

Rearticulating culture in a place in-between: Exploring the multimodal experiences of hearing mothers and their deaf children

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Culture has been commonly understood as something we “have”, acquired through membership in a community rather than something socio-ideologically situated that we “do” bodily in and through language. Through videotaped interviews with hearing mothers of deaf children discussing their language experiences in the visual world of their deaf child, I attempt to shape an emergent notion of culture as a site of struggle that includes multiple modes of communication via speech, sign, and sensory production.

I aim to tell a story—a story of hearing mothers and their children who are situated in a unique in-between space—between modalities, languages, and ideologies. In their stories we find contradiction. On one hand, we see the ideological pull of English and hearingness that underpins these language-learning practices, and, on the other, we see the mothers struggle to hold on to the visual and sensory connections they have with their child. I begin by sharing the voices of the mothers I interviewed as they paint a picture of what it means to be a hearing mother of a deaf child.

I’d like to make a brief side note about the background I bring to my research. I am what you call a CODA or “child of deaf adult.” Both my mother and father are deaf and my younger sisters and I are all hearing. Roughly, nine out of ten deaf children are born to hearing parents and most deaf couples have hearing children; thus, these places of being in-between are a common experience in the deaf-hearing world and an experience that resonates with me and affords a particular lens to my research.

The voices of hearing mothers of deaf children

Mother G describes this in-between place as a place where she and her deaf daughter learn language together, “Wow, we got this...we’re learning this new thing, this new world, this new whole language...it’s exciting. And knowing that someone else would learn it along with me...” Similarly, mother S looks at her experience in a positive light. She reframes what the hearing discourse understands as “loss” to a “gain” for her, which provides her a communication avenue to a visual world. She explains, “I look at his hearing loss as a blessing...a blessing in disguise. Because if it weren’t for his hearing loss I probably would have never learned sign language.”

Yet, common to all the mothers was an articulation of the larger “Deaf culture” as exterior to their experiences, as something not their own and almost inaccessible. Mother T explains, “I have a lot to learn about the deaf culture.” And Mother M states, “It’s intimidating...you know...going to those Deaf events.” Here we understand the “the” in “the Deaf Culture” the “those” in “those deaf events” as indexing an exteriority or a distance to deafness although their own children are deaf. Despite this external indexing, mother T later reflects on the exciting process of learning a visual language together, in which the child, a 5 year old, takes the lead. Mother T explains what happens when she and her son do not know a sign, “If he’s not sure and I’m not sure, he’ll go get the dictionary. Let’s look it up, Mommy!”

Mother M exposes us to the complexities experienced while situated in this in-between place; In her explanation of why she chooses to have her son use a hearing device, she helps us understand the deep emotional tug between both worlds. She reflects, “I understood where they (*“they” referring to those who choose not to use hearing devices*) were coming from. Why can’t you accept him as he is? And, you know, you are always trying to be accepted in life...and which, you know, I understand that, but at the same time, I didn’t live it. I am in a hearing world and that’s what I want for my child. But, I am not taking away the fact that he is deaf. I want him to be able to function in both worlds.”

Re-articulating Culture

In these places of contradiction—where larger ideological constraints certainly inform but do not really match up with the everyday language practices—how are we to understand “culture”? A closer look at the hearing mothers and their deaf children’s experiences illustrate that culture is something we “do” bodily in and through language and includes multiple modes of meaning making.

By “multimodal” I refer to various semiotic resources we draw upon in interaction via speech, sign, and sensory means. In particular, building on the work of McNeill’s (1992) co-speech gestures (simultaneously blending gesture and speech) and Petitto et al.’s (2001) code-blends (simultaneously blending sign and speech), I am interested in the usage of what I call “mode-blending”—using sign, speech, and sensory modes together—making it different from both co-speech gesture and code-blends because it includes a sensory dimension and encompasses both co-speech gestures and code-blends; thus, the concept mode-blending is perhaps best applicable to multilingual-modal contexts. Also different from previous research in this area, is my attempt to understand modality beyond just linguistic meaning but also in relation to subject positioning in interactions.

