Building the tower of Babel: International Sign, linguistic commensuration, and moral orientation

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A B S T R A C T

This article examines International Sign (IS), a mode of signed cross-linguistic communication, in the context of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD). I contend that the WFD General Assembly's language policy, which bans interpreters and requires that delegates use IS, formalizes the commonsense deaf notion that what is particular about deaf people is their capacity for connecting across differences, rooted in and materialized through the ability to use sign across language boundaries. While such an ability has been explained primarily in terms of the affordances of the visual-gestural modality, this article foregrounds and theorizes the irreducibly relational dimensions of linguistic commensuration. I argue that communicating in IS relies on and produces mutual moral orientation among signers, and that ultimately, it is the labor involved in using IS that deaf people value and that the WFD General Assembly institutionalizes. (International Sign, sign language, deaf, linguistic commensuration, moral orientation)*

I N T R O D U C T I O N

In July 2007, the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) held its quadrennial World Congress at a sprawling convention center in Madrid, Spain. The seven-day Congress consisted of plenary lectures, more than a hundred presentations on topics ranging from early childhood education to asylum for deaf refugees, film screenings and theater performances, and an exhibition of deaf-centered art and technology.[1] To ensure that the diverse crowd—approximately 2,000 attendees from over 130 countries—could participate 'without barriers', the Congress provided multiple interpreting teams made up of deaf and hearing professionals.[2] In sharp contrast, at the meeting of the General Assembly—the WFD's all-deaf governing body comprised of delegates from each of its 100-plus national members—interpreters were banned entirely, in accordance with standard WFD policy. For the duration of the two-day meeting, which immediately preceded the Congress, all delegates were asked to express themselves in International Sign in order to communicate directly with each other.

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International Sign (IS) is a mode of signed communication between deaf persons who do not know any sign language in common (Moody 1989; Woll 1990; Supalla & Webb 1995; McKee & Napier 2002; Hiddinga & Crasborn 2011). It is characterized by the strategic recruitment of lexical and syntactic resources rather than a stable grammar, and thus by rampant variation. Indeed, a study commissioned by the WFD—reported to delegates in a workshop prior to the General Assembly meeting—found that most experts do not consider IS to be a language in the technical sense.[3] We have, then, the striking case of a preeminent international organization demanding of itself that delegates from over a hundred nations conduct business in a communicative mode that has no native speakers, belongs to no nation-state, and—according to its own report—is not a language. As a point of comparison, UN General Assembly meetings are simultaneously translated into the UN's six official languages, each of which has millions of native speakers in one or more countries. The WFD asserts a positive stance towards linguistic diversity, emphasizing the right of each deaf community to use its own sign language, and supports the presence of interpreters at the Congress. Why, then, does it insist on a policy of direct communication at the General Assembly?[4]

Umberto Eco (1995:1) argues that the 'dream of a perfect language ... a language common to all humanity, can be found in every culture'. A scene from the 2007 Congress, however, suggests that there is something particular about DEAF notions, policies, and practices of cross-linguistic communication.[5] At the Closing Ceremony, a troupe of young deaf actors put on a performance that recast the story of Babel through a deaf lens. According to the Old Testament version, all humankind once spoke a single language, until some people tried to build a tower up to heaven to reach God. Furious at their hubris, God destroyed the tower and caused the builders to speak myriad different languages. They found themselves suddenly unable to understand each other, and the tower was never rebuilt. The actors compared deaf people from across the world signing with each other to rebuilding the tower of Babel. In this case, the actors maintained, God would not be angry. Framing deaf communication across language differences as good and right, they proclaimed, 'International Sign links us together'.[6]

This article contends that the General Assembly (hereafter GA) policy formalizes the commonsense notion, articulated by the Babel performance and shared widely by deaf people around the world, that what is particular about deaf people is their capacity for connecting and forging commonalities with other deaf people, rooted in and materialized through the ability to communicate in sign across languages.[7] Both historically and in contemporary research, this ability has been explained primarily in terms of the affordances of the visual-gestural modality.[8] While such affordances are indeed critical, my purpose in this article is to foreground and theorize the relational dimensions of communicating in IS. I argue that the practices involved in IS rely on and produce mutual MORAL ORIENTATION on the part of communicators. I elaborate on the concept of moral orientation below. Put briefly, I mean the socially expected turning of one's corporeal,

cognitive, and moral attention towards another. In the case of International Sign, moral orientation constitutes the conditions of possibility for, and characterizes and motivates the work involved in, communicating across difference.

The ethnography and argument I put forth here contribute to several current intellectual conversations. In recent years, scholars have examined how language is a key site for and an instrument in social processes of both differentiation and affiliation (e.g. Irvine & Gal 2000; Bucholtz & Hall 2005). French (2009:609) makes the important point that cultural 'sameness claims' are often but by no means inevitably linked to projects of standardization. In French's case, an Irish scholar celebrated dialect differences within a broader nationalist framework. In the case at hand, deaf people work to momentarily overcome the boundaries created by linguistic differences, indexing and instantiating powerful claims about deaf commonality. I use the phrase LINGUISTIC COMMENSURATION to refer to the process whereby signers actively try to produce linguistic forms that signers of other languages can make sense of, and to understand their utterances in return. Linguistic commensuration differs from standardization because the goal is not the 'imposition of uniformity upon a class of objects' (Milroy 2001:531). Instead, it aims at (though does not necessarily achieve) understanding across difference.

