An directly, assuring me that she had told An about my transition and that he was very supportive.

When I reached out to An, I was surprised that he asked to do a video call immediately. During my dissertation work, he and the other staff at SC Deaf had always been so busy and tired that finding time to interview any of them was extremely difficult. An frequently complained to me about how he was burnt out; how trying to keep SC Deaf financially solvent, recruit new interpreters, and being the president of HAD meant that he was nearly always busy and never got enough sleep. Yet here An was on a weekday morning, leisurely sitting drinking coffee outside at one of **Hà Nội**'s numerous cafes. He told me that now that SC Deaf had shut

down he had free time but was once again having to figure out other sources of employment. After briefly catching up, and An telling me that I made a handsome man[66], An explained what happened to SC Deaf. He confirmed that SC Deaf had indeed shut down in June of 2022 due to financial troubles. SC Deaf had continued to lose subscribers, because for deaf people paying for interpreters was an economic burden they either couldn't afford or felt was unjust. Further complicating matters was COVID-19, which meant that interpreting assignments for workshops and conferences that SC Deaf used to subsidize its income had dried up.

With this limited source of income, SC Deaf struggled to pay taxes. In 2008, Việt Nam passed laws providing tax subsidies and access to financial capital for businesses that could prove that they were "stabilizing jobs for the disabled and attracting more laborers who are disabled" (1680/NHCS-TD). Theoretically, access to interpreting services should help deaf people find employment and stay employed in a wider range of careers. However, An had been told that this law only applied for companies that employed a significant number of disabled workers, which SC Deaf did not[67]. So, SC Deaf was taxed as a standard private business, making it difficult for them to keep afloat. To cut costs, SC Deaf had used one of An's relatives as an accountant, as she had been willing to work for free. However, delays in submitting taxes combined with errors in the tax submission meant that SC Deaf would have been faced with significant fines, and the team chose to declare bankruptcy rather than pay those fines. An told me that he still kept the website for SC Deaf as a platform to make announcements, and

[66] I don't identify as a man, I identify as trans masc, but I don't know of a nuanced way to discuss that in HNSL.

[67] It's possible that this information was inaccurate and SC Deaf could have applied for tax shelters under the law, however one of the difficulties of running a business as a deaf person is limited access to accessible legal information.

whenever he gets requests from deaf people inquiring about interpreting services, he connects them with interpreters, but now he does all of this labor for free. SC Deaf's bankruptcy is a direct result of the precarious interdependence outlined in this dissertation, and the impossibility of squaring the moral and financial economies of sign language interpreting in the absence of external funding. It also reflects the impossibility of creating a sustainable business model that relies on deaf people paying.

In addition to discussing SC Deaf's bankruptcy, An brought up that Hương, the former president of HASLI had left interpreting all together, moving to Europe to pursue a master's degree in economics. I wasn't surprised that Hương had left. Near the end of my time in the field, Hương had been extremely burnt out. Her responsibilities with running HASLI and SC Deaf, interpreting on the evening news, training new interpreters and attending deaf events meant that she struggled to find even enough time in the day for herself to do a short yoga routine. In front of deaf people, she would say she got her energy from the deaf community (something which I don't doubt on some level she did), but when nobody else was around she would tell me about how her legs hurt from standing so long to interpret (sometimes up to three hours at a go for conferences), how she was tired of constantly applying for grants, and how the mental strain of all of her responsibility was impacting her memory. In the last month of my fieldwork, she had won a scholarship to attend a short business training workshop in Italy. She was gone for about a week, and when she returned, we met up for a final interview at a cafe near VTV news where she had just finished interpreting for the nightly news. I tried to interview Hương to get her reflection on things I had seen during my fieldwork, but she was uninterested and kept changing the topic. She told me that after her trip to Italy she felt like a

new woman. She said in Italy she had gone and sat on a beach, and it was the first time she had been able to think just about herself in years. She said before she left she was extremely anxious about how SC Deaf would fare without her, but she realized that Lê had been able to handle all of her responsibilities. She told me she was considering getting a master's degree in business, with the hope of being able to better run SC Deaf. But she also said maybe it was time to just focus on herself for a little while.

A few months after speaking to An, I reconnected with Hương and she gave more perspective on why she decided to leave. She said on one hand she could sense that SC Deaf was probably going to close, but that wasn't the primary reason she wanted to leave, she simply felt like she had to leave for herself. She hoped that in leaving that An would be able to take a more active role in running SC Deaf, and she worried that she had overstepped her bounds as a hearing person, like perhaps she was doing too much of An's role. She explained that she was getting tired of doing the same thing every day; interpreting on the news, interpreting for workshops, meeting with the same people over and over, and she wanted a chance to grow and learn new things. So, she applied for a masters in International Finance and Economics, finally picking up her studies that she had put aside a decade prior in order to work with the deaf community.

Hương reflected on how she realized that what had been keeping her in the field of interpreting was belonging; "Before I thought that I could not live without sign language and deaf people because I was so in love with it. But I realized that the most important thing was the feeling of belonging, and that passion could be found elsewhere. Of course, I miss it, and if I were to return to Việt Nam I would continue, but I don't think that's the decision I want to

make now”. She explained that she wanted to stay in Norway, have kids, raise a family of her own -dreams that had been difficult for her to achieve while she was working as an HNSL sign language interpreter. Hương’s comment that “passion could be found elsewhere,” underscores the fact that the sense of belonging interpreters gain by participating in deaf sociality is the lynchpin holding up the entire precarious house of cards that is HNSL interpreting. If interpreters are able to find that sense of belonging elsewhere, what is to stop them from leaving interpreting all together, from walking away from the economic precarity and the precarity of voice that comes with interpreting? What is to stop interpreters from seeking more normative life courses, pursuing their own economic dreams, and finding a profession that more easily allows them to marry and raise a family?

An and Hương also informed me that since Hương left, no one has filed her position as head of HASLI. HASLI still exists in name, and as a group WhatsApp chain where the interpreters divide up interpreting jobs amongst themselves. But no interpreters are attempting to engage in advocacy work at the moment. No one has felt comfortable filling Hương’s shoes. An wouldn’t speculate on why, he said that was the interpreters’ decision. Hương was somewhat more forthcoming with her analysis; she explained that making a living as an interpreter is so difficult, that many interpreters are unwilling to take on the additional burden of engaging in advocacy work. She commented that engaging in advocacy work was so difficult because in addition to attempting to coordinate and lead a group of interpreters who were all “really strong characters”, you faced resistance from deaf people to engage in advocacy work in the first place. She explained that even being able to engage in self advocacy work as an interpreter required that deaf people defend her reputation, they work to convince other deaf people that

interpreters “were not presenting on the deaf community and sign language.” In other words, the labor required to fit the interdependent role of interpreting into the independent voicing model of self-advocacy, and the constant work of defending one’s reputation within the deaf community meant that advocating for interpreters was an effort that no other HNSL interpreter wanted to shoulder. Hương had walked away from this role, and now no one else was willing to risk their reputation in taking it up.

