Signed languages and sociopolitical formation: The case of "contributing to society" through Hồ Chí Minh City Sign Language

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A B S T R A C T

Claims about signed languages present a unique resource for examining sociopolitical formation and change. Examining three claims drawn from original ethnographic data on Hồ Chí Minh City Sign Language, analysis centers on the ways language practices and language ideologies reflect, respond to, and impact sociopolitical formation in Việt Nam, particularly in connection to state restructuring of deaf education during the political reform period (1986 to present). Signer narratives evaluate such circumstances in relation to notions of citizenship, national development, and social participation to posit signed language as the basis for Deaf people's contributions to national development and broader social change. Articulations between signed language and sociopolitical formation have been largely ignored within mainstream social science disciplines and global disability-oriented development, hindering theoretical and practical projects. This article aims to expand the theoretical scope of language-centered inquiry by demonstrating how ethnographic research on signed languages contributes to examination of sociopolitical formation. (Signed language, Việt Nam, deaf education, sociopolitical, citizenship)*

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

Claims about signed languages present a unique resource for examining sociopolitical formation and change. For example, in an interview for *Tuổi Trẻ* newspaper, Deaf[1] university student Lưu Ngọc Tủ stated:

> Tôi hi vọng khi kết thúc khóa học này tôi sẽ cùng các bạn ở đây xây dựng được một ngôi trường dành riêng cho người khiếm thính học tập bằng NNKH và sẽ học cao hơn, giúp ích nhiều hơn cho xã hội.

> 'I hope that by the end of this course of study I and my peers will build a school dedicated to hearing impaired students to study using sign language, and advancing their educations even further, help society even more.' (Trung Tân 2009)

At the time *Tuổi Trẻ* conducted the interview, Lưu Ngọc Tủ was a student in the signed language-based education project for Deaf adults, Opening University Education to Deaf People Through Sign Language Analysis, Teaching, and

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Interpretation, also known as the Đồng Nai Deaf Education Project. Connecting her own signed language-based academic career to educational advancement and social progress, Ms. Lưu's remarks invoke a familiar social trajectory in contemporary Việt Nam: study leads to achievement oriented toward a social and national end. Applying expertise in service to the country, citizens fulfill their constitutional right and duty to 'participate in building society' (*Góp phần xây dựng cho xã hội*) or 'contribute to society' (*đóng góp cho xã hội*). This orientation toward society building is also reflected in the national slogan, 'Wealthy people, strong country, equitable, democratic, and civilized society' (*Dân giàu, nước mạnh, xã hội công bằng, dân chủ, văn minh*).

What the *Tuổi Trẻ* article does not state—and Ms. Lưu only alludes to in her expression of *hi vọng* 'hope'—is that the Đồng Nai Deaf Education Project is the only educational program of its kind in Việt Nam. In the national system of deaf education "special schools", Deaf students do not have the opportunity to study beyond the US fifth or ninth grades (depending on the school); therefore, they presently have little opportunity to contribute to the country in the way Ms. Lưu's remarks suggest.

The most recent Vietnamese Household Living Standards Survey (conducted in 2006) further indicates that both enrollment in and educational outcomes for the national special schools have been poor: less than one percent of school-age youth with the greatest "hearing difficulty" (about 40,000 persons) attends school at any level or obtains employment (Vietnamese Household Living Standards Survey 2008:section 2, part 4.25).[2] Deaf people's social participation in Việt Nam is also limited in other ways: Deaf people are not permitted to obtain driver's licenses or join the military, and the absence of interpreting services limits access to health and government programs, as well as society-building campaigns.

Put into this broader context, Ms. Lưu's remarks guide us toward critique of the contemporary special school system and assumptions connected to signed language and Deaf people. They also guide critique of notions of citizenship participation that encourage every citizen to "help society" yet marginalize Vietnamese Deaf persons who use a Vietnamese signed language.

Ms. Lưu's perspective is contrary to the ways Deaf people are usually described in many journalistic, scientific, and social policy accounts in Việt Nam. DEAFNESS is commonly described as a condition of absence and a medical condition, reflected in the terms *không có khả năng nghe* 'no hearing ability,' *không âm thanh* 'no sound,' *không nói chuyện* 'no talking,' *khuyết tật* 'disability,' and *khiếm thính* 'hearing impairment.' The title of the *Tuổi Trẻ* article in which Ms. Lưu appeared corresponds to this discourse: *Giảng đường không tiếng nói!* 'Lecture hall without spoken language!,' as does reference to *khiếm thính* 'hearing impairment' within the body of the article and in the ostensible direct reporting of Ms. Lưu's remarks.

In my own interviews with Deaf people regarding their interaction with the news media, interviewees commonly reported that journalists' published stories failed to

use their preferred term *Điếc* (Deaf; capitalized to indicate cultural group affinity). An "imposition of form" via specialized language, the substitution of *hearing impaired* ruptures the positive connection between Vietnamese Deaf persons (in this case, students), signed language, and related social goals, replacing it with a negative medical framing (Bourdieu 1991:137). This struggle for "control of the representations of reality" suggests ideological contestation over such things as classificatory frameworks, assignment of subject positions, explanations given for social conditions facing Deaf people in contemporary Việt Nam, as well as broader debates about language, citizenship, and national identity (Gal 1989:348).

In this article I aim to pursue Ms. Lưu's commentary by connecting it to the perspectives of other southern Vietnamese Deaf people who use signed language, and to the broader contexts to which these perspectives relate. In doing so I hope to expand the scope of language-centered anthropological analysis by showing how signed language-based claims contribute to examination of sociopolitical formation.

Current efforts to understand relationships between signed languages and sociopolitical phenomena are hampered by the lack of extended ethnographic accounts of Deaf groups. Over the past two decades another set of forces has also emerged that now powerfully threatens to displace linguistic and anthropological insight into signed languages: rapidly expanding global disability-oriented knowledge production and development.

Linguistic description of signed languages began in North America in the 1960s and was soon followed by ethnographies of Deaf groups. In the same period, intensification of post-Cold War development and modernization projects concentrated resources on issues such as disability. Global disability programs and rehabilitation services now represent a multidisciplinary, multibillion-dollar industry, supported by international initiatives (e.g. Education For All) and United Nations instruments (e.g. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability or CRPD). The primary goal of these initiatives and instruments is "inclusion".

