

Introduction

Signed Language as Social Participation and National Contribution

ON A TUESDAY AFTERNOON in late December 2008, the Education Project (EP), located in Đồng Nai, Việt Nam, let classes out early to allow its nearly fifty adult education students watch their classmate's appearance on a provincial television show. Trang, a high school graduate of the EP,¹ had been asked to participate in the show as part of a series of celebrations titled "310 Years of Đồng Nai Province" (1698–2008). At that time, the use of Vietnamese signed languages (VSLs) in government-sponsored special schools for Deaf students was highly contested and rarely seen in any public media. That day, I was observing classroom instruction at the EP as part of my dissertation fieldwork at such sites and in Deaf community organizing. It was therefore with a great sense of excitement that the EP staff, students, and I hurried to take our places on the floor and to arrange ourselves so that everyone could enjoy unobstructed views of the television show.

Hosted by Đồng Nai Television (DN2), "310 Years of Đồng Nai Province" focused on both the history of Đồng Nai province and the contemporary accomplishments of remarkable individuals hailing from or contributing to Đồng Nai's development. Symbolically accentuating the historic contours of the focus of the show, the filming took place outdoors in the courtyard of the Văn Miếu Trấn Biên, or Temple of Literature, on the site of the historic Trấn Biên Temple (see figures 1 and 2).² Against this backdrop of revivalist tradition, the show focused on the social achievements of four women: a scholarship recipient entering medical school; a high school chemistry teacher, also known for her accomplishments as a singer; a self-identified person with a disability, well known for earning a graduate degree in the United States but especially for returning to Việt Nam to found a disabled people's organization in Hồ Chí Minh City (HCMC); and Trang, one of the first signing Deaf persons to graduate from high school in Việt Nam.

Trang's imminent appearance on state-run television was intriguing. What forces were now bringing signing Deaf people into the public spotlight? What might this event indicate about official state-institutional orientations toward Deaf people and

1. All names are pseudonyms, selected by the research participants themselves, unless otherwise noted. The names of the research sites, which I selected, are also pseudonymous.

2. Trấn Biên Temple was originally constructed in 1715 in honor of Confucius but was destroyed by the French in the mid-1800s. In 2002, the temple was reconstructed and renamed, modeled on the venerated Văn Miếu–Quốc Tử Giám Confucian academy in Hà Nội, which has been preserved since its construction in 1070. Unless otherwise noted, all of the photographs are ones that I took.

signed language?³ And because this program would be broadcast in real time both in Đồng Nai province and nationally, what might Trang, if given the opportunity, say about her experience as a Deaf person in contemporary Việt Nam?

At 24 years of age, Trang appeared the epitome of successful political economic reforms and an outstanding contributor to ongoing market-socialist development and modernization—one of seemingly many potential representatives of Vietnamese Deaf achievement. Such appearances, however, belie the conditions facing Deaf people in the 21st century. At the time of her appearance on television, only about 80 students who had attended the EP since it opened in 2000 had had an opportunity to obtain a secondary-school education and to attend classes taught in a local signed language, Hồ Chí Minh Sign Language (HCMSL).⁴ Although Việt Nam is home to one of the world's first signed language–based schools, the Trường Âm-Điếc Lái Thiêu [Lái Thiêu School for the Mute-Deaf], with the initiation of the political-economic reform period (Đổi Mới; 1986–present), the Vietnamese state began establishing a national system of speech-based special schools founded on instruction in spoken and printed/written Vietnamese. In the mid-1990s, implementation of inclusive education (IE) then promoted the placement of Deaf students into regular education classrooms. Whether attending a school with Deaf peers where signed language was not permitted or where signs might be used in Vietnamese word order (special schools) or attending a school with no Deaf peers and no signed language (IE), both approaches resulted in poor educational outcomes (Reilly & Nguyễn, 2004; Tạc, 2000; cf. Lê, 2013; NCCD, 2010; Kham, 2014).

At the time Trang appeared on television, Deaf people—specifically, those who either had attended or were then enrolled in school—had little to no access to educational content; those who left school were either unemployed or working as low-wage manual laborers as, prior to 2008, few had formally graduated from high school or college (GSO, 2006; NCCD, 2010).⁵ Therefore, no Deaf person held teaching credentials that would allow them to pursue a career in education, as Trang proposed in her commentary.

