

“It’s like he can’t be bothered”: Ideologies of effort in CODA family narratives

Ginger Pizer

University of Texas at Austin

1. Introduction

In dealing with sign language and deafness, it is tempting to essentialize the Deaf and Hearing communities as clearly separate entities, each with its own language and culture. There is no question that there exist a Deaf Community and a Deaf Culture (Padden, 1980), but any idea of a sharp division between Deaf and Hearing communities disappears with a look at almost any deaf person’s family. Ninety to 95 percent of deaf people have hearing parents, and 90 to 95 percent of the children of deaf people are hearing. The fact that the most common configuration combines people of varying hearing status within the family calls into question traditional understandings of the concepts of community and culture. In every family that includes both hearing and deaf members, a complicated linguistic and cultural situation can easily arise.

This paper presents an analysis of narratives from ethnographic interviews of 12 hearing adults whose parents are deaf. They were interviewed on questions of language use and communication in their families. I call them CODAs: hearing “children of deaf adults.” This term is relatively widely used, but not all of my interviewees self-identified with it; my use of it as a convenience is not meant to imply that it is necessarily a label of group identity. This paper focuses on the moral stances (Ochs & Capps, 2001) that these narrators took in sections of the narratives where they expressed judgments of their own or others’ language behavior in family contexts.

The narrators in this study were twelve adult American CODAs, ranging in age from 20 to 66. Language varieties that they used with their parents included combinations of spoken English, fingerspelling, signed varieties of English, and American Sign Language. Their fluency in ASL varied widely. As adults, some participants were socially and professionally involved with the Deaf Community, some were peripherally involved, and some had no regular contact with any deaf people other than their parents. Their geographic, ethnic, and class backgrounds were varied. Although all of the participants in this study were able to sign at least a little, a number of them had siblings who did not sign at all. All of their families had only hearing children, and all but one had two deaf parents. One family had a hearing father who was divorced and rarely involved with his children. In all but one of these families, the deaf parents were the only deaf people in the extended

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family. All of the deaf parents themselves had hearing parents; one of the deaf fathers had a deaf brother.

2. A Question of Effort

Attention to sections of the interviews where the narrators expressed judgments of their own and others' language practices in family contexts reveals a recurring theme: Communication between deaf people and hearing people potentially involves effort, and family members who fail to put in appropriate effort deserve criticism. This generalization is not meant to imply that family communication is always effortful; in fact, most of the CODAs explicitly stated that their own communication with their parents was generally easy or natural. The point is that ease of communication cannot be assumed in the family situation. Given this situation, when the narrators criticized or praised people for their communicative behavior, they generally framed it as an issue of whether those people were putting in appropriate effort. The narrators never stated explicitly how they decide when effort is to be expected, and in fact, they did not always praise communicative effort: sometimes—though less frequently—what they criticized was undue effort. The observation of the theme of effort raised the following research questions: 1) What is the organizing principle around which judgments of appropriate communicative effort are made? and 2) Can we identify a source for this ideology of language and effort?

Analysis of the narratives leads to the conclusion that these narrators determine their judgments based on the principle that effort is appropriate only to the degree that it overcomes potential communication barriers. Their moral stances are consistent with the following organizing principle of communicative effort: Appropriate effort functionally overcomes potential communication barriers. Undue effort is driven by any other motivation or is too difficult to successfully overcome communication barriers. Despite the fact that hearing family members tend to be more commonly criticized for failing to put in appropriate effort than deaf family members, this principle applies to all family members, both hearing and deaf. The difference is in the options that each family member has. Every hearing person can learn to sign, but not every deaf person can learn to speak, and lipreading is inherently difficult. From this perspective, the people with more options have a greater responsibility to adapt to the communicative situation than those with fewer options.