As suggested above and discussed below, the possibility of such an achievement depends on the skillful exploitation of widely shared features of sign languages. Formal accounts, however, risk taking for granted the relational practices at stake. In arguing for the centrality of moral orientation, I am extending a line of inquiry that, while attentive to form, insists on the irreducibility of intersubjective co-presence (e.g. Goffman 1964; Enfield & Levinson 2006; Duranti 2010; Hanks 2013). Expanding the investigation of the cognitive, sensory, and experiential relationships of (partial) reciprocity upon which communication builds into the field of moral engagement, I maintain that deaf persons engage in linguistic commensuration precisely because of the quality of relations that doing so both relies on and creates. Here I am also in conversation with anthropological work that resituates the analysis of morality and ethics from extraordinary events to the unfurling of everyday life (e.g. Lambek 2010a; Fassin 2012), including communicative practices (e.g. Rumsey 2010; Sidnell 2010).

In addition, this article offers a linguistic anthropological approach to key themes in Deaf Studies. From inaugural texts based in the United States (e.g. Padden & Humphries 1988; Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan 1996) to more recent edited volumes focused on international locales (e.g. Monaghan, Schmaling, Nakamura, & Turner 2003; Mathur & Napoli 2011), scholars have highlighted the fundamental role of sign languages in the formation of (national) deaf communities. Cross-linguistic signed practices, similarly, are understood as constitutive of deaf connections across national and linguistic differences (Ladd 2003, 2008; Murray 2007; Hiddinga & Crasborn 2011). Ladd (2008:51), for example, considers international events where people interact through IS a 'site in which we can locate some of the deepest manifestations' of deaf collectivity. Wrigley (1996:101) similarly

celebrates 'the spirit of spontaneous and voluntary group solidarity that surrounds ... international events'. While Ladd and Wrigley approach connections among deaf people as pre-given, this article highlights the linguistic and moral labor realized in practices of cross-linguistic sign. My analysis resonates strongly, and has developed in conversation, with Friedner's (2011) account of how deaf Indian youth conduct 'sameness work'. In the sites Friedner examines, shared communicative practices such as learning, using, and valuing Indian Sign Language are a key dimension of how deaf people take up 'deaf orientations' that gloss over differences such as caste, class, and region. In the case of IS examined here, an orientation towards other deaf people and their potential for commonality is a key dimension of what makes shared communicative practices possible in the first place.

ARTICLE STRUCTURE AND RESEARCH METHODS

In this section, I outline the structure of the article, clarify the term INTERNATIONAL SIGN, and describe my research methods. In the next section, GENEALOGY OF A DREAM, I sketch historical and contemporary understandings of what IS is and how it functions, showing that current conceptions of iconicity as well as IS's roots in Western Europe complicate the former idea that sign is universal. Nevertheless, deaf people from around the world not only communicate in sign across languages, they also find value and pleasure in doing so. Bringing together linguistic anthropological perspectives on the intersubjective foundations of communication with prior work on IS and deaf sociality, MORAL ORIENTATION offers the concept of moral orientation as a way to think about both how and why people communicate in IS. In IS IN ACTION, I return to the General Assembly to examine how delegates actualize moral orientation through practices of linguistic commensuration, such as shifting how they sign and monitoring and re-signing others' utterances. My ethnographic description includes some delegates' opposition to the GA policy, which I examine in MULTIPLE ORIENTATIONS, drawing attention to the assumptions and values that are in fact shared by people who support and disagree with the policy. In the conclusion, I juxtapose hearing people's persistent misconception that sign languages are (or should be) universal with the deaf dream of Babel.

At this point, it is helpful to clarify what is meant by International Sign. As mentioned above, the PRACTICES frequently called International Sign are characterized by variation. What a given instance of cross-linguistic signed communication actually looks like correlates with factors such as where signers are from, how much experience they have communicating with signers from other countries (and which ones), the social and institutional context and duration of the communicative event, and even its geographical location (Moody 1989; Woll n.d. cited in Moody 1989[9]). Moreover, the TERM International Sign has a range of referents. Most broadly, IS (whether written or signed) can refer to any instance where deaf people use sign

to communicate across languages (and the goal is not to learn another sign language).[10] International Sign is, however, strongly associated with the WFD and hence sometimes refers more narrowly to the communicative forms used, in overlapping domains, by its official interpreters, board members, GA delegates, and attendees.[11] While at the inner ranges, this more narrow sense of IS designates a relatively standard phenomenon, at the outer ranges, IS as WFD-related merges with IS in the broader sense. Following common use, I employ the term IS to refer to various cross-linguistic practices and to designate their objectification as IS, while also paying attention to precisely which practices and objectifications are in play.

The ethnographic material in this article is based on participant observation conducted in July 2007 at the General Assembly and World Congress. I also draw indirectly on my attendance at the international SIGN4 conference held in December 2009 in Delhi, India, and on my longer term involvement in deaf communities in the United States and Nepal. In fact, it was my research in Nepal that sparked my interest in the WFD, and before going to Madrid, I arranged to stay at the same hotel as the Nepali delegates. On arrival, I found that all GA delegates from countries designated developing had been provided with free lodging there. This social location allowed me to interact with many delegates outside the space of the meeting and shaped my overall experience in Madrid. Over the course of ten intensely interactive days, I spent most of my time at the convention center, watching lectures and chatting with countless fellow attendees in sunny courtyards and carpeted lobbies. We also conversed at the aforementioned hotel, on the metro, in restaurants and bars, and before theater shows. My interlocutors included deaf and, in much smaller numbers, hearing persons from countries around the world, including India, Saudi Arabia, Columbia, Sweden, Syria, Germany, Uganda, Japan, the United States, and Suriname.[12] When conversations included introductions, I identified myself as a hearing university student/researcher from the US. Nearly all interactions involved some form of International Sign; my prior familiarity with American Sign Language (ASL) and Nepali Sign Language (NSL) were critical in this regard, providing a base not only of semiotic forms but also embodied practices and orientations. In this regard, I should note that my exhilarating and exhausting experiences of engaging in linguistic commensuration also inform my analysis.