3. Televised and print media campaigns to raise awareness of people with disabilities were carried out by the project known as “Assisting Vietnamese People with Disabilities between 2006 and 2010” (NCCD, 2010). Such awareness raising may have led to the filming of “310 Years of Đồng Nai”; however, this event, and those that followed, were nevertheless remarkable for being the first instances of signing Deaf people appearing on television and presenting their own perspectives via a HCMSL-Vietnamese interpreter.

4. Note that my use of *HCMSL* in this book is a departure from my previous individual (Cooper, 2011; 2014) and joint publications (Cooper & Nguyễn, 2015), and from Woodward (2003) and Woodward et al. (2004), and Woodward and Nguyễn (2012). This change reflects ongoing work with Vietnamese Deaf co-researchers who preferentially use the English-language abbreviation *HCMSL* as this convention resembles the Vietnamese-language abbreviation for Hồ Chí Minh City: *Tp. HCM* (Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh), and also parallels the convention of representing Hà Nội Sign Language as *HNSL* and Hải Phòng Sign Language as *HPSL* (i.e., not adding ‘C’ for city to the abbreviated form). See Cooper and Nguyễn (2017) for an example of the use of *HCMSL*.

5. The 2006 Vietnamese Household Living Standards Survey reported that less than 1% of school-age youth with the greatest “hearing difficulty” (about 40,000 persons) attended school or were employed in the work force at any level (GSO, 2006, section 4.25). This survey was more comprehensive than earlier ones and was the first to document disability.



Figure 1. Courtyard of the Temple of Literature (Văn Miếu Trấn Biên; Đồng Nai, Việt Nam).

It is doubtful that many audience members viewing the “310 Years of Đồng Nai” commemoration were aware of the circumstances of the Deaf educational situation, particularly from a Deaf person’s perspective. Although special schools for Deaf students were routinely featured in humanitarian and social welfare reportage in 2008, such coverage tended to focus on the problems that school administrators and teachers associated with teaching Deaf students.⁶ In such accounts, deafness is characterized as a medical condition involving the absence of certain capacities—no speaking (*không nói chuyện*), no hearing ability (*không có khả năng nghe*), no sound (*không âm thanh*)—and Deaf people are portrayed as a group associated with loss and incapacity and commonly referred to as having a hearing impairment (*khiếm thính*) and a disability (*khuyết tật*). Whereas citizens are expected to fulfill their constitutional duty to “participate in the building of society” (*góp phần xây dựng cho xã hội*) and to “contribute to society” (*đồng góp cho xã hội*), discourses on Deaf people typically describe them as the recipients—rather than the agents—of such action.

Under such circumstances, Trang’s presence on television as a representative of signing Deaf persons was quite remarkable, providing an example of the kind of emergent phenomena that Rabinow terms “events”: occurrences that “problematize

6. Infrastructural conditions are addressed in “Education for the disabled needs more attention” (Bich, 2009). Educational quality is addressed in “In a world without sound: Teachers learn from students” (Nga, 2010).



Figure 2. Poster commemorating “310 Years of Đồng Nai” (Đồng Nai, Việt Nam).

classifications, practices, and things” (2003, p. 67). In the instance of “310 Years of Đồng Nai,” the key “event” is the social visibility not simply of a signing Deaf person but also of a Deaf person who possesses capabilities that contribute to national prosperity as a *citizen*.

Conducted in recognizable talk-show format, the program featured the host’s interviews with the four participants in spoken Vietnamese. The participants commented on various facets of their lives and on the opportunities that had enabled them to overcome difficulties (*vuốt qua khó khăn*) in contributing to the nation’s growth and prosperity.⁷ Trang’s remarks focused on the struggle to progress in schools, in which she and her peers were not allowed to use Hồ Chí Minh Sign Language. As one of the EP codirectors interpreted her comments into Vietnamese, Trang charted a rhetorical path much like that of her fellow participants; however, rather than focus on familial or historical circumstances, Trang attributed *difficulty* to the institutionalized disavowal of HCMSL and *overcoming difficulty* to the promise of HCMSL as a formal language of instruction. This perspective is mirrored in contemporary southern Vietnamese