All of the CODAs I interviewed seem to share this principle, although they do not necessarily share judgments of particular language behaviors. For some, for example, if their parents are present when they are talking to their siblings or hearing friends, signing and talking at the same time is seen as appropriate effort; for others, it is seen as undue effort: too difficult to be effective and unnecessary when they are not directly addressing their parents. With the above definitions of appropriate and undue effort, the CODAs' judgments of language behavior can be seen as guided by the following maxims: 1) Put in appropriate effort. 2) Force others to put in appropriate effort. 3) Do not put in undue effort. 4) Do not force others to put in undue effort. The examples in the following section illustrate the narrators' application of these maxims.

3. CODAs' Maxims of Effort in Communication

3.1 Put In Appropriate Effort

The most common targets of criticism for failure to put in appropriate effort were hearing siblings and grandparents who do not sign. In the first example, Allison¹ attributed her teenage brother's tendency to speak to their parents rather than signing to a preference for what is easier for him:²

- (1) My brother is very much opposed...he's, he's opposed to anything that will **put him out**. So it is just **easier** for him to rely on *talking to my parents like this* [over-enunciated], than to **have to come up with the sign**....It's almost like **he can't be bothered**.

In a similar way, Craig criticized his maternal grandparents for failing to put in enough effort to learn the manual alphabet:

- (2) It's striking to me, I mean...like, even to this day, like my mother's parents, they don't, they **don't even know A**. Like in sign language...I can understand like not knowing, y'know, like "dog." I can understand that. But not to know the alphabet, and **try** to communicate, **just one ounce**.

Craig's use of the letter A and this description of the amount of effort learning it would require—"just one ounce"—illustrate the minimal expectations that he has for his grandparents, expectations that they do not live up to. In contrast, Craig and his brother Derek, interviewed together, praised their paternal grandmother for the amount of effort she put in to communicate with her son:

- (3) Derek: I mean like, even my grandmother **went as far as** to teach my father, uh, Indian sign....

Craig: And that's what's so mind-blowing, is that she actually **went the extra mile**.

It is important to note that in these CODAs' narratives, not all attempts to put in appropriate effort lead to a satisfactory result. When asked whether she and her siblings signed to each other when their deaf mother was present, Rachel responded as follows:

- (4) That's a really big issue. We [my siblings and I] **try** to always sign...when we're—when she [our mother] is present, but, y'know, it's **difficult**. It's just **not instinctual** sometimes. And so we **try** to really always **make an effort**,...but it doesn't always happen.

As mentioned above, many of the narrators found communication with their parents easy and natural; however, in some cases, they described the family situation as obliging them to engage in behaviors that they found "difficult" and "not instinctual."

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

² Words and expressions having to do with the idea of effort are in bold.

3.2 Force Others to Put In Appropriate Effort

Included in the obligation to put in appropriate communicative effort is the obligation to force others to do the same. In the following example, Boyce compared his wife and daughter, both of whom sign well, with his brothers' wives and children, who do not sign at all. He presented the difference as primarily caused by whether the CODAs—himself and his brothers—forced their nearest and dearest to learn to sign:

- (5) An added blessing was, is that my daughter had a mother...who **had no choice** but to either learn the language [ASL],...or she was always going to be an outsider. My two brothers, their spouses... they weren't **forced** to make that kind of choice....I **refused** to interpret for my wife....My two brothers continued to interpret for their spouses *always*. Well as long as they had an interpreter, why would they? And then if the *kids* had *mothers* that **didn't bother** to learn, why would they? The fact that they lost a bridge with their grandparents was never fully appreciated. And I don't blame the spouses, and I don't blame the kids. I blame my two **lazy** brothers for **giving in** to the **easier** of the two.

In other excerpts from the interviews, CODAs presented interpreting for their parents and other family members as effortful. In contrast, in this example from Boyce, interpreting is framed as the lazy option. This difference supports the claim made above that it is not particular language behaviors that are judged as good or bad, effortful or easy. Instead, the issue is whether the effort required by those behaviors is seen as appropriate or not in a given situation.