GENEALOGY OF A DREAM

I begin in Western Europe because the precursors to the WFD grew out of cross-national deaf encounters among Western Europeans and, later, Americans (see below).[13] From the 1750s onwards, growing opportunities in Western Europe for formal deaf education catalyzed the emergence of a 'network of national and international Deaf communities' (Ladd 2003:109). During this period, deaf as well as hearing people saw in sign language the (potential) fulfillment of the dream of a 'universal language for which scholars had been searching for centuries' (Moody

1989:1). The hearing philosopher Michel de Montaigne, for example, described sign language and gesture (frequently grouped together) as 'intelligible without instruction' (quoted in Ladd 2003:105, citing Mirzoeff 1995:16–17), while Ferdinand Berthier, a deaf educator and author, praised the 'language of Deaf-mutes, that sublime universal language given to us by Nature' (quoted in Ladd 2003:110). Indeed expressions of the hand were considered 'uncontaminated by social convention' (Rée 1999:169) and thus far superior to those of the tongue, which were in Montaigne's words 'particular', or in deaf educator Laurent Clerc's terms, 'imitated, borrowed, and conventional' (quoted in Rée 1999:169, 197).

For deaf persons the sense of sign as universal found both inspiration and expression in experience (even if that experience was recounted with 'a degree of idealization' (Ladd 2003:109) and even if the universal was relatively circumscribed geographically, and, as Murray (2007) points out, in terms of race, gender, and class). In 1815, for example, Clerc visited the London Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb (sic), where a witness named Laffon de Ladébat described how the Frenchman 'made signs and they [the students] answered him by signs' (quoted in Rée 1999:198). What is more, doing so gave them all great pleasure, or what de Ladébat called 'a most delicious sensation' (quoted in Rée 1999:198), a point to which I return. Beginning in the 1830s, meanwhile, 'Deaf Parisians ... convened annual banquets which attracted Deaf people on an international scale' (Ladd 2003:109).

Even after the infamous 1880 Milan Congress (which banned the use of sign in deaf education), deaf people from Europe and, increasingly, the United States (Murray 2007:4) continued to seek each other out, creating 'a dense web of interconnections' (Murray 2007:97). Meetings held across Western Europe and the United States were attended by a few dozen to a thousand people from Western Europe, Canada, the US, and occasionally beyond (Murray 2007:60, 248). In 1924 a deaf athletic association became the first 'standing international organization for Deaf people' (Murray 2007:59) and in 1951 the World Federation of the Deaf was founded in Rome.

In the early 1970s the WFD decided to standardize international signing, publishing in 1975 a volume called 'Gestuno: The International Sign Language of the Deaf'. The reaction to Gestuno was largely negative, with complaints that the 'vocabulary was not understood by the majority of Deaf people' (Moody 1989:3). The WFD dropped Gestuno as a project, although according to some researchers Gestuno vocabulary continues to appear in IS at WFD events (Moody 1989:3; Supalla & Webb 1995:335; McKee & Napier 2002:28–29; cf. Hiddinga & Crasborn 2011:501). What I want to highlight is how this effort at standardization marks a shift away from earlier notions of sign as perfectly universal. As Moody (1989:2–3) points out, the Gestuno project occurred during a period of intense deaf political activism, which included an effort to 'combat the myth that Sign was simply pictorial and therefore universal'.

> Linguists took great pains to prove that sign languages were not, as was popularly be-
> lieved, purely iconic and concrete—they are languages, and, as such, ... as 'arbitrary'
> as spoken languages, and fully capable of expressing abstract thought. (Moody 1989:3)

Whereas sign's 'pictorial' and 'universal' qualities had once been cause for celebra-
tion, over the course of several centuries, the definition of language itself had
changed. Now a language with such properties was no language at all. Linguists
thus sought to demonstrate that sign languages possessed precisely the features
they had once been esteemed for lacking. Nevertheless, the Gestuno committee
members had

> set themselves the task of selecting the most 'naturally spontaneous and easy signs in
> common use by deaf people of different countries'. (Moody 1989:3, quoted source not cited)

Their goal indicates the continued notion that some signs can be understood more
'naturally' and 'spontaneous[ly]' than other signs.

In the present day, in line with our current view of sign languages as both arbi-
trary AND iconic (e.g. Taub 2001; Pietrandrea 2002), abstract AND depictive (e.g.
Dudis 2007), linguistic AND gestural (e.g. Liddell 2003), scholars analyze IS in
terms of shared resources and the exploitation of key affordances of the signed
modality. At the level of the lexicon, signers use particularly 'iconic or pictorial
signs' from their own and other sign languages, invent them on the spot, and
draw on what they perceive to be a core, internationalized vocabulary (Moody
1989:6). Both to enrich the small number of stable signs and to create actual utter-
ances, signers make use of features widely shared by sign languages such as clas-
sifier signs, role shift, spatial or diagrammatic syntax, and affective and
grammaticalized facial expressions[14] (Moody 1979 cited in Woll 1990; Moody
1989; Moody 1994 cited in McKee & Napier 2002; Supalla & Webb 1995;
Allsop, Woll, & Brauti 1995 cited in McKee & Napier 2002; McKee & Napier
2002).[15] In addition, signers implement strategies of 'pantomime' and acting out
(McKee & Napier 2002:40–41), making the abstract concrete through metaphor
and metonymy (Woll 1990; McKee & Napier 2002; Rosenstock 2008), and expres-
sing themselves in 'basic visual concepts' (Madsen n.d.:1).

