“We Communicated That Way for a Reason”: Language Practices and Language Ideologies Among Hearing Adults Whose Parents Are Deaf

Ginger Pizer*1, Keith Walters2, Richard P. Meier3

1Mississippi State University
2Portland State University
3University of Texas

Received May 1, 2012; revisions received July 30, 2012; accepted August 6, 2012

Families with deaf parents and hearing children are often bilingual and bimodal, with both a spoken language and a signed one in regular use among family members. When interviewed, 13 American hearing adults with deaf parents reported widely varying language practices, sign language abilities, and social affiliations with Deaf and Hearing communities. Despite this variation, the interviewees’ moral judgments of their own and others’ communicative behavior suggest that these adults share a language ideology concerning the obligation of all family members to expend effort to overcome potential communication barriers. To our knowledge, such a language ideology is not similarly pervasive among spoken-language bilingual families, raising the question of whether there is something unique about family bimodal bilingualism that imposes different rights and responsibilities on family members than spoken-language family bilingualism does. This ideology unites an otherwise diverse group of interviewees, where each one preemptively denied being a “typical CODA [children of deaf adult].”

Families with deaf parents and hearing children are often bilingual and bimodal, with both a spoken language and a signed one in regular use among family members. The circumstances of deaf parents having a preferred home language different from the dominant language of the surrounding community are parallel in many ways to the circumstances of spoken-language bilingual families, especially immigrant-parented families. In both types of families, the degree to which the children acquire and use their parents’ preferred language may influence the ease or difficulty of communication between parents and children and may interact with the children’s affiliations with the family’s heritage community and culture. In both situations, each family is likely to develop language practices guided by a system of beliefs and attitudes concerning the languages and communities in question and by the family members’ judgments concerning appropriate linguistic behavior in the home. Although it is common to consider parents as the decision-makers in family language policy, children in fact have significant power over language choices, especially if the children potentially control a larger linguistic repertoire than their parents.

In this paper, we describe the language choice patterns that 13 American hearing adults reported from their deaf-parented childhood households. Analysis of these reports revealed a language ideology concerning the obligation of all family members to expend effort to overcome potential communication barriers. This ideology was shared by all of the interviewees, despite significant reported variation in their family language practices, sign language abilities, and affiliations with Deaf and Hearing cultures and communities. To our knowledge, such a language ideology is not similarly pervasive among spoken-language bilingual families,
although many researchers have remarked on the effort required on the part of parents who seek to transmit minority language competence to their children (e.g., Kasuya, 1998; Schüpbach, 2009), as well on the regret or shame that some adults feel at not having learned their family’s heritage language well enough to forestall family-internal communication barriers (e.g., Cho, Cho, & Tse, 1997; Hinton, 1999). Some researchers have also reported on the obligation felt by younger spoken-language bilinguals to switch to the family heritage language out of respect to an older monolingual family member (Hinton, 1999).

If an ideology of communicative effort is indeed less prevalent in spoken-language bilingual families, the question arises as to whether there is something unique about family bimodal bilingualism that imposes different rights and responsibilities on family members than spoken-language family bilingualism does.

After a presentation of necessary background, we describe the methods of this study and introduce the interviewees. We then address the variation in family language behavior as described in the interviews and the connections that the interviewees drew between their language choices and their identities. We subsequently analyze the signing that these adult hearing children of deaf adults (CODAs) produced during the interviews as well as the relationship that the amount and kind of signing has to each interviewee’s affiliations with the Deaf and Hearing communities. Finally, we present the language ideology of communicative effort that was evident in the ways that the interviewees evaluated the behavior of various participants in family interaction.

Background

In families with signing Deaf parents and hearing children, as in other bilingual families, parents and children make choices in their home language use that influence the children’s competence in the minority language—here American Sign Language (ASL)—and the maintenance of that language across generations. Studies of bimodal bilingual adults have shown that they sometimes use their two languages creatively through simultaneous combinations of signs and spoken words and through speech that follows ASL grammar (Bishop, 2010; Bishop & Hicks, 2005; Emmorey, Borinstein, & Thompson, 2005). Through such language practices, these hearing adults with deaf parents perform and create bilingual, bicultural identities. However, not all adult CODAs are fluent bilinguals, and not all interact frequently with the Deaf world; instead, they vary widely in signing ability and in community affiliation (Preston, 1994). In cases where the hearing children of signing deaf parents do not become fluent signers, they may report their communication with their parents as being “unsatisfying” (Wilhelm, 2008, p. 172) or “superficial” (Hadjikakou, Christodoulou, Hadjidemetri, Konidari, & Nicolaou, 2009, p. 498).

Whether d/Deafness is defined on the basis of hearing ability (as is common in the Hearing world) or cultural affiliation (as is common in the Deaf world), both definitions set up a dichotomy between h/Hearing and d/Deaf, such that being one means not being the other. Thus, the status of CODAs—hearing people growing up in deaf families—can be conflicted. Singleton and Tittle (2000) addressed this ambiguity by stating both that “Deaf parents are essentially raising ‘foreign’ children” (p. 27)—thus implying that the children are not Deaf community members, while the parents are—and that these children are “bicultural and bilingual members of the Deaf community” (p. 28). Hoffmeister (2008) described CODAs as “living on the border” (p. 189) and claimed that “every Coda leads two lives: one as a Coda and one as a hearing person” (p. 191). Both Preston (1994) and Bull (1998) described significant variation in CODAs’ cultural affiliations, with identities that shift across time and situations. As Preston (1994)—a CODA himself—remarked, “We are neither deaf nor hearing. We are both deaf and hearing” (p. 236). With English symbolically linked to the Hearing world and ASL to the Deaf world, family language choices can both create and reflect family members’ cultural affiliations. Under the cultural view of deafness, CODAs are potential members of the Deaf community, in that they are potential native signers who may be socialized into Deaf culture. However, because many do not in fact become fluent signers, this potential community membership is often not fully realized.