While the guiding definitions and models of inclusion vary widely within and across national and programmatic contexts, educational inclusion generally refers to placing "disabled" and "nondisabled" students together in order to prepare the former to become "productive and active citizen[s]" (Winzer 2000:20). Within Deaf Studies and deaf education literatures, inclusion has less positive associations than for other contexts. Focusing on deafness as a status of remediation, educational inclusion, or "mainstreaming", often privileges educational enrollment over educational access, eliding concerns of language acquisition and socialization in the process. Thus, Deaf students may be enrolled in educational programming yet lack linguistic access to the activities occurring there.

Placement of Deaf students in settings that privilege spoken language is often accompanied by a language ideology about the necessity of speech for social inclusion and productivity. This language ideology also informs critique of signed languages qua language, and a set of debates regarding language modality

that are as old as deaf education itself: Johnson argues that debates regarding the instructional merit of speech versus signed language rose to a global scale in the 1880s and have since "never really stopped—especially among Deaf people" (2006:32). Yet, whereas such debates are conducted in signed languages, there is little evidence of these debates or the social, political, or economic critiques they articulate—particularly for settings outside the North Atlantic context.

Three factors make Việt Nam a compelling case for examining signed language claims in relation to sociopolitical formation: state restructuring of deaf education as part of its national political economic reform agenda; changing linguistic criteria applied to Deaf student participation in these educational settings; and the recent emergence of signed language-centered social organizing coupled with the historic advent of Việt Nam's first college-educated Deaf professionals now capturing public attention. To contextualize these circumstances, I begin with a brief discussion of theoretical connections between language, language ideology, and sociopolitical formation. I then describe sociopolitical formation in Việt Nam, particularly in relation to the historic establishment of deaf education and its restructuring in the contemporary period. In the third section I move to an examination of three claims instantiated in Hồ Chí Minh City Sign Language in which language practices and language ideologies reflect and respond to opportunities for sociopolitical participation. These claims are drawn from original ethnographic research I conducted in the southern Vietnamese cities of Hồ Chí Minh City and Biên Hòa as part of my dissertation fieldwork in 2008 and 2009, and follow-up interviews conducted in the summer of 2012. The fourth section then returns to issues raised earlier in the article to argue the salience of examining signed language claims in relation to social change.

EXAMINING SIGNED LANGUAGE CLAIMS AND
SOCIOPOLITICAL FORMATION

> Languages do not rise or fall simply on their own linguistic merits—indeed it has long been accepted that all languages are potentially equivalent in linguistic terms. Rather, the social and political circumstances of those who speak a particular language will have a significant impact on the subsequent symbolic and communicative status attached to that language. (May 2008:134)

Within language-oriented social research it is well accepted that linguistic utterance is "socially charged" with the meanings of other language users, related social positions and contexts (Bakhtin 1981:293). Linguistic anthropological and sociolinguistic research further demonstrates the ways linguistic utterance is also constitutive of sociopolitical materiality, "contribut[ing] practically to the reality of what it announces" (Bourdieu 1991:128). I use the contracted form *sociopolitical* to mark the practical, analytic, and linguistic interpenetration of the social with the political.

Over the last two decades theorizing on language ideology has been enormously helpful to sociopolitical examination, describing interrelationships between

language practices, ideas about language, and sociopolitical organization within particular historical moments and sites. Authors examining language ideology in relation to the sociopolitical have connected nationalisms and citizenship (Blommaert 1999; Bokhorst-Heng 1999); dominant ideology, multilingualism, and multiple subjectivities (Irvine & Gal 2000; Silverstein 2000); colonial legacies in postcolonial sites (Spitulnik 1998), as well as "things that never became part of that legacy" (Blommaert 1999:30; see also Leap 2004, 2005).

In this article I draw on Irvine's well-known definition of language ideology as a "cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests" (1989:255). Emphasis on the cultural system of ideas underlines the importance of ethnographic documentation of ideas circulating within signed language groups, and the ways these ideas relate to broader contexts. In the present case, this includes description of the postcolonial, late-socialist educational system and the processes by which linguistic "things" have or have not come to be recognized as part of that legacy.

Conceptualizing the nation-state in relation to signed language users

Following May (2008), I pursue examination of ideological connections of (signed) language and sociopolitical formation in relation to the national state. This focus is informed by two observations. First, the fact that the nation-state "remains the bedrock of the political world order", exercising a dominant role in creating and enforcing policies impacting languages domestically and representing domestic interests transnationally (May 2008:5; see also Hansen & Stepputat 2001). Second, that state interest is fundamentally concerned with the production of certain kinds of ability (e.g. economic labor, self- and collective-conduct), and is structured and regulated through domains of legitimate state control.

As Calhoun (2007) argues, there is nothing prepolitical or stable about the structure of modern nation-states; rather, it is through "speech, action, and recognition" that nations not only can undergo transformation but, "recognized as always politically as well as culturally made", they are "therefore remarkable" (2007:153). Accordingly, ideological contestation between signed and spoken language groups is inherently political, each aiming toward particular ways of making and remaking social worlds.

The Deaf Studies and signed language-related literatures contain ample evidence of language related ideological contestation; however, the ways that such contestation impacts macrolevel sociopolitical formation and change have not been addressed as they might. There are few extended ethnographic accounts of Deaf groups, and much of the work that has been done concentrates on populations in the United States and Europe. Two exceptions are Reilly & Reilly (2005) and Nakamura (2006), respectively describing circumstances in Thai Deaf boarding schools and Deaf community organizing in Japan. Unpublished dissertations by Cooper (2011), Kusters (2012), and Nonaka (2007) also describe signed language usage and related

forms of social organization for Việt Nam, Ghana, and Thailand. In each of these settings, the signed language varieties under consideration are shown to possess unique social histories relative to interaction with and ideological loading from dominant spoken language groups and/or other signed language groups. Relationships between microlevel settings of signed language usage and macrolevel sociopolitical circumstances have received little scholarly attention elsewhere. In this context, initiatives undertaken by nongovernmental organizations, such as the World Federation of the Deaf's extensive report, *Deaf people and human rights*, have made important contributions to understanding national and transnational forces impacting signed language usage and sociopolitical participation (Haualand & Allen 2009).