Research questions

I began the interview process with the following large brushstroke questions in mind in regards to the visual learning experience of the mothers:

1. What does it mean to become a “hearing mother of a deaf child”? In particular, how are parents’ identities shaped through language and how do parents carve their own sense of self through their language practices? What is the relationship between the use of multiple modalities and identity processes?
2. How do my participants articulate “culture” and do “culture” through their language learning interactions with their deaf child?
3. What role does modality play in these meaning-making processes?

Admittedly, my initial questions covered a vast landscape and my data confirms a need to continue exploring these questions. In practice, we will see the means in which the children, teachers, and parents gravitate towards making meaning in multimodal ways—undermining the English-only path they are supposedly on. Hearing parents are trying to engage in the visual world of their child at the same time they are desperately trying to bring their child into their own hearing world. Children teach parents new signs while parents weave together the signs they know with both English and their home languages.

The language learning experiences of these hearing parents and deaf kids are often left out of the larger second language learning narrative despite ASL being cited as the fifth or sixth most-used language in the United States. (Lane et al., 2006) In addition, it should be noted that children in my data are being facilitated into their second language, English, without having full access to American Sign Language, arguably their first language.

“Culture”

All too often culture is seen as fixed, stable categories—for instance, in an SLA context we speak of the C1 and C2—associated with fixed cultural identities and languages. Secondly, culture in a language-learning context is sometimes understood without struggle or struggle is glossed over as differences. In this view, culture is devoid of what Bakhtin (1981) calls heteroglossia, a multiplicity of discourses underpinned with push and pull ideological forces. A third common notion of culture that does not fit my data is the idea that culture is acquired through a linear expert-novice relationship (e.g., teacher-student or parent-student relationships), as for instance, commonly expressed through some language

socialization frameworks. And, finally, language examined in cultural processes is most often rooted in verbal and auditory modes with little attention to the embodied ways we make meaning.

Project

The larger project I am engaged in is an ethnographic, critical discourse analytic study exploring the use of bimodality in multilingual/multimodal interactions at a preschool for deaf and hard of hearing children in the San Francisco Bay area. In terms of the larger project, the three components of the school I am focusing on are as follows: The first component is exploring the multimodal interactions in the classroom in relation to identity processes. The second component is the language interactions in what is called the “family sign language class” made up of mostly mothers. And the third component is an interview component with the mothers of the children. For the BLC project, I conducted 6 videotaped interviews with the mothers, each about 20-30 minutes long. In addition, I will present one language interaction from the classroom to better contextualize the interview data with the mothers of the children.

Site

The school at my site is a federally funded early education program that serves students age 0-5 who have hearing loss or speech and language(s) delays. I have been volunteering as a teacher’s aid for nearly 4 years at this site and I continue to fulfill this role while videotaping classroom interactions and thus I consider myself a participant observer and an object of my own study.

Language Approach

The preschool encourages a bimodal approach to language development. Students initially use mostly signs to communicate. Then, as students’ speech develops and sound becomes recognizable with the assistance of cochlear implant devices (CIs), an electronic hearing device surgically implanted, they begin to communicate with a mixture of English and sign. The manual sign system employed at this school is called Signing-Exact-English or SEE Sign. The Signing Exact English sign system draws on borrowed and modified signs from ASL, as well as invented signs that attempt to correspond directly to English grammar and vocabulary. Thus, one can liken SEE Sign to a communication strategy following the linear grammar of English and *not* a language like ASL which has its own distinct structure and grammar.

Participants

Six of seven children in the classroom are deaf and one child is hearing. The hearing child has apraxia and thus has difficulty physically producing speech and

relies on signs and verbal approximations for communication. All the deaf children use hearing devices and 5 out of 6 have cochlear implants. In addition, one rotating hearing role model, a student from the “hearing” preschool across the courtyard, is present daily. Despite being the “native speaker” model, he/she is expected to use sign alongside the deaf kids. All the head teachers at the site have a background in ASL or Deaf Studies although they use Signing Exact English they use Signing Exact English Sign in the classroom.