Yet while Hương could walk away from precarious interdependence and find belonging elsewhere, deaf leaders like An were left trying to continue to make interpreting function. An explained the latest development project related to sign language interpreting; Action to the Community Development Institute (ACDC), a local disability NGO has a six-month project (April 1, 2022 – October 31, 2022) to reduce the cost of interpreting for deaf people seeking medical care. The service is part of the project *Enhancing the information accessibility for persons with disabilities and Associations of Persons with Disabilities* funded by Christian Blind Mission (CBM). ACDC is a well-respected organization by deaf people in **Hà Nội** , and has a former vice president of HAD as a full-time staff member. The project has partnered with HASLI and SC Deaf in the north (although SC Deaf is a partner in name only now that it has shut down), as well as Nang Moi- Learning Sign Language Company, a sign language interpreting company in Southern Việt Nam that opened in October of 2020 with oversight from local deaf leaders. The project has provided medical training to six interpreters from the north and six interpreters from the south, and for the duration of the project will pay 80% of interpreting fees (800.000VND paid by

project/ 200.000VND paid by deaf client) for a four-hour interpreting shift[68]. While An was glad that deaf people were getting better access to medical services, he confided he was sad that interpreting was no longer being run by deaf people. His critique about the loss of deaf ownership underscores that like other attempts to fund HNSL interpreting this project faces the same impossibilities of bringing together the moral and financial economies of sign language interpreting.  Moreover, the project does not fully solve the moral and financial problem of deaf people having to pay for sign language interpreting. We wondered together whether deaf people will be willing to pay for interpreters and thus be able to access medical services after the six-month program was over. HNSL interpreting had once more found itself funded by external NGO organizations, subject to precarious logics of sustainability (Scherz, 2017).

I asked An how the rest of the infrastructure of sign language interpreting was holding up. An was happy to inform me that the Center was still running strong. He explained that running an interpreting business was far more financially difficult than running sign language classes for hearing students; "It's easy to keep funding for theCenter, hearing students always want to learn sign, but it's hard to convince deaf people to pay for interpreting." However, the numerous forms of precarity had also affected their retention of interpreters. Of the fifteen or so novice interpreters I had observed during my field work, only Lê had stayed involved enough to be considered a "professional" interpreter and join HASLI. An said that he had three novice interpreters he had recruited from the Center, but whether those novice interpreters would continue long enough to become professional interpreters was an open question.

[68] Many medical appointments in Việt Nam operate on a walk-in system, meaning that interpreters need to be available for long shifts while they wait for the patient to be seen by a doctor. Therefore an appointment could easily take the full four hours shift.

Conditions of Exit

Hương's stories illuminate a fundamental asymmetry within precarious interdependence: interpreters' ability to leave. Burke has theorized the differences between hearing and deaf people's relationship to deaf communities in terms of *conditions of exit* (Burke, 2011). Burke's analysis is based on the hypothetical comparison of deaf vs. hearing children of deaf parents in the United States.  Burke argues that a hearing child of deaf parents "would be able to move into the non-Deaf community fairly easily, because [they] would have the ability to hear and speak and interact directly with the non-Deaf community without any assistance" (Burke, 2011, p. 138). Burke argues that this is significantly different for deaf children, for whom navigating hearing spaces requires literacy, access to interpreters, and/or access to assistive hearing technology and proper training to utilize it. Burke's analysis of this fundamental difference between deaf and hearing individuals' ability to leave deaf communities is very compelling, yet as a hypothetical thought experiment, it does not account for the nuances of people's experiences of leaving, or the complexities of leaving a highly interdependent relationship.

What are the conditions of exit for precarious interdependence for deaf people and interpreters? Interpreters, like Hương  can and do choose to walk away from precarious interdependence. Leaving interpreting is not without cost for interpreters; it means sacrificing the belonging to the deaf community that they worked so hard to cultivate, it means having to find a new career and profession, and it means building a new community of hearing friends. Given how deeply enmeshed HNSL interpreters are withing deaf sociality and in their relationships with deaf leaders and deaf people more broadly, they do not experience these

costs as trivial. For example, one interpreter, Mai, who was kicked out of the deaf community over disagreements about how to compensate interpreters, commented that she became severely depressed when she was kicked out of the deaf community. She described her time after being kicked out of the community in the following manner:

> I was very directionless. I spent all the time after graduation working in this field. It was in 2009, when I was from 22 to when I was 25 which is when I married and had a baby. So basically, I had lost and forgotten all the skills I learned at college for my major. Sign language interpreting was, for all intents and purposes, my only job and when I was deprived of my job, I became unemployed. I stayed at home for 2 years with my baby with no work. I was directionless. I couldn't go back to jobs related to my degree. I had a small baby and no 8-4:30 company would accept a new mom. Secondly, I forgot all things from college, to be completely honest. The third thing is that after 2 years of my husband taking care of me, I was unemployed and had no money. So, I was directionless and people no longer socialized with me. I mean, after working in this field [interpreting], I spent all the nights within the [deaf] community only and I lost most of my friends. I only retained 5-6 very close friends since senior high with the occasional meetups. So, I had no friends, no job, no money. I was all by myself. I was severely depressed, and stressed out. (Mai, personal communication, Vietnamese, 2019)

Mai's story illustrates the very real emotional and financial costs that HNSL interpreters experience when they leave the deaf community and stop interpreting. Yet for interpreters, the ability to recover from this loss and forge new forms of belonging and financial futures outside of deaf communities always exists, even if it can take a while to find. Two years after Mai was asked to stop interpreting in Hà Nội , Mai came to the realization that something needed to change; "that I could not continue like that [being depressed], I was on the path of destroying my life and my baby's life" (Mai, Personal Interview, spoken Vietnamese, 2019). She decided to start rebuilding her life, socializing with people outside of the deaf community, and searching for a new career. She eventually moved to Japan where she learned Japanese and became a Japanese/English interpreter. Hương and Mai's stories emphasize that for hearing interpreters

the ability to leave precarious interdependence is always there (whether of their own choice or not), whenever a hearing interpreter is willing to bear the costs.

However, for deaf leaders, the conditions of exit from precarious interdependence are very different. For deaf leaders there was a sense that they can never truly walk away from precarious interdependence with HNSL interpreters. Giving up on the labor of training interpreters and advocating for interpreters means accepting the consequences of not having access to interpreters. It means stunting the growth of deaf politics and with it the dream of a future where all Vietnamese deaf people can experience social inclusion through sign language. For deaf leaders like An, who had spent their whole adult lives trying to advance the rights of deaf people, this was not an option they were willing to accept. As An explained to me, there would come a point where he would finally completely burn out and need to personally stop working to grow the field of sign language interpreting, but then the work of trying to grow the field of interpreting would simply fall to another deaf leader.