Analysis of claims to social participation through a contested mode (signed language) directs attention to the ways that nation-states organize national reproduction, as well as to the particular ways citizenship participation is negotiated. Classically conceived, citizenship describes a composite of civil, political, and social rights and activities bestowed "on those who are full members of a community" (Marshall 1950/2009:149). Yet citizenship WITHIN THE STATE does not preclude exclusion from the state. Paraphrasing Agamben (1998), where states establish differential control over particular populations they structure conditions of INCLUSIVE EXCLUSION. In the literature on ideology and state governance, schools have been productively examined as paramount sites for the reproduction of state ideological power (Althusser 1971) and authority (Bourdieu 1998).

Recently, a growing body of literature shows that official modes of citizenship do not exhaust the forms of linguistically mediated citizenship practice found in specific social contexts (Ong 1996; Wilson 2001; Leap 2004). In addition to formal rights and obligations, citizenship aspirations also appear in everyday situations through invoking "languages of stateness" (Hansen & Stepputat 2001:8). Taken together these materials argue the significance of linguistic practice for sociopolitical formation, and the significance of schools for examination of sociopolitical contestation.

DEAF EDUCATION, LANGUAGE, AND SOCIOPOLITICAL FORMATION IN VIỆT NAM

Formal education of Deaf students in Việt Nam began in 1886 with the Trường Câm-Điếc Lái Thiêu 'Lái Thiêu School for the Mute-Deaf.' Located in Bình Dương province just north of present day Hồ Chí Minh City, the school was established by the French missionary Father Azemar, with the assistance of Nguyễn Văn Trương, who became the school's first teacher. According to Pitrois (1914), Nguyễn was a local Deaf youth whom Azemar sent to the Deaf school in Rodez, France; after completing his education, Nguyễn returned to Việt Nam whereby Azemar reportedly taught him the "Annamite language (for, of course, in Rodez the Deaf pupil had been taught in French). At the same time, he [Azemar] learned the sign-language from him and the methods of articulation and lipreading" (1914:13).

Pitrois' account of the languages used at Lái Thiêu has bearing on connections of language and sociopolitical formation, for the colonial period and continuing up to the contemporary moment. Of concern then as now is the nature of the languages in use, their attributed origins, and their perceived sociocultural and national affordances. According to Pitrois, SIGN-LANGUAGE is a practice Nguyễn acquired at Rodez while the ANNAMITE LANGUAGE was acquired upon his return home; thus, sign language is derived through colonial channels much as the designation "Annamite" is derived from French colonial oppression (Tai 1992:7).

In the absence of documented description of Nguyễn's actual language use, the form of signed language he used is unknown. Nevertheless, the significance of such colonial associations for contemporary sociopolitical concerns is underlined in one of the first Vietnamese deaf education texts. *Vấn Đề Phuc Hồi Chức Năng Cho Người Điếc* 'Rehabilitation issues for the Deaf' (Phạm 1984) extols the use of speech-based methods in education and connects signed language methods with underperforming national development agendas.

> Đó là một công trình vĩ đại của trường phái Đờ Lêpê từ cuối thế kỷ thứ 18 mà ngày nay đã số các nước không còn dùng nữa nhưng lại có một số it nước được phát triển và nâng cao lên thành một thứ ngôn ngữ bằng điệu bộ phổ biến cho người điếc với cái tên mới là <gestuno>.

> 'Measuring the great work of l'Épée's school from the last century, now some eighteen countries no longer use this method, but there are some less developed countries who have taken up a gestural language for Deaf people in their countries popularly known as <gestuno>.' (Phạm 1984:212)

Framing GESTURAL LANGUAGE as something foreign to Việt Nam, reference to l'Épée further strengthens Phạm's argument given France's not-too-distant occupation of Việt Nam. The failure of gestural language is further accentuated by France's historic role in the development of signed language pedagogy and its subsequent conversion to speech-based methods,[3] and the claim to its apparent role in under-performing economies.

During the nearly one hundred years separating the establishment of Lái Thiêu and the publication of *Rehabilitation issues for the Deaf*, major social and geopolitical challenges to sovereignty had been confronted and won. French colonialism had been defeated, and after more than two decades of partition, the end of the American War brought independence and national reunification. Literacy in *Quốc ngữ* 'national language' played a significant role in each of these achievements, and shaped deaf education restructuring that followed during the reform period.

Literacy in Quốc ngữ: Nation-state formation and national education

Thorough examination of the precursors to contemporary sociopolitical formation is not possible here (for more extensive accounts, see Marr 1981; Woodside 1989; Tai 1992; Dang Phong & Beresford 1998; Luong 2010). As shown by these materials, institutionalization of *Quốc ngữ* 'national language' was a historic

achievement, as well as an ongoing sociocultural and political economic process with significant impact for contemporary citizenship.

Quốc ngữ is the Romanized writing system for representing spoken Vietnamese. Widely credited to Alexander de Rhodes, a missionary working in Việt Nam in the mid 1600s, Quốc ngữ did not come into widespread use until the French colonial period (Phan 2006). Marr notes, however, that colonial promotion of Quốc ngữ was not conferred out of recognition of its linguistic status but its perceived usefulness "for the transmission of very basic concepts to the colonized masses" (1981:146). Given low enrollment of Vietnamese students in French-controlled education and high rates of illiteracy, Quốc ngữ was not a linguistic practice widely shared by the colonized population.

In the historical context of anticolonial revolutionary activities, popular interest in Quốc ngữ marked a turning point in the collective will to usher in a different sociopolitical order. Marr observes, for example, that after World War I, "a number of educated Vietnamese became excited... about the possibility of advancing their country's destiny primarily by means of language development" (1981:150). Marr continues, "By the 1930's, the idea that Quốc ngữ development and dissemination constituted essential components of the struggle for independence and freedom was part of every radical platform" (Ibid.).