Video Data: Preschool classroom

Now, I will discuss four short video snippets from one continuing language interaction that takes place during snack time. These clips provide context in understanding the classroom discourse.

In the following sequence of clips, students sit around a table as the teacher introduces the special Valentine’s Day snacks—chocolate-covered bananas. I would like to focus on the different sensory ways the teacher and children make meaning, and by sensory, in this interaction, I refer to smell and touch. I am also present to the left of the camera as support for the head teacher. All the children are deaf and wear hearing devices except two—the boy in the red, Student M, bottom corner facing us and the girl in the white, Student AS in the back left corner. The red-shirted boy, student M, is the hearing role model and the girl, student AS, has apraxia and uses a combination of verbal approximations and signs to communicate. (Please see Figure 1 for names.)



Figure 1 **Snack Time – Names**

CLIP 1: Olfactory Mode: “Smell it!”

In this clip, the teacher, mode blending both sign and speech simultaneously, requests each student take a turn at smelling the fresh-out-of-the-oven heart-shaped valentine’s cake. Student B associates the smell with the temperature-signing “hot” and with the consequence of heat, “hurts”. Student B then turns to Jennifer to relay the information he has acquired through this sensory and language interaction with the teacher. The hearing role model, student M expresses, verbally, he also wants a turn at smelling the cake.

“Smell it!” transcription (See figures 2-5 for still shots.)

Teacher (sign and speech):	Smell it!
Student B (sign only):	Hot? Finished?
Teacher (sign and speech):	A little hot. Yeah, warm. Yeah, finished. Out of the oven. We took it out of the oven.
Student M (speech only):	Hey, I didn’t get a smell! (<i>Rising hand</i>)
Student B (sign only):	Finish. Hurt. Finish. (<i>Turning to Jennifer</i>)
Jennifer (sign only):	Yeah, Hurt. Not hot.



Figure 2 Teacher J signs "warm" (closed to open "O" handshape by mouth)



Figure 3 Student B signs “finished” (shaking of “five” handshape) followed by teacher J signing “finished” and Jennifer signing “finished”



Figure 4 Student B signing "finished" to Jennifer

CLIP 2: Tactile Mode: “Touch it!”

In this interaction, the teacher asks each student to feel the cold plate of frozen chocolate-covered bananas just removed from the freezer as she mode blends the sign for cold and with the verbal representation of cold. If a student does not willingly touch the plate on his/her own, she pulls their hand under the plate. Student AS (hearing student with apraxia) after feeling the plate signs “cold” and produces a one-syllable approximation for cold, “Uhhhhh”.

“Touch it!” transcription (See Figures 6-8 for still shots.)

Teacher (speech only): Look! Oooooohhh! (*Taps Student B to get attention*)
Student I (speech only): I want one! Can (name) have one?
Teacher (sign and speech): It’s coold. Feel it. (*Places student K’s hand under cold plate*)
Student AS (sign and approximation for cold): Uuuuuuh. (*After touching plate*)
Jennifer (sign and speech): Coold. (*Touches plate*) Touch it!



Figure 5 Teacher signs "cold" (elbow bent, fist closed, O-shaped mouth)



Figure 6 Students AS and AL sign "cold" after touching plate



Figure 7 Teacher pulls student R's hand to feel the plate

In these two clips, “smell it” and “touch it”, the teacher draws on olfactory and tactile modes to supplement the speech and sign production. Students associate signs, gestures, and the spoken English with the sensory experience. The teacher uses this sensory activity as a structuring principle in the larger activity of snack time—the sensory activity creates desire for warm yummy cake. Students must wait as their anticipation for the snack increases perhaps facilitating their eager participation in the bimodal request “I want chocolate-covered bananas.”

CLIP 3: Bimodal Request #1 “I want...”