An was not the only deaf leader who felt this way. For example, I interviewed one young deaf leader, Hien, who was part of the second graduating class from Hà Nội's high school program for deaf students. Hien was highly involved in the world of training interpreters, she was a teacher at the Center, attended the Sign Language Club on a regular basis to socialize with hearing students, and even attended the interpreter training sessions taught by faculty from the Rochester Institute of Technology, National Institute for the Deaf, receiving training to work alongside hearing interpreters as a deaf interpreter. However, when I asked Hien about her dreams for the future she broke down crying uncontrollably. After I turned off the camera and gave her time to recover, she explained that she did not want to do any of the work she

was currently doing with hearing interpreters- she did not want to teach hearing people how to sign, attend the sign language club or get training as a deaf interpreter. Her dream was to get a Ph.D. in Deaf Education so that she could reform deaf education practices in Việt Nam. Yet her path to receiving this education was currently blocked. While the first cohort of deaf students to graduate with high school degrees in Hà Nội had been allowed to start associate level degrees in deaf education, a new president at the university was barring the second cohort from continuing, insisting that the students had to be able to speak Vietnamese to continue. She didn't want to attend university at the Dong Nai deaf Education Project, because doing so would have required her to learn Hồ Chí MinhSign language and move far away from her family. Hien could have applied to attend a hearing university in Hà Nội , but the cost of paying for an interpreter out of pocket was prohibitive to her family. With her dream of higher education put on hold, Hien decided that at least training interpreters would help improve deaf advocacy efforts and eventually lead to better educational opportunities for deaf individuals like herself. It was not work she wanted to do, but work she felt she had to do

The significant asymmetry in the conditions of exit between deaf people and interpreters created still new forms of precarity for deaf leaders. For deaf leaders like An, the fact that interpreters could burn out and decide to quit interpreting was in and of itself a form of precarity; a risk of losing the interpreters they depended on. Therefore, deaf leaders found themselves trying to manage the precarity interpreters faced. It meant working to make interpreting a livable enough of a practice that he could continue to entice new hearing people to enter the field, and senior interpreters to stay connected to the community. For An, it meant continuing to participate in the next scheme to fund interpreting (such as the ACDC medical

interpreting project), in the hopes that it would keep interpreters around, even when he was unsure that it would solve the problem. It meant continuing to train new interpreters to replace the interpreters who had burnt out. It meant attempting to navigate the complex structures of voicing to try to advocate for state support of sign language interpreting. And it meant wondering what deaf leaders would continue this work after he stepped back from deaf leadership.

## Interdependence without Precarity:

I conclude this dissertation with this epilogue to highlight the consequences of precarious interdependence for deaf leaders and interpreters in Việt Nam. In highlighting these harms, I do not want to minimize the resiliency and determination of deaf leaders or HNSL interpreters. Indeed, throughout this dissertation I have shown ways in which deaf leaders and interpreters have creatively utilized their interdependence to navigate worlds not designed for them. For example, the practices of “silence” and “invisibility” strategically manipulate the interdependent relationship between deaf leaders and interpreters in order to have hearing people recognize deaf people’s communicative personhood. Similarly, when interpreters cannot successfully conform to the voicing norms of self-advocacy, deaf advocates have used their platform to advocate for interpreters. While not negating this resiliency, I highlight the harms of precarious interdependence to think through how we can imagine a less precarious future for both deaf people and interpreters. How can we move away from a state of precarious interdependence, to a form of interdependence where both deaf people and interpreters can thrive?

I argue that the first step to this problem is retheorizing interdependence. In disability studies interdependence is often offered as an end into itself, a panacea that if we can just embrace fully, will somehow bring about disability justice. The argument is that that in recognizing and valuing interdependence, and the ways in which non-disabled people depend on disabled people, the forms of dependency in disabled people's lives (dependence on caretakers, dependence on wheelchairs, dependence on interpreters, etc.) will be normalized (T. Shakespeare, 2000; T. W. Shakespeare, 2000). With this normalization will come a reduction in stigma and a greater attendance to disabled people's needs. Like these disability scholars I share the belief that normalizing interdependence is important, but it is not enough. In theorizing interdependence, we need to recognize that interdependence is a beginning, not an end.

Instead, we must attend to the dynamics within interdependence, the processes and practices through which interdependence unfolds, and the structural factors that permeate and shape interdependent relationships. I return to the trenchant quote from Eli Clare, "interdependence exists whether it's laced with easy banter and mutuality or with struggle, hierarchy, and exploitation". (Clare, 2017, p. 136). Only when we look at interdependence as a neutral structure that exists between disabled and non-disabled people (such as deaf people and interpreters), can we start to tease apart the dynamics that cause interdependence to be characterized by "easy banter and mutuality" or "struggle, hierarchy and exploitation."

In this dissertation I have argued that one such dynamic is precarious interdependence. Precarious interdependence is the idea that precarity does not end at the bounds of the individual, but rather seeps through to those who they are in relationship with, changing forms

and creating new types of precarity as it goes. Throughout this dissertation I have analyzed three different forms of precarious interdependence: precarious belonging, precarious livelihoods and precarious voice. I have shown how interpreters are drawn to the deaf community to shore up precarious belonging that has emerged from other aspects of their classed and gendered life course trajectories. I have shown how with the absence of the state, the financial precarity of deaf people and inability to pay for sign language interpreters comes into tensions with interpreters' desire to build a livelihood free from precarity. This in turn wraps back around and impacts interpreter's precarious belonging through the moral economy of HAVE-HEART that requires interpreters to interpret for free in exchange for sign language and the sense of community they receive from deaf people. I have shown how the precarity of voice experienced by deaf people due to ideologies that discount sign as a conduit of communicative personhood wind up affecting interpreters, as interpreters are called upon to diminish signs of their own personhood to let deaf agency shine. And I examine how the norms of self- advocacy, which are not built for interdependent voices, render interpreters voices precarious, thus increasing their dependence on deaf leaders. These multiple forms of precarity piled on top of each other create impossible traps that lead to the future outlined in this epilogue.

Empirically, how do we move from precarious interdependence to a form of interdependence where both deaf people and interpreters can thrive? I argue that one of the first steps is recognizing the dynamics of precarious interdependence. The relationship between deaf people and interpreters in Hà Nội is currently being theorized by deaf leaders through theological lens of BELOW and BEHIND. In this model, power dynamics between deaf and

hearing nonsigners are mapped onto the relationship between deaf people and interpreters, and then inverted so that deaf people are in a position of authority. Interpreters may either choose to comply with this ethics, or risk their belonging to the deaf community. My suspicion is that part of the rationale behind BELOW and BEHIND comes from the tensions between deaf people and interpreters; deep seated conflicts over pay and representation. However, if deaf leaders and interpreters were to step back and see these conflicts as stemming from precarious interdependence, and recognize the structural factors that put both deaf leaders and interpreters in impossible situations, would this ease some of the tensions?

This is a question which I direct not only at deaf leaders and interpreters in Việt Nam, but at the field of sign language interpreting studies, which has a history of characterizing interpreters as hearing individuals that can (unintentionally) perpetuate deaf oppression (Baker-Shenk, 1986; Cokely, 2005; Robinson et al., 2020; Witter-Merithew, 1999), and has sought to counter this tendency through creating normative models of interpreters' role(s) ("helper," "conduit," "bi-cultural, bi-modal mediator" and "ally") and codes of ethics (Baker-Shenk, 1986; Janzen & Korpiniski, 2005; McIntire & Sanderson, 1995). I suggest that acknowledging the precarious interdependence between deaf people and interpreters need not deny or erase such power dynamics. Rather, paying attention to precarious interdependence can add additional layers to our understanding of power dynamics between deaf people and interpreters, helping us better understand the friction that can emerge between these groups. It can help us see the relationship between deaf people and hearing sign language interpreters in ways that are less black and white, more processual, and leaves more

room to account for the messiness that occurs when deaf people and interpreters navigate inaccessible systems together.