Researchers on spoken-language bilingual families have noted that cross-generational transmission of minority languages is by no means guaranteed, and that the majority language often makes its first inroads into
family communication in interactions between siblings (e.g., Pearson, 2007). Signed languages may be particularly vulnerable to fast language shift, both because they often lack support from a heritage-language-using extended family, and because the children’s sense of the minority language as being a part of their own identity and heritage may be even more conflicted for CODAs than for children in immigrant families. On the other hand, in many cases, a signed language may be more vital to day-to-day family communication than a minority spoken language, under the assumption that speech reading is an inherently more difficult task for deaf parents than is learning to understand a new spoken language for hearing immigrant parents.

In both deaf-parented and immigrant-parented families, bilingual children may serve as interpreters between their parents and the dominant-language community. This interpreting task may lead to a different balance of communicative power and responsibility between parent and child than in monolingual families. Previous researchers have discussed this issue at length (e.g., Preston, 1996 for deaf-parented families; Morales & Hanson, 2005 for immigrant families). Although addressed in the interviews, the role of CODAs as interpreters for their parents was not a central focus of the current study, which was concerned more with language choices inside the home.

Family language shift is realized in the day-to-day language choices that family members make. Sociolinguists assume that language choices may be driven by multiple factors, including accommodation to an audience, discourse topic, setting, and the conversational participants’ social and cultural identities. The ways that speakers/signers explain their own choices to themselves and to others reveal their ideologies concerning the languages in question. Language ideologies have been defined as “beliefs, or feelings, about languages as used in their social worlds” (Kroskrity, 2004, p. 498), including the “moral and political interests” (Irvine, 1989, p. 255) associated with those beliefs. Language ideologies arise from the sociolinguistic situation and reinforce or change that situation by framing the ways that speakers think about languages and language behavior. Language ideologies provide a useful analytic tool for understanding the driving forces behind language behavior and for fitting that behavior into a larger framework that includes interaction with social power structures.

The role of language ideologies in family interaction has been addressed through the framework of family language policy: “explicit and overt planning in relation to language use within the home among family members” (King, Fogle, & Logan-Terry, 2008, p. 907). The decisions that family members make and the influence that they have over each other in how particular languages are used at home have a particular impact in bilingual situations, where these decisions may make the difference between minority language maintenance and language shift. Although explicit planning and direction with regard to home language use are generally the province of caregivers, researchers on family language policy have noted that children also contribute significantly to the determination of family language practices, especially when they are the ones bringing the ideologies and practices of the larger society into a minority-language household. For example, Tuominen (1999, p. 73) argued that “Children in multilingual families are socializing their parents instead of being socialized by them.”

Although not writing explicitly from a perspective of family language policy or language ideology, van den Bogaerde and Baker (2008) recognized the importance of parental language strategies in their study of interaction between three Dutch deaf mothers and their hearing children. They found that the children did not seem to model their choices of Dutch, of Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT), or of code-blends of various kinds on their mothers’ linguistic behavior: “The children’s output does not seem to be driven by the input” (p. 119). Instead, they found that the children’s language choices seemed more closely related to what type of language use the mothers accepted from them. The child who used the most NGT utterances and the most code-blends that were grammatically based on NGT was the one whose mother used a “monolingual strategy,” insisting on fully signed utterances by asking for clarification of code-blended or spoken utterances. The mother of the child who used the most Dutch used a “bilingual strategy,” accepting such utterances as long as she could understand them, while the third mother-child dyad fell between the others in both maternal strategy and child language behavior.
In sum, deaf parents and their hearing children are exposed to and influenced by the language ideologies of the Deaf and Hearing communities outside the family. At the same time, their interactions with each other at home are likely to contribute to more local ideologies about the languages used in the family; these ideologies influence those family members’ language choices as well as the ways that they interpret and evaluate their own and each others’ linguistic behavior. This paper describes and explicates a language ideology that was evident in the interviewed CODAs’ descriptions of their family experiences.

Methods

Thirteen adult CODAs from 11 families were interviewed; all currently live in a mid-sized American city that houses a state school for the Deaf. The goal in recruiting participants was to obtain a group that varied in community affiliation and in sign language proficiency and use. Contact information for potential interviewees was obtained through the researchers’ friends, colleagues, and personal connections in the local Deaf community. All but one of the interviewed CODAs grew up with two deaf or hard-of-hearing parents, and all had only hearing siblings. All of their grandparents were hearing. This combination of deaf and hearing family members is the most common one for families with deaf parents, given that over 90% of deaf people have hearing parents (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004), and at least 90% of children with deaf parents are hearing (Schein & Delk, 1974). Including families with one hearing and one deaf parent or with both deaf and hearing children would clearly have impacted the findings. Despite these constraints on the selection of potential interviewees, there nevertheless remained significant differences between the interviewees. By allowing little variability in family makeup with respect to hearing status, we have cut down on the complexity of finding patterns in family language use. At the same time, this choice means that only one segment—albeit an especially important one—of the people who grow up in bimodal families was investigated.

The pseudonyms and basic demographics for the interviewees appear in Table 1. Kevin, Derek, and Craig are brothers; Derek and Craig were interviewed together. The interviews were semi-structured and were conducted in English by the first author, who is a hearing non-native signer with hearing parents. The questions covered topics such as the interviewees’ experience and skill in sign language, typical interactions within the family, connections to the Deaf community, and interactions between the family and the Hearing world. The interviews tended to last about an hour; the shortest was 25 min, while the longest was 1 hr and 45 min. The interviews were videotaped in order to provide a record of any signs that the participants produced. The interviews were transcribed in full, including both spoken and signed productions.