The broad implication is that individual signs (with the possible exception of
signs perceived as standard) and sign combinations are selected and understood
on the basis of a non-arbitrary form-meaning relationship, usually glossed as ico-
nicity. As Rosenstock (2008:144) reminds us, however, iconicity encodes a 'cultu-
rally motivated' relationship and thus iconic signs are 'iconic only to those who
share the [relevant] cultural knowledge'. Similarly, Sahasrabudhe (n.d.) explains
that many signs used in international contexts are indeed iconic—but only for
those people who are already familiar with the culturally specific, visually per-
ceived social facts that the forms index and iconicize. The critique of iconicity,
which can be extended to metaphor, metonymy, and 'visual concepts' more

broadly, makes it exceedingly clear that prior familiarity—if not with the signs then with particular social worlds—affects how and if signers understand IS.

Indeed, there was general consensus among my fellow observers at the GA meeting that it takes time to get used to or learn IS. More generally, my interlocutors at the GA and the Congress observed that IS, at least in the context of the WFD, evidences similarities with European sign languages and/or ASL, which is unsurprising given the organization's history. The WFD-commissioned study, as reported to delegates in 2007, also found that IS is used more frequently in Europe and the US than elsewhere, though the written version (World Federation of the Deaf 2010:4) makes the more subtle point that the work of 'describing IS in different parts of the world' remains to be done. While the exact relationship of IS to particular sign languages is variable and sometimes contested, scholars and lay people seem to agree that what gets objectified as IS at the WFD bears a strong relationship to sign languages used in the West (see e.g. Moody 1989).

I do not want to give the impression, however, that the use and positive valuation of IS are restricted to certain nationalities. One deaf man from South Asia whom I interviewed, for example, was a long-time, fluent signer, and had initially found IS interpreters hard to fully follow. Later he had this to say:

> [During presentations] you can see two different people signing, one in IS and one in LSE [Lengua de Signos Española]. At first this was a little distracting, but I focus on the IS because I can understand it. I learn just fine in this way.

Even in its more narrow sense, then, IS appears to be quickly decipherable to people quite unfamiliar with it. This kind of sharp learning curve (which I have observed in others, been told about countless times, and experienced myself) relies not only on the modality-based resources described above but also on pragmatic strategies of sense-making. Signers are aware of and capitalize on (what they assume to be) shared knowledge and experiences, such as related cultural backgrounds and being deaf in hearing-majority worlds, as well as on the more immediate context of the social setting or event (Moody 1989:7; McKee & Napier 2002:45–46, 49–50). Wrigley (1996:101) observes that 'years of attempting to communicate ideas to … hearing people provide a vast array of communicative strategies and ad hoc tactics that deaf people share'. Put another way, signers develop 'general communicative flexibility and creativity', which they also bring to 'international sign encounters' (Hiddinga & Crasborn 2011:493).

In such encounters, signers pay close attention to each other's cues to monitor for understanding and to achieve consensus on the use of specific signs (Moody 1989:7, see also Madsen n.d.:1). More generally, Moody (1989:7, emphasis in original) describes how

> [t]he whole process happens in an atmosphere where the signers and the watchers are doing whatever is necessary to be understood. The degree of ATTENTIVENESS and heightened relationship are extraordinary.

While these aspects of communication are only hinted at or mentioned in passing in most IS scholarship, I contend that practices of attention and relationality are in fact at the heart of both how and why people communicate in IS. It is to this claim that I turn now.

MORAL ORIENTATION

In this section, I lay out the concept of orientation, drawing on relevant work in linguistic anthropology, before turning to a detailed explanation of its moral dimensions in relation to deaf practices of linguistic commensuration. I begin with Hanks (1996) and Goodwin (2006), both of whom invoke 'orientation' in their accounts of settings where ordinary semiotic or interactional resources are absent or altered. Explaining how communication may involve far less (or rather, far more) than linguistic forms and their habitual usage, Hanks (1996:229, emphasis added) writes:

> In order for two or more people to communicate … it is neither sufficient nor necessary that they 'share' the same grammar. What they must share, to a variable degree, is the ability to ORIENT THEMSELVES verbally, perceptually, and physically to each other and to their social world.

Communication, in other words, cannot be reduced to cognitive—even embodied—knowledge of a language, nor even of a language and the world. Instead, communicators must—in and through their words, their senses, their bodies, that is, their selves—turn towards and adjust to each other and the particularities of the world in which they find themselves. Indeed, so far as a shared grammar is 'neither SUFFICIENT nor necessary' (Hanks 1996:229, emphasis added), communicators must do this even when they do have a common language. While scholarly attention to co-presence is not new, this passage is generative because of its assertion that in the ABSENCE of a shared language, the modes of orientation present in ordinary interactions can provide a scaffold for communication.

Goodwin (2006) analyzes a situation where interlocutors share a grammar but nevertheless must engage in considerable work to communicate. Though a native English speaker, Chil, an elderly aphasic man, has been rendered unable to produce utterances in accordance with that (or any) grammar. Instead, he relies on the words 'yes' and 'no', intonation patterns, gestures, and the inferences of his interlocutors, who physically produce 'the words he needs to say something meaningful' (2006:103). Goodwin argues that the communicative successes achieved by Chil and his interlocutors depend not only on these semiotic resources, but also, and more fundamentally, on their 'embodied mutual orientation' (2006:107) to each other and to the rich contextual features of talk and their environment.

While communication always involves orienting, then, it becomes both more visible and more important in cases where taken-for-granted features of interaction

(such as a shared grammar or full articulatory capacities) are missing. IS is one such case. Like Hanks' hypothetical speakers, deaf signers possess full articulatory and sensory capacities in relation to the socially relevant modes of orientation and communication.[16] And like an amalgam of Hanks' and Goodwin's cases, IS signers share many grammatical resources, but not a full grammar. As in Hanks and Goodwin, then, communication in IS is possible because signers actively orient to each other and to the task of linguistic commensuration. As Moody (1989:10, emphasis in original) puts it, signers have a 'profound DESIRE to communicate' and, like Chil's interlocutors, the 'willing[ness] to do the work' (Goodwin 2006:106).[17] Moreover, deaf signers know from experience, or they have been told, that communicating across language boundaries is possible; doing so is understood to be a core deaf experience (for a similar point, see Hiddinga & Crasborn 2011:494).