Second I argue that part of what intensifies the dynamics of precarious interdependence is working within systems that that do not value interdependence, but value independence. Here I draw from Nishida's insight that interdependence between disabled and non-disabled people is often practiced "in the middle of the status quo, which instead values and enforces *in*dependence" (Nishida, 2016, p. 128).Deaf people and interpreters in Việt Nam operate within multiple systems that value independence. Navigating systems that value independence can warp practices of interdependence, introducing hierarchies and tensions. For example, the rhetoric of silence and invisibility, which requires interpreters to diminish signs of their own communicative personhood, developed in response to hearing people's ideologies of voice in Việt Nam that equate material speech with the figure of the voice, and expect author, animator and principal to align. If hearing people could recognize that voice is not a zero-sum game, and that the roles of author, animator and principal are split in many circumstances, not only interpreting, then perhaps such forms of hierarchy would not have to exist.

Often in disability studies, the values of independence are assumed to come from an external ableist society. Yet, as Chapter 5, shows, values of independence can be imbedded within disability rights movements. The model of self-advocacy which originated from disability movements in the Global North has traveled internationally, bringing with it ideologies of independent voicing. Self-advocacy originates from a historical moment before interdependence began to be as heavily theorized in disability social justice circles, and yet it has not been substantially modified to recognize the messy forms of interdependence that exist

between disabled people and those who provide services to disabled people (such as interpreters). Particularly in the way that self-advocacy has been taken up locally in Việt Nam, it does not allow for interdependent, entangled voices.

It is important to acknowledge that critiquing the voicing structure of self-advocacy is deeply uncomfortable. Self-advocacy developed as explicit corrective to a long history of non-disabled people speaking on behalf of disabled people, often without concern for what disabled people themselves want (Charlton, 1998). Its spread outside of its origins in the Global North and uptake in countries like Việt Nam is not simply a story of the hegemony of Global North discourses of human rights and social justice (although this is likely part of its appeal). Its spread is also a reflection of local histories of governments, charities, and NGO's, enacting projects on behalf of disabled people without recognizing disabled people's personhood, agency and capacity to make decisions. In critiquing the voicing structure of self-advocacy, I am not suggesting that we let non disabled voices (such as interpreters) speak over or instead of disabled people.

Instead, I ask-how can we imagine voice differently? How do we imagine voice in an interdependent matter that still recognizes asymmetries in sensory access, power and precarity? How can we take into account the theoretical insights from linguistic anthropology (and developed in this dissertation) that when we speak we always already are speaking with/for others; and further, that it is unclear whether our "selves" are ever so unified such that we could speak *only* for *one's* self. Can we learn to listen to voices that are discordant and heterogeneous, recognizing that people come from different perspectives, without demanding that they speak with pure independent voices?

The foundations for these forms of listening are already present in interpreting practices in Hà Nội . During my fieldwork, there were a handful of interactions between deaf leaders and hearing non-signing individuals who were allies of deaf people. These hearing individuals already took deaf peoples' communicative personhood for granted, freeing interpreters from the necessity of sticking to the normative practices of "silence" and "invisibility" discussed in this dissertation. For example, near the end of my fieldwork two young women from a local NGO met with the SC Deaf team to plan an awareness day event that would be a collaboration between the two organizations, and would provide an advertising platform for SC Deaf. One of the women from the local NGO was hard of hearing, and had worked with deaf leaders and interpreters on several previous projects. An and the SC Deaf interpreters knew that the two NGO representatives respected An and took his expertise seriously. Therefore, instead of trying to hide interpreters' visible presence, the representatives from the NGO, An and the SC deaf interpreters sat in a circle in the SC Deaf office all inhabiting the position of conversational participants. Not only were the interpreter's bodies allowed to be visible, the interpreters were permitted to be participants in the conversation, sharing their ideas about how best to run the event. For the majority of the conversation, Ngọc and Hương worked together as an interpreting team, with Ngọc signing in HNSL and Hương voicing in spoken Vietnamese everything An said. However, whenever Hương wanted to contribute her own opinion to the conversation she would switch to signing in HNSL and Ngọc would voice in spoken Vietnamese so the hearing NGO participants could understand. As An explained to me afterwards when reviewing a film of the conversation, it was acceptable for Hương to actively participate in the conversation because the two NGO advocates already respected deaf people. Moreover, An

explained that unlike in an advocacy context, where it was important for deaf people to engage in all advocacy work "because we are the disabled ones," in a business setting, it was acceptable for interpreters to contribute their own opinions. After all, he reasoned that Hương also had a financial stake in the company succeeding. In other words, when deaf people's communicative personhood is taken for granted, and outside of voicing structures like self-advocacy that demand pure voices, An was comfortable showing the messy entanglement of deaf peoples and interpreters voices.

Finally, I suggest that we need to reconsider the relationship between interdependence and the state. At the end of every interview with all of my interlocutors, I asked about their vision for the future of interpreting. Without fail - HNSL interpreters, deaf leaders, disability advocates, and NGOs employees alike – all stated that they envisioned a future where the Government of Việt Nam supported sign language interpreting. The exact way in which they envisioned this support happening, and the timeline they envisioned varied. However, when I asked why state involvement was necessary, the unanimous consensus was that the state had a moral responsibility to support sign language interpreting, and that the problems facing sign language interpreters and deaf people could not fully be resolved without state support.

The desire for and anticipation of state intervention in sign language interpreting on the part of my interlocutors sits in tension with the ways interdependence has been theorized in disability studies, as a form of *resistance* to state control. For example, Nishida has argued that "politically, interdependence is a way to value community based collective and mutual care in critique and resistance against the ways state-sponsored care is deployed as a mechanism of surveillance and control" (Nishida, 2022). However, as this dissertation shows, interdependence

does not only emerge in resistance to state care, it can also be practiced in the absence of the state. The dynamics within interdependent relationships may be shaped by the specific political circumstances in which disabled people and their allies find themselves in, however interdependence itself is a neutral relationship which can exist regardless of state care or abandonment. This again emphasizes the importance of not conflating ideologies of interdependence that have emerged in social justice circles (i.e., interdependence as a tool of resistance) with actual practices of interdependence.

I argue that the turn towards the state on the part of my interlocutors does not stem from a naiveté about the role of states in extending control and perpetuating harm in the name of care. Deaf people in Việt Nam are well aware of the harms and risks of state intervention and care. For deaf signers, one of the most noticeable harms of state control in the name of care has resulted from the nationalization of the deaf education system in the early Đổi Mới era (1986-1988) and subsequent collaboration with Komitee Twee to introduce speech and lipreading into all of Việt Nam's deaf schools. As Cooper has noted, this policy resulted in the banning of VLS from state schools, and the proliferation of ideologies that painted deaf signing people as "backwards" (Cooper, 2017). In seeking legal mandates for interpreting, state accredited interpreter training programs, state recognized licenses for interpreters, and state funding for interpreting services, deaf people will have to grapple with the extension of state control and the harms that emerge from state care. Indeed, deaf leaders and interpreters in Hà Nội are already anticipating and trying to figure out how to preemptively reduce these problems. For example, in a discussion between deaf people and interpreters over how best to

fund sign language interpreting, a deaf leader, Long, weighed the pros and cons of having the state finance interpreting:

> If you work with the government you have to suffer through following them. For example, if you want to change an idea you have to bring it to them for their approval, and if they refuse to change it you just have to follow them… I think that when the government is supporting you sufficiently (lit: when the government is feeding you sufficiently), then you can think differently. Currently, without government support, we are free to think differently but we have no funds to do anything about it… We are new and we have no resources so we need the government to support (feed) us. But then with time and experience we can safely separate" (Long, personal communication, 2019, HNSL)

Long's comment reflects an acknowledgment that receiving financial support from the government comes with the trade-off of relinquishing control over interpreting to the government. Yet at the same time, Long recognizes that control and intellectual freedom are not sufficient on their own, one also needs financial resources to enact your vision. Long's suggestion recognizes that state support is not an either-or solution, but that deaf people and interpreters can build alternative structures that support interdependence alongside official state endeavors.