The following example from April similarly presents a situation where the right thing to do is to force others to put in effort. In this case, it is the deaf parents who were judged for not having forced their children to talk and sign at the same time when they were growing up. Previously in the interview, April had described learning as an adult that some of the signs she used were homesigns, not ASL, and that she wished her parents had corrected her signing. I asked her why she thought they had not:

- (6) I think that they didn't want to be, um,...tyrannical...parents, um, and that's—and I *know* that that's the reason...why they never **forced** us to sign while talking. And I wish that they had,...because I was in high school before my parents finally were like, uh, y'know, it kinda hurts our feelings that you never sign and talk at the same time. Because I think that they kinda thought that we would **just pick up on it**, and **just do it of our own accord**, but we never did...So, it, it took *years* for me to get used to doing that....Several times from that time on they'd be like, could you sign and talk at the same time? What are you saying? Y'know. It hurts our feelings. And I felt horrible for years. I was just like, I can't believe we've been doing this all of our lives. And even now, it's **so hard** for me to do it, and **I would forget** a lot, and I would be like, oh, I'm a horrible person, y'know, and I just would feel so bad.

In this excerpt, April discussed the same behavior as Rachel did in example 4. Once again, signing while talking was represented as difficult but nevertheless something that should

be done. However, in this case, April did not place all the blame on herself. Even though she criticized herself for her failure to consistently sign while talking, she placed part of the responsibility on her parents: If they had put in the appropriate effort to force her to do it when she was younger, it would not be so hard for her now.

The following example, also from April, introduces another responsibility of deaf parents: forcing their children to sign:

- (7) I'm just like *shocked* at how *bad* they [CODA acquaintances] are [at signing]. I mean, they are just like, barely just [signs awkwardly]. And I'm like, that's just sad. And, um, I think that maybe the parents don't, um, **enforce it** on the kids? I mean,... you need to **make your kids** speak sign language, I think. If you're, if you're a deaf adult and you are raising your children, y'know, that's like vital for you to be able to understand your kids and for them to be able to understand you. So, and it's not like it can really happen the other way around. Y'know? So it is very essential that you **make your kids** learn sign language, and expose it to them, so that they will learn it.

Later in the discussion, April expressed confusion that this force should be necessary, since it had been her experience that learning sign came naturally. However, to the degree that learning to sign is effortful for hearing children, her feelings were unambiguous that those children should put in the necessary effort and that their parents should force them to do so. Her position on this point assumes that the parents *can* in fact force their unwilling children to sign, something that many deaf parents would dispute.³

3.3 Do not Put In Undue Effort

Up to this point in the paper, all criticisms have been of people who failed to put in appropriate effort. However, other examples make it clear that it is not effort itself that is valued; rather, appropriate effort is valued, while undue effort is criticized. In the following example, Kevin described a deaf friend who spoke to her hearing 4-year-old son rather than signing to him:

- (8) It almost makes me cringe when she talks to him and doesn't sign, because her speaking is so bad that it's almost like, you're not doing any good....I want to just like say, hey, **just sign** with him, y'know?...I would- I mean, I guess I would say like,...don't **force** something that's **not gonna work**.

The mother's behavior in this example falls under both of the definitions of undue effort presented above. Although the mother clearly meant well and was putting in significant effort, her language choice was driven by an ideology that connects signing with deafness and speech with hearing, rather than being motivated by functionality. Additionally, because of her own weak speaking skills, the behavior that she chose was simply too difficult to allow successful communication.

³ Thanks to Carol Seeger for making this point.

Other references to undue effort were introduced by several different CODAs who rejected pictures of deafness or rules for behavior that they encountered in ASL or interpreter training classes. In the following excerpt, Tabitha expressed her view of her ASL teacher's injunction to turn off her voice and sign "pure" ASL:

- (9) If I'm talking while I'm signing, it's always, signing and speaking, like, it's always *English*. And my ASL teacher hates it, but it's just **easier** than, like, it's really **hard** for me to sit here and be like SIGN [mouth pursed shut]. I don't, I don't like it. And **it doesn't work** for me.