In both Hanks's and Goodwin's accounts, orientation activates and recruits non-semiotic structures on which semiotic forms, however lean or unconventional, scaffold. Goodwin (2006:119) explains that Chil and his interlocutors utilized both the organization of emergent talk and the 'meaningful structure … that had been sedimented into the social and physical world'. Their ability to do so suggests that they held 'commensurate ways of locating themselves in relation' (Hanks 1996:229) to the social and physical world. This notion articulates with both scholarly and lay accounts of the (presumed) linguistic and social similarities among deaf people. Ladd (2008:51), for example, posits that deaf people are united by 'a set of deep … existential similarities', or shared ontologies (Kusters & De Meulder 2013) and epistemologies (Ladd 2003). Following Friedner (2011), we can examine how these ways of being in and knowing the world are themselves socially produced. At the WFD, for instance, I took part in a conversation wherein a Pakistani man stated that he loved India and that between deaf Indians and Pakistanis there was no problem. Another Pakistani man laughingly joined the conversation, saying that deaf people would take over and hearing people would dwindle. My point is not that nationalist and other tensions are absent from the WFD. Rather this conversation illustrates the common expectation that while hearing people get stuck in differences like nationality, deaf people can (and should) overlook or overcome them. Practices of orientation, in other words, are reciprocally embedded in discourses of sameness that circulate, sometimes with friction and contestation, in and across deaf worlds (Friedner 2011; Friedner &Kusters 2014). Bringing this point into conversation with Hanks and Goodwin, we can see that turning towards, attuning to, and attending to others not only requires but also PRODUCES 'commensurate … categories' (Hanks 1996:229) of experience.

Communicating in IS, then, requires that signers orient to each other, and in doing so, they both draw on and create expected and valued forms of relationality. Goodwin (2006:106) explicitly states that attributing communicative intent to another and carrying out the necessary work is not only cognitive but also 'moral' action. Although he does not elaborate, I take him to mean pertaining

to persons' entanglements, dependencies, and relations with other persons (see Lambek 2010a). It is this sense of moral that resonates with Moody's (1989:7) description, quoted above, of the 'attentiveness and heightened relationship' felt by signers, which I argue is not only necessary, but also a motivating factor, for the use of IS. The keenly relational quality of orientation, in other words, helps us to account for both how and why deaf people use IS.

IS signers' orientation is moral in two additional senses: it is experienced as good and right.[18] By good, I mean that the process of turning towards other deaf signers and communicating with them evokes what de Ladébat (quoted in Rée 1999:198, see above) called a 'delicious sensation'. At the WFD there was often an air of pleasure as deaf visitors to Madrid grabbed lunch with new acquaintances, introduced themselves to signing strangers in the metro, and stayed up late telling ribald jokes in the hotel lobby. A deaf man from the Caribbean whom I interviewed expressed his enjoyment this way:

> I've met so many people; we talk easily together in sign. At night we go out for drinks, with conversations going on between lots of people. I really love it.

Similarly, I recall one evening when two deaf women from different European countries and I decided we would try to have a conversation without using ANY conventional signs (including from IS) or fingerspelling. I wrote in my fieldnotes that 'it was hard but really fun', unknowingly echoing Moody (1989:7, emphasis added) who writes, far more eloquently, that communicating in IS 'may not always be EASY, but the excitement of mutual discovery … is stimulating'. In the case of the GA's policy, as I discuss more fully in the following section, it is not that communicating directly with each other is valuable DESPITE the work involved, but rather BECAUSE OF it.

In fact, the experience of signing together may not only take precedence over the easy or efficient transmission of referential meaning, it may sideline it altogether (see also Friedner & Kusters 2014). For example during the Congress's Opening Ceremony, a group of actors on stage signed 'sign language rights!' over and over, with the audience joining in. One man with whom I was sitting gamely participated, then turned to ask me what the sign 'rights' meant.[19] Communication in IS is also thought to be conducive to creating goodness beyond itself. As the director of a deaf youth program declared at the 2007 Congress's Closing Ceremony, 'Through this kind of international communicating we can build a better world'. In the same vein and at the same event, the president of the Spanish National Confederation of Deaf People proclaimed that during the Congress, deaf people had 'met and prolifically shared with each other without regard to national origin, religion, culture, and above all, language. Building a generous and open community, our differences have been enriching, not barriers to sharing'. The joyful experience of linguistic commensuration is thus linked to broader social and political projects of (deaf) community formation and improvement.

Finally, orientation is experienced as moral in the sense of being right. In settings like the WFD there are powerful expectations that everyone will, or should, orient towards each other and try to communicate with people from different language backgrounds. As is often the case, these norms were explicitly mentioned when violated. During the Congress, for example, I took part in several conversations evaluating which nationalities were more or less likely to interact with foreigners. Similarly, a middle-aged deaf interpreter I met expressed concern that the WFD had weakened over the years. Regardless of the truth of his claim, what matters is the evidence he recounted. Having observed the General Assembly meeting, he said that people were not paying as much full attention to each other when signing as they once had—in other words, as they should—and that the person who stood on stage to re-sign questions from the audience (so that everyone present could see the question) was less exact in her replications. In critiquing these practices, the interpreter was implicitly stating that a strong WFD is one in which GA delegates properly orient to each other and to their joint communicative endeavor.