Results

Variation in Reported Family Language Behavior

There was significant variation in the sign language fluency that the interviewees reported and in the linguistic behavior they described in their families. We first give an overview of their reported sign language fluency as adults and discuss possible connections with their early language acquisition and their parents’ language skills and choices. We then address situations in which the children’s language choices conflicted with parental preferences. At the end of this section, we present the interviewees’ own explanations for why CODAs as a group vary so widely in sign language skill and use.

As adults, the interviewed CODAs’ ASL skills range from high enough fluency that Deaf people regularly mistake them for Deaf to being “in no way fluent in any type of sign” (all information on the interviewees’ ASL abilities is based on self-report; no language assessments were made). In the middle are a few who are comfortable signing with their parents but self-conscious about signing with deaf strangers. Several interviewees described their signing as “English sign language” or “Englishy.” It is important to note that fluency and type of signing are not the same thing; i.e., it is not the case that interviewees who claim to use ASL are necessarily more comfortable signing than those who say that they use something more English-based. Although all of the interviewees reported knowing some form of sign, four of them have siblings whom they described as not signing at all,
and three have siblings whose signing knowledge they report as being limited to fingerspelling.

Ten of the 13 interviewed CODAs were in a bilingual environment from birth. Eight reported having learned ASL before English; five of those later became more fluent in spoken English than in ASL. This pattern is consistent with anecdotal descriptions of typical CODAs that circulate in the Deaf community as well as with common patterns of shift away from the heritage language in minority spoken-language communities. The three interviewees for whom English never surpassed sign each seem to have had somewhat special circumstances favoring their use of ASL, whether that was being an only child and therefore having no hearing siblings to use speech with at home, or a childhood spent playing with deaf peers from the state school for the Deaf across the street.

The degree to which the deaf parents could produce and comprehend spoken English appears to have had a strong effect on their children’s acquisition of sign, regardless of the parents’ preferences for their children’s language use. There were six families where both parents were able to communicate with their children in spoken English, although they differed in what language they desired in response. Among these six families, there were some parents who did not sign even to each other, others who much preferred to communicate in sign with everybody, and others who tended to sign to each other and speak to their children. The parents’ abilities were more determinative of their children’s behavior than were the parents’ preferences: Rachel, Allison, and Tabitha reported conflict in their families when some of their siblings resisted the parents’ desire to be addressed in sign. Despite variation in the parents’ preferences and behaviors, every CODA whose parents could both produce and comprehend messages in spoken English reported having at least one sibling with signing skills that are minimal or nonexistent. In contrast, in the families in which speech was virtually useless for communication with at least one parent, no children were without functional signing abilities.

If the parents had less than full control over what language their children used when addressing them, they had still less influence over how hearing siblings addressed each other. This was true even when the deaf parents were present, a situation that caused conflict in a number of families. Many parents wanted the siblings to sign while speaking to each other so that the parents could follow the conversation; such signing almost never occurred. Overall, when growing up, regardless of their parents’ preferences or the children’s own level of sign language competence, these hearing children seem to have used speech rather than sign whenever speech could successfully transmit their message to their addressee. Only one interviewee, Boyce, reported that he and his brothers regularly switched back and forth between ASL and English without paying attention to which language they were using. All others signed with their siblings only for specific purposes such as communicating at a distance or keeping quiet in church.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Description of parents’ hearing status</th>
<th>Sign language interpreter?</th>
<th>Birth rank among siblings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allison</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Both deaf</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Oldest of 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>F deaf, M hard-of-hearing</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Only child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabitha</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Both deaf</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Youngest of 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Both deaf</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Second of 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Both deaf</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Fourth of 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derek</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Both deaf</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Third of 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craig</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Both deaf</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Second of 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>M deaf as an adult, F hearing, not involved with the family</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Oldest of 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Both hard-of-hearing</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Oldest of 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bev</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Both deaf</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Second of 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Both deaf</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Oldest of 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boyce</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Both deaf</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Youngest of 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>M deaf, F hard-of-hearing</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Oldest of 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. F = father; M = mother.
At the end of every interview, the interviewees were asked to speculate on reasons why signing skills of CODAs vary so much. As a group, they suggested a range of factors, including those discussed earlier in this section. David, who had grown up never seeing people sign, said that differences in fluency depended on how much exposure CODAs had to the signing Deaf community. Tabitha and Allison, whose parents could function in spoken English, said that signing skills depended on the parents’ speech and hearing: children who had to sign to communicate with their parents ended up signing as fluently as deaf people, while children who could get along with speech did not. Rachel, observing significant differences between her siblings, said that signing skills depended on each child’s relationship to his or her parents. Derek concurred when he described comparing his own signing to that of other CODAs at the Deaf church: “That was something I always judged, about...how close someone was to their parents, and you could tell by how good they could sign.” April expressed some bewilderment that children with deaf parents would not naturally learn to sign, but guessed that in those cases, perhaps the parents had not insisted strongly enough that the children learn and use it. Bev raised the issue of attitudes toward sign language from influential people outside the nuclear family: “Are Grandma and Grandpa... saying signing’s bad, are the kids hearing that?”

Regardless of the specific reasons proposed, all of the interviewees were acutely aware of variation between CODAs, both in signing ability and in life experience. In fact, many of them expressed a concern that perhaps they were not the best people for us to interview, as they were not typical of CODAs in general. This impression of their own atypicality was held by CODAs at all degrees of cultural Deafness and ASL fluency. Their consciousness of the differences among hearing children of deaf parents led them to warn the outside observers against assuming that they make up a uniform group.

