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# Deaf people with “no language”: Mobility and flexible accumulation in languaging practices of deaf people in Cambodia

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**Abstract:** Deaf people in Cambodia are often represented in the media as lacking language but in reality, deaf people’s repertoires and communicative practices challenge essentialisms regarding modalities and conventional understandings of “language.” Drawing on fieldwork in Cambodia, this article examines how notions of an urban/rural dichotomy devalue the communicative practices of rural deaf people. These ideologies marginalize the creative deployment of various modalities by deaf people in everyday languaging that are not commonly indexed as parts of a linguistic repertoire. Communicative practices such as drawing a picture to communicate, gestures, the use of physical objects such as city maps are devalued because academics and lay people tend to have rigid conceptualizations of language. This article calls for closer attention to modalities such as gestures, the drawing of pictures and the use of physical objects in everyday languaging to interrogate how the “invention” of languages results in distinctions between groups and individuals, especially in terms of access to linguistic resources such as a national signed language and perceptions about the use of modalities other than signing or speaking. In NGO narratives, often echoed by deaf Cambodians themselves, deaf people acquire a signed language only after rural-urban migration, which misrepresents their communicative competencies and creative use of linguistic resources. In reality, deaf people’s linguistic repertoires are constantly expanding as they enter new spaces, resulting in the flexible accumulation of languaging practices and modalities.

**Keywords:** translanguaging, signed languages, multimodality

## 1 Introduction

Often, NGOs and/or other entities or people who plan and implement development projects for deaf people in the Global South put forward claims that there

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are many “isolated” deaf people, especially in rural areas, who do not have a language because they are not recognized as a part of spoken or signed language communities, have not had the opportunity to attend school, or learn a signed language (Kusters 2015). Numerous fundraising videos and other media have emerged from places in the Global South claiming that deaf people there thrive only when they are taught a national signed language or attend school (Kusters 2015; Moriarty Harrelson 2017). These videos misrepresent deaf people who do not use a national or urban sign language by claiming they have “no language,” the implication being that it is impossible for them to engage in mutual sense-making with other people. These claims reinforce North/South inequalities and justify development interventions and modernization schemes (Nepveux and Beitiks 2010).

Cambodia is one such country where representatives of NGOs working with deaf people have claimed in newspaper articles and fundraising videos that deaf people there are “isolated” in villages and “have no language.” Over four years between 1975 and 1979, Cambodia experienced social destruction as the Khmer Rouge regime enacted mass killings that led to the deaths of about a quarter or one-third of its population of 8 million people. After the 1993 Paris Peace Accords, the United Nations governed Cambodia as a part of the United Nations Transnational Authority in Cambodia, which led to significant growth in the NGO sector and development interventions in Cambodia. Examples of NGO intervention in the lives of deaf people in Cambodia include the invention of a national sign language and the import of a hegemonic foreign sign language, American Sign Language, leading to an erasure of the existing languaging practices of deaf people, such as the use of gestures, homesign and/or writing, as well as the history of deaf education in Cambodia. During fieldwork in 2014–2015, I interviewed an individual who said he was a student in a deaf education setting with other deaf students in 1969 until armed conflict led to the closure of the school and that they used sign language.

Deaf schools (or other spaces where sign languages are used) are important venues for the transmission of what some researchers have called “deaf community sign languages,” which develop when a group of deaf people, often from different locations, come together and form a community (Meir et al. 2010). In Cambodia, signers living in urban areas tend to learn what is referred to as Cambodian Sign Language at two NGOs called Deaf Development Programme (DDP) and Krousar Thmey. As a part of an effort to rebuild Cambodia, these NGOs established a project to incubate a national signed language. The NGOs refer to this language as either Cambodian Sign Language or Khmer Sign Language, and deaf people themselves sometimes refer to as “DDP sign” or “Krousar Thmey sign.” Cambodian Sign Language, as used at Krousar Thmey,

incorporates initialized signs from American Sign Language, fingerspelling using handshapes based on the sounds of spoken Khmer and grammar following spoken Khmer. The Cambodian Sign Language used at DDP incorporates handshapes representing the Khmer alphabet and signs collected (or invented by deaf people and then recorded) from different provinces in the beginning days of the Cambodian Sign Language development project.

