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Review

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By Erika Hoffmann-Dilloway
Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press 2016
ISBN 978-1-563-68664-1
xi + 135 pages

Reviewed by Cedar Lay

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Signing and Belonging in Nepal is an accessible, quick-reading 120 pages on how the Deaf signing community of Nepal has strategically reshaped their ethnolinguistic identity to gain legitimacy in a society that subordinates them. Erika Hoffmann-Dilloway describes a predominantly Hindu society largely influenced by the belief that "an inability to hear was the result of bad karma, or misdeeds in a previous life" (p. 3) and that this bad karma "could be transmitted to others through contact" (p. 4). Fearing negative karmic effects on their own lives, the greater Nepali community ostracized the deaf. Hoffmann-Dilloway explores how the Nepali signing community legitimize themselves as an ethnolingusitic community within this dominant Hindu framework, as equally deserving of representation. She distinguishes ethnolinguistic in-group members with the capitalized *Deaf*, a convention I will maintain throughout this review.

Hoffmann-Dilloway explains how, in establishing their own ethnolinguistic identity, Deaf signers use a dominant social framework to elevate themselves "rather than outright rejecting local understandings of personhood and social groups based in notions of karma and transmissible purity and pollution" (p. 7). The topic of a disadvantaged ethnolinguistic community struggling over issues of identity and legitimacy is no stranger to the field of linguistic anthropology. However, Hoffmann-Dilloway's work on the Deaf signing community of Nepal provides a refreshingly unique perspective on this scenario, at times stepping away from a high academic register to level with her readers and provide candid insight into what an ethnography on this topic entails.

After providing the diachronic cultural context in which the Deaf Nepali community resides, the book dives into specific case studies and explores the semiotic features of Nepali Sign Language (NSL), and how those features are viewed negatively by dominant society. As the chapters progress, the reader is graced with a hopeful tone not always present in linguistic ethnographies, thanks to the success of the Deaf community's plight as described by Hoffmann-Dilloway. The author explains how the Deaf community adapts to the dominant social framework that has subordinated them in order to become a more accepted part of society.

Chapter 3 demonstrates how language is central to this enterprise, turning to the example of NSL standardization projects. As described by Hoffmann-Dilloway, authorities on the language made a conscious decision to standardize "those signs that could have potential links to caste Hinduism and Nepali nationalism" (p. 56), thereby buttressing their position through a process of 'adequation' (see Bucholtz & Hall 2004). Rather than attempt to overthrow dominant cultural ideals altogether, the Deaf community exaggerated shared similarities to encourage understanding and legitimate themselves. For example, when standardizing kinship terms, NSL officials

consciously chose to relate the sign for *mother* to caste Hinduism by linking the semiotic gestures to specific clothing and jewelry worn by mothers in caste Hinduism (p. 57). In this sense, the book provides a convincing illustration of the power of language as a social tool, even if it exploits dominant discourses to legitimize a subordinate identity position.

Linguistic anthropology appears to be in the midst of a shift towards introspection, as we strive to "walk backwards into the future" (Heller & McElhinny 2017: p. 2), to analyze and critique all that we have done before, and to avoid the tribulations of early anthropologists who sometimes brought detriment instead of recognition to their research communities. Contemporary ethnography requires researchers to consider themselves and the impact they have on those they study. It is clear in *Signing and Belonging in Nepal* that this power dynamic is not lost on Hoffmann-Dilloway. The end of Chapter 2, for instance, finds her refusing to ignore her own positionality as researcher; in her own words, her work is "produced not in spite of, but through, relationships, with all the complexities and obligations they entail" (p. 17). She explains that many of these research relationships in turn became long-lasting friendships, a point which may trouble the traditional social scientist who requires a certain removal of the researcher from the researched. Yet it is precisely the sorts of friendships forged by Hoffman-Dilloway that remind researchers of the importance of conducting work in ways beneficial to the community.

Chapter 5 discusses the process by which the Deaf Nepali ethnolinguistic community secured legitimation and became more integrated into mainstream society. The chapter focuses on the arrival of The Bakery Café in Nepal in the late 1990s, a restaurant that hires exclusively Deaf servers. This was an especially surprising development given the Nepali concept of pollution transfer, particularly through the preparation and sharing of food. Hoffmann-Dilloway describes The Bakery Café as a sort of development project that successfully helped the Deaf community by placing them front-and-center in both the restaurant and advertising media. Deaf signers became commonplace in a cultural system that had previously rejected them as impure, and NSL was accordingly seen and therefore accepted much more widely, at least among the urban middle classes. It is for similar reasons that Hoffmann-Dilloway says the NSL signers she worked with were encouraging of her research: The community hoped to gain recognition and acceptance through her publications.

One of the most unique aspects of *Signing and Belonging in Nepal* is the book's accessible style, described by the author in the following way: "I avoid using the technical terminology of my field in this book (we linguistic anthropologists are known for our jargon!)" (p. 12). Hoffman-Dilloway adheres strictly to this promise, following up with one hundred pages of easily digestible ethnographic analysis devoid of jargon. In fact, because this book reads more like an engaging story than an academic text, the reader is motivated to flip the page and find out what happens next in the Deaf Nepali struggle for legitimacy. As a professor at Oberlin College, a private liberal arts college without a graduate department, Hoffmann-Dilloway is particularly attuned to the academic needs and desires of undergraduate students. In appealing to a younger, less academically experienced readership, the author widens the scope and impact of her work. While more jargon-heavy, citation-packed academic texts certainly hold their own merit, they typically improve knowledge of the field from *within*, while Hoffmann-Dilloway's text reaches outside the field. In this way, the book carries the potential to expose younger students to the field of linguistic anthropology and inspire future generations of researchers.

To this aim, Hoffmann-Dilloway interjects a number of personal anecdotes and learning-experiences from her research process that the more traditional ethnographer would likely choose

to omit. For example, she introduces the concept of *name signs*—or rather, "signed alternatives to spoken language names" (p. 10)—through a personal anecdote of how she earned her own name sign thanks to her initial misunderstanding of Nepali culture. As an American outsider who had just arrived in the country, she found herself "grinning awkwardly and laughing" (p. 8) to hide her own embarrassment without realizing that "Nepalis did not habitually grin and laugh when nervous, nor did they typically smile in photographs" (p. 9). Because her excessive smiling was so unusual, she was given a name sign that pertained to smiling. The author's admission of these cultural mishaps and humorous research anecdotes adds to the accessibility of the text, reminding the reader that researchers are real human beings who also make mistakes in the field.

Ultimately, Hoffmann-Dilloway's ethnography is an inspirational example of an ethnography of language and society that is as accessible and honest as it is illuminating. Her casual register may serve as a departure from the genre, but the aspiring readers who are its target audience will find it a welcoming introduction to linguistic anthropology. Hoffmann-Dilloway provides a refreshingly digestible look at how a Deaf ethnolinguistic community in Nepal strategically shapes their language to improve their own social status.

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