In the artificial context of the language classroom, Tabitha is asked to suppress a way of communicating with deaf people that feels natural to her. CODAs who developed a functional ideology of communicative effort as children at home may understand the value of signing for language practice while still being uncomfortable with it. For example, Kevin described his discomfort when seeing hearing people signing to each other:

- (10) It bothers me when people use sign when there's no one deaf around...I experienced it a lot...being with other people who were in the deaf studies program....They wanted to learn, and they were practicing, and so I understood that. And that was fine, but at the same time, they would like use it with each other, when they were both hearing, and like that always bothered me...and if they did it to me, I just kinda like turned my head and like, don't talk to me like that....I'm like, I can talk to you. It's— to me it's more like,...**whatever it takes** to communicate, and...that's almost like **over-communicating** or **over-compensating**.

In this example, Kevin clearly expressed his philosophy that appropriate communicative behavior is to do as much as necessary and no more.

3.4 Do not Force Others to Put In Undue Effort

The fourth maxim (do not force others to put in undue effort) is connected to the first (put in appropriate effort), in that it is often the failure of one family member to put in appropriate effort that forces other family members to put in undue effort. Allison criticized her grandparents on this point:

- (11) I've been kind of frustrated with the fact that my grandparents **never bothered** to learn sign language, and that is a source of contention for me, that they just won't do it, and they'll, they'll only, um, speak to my parents and, and **force** them to read their lips.

Even though Allison reported her parents' lipreading skills to be very strong, she nevertheless considered lipreading to be undue effort: too difficult to successfully overcome communication barriers, especially when appropriate effort on the part of her grandparents would lead them to learn to sign.

In the final example, Sara described herself as being forced to put in undue effort at a family gathering:

- (12) And one time we all got together, and everyone was chit chatting, and my mother's in one ear saying, what is everybody saying, what is— what're they saying? And the other ear, nobody wanted to know what Mom and Dad were saying, and I was **trying** to interpret, and it was a mess. It was terrible, I just hated it. And I finally just said, Janet [sister], you do the— some of the signing, why don't you interpret what you're talking about, y'know? Why don't you sign and talk at the same time? And I got really mad at them, and I said, y'know, you need to do that, and my brother fi— I think it really took him, took it, took it to heart, when I said that. Um, and so he just decided he needed to get to know my father better, and learned how to sign at that point.

Several other CODAs told similar stories of the person called upon to bear the entire load of interpreting at a family gathering blowing up at the other family members. Interpreting in such a group situation is clearly undue effort—too difficult to be successful—that could be avoided by all participants putting in appropriate effort and sharing the responsibility to sign. This excerpt also presents another common situation: significant variation in sign language abilities among the hearing children in one family. At the time of this story, Sara's brother was an adult who did not sign at all. By the time of the interview, Sara reported that her brother signed fluently.

4. An Emergent Ideology

Based on how these CODAs evaluate the effort that family members put in, it appears that they value functionality over other language ideologies of the surrounding Hearing and Deaf communities. How is it that they all came to hold the same language ideology? One possibility would be that they learned it through socialization into the same speech community. However, they share neither the same repertoire of language practices nor the same norms for language behavior, both of which are criteria for membership in a speech community (Labov, 1972). They sign in different ways, with different degrees of fluency and different ways of integrating signing and speech, as well as different judgments on the appropriateness of particular language practices in particular situations. In addition, these CODAs have different social networks and different social identities. Their positions with regard to the Deaf and Hearing communities vary widely, considering both patterns of interaction and identification with the social groups. Further, it does not make sense to call CODAs as a group a community of practice, in that they are not mutually engaged in any kind of common endeavor (Wenger, 1998; Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999). But the idea of the community of practice is nevertheless valuable. Each family can be seen as its own community of practice, with its own repertoire of language behaviors and its own negotiated practices, which are not necessarily shared with other families. Despite these differences between the families, the hearing children of deaf adults are similarly situated within their own families. It is from this similar situation that they each appear to have independently developed a functional language ideology. The value that these CODAs place on doing what works—no more, and no less—appears to have emerged from their situation as children of deaf parents, rather than being a learned community norm.

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Department of Linguistics
 The University of Texas at Austin
 1 University Station B5100
 Austin, TX 78712
 gpizer@mail.utexas.edu