Many deaf people in the provinces have not had the opportunity to learn a signed language, relying on drawing, gestures and/or homesign. Homesign is the term used for gestures/signs that deaf and hearing family members develop to communicate with each other (Goldin-Meadow 2003). Changes in rural Cambodian deaf peoples' linguistic practices are associated with relocation (permanent and temporary) from their villages to provincial capitals where the NGOs are located. Some deaf people are recruited by the NGOs to participate in education or vocational training; others are sent to school by their families. As deaf people migrate from rural villages to urban centers for schooling, vocational training or to receive services, they add new resources to their linguistic repertoire. New linguistic resources include varieties of Cambodian Sign Language, learned at the NGOs. Additional linguistic resources acquired through mobility include American Sign Language, and International Sign, learned through social media, or from foreign visitors such as tourists or development workers. Others include emoticons, written Khmer and English, most often used on social media. They also acquire attendant ideologies about what language is, who possesses language, and what constitutes communication.

These ideologies include the idea that the use of gestures and pointing alone, as well as homesign, are inferior because they do not “fit” conventional understandings of language. In contrast, the use of what the NGOs label as Cambodian Sign Language, International Sign or a foreign sign language are associated with cosmopolitanism by deaf people in urban centers. Notions of an urban/rural dichotomy index various communicative modalities for communication with gestures and pointing as less sophisticated than the ability to use a signed language. However, my observation of deaf people in everyday settings in rural Cambodia shows they have varied language resources and repertoires they use to communicate. In fact, deaf people in rural Cambodia are using key elements of conventionalized linguistic resources when they use pointing gestures (cf. Kendon 2004).

Conventional linguistics research contorts the flexible communicative practices of deaf people into a paradigm of a bounded language for the purposes of linguistics analysis (Makoni and Pennycook 2007). Branson and Miller (2007) argued that the application of conventional linguistic research principles to the

study of signed languages is a form of symbolic violence, which is the unconscious ways structures and hierarchies that subjects internalize leads to harm (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Following challenges to linguistic orthodoxy that recent scholarship in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics have called for, portrayals of deaf people as “having” or “not having” a language should be interrogated. As such, how therefore should we analyze the communicative practices of people with linguistic repertoires that include elements other than a shared spoken or signed language?

To answer this question, I draw on 15 months of fieldwork conducted in Cambodia between 2009 and 2016 to describe the ways in which deaf people’s linguistic repertoires change as they migrate from rural settings to more populous settings where NGOs have created spaces for the transmission of what they view to be the national signed language. Based on data collected during participant observation and interviews, I examine the ways NGOs contribute to deaf peoples’ linguistic repertoires and the various additions/subtractions of communicative resources that occur as a result of their encounters with NGOs and national signed languages.

In the next section, NGOs are examined as conduits for the global circulation of ideas about signed languages and deaf people. The repertoires of deaf people expand as they move from their rural villages to larger urban centers. The mobilities of deaf people shape their language practices, as well as the ways they talk about their everyday communicative practices.

## **2 Setting the stage for examining everyday languaging practices among deaf people in Cambodia**

Scholars working in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics have challenged fundamental beliefs about language, calling for a paradigm shift in the analysis of languages and communicative practices (e.g. Canagarajah 2013; Otheguy et al. 2015; Pennycook 2010; Makoni and Pennycook 2007; Wei 2010). Scholars are increasingly moving beyond the idea of language as a naturally bounded entity, arguing that the naturalization of language as a bounded entity is a social construct rooted in European nationalist projects (Otheguy et al. 2015; Makoni and Pennycook 2007; Pennycook and Otsuji 2014). Transcending the ways in which language has traditionally been theorized, recent research in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics has put forward new ways of theorizing

communicative practices by focusing on the everyday communicative practices of people through the lens of translanguaging, defined here as “the deployment of a speaker’s full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages” (Otheguy et al. 2015: 283). Translanguaging has emerged as a paradigm for understanding how people communicate and for describing the linguistic practices of people using two or more languages in different ways in a variety of spaces, such as classrooms (Creese and Blackledge 2015; Wei 2010), busy restaurants and markets (Pennycook and Otsuji 2014), and encounters in tourism (Heller et al. 2014).