The students are encouraged, if possible, to use both modalities, signing and speaking, or at least the verbal approximations. The boy farthest to the right, student M, volunteers to go first. He is the hearing role model and is very keen on fully engaging in these classroom practices: “I didn’t get a smell.” “Can I feel?”, he exclaims in this interaction.

Bimodal Request #1 transcription (See still shots 8-10.)

Teacher (using sign and speech): These are chocolate-covered bananas! Who wants one?

Student M (using speech): Me! (*Various students including Student M raise hands*)

Teacher (using sign and speech): Ok, tell me.
I...want...chocolate...covered...banana!

Student M (using sign and speech): I...want...chocolate...covered...banana!
(*Repeating each word/sign after teacher*)

Student K (sign only): want chocolate covered banana. (*Repeating sign after teacher*)



Figure 8 Teacher J introduces bimodal request signing "want" ("five" handshape, palms up, bring forward claw handshape)



Figure 9 Student M (hearing) begins request following prompt from teacher J signing "want"



Figure 10 Student K signs "chocolate" ("C" handshape, circular motion on back of hand) in her request

CLIP 4: Bimodal Request #2 “Use your signs!”

Ironically, given the emphasis on English/speech production in the language philosophy of the school and the Signing-Exact-English communication strategy employed, the teacher ignores the most outspoken child because she is only using her words and not her signs. In the next clip, you will notice, at first, the student I self-corrects from third person to first person and then she shifts into sign without any prompt from the teacher. And finally the teacher responds to student I by giving her the snack. In the case of Student I, teacher J does not offer a signing prompt, rather she expects Student I to produce the bimodal request on her own.

Bimodal request #2 transcription (See figures 11-12 for still shots.)

Student I (using only speech): (name) wants...I...I Me! I want... (*Teacher J ignores student I*)
Teacher (using only speech): I thought you didn't want one?
Student I (using sign and speech): I want chocolate-covered bananas.



Figure 11 Teacher J ignores "speaking only" student I. Teacher J continues interaction with student AS.



Figure 12 Student I makes bimodal request without prompt from teacher

These clips give you an idea of what the classroom discourse looks like, in particular the affordances of different modalities as communication and the language ideologies at play. Theoretically the language approach privileges English yet in practice there are multiple discourses competing. To be clear, it is not my intention to romanticize what I call “affordances”. Modality certainly opens open new spaces for meaning making and thus begs the question of what communication would look like for these children if they had been exposed to ASL from birth. These interactions of what goes on in the classroom will help segue into exploring the experiences the mothers share.

Interviews with hearing mothers

I interviewed six hearing mothers of deaf children participating in the school-sponsored “family sign language class” which uses “SEE” sign, or “Signing-Exact-English.” The language profiles of the mothers are as follows:

- Mom F: Mam, Spanish, English, SEE-sign
- Mom G: Spanish, English, SEE-sign
- Mom M: Tagalog, English, ASL/SEE-sign
- Mom A: English, Mandarin, Cantonese, ASL/SEE-sign
- Mom T: English, SEE-sign
- Mom S: English, SEE-sign

I would like to thank these mothers for so graciously sharing their experiences and time. Four out of six of the hearing mothers I interviewed (all of children

whom I have worked with in the classroom) come from households in which multiple languages are spoken and all mothers use varying degrees of sign—Signing Exact English and some ASL—at home. Two parents learned basic ASL before entering this program and express the desire to hold on to this language connection despite the SEE-sign focus at this school. For instance, Mother A notes she wants to continue using ASL because it is a "real language and do SEE because it ties in with English." Interestingly, in the two Spanish-speaking households, Spanish and Signing Exact English are often used in bimodal production, which one could say undermines the goal of SEE, to verbally and manually produce English; however, the goal of acquiring speech remains consistent.