When we recognize interdependence as a relationship that can exist both in the abandonment of the state or alongside state harm and enforced care, it opens up room to think creatively about how to navigate state intervention. Deaf leaders and interpreters in Việt Nam can continue to work interdependently even after the state becomes involved in sign language interpreting. They can continue manipulating their interdependent relationship to navigate the harms that come from state care, the same way they currently use their interdependent relationship to navigate systems of voicing that devalue both deaf people and interpreters' voices. Perhaps, with a bit of funding from the state, and enforcement of laws that protect

both deaf people's rights and interpreters' livelihoods, interdependence between deaf people and interpreters can become a bit less precarious. After all, the goal is figuring out how to achieve a form of interdependence in which all parties, deaf people and interpreters, can thrive.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A: List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

- Children of Deaf Adults (CODAs)
- Disabled People of Hà Nội (DP Hà Nội)
- Finnish Association of the Deaf (FAD)
- Hà Nội Association of Sign Language Interpreters (HASLI)
- Hà Nội Association of the Deaf (HAD)
- Hà Nội Sign Language (HNSL)
- Hồ Chí Minh City (HCMC)
- Hồ Chí Minh City Sign Language (HCMC SL)
- Intergenerational Deaf Outreach Program (IDEO)
- Ministry of Education and Training (MOET)
- National Institute of the Deaf (NTID)
- Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)
- Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID)
- Sign Language Training Center (the Center)
- United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)
- United Nations Development Program (UNDP)
- Vietnam Television (VTV)
- Vietnamese Sign Languages (VSLs)
- Vietnamese non-governmental organizations (VNGOs)
- World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI)
- World Federation of the Deaf (WFD)

## Appendix B: Conventions for Reading Signed Transcripts

| | |
|---|---|
| CAPS | signed utterance (HNSL or điệu bộ ) |
| (text) | description of co-accompanying movements or signs, possible meanings |
| + | repetition of the immediately preceding sign(s) |
| ### | sign(s) that I do not know how to gloss or describe |
| PT(location/name) | Point, including pronominal indexical; parenthesis indicate the denotational content of the point |
| Left/right/center | Indicates where the sign was produced in signing space. If unmarked the sign is produced in central signing space |
| CL(@@: text) | A classifier/depicting construction. The @@ symbols refer to the left and right handshape respectively, the text to the semantic meaning of the classifier construction |

Appendix C: Hương HASLI Advocacy Speech

Xin chào các quý vị đại biểu ạ, lại là cháu, cháu là Giang, trưởng nhóm phiên dịch ngôn ngữ kí hiệu Hà Nội, thì hôm nay cháu muốn chia sẻ về cái công tác của chúng cháu, tức là người phiên dịch thì luôn được coi là cái người mà invisible, tức là ít xuất hiện nhất nhưng mà cũng là một cái cầu nối vô cùng quan trọng để giúp cho người điếc có thể hòa nhập được với cộng đồng xã hội và tiếp cận được thông tin.

Ladies and gentlemen. I'm Giang, the head of HASLI. Today, I would like to talk about our work, about the people who are supposed to be *invisible**, or in other words, least in the open, but also serve as an essential bridge for deaf people to be included in the society and get access to information.

* "invisible" was spoken in English

Vậy thì đối với bọn cháu là những người mà nghe được, nói được, có rất nhiều cánh của ở đây, tại sao bọn cháu lại chọn nghề phiên dịch, đấy là một cái câu hỏi mà khá nhiều người đặt ra khi chúng cháu làm công tác phiên dịch. Cháu nghĩ là tất cả những người làm phiên dịch ở đây thì mỗi người sẽ có một lý do khác nhau để dẫn đến cái việc là tại sao một cái người mà nghe được, nói được, có rất nhiều cơ hội làm việc trong một cái văn phòng mà có thể là ngồi hàng ngày điều hòa 8 tiếng, nhưng không, chúng cháu lại chọn một công việc mà thậm chí còn chưa được gọi là nghề. Đó là công tác phiên dịch ngôn ngữ kí hiệu.

So, we are hearing people, speaking people and so, doors are open to us. Why did we choose to be SLI? It's a question I have no doubt many of you are wondering. The interpreters with us here today might have had different reasons to not choose an 8-hour cushy air-conditioned office job. We are hearing, speaking people, after all, and those opportunities are wide open for us. And yet, we have chosen a line of work that is not even considered a real job, that is Sign Language Interpretation.

Cái việc trở thành phiên dịch ngôn ngữ kí hiệu thì bắt nguồn từ một câu chuyện rất là cá nhân của cháu, cháu đi học ngôn ngữ kí hiệu thì cũng chỉ là do tò mò thôi và cháu nghĩ là ở đây phần lớn các bạn phiên dịch ngôn ngữ kí hiệu cũng vậy, đi học là do tò mò, một ngôn ngữ rất là mới, rất là hay. Nhưng mà cái việc tại sao đi học ngôn ngữ kí hiệu và việc tại sao vẫn tiếp tục công việc này nó là hai câu chuyện hoàn toàn khác nhau, và khi mà chúng cháu đã học ngôn ngữ kí hiệu rồi thì nó mở ra cho chúng cháu một cái thế giới mới, mình nhìn được xung quanh là "à đúng là xung quanh có những người khác biệt và có những người phải nói là thiệt thòi hơn chúng ta rất là nhiều". Cháu có một người bạn, bạn ấy là người điếc và khi đó thì trong gia đình của bạn ấy là, mặc dù có con điếc mà bố mẹ không giao tiếp được với nhau, và một ngày thì bạn ấy có mời cháu đến gia đình để mà phiên dịch, để nói chuyện với gia đình tại vì là hai bên không thể nào hiểu được nhau. Và bạn ấy đã có chồng rồi, thế nhưng mà không hiểu làm sao mà tại sao hai vợ chồng quan hệ rồi mà tại sao lại không có bầu, thì khi đến gia đình thì sau một cuộc nói chuyện rất là dài thì bố mẹ của bạn ấy cuối cùng mới nói rằng: "tại vì con là người điếc, con không có công việc, con không thể nào nuôi được con" cho nên bố mẹ đã quyết định là đi cắt buồng trứng của bạn ấy. Và khi mà bạn ấy nhận ra rằng bạn ấy không thể trở thành người mẹ,

đấy là một cái thiên chức của bạn ấy, thì bạn ấy cứ luôn luôn, bạn ấy cứ kí hiệu đi kí hiệu lại với cháu để cháu nói với gia đình là tại sao bố mẹ không cho con biết điều này, cái quyền của người ta là cái quyền được biết và cái quyền quyết định cuộc sống của họ. Tất nhiên cả cháu và bố mẹ bạn ấy đều im lặng bời vì là mọi người đều hiểu rằng làm sao có thể nói với bạn ấy, làm sao có thể giải thích cho bạn ấy.