Wei (2010: 1223) describes translanguaging as the creation of “a social space for the multilingual language user by bringing together different dimensions of their personal history, experience and environment, their attitude, belief and ideology, their cognitive and physical capacity into one coordinated and meaningful performance, and making it into a lived experience.” The turn towards translanguaging as a theoretical framework for analysis has expanded the boundaries of language study to include the actual communicative practices of people and the various linguistic resources they deploy in their pursuit of “meaning-making,” however, meaning-making does not always involve the use of a single language or modality (Kusters et al. 2017). Pennycook and Otsuji (2014) call for a questioning of categories of communicative practices that underpin concepts such as bilingualism and multilingualism. The study of communicative practices in everyday settings has provided a foundation for new conceptual frameworks to understand how people engage in sense-making with other people, especially if they, in their process of sense-making, make use of modalities and/or other semiotic resources that are not commonly recognized as “language.” Examples of communicative competences include the use of city maps by deaf tuk-tuk drivers in Phnom Penh to communicate with tourists or a deaf vendor’s use of a calculator to haggle with hearing tourists in a market in Siem Reap.

Translanguaging research has expanded prevailing understandings of linguistic practices and the linguistic resources people deploy in different spaces at different times. Meaning-making is constrained or enabled by the availability of linguistic resources and the particular repertoires available to individuals in specific communicative settings. Linguistic repertoires are intimately connected to meaning-making in specific spaces and as such, become spatial repertoires (Busch 2015; Pennycook and Otsuji 2014). The spatial repertoires framework is a useful point of departure for understanding how spaces/objects can be deployed as a part of a person’s linguistic repertoire as a part of their efforts to communicate effectively.

Blommaert and Backus (2013) re-conceptualized Gumperz's (1964) original theorization of the linguistic repertoire as embedded in stable, territorialized speech communities, arguing that linguistic repertoires are comprised of flexible and dynamic resources that appear and disappear in relationship to their communicative functions, situational expectations and rules. Blommaert and Backus (2013) expanded on Gumperz's work by theorizing linguistic repertoires as "a patchwork of resources, skills and competences learnt by (mobile) individual speakers along their life trajectories in situations of formal language learning and informal encounters with language." In fact, repertoires should not be considered as being tied to a nation, nor should they be connected to "a national, stable regime of language" but rather, they should be viewed as a result of an individual's life experiences (Blommaert 2008: 16). Personal linguistic repertoires are intimately tied to a person's life trajectory, their embodiment, and movement through space; and as such, embodiment and space expand and constrict an individual's ability to use all of the resources in their linguistic repertoire (Busch 2015).

In some cases, communicative practices and everyday sense-making do not include what many lay people and linguists typically describe as a distinct bounded language, especially among people who may not have had access to the same linguistic resources as other people. For example, some deaf people may not have learned a spoken language because they cannot hear well enough to access speech. Some deaf people may not learn a sign language because they did not have access to other deaf people or a space where sign language is used. This does not mean, however, that these deaf people are incapable of communicating or that they do not have their own particular personal linguistic repertoires that have been shaped by their life trajectories. These personal linguistic repertoires often include resources such as homesign. Meaning-making is fluid and has contingent aspects, such as the availability of resources that are deployed in situated encounters, such as the pointing at an object and the deployment of a gesture that is understood as, "How much?"

The process of mutual meaning-making is a fluid and creative process comprised of elements of peoples' spatial repertoires and life trajectories. Mutual meaning-making is a process in which people orient towards each other to arrive on a mutually intelligible system that can be based on shared iconicity among people from the same cultural milieu (Green 2014). The process I just described may or may not succeed, depending on how much overlap there is in the individuals' linguistic repertoires and shared iconicity in gesture-based communication. Building upon the theorization of language and communicative practices discussed in the above section, I show that communication and sense-

making does not necessarily require a shared language or even an agreed upon modality (such as drawing or writing).