By 1945, language had emerged as such an important concern that the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam made literacy in Quốc ngữ its first war campaign against the French, and the very foundation of national citizenship and sovereignty (see the 'Appeal to fight illiteracy,' Hồ Chí Minh 1977:64–65). Salient to the proper use of Quốc ngữ (hereafter, Vietnamese) is appropriate use of "person-referring forms," which Luong describes as "indexical symbols whose use is linked to the allocation of tangible and intangible resources such as authority and solidarity" (1988:21). Demonstration of socialist citizenship thus foregrounds spoken Vietnamese as an instrument of social obligation, leadership, and popular inspiration.

With the end of colonial rule, the establishment of formal mass education championing Vietnamese language instruction proved effective at ending illiteracy (Woodside 1983:405). In 1959, socialist educational reform then established a "training objective to educate the young generations to be citizens loyal to the Fatherland qualified physically and morally to serve the country," delivery of which was maintained throughout the American war period and later institutionalized in the new national curriculum during the 1981–82 academic year (M. Phạm 1994:30). Content on moral and political citizenship established the core of the compulsory curriculum, followed by standard subject areas (see also Doan 2005).

Political economic reform, social problems, and disability

In the early 1980s, worsening post-war poverty and infrastructural conditions led state officials to begin a process of political and economic reform termed *đổi mới*, often translated as 'renovation' or 'renewal' (1986 to the present). Dang

Phong & Beresford (1998:21) describe this period as one of "statification," whereby the role of the government and legislature expanded to promote decentralization of governance, competitive production domestically, and trade and cooperation externally. With đổi mới the Vietnamese state also began the gradual privatization of education and public services, referred to in Vietnamese as *xã hội hoá*, 'socialization', to indicate the increased role that citizens would play in financially supporting social development activities. Education and training now comprise "the top national policy," particularly for guiding economic development (M. Phạm 2007:278–89).

With the new reform agenda the state also began to implement national campaigns to address social problems. Nguyễn-võ argues that prior to đổi mới, "social problems did not exist in the Leninist mentality of governance" (2008:88); she continues, "what was becoming clear as economic liberalization picked up speed was the need to 'understand' people or 'humans' in their various relations, which became the subject of social sciences starting in the late 1980s" (Ibid.).[4]

Medical description of deafness contributed to the growth of new expert knowledge and corresponding institutions during the early years of đổi mới. However, whereas books such as *Rehabilitation issues for the Deaf* focused attention on deafness as a "một tàn tật hết sức nặng nề", 'severe handicap,' they did not present deafness as an insurmountable obstacle (1984:124). Rather, as Professor Trần Hữu Tước (then Chair of the Ear, Nose and Throat Institute of Việt Nam) wrote in the book's foreword, a "một cuộc cách mạng lởn về khoa học kỹ thuật", 'major revolution in science and technology', would restore hearing and speaking capabilities to Deaf children (K. Phạm 1984:3).

Marking a key cultural change from viewing conditions such as deafness as karmic or moral transgression (Gammeltoft 2008), new classificatory mechanisms nevertheless distinguished *người khuyết tật*, 'disabled persons', from *người bình thường* 'normal persons.' The national curriculum further institutionalized these classifications by training students in "helping the disabled" (Doan 2005:456). Social protection to persons with disability is also addressed in the 1992 National Constitution and subsequent legal mechanisms including the following: 1998 Ordinance on Persons with Disabilities; 1998 Law on Education for Children with Disabilities; 2004 Law on Child Protection, Care, and Education; 2006 Vocational Training Law; 2010 National Disability Law; and the 2012 National Labor Code. Of these, the 2010 National Disability Law is remarkable in its mention of signed language and in stipulating that "người khuyết tật nghe, nói được học bằng ngôn ngữ ký hiệu", 'persons with hearing and speech disabilities may study using sign language' (section 4, article 27, item 3).

Deaf educational restructuring and contemporary Deaf citizenship

From 1886 to 1945, Lái Thiêu (now renamed the Thuận An Center for Education and Training of Disabled Children) was the only deaf education school in Việt Nam,

and was attended by students from all over the country. During partition (1945–1975), there were no deaf education schools in North Việt Nam until after the country's reunification; in 1975, the government established a school in Hải Phòng, followed in 1976 by a second school in Hà Nội (Woodward, Nguyễn, & Nguyễn 2004). In the same period, parents of Deaf children organized to establish the first speech-based special school in Hồ Chí Minh City: Hy vọng Bình Thạnh 'Hope School Bình Thạnh District.' Initially privately subsidized, a relationship with Komitee Twee—a Dutch nongovernmental organization endorsing speech-based educational methods—brought substantial foreign aid and training to the school in the late 1980s. Cooperation between the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and Komitee Twee followed, supporting implementation of a national system of special schools in the model of Hy vọng Bình Thạnh and establishment of special education teacher training. Woodward and colleagues (2004) reported that by the early 2000s the government had established more than fifty speech-based special schools.

Unlike the regular education system, special school education ends at the primary level (Cấp 1; equivalent to US grades 1–5) or, where available, the lower secondary (Cấp 2; equivalent to US grades 6–9). Conducted primarily in spoken and written Vietnamese, students typically repeat grade levels. Special schools are also permitted to modify the national curriculum, substituting subject-area classes with vocational training. In the aggregate, special school students do not complete the full formal national curriculum nor do they graduate from high school. Moreover, as noted earlier, special schools serve only a fraction of Deaf school-age youth.

Recognizing these circumstances, educational leaders sought to expand educational opportunity by promoting 'inclusive education' (giáo dục hòa nhập, or simply, hoà nhập). As it applies to Deaf students, hoà nhập involves placing Deaf students into regular education classrooms, sometimes in combination with attendance at a local special school. In 2004, an evaluation of inclusive education settings in three provinces found improvement in terms of local attitudes toward Deaf students but described communication as "fraught with serious problems," (Reilly & Nguyễn 2004:6); conducted by two educational experts, one from Việt Nam and the other from the United States, the evaluators reported that they "only witnessed one child with hearing loss who shared an effective communication channel with another person" (Ibid.:7). Inclusive education and special school settings are similar in that both settings conduct classes primarily by means of spoken and written Vietnamese. The biggest distinction between the two settings is that Deaf students attending an inclusive education school are typically separated from signing peers. By contrast, Deaf students attending special schools have opportunities for interaction with peers using a Vietnamese signed language. The latter circumstances resemble those described by Reilly & Reilly (2005) as SELF- and PEER-EDUCATION for Thai boarding schools.