7. The notion of overcoming difficulty has roots in Vietnamese morality tales, such as Nguyễn Du’s (1766–1820) *Đoạn Trường Tân Thanh* or *Truyện Kiều* [Tale of Kiều], in which the protagonist, Kiều, overcomes destiny or fate, *mệnh*, the difficulties of which have been brought on by some unusual endowment, *tài*. In the contemporary vernacular, *mệnh* and *tài* are replaced by (*số phận* and *tài*, as in the expressions *mỗi người có một số phận* [each person has a destiny] and *chúng ta phải vượt lên số phận* [we must overcome fate] (Nguyễn, personal communication). Malarney (2011) also notes that, in the anticolonial revolutionary and early state socialist periods, “overcoming difficulty” referred to the yoke of foreign control, which had resulted in mass illiteracy.

disability advocates' reframing of disability from an individual/family concern to one centered on social-institutional barriers, transforming *vuot qua khó khăn* [overcome difficulties] into *vuot qua rào cản xã hội* [overcome social barriers].⁸ Having had an opportunity to pursue higher education using HCMSL, Trang stated that she hoped to one day become a teacher herself, teaching Deaf students using signed language.

Reporting on her own and her peers' actual lived experiences, Trang framed the nature of Deaf education by implicitly evaluating the conditions they all encountered in striving to fulfill citizenship obligations through education. Trang's evaluation was not directed at a particular special school; rather, she addressed the systematic reproduction of citizenship participation via spoken Vietnamese and normative ideas about what citizens should be able to do and to achieve exclusively in that mode. Trang's remarks are also relevant to citizenship in that she presented a view of Vietnamese society that was not reflected in the wider social, political, or institutional orders. Thus, Trang's commentary advanced a sociopolitical claim: HCMSL should be regarded both as a legitimate language and as the legitimate language of Deaf education in southern Việt Nam. Moreover, Trang's commentary advanced the idea that HCMSL might—and implicitly should—be used by Deaf and non-Deaf teachers in Deaf education schools and other social locations. Emphasizing changes in social attitudes about Deaf people and HCMSL, as well as changes in the distribution of language-related social resources and power, this book shows that such claims emerge through shared signed language practices and contribute to sociopolitical formation (e.g., to legitimate HCMSL practices). Tensions between social participation and contribution, which developed from shared signed language practices and those guided by state-directed language planning, are a major focus of this book. These tensions appear in journalistic reportage that preceded and followed Trang's appearance on television, where references to *bị khiếm thính* [marker of illness/unfortunate status + hearing impairment] dominate social-interest stories about Deaf people. Ostensibly portraying Deaf people's achievements, such negative indexing of the latter's languages and bodies has implications for citizenship, particularly where mass media sources authorize certain forms of information but not others.

Between the time of Trang's appearance in "310 Years of Đồng Nai" and the time of this writing, attention to Deaf people's signed language-based social participation has expanded considerably. A few examples suggest the variety and breadth of these activities: Print and broadcast news outlets now routinely include public-interest stories on Deaf community activities such as signed language classes, Deaf community social voluntarism, and community-based *giao lưu* [cultural or community-building exchanges]. In addition, in 2010, the Law on Persons with Disability acknowledged the right to use sign language in education. In 2012 and 2013, signed language instruction taught by Deaf people was featured in weekly television programming. Furthermore, in February 2015 the state's ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and its acceptance of the CRPD's Optional Protocol

8. Disability Research and Capacity Development (formerly named Disability Resource and Development), a HCMC-based organization run by and for people with disabilities, archives news and research related to *vuot qua rào cản xã hội* and other relevant topics. See <http://drdvietnam.org>

acceded to international standards and compliance measures regarding state-subsidized provision of access to signed languages.⁹ Notwithstanding historic changes in Vietnamese policy statements on sign language, their absence or presence in schools and other social locations needs to be clarified, particularly with respect to the linguistic status of VSLs and their perceived human development and social affordances.