### 3 The Cambodian context: NGO claims of “no deaf community or sign language”

The signing of the 1993 Accords ended more than fifty years of political instability and armed civil war in Cambodia, opening the way for a rapid expansion of the NGO sector. Cambodia became the poster child for the new era of humanitarianism as the United Nations governed Cambodia in the first undertaking of its kind. The NGO sector assumed responsibilities for many social welfare programs typically under state purview such as the provision of “special education” for deaf students and services for people with disabilities. As Cambodia became more politically stable, the NGO sector became a powerful ideological force in Cambodia and the sector acted as a conduit for circulating ideologies about language and community. When humanitarian workers arrived in the 1990s to work with people with disabilities, they claimed in funding applications, reports, and newspaper interviews that they could not find any evidence of a deaf community or a national Cambodian sign language.

The Cambodia Disabled Peoples’ Organization (CDPO) started a program for deaf people with consultancy from a deaf development worker from Finland. The initial focus of the program was to bring deaf people together to foster the “natural” development of a national signed language and a Deaf community, which CDPO, upon the advice of consultants from Finland, adopted as best practices for deaf development in Cambodia. “Natural” sign languages are sign languages that emerged from the communicative practices of deaf people without any prior exposure to a signed language who have come together (Meir et al. 2010).

Today, two NGOs provide the majority of services for deaf people in Cambodia: Deaf Development Programme (DDP) and Krousar Thmey.<sup>1</sup> DDP provides basic education to adults aged 16 or older and vocational training. Krousar Thmey is the sole provider of formal, nationally standardized education designed specifically for deaf and blind children in Cambodia. In 1991, Benoît

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that as of this writing, Krousar Thmey has begun the process of turning over its schools and to the Ministry of Social Affairs Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation (MoSVY) of Cambodia with the end goal of the government being in complete control of “special education” by 2020.

Duchâteau-Arminjon, a hearing man from France left his job as an investment banker in Bangkok to work in the Site II refugee camp on the border of Thailand (now closed). There, he founded Krousar Thmey as a school for blind children and children living in the streets. It then expanded to include deaf students in 1996 or 1997. It then relocated to Phnom Penh where it operates two schools today.

As external “experts,” especially about people with disabilities and deaf people, these NGOs came to have disciplinary power over deaf people and signed languages in Cambodia but with different approaches. Each NGO had its own attendant ideologies about appropriate communicative practices (e.g. speech-reading and listening with the aid of hearing aids, the use of a manual code based on the national spoken language, and/or using a signed language); means of accessibility (e.g. the use of hearing aids, cochlear implantation, or neither) and educational methodology (e.g. oralism, total communication, residential boarding schools or what is now known as “inclusion” but was called mainstreaming in late modernity). These categories all had their own proscriptions about deaf people and their communicative practices.

DDP based its interventions on identity-based classification systems for deaf people, which originated in the Global North. This classification system included categories deaf people were expected to identify with, such as Deaf, deaf, and hard of hearing, which have their own attendant expectations for the performance of an identity, such as the claiming of “big D Deaf” as a matter of cultural pride and empowerment.<sup>2</sup> Krousar Thmey operates on the principle that deaf students should be integrated into society and that signed languages are technologies of deaf education, not a language, per se, but rather, a visual means of information transmission on par to Khmer braille, which Krousar Thmey developed.

Since the late 1990s, DDP and Krousar Thmey have been working to develop and document the lexicon of Cambodian Sign Language, also referred to as Khmer Sign Language in the early years of this project. DDP, with funding from the Finnish Association of the Deaf, embarked on a decades-long effort to support the flowering of a Deaf community by funding spaces where deaf people could meet and ideally create their own sign language naturally. In the

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<sup>2</sup> James Woodward, a hearing linguist from the United States, coined the d/D distinction in 1975 to distinguish between deafness as a medical condition and Deaf as a cultural identity. Many academics and activists then adopted Deaf as a political identity, which was problematic in some parts of the world as the d/D distinction became a means of including or excluding people based on their performance (or not) of a Deaf identity; however, recent scholarship in Deaf Studies rejected this designation.

beginning, this project included traveling to different provinces throughout Cambodia to capture the signs used by deaf people in these provinces. The objective of this development project was for deaf people to come together as a national community with a political identity based on the use of a national signed language: a Cambodian sign language.