For me, my story of how I became a SLI started from a very personal reason. I was simply curious and I started learning SL. I believe most of our interpreters here share that origin story. It was a novel and fascinating language to us and so, we started learning SL. But why I started learning SL and why I continue my work are essentially different stories. Learning SL opened our eyes to a new world. "Oh, it turns out that there are many different people around us, and they are more disadvantaged than us." I have a friend, she's deaf. Her parents cannot communicate with her even though she's their own child. One day, she asked me to interpret for her family because they couldn't talk to each other. She was married and the couple was trying to have a baby to no avail. After a long conversation, the mom finally said "It's because you are deaf, you do not have a job, and you cannot raise a child." And so, the parents had decided to have her ovaries removed. And so, when she realized that she couldn't be a mother, she couldn't fulfil her God-given responsibility**, she kept signing to me to interpret, over and over again, to ask why the parents hadn't told her and that it was in everyone's right to know and determine their life decision. Of course, her parents and I were silent because we understood that nobody could explain why.

** Literally "sky-given role". The "sky" in Vietnamese is not exactly God in a religious sense, but a higher power in general and interlinked with nature itself.

Thì đó là một trong những cái câu chuyện của cháu mà dẫn đến việc là cháu chọn công việc này. Rất tiếc là nó chưa được gọi là nghề. Và nhìn ra cộng đồng người điếc, thì theo một nghiên cứu ở trên toàn Việt Nam thì có khoảng 2,5 triệu người điếc, tuy nhiên số lượng người phiên dịch chỉ có 10 người, như anh Thái Anh đã chia sẻ, và chỉ tập trung ở hai thành phố lớn đó là Hà Nội và TP HCM, và số lượng phiên dịch được gọi là chuyên nghiệp ở Hà Nội là chỉ có 6 người, vậy thì chúng ta hãy thử làm một bài toán xem ạ, một bài toán cấp 1, tức là như vậy thì 250000 người điếc mới có 1 người phiên dịch, giống như hình ảnh cháu sử dụng ở đây, chúng cháu như 1 cốc nước ạ, 1 cốc nước bé nhỏ, làm sao có thể đổ đầy 1 cái bình như thế này, làm sao có thể cung cấp được cái nhu cầu của cộng đồng người điếc, trong khi người ta đi đến đâu người ta cũng gặp rào cản, đi đến viện cũng không dám đi tại vì là không có phiên dịch, đi đến tòa án thì cũng không có ai biết ngôn ngữ kí hiệu của các bạn ấy để mà bảo vệ quyền cho các bạn ấy, rồi đi đến các hội thảo ví dụ như là hội thảo hôm nay không có những người phiên dịch như thế này thì làm sao bạn ấy có thể tiếp cận được thông tin.

So that was one of the many stories that led me to choose this job. Unfortunately, it's not recognized as a profession yet. Let's take a look at the deaf community, a research has estimated that there are around 2.5 million deaf people in Vietnam, but the number of interpreters is only around 10, like Mr. Thai Anh has said, and only concentrated in Hanoi and Hồ Chí Minh City. In Hanoi, there are only 6 people who could be considered professional SLI.

So, we could do some basic elementary math and come out with the ratio of one interpreter for every 250,000 deaf people. We are like a small coffee cup trying to fill a whole tank of water. We couldn't fulfil their needs for interpretation and deaf people have to go everywhere with barriers. They don't even want to go to the hospital because there would be no interpreters. In the court of law, there would be no one with SL either and their rights are not guaranteed. If we didn't have interpreters in this conference, deaf people wouldn't be able to access information either.

Thì đó là lý do vì sao chúng cháu thành lập hội phiên dịch ngôn ngữ kí hiệu. Trước kia chúng cháu là những cá nhân đơn lẻ, hoạt động một cách đơn lẻ, và cái kinh nghiệm của chúng cháu là hoàn toàn khác biệt. Tại Việt Nam thì vì chưa được công nhận là nghề cho nên là chúng cháu chưa có chương trình đào tạo một cách bài bản, không giống như ở nước ngoài, nếu bạn muốn trở thành phiên dịch ngôn ngữ kí hiệu, bạn có thể học 4 năm hoặc bạn có thể học lên cao hơn để làm sao hỗ trợ cho cộng đồng người điếc tốt nhất. Tuy nhiên, tất cả những phiên dịch ở đây đều là phiên dịch từ cộng đồng, chúng cháu làm bạn với người điếc, chúng cháu đi chơi cũng người điếc và học ngôn ngữ kí hiệu từ người điếc. Thì mục đích của việc thành lập hội phiên dịch ngôn ngữ kí hiệu Hà Nội, đầu tiên chúng cháu muốn có một cái nhóm, đương nhiên là nhóm sẽ mạnh hơn là cá nhân rồi, và chúng cháu muốn là những người đi trước có thể truyền đạt lại những cái kinh nghiệm tại vì chúng cháu học bằng kinh nghiệm chứ không phải học bằng những cái chương trình từ giảng đường, từ các thầy cô giáo, cho nên là những người đi trước chia sẻ cho những người đi sau. Và chúng cháu muốn, tất cả chúng cháu đều muốn đây sẽ trở thành một nghề trong tương lai. Mặc dù cái nguồn lực của chúng cháu rất là hạn hẹp tuy

nhiên thì chúng cháu, khi mà mình nhìn thấy cái vấn đề của 2,5 triệu người điếc đó thì chúng cháu luôn mong muốn là làm sao để có thêm nhiều người phiên dịch hơn nữa để giúp cho cộng đồng. Có rất nhiều bạn trẻ bây giờ, thì họ đã học cái ngôn ngữ kí hiệu và họ rất là yêu thích ngôn ngữ kí hiệu, vậy tại sao lại không biến nó trở thành một nghề khi mà bạn có thể vừa có thể giúp đỡ được cộng đồng, bạn vừa có thể… tất nhiên là thu nhập thì chưa được nhiều nhưng mà cũng có một khoản nào đó để chúng ta có thể phát triển cái nghề này trong tương lai.

So, that's why we founded the Hanoi Association of Sign Language Interpreters. We used to be individuals working separately and with completely different experiences. In Vietnam, SLI hasn't been recognized as a profession so we didn't have a proper training program like overseas. In other countries, you can attend a 4-year bachelor course and even postgraduate programs are available so that you can learn how to support deaf people the best. We are different, all of us here are SLI from the community, we are friends with deaf people, we hang out with deaf people, and we learn SL from deaf people. The foremost reason that we founded HASLI is that we want to band together as an organization and the voice of many is clearly stronger than the voice of one. Moreover, we, as the forerunners, can now pass down our experiences, albeit not learned from a classroom with teachers, to the future generations of interpreters. Also, all of us want SLI to be recognized as a profession. Our resources are extremely limited, but faced with the need of 2.5 million deaf people, we have always wanted to have more SLI to help the community. Many young people have learned SL and they love SL, why not turn it into a job so that you can help the community. And at the

same time, you can still earn an income, although it's still small but we can develop our profession in the future.