This book is a study of the relationships among language practices, ideologies, policies, and programming that exist in sites of Deaf education and Deaf community organizing in and around HCMC. Examining the forces shaping and shaped by such relationships, I focus on ethnographic and language-centered accounts of sociopolitical formation, principally in relation to the modernizing and development-oriented state. My main argument connects three propositions. First, that educational structuring reflects ideologies of sign language (*ngôn ngữ ký hiệu*) and of Deaf people as a subject group, thereby facilitating forms of inclusion and exclusion in the contemporary moment. Second, that Deaf people's responses to educational structuring—and other social and political economic forces—involve HCMSL-centered social action, thus contributing to sociopolitical formation among and between Deaf and non-Deaf people. Third, that such signed language-based social action contributes to broader sociopolitical transformation within Việt Nam. Ultimately I argue that differently positioned evaluations of HCMSL and notions of Deaf social capacity reflect and respond to concerns over the changing limits of citizenship under contemporary market socialism, particularly those connected to increasing demands on the development-oriented state. Moreover, this study shows that differing understandings of, or stances on, “sign language” are strongly influenced by language ideologies connecting language (and language modalities) with idealized forms of national participation.

Describing circumstances of Deaf groups for a postcolonial, market-socialist setting in Southeast Asia, this study examines perspectives not sufficiently represented in Deaf education, Deaf studies, signed language linguistics, or anthropological literatures. With the analysis I develop here, I aim to expand the scope of language-centered anthropological analysis by showing how signed language-based claims contribute to an examination of sociopolitical formation and change. That is, it is not my contention that sociopolitical formation is the exclusive domain of the state. On the contrary, in these chapters I show the ways in which Deaf social action and HCMSL play a role in shaping state-institutional practices. My description of Trang's television appearance that opened this chapter, suggests one potential route: audience appreciation of the performances and perspectives of signing Deaf people, including critiques not accounted for by official rhetoric.

Examining Signed Language-Centered Social Formation: The Salience of the State for Education and Deaf People's Citizenship Participation

There is no Deaf education in a general sense, nor are there (necessarily) shared meanings associated with the linguistic identities, social positions, or contests

9. Việt Nam ratified the CRPD on February 5, 2015.

claimed in relation to Deaf education within and across national contexts. Whereas Deaf and signed language–related marginalization is common enough throughout the world to discuss these circumstances in a generalized way, this study shows that Deaf people’s marginalization and participation take shape in particular ways in Việt Nam and need to be documented, mapped, and closely considered and clarified—for theoretical and practical purposes. This clarification allows us to address issues related to processes of modernity, intersubjectivity, and linguistic citizenship and sovereignty within and across signed and spoken language groups in Việt Nam. The issues Trang raised during a chance appearance in a televised broadcast she neither organized nor helped to plan demonstrate the importance of ethnographic attention to everyday events and their implications for theorizing social change. How issues of concern are framed and pursued by Deaf and non-Deaf people in Việt Nam expands social scientific understanding of market-socialist forces and the sociocultural dimensions of political-economic change.

Viewed from within anthropology, late-modern systems of education are principal vehicles for the reproduction of state power and the organization of social relations. Schools have been examined as paramount sites for the reproduction of state ideological power (Althusser, 1971) and authority (Bourdieu, 1998). Recently, investigations of sites of everyday practice demonstrate the ways that populations “imagine” (Hanson & Stepputat, 2006) and “culturally constitute” (Sharma & Gupta, 2006) the state and their relationships to one another as state subjects (see also Jaffe, 2009). From the vantage point of culturally specified practices, Sharma and Gupta argue that “anthropological analyses of the state, then, begin with the counter-intuitive notion that states that are structurally similar may nonetheless be profoundly different from each other in terms of the meanings they have for their populations” (*ibid.*, p. 10). Put another way, there is nothing prepolitical or stable about the structure of modern states; rather, as Calhoun argues, it is through “speech, action, and recognition” that nations undergo transformation (2007, p. 153; see also Althusser, 1971; Williams, 1977).

Language-centered anthropological accounts examining relationships between language and inequality provide insight into the state as a chief medium for establishing and transforming political economies of language. For example, Blommaert argues that the state is responsible for organizing the following: “a dynamic between the world system and ‘locality’”; “a regime of language perceived as ‘national’ with particular forms of stratification in value attribution to linguistic varieties and forms of usage”; and “an infrastructure for the reproduction of a particular regime of language: an education system, media, culture production—each time a selective mechanism that includes some forms of language and excludes others” (2005, pp. 396–397). Regimes of language can be observed, for instance, in Deaf education special school requirements to speak Vietnamese. Trang’s use of HCMSL during her first opportunity to address the wider Vietnamese society via the televised medium is, significantly, a reflection of her own natural language use, as well as a commentary on—or disalignment with—regimes of language connected to spoken Vietnamese and signing in Vietnamese word order. State emphasis given to language modalities in connection to classroom and social conduct, literacy, citizenship education, cultural heritage and obligation, and training for life-after-school, among other areas,

indicates the significance of particular notions of language to specific state-directed political and institutional orders.