The situation did not unfold as the funders, external observers, and foreign DDP staff had hoped. In 1997, Duchâteau-Arminjon introduced signs from American Sign Language as a visual system for instruction at the school, with the intent to “Khmerize” the signs over time. He argued that ASL should be used because he believed it was more widely used than any other signed language. Today, Krousar Thmey uses a system of signing based on borrowed signs from Signed Exact English, such as the sign for “language” which is the same as the ASL sign, signed with the ASL fingerspelling handshape for “L.”

Duchâteau-Arminjon made this controversial decision, which the World Federation of the Deaf protested with support from a sign language linguist working in the country at the time, because he believed that deaf children should be in a classroom, being educated immediately. Duchâteau-Arminjon felt the development of a Cambodian sign language was not progressing quickly enough. He, and other hearing teachers at Krousar Thmey, claimed that the sign language that was slowly spreading among deaf people in Phnom Penh was not sophisticated enough to teach scientific concepts or mathematics.

The teachers and staff at Krousar Thmey insisted that there must be an indigenous sign invented for each corresponding word in Khmer if an ASL sign did not exist for that word. The Cambodian/Khmer Sign Language documentation (and sometimes, invention) project progressed in fits and starts. At one point, ideological differences between the two NGOs led to the dissolution of the Cambodian Sign Language committee. Hoping to resolve these issues, several signed language linguists were brought in as consultants but to no avail. For the next twenty years, until very recently, DDP and Krousar Thmey had separate but concurrent efforts to “develop” Cambodian Sign Language, resulting in the emergence of perceptions that two distinct sign languages were in use.

Deaf people cleaved along NGO lines, socializing primarily with other deaf people from the same NGO. Deaf people referred to the signs used by the other group as “DDP sign” or “Krousar Thmey sign.” Some deaf people from each group claimed that the signs used by the other group were incomprehensible. Interestingly, deaf people identified with either group were able to communicate and understand each other, despite of their claims that the other group

used a different sign language. In this way, the categorizations of the sign languages functioned as categories for the inclusion and exclusion of deaf people based on their linguistic repertoires and perceived corresponding educational attainment.

Another possible factor in the perception of elite status for deaf people at Krousar Thmey is that its patron is Hun Sen, the authoritarian prime minister who has ruled Cambodia for over thirty years. Krousar Thmey receives substantial support from the Cambodian government in the form of financing for the printing of national curriculum textbooks “translated” into what Krousar Thmey calls Khmer Sign Language but people associated with DDP call Cambodian Sign Language. In 2013, DDP and Krousar Thmey signed a new agreement to work together to continue developing a national sign language. As of this writing, a committee of deaf and hearing people from each NGO continues to invent signs for each Khmer word, with high-level support from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport and Hun Sen, who has called for “one sign language” for Cambodia in his speeches.

## **4 From the provinces to the city: Deaf mobilities and everyday languaging**

A significant number of young people from rural areas are migrating to the cities to pursue economic and educational opportunities in urban centers. Phnom Penh, the capital, has doubled in population between 1998 and 2010 (MoP 2012). Very few people in Cambodia have lived in the city for more than a generation and almost all identify an agricultural village in the provinces as their “homeland” and return on a regular basis for major festivals or other familial obligations such as funeral ceremonies (Derks 2008; Davis 2016; Hutt 2016). It is important to note that the divide between urban and rural is very fluid and ambiguous but still has associated social distinctions, especially in relation to deaf people’s linguistic and social practices.

Due to geographical distances and the inability to access sign language-based educational programs or a concentration of deaf people who meet regularly, many deaf people living in rural Cambodia do not have access to a sign language used by multiple deaf people from different areas or socialize with other deaf people on a regular basis until they migrate to an urban center such as Phnom Penh or a provincial capital where one or both NGOs have a presence. DDP and Krousar Thmey are headquartered in Phnom Penh, the

capital of Cambodia, but also have programs and schools in provincial capitals throughout the country such as Battambang, Kampot, Kampong Cham, and Siem Reap.

Many deaf young adults migrate from their homes in the countryside to urban centers for education and/or vocational training with the two NGOs. A cornerstone of Deaf Development Programme’s work is finding deaf people in the provinces with the purpose of registering them and then hopefully bringing them to one of DDP’s centers where they can enroll in the two-year basic adult education program and/or vocational training. There, they come into contact with a critical mass of deaf people, most of whom use Cambodian Sign Language. As deaf people migrate from rural villages to urban centers, they add new resources to their linguistic repertoire.