Language and Identity

There was wide variation between the interviewed CODAs in how closely they affiliated themselves with either the Deaf or Hearing communities. Whatever their affiliations, many of the CODAs described their sense of their own identities in terms of their language use. Tabitha felt that as a child of deaf parents, she had to defend her right to a Hearing identity and and to Hearing language practices:

(1) That was considered a big disgrace, to the deaf kids of deaf parents, that I couldn’t sign on their level. And like, there were many times that like, I would tell a deaf child, you know, I'm hearing, I'm hearing, I talk.

A number of other interviewees described their language skills and language use patterns as a part of who they are. For example, Daniel explained why he considered ASL his true first language:

(2) ’Cause I don’t even have to really think— even though, when I speak English I don’t have to think, it’s still something that I have to do. ASL is just something that I am.

David made a similar connection between language and identity while describing his own less fluent signing:

(3) I’m a very Englishy signer, I actually feel most comfortable signing along with my speech.... I can communicate well with almost all deaf people, but no one ever looking at me signing is gonna go, oh, native signer.... And I’m, I’m, it’s who I am, y’know?

Signing in the Interviews

Given that sign language is a strong identity marker for cultural Deafness (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996; Padden & Humphries, 1988) and that the interviewees varied in the degree to which they reported an affiliation with the signing Deaf community, we hypothesized that the amount of signing that they produced in the interviews—which were spoken-language interactions in which signs were nevertheless acceptable—would correlate with the degree to which they affiliated with the signing Deaf community. In other words, we expected that the more culturally Deaf a CODA was, the more he or she would sign in the interviews. To address this question, we evaluated the quantity of
signing in each person’s interview and the discourse functions that signed utterances served. Most of the signing that occurred in the interviews consisted of code blends (i.e., signs produced simultaneously with speech), rather than code switches (i.e., producing sign alone adjacent to speech alone). Less than 9% of mixed utterances were code switches. The prevalence of code blends is consistent with other studies of bimodal bilinguals (e.g., Emmorey, Borinstein, Thompson, & Gollan, 2008).

For each interviewee, the degree of affiliation with the signing Deaf community was roughly quantified by answering yes or no to each of the following criteria involving background, language fluency, and adult social and professional practice:

- The interviewee grew up signing.
- The interviewee’s childhood sign variety was ASL (as opposed to a signed form of English).
- As a child, the interviewee had deaf peers as friends.
- The interviewee’s adult social life regularly involves the Deaf community.
- The interviewee’s work involves the Deaf community.
- The interviewee is highly fluent in ASL, as determined by either or both of the following self-reported criteria:
  - Deaf people commonly mistake him/her for Deaf.
  - S/he reports ASL fluency equal to or greater than English fluency.
- The interviewee explicitly self-identified as at least partly “Deaf.”

Based on the number of “yes” responses to these criteria, the interviewees ranked as shown in Figure 1.

Each interviewee’s amount of signing was calculated as a ratio of signs to words in the interview, expressed as a percentage. The results are shown in Figure 2. The numbers are very small overall, with a maximum of less than 3% of words. The number of sign tokens ranged from 0 (Rachel) to 415 (Bev). There is a general decline left to right, although there is a non-trivial amount of individual variation between people who had the same rating on the “Deaf affiliation” scale.

The correlation between Deaf affiliation and amount of signing is .52; while it shows a trend in the expected direction, it is not statistically significant. Two clear exceptions to the general downward slope are evident: Daniel and Tabitha. Daniel signed much less than his cultural neighbors, and Tabitha signed much more than hers. As mentioned earlier, Daniel appears to have a strongly Deaf cultural identity: he talked about ASL as “something that I am.” He is also one of the most Deaf-like signers in the group: he reported that Deaf people regularly mistake him for being Deaf when they first converse with him. The infrequency with which Daniel signed in the interview is problematic for the hypothesized connection between a Deaf cultural identity and frequency of signing in this context. Similarly problematic is the frequency with which Tabitha signed, given her insistence on her Hearing cultural identity, as quoted earlier.

The amount of signing may in fact not be about identity after all, or at least not about the “Deafness” of the identity. Daniel’s cultural neighbors (Bev, Boyce, Sara, and April) are all sign language interpreters. Daniel is the only interviewee who has strong affiliations with the Deaf community but who is not a professional interpreter. Interpreting means dealing with both languages at once. It follows that the results displayed in Figure 2 may have more to do with being in the habit of bilingual bimodal practice than with the Deafness of an interviewee’s identity. Most commonly Daniel is in either a signing environment or a speaking environment, but not in places where he would be doing both at once or switching between the two (as an interpreter would be). As an only child, he rarely spoke when at home with his parents. In contrast, whenever Tabitha signs, spoken English is generally also in the picture. She grew up addressing her mother in a signed form of English while speaking simultaneously. Her two siblings do not sign: family communication almost always involves both modalities. As far as being in the habit of bimodal interaction, Tabitha resembles the sign language interpreters more than Daniel does.

Despite this resemblance, differences between Tabitha’s signing behavior and that of the more culturally Deaf sign language interpreters are evident from a more detailed analysis of the discourse functions for which signs were used in these interviews. Previous
research on codeswitching in spoken languages (e.g., Poplack, 1987) led us to expect two of those functions: metalinguistic commentary (demonstrating a sign that is under discussion) and constructed dialogue (direct quotation). Both functions were demonstrated by April in the example below:

Figure 1  Interviewees’ degree of affiliation with the signing Deaf community.

Figure 2  Number of signs produced in the interviews as a percentage of number of words.
Growing up, I had always known pillow to be this. I didn’t know any other sign. That was the sign I used, I thought that was the sign that everybody used. So I’m out there interpreting and everything, and somebody’s like, what? And I’m like pillow, y’know, pillow.