Where states organize regimes of language to include selected languages and omit others, the excluded languages form a fundamental part of the sociopolitical basis, by which dominant language regimes and dominant language groups claim legitimacy and authority. For example, languages perceived as interfering with certain institutional goals may be characterized as having negative characteristics that differentiate them and their users from ratified languages and their users. Applying this argument to situations of signed language inclusion and exclusion, state approaches to signed languages are one way in which states pursue projects on various scales—locally, nationally, and transnationally. Moreover, signed languages are implicated in state decisions regarding language broadly, as decisions affecting spoken language users also affect signed language users. For example, requiring the use of specific spoken languages to obtain routine government services (e.g., drivers' licenses, passports) disqualifies signed language users from accessing services in many national locations. Current efforts to understand sociopolitical relationships between signed language groups and the dominant spoken language settings in which they are embedded are hampered by a lack of extended ethnographic accounts of Deaf groups tracking relationships between microlevel practices and macrolevel structures and forces. Significantly, this book contributes to such efforts, as well as to collaboration between researchers and research participant groups with respect to best practices for conducting, analyzing, and disseminating such work.

Deaf Education and Deaf Community Organizing in Việt Nam: Sites of Sociopolitical Formation

The formal education of Deaf students in Việt Nam began in 1886 with French colonial establishment of the Trường Âm-Điếc Lái Thiêu [Lái Thiêu School for the Mute-Deaf] in Bình Dương province, just north of present-day Hồ Chí Minh City. Lái Thiêu was the only Deaf education school in the country until after the American-Vietnamese War, when the government established two schools in the north, and parents and parents-turned-educators organized to establish additional schools in the south. It was only with the 1986 initiation of *đổi mới* [political economic reforms], however, that the state consolidated a national approach to Deaf education that was speech based. Aiming to stimulate economic development and modernization, the state made education the foundation of *đổi mới* and its top national policy, with a central role given to literacy in spoken and printed/written Vietnamese (Phạm, 2007, pp. 282–283). Passage of the 2010 Law on Persons with Disability officially ended the formal era of speech-based Deaf education by giving students the right to use “sign language” (*ngôn ngữ ký hiệu*) in school;¹⁰ however, lack of teacher training in the use of the three main varieties of VSLs

10. Reference to “sign language” appears one time in the 2010 Law on Persons with Disability. Paragraph 4 of article 27 in the section on education of persons with disability states that *người khuyết tật nghe nói được học bằng ngôn ngữ ký hiệu* [persons with hearing and speech disabilities can study using sign language].

continues to limit teacher-student engagement and access to educational content.¹¹ Moreover, there are not enough schools to accommodate the more than 400,000 school-aged youths who are Deaf or hard of hearing, and educational programming in most existing schools ends at the fifth or ninth grade (depending on the school) (GSO, 2009; cf. GSO, 2006, for figures reported at more than double those found in GSO, 2009).

Language Ideology, Special Schools, and Action by Deaf Social Organizers

Emphasizing the importance of the Vietnamese language for Deaf people's human and social development, as well as their role in Việt Nam's future, educational leaders determined that spoken Vietnamese should be the instructional language for the special school system. This approach resulted in increased enrollment but widespread educational failure, with students typically taking two or more years to complete one curricular year of study. Whereas Deaf students could not hear their teachers or visually decipher (i.e., lip-read) the tonal system of Vietnamese, some special school principals and teachers began learning signs from their students; however, believing that students suffered language and intellectual deficits leading them to sign incorrectly, school personnel superimposed Vietnamese word order on the signs they had learned and required students to sign in this manner. As discussed in chapters 3 and 4, student obedience to teachers included efforts to speak Vietnamese and to sign in Vietnamese word order; however, when outside of the direct gaze of school personnel (and often within), students signed in the ways they had developed with one another and the Deaf adults with whom they had contact. Special school language requirements also extended to the family home, with school administrators and teachers encouraging families to exclusively speak with Deaf children and discouraging them from signing.