As Pennycook and Otsuji (2014) found, certain linguistic resources are part of the repertoires of certain spaces. In the urban context of Phnom Penh, deaf tuk-tuk drivers will use a laminated city map to communicate with hearing tourists who do not know sign language or share their repertoire of Cambodian gestures. In the markets, deaf customers will first point to their ear and make a gesture that is locally understood as “not having” or “no,” then ask for a “deaf discount,” a reduced price for goods based on notions of pity and compassion for deaf people, and then use a small handheld calculator to haggle with the shopkeeper. Pennycook (2016) argued that repertoires should be understood as emergent from the interactions between people, artifacts and space.

Deaf Development Programme’s “Deaf Class” is housed in a primary school, a low-slung building painted ochre yellow with green shutters, on the outskirts of Kampot that caters to children who can hear and do not use sign language but rents several classrooms to DDP. The students who attend DDP’s basic education programs range in age between 16 to 25. Older adults are considered “too old” to benefit from the basic education program so they are not enrolled in the program. Most of the first-year students enrolled in DDP’s basic education program learn what DDP refers to as Cambodian Sign Language and Krousar Thmey students refer to as “DDP sign.” Learning occurs in formal lessons in the classroom and through informal socialization with their deaf peers. As these students learn sign language, they also learn about different rules for communication, and what it is to “have” a language and an attendant identity as a deaf person. They are explicitly told that they are learning Cambodian Sign Language. In her discussion of mobility and linguistic repertoires, Busch (2015) showed how one can come to realize that one’s linguistic repertoire “no longer fits” as one moves into a new space with different “rules” for how to communicate.

In the DDP classrooms, deaf people learn what they call Cambodian Sign Language, as well as conventions about appropriate ways to communicate. The walls of DDP's classrooms are covered by posters with images of various fruit, animals, and body parts, all labeled in English. There are also hand-drawn pictures of hand-shapes, each corresponding to a script in the Khmer alphabet. In addition to hand-drawn pictures of the Khmer alphabet as rendered on the hands, there are hand drawn pictures of various animals commonly seen in rural Cambodia, such as rats, dogs, monkeys, pigs, and water buffaloes.

As some deaf Cambodians move from a rural setting to urban spaces where a number of other deaf people gather, they may also come to realize that some of the communicative strategies they used with their families and neighbors in their village were not considered to be appropriate in their new communicative environment, such as pointing or the pantomime of a water buffalo in rural areas. In an example from my fieldwork, a new student learned that aspects of his existing linguistic repertoire were regarded as inappropriate in his new context. During a lesson, one of the students began moving his mouth, evidently making sounds in an effort to verbalize. The teacher, a hearing woman, pointed at him, gestured at him to shush, and told him to use his hands, not his mouth. Interestingly, in an interaction later in the same day, this same student used a sign that looked exactly like the American Sign Language sign for "name," and the teacher scolded him, telling him, "No, no. That is the Krousar Thmey sign. This is DDP. Use DDP sign," demonstrating the DDP sign for "name," which looks very different.

In another example, the photo below (Figure 1), taken in one of DDP's classrooms on the first day of school, captured two of the second year students teasingly asking a new student to sign "water buffalo," using the handle of a broom to point to the hand drawn picture of a water buffalo. In response, he brings both of his hands to the top of his head, with the index fingers on both hands pointing upwards. The second year students, both female, giggle because it is not the sign for "water buffalo" they learned in the DDP class. Embarrassed, the new student looks at the older students with a questioning look. They then demonstrate their way to sign "water buffalo," which also references horns with both hands in a closed shape, moving away from the head, an iconic sign that brings to mind the long horns of a water buffalo, a distinctly rural sign (see Figure 2).