The normative aspect of moral orientation also offers further insight into previous work on international gatherings' importance to deaf people. Haualand (2007:41) describes how deaf people '[leave] their everyday homes ... [to] seek the experience of commonality with other Deaf people' at events like the WFD or Deaflympics. In 2007, for example, along with the 2,000 registered attendees, a vast number of other deaf people (mostly European) flooded into Madrid, not to participate in official Congress events but to spend time with each other. In doing so they turned Madrid into a 'temporary deaf city', to use Breivik, Haualand, & Solvang's (2002) phrase. It is my contention that what deaf people seek and (often) find is not only a place where 'visual communication dominates' (Haualand 2007:42), but also a place where they can expect that others will orient towards them and towards the shared and pleasurable process of linguistic commensuration.

IS IN ACTION

Having laid out the social and moral fields in which linguistic commensuration is embedded, I turn in this section to the institutional setting of the General Assembly, where the policy of direct communication in IS operationalizes a series of implicit claims: deaf people can communicate without a shared language; they can do so effectively enough to conduct GA meetings; and not only can they do so, they should. The practices I describe below—monitoring other signers' utterances for intelligibility, trying to express oneself in IS, re-signing certain utterances—are manifestations of the labor of moral orientation and the work involved in linguistic commensuration.

The GA assembled in a large auditorium at one end of the convention center. In a preparatory workshop the day before the official meeting, GA board members used a skit to explain the language policy and to introduce a number of standard IS signs

relevant to GA business, such as 'world', 'delegate', 'debate', and 'information'. Once the official meeting began, the delegates sat at tables arranged in alphabetic order by country, facing the stage. Non-delegates of various sorts, myself included, were allowed to observe from the back. As the GA deliberated and discussed the issues on the agenda, delegates frequently went up on stage to ask questions and give comments. Despite the brief lesson, it was not expected that delegates would all produce the same sign forms, which indeed varied greatly. Board members (among whom I observed much less variation) appeared attentive to such variation.

Sometimes, if a delegate asked a question or made a comment in something that was judged to not be IS, she would be asked to use IS. From the original signer's perspective, however, or even from a third party's, she might have been using IS in the first place. This highlights the lack of fixity in terms of what IS is or looks like, as well as the individual effort involved in using it. For example, a delegate from a country in the Regional Secretariat for Eastern and Southern Africa was asked by a board member to 'please not use ASL' when addressing the Assembly. A woman from the same country, who happened to be sitting in front of me, commented that the delegate hadn't been using ASL; earlier the same woman had mentioned that ASL had greatly influenced her country's sign language. Here it is important to note that educators and missionaries have exported ASL, and sign systems based on ASL signs, to many countries. The sign languages that emerge in such settings frequently are given national names that do not indicate a historical relationship to ASL (e.g. Ghanaian Sign Language, Filipino Sign Language). Despite signers' strong sense that what they are signing is their particular language and not ASL, others may nevertheless interpret it as such. In the instance mentioned above, I believe that the signer had modified her regular signing practices; for her, this move AWAY from her native sign was a move TOWARDS or INTO IS. For the board member, however, the MOVEMENT was not apparent, and what he saw looked to him like ASL. Similarly, an unsuccessful candidate for the GA board from a different Eastern/Southern Africa country was encouraged by a delegate from Asia/the Pacific to keep trying; next time, the latter told the former, he should sign in IS, because he had used ASL and therefore had not been understood.

Occasionally a board member waited for a delegate to finish signing and then resigned his/her comments. Presumably this occurred when the delegates' signs were judged too difficult for other delegates to understand. According to a participant with whom I spoke, the board meeting, which took place about one week later, employed a similar system of de facto interpreting.[20] My interlocutor marveled at how one board member in particular invariably understood what each of the other board members signed. When necessary that board member would translate for the rest of the board, which consisted of persons from nearly every continent. These translations were successful, at least for my interlocutor, who reported that while he did not always understand everything other board members said, he completely understood the de facto translator.

This kind of informal interpreting brings into question the very premise of the GA's policy, which is that deaf people should communicate DIRECTLY with each other. Since not only hearing but also deaf professional interpreters are banned, it seems there is more at stake than ensuring that only deaf people do the official work of the GA. It is also imperative that delegates (including board members) engage in the moral work of being deaf together. De facto interpreting gets taken up as part of this work, whereas professional interpreting does not.

Instances of monitoring and re-signing also demonstrate that utterances produced at the GA were not a priori considered to be IS by everyone present. The act of interpreting indexed and constituted IS as a communicative mode with recognizable, if not fully codified, parameters. As mentioned above, some standard sign forms were introduced and some people used them consistently; as the 'ASL' example demonstrates, other forms (not only lexical items but longer utterances) were deemed unacceptable. Nevertheless, the parameters seemed to involve not so much a particular set of forms but rather (perceptions of) which forms were most understandable, or, recalling the terms discussed in GENEALOGY OF A DREAM, most iconic or natural.

The extensive moral and linguistic labor engaged in by delegates and board members did not, however, guarantee that understanding would be achieved. Multiple people attending the GA, including delegates, either told me or mentioned in my presence that they could not fully understand IS (nor could I). What is more, some people contested the very presumptions that the use of IS meant that everyone present would understand and/or that interpreters were antithetical to the GA's mission. The evening of the pre-meeting workshop, for example, I talked with a delegate from a non-European/non-North American country who earlier in the day had requested that written material be provided in the language of her country, and not just English.[21] Standing in the crowded hotel lobby, she reflected on the conversation that ensued. She explained, 'I don't understand English or IS. I was told, "If you can't understand English, then look at the person signing IS." But this doesn't help!'. While focused on written language, her objection also indicated that she thought there were unrealistic expectations regarding delegates' grasp of IS.