April’s first use of pillow was coded as metalinguistic, while her second stretch of signing was coded as both metalinguistic and constructed dialogue. These two functions were common uses of sign for many of the interviewees. Previous research on bimodal bilingualism (Emmorey et al., 2005, 2008) led us to expect the use of classifier constructions and other spatial depictions (showing the location, shape, or movement of objects or people), as demonstrated by Bev below:

Y’know, I mean, we went around digging ditches and carrying railroad ties down these big steep hills to build the little steps that you climb up, y’know.

We developed two other categories for discourse functions after looking at the transcripts: keywords (representing a central topic under discussion, e.g., DEAF, HEARING, SIGN, INTERPRET) and other abstract concepts. The example below shows Boyce using a sign for an abstract concept:

Table 2 Percentage of code-mixed utterances by function

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Bev (n = 261)</th>
<th>Boyce (n = 44)</th>
<th>Sara (n = 35)</th>
<th>April (n = 11)</th>
<th>Derek (n = 13)</th>
<th>Tabitha (n = 46)</th>
<th>David (n = 14)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract concept</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metalinguistic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructed dialogue</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keyword</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spatial depiction</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Each interviewee’s most frequent function is italicized. Total percentages are greater than 100% because the signs in some utterances served more than one function simultaneously, as in example (4).

(4) Growing up, I had always known pillow to be this. I didn’t know any other sign.

PILLOW(var.)

That was the sign I used, I thought that was the sign that everybody used.

So I’m out there interpreting and everything, and somebody’s like, what?

And I’m like pillow, y’know, pillow.


April’s first use of pillow was coded as metalinguistic, while her second stretch of signing was coded as both metalinguistic and constructed dialogue. These two functions were common uses of sign for many of the interviewees. Previous research on bimodal bilingualism (Emmorey et al., 2005, 2008) led us to expect the use of classifier constructions and other spatial depictions (showing the location, shape, or movement of objects or people), as demonstrated by Bev below:

(5) Y’know, I mean, we went around digging ditches and carrying railroad ties down these big steep hills to build the little steps that you climb up, y’know.

DOWN–HILL LEVELS

that you climb up, y’know.

CLIMB–STAIRS

(6) And it’s only after, after all these years I can analyze that now and realize, there was a different impact.

Table 2 shows the functions of signing for those interviewees who produced more than 10 code-mixed utterances. Those interviewees with greater affiliation with the Deaf community were more likely than the others to use signs for abstract concepts and spatial depictions. Their signed utterances also tended to serve a wider variety of functions. In particular, Bev and Sara each produced examples of all five discourse functions, contrasting strongly with Derek and Tabitha, who signed primarily for metalinguistic reasons or for constructed dialogue. David, who did not learn to sign until adulthood, showed a completely different pattern from the other interviewees; he mostly used signs for keywords.

These results suggest that code mixing frequency among bimodal bilinguals cannot be neatly predicted from sign language fluency or degree of affiliation with a culturally Deaf identity. Rather, sign frequency in this situation appears to be tied to habits of bilingual/bimodal practice. Such habits are built not only among interpreters, but also in organizations that make up a community of CODAs, such as the national CODA organization, where code-mixing is common (Bishop & Hicks, 2005, 2008). This possibility that a CODA identity may be strongly influenced by adult affiliations seems to indicate that a CODA identity is not the same thing as a Deaf cultural identity that belongs to a hearing child of deaf parents.

It could be argued that Daniel is culturally Deaf but perhaps not culturally a CODA, in that he is not socialized into the CODA community. Despite our original suppositions, the bimodal bilinguals in this study were probably
not simply indexing a Hearing identity through speech or a Deaf identity through sign, but rather demonstrating tendencies built on their habits of bilingual/bimodal practice.

Ideologies of Family Communication

In order to investigate the attitudes of the interviewees toward the communication patterns in their families, we identified sections of the interviews where they expressed judgments of their own and others’ language practices in family contexts. A recurring concept in those judgements was the idea of effort; specifically, the idea that 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 communication in these families is always effortful; in fact, most of the interviewees explicitly stated that their own communication with their parents was generally easy or natural. The point is that ease of communication could not be assumed in their families, because family members had varying fluency in the languages in use and varying access to different language modalities. Given this situation, when the interviewees criticized or praised people for their communicative behavior, they generally framed it as an issue of whether the individuals in question were putting in appropriate effort. The interviewees never stated explicitly how they decided when effort was to be expected, and in fact, they did not always praise communicative effort: sometimes—though less frequently—what they criticized was undue effort.

Analysis of the interviews leads to the conclusion that these interviewees determined 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; the statement of the principle and its component guidelines are loosely inspired by Grice’s (1975) Cooperative Principle:

Appropriate effort overcomes potential communication barriers. Undue effort is driven by some other motivation or serves a communication strategy that cannot realistically succeed.

Despite the fact that hearing family members were more commonly criticized for failing to put in appropriate effort than were deaf family members, this principle applies to all family members, hearing and deaf. The difference lies in the options that each family member has. Every hearing person can learn to sign, but not every deaf person can learn to speak intelligibly or lipread effectively. From this perspective, people with more options have a greater responsibility to adapt to the communicative situation than do those with fewer options. Because the interviews focused on family contexts, it is those contexts that provided most of the examples in support of this principle. Nevertheless, as will be demonstrated in later sections, many of the interviewees appeared to apply this principle to non-family contexts as well.

All of the interviewed CODAs seemed to share this principle, although they did not necessarily share assessments of particular language behaviors. For some, 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: unnecessary when they are not directly addressing their parents and too difficult to be effective. With the definitions of appropriate and undue effort, the CODAs’ judgments of language behavior can be seen as organized around the following guidelines: (a) Put in appropriate effort; (b) Force others to put in appropriate effort; (c) Do not put in undue effort; and (d) Do not force others to put in undue effort. The following examples illustrate the interviewees’ application of these guidelines.