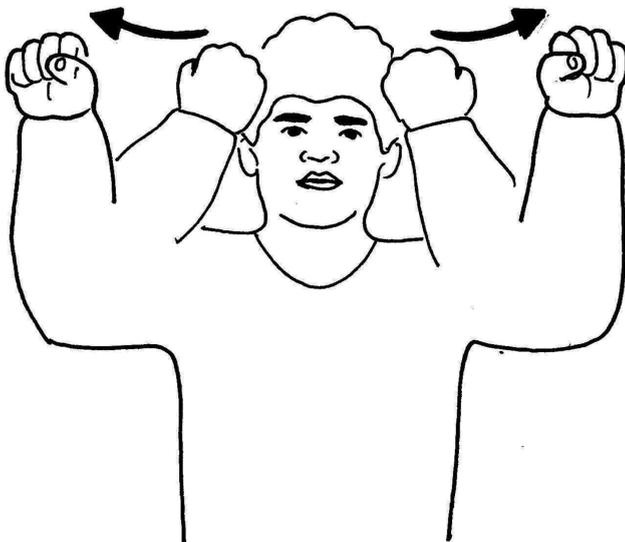
Notions of an urban/rural dichotomy stigmatize various communicative modalities for communication. Using pointing and gestures alone is considered as more "provincial," compared to the ability to use sign language. Many deaf teachers and sign language researchers at DDP in Phnom Penh associated the use of gestures or pointing to the provinces, referring to it as "provincial," (glossed in sign as PROVINCE-THEIR) but they did not exclude these people



**Figure 1:** Two second year students Giggle as a new student shows them his sign for “water buffalo.”

from their group based on this categorization. In fact, they viewed it as their responsibility to teach them “Cambodian Sign Language.”

Many of the students and graduates of Krousar Thmey did not exhibit the same attitude. They made negative comments about those who did not attend the school and did not socialize with them, saying they were “stupid.” Differences in linguistic repertoire, some of them agreed upon and others not, can index distinctions between groups and individuals (Creese and Blackledge 2015).



**Figure 2:** The Cambodian sign language sign used at DDP for “water buffalo.” Illustration courtesy of HEANG Samath.

## 5 Flexible accumulation and Cambodian deaf people’s linguistic repertoires

As Canagarajah (2013) noted, communication involves diverse, mobile semiotic resources. He argues that people shift between different norms to negotiate and co-construct meaning. In everyday communicative practice, people collaboratively co-construct meaning “by adopting reciprocal and adaptive negotiation strategies in their interactions” (Canagarajah 2013: 26–27). For many deaf people in Cambodia, a documented national signed language is only one resource among many used to achieve an objective. Deaf people in Cambodia draw on linguistic repertoire that includes drawing, such as when an older deaf woman (who only knew homesign) drew pictures of worms and bugs to narrate her experiences of extreme deprivation during the Khmer Rouge period during an interview with me. Their repertoire also includes gestures, such as when an older deaf man explained to me in gestures that he “threw off” his black Khmer Rouge uniform and “stood to attention” as Vietnamese soldiers marched by. Another example of a linguistic resource is the creative use of mobile technology, such as taking a photo of their surroundings and sending it to another deaf friend to show them where to meet. For example,

during fieldwork, I would get a text message with the English word, “Meet?” with a photo of the location because we did not share the same repertoire of written English or Khmer that would allow us to understand where to meet using text only.

During the first portion of my fieldwork, I met deaf twin sisters who explained to me that when they were children, they developed elaborate home-sign they used to communicate with their family, such as a sign for *Việt Nam*. They told me that when they were young children, their grandfather spent a lot of time interacting with them. Together, they invented signs for various things and activities around the household, such as cleaning and sweeping. As young adults in their early twenties, the twins enrolled in the basic education program at DDP and learned sign language, whereas their youngest sister, who is also deaf, enrolled in Krousar Thmey. They have participated in several testimonies (such as in fundraising videos and in newspaper interviews), saying that they had no sign language until they arrived at DDP but they clearly had elaborate linguistic repertoires that they used to communicate with each other and their family about abstract concepts, such as the “fact” that oranges grown in *Việt Nam* taste better. Reporting on their survey of deaf people living in Douentza, a rural area in central Mali, West Africa, Nyst et al. (2012) argued that sign language linguistics have insufficiently theorized the communicative practices of deaf people in rural areas who do not regularly participate in deaf sociality or have regular contact with groups of deaf people who sign.