It is in this context that linguist James C. Woodward and Nguyễn Thi Hoà, a former special school teacher, established the Đồng Nai Deaf Education Project—

the first and only program to offer coursework at the high school level and above using the local signed language, Hồ Chí Minh City Sign Language (hereafter, HCMC SL). Woodward & Nguyễn (2012:270) report that when they established their project in 2000 they decided to do so independently, as "most government agencies and schools did not feel that Deaf students were able to study at the sixth grade level". Aims of the Đồng Nai Deaf Education Project include demonstrating the effectiveness of using the language of local Deaf people to teach the formal national curriculum, and demonstrating the related cost efficiency to countries with a gross domestic product similar to that of Việt Nam (Woodward et al. 2004). Evaluation of project outcomes have been extremely positive, with several hundred students completing 6th through 12th grade coursework, ten of whom continued on to earn the equivalent of associates of arts degrees in 2010. Of that group, one cohort of nine students earned undergraduate degrees in Early Childhood Education in August 2012.[5]

In 2008, students of the Đồng Nai Deaf Education Project established the Câu lạc bộ Văn hoá người Điếc Tp. Hồ Chí Minh 'Deaf Culture Club of Hồ Chí Minh City' to promote Deaf leadership and community development, signed language teaching, and cooperation with other Deaf clubs to build support for national recognition of Vietnamese Deaf cultural associations. Now in its fifth year, the Deaf Culture Club also sponsors and participates in events with local special-school personnel to promote understanding and acceptance of Vietnamese signed languages.

INSIGHTS FROM HỒ CHÍ MINH CITY SIGN LANGUAGE FOR SOCIOPOLITICAL FORMATION AND CHANGE

In this section I examine three claims from HCMC SL. According to Woodward (2000), there are three major varieties of Vietnamese signed language; HCMC SL is the variety used by Deaf people living in and around Hồ Chí Minh City. Drawn from individual and group interviews with twenty-five Deaf adults, all of the interviewees had attended a special school (twenty-one of twenty-five attended a school in the research sample), nineteen attended deaf education into adulthood, and eight were also founding members and leaders of a local Deaf culture club. HCMC SL-based claims are further contextualized through data drawn from interviews with former special-school personnel.

My rationale for selecting these particular examples is informed by the frequency with which Deaf signers instantiated these particular linguistic forms across interviews, in relation to explicit evaluation of their social conditions, and for which they used HCMC SL and Deaf socialization practices as the basis for evaluation. Thompson & Hunston (2000:5) define evaluation as the "expression of the speaker or writer's attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about" (see also Fairclough 2003 and Du Bois 2007 for sociolinguistic perspectives on stancetaking).

Reproducing the sociopolitical order: The example of
|nodding-as-if-understanding|[6]

In descriptions of special-school experiences, Deaf interviewees commonly remarked that they did not understand the communication used by special school teachers and that they typically responded to such communication by |nodding-as-if-understanding|. As shown in Figure 1,[7] this sign is produced as follows: the signer's right hand maintains an open-palm configuration as it moves along a forward-back trajectory depicting nodding of the head, while the left forearm and palm orient down, depicting a flat surface. Body position and head orientation are suggestive of a student seated at a school desk looking up at a teacher. Facial expression depicts the condition of "eyes glazed over," while the position of the tongue indicates negative evaluation of the experience of |nodding-as-if-understanding|.

Deaf interviewees explained that when they were younger they often strained to understand teachers by using lip-reading techniques. Lip-reading spoken Vietnamese is complicated by the fact that, as a tonal language, tones and tone patterns do not have visual counterparts. Thus, by the time they reached the upper-primary grades, failing to comprehend teacher communication had become so routinized that they simply waited for class to end so they could socialize with their peers in signed language. |Nodding-as-if-understanding| thus describes the practice of feigning comprehension by literally nodding their heads to whatever teachers said. This sign is also used to represent an internal state of resignation to one's circumstances.

Deaf narratives reached consensus that use of HCMC SL in the special schools (i) was prohibited, (ii) resulted in disciplining, and (iii) prompted school personnel to discourage students' families from using signed language at home. Interviewee narratives also reached consensus that use of speech (i) was rewarded (e.g.

FIGURE 1. HCMC SL for |nodding-as-if-understanding|.

garnering teacher approval), and (ii) resulted in opportunities outside the special school (e.g. employment). Teacher narratives are consistent with these circumstances, as the comments of a former special-school teacher illustrate below.

> If I saw them sign I would say, "no, don't sign." I would ask them, "no, don't sign." And, yes, I remember some [students]—when they come to class, and they have to learn some story—when I asked them to come speak for me [in front of the class] and they do like this (shows fingerspelling behind back). I would get angry and say, "no signing!"[8]

Teacher disciplining of signed language was one of the most common themes appearing across the data sample. Below, Công's[9] remarks provide some context for teacher disciplining and student attempts to do what is "good".