Returning to my initial research questions, I am interested in what it means to be a hearing mother of a deaf child and how modalities open up spaces for meaning making for these mothers. I will argue that the bimodal/mode-blending production allows them to move temporally, on multiple scales, through a narrative space. Participants sometimes use signs while talking to me, a hearing interviewer, as a semiotic resource that allows them to change footing. Additionally "doing in discourse", that is positioning oneself through language and modality across both time and space illuminates dialogic tension and expands temporal notions of identity.

CLIP 5: "Look at the Mohawk!"

I introduce Mother T, a teacher's aid in the preschool class. Three years ago, her son attended this preschool and I had a chance to work with him. The son is now mainstreamed into a hearing classroom with the support of an interpreter in second grade at a public school. In the home, Mother T uses a combination of English and Signing-Exact-English. In this video clip, Mother T describes an encounter she and her son (son D) have with another deaf boy at a Deaf event.

Mother T describes son's (son D) encounter with boy with a Mohawk

(Brackets indicate the word was signed. Parenthesis/italics indicate additional information, paralinguistic features and type of multimodal production.)

“Mom look he has a mohawk! (*Gazing upward pointing, taking role of son D*) Mom mom... and then he was like you something something...he was saying to the boy. (*Continues pointing upward*) And he just kept walking (*Mother T struts across room, takes role of mohawk boy*)...And (name- son D) was like [mom]...[why] didn't he...and I was like (name- son D)...he's [deaf] (*gazing downward, taking role of mother*) ...he [can't hear you]. [You need to sign]. (*No speech*) And he was just...he didn't take grasp of it at all but he just...he was just like...you could tell he was like HUUUH (*mouth open, look of surprise*) I was talking to him and he didn't say nothing.”

In this situation, her son is shocked that Deafness could possibly exist outside the relationship he has with his mother and it is the mother who attempts to convey a new understanding of Deafness to her son (i.e., that it exists outside of their mother-child relationship). While cultural practices may be emergent in the family and school context there is also an isolation from a larger “Deaf community” for these children.

In this interaction, Mother T draws on different mode-blends—during the body movement, gaze shifts and the use of sign—to coincide with shifts in footing (see Figures 13-15 for role shifts). Initially, she is “standing” as the mother, then “strutting” as the guy with the Mohawk and, finally, “gazing upward” as her son and eyes “gazing downward” as herself talking to her child. In each different bodily stance she is taking on a different role in her narration. Interestingly, gazing upward and downward are similar to features of ASL narration. Such observations—grammatical or narrative features of ASL mixed into signing exact English-sign production—are frequent in the classroom.

The bimodal production, signing and speaking at the same time, allows Mother T to tell the story in English to me at the same time she physically enters into that past space, signing just as she had signed with her son. While similar changes in positionality take place in verbal narration or code-switching between two languages, two simultaneous modes open up the possibility of expanding into the past and present at the level of the utterance, perhaps offering a more nuanced way of understanding what Blommaert (2005) calls “layered simultaneity” or the process in which language is expressed on multiple time scales.



Figure 13 Mother T, taking role of mohawk man, strutting across room



Figure 14 Mother T taking role of son D, body shift right, signing "Mom" (open "five" handshape thumb at chin)



Figure 15 Mother T taking role of herself, gaze shift down, signing "deaf" (handshape "one" moving from ear to side of mouth)

CLIP 6: "Shut my mouth"

In this clip Mother G, a fluent English-Spanish bilingual, discusses the calm and peaceful experience when she enters the visual world of her child. There are places in which she stops talking and reenacts the conversation with her daughter, without voice, signing, "You know mommy said to you?" This visual silent space is their space, a space where they reach understanding together. She explains that when she "shuts her mouth" a special embodied connection opens up with her daughter. Shifting into the signing mode allows her to re-enact the story at the same time she tells to me it and affectively brings the calmness from her past experience into the present moment effectively allowing her, drawing on Blommaert (2005) again, to "jump scales."

*Mother G describes experience with deaf daughter when she “shuts her mouth”
(See Figures 17-20 for still shots.)*

(Brackets indicate the word was signed or a signed word accompanied spoken word. Parenthesis/italics indicate additional information, paralinguistic features and type of multimodal production.)