Trang's early educational career provides an example of these circumstances. When it was time for Trang to enter school, she was given a choice between several HCMC-based schools—an inclusive school (i.e., with no Deaf peers and no signed language) or one of several special schools with Deaf peers but where signed language use was prohibited. Trang and her family chose the latter. In the school she attended (introduced in chapter 1 as Hope C), the school principal required teachers and students to speak Vietnamese and discouraged families from signing with students at home. Trang's educational achievement was limited, and her studies were delayed due to the fact that teachers and students did not share a classroom language. As a result, it took Trang nearly ten years to complete the first through the fifth grade, which she completed at age 16. At home, communication with her family was limited due to the fact that they did not share a home language. Trang's parents and siblings did not sign (and still do not), and she did not speak Vietnamese; moreover, because of her school experiences, she did not feel confident at that time to write to them using the romanized script (*quốc ngữ*; "national language"). Experiences such as Trang's, with language regulation and their effects, are a significant

11. One example of sign language training classes cosponsored by MOET is a course organized by MOET's Special Education–Educational Science Institute of Việt Nam and the Association of People with Disabilities, October–December 2014, held in the Thanh Xuân District of Hà Nội. See <http://thanhxuan.gov.vn/portal/home/print.aspx?p=1542>

focus of Vietnamese Deaf social organizers' critique of special school structuring and of language regulation encountered in other locations (e.g., vocational training, employment).

In the late 1990s, Deaf people began organizing to address their own educational and training interests and to confront the widespread social marginalization related to the use of VSLs. In 2000 these efforts were further facilitated by the establishment of the EP, an internationally funded program that innovated the teaching of the national curriculum in HCMSL.¹² With the support of Deaf networks and associations, the EP drew Deaf students from all over Việt Nam to study at the high-school level and later also at the college and university levels. At the time of this writing the EP is still the only program to offer Deaf people access to higher education up to and beyond high school in HCMSL. The EP is also the only educational program to train students in signed language linguistics and HCMSL instruction, making it the primary (and, until recently, the only) source of training capacity for Deaf people's language-oriented projects.

Since the latter part of the first decade of this century, Deaf community organizing has surged, advanced by general educational and signed language linguistic training through the EP, as well as by collaborative partnerships between Deaf social organizations and both national and international partners supportive of signed language-related research and training. Deaf organizations throughout the country have formed a national network and are poised for official recognition as a national association, much like thousands of other community-based organizations that enjoy official recognition in Việt Nam (Norlund, 2007). However, at the time of this writing the state has yet to grant Deaf community organizations official status. Deaf community organizers address these circumstances by continuing to build the number and capacity of Deaf organizations around the country.¹³ They also contribute to social development by hosting events at which Deaf and non-Deaf family and community members socialize using VSLs. In addition, they conduct civic-oriented projects. Settings of educational and community organizing offer Deaf constituencies opportunities to engage in ongoing conversations about the social conditions they encounter and to develop coordinated responses. As explored in chapters 3 through 5, such responses are directed at critical change within Deaf constituencies as well as in the broader society.

Education as Citizenship Participation: Signed Language Literacy and Self-Determination

Around the world, Deaf education projects are fraught with controversy, as is well documented in Deaf studies, Deaf education, and signed language linguistic literatures. Pivoting between oral (or speech-based) and manual (or sign-based) philosophies,

12. In 2010 MOET established a sister project to the EP in Hà Nội, offering sixth-through ninth-grade classes in Hà Nội Sign Language. In 2015 MOET extended educational programming to the tertiary level, offering tenth through twelfth-grade classes at the Trường Cao đẳng Sư phạm Trung Ương, Hà Nội [National College for Education, Hà Nội].