> |So from 7:30 to 9 o'clock in the morning we sat at our desks and used speech. The teacher would ask each of us to stand up independently and read clearly. When did we always signed discreetly as we read aloud…. That's how we would memorize the lesson, by signing. So when we got up to demonstrate, we always signed whatever we said aloud. Always one hand moving, from the wrist down. The teachers never saw us signing; they weren't paying attention to our hands, just our voices. Outside the classroom we [students] always signed with each other, and anytime a teacher came by, we would hasten to stop signing, hoping not to be caught. Because we had learned from signing to each other in the past that the teachers would always approach us and say, "you are supposed to speak, not sign; signing is not good."[10] We would say to the teachers, (looking doubtful) "speaking is good?" (they: yes!). So we tried that—just speaking to each other. But it's impossible!!! (laughs). I would sign [to classmate]: "Did you understand me?" And they would answer, "no, nothing." Then we would sign… until the teachers came along again… This happened every day, repeatedly, on and on, until they couldn't control for it. There was nothing they could do but let the Deaf do whatever they want. We are (fingerspells) "Điếc tủy" (Deaf to the marrow)|

Công's narrative indicates that even when foregoing HCMC SL resulted in lack of understanding, Deaf students attempted to follow teacher instructions in order to be obedient. |Nodding-as-if-understanding| thus involves a strategy of accommodation to an inaccessible linguistic tradition in order to participate in the moral and social universe of the school and, by extension, Vietnamese society.

|Nodding-as-if-understanding| also applied to instances where school principals and teachers spoke Vietnamese in combination with signs (sign supported speech)—a practice documented for each of the five special schools in my research sample. These practices connect to school personnel's stated expectation that students should either speak Vietnamese or sign in a manner corresponding to the grammatical structure of Vietnamese. They also connect to Deaf interviewee reports of signing in "|Vietnamese word order|" when in the special school setting. Space does not permit detailed discussion of the ways HCMC SL and spoken Vietnamese differ in terms of modality and structure; for this the reader is referred to Woodward (2000, 2003) and Woodward & Nguyễn (2012). It will suffice to say that if spoken Vietnamese is in use, HCMC SL is not.

Despite student attempts to accommodate the structure of spoken Vietnamese in their signed interactions with school personnel, school principals from three of the five special schools in my sample described student signing as not "proper" because it did not correspond sufficiently to Vietnamese grammar.[11] School principals referred to such signing as *ngược* 'opposite or backwards' and also to students

themselves as *người điếc ngược* 'lit. person + Deaf + opposite or backwards.' Notwithstanding such negative labeling, school principals insisted on the intelligence of Deaf students and readily remarked on the complexity of fluent signing as a basis for this evaluation.

The comments of one former special-school principal—who at the time of the interview was the director of an inclusive education center—provide further context for teacher attitudes about Vietnamese signed languages.

> As you know, when there is some new idea, it is often very popular—and nowadays, the people [general public] know about sign language. But MOET thinks that it is not the right way for Việt Nam to use sign language. For example, MOET… they have some books about sign language.[12] But it's very difficult to study that. How can people learn sign from the book? ... And it is just pictures of signs, pictures of hands. Just vocabulary. No grammar…. So the people who see this book think that sign language is very simple. And it is not.

Contextualized by this interviewee's decades-long career working for MOET (Ministry of Education and Training), this evaluation includes a historically deep view of deaf education. Reference to "sign language" not being the "right way for Việt Nam" also places |nodding-as-if-understanding| in broader context of debates about contemporary demands on socialist education (Doan 2005), and educational design for a competitive workforce (Nguyễn 2004).

Self-determination versus charity: The examples of |in-retrospect| and |social inclusion|

Whether describing their experiences within special schools, adult deaf education, a Deaf cultural club, or work aspirations, notions of self-determination were frequently invoked and used as a measure of experience. The sign most commonly used in connection with a self-aware form of self-determination was |tự nhìn lại mình|, 'in retrospect.' Shown in Figure 2a, the sign begins with both hands near the eyes, with contact between each thumb and forefinger creating a configuration suggesting the shape of the eyes. The sign then completes, as shown in Figure 2b, after both hands have moved in an arcing path bringing the "eyes" toward the upper torso. Metaphoric for the self and looking inward, this sign symbolizes the concept of retrospection.

The meaning of this sign is clarified by looking at Tấn's comparison of the institutional opportunities he encountered in a special school versus those he encountered as an adult deaf education student:

> |At school [special school] I used to talk with the teachers in Vietnamese. They always told me I could speak well. So anytime we had a school ceremony with visitors the teachers would pick me to read something for the audience. I signed with students too. I did both. But I thought speaking was better. The teachers said we should speak. When I came here [adult deaf education] and learned about sign language and Deaf people, I |in retrospect| realized that, at [special school] they didn't teach me about being Deaf. They just rewarded me when I talked like them|.

Here, RETROSPECTION articulates within an ideological universe that prominently foregrounds not only individual insight, but a complex form of collective self-awareness:
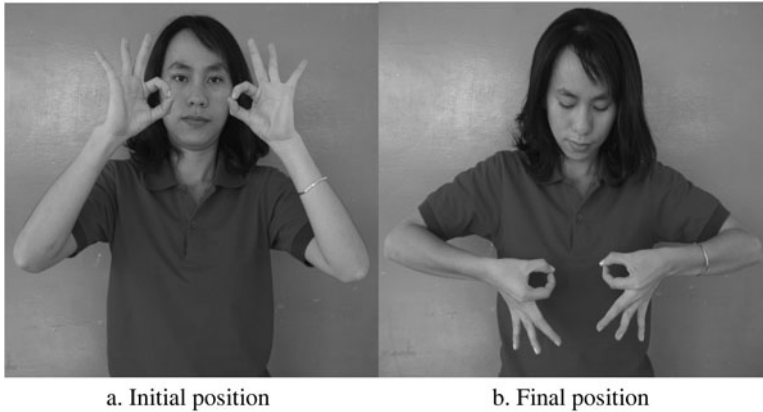
a. Initial position   b. Final position

FIGURE 2. |tự nhìn lại mình| 'in retrospect.'

awareness as a Deaf person and user of a Vietnamese signed language yet in context of non-Deaf Vietnamese persons. Therefore, the full meaning of the sign contains additional meaning not found in the Vietnamese expression *tự nhìn lại mình*.

Another example clarifies this embedding of Deaf insight in non-Deaf sociality—this time drawn from participant observation in a meeting of a Deaf culture club. Below Lê evaluates the "opinions" of hearing people to posit |in retrospect| as an activity in which social transformation is implicit.

> |We all had the experience of teachers telling us sign language is bad—we internalized that. But sign language is the language of Deaf people. If hearing people see Deaf and hearing people communicating in sign language, then they will have to | [use] retrospection| and reevaluate their opinion of [Vietnamese] sign language. In the future, society will change when hearing people see that Deaf people who sign can be a part of society|.