I learned more about the twins’ life trajectories and how they shaped their language practices, as well as the language practices of other deaf people in their social network in Cambodia. We traveled together to Svay Rieng, a rural province near the border of *Việt Nam*, for a friend’s Buddhist ceremony to inaugurate her parents’ funeral *stupa*. As we sat in front of the fan, conversing after a long evening at the pagoda, they used a sign that I had never seen before. I asked them what it meant. Giggling, they explained that they had made it up themselves. It essentially means something like, “thinking a lot,” “ruminating,” or an idea popping up in their heads. The twins told me they invented it, as they did with many other signs in use among deaf people in Phnom Penh. The twins told me that they had made up many different signs for different concepts but then “learned the right signs” when they arrived at DDP. They also told me, giggling, that they had spread some of these signs amongst deaf people “by mistake” but had to be careful because the CSL committee did not sanction these signs.

There are several examples of Cambodian deaf people claiming that they learned sign language only when they arrived at DDP (or its precursor, Cambodian Disabled Peoples Organization’s Deaf Project). A long-time member of the Cambodian Sign Language research team shared his life story with me

over several interviews. He explained to me that when he was a young boy in the early 1970s, his parents brought him to the pagoda for an education, as was typical for boys in Cambodia at the time. He was the only deaf person at the pagoda and communicated with the monks through what he called “signing.” At the pagoda school, the head monk taught him how to read Khmer and instructed him in daily lessons. What is interesting about this narrative is that this man clearly was able to communicate with the monk well enough to learn how to read, follow instructions for his daily chores and participate in pagoda life but he says he did not learn any language until he arrived at the NGO.

Semiotic resources are embedded in a social and physical environment, aligning with contextual features such as participants, objects, the human body, and the setting for meaning (Canagarajah 2013). Repertoires should be understood as an emergent property deriving from the interactions between people, artifacts and spaces (Blommaert and Backus 2013; Busch 2015). There is diverse and compelling evidence for a human capacity for communication that transcends what is regarded as formal language. The flexible accumulation of various linguistic resources and skills in an increasingly interconnected and mobile world reinforces the idea that individual repertoires expand with entry into new spaces and encounters, driving new languaging practices.

## 6 Conclusion

Linguistic proscriptions tell us a great deal about language, language ideologies, governmentality, and politics (Pennycook 2016). Many language scholars have noted that ideologies of language are concerned with boundary construction; as Canagarajah put it, “labeling is an ideological act of demarcating certain codes in relation to certain identities and interests” (2013: 6). NGOs in Cambodia often represent deaf people as lacking a language but in reality, deaf people’s repertoires and communicative practices challenge essentialisms regarding modalities and understandings of “language.” Dismissing the communicative resources deaf people deploy that may not align to conventional understandings of language is a form of epistemic violence that devalues non-conventional languaging practices by placing different resources in semiotic repertoires into categories. Deaf people in Cambodia have diverse repertoires, with flexible communicative strategies that change as they move through various spaces or co-create languaging spaces.

Deaf people draw on different elements within their linguistic repertoire as they navigate different spaces. As rural deaf people move from their villages to

urban settings, where the NGOs are located, their repertoires expand. In urban centers, deaf people engage in the flexible accumulation of communicative resources, such as signs from ASL, what is commonly understood as Cambodian Sign Language, written English and/or Khmer. Scholars should consider how the “invention” and the imagined having (or not having) of a language results in misrepresentations of deaf people and the devaluation of their linguistic practices. More attention should be paid to how differences in access to linguistic resources (e.g. a signed language a “recognized” by linguists or NGOs or literacy in the written national language) as opposed to use of “non-elite” modalities function as subtle, hierarchical distinctions between groups and individuals.

In closing, I call for closer attention to communicative practices that are often devalued in comparison to the use of a national sign language, such as the use of gestures/pointing alone, the drawing of pictures and the use of physical objects in everyday languaging. The role of smartphones, as well as the access to a virtual international deaf space they provide warrants further analysis. Future work in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics would benefit from the study of communicative practices, especially practices that involve spatial resources and diverse semiotic repertoires, that do not include the use of a formally recognized signed or spoken “language.”

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