Another delegate, from a country in the Eastern Europe and Middle Asia Regional Secretariat, publicly opposed the ban on interpreters. On the second day of the GA meeting, he and his co-delegate sat at their table, while an interpreter—presumably translating from IS to their national sign language—sat in the aisle facing them. When members of the board became aware of her presence, they politely interrupted the proceedings to request that all interpreters leave 'so that all are equal'. The interpreter complied, moving to the back with the other observers, but when the next matter came to a vote, one of the delegates from this country took the opportunity to go on stage and announce that if he were forbidden an interpreter, he would abstain from voting. Delegates from several other countries raised green cards (used to indicate a 'yes' vote) in support.

Before turning to an examination of these instances of dissent, I briefly highlight the statement 'so that all are equal'. While the surface meaning is that the delegates

in question should not be allowed an interpreter because no one else had one, it also indexes a much deeper assertion, which is that deaf people, by virtue of their sameness (see previous section), are equal to each other. As we see in the next section, this presumption is a point of contestation.

MULTIPLE ORIENTATIONS

As I have just shown, delegates held different opinions regarding the effectiveness and appropriateness of IS as the communicative medium of the GA. As discussed in GENEALOGY OF A DREAM, IS has strong roots in European and possibly North American sign languages. Expanding on Padden's (2011) geography of sign languages, we might envision a political geography of IS, mapping the differential relationships of its various forms to particular places and histories. Indeed such relationships are acknowledged by researchers, such as those cited in GENEALOGY OF A DREAM, who are sympathetic to the use of IS in institutional settings, as well as by authors such as Wrigley (1996), who views IS as an elite, colonialist imposition. While a political geography would be productive for the broader task of thinking critically about geopolitical inequalities in deaf spaces, I want to emphasize that it would not predict the pleasure my above-mentioned non-Western interlocutor experienced when communicating with his European fellow board member. It would not, moreover, account for the fact that there was significant overlap in the practices and presuppositions of people who supported the GA's language policy and those who questioned it.

   Like dissenters, supporters appeared to recognize that skill in producing and understanding IS was not equally distributed among delegates (hence the pre-meeting lesson on key signs and the above practices of monitoring signers and informally translating).[22] The introduction of standard signs acknowledged that immediate and transparent intelligibility could not be assumed, or that it could be assumed for some concepts but not for those encoded in the introduced signs, or that because some codification has occurred, instruction was required. Similarly, in the context of the Congress, a mixture of interpreting setups both affirmed IS as international and made room for national sign languages. At plenary lectures and presentations in smaller venues, when the presenter signed in one of the Congress's two official sign languages, Lengua de Signos Española (LSE, Spanish Sign Language) and International Sign, a sign interpreter translated into the other one, and when the presenter used neither, sign interpreters translated into both.[23] IS was offered—and utilized by some, as we have seen—precisely because of its nonnational or international character. Nevertheless national sign language interpreters were often found seated in the audience, surrounded in a rough semi-circle by signers. It is also worth mentioning here that the interpreter who was asked to leave the floor of the GA meeting later returned to sit at the table with the delegates.[24] In sum, those in favor of a policy of direct communication and the

institutionalization of moral orientation ALSO recognize the constraints of IS and the limits of linguistic commensuration.

Inversely, in the examples of dissent described above, the signers were able to make themselves understood to an international audience, without interpreters, engaging in precisely the kind of linguistic commensuration demanded by the policy. The delegate mentioned above was more upset at the refusal of the board to provide documents in the written language she knew best than by her own self-professed lack of understanding IS. I suggest that she accepted the premise that IS SHOULD, and eventually WOULD, be intelligible to her, whereas English need not and would not be. During conversations I participated in and observed, in fact, no one contested the basic premise that deaf people can and should communicate directly with each other across differences; dissent regarding IS appeared limited to the context of the GA meeting. In other words, using (only) IS was considered by some to be insufficient or even antithetical to the particular work of the GA. Returning to the theme of sameness, we might say that such a position asserts that by treating everyone as the same, some people were rendered UNequal. I suggest that from this perspective, the moral claims of IS are recognized but are not seen as outweighing the immorality of unevenly distributed linguistic opacity. Drawing on Weber's (1947:175) classification of the modes of orientation that characterize the relationship of a person to her actions, we might think of supporters of direct communication at GA meetings as strongly orienting to IS itself as an 'absolute value', while dissenters more strongly oriented towards the value of full understanding. In the case of the former, however, understanding was not forsaken, and in the latter, the value of linguistic commensuration more broadly did not appear in question.

CONCLUSION

My goal in this article has been to understand what is at stake in the WFD General Assembly's policy of direct communication in International Sign. After briefly tracing the roots of IS and notions of sign as universal, I argued that in addition to formal and pragmatic analyses, understanding linguistic commensuration requires a theory of how and why persons turn towards each other with both the 'desire' (Moody 1989:7) and the will to literally make sense. I asserted that moral orientation—which is both required for and produced by communication in IS—is mutually embedded in deaf notions and practices of sameness, and experienced as both good and right. I then analyzed how delegates at the GA engaged in the moral labor of linguistic commensuration through practices such as trying to use IS and monitoring and re-signing others' utterances. Finally, I turned to how opposition to the GA's policy reflects broader geopolitical histories. Nevertheless, as I showed, practices of moral orientation and linguistic commensuration also saturate articulations of dissent.

I end by quoting a question, familiar to so many signers, from the WFD web-site's Frequently Asked Questions section: 'Is sign language the same all over the world?' And the answer:

> No. Each language is unique with [its] distinct culture expressed by visible hand gestures. Just as spoken languages have evolved throughout the world, various signed languages have also emerged in different parts of the world. The languages may differ from region to region and country to country.[25]

The fact that the WFD bothers to ask and answer this question indexes the frequent misrecognition of deaf sign languages as 'the same all over the world', as well as current understandings of language more broadly. Yet even as the WFD clearly states that sign languages 'differ from region to region and country to country', the GA is run on the basis of International Sign, suggesting that deaf dreams of universal sign are not the same as hearing people's imagination of it. Communication in IS is neither effortless nor pre-given; signers must engage in linguistic but also, and more fundamentally, moral labor, predicated on and productive of expected and valued forms of relationality. It is this value that motivates and gives meaning to deaf people's commitment to and, even in dissent, use of IS. Returning to the deaf Babel performance from the 2007 Closing Ceremony, it becomes apparent that what matters is not touching heaven but jointly laboring in the tower's construction.