13. According to state protocol, Deaf clubs must be established in at least half of the country's 58 provinces and 5 municipalities in order to be eligible for official recognition.

problem-oriented formulations of deafness, language acquisition, and literacy have dominated language planning debates for hundreds of years. See chapter 2 for an in-depth discussion of the historical context and legacies of the oralism vs. manualism debates; briefly, in these debates, expert knowledge typically privileges dominant spoken languages, shaping recommendations for instructional language use in connection to arguments about membership in and productive contributions to societies and nations (Branson & Miller, 2007, 2008; Lane, 1989; Reagan, 2010; see also Tollefson, 2008, for a view from minority spoken languages). Davis (1995) locates the emergence of notions of language ideological and embodied difference in the combined rise of nineteenth-century nationalist discourses and expert rhetoric on deafness (cf. Branson & Miller, 2002).¹⁴ Articulating in the notion that *able-bodies* make an able nation, an able citizen is a normatively speaking citizen, one who calls citizenship into being by producing the national language. Rarely addressed on their own terms, signed languages have been treated largely instrumentally, as methods perceived to support or hinder educational and national goals.

Language practices found in sites of Deaf education and Deaf community organizing in Việt Nam place citizenship in the context of legacies of Confucianism and Marxist-Leninist thought, both of which contribute to the hierarchical nature of state-society relations (Porter, 1993; Tai, 1992). In Việt Nam, anticolonial citizenship education is a core requirement from the sixth through the twelfth grade, while Marxist-Leninist philosophy is a core requirement of all higher education training. As mentioned earlier, in the market-socialist era, citizens are expected to fulfill their constitutional duty to participate in (*góp phần*) and contribute to society (*đồng góp cho xã hội*). In chapter 4 I discuss Reis's (2013) description of *active citizenship* and its expression through hierarchical relations in Việt Nam, and apply that notion to examine the types of citizenship practices carried out by Deaf people at the three major ethnographic sites included in this study.

The data from the three sites suggest that, although the state apparatus provides an efficient delivery system for ideological formations and regulation, state governance cannot determine people's thoughts or the actions they may take with respect to their diverse human experiences and social positions. By sharing language and intersubjective experience, constituent groups may socialize one another to common understandings of their circumstances as subjects within and in relation to the given sociopolitical system and its variable dynamics. Analysis of the current data set shows state governance and Vietnamese Deaf people's social action reflecting *different but interrelated* forms of sociopolitical organization, raising the following questions: What forces are promoting speech-based and sign-based regimes in contemporary Deaf

14. Growing in popularity throughout the 1800s, this idea reached its apogee at the 1880 Second International Congress on Education for the Deaf, held in Milan, Italy, whereby hearing educators voted to institute a worldwide ban on the use of sign languages in Deaf education. To ensure the vote, Deaf teachers attending the convention were ejected from the proceedings and prohibited from voting. In addition to Davis (1995), a number of scholars have addressed the history and legacy of "Milan" (e.g., Branson & Miller, 2002; Ladd, 2003; Lane, 1984; Van Cleve & Crouch, 1989). See also Haualand and Allen's (2009) "Deaf People and Human Rights," a report for the World Federation of the Deaf.

education? What roles do Deaf citizens and state actors play to connect VSLs to or distance them from institutions of the state? And in what ways does Deaf social action align or disalign with state-authorized forms of citizenship practice?

Meanings of Active Participation and Contribution

The Vietnamese state's platform makes education the primary vehicle for ensuring national economic development, and it sets literacy in the Vietnamese language as the foundation of that education. Minority language claims implicitly complicate these national development goals and established modes of national participation. State approaches to Deaf education and Deaf community-based organizing between 2000 and 2016 nevertheless allowed Deaf people's signed language-centered activities to gain wider circulation—evidencing what some scholars of Việt Nam term “change from within” (Wischermann, 2011; cf. Fforde, 2011, and Thayer, 2009). The Vietnamese state's responsiveness to signed language-centered interests suggests that it is “sensitive to changing definitions of the political” (Faulks, 2006, p. 65). The terms of such sensitivity and related effects are taken up throughout this book.

Discussions of the nature of language in this changing social and political terrain are producing a set of debates about, and distinct agendas related to, language modality and usage. The ways in which normative ideas about both language and bodies interact in the Vietnamese context are discussed throughout this book, especially with regard to the use of HCMSL. Deaf people in Việt Nam broadly encounter notions of their bodies and intellects as “disabled.” They also encounter particular gendered and sexual assumptions. Wischermann argues that “categories of gender analysis are central not only to the analysis of states, markets, and families, but also to the analysis of CSA [Citizen Social Action]” (2011, p. 389; see *inter alia* Howell, 2007, p. 427). In this book, signed language usage is examined as one of the ways that gender and sexuality are attributed, according to particular sites of interaction between Deaf and non-Deaf people and between institutionalized forms of disciplining and regulating bodies.

