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## Enacting Dependence

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By Sharon S. Marie

One summer evening while I was conducting fieldwork on sign language interpreting in Hanoi, Vietnam, the board members of the Hanoi Deaf Cultural Group (HDCG<sup>1</sup>), all of whom are Deaf<sup>2</sup>, and Chi, a hearing Ha Noi Sign Language (HNSL<sup>3</sup>) interpreter, gathered around a long wooden table at one of Hanoi's many upscale coffee shops. As people settled in, Chi set up her computer at the head of the table, clearly directing the meeting. While I had initially assumed Chi was there to take notes, or interpret for a hearing person, it turned out she was introducing a project she had designed to teach Vietnamese architects about Deaf Space, the practice of designing spaces for Deaf users. Chi had done extensive research on Deaf Space<sup>4</sup>, and was here to share this knowledge with HDCG leaders, and ask for their assistance in educating hearing architects about the topic.

While sign language interpreting studies, which has largely been centered in the global north, has traditionally focused on the role of interpreters during interpreted interactions, HNSL interpreters spend much of their time directly engaged in advocacy work with deaf people, rather than interpreting. This raises important questions for disability studies and deaf studies scholars about how deaf people and interpreters negotiate their relationality. As disabled and non-disabled people work together on long-term advocacy projects, it requires navigating issues of agency and privilege, and building trust to create what Simplican refers to as “thick alliance” (2015). But what glue holds such thick alliances together? How is trust built and maintained as deaf people and interpreters engage in activism?

Maintaining thick alliances requires hearing interpreters to navigate a host of competing expectations, as Chi did that night. On one hand, through her advocacy work Chi was complying with the local expectation that interpreters “love” or “have heart for” (TRÁI TIM<sup>5</sup>) Deaf people. In the context of HNSL interpreting, loving Deaf people means cultivating close personal connections with Deaf people, and participating in Deaf activism. Yet on the other hand, Chi's leadership activities of designing the project and teaching Deaf people about Deaf Space risked being perceived as impinging on Deaf people's agency. According to accepted norms in Hanoi, interpreters are supposed to let Deaf people take the lead in Deaf

activism only assisting from the normative positions of BELOW and BEHIND. Being BELOW and BEHIND entails prioritizing Deaf leaders' decisions, having Deaf people run all HNSL related organizations, and even having interpreters introduce themselves last in social situations.

That night I watched Chi navigate these expectations through a process I have come to think of as enacting dependence, demonstrating that even as she took the lead in this project, she in fact depended on Deaf people to be able to do her work. Although Chi had applied for the grant, picked the topic, and organized the conference, she started her presentation by stressing that Deaf people needed to be the voice of Deaf advocacy. She formally invited HDCG to give the keynote speech, explaining that HDCG would be listed as a co-sponsor, and their logo prominently displayed on the event's banner. Chi's offer was greeted with enthusiasm by the Deaf leaders, particularly around displaying HDCG's logo, which legitimated the Deaf association as an author of the event (in the Goffmanian sense). In doing so, Chi recognized that she, like all hearing interpreters, was dependent on Deaf leaders to conduct advocacy work. HDCG describes itself as "an independent, representative voice for the Deaf community in Hanoi and Vietnam."<sup>6</sup> Although interpreters are crucial for translating this "voice" into speech, Deaf people and interpreters insist Deaf people should be the primary advocates.

After establishing HDCG'S main role in the event, Chi then moved into a lesson on Deaf space, enumerating its many architectural features (i.e. extra wide hallways for signing while walking, doorbells rigged to lights). The lesson was generally well received, yet when Chi used the sign ENVIRONMENT, the meeting exploded into side conversations about the correct sign for the concept. "Where is the sign ENVIRONMENT from?" asked one Deaf leader, in an accusatory tone that implied Chi had made it up. I could feel the tension as all eyes turned to Chi to see how she would respond to the accusation. Interpreters making up signs is highly taboo in Hanoi, as Deaf people are seen as the primary owners of sign language, and the only people who can invent new HNSL signs. There is a constant fear among Deaf leaders that hearing people will not recognize that Deaf people had "given them the gift of sign," and would go off and teach sign language on their own, without Deaf people.