**Put in Appropriate Effort.** The most common targets of criticism for failure to make appropriate effort were hearing siblings and grandparents who do not sign. In the example below, Allison attributed her teenage brother’s tendency to speak to their deaf parents to a preference for what is easier for him. In this example, as in several others from other interviewees, willingness to put in appropriate effort in communication and to force others to do the same is presented as evidence of a person’s fundamental character:
(7) 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 (over-enunciating) talking to my parents like this, 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:

(8) 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:

(9) 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.

Allison’s description of a similar distinction between her grandparents raised the point that appropriate communicative effort can be realized not only through language knowledge but also through the acceptance of communication technologies:

(10) My mother’s mother knows a little bit of sign language, I think she makes more of an effort, ... and of course she owns a TTY and they talk all the time on the phone, um, so that’s really great. She’s been a lot better, when I think about it, than my father’s parents.

It is important to note that, in these CODAs’ descriptions, 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:

(11) That’s a really big issue. We try to always sign ... when we’re—when she 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 interviewees 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,” as Rachel put it.

This idea of appropriate effort extends outside the home. According to the CODAs’ ideology of appropriate effort, other ideologies privileging particular ways of communication are negatively viewed. Lisa noticed that “hard-core ASL-only folks ... didn’t socialize with my parents,” whom she described as hard-of-hearing, using a combination of spoken English, fingerspelling, and some signs.

(12) [My dad] would talk about, oh well, y’know, Jimmy talks to me but so-and-so doesn’t because I don’t know ASL.... I guess my parents have just always accepted everybody, so it was like, it never would have occurred to me to not— if I don’t know ASL, and you want to talk to me, we’ll find a way to make it work. Um, if you don’t know sign, and you want to talk to me, we’ll figure out a way to make it work.

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 due to whether the CODAs—himself and his brothers—forced their nearest and dearest to learn to sign:

(13) An added blessing was, is that my daughter had a mother ... who had no choice but to either learn the language [ASL], ... or she [the interviewee’s wife] 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 [learn ASL]? 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 [choices].

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 in terms of the prevalent ideology 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. The interviewer asked her why she thought they had not:

(14) 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 11. 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, introduced another responsibility of deaf parents: forcing their children to learn to sign:

(15) I’m just like shocked at how bad they [CODA acquaintances] are [at signing]. I mean, they are just like, barely just <gestures signing 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.

Later in the discussion, April expressed confusion that this force should be necessary, since it had been her experience that learning to 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 likely dispute, as would parents who want their children to use a minority spoken language.

Do Not Put in Undue Effort. Up to this point in the discussion of CODAs’ language ideologies, 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:
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 apparently driven by an ideology that connects sign with deafness and speech with hearing, rather than being driven by a need for effective communication. Additionally, because of her own weak speaking skills, the behavior that she chose was simply too difficult to allow successful communication.

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:

(17) 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**. I don’t, I don’t like it. And it

<mouth pursed shut>

doesn’t work for me.

In the artificial context of the ASL classroom, Tabitha was asked to suppress a way of communicating with deaf people that felt natural to her. Like Tabitha, Kevin grew up combining ASL and English; he also defended his continuing use of mixed languages and modalities in the family:

(18) It’s so hard to break like a bad habit, I mean, I fingerspell and use English and it’s just like, almost impossible, I did five semesters of ASL and I know how to do it if I’m ... **consciously** doing it or with a deaf person besides my parents, I’ll probably do all right. But with my parents, I just go back to the way—’cause that’s just the way I communicate with them.... It’s like, we communicated that way for a reason. It wasn’t because ASL wasn’t there, it was because there was something better … for our situation.

Despite calling the way he mixes his languages “a bad habit,” Kevin made clear that he found his family’s language choices effective for communication and therefore preferable to other options that would require more effort. He demonstrated in this example a keen awareness of different language choices being appropriate in different situations; for him, the determining factor for whether he should be signing ASL and minimizing English appears to be if he is communicating with a deaf person who is not a member of his family. Given his criteria for when the use of ASL is appropriate, he is uncomfortable when he sees hearing people sign to each other:

(19) 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 to communicate a message and no more. At the same time, he betrayed a belief in the kind of essentialism that he criticized in the mother’s behavior in example 16, that speech is for addressing hearing people and sign is only for addressing deaf people.

Do Not Force Others to Put in Undue Effort. The fourth guideline (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:

(20) 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 following example, Sara described herself as being forced to put in undue effort at a family gathering:

(21) 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.

Several other interviewees 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 or enjoyable. Crucially it was effort that could have been avoided if all participants had put in appropriate effort and shared the responsibility to sign.

Discussion
These adult hearing children of deaf parents seem to share a language ideology that valorizes the expenditure of communicative effort to get a message across to an addressee but that rejects such effort given any other motivation. In a related study (Pizer, 2008), the first author analyzed the language choices of two families; the data came from videotaped naturalistic interaction at home. Each family had deaf parents and three hearing sons; both families were heavily involved in the Deaf community, and all of the children were fluent signers of ASL. Nevertheless, in keeping with the language ideology described above, the siblings almost never signed to each other, reserving sign for times when it was the easiest way to communicate a message to an addressee.

To the degree that CODAs have greater competence in spoken English than in ASL—as is true of the majority of the interviewees—this greater fluency could play into their choice to speak whenever communicatively possible. This choice and the asymmetry in language skills would be mutually reinforcing. Allison expressed frustration that “I like to talk a lot, and it does take, I think, longer to say things in sign language than it does just to say it outright.” She specifically mentioned situations when she wanted to talk about complex concepts from school or when she and her brother were fighting:

(22) If we’re having a disagreement ... we’re going so fast back and forth trading our thoughts that we ... don’t really have to stop and like sign so my parents can get in on it.... Arguments are usually pretty heated things, and they don’t usually involve a lot of, like, slow thoughtfulness, taking the time to sign this out just for your benefit.