Describing an imagined situation in which "|hearing people|" might use retrospection to reevaluate their own perspectives and attitudes, the potential for insight is further framed as contingent upon Vietnamese Deaf people's social circulation of signed language. Thus, it is Deaf insight into and use of their own languages that leads to social change.

When asked about the approach to social change found in institutions such as special schools and rehabilitation, several Deaf interviewees referred to these approaches as |*từ thiện*| 'charity.' Deaf people are commonly invited to attend charity ceremonies at the Vietnamese New Year (*Tết*) and other holidays. During such ceremonies, the *Hội Bảo Trợ* 'government patronage association' or other host organization dispenses small sums of cash in the range of approximately US $3 to $5 (50.000 to 100.000 VNĐ) along with small gifts, including snacks, toiletries, clothing, and other items (see Figures 3a,b).[13] By definition, these settings lack opportunities for retrospection.

a. Audience   b. Charity bags

FIGURE 3. Eighth Annual Assembly Festival.

Lê described acts of *từ thiện* 'charity' as an expression of the |*quan điểm*| (finger-spelled; 'perspective' or 'point-of-view'), exemplified by certain special-school personnel and other |hearing people|.

> |When they *từ thiện* they also *an ủi* ('console'; negative affect accompanying the sign for *an ủi* suggests 'pity'). They think they are consoling us for our problem. But being Deaf is not a problem. Not allowing us to use sign language in school is a problem. Not allowing us to contribute to Việt Nam by working is a problem|.

When asked about the relationship between |*từ thiện*| and |*an ủi*|, five interviewees evaluated the former as a product of the latter. These interviewees juxtaposed |*an ủi*| with |*bảo vệ*| 'protection,' also rejecting the notion of charity as a form of social protection. One interviewee stated, "|Protection means that you respect the experience and the perspective of the person, their culture, their language, and you do something to support their independence. Protection is about fairness|." Fairness connects to a national discursive field, not simply through description of state-sponsored charity events, but more broadly to the egalitarian socialist project. Two interviewees remarked that charity ceremonies would be fair if they |had sign language interpreters|.

Evaluations of CHARITY suggest that Vietnamese Deaf persons see the latter as involving forms of exclusion, yet that they also see them as available to transformation VIA FULL PARTICIPATION IN HCMC SL. Such participation is described with the sign |social inclusion| (see Figures 4a,b).

|Social inclusion| (*hòa nhập xã hội*) is a construction involving two signs. The first sign (Figure 4a) symbolizes the concept of society. The second sign (Figure 4b) symbolizes the concept of being included, with the initial position establishing an object in a location in space to the signer's right that then moves into the final position "inside" the signer's opposing hand. |Social inclusion| is observed in narratives such as Lê's first narrative above (this section): "|society will change when hearing people see that Deaf people who sign can be a part of society|." In the

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a. Initial sign, |xã hội| 'society'   b. Final sign, |hòa nhập| 'inclusion'
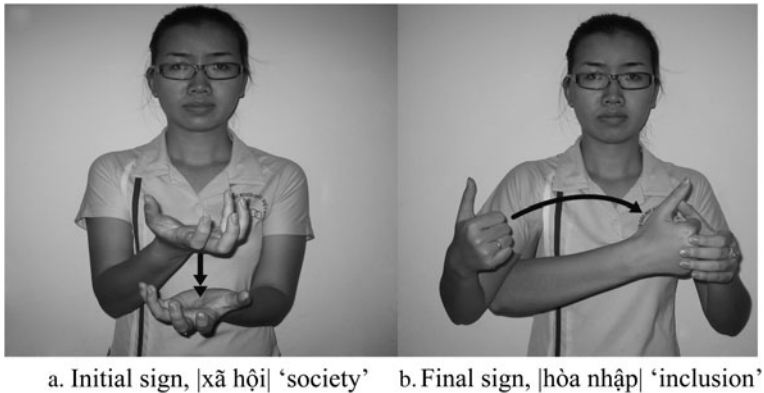
FIGURE 4. |Social inclusion|.

latter, being part of society involves social acceptance of Vietnamese Deaf persons and signed languages, leading to positive social change.

During the research period reference to |social inclusion| was a common feature of discourse among the Deaf persons I interviewed, as well as those encountered in the various research sites. The primary way interviewees sought to achieve social inclusion was through official recognition of HCMC SL—which they clearly described as a Vietnamese cultural endowment. Asserting a place within the system of hierarchies governed by the state implicitly reinforces the legitimacy of those hierarchies even as claiming HCMC SL as a Vietnamese language implicitly challenges the established linguistic and ideological foundation of such hierarchies.

Whereas interviewees commonly referenced acceptance of HCMC SL (and Vietnamese signed languages broadly) as the basis for |social inclusion|, such references were often framed as HAVING NOT OCCURRED YET or something that MIGHT HAPPEN IN THE FUTURE. Thus, whereas interviewees described their own potential to |contribute to society|, social conditions had yet to allow them to make such contributions.

SIGNED LANGUAGE CLAIMS AND THEIR SOCIOPOLITICAL MEANINGS

In examining one subset of signed language-based claims relative to sociopolitical formation we can observe the following: that sociopolitical formation in Việt Nam manifests in certain linguistic criteria in the contemporary moment, and that Vietnamese Deaf people are responding to such criteria with citizenship aspirations related to signed language usage. According to the analysis presented, each of the claims examined reflect on social, political, and/or economic circumstances encountered by Deaf people in contemporary Việt Nam. Each of the claims also

reflects on linguistic awareness and practices connected to these circumstances, particularly the negotiation of ideological assumptions about HCMC SL.

|Nodding-as-if-understanding| is an example of a claim evidencing accommodation to and reaction regarding settings that privilege spoken Vietnamese. That is, narratives invoking this sign describe situations involving the performance of proper social conduct, as well as critique of this very arrangement. Its use therefore directs attention to a view of citizens-in-the-making that places demands on Deaf students to listen with the ears and speak with the mouth for full citizenship participation. Such requirements recall Agamben's INCLUSIVE EXCLUSION in that Deaf people's participation in such settings is contingent on the exclusion of one of the most valued aspects of southern Vietnamese Deaf experience: use of HCMC SL.