Hiện tại thì HASLI cũng đã hỗ trợ cho các bạn phiên dịch mới, tuy nhiên là chỉ bằng cái việc là truyền đạt lại những cái kinh nghiệm cho các bạn mới thôi, thì chúng cháu đã có 2 lớp phiên dịch ngôn ngữ kí hiệu và có 15 bạn học trong đó. Và nhiệm vụ chính của HASLI là cung cấp phiên dịch ngôn ngữ kí hiệu cho tất cả các hoạt động của người điếc, mọi người có thể nhìn thấy trên này là cung cấp phiên dịch để giúp cho người điếc có thể tiếp cận được thông tin thông qua các phương tiện thông tin đại chúng, hoặc là, có thể là khi đến tòa án, có rất nhiều bạn điếc là không hề biết luật, cho nên là bạn ấy rất là cần các bạn phiên dịch đến để có thể mà phiên dịch, trao đổi lại để làm sao có thể bảo vệ được quyền của người điếc, hoặc là tham gia vào các chương trình hội nghị, hội thảo và HASLI hiện tại đang cung cấp phiên dịch ngôn ngữ kí hiệu cho người điếc trên tất cả các lĩnh vực trong cuộc sống.

At the moment, HASLI has been supporting new interpreters by passing down our experiences. We have had 2 sign language interpreting  classes with 15 students. Our mission is to provide sign language interpreting for all activities of deaf people. As you can see, we want to provide sign language interpreting services to mass media so that deaf people can have access to information, to the courts of law to guarantee the rights of deaf people who are more likely to be uninformed of the law, to conferences and seminars. So, HASLI is now supplying sign language interpreting for deaf people in all aspects of life.

Vậy thì chúng ta hãy cùng một vài phút nhìn lại xem là chúng cháu đã được nhắc đến ở đâu. Thứ nhất là về luật người khuyết tật Việt Nam, thì trong điều 24 có nhắc đến việc là quyền bình đẳng trong giáo dục đối với người khuyết tật và cung cấp các cái phương tiện và dịch vụ dành cho người khuyết tật, và các bạn điếc cũng cần phải có phiên dịch ngôn ngữ kí hiệu trong môi trường giáo dục. Và đồng thời trong Công ước quốc tế về quyền của người khuyết tật cũng có điều 9 rất là rõ ràng đây, đảm bảo quyền tiếp cận, tức là cung cấp các phiên dịch kí hiệu chuyên nghiệp cho cộng đồng người điếc để tiếp cận, tuy nhiên đấy là luật. Trên thực tế thì sao ạ? Có rất nhiều những khoảng trống mà chúng ta cần phải lấp đầy. Và đầu tiên là cái việc nâng cao nhận thức. Khi mà chúng cháu nhận được một cái lời đề nghị gì đấy, phiên dịch cho một hội thảo, trước kia hoặc là kể cả bây giờ cũng xảy ra một số trường hợp, luôn luôn là: "ôi anh chị không có kinh phí đâu em ạ" rồi là "anh chị chỉ có nguồn kinh phí hạn hẹp thôi". Tất nhiên là cái mục đích của chúng cháu là giúp cho người điếc để làm sao đảm bảo được quyền tiếp cận.  Nhưng chúng cháu cũng là con người và chúng cháu cần đảm bảo cuộc sống của chúng cháu.  Nếu, chúng ta thử nhìn xem, nếu mà không có những chính sách hỗ trợ cho phiên dịch ngôn ngữ kí hiệu thì làm sao các bạn có thể đảm bảo cuộc sống để mà theo đuổi cái niềm đam mê của mình. Hiện tại thì hầu như các bạn phiên dịch ngôn ngữ kí hiệu ở đây, chúng cháu phải làm 2 nghề, và rất vất vả, và ngày xưa, thậm chí là phải đi làm tình nguyện rất là nhiều, tức là không có một chút tiền công nào cả.

Therefore, raising awareness is something very important. Organizations that are involved with the deaf community, when they plan an event, need to understand what is

needed to ensure inclusion and access for information for deaf people. Furthermore, we really want to have training programs for SLIs and, in the future, we need to have an occupation code and a university major code to develop the labor force of SLI. Deaf people have the rights to be provided with a professional SLI service done by properly trained interpreters. And of course, a policy on the payment of SLI would provide an environment in which we can afford to work and support the equality of everyone.

Cho mình hỏi một chút, là các bạn phiên dịch trong khán phòng này, các bạn có thể đứng lên một chút được không ạ? Mọi người có thể nhìn quanh xem là chúng ta có bao nhiêu các bạn phiên dịch ở đây? Cháu rất mong là chúng ta hãy dành một tràng vỗ tay cho các bạn đang làm cái công việc thầm lặng này được không ạ? Vâng xin cảm ơn ạ, xin cảm ơn mọi người đã lắng nghe.

Interpreters in this room, can you stand up for a little bit? You can look and see how many interpreters we have here today. Could we get a round of applause for the people doing the silent work? Thank you, thank you so much for listening.

## Appendix D: HAD Government Skit

Transcription key:
ALL CAPITALS: HNSL Gloss Cl: Classifier (portion before the brackets describes hand shape), these re size and shape specifiers, or constructed actions which utilize standardized handshapes, but are not lexicalized signs
PT: Point

1. 00:00:00.230 - 00:00:04.640

An: There is one people's committee for all of Hanoi. One for the whole area.
CL:1(ALL) HANOI PT:( board PEOPLE'S COMITTIE) HANOI CL: bent 5 (LARGE ENTITY) HANOI 1 CL: bent 5 (LARGE ENTITY)

2. 00:00:04.680 - 00:00:08.940

An: So that is part of the government, and Bao and I will bring those records to the people's committee.
CL: thumb up (HEAD-OF GOVERNMENT) PT: l (GOVT) PT:(BAO) PT: (SELF)
CL: bb (BRING BOOK TO PEOPLE'S COMITTIE) PT: (PEOPLE'S COMITTIE) (depiction 1)

3. 00:10.700 - 00:00:13.230

An: After that, they will ask to examine the records
FINISH ASK EXAMINE LIST (depiction 2)

4. 00:00:13.260- 00:00:19.365

An: They will use the records from all the deaf people, from all of you, to make estimates. For example
DEAF DIFFRENT++ YOURS+++ NUMBER CALCULATE GUESS HOW MANY IF NONE PT: (BAO) EXAMPLE

5. 00:00:19.385 - 00:00:21.845

*An: [Takes record book from K, and sets it aside on a chair]*

6. 00:00:21.880 - 00:00:28.360

An: So come on, you and I are going [too the government]. I have nothing. He has no papers, I have no papers
PT (SELF) PT (BAO) TWO-OF-US XXXX NOTHING (IN POCKETS) NOTHING(front of body) PT: (BAO) CL: 11, trace rectangle (PAPERS) NOTHING(in front of Bao) PT self NOTING (in front of self) ALSO PT: (SELF) (Depiction 3)

7. 00:00:28.530- 00:00:31.730

An: We ask to communicate with the government, and they will say "let me see the records!"
GET-ATTENTION COMMUNICATE CL: (folds arms and nods) CL: B (brings document to face)