Derek also brought up the role of emotion and speed in choices to avoid sign: “Like if we’re really excited, we can’t sign that fast.” For these CODAs, finding signs simply seems harder than finding words. Nevertheless, it is not the case that speech is consistently connected with ease and sign with effort. For all of the interviewees whose parents sign, the easiest way to communicate clearly to their parents is to address them in sign. Craig continued his brother’s thought:

(23) Yeah, if we’re really excited, we talk a lot, and then if it’s really serious, we sign. So like if I need to talk to my dad heart-to-heart, we do a lot of signing. Y’know, so everything’s real clear.

As described above in the discussion of family language practices, the CODAs with the greatest asymmetry in competence between English and ASL were likely to be those whose deaf parents could produce and comprehend messages in spoken English. Because of this tendency, the parents’ degree of hearing and command
of speech could play greater a role in their children’s cultural affiliations than it did in their own. A central tenet of Deaf culture is that community membership is not determined by degree of hearing loss, but rather by personal choice, history, behavior, and sign language skill. This generalization appears to be true for the deaf parents of the interviewed CODAs. For example, David’s mother had more hearing and clearer speech than his father, but she joined the signing Deaf community after their divorce, while he remained a dedicated oralist until his death. Tabitha reported her two parents having similar hearing, speech, and lipreading skills, but when the couple divorced Tabitha’s mother deepened her connections with the Deaf world, while her father’s social life remained centered on the Hearing world. Although the details of the parents’ hearing abilities did not necessarily determine their own community affiliations, they do appear to have had a strong impact on their children’s cultural membership. Those parents with strong speech and lipreading skills, whatever their own cultural affiliations, often ended up with children who signed little, or Englishy, or not at all. Adult CODAs who sign like deaf people may be able to prove their loyalty to the Deaf community and become accepted as virtually full members. CODAs whose signing indelibly marks them as hearing are less likely to achieve this membership, regardless of their parents’ affiliations; in fact, Tabitha felt that the fact of CODAs having deaf parents raised expectations among Deaf community members and made the linguistic bar for cultural acceptance even higher for them than for hearing outsiders.

Differences in competence between speech and sign both influenced and were reinforced by family language practices for a number of the interviewees, but they do not explain why CODAs who are fluently bilingual, like those in the families observed in Pizer (2008), so rarely signed to their siblings, even though their skills in ASL should keep signing from being effortful for them. The fact that they defaulted to spoken English is likely connected to their social identities as Hearing people. Like spoken-language bilingual children who are strongly influenced by the language of their peers and of the community outside the home, even those CODAs whose families are deeply connected to the wider Deaf community have mostly hearing friends and schoolmates and spend much of their time in the Hearing world. Those interviewed adults who reported a shift from ASL-dominance to English-dominance in their own language competence often pointed to their entrance into school as the time of the shift. As mentioned earlier, only one interviewed CODA, Boyce, said that in his childhood he and his siblings codeswitched effortlessly and without noticing between ASL and English; it is not surprising that the one interviewee who reported such behavior lived across the street from the state school for the Deaf and had many deaf children and other CODAs as playmates.

The push to develop a Hearing identity is not likely to come only from the Hearing world. Despite the principle that Deaf community membership depends more on language skills and cultural affiliation than on hearing ability, the distinction between deaf and hearing is very salient in the American Deaf world. Any introduction or description of one’s family members tends to include mention of which are deaf and which are hearing. One interviewed CODA, Bev, recalled seeing her mother’s deaf friends lament the fact of having hearing children. Once when Bev’s mother was going through a difficult time, she rejected Bev’s attempts to comfort her, saying that Bev could never truly understand her: “**you hearing. different.**” Sara’s parents originally did not teach their children to sign, believing that the children’s natural language was spoken English. Changed views of ASL both inside and outside the Deaf community make that parental language choice unlikely today. Nevertheless, even in the most culturally Deaf household, a hearing child is likely well aware of being hearing and of the link between hearing status and language modality. Although hearing acuity varies on a continuum for the entire population, Hearing and Deaf identities are generally framed as distinct categories within the Deaf community (Padden & Humphries, 1988). Given this situation, there is a question whether parents and children consider a signed language such as ASL to be a hearing child’s “heritage language” in the same way that the spoken language of an immigrant parent would be a heritage language for their American-born children. Such consideration of ASL as a CODA’s heritage language might be more likely for children in multigenerational deaf families, in contrast to the interviewees in the current study, who all had hearing grandparents.
The combined influence of hearing peers and Deaf world distinctions is likely to lead many CODAs to develop an unquestioned assumption that the normal language choice when addressing a hearing person is spoken English. If this strong association between language choice and the hearing status of the addressee extends to hearing siblings or if the person being addressed is a hearing playmate, the only way not to exclude a deaf parent who is an unaddressed participant in the interaction is to sign and speak at the same time. Given the major grammatical differences between ASL and English, creating a complete message in both at once is a challenge even for fluent bilinguals (Emmorey et al., 2005; Wilbur & Peterson, 1998). As quoted above, April agonized over how hard it was to remember to sign and speak at home and how bad she felt about not doing it. Kevin also expressed unease with the status quo that excluded his parents but—finding it too difficult to consistently use both speech and sign—gave up on the issue:

(24) We [Kevin and his siblings] only spoke, and that actually caused some controversy.... It was a problem that we would ... speak to each other, we would never sign, so at dinner, ... if anyone was talking to my parents, then we’d sign, but if we were talking to each other, we wouldn’t, and they would want to know what was going on, ... and it was like almost too hard to do both.... It’s just like being in two conversations at the same time, it just didn’t work, and we just didn’t do it. I mean, we never thought it was rude. Our parents never– I mean, they would ask us to do it, ... but it wasn’t like a constant battle, it was just kinda like, fine, this is the way it is. And so then of course when I studied sign language and started being more conscious of it, then I was like, man, that’s kinda crappy, and so I would try to do it, and it still wouldn’t work. So then I just said, y’know, some things are the way they are, and you know they suck, and you just do it.