“I would shut my mouth (*places hand on mouth*) and just [sign] (*no speech*) to her. And if I sign to her once, twice, the same sentence...the same you know order or whatever action I wanted her to do...signed it two three times—you got it (*gaze shift right side*)? And she said [ok] (*no speech with head nod*) and it feels so peaceful and calm and [loving]...that she would just sit there in bed and look at [me moving my hands] (*sign for “signing”*) and respond [back] (*sign for “yes”*) and try to do the [okay] (*imitates daughter’s sign for okay*) sign without even speaking...its great that she gets to that point. Because then I could be completely in a loud environment and [you know what mommy said to you?] (*no speech*) And she’s like... (*sits back crosses arms*) She gets it. I know she knows it. She might not [practice] it. You are not going to see it every minute she talks but I know she is really capable of it.”



Figure 16 Reenacts speaking to daughter, gaze shift right



Figure 17 Imitates daughter's "OK" sign: fingerspells "OK" without speech



Figure 18 Signs/gestures "loving" ("s" handshape at chest) with speech



Figure 19 Mother G signs "know" (closed "five" handshape, bent at knuckles fingertips tap forehead) without speech



Figure 20- Mother G signs "Mommy" ("five" handshape, thumb on chin) without speech

Discussion

These language interactions offer some insight on what it means to be a hearing mother of a deaf child, how these mothers and children do culture together and the many different ways we can make meaning outside a verbal mode. With these insights in mind, how might we articulate culture in this language learning process?

I draw on the following authors in my own working articulation of culture. Bakhtin (1981) helps us understand culture as rooted in language processes which are “heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past... all given a bodily form” (p. 291). Culture as a process of meaning making in practice needs to be contextualized in relation to the larger societal ideological constraints; in the case of my participants, we see the meaning making taking place in between the push and pull of hearingness and deafness. To draw on Geertz (1997) and Kramsch (2009), culture is a semiotic, symbolic process. In the case of my participants, modality—both sensory and linguistic modes—opens up a space for new meanings and emotional experiences. In these meaning making in-between spaces the children and parents, to put it in De Certeau’s (1984) words, “make do,” with the “plurality and creativity” offered by the in-between, drawing on semiotic resources they have to make connections to others and make sense of the their own experiences.

Baynton (1996) stresses the importance of the body in shaping how we experience the world. “Our bodies matter because they shape how we experience, understand and interact with the world and because they affect how others view us”(p. 296). It is important to note the ideological and bodily struggle is different for the children and parents as they tug at the delicate seams in between deafness and hearingness and learn the sensory world of other. The mother and child come to this in-between places with different lenses, for the mothers they have, for most of their lives, only understood the world through hearing eyes and for deaf children they have mostly come to understand their world through deaf eyes. This idea of these “worlds” for these mothers and children can be thought of as both inseparable and engaged in a context where we “do” culture in an emergent way.

To end my talk today, I put forth this articulation of culture: A site of struggle and a process of meaning making emergent in and through language which includes bodily and sensory ways we experience the world. I hope these stories introduce to you a narrative often left out of the more common one of the second language learner whose experiences are underpinned by a monolingual, assimilation ideology. Secondly, I hope these interactions brings forth a bodily understanding of culture as emergent on the margin and in the in-between. And, finally, this data illustrates how the use of multiple modalities creates spaces for meaning making providing us with insight on the social and individual level. For language educators and researchers, this might challenge us to change the way we look at our students’ interactions and how we might benefit from a modal analysis in classroom language practices.

Perhaps we can think about how engagement with sign languages, gestures, and sensory experience enable us to overturn conventional notions of language acquisition and learning, as well as temporal, spatial, and modal aspects of language thereby perhaps expanding our understanding of human communication not just for deaf learners, but also for all learners.

I welcome any questions and feedback and questions via email. Thank you.

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