8. 00:00:31.785 - 00:00:37.060
An: I will go back to Bao and say, "how are we going to do this? We don't have any records!
Pt (BAO) PT (SLEF) ALSO Cl: 55 (PALMS UP(EMPTY HANDED) CL: 55 PALMS UP (EMPTY HANDED)

9. An: They will say sorry, go away
SORRY GO-AWAY

10. 00:00:37.110 - 00:00:39.620
An: It's like a slap in the face; our ears will go down like a dog's
CL: bent B (SLAP-IN FACE) TWO-OF-US EARS-GO-DOWN

11. 00:00:39.700 - 00:00:41.100 00:00:41.135 - 00:00:42.575
An: Because you didn't support us, you see?
CL(FOLDS ARMS) PT(AUDIENCE) SUPPORT NONE CL:(crosses arms)

12. 00:00:43.060 - 00:00:45.620
*An: Picks up record book and hands it back to Bao*

13. 00:00:45.710- 00:01:03.220
An: For example, who should I choose for the government... hmmmmm. Who should I choose...? Chung! Come here. Come on up.
EXAMPLE WHO GOVERNMENT STROKES-CHIN I CHOOSE STROKES-CHIN Pt[CHUNG] CHUNG COME PT[CHUNG] COME

14. 00:01:06.855 - 00:01:14.235
An: In this example he is the government. Look handsome and well dressed!
EXAMPLE EXAMPLE GOVERNMENT PT[CHUNG'S FUTURE LOCATION GOVERNMENT. GOOD-LOOKING PT[CHUNG] CL: bb[ smoothes clothes] GOOD-LOOKING PT[CHUNG]

15. 00:01:14.290- 00:01:23.170
An: So he is the handsome government I am the president of HAD and Bao is with me. I ask the people's committee, can we meet?
HEY GOVERNMENT PT[CHUNG] GOOD-LOOKING PT[SELF] PRESIDENT PT[SELF] HAD PT[BAO] WITH TWO-OF-US. HEY[directed towards "people's committee" on board] REQUEST MEET OK?

16. 00:01:23.260 -- 00:01:28.435
An: We are going to the government. Come, let's go meet them
PT[CHUNG] GOVERNMENT PT[CHUNG] NODS HEAD COME-WITH-ME TWO-OF-US MEET

17. 00:01:28.435 - 00:01:33.405

An: Hello, I am a representative from the Ha Noi Association of the Deaf, and I would like to introduce Bao
HELLO HEY PT[SELF] WHAT PT[SELF] HAD DEAF PT[SELF] CL: bent BB [person] PT(formal)[BAO] INTRODUCE PT(forma)[BAO]

18. 00:01:33.455 - 00:01:35.705
Chung: Where is your list of names? Let me see you list of names
LIST NAME GIVE-ME REGISTRATION LIST REQUEST

19. 00:01:35.675 - 00:01:42.595
An: Deaf people encounter many barriers, we have difficulty finding work, our families are poor, and we face many hardships
HEY PT[SELF] PT[AUDIENCE] DEAF BARRIERS DIFFICULTY WORK CL: 55[ HANDS-UP]FAMILY CL:[POCKETS-EMPTY] PT{AUDIENCE] DIFFICULT

20.
Chung: Let me see your registration records
LIST SEE GIVE-ME

21. 00:01:42.650 - 00:01:51.605
An: I have them here. He is going to look through them
PT[RECORDS] MOUTH[HAVE] PT[CHUNG] CL[PAGE-THROUGH] PT[CHUNG]

22. 00:01:55.670 - 00:01:57.830
An: Understand? That's why.
UNDERSTAND PT[CHUNG] WHY

23. 00:01:58.205 - 00:01:59.965
An: Are they good?
PT[RECORDS] GOOD?

24. 00:02:00.060 - 00:02:05.350
An: Will they approve it, or not?
PT[SELF] HOW GOOD BAD TWO-OF-US GOOD CL{SCRATCHES-CHIN] APPROVE NO CL[SCRATCHES CHIN]

25. 00:02:05.480 - 00:02:11.630
An: We are praying, waving incense, praying and waving incense
PT 2 HANDED[ CHUNG+SELF] CL[RUBBING HANDS TOGETHER IN ANTICIPATION] CL[PRAYING] PT[SELF] CL:99[WAVING INSCENSE] CL[PRAYING] CL[WAVING-INSCENCE]

26. 00:02:11.790 - 00:02:14.190
An: [walks over to Chung] Hey! Are they good?
CL[PALMS-UP] GOOD?

27. 00:02:14.205 - 00:02:15.815
Chung: I approve!
APPROVE

28. 00:02:15.615 - 00:02:16.345 TC
An: You approve?
APPROVE?

29. 00:02:16.225 - 00:02:19.715
Chung: I approve- these are insufficient. It is not at all clear.
APPROV- pt[RECORDS] CL{PALMS-OPEN] WHAT RECORDS INSUFFICIENT PT[RECORDS] CLEAR NOT

30. 00:02:19.235 - 00:02:20.505
An: Why?
WHY

31. 200:02:20.345 - 00:02:27.495
Chung: These are blurry; first you need the registrant's name, then all these other details to be clear. These are too short, they aren't clear. Do them again.
BLURY FIRST REGISTRANT NAME SECOND REGISTRANT CL:5, bent B[LIST-OF DETAILS] CLEAR SHORT {(NOT)-CLEAR PT[AN] FIX AGAIN

32. 00:02:27.070 - 00:02:30.910
An: *[Carries binder back to Bao, grimacing]* These are insufficient, we need To add to them
PT[BINDER] INSUFFICIENT ADD-MORE

33. 00:02:30.545 - 00:02:31.475
Chung: [to a friend in the crowd] He made me do it again!
AGAIN

34. 00:02:31.945 - 00:02:33.925
An: That's what he told me. [Holds forehead in hand in shame]
TOLD-ME CL[HEAD-IN-HAND]

35. 00:02:33.990 - 00:02:35.860
An: [to Bao] You and I have to do this again.
PT[BAO] PT[[SELF] AGAIN

36. 00:02:35.910 - 00:02:38.430
An: Hey all of you, tell everyone! That's why. Is that clear?
HEY-ALL-OF-YOU TELL-EVERYONE KNOW CLEAR

Appendix E: Lexical Items from HAD Government Skit

1. AGAIN
2. ALSO
3. APPROVE
4. ASK
5. BAD
6. BARRIERS
7. CALCULATE
8. CHOOSE
9. CLEAR
10. DEAF
11. DIFFERENT
12. DIFFICULTY
13. EARS-GO-DOWN[69]
14. EXAMPLE
15. FINISH
16. FIRST
17. FIX
18. GOOD
19. GOOD-LOOKING
20. GOVERNMENT
21. GUESS
22. HAD
23. HANOI
24. HELLO
25. HOW-MANY
26. IF
27. INSUFFICIENT
28. LIST
29. MEET
30. NAME
31. NO
32. NONE
33. NUMBER
34. OK
35. RECORDS
36. REGISTRATION
37. REQUEST
38. SECOND
39. SEE
40. SHORT
41. SORRY
42. TELL-EVERYONE
43. TOLD ME
44. TWO-OF-US
45. UNDERSTAND
46. WHAT
47. WHO
48. WHY
49. WORK
50. YOU

[69] (idiom for to be embarrassed or humiliated like a dog)