It does not seem to have occurred to any of these CODAs that the way around this impasse would be to sign to their siblings without speech. Their ideology of expending effort to avoid communication barriers seems to apply primarily to addressees, not to unaddressed participants. Although many of them were aware that their parents were being excluded, their desire to prevent that exclusion did not overcome their sense that the natural way to address a hearing person was in speech. Once more than one hearing child is present in the home, it becomes a bilingual, bicultural environment. Kevin stated that he would never just stand around talking at the Deaf Club—the prototypical Deaf environment—but his own home was different.

Conclusion

In these families with deaf parents and hearing children, the family members’ unequal access to languages and communication modalities created a greater potential for communication barriers than in monolingual hearing families. Overcoming potential communication barriers was a priority, and the effort required to overcome those barriers was valued. The specific linguistic behaviors worthy of effort varied depending on many factors, including the ability of the deaf parents to produce and comprehend spoken messages, the degree of the family’s affiliation with the signing Deaf community, changes in outside attitudes toward sign language, and individual relationships between particular parents and children. As in other minority language households, the language of the majority community exerted a strong influence on the children, leading them to use spoken English whenever communicatively possible, even within the home. This parallel with spoken-language bilingual families raises a question for further research: does an ideology of communicative effort exist in those families as well, or do differences in hearing status within families bring the need for communicative effort to children’s attention in a way that simple differences in language competence may not? The prevalence of this language ideology among these hearing adults with deaf parents provides a unifying thread in an otherwise diverse group, where each interviewee preemptively rejected the label of “typical CODA.” Despite differences in language skills and community affiliations, these CODAs were united by an awareness of the responsibility shared by all family members to collaborate in forestalling communication barriers.
Notes

1. These interviews were part of a larger study that also included the analysis of videotaped naturalistic interaction of families at home (Pizer, 2008). Inspired by anecdotal observation of considerable variation in the signing skill and cultural affiliations of hearing adults with deaf parents, the research question of that study was how such variation might be related to patterns of language use in the childhood homes of CODAs.

2. We use the term “CODA” to refer to the hearing children of deaf adults. Some authors (e.g., Bishop & Hicks, 2005; Bull, 1998) prefer to write “Coda” or “coda,” reserving the form in all capital letters for the international organization of the same name. All of the participants in this study were aware of the term, but not all identified with it. We have chosen to use the term as a matter of convenience and to write it in capital letters because it is an acronym. Our usage is not meant to imply that the term is a label of group identity for all of the participants in this study.

3. The interviewees’ characterizations of their own signing skills were elicited with questions asking them to describe their variety of sign, their relative skill in sign and English and whether that relationship had changed over time, whether Deaf people mistake them for Deaf, and their ease of communication (both productive and receptive) in both casual and formal situations with their parents, Deaf people whom they know, and Deaf people whom they don’t know.

4. Transcription conventions: Signs are represented in SMALL CAPS. Gestures are described in angled brackets. If signs or gestures were produced simultaneously with speech, they are represented underneath the transcription of the corresponding speech, and the words that were produced at the same time are underlined. Clarifications of meaning are added in square brackets. Words produced with an unusual voice quality are typed in italics, preceded by a description in (parentheses). Omissions are marked with ellipses.

5. This analysis was not an original goal of the data collection, so the interview situation was not explicitly designed to elicit signing, although the topics of the interview might tend to do so. The presence of the first author—a non-native signer with individual signs are produced at a slower rate than individual words in the rate of producing propositions, despite the fact that individual signs are produced at a slower rate than individual words due to the larger movements required (Bellugi & Fischer, 1972; Klima & Bellugi, 1979).

6. Bishop (2008) distinguishes a CODA identity from a Deaf cultural identity: “Many people who see themselves as not quite fitting into the Deaf/hearing categories choose the Coda label as a way to carve out a third niche for themselves….” There is some consensus in the CODA community that Coda should be used to refer only to those people who have found their Coda cultural identity through self-exploration via CODA conferences, retreats, and other Coda gatherings” (p. xvi). In her study of code-blending (Bishop, 2010), she suggested a relationship between such a CODA identity and the quantity of code-blending upon observing that, in contrast to those study participants who code-blended frequently, “the four people who expressed little or no enthusiasm for CODA events and Coda talk were also those who used predominantly English or predominantly ASL” (p. 234).

7. Kevin’s description of this mother’s behavior is reminiscent of the family studied by Sachs, Bard, & Johnson (1981), in which the acquisition of language by two hearing children was delayed because their deaf parents refrained from signing to them and addressed them only in unintelligible speech. However, Kevin’s brothers, Craig and Derek, described the same child as a fluent ASL-English bilingual, indicating that he was in fact receiving sufficient language input.

8. Studies comparing rates of signing ASL and speaking English have shown no difference between the two languages in the rate of producing propositions, despite the fact that individual signs are produced at a slower rate than individual words due to the larger movements required (Bellugi & Fischer, 1972; Klima & Bellugi, 1979).

9. The fact that signed utterances require the addressee’s visual attention may make signing somewhat more effortful than speech for hearing people addressing other hearing people. Analysis of interaction in the observed families showed that signed utterances were somewhat more likely to be preceded by explicit attention-getting cues than spoken utterances were (Pizer, 2010). More research is needed on this point.

References