NOTES

[1]Many scholars use *Deaf* to signify 'culturally Deaf' persons and *deaf* to signify persons with hearing loss. While I recognize the political and affective power of this distinction, I also believe that applying it (even in the form of *d/Deaf*) to international arenas erases its cultural and historical specificity and presumes its universal relevance. In this article, therefore, I use *deaf* as the least marked option available in written English. In other words *deaf* is NOT intended to signify the meaning it carries in relational opposition to *Deaf*, although the residues are no doubt present. All quotations retain the original orthography.

[2]These figures are taken from, respectively, the WFD News (World Federation of the Deaf 2007a:2) and the Congress's Official Programme (World Federation of the Deaf 2007b:13); the quoted phrase is taken from the latter (2007b:64).

[3]The study was motivated by a debate at the 2003 General Assembly regarding the name then in use, 'International Sign Language' (World Federation of the Deaf 2010). The 2007 General Assembly, following the report's suggestion, voted to adopt the term INTERNATIONAL SIGN. As the written report explains, however, IS's linguistic status is not unambiguous, in part because its 'grammatical features … are highly complex and make use of the same structures that natural sign languages share' (2010:4); see GENEALOGY OF A DREAM.

[4]Moody (1989:4) argues that the 'the cost of interpreters in every sign language [used by delegates] is prohibitively high' (see also Wrigley 1996:115). My focus in this article is on how participants understand and implement the General Assembly policy; I never saw the policy or IS talked about in economic terms.

[5]Phrases such as 'deaf notions' are not meant to imply a fixed, singular, or prescriptive meaning of 'deaf'. Rather, I mean that I understand what I am analyzing (a notion, practice, etc.) to be understood by (some) deaf people as deaf in its very nature.

[6]I employ two formats when quoting signed utterances. Quotes that are not indented were translated by me and recorded in my fieldnotes, either during or after the fact. Indented quotes were translated by me from videotaped interviews I conducted.

[7]By commonsense, I mean shared, habitual ways of acting in and understanding the world; see Hanks (1996:29–30).

[8]Such affordances and deaf people's emphasis on cross-linguistic communication illustrate the dialectical relationship between linguistic and social forms (Silverstein 1979).

[9]Moody summarizes a study by Woll but does not provide citation information.

[10]According to the World Federation of the Deaf report (2010:5), 'there is a distinction between IS within a group who meets regularly and IS as cross-sign communication (ad hoc signing) with people who don't know other sign languages or [more standard forms of] IS'. As this quote illustrates, even when present such a distinction may be blurred. Zeshan, Sagara, & Bradford (n.d.) explicitly distinguish between IS and what they term 'cross-signing'.

[11]In fact the second sign in the three-sign IS phrase translated as 'World Federation of the Deaf' and the first in the two-sign phrase translated as 'International Sign' are identical. (The first sign in the three-sign phrase means 'world'.)

[12]To protect anonymity, I identify most of my interlocutors by region rather than nationality (especially important in the case of delegates, since no more than two people represented each country). For delegates, I follow the geographical divisions of the WFD's Regional Secretariats. To further anonymize contributions I have, in several cases, split one person into two and/or made geographical affiliation more vague.

[13]My narrative thus reflects the West's historical dominance in (scholarly accounts of) transnational deaf connections, but I do not mean to deny the existence or importance of other deaf histories (recorded or not).

[14]Supalla & Webb (1995, nicely summarized in Murray 2007:75–76) provide three possible reasons for the degree of sharedness: historical relatedness, recreolization of sign languages with each generation, and modality itself.

[15]Morgan (2009:5) ascribes similarities to a higher level of linguistic organization: 'Although sign languages can be quite distinct in their lexicons and in the details of their morphology and syntax … they share much in their "meta-structure"'.

[16]Deafblind signers also communicate across linguistic boundaries. Discussion of this important topic would require further research.

[17]The kind of patience required to communicate this way is also reminiscent of the 'effort' necessary to communicate with persons with speech disabilities (Kasnitz & Block 2012).

[18]Here I draw on Lambek (2010b:9), who in discussing the subtle distinction between ethics and morality notes that the former has a 'possibly greater association [than morality] … with "the good" than "the right"'. In this ethnographic situation, what is right entails what is good.

[19]I was able to provide an answer because the sign form used was identical to the ASL form.

[20]Board meetings, in other words, were also spaces of direct communication. The one Regional Secretariat meeting I observed also used IS, with a tactile interpreter for a deafblind delegate. I do not know if they were using IS or a national sign language.

[21]A member of the board said that they could not honor her request because it would be impossible to provide translations in all the written languages used by delegates.

[22]The WFD website (http://wfdeaf.org/about/general-assembly) states that '[a]ll delegates must assume responsibility for acquiring a working knowledge of this method of communication [International Sign]' but does not address how doing so may be harder for some persons than for others.

[23]At plenary lectures, held in the cavernous main auditorium, large screens projected images of the presenter and sign interpreters, and featured captions in Spanish and English. Voice interpreters also broadcast in either Spanish or English. While English and IS are official languages of the WFD, LSE and Spanish were official languages of the 2007 Congress because it was held in Spain.

[24]Unfortunately my notes say nothing further about her. Based on the interest I took in the situation and the kind of observations I recorded that day, the absence of further notes strongly suggests that she stayed there for the remainder.

[25]http://wfdeaf.org/faq

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