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(Almost) everyone here spoke Ban Khor Sign Language—Until they started using TSL: Language shift and endangerment of a Thai village sign language[☆]



Angela M. Nonaka

The University of Texas, Austin, USA

A B S T R A C T

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Found only in face-to-face communities with distinctive socioeconomic and demographic profiles that include numerous deaf residents, 'village sign languages' correlate with special 'speech/sign communities,' wherein widespread deafness is successfully communicatively managed because hearing villagers routinely acquire and use the local sign language. This language variety is as unusual as its sociolinguistic environment is fragile. Charting the life course of a contemporary village sign language and speech/sign community in Thailand, this article examines the causes and consequences of the emergence, expansion, and endangerment of Ban Khor Sign Language and its speech/sign community.

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1. Introduction

The 'speech community' is a foundational concept for scholars in various disciplines interested in understanding the mutually constitutive dimensions of language and social life. Although [Leonard Bloomfield \(1933\)](#) first invoked the term in the early decades of the 20th century, it is [John Gumperz's \(1968\)](#) post-World War II reformulation that is perhaps more famous. Their foundational definitions are shown below in [Table 1](#).

In the ensuing decades the idea of the 'speech community' has been subjected to sustained critiques and undergone significant revisions ([Corder, 1973](#); [Dorian, 1982](#); [Duranti, 1997](#); [Holmes and Meyerhoff, 1999](#); [Horvath and Sankoff, 1987](#); [Hudson, 1996](#); [Hymes, 1972](#); [Kroskrity, 1993](#); [Labov, 1966](#); [Rickford, 1986](#); [Romaine, 1982](#); [Santa Ana and Parodi, 1998](#); [Winford, 1988](#); etc.) and even occasional re-namings ([Agar, 1994](#); [Bucholtz, 1999](#); [Silverstein, 1998](#)). Reflective of major intellectual paradigmatic shifts in anthropology, linguistics, and the social sciences generally (see [Morgan, 2004](#); [Patrick, 2002](#)), numerous re-definitions and re-analyses have simultaneously underscored the enduring importance and utility of the notion of the speech community, while also honing and refining understanding—descriptive, methodological, and theoretical—of the phenomenon itself.

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E-mail address: angelanonaka@austin.utexas.edu.

Table 1
Bloomfield's and Gumperz's foundational definitions of the 'speech community'.

Bloomfield (1933), p. 42	Gumperz (1968) [reprinted in Duranti, 2009, p. 43]
"A speech-community is a group of people who interact by means of speech. All the so-called higher activities of man—our specifically human activities—spring from the close adjustment among individuals which we call society, and this adjustment, in turn, is based upon language; the speech-community, therefore, is the most important kind of social group."	"Any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage."

In that vein, this paper discusses an uncommon and under-examined type of speech community—a 'speech/sign community'—which shares the core characteristics and functions of any speech community but which is distinctive enough to merit special appellative designation. Whether working from Bloomfield's or Gumperz's definition, the term 'speech community' was coined and conceptualized before sign languages were acknowledged (initially scientifically and later popularly) to be actual languages; thus the term reflects a language ideology that was orally rather than manually centered.

Subsequent research in the fields of Sign Language Linguistics and Deaf Studies has produced long overdue but steady advancements in our collective understanding of 'signing communities.' Anchored in native use of languages expressed in the manual modality, signing communities are ones developed by and for 'culturally Deaf' people whose sociolinguistic identity and minority status are indexed by writing Deaf with a capital letter D (versus deaf written with a little d, which describes an audiological disability). American Sign Language, Japanese Sign Language, and Italian Sign Language are just three examples of the many 'national' (Woodward, 2000) or 'urban' (Zeshan, 2004) sign languages around which particular Deaf signing communities have arisen.

It is only within the last quarter-century, however, that researchers have begun to understand the extent of extant linguistic "variation in sign languages" (Lemaster and Monaghan, 2004) and to appreciate the world's "many ways to be Deaf" (Monaghan et al., 2003)—i.e., sociocultural diversity within and among signing communities. Along those lines, some of the greatest linguistic and sociocultural diversity found, to date, involves 'village' or 'indigenous' sign languages and their distinctive speech/sign communities. Study of the former is transforming knowledge of sign language typologies, while information about the latter is challenging assumptions about both hearing speech communities and Deaf signing communities.

1.1. Village/indigenous sign languages and speech/sign communities

The title of this paper borrows from that of an influential book published almost 30 years ago, *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness on Martha's Vineyard* (Groce, 1985). An ethnohistory of 18th and 19th century life on Martha's Vineyard, the text described a previously unconsidered sociolinguistic response to a high incidence of genetic deafness in a small community, more specifically: the extensive use of a local sign language by both deaf and hearing islanders to socially and communicatively manage widespread deafness, thereby rendering the condition non-disabling. In addition to explicating deafness as a social construction and supplementing linguistic and sociological hypotheses about the development of American Sign Language (Frishberg, 1975; Woodward, 1976, 1978) and the early U.S. Deaf community (Bahan and Nash, 1995; Lane et al., 2000), Groce's historically reconstructed account inspired subsequent ethnographic and linguistic investigation of contemporary language ecologies like the one that had existed on Martha's Vineyard.

While uncommon, such sociolinguistic situations are less rare than once imagined. Martha's Vineyard-like language ecologies have been found in several communities around the world in Africa, the Americas, Asia, the Caribbean, the Middle East, Australia and Oceania (Branson and Miller, 1996; Branson et al., 1999; Cumberbatch, 2012; Delgado, 2012; De Vos, 2012; Dikyuva, 2012; Ferreira-Brito, 1983; Fox Tree, 2009; Frishberg, 1987a; Haviland, 2011; Hinnant, 2000; Johnson, 1991, 1994; Kakumasu, 1968; Kendon, 1980; Kisch, 2004, 2007, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c; Kusters, 2012; Lanesman and Meir, 2012a, 2012b; Marsaja, 2008; Maypilama and Adone, 2012, 2013; Meir et al., 2010; Nonaka, 2004, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012a, 2012b; Nyst, 2007, 2012; Nyst et al., 2012; Osugi et al., 1999; Panda, 2012; Sandler et al., 2005; Schuit, 2012a, 2012b; Shuman, 1980; Torigoe et al., 1995; Van den Bogaerde, 2005; Washabaugh, 1978, 1979, 1981, 1986; Woodward, 1982).

Now widely referred to as 'village' sign languages (Zeshan, 2004) or 'indigenous' sign languages (Woodward, 2000),¹ this language variety spontaneously develops in small-scale societies with unusually large deaf populations, where typically there are high degrees of real (biological) or fictive (non-biological) kinship; labor-intensive, non-industrial local economies; and relatively low levels of occupational and educational differentiation between deaf and hearing members of the community. The places where such languages have arisen are geographically, culturally, and linguistically diverse, but the collaborative creation and quotidian use of the local sign language by deaf as well as by hearing people in the society transforms the local speech community.

Village sign languages correlate with a special kind of speech community—a 'speech/sign community' (Nonaka, 2007, 2009) or "shared-signing community" (Kisch, 2008; Nyst, 2012). Two European anthropologists, Annelies Kusters (2009)

¹ For a more detailed discussion of this developing scientific nomenclature and its relationship to language typology, see Nonaka (2012a), p. 277–278.

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