"I didn't make it up!" protested Chi, "Deaf people use it." "It's a southern sign" explained Cam, HDCG's president, who knew Ho Chi Minh City Sign Language (HCMC SL). The tension seemed to dissipate, and participants went back to discussion the slides. A few minutes later, Chi suggested a way for the keynote speaker to cite statistics, demonstrating in mock formal HNSL. But she was curtly interrupted by another Deaf leader, "You are using a lot of incorrect signs; you need to fix it." Again, all eyes turned towards Chi and I saw several Deaf leaders

raise their eyebrows at each other. “I’m sorry,” Chi apologized, “Deaf people taught me, but I mixed the signs up.” She let a Deaf leader teach her the correct signs and dutifully practiced them. I joined in the lesson, asking the sign for MINISTRY. With the two hearing people successfully schooled, the tension dissipated, and the meeting resumed.

In both of these cases, Chi was accused of overstepping the bounds of BELOW and BEHIND, and acting like she “owned” sign language, inventing signs, and suggesting the proper way to sign something. In each case, Chi worked to resolve the tension by highlighting that her sign language knowledge originated from Deaf people. She emphasized that Deaf people had taught her the signs, foregrounded her ineptitude in mixing up signs, and even let one of the leaders give her an impromptu lesson, enacting her dependence on Deaf people in the moment.

Deaf people and interpreters in Vietnam explain their ability to work together as a matter of collaboration and mutual support. As Deaf activists frequently reminded me, Deaf people taught interpreters sign language, and advocated for the growth of interpreting as a field, and in return interpreters provided Deaf people with interpreting. This bi-directional support and collaboration is similar to discourses of interdependence used by many disability scholars and activists around the globe (Shakespeare 2000; Nishida 2016).

However, through watching HNSL interpreters and deaf people collaborate in activism I came to see such interdependence not as a structural relationship of fixed needs, but as something that had to be actively preformed to maintain working relationships and collaboration. Deaf peoples’ dependence was seen as tacit, and often strategically downplayed. For example, one Deaf leader spent nearly 10 minutes of an interview explaining that while Deaf people might sometimes need interpreting, interpreters and deaf people are “equal” because interpreters also need Deaf people (as sign instructors and advocates). Conversely HNSL interpreters’ dependence had to be enacted, highlighted and brought into existence in the moment, especially when interpreters were perceived as at risk of overstepping their bounds. In other words, interpreters enacting dependence was the “glue” that built trust and held this thick alliance together.

Paying attention to the way dependence is enacted can help shed new light on the way disabled and non-disabled people relate to each other and engage in shared activism together. But it can also elucidate the reasons non-disabled people can come to value and emphasize their own dependence. After Chi repeatedly demonstrated that she was dependent on Deaf people, the meeting took on a decidedly different tone. The Deaf leaders began joking about ways they would pull the wool over the eyes of

the hearing architects with their smooth talking and slick presentation. Chi was permitted to join in the joking, demonstrating how the keynote speaker could convince the hearing architects using humorously exaggerated HNSL signs. In other words, Chi was afforded a kind of belonging, which Gammeloft describes as “intensely precarious accomplishment” of becoming “embedded in collective fields of being” (Gammeloft 2014, 231, 9). Precarious belonging captures the often-fought process of securing a place in a group, family or community. It was precisely through enacting their dependence that HNSL interpreters were afforded a place in Vietnam’s Deaf movement, that they came, however tenuously, to belong.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used for all organizations and people mentioned in this article.

<sup>2</sup> My informants prefer Deaf/ ?i?c capitalized to emphasize that all Deaf people (regardless of linguistic upbringing) are a “cultural group,” and do not distinguish between d/Deaf people. I use this terminology to respect and accurately reflect my informants’ claims. For thoughtful critiques of using d/Deaf in writing see Friedner and Kusters 2015; Kusters, O’Brien, and Meulder 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Woodward (2000) argues there are at least three distinct sign languages in Vietnam: Hanoi Sign Language (HNSL), Ho Chi Minh City Sign Language (HCMC SL), and Hai Phong Sign Language (HPSL) .

<sup>4</sup> I refer here to the architectural movement originating from Gallaudet university (“DeafSpace” n.d.), not the broader use of the concept of Deaf space in Deaf studies.

<sup>5</sup> HNSL signs are in small caps.

<sup>6</sup>

“M?t t? ch?c ??c l?p, ??i di?n ti?ng nói cho c?ng ??ng ng??i ?i?c ? Hà N ?i và VN” (HDCG’s facebook profile).

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*“[Disability from the South: Toward a Lexicon](#)” is a series edited by Michele Friedner and Tyler Zoanni. Contributors in this series consider what changes in theorizations of disability when research is located in places marked “Southern” and offer reconfigurations of keywords and concepts typically utilized in the study of disability.*

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