By contrast, |in retrospect| and |social inclusion| describe an ideological universe in which negative assumptions about Vietnamese signed languages and Deaf people must change in order for society to change. Deaf interviewees identify special schools as a primary origin point for such assumptions; thus, these interviewees do not attribute special-school personnel with the possibility of change, but rather the average hearing person who "|sees Deaf and hearing people communicating in sign|." However, the capacity for hearing people to come to new social awareness derives from Deaf people's social circulation of HCMC SL. Therefore, these two claims not only critique social conditions, but posit an affirmative approach to sociopolitical change based in familiarity with and use of Vietnamese signed languages.

Viewed through a linguistic and sociopolitical lens, the multilingual vision of social change articulated by this subset of Vietnamese Deaf commentators is one not yet available in Vietnamese special education or disability frameworks. HCMC SL has not been officially recognized, nor has it been granted an official role in any state institution. Therefore, to the extent that a cohort of nine Deaf adults have recently earned undergraduate degrees in early childhood education, it has yet to be assessed whether these newly credentialed Deaf teachers will undergo |social inclusion| in the ways that their training prepared them.

From the perspective of signed language as a compensatory system for spoken language, the chances that MOET will further restructure the special-school system to allow teachers to use a Vietnamese signed language as the instructional modality is highly unlikely—particularly where special-school mandates demand that Deaf children use spoken Vietnamese. From the perspective of signed language as a national cultural and linguistic resource, however, there are early signs that Deaf teachers will be welcomed into special-school classrooms. MOET has already approved the employment of two Deaf teachers to work in one special school in Hồ Chí Minh City. As of summer 2012, all of the twenty Vietnamese Deaf research participants with whom I conducted follow-up research also described current circumstances as "|more open to sign language|." Indeed, the appearance of Deaf, signed language-centered commentaries in a national newspaper, such as the one discussed in the introduction to the article, indicates a shift in language attitude and related sociopolitical circumstances compared with even the prior decade.

While the ethnographic details of the HCMC SL materials are certainly intriguing, it is reasonable to question what makes them, or any claim instantiated in a signed language, among the more useful entry points to the analysis of sociopolitical formation and change. I have attempted to answer this question by showing: how decisions regarding the education of Deaf people and signed language have been made in one national location; how these decisions can be traced in relation to certain structural opportunities and ideological sentiment; and, how the practices of one subset of signed language users reflect and respond to these circumstances.

As shown by these materials, Vietnamese Deaf language practices and language-centered organizing offer unique ways of "reimagining the nation-state and the role of minority languages and cultures within it" (May 2008:233). Moreover, these practices seem to be having the effect of emergent positive recognition of Vietnamese signed languages and of Vietnamese Deaf people as legitimate agents of social and national development. Two implications follow from this analysis. Deaf people who use signed languages are likely at a disadvantage for sociopolitical self-determination wherever signed language is ignored. Ethnographic description of Deaf people's linguistic perspectives is therefore warranted for understanding Deaf social positions, as well as for clarifying how particular sociopolitical projects come into being and how these projects change.

NOTES

[1]In North Atlantic deaf-related scholarship it has been standard practice to use a classification device of D/d to distinguish deaf persons according to cultural-linguistic and audiological designations, respectively. In recent years, debates over the use of D/d question this device, including researcher legitimacy in determining D/d statuses. In the Vietnamese case, Deaf research participants argued for use of the capitalized form of *Điếc* 'Deaf' much like ethnic group categories are marked by capitalization in Việt Nam. For this reason, I capitalize Điếc and Deaf throughout the article.

[2]This iteration of the Vietnamese Household Living Standards Survey was the most comprehensive census to date and the first to survey disability (according to four categories of hearing, vision, intellectual, and physical). Findings showed a disability prevalence substantially higher than all previous estimates: 15.3% or 12,867,300 persons (out of an estimated 84.1 million total population in 2006). The category *khuyết tật về khả năng nghe* (lit. 'disability in hearing ability,' or 'hearing disability') estimated

3.3% of the total population, or 2,775,300 persons, has some kind of hearing disability (section 2, part 4.25).

[3]This (uneven) conversion took place in accordance with the 1880 "Milan decree" banning the use of signed languages in deaf education (issued by the Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf).

[4]Internal quotes are the remarks of Trần Độ, "a high-ranking party official at the start of economic liberalization" (Nguyễn-võ 2008:88).

[5]See Woodward & Nguyễn (2012) for a detailed description of project implementation and outcomes, including training subject-area teachers in the use of HCMC SL and Deaf participation in project decision-making.

[6]There is no standard way to represent signed languages in print; in this article I use flat brackets to indicate concepts expressed via one or more signs.

[7]With the exception of Figures 3a,b, all persons appearing in Figures 1 through 4 are HCMC SL language models (i.e. not taken from interview footage).

[8]A note about treatment of interview texts: After conducting interviews with Deaf research participants using HCMC SL, I transcribed each interview into English and reviewed my translation with interviewees for accuracy. Interview data drawn from HCMC SL is presented in English, except where interviewees emphasized a particular Vietnamese word. Interview data from hearing research participants are drawn only from interviews conducted in English.

[9]All names are pseudonyms, selected by the research participants themselves.

[10]In a survey I conducted with former special-school students for the dissertation project, all forty-seven respondents reported that special-school teachers had ordered them to "stop signing" in the classroom setting.

[11]The two remaining school principals did not use sign language.

[12]In the early 2000s MOET produced three books titled *Signs of Deaf people in Vietnam: Book one* (followed by *Book two* and *Book three*) containing signs from HCMC SL, Hà Nội Sign Language, Hải Phòng Sign Language, and "common sign." According to the school personnel with whom I interacted, these books have neither been widely disseminated nor accompanied by training.

[13]Held in 2009 in Hồ Chí Minh City, the official title of the assembly festival was Lễ Hội Cây mùa nhân ái, xuân kỷ sửu thứ VIII 'Eighth Annual Assembly Festival, Season of Giving, Year of the Water Buffalo.'

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