With respect to language, social expectations of citizenship participation in Việt Nam tend to dichotomize practices of *hearing-speaking* and *seeing-signing*, attaching active roles to the former and passive roles to the latter. Also discussed in depth is the contestation between two forms of signing found in HCMC: One form corresponds to the grammar of HCMSL, and the other to Vietnamese word order. Deaf people's commentaries attach distinct cultural affiliations and social identities and interests to these forms of signing: HCMSL is described as the form of language engaged in by persons who claim cultural Vietnamese and Điếc [Deaf]¹⁵ identities and who seek social participation and contribution through the use of HCMSL. By contrast, signing in Vietnamese word order is described (by users of HCMSL) as the form of language engaged in by persons who identify themselves as having a hearing

15. Note on the transcription of HCMSL signs: Following signed language linguistic conventions, signs are glossed using small capitalized letters without dashes, and fingerspelled terms are capitalized with dashes between individual letters. Where signers also indicate a particular Vietnamese word or phrase that they connect to a signed concept, I use that word or phrase followed by my English translation. All errors are my own.

impairment or a disability and who seek social participation through Vietnamese language practices. Signing in Vietnamese word order also aligns with efforts by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) to standardize the varieties of VSL described for Việt Nam (Woodward, 2003), as well as with MOET's use of *khiếm thính* (hearing impairment) (see chapters 3 through 6 for an in-depth discussion of the historical and social underpinnings of the varieties of signing, signed language ideologies, and identities found in southern Việt Nam).¹⁶ In this book, description of Vietnamese Deaf social action concentrates on the sociolinguistic perspectives of persons who use HCMSL.

The ways in which Deaf social organizers who use HCMSL respond to new signed language-based, market-based niches further illuminate the meanings of citizenship participation and contribution. For example, in 2008 the state enacted the first laws providing tax subsidies to businesses employing or serving persons with disabilities, spurring disability-related business development. "Hearing impaired tourism" was among the first of such businesses, established by a hearing entrepreneur in Hồ Chí Minh City who employed local Deaf tour guides to provide tours in American Sign Language. In the same period, Deaf-owned and -operated tour companies from other countries began appearing. Viewing both forms of tourism as an encroachment on cultural and linguistic sovereignty, Deaf social leaders responded by calling meetings with local and international touring company representatives to encourage the hiring of Vietnamese Deaf people to conduct tours in local VSLs (Cooper, 2015). These practices reflect the hierarchical sociocultural and political-bureaucratic orders in which Deaf community organizing is embedded (Norlund, 2007). Neither criticizing state policy nor making demands on relevant businesses, the Deaf community organizers I observed sought to influence changes in state-institutional and business domains through direct sharing of their perspectives and offering information, encouragement, and support.

Interpreting Signed Language-Centered Social Participation

My main points of departure for this study are the use of HCMSL and related sociolinguistic practices at sites of Deaf education and Deaf social organizing. According to my analysis, contemporary Deaf social organizing is a response to the institutionalized marginalization of HCMSL (and other VSLs) within the national system of Deaf education special schools. Therefore, they are a significant site of sociopolitical analysis, particularly with respect to the national state, its ideologies and imaginaries, and the material conditions that Deaf individuals and groups draw on to increase their social participation and contribution through the use of HCMSL. During the first phase of *đổi mới* political-economic reform, the state established the goal of educating every Vietnamese citizen for participation in the development, modernization, and defense of a sovereign nation. Very similar to anticolonial approaches to anti-illiteracy, under

16. See Woodward (2003) for a description of sign language varieties and standardization in Việt Nam; see also Woodward and Nguyễn (2012) for a discussion of signed language policy and practice.

đôi mới educational leaders made literacy in spoken and written Vietnamese the key driver of national unity, solidarity, and economic progress.

As noted in the foreword to this book, the sociopolitical context in which Deaf education and Deaf community organizing participate is undergoing rapid transformation. This book is coming out at a time when many things or are in the process of changing, including increasing state attention to language recognition, state-subsidized community-based VSL classes, and imminent official recognition of national Deaf associations. Given these circumstances, this book cannot cover the events that will be most immediate to its publication date. Instead it focuses on events that took place between 2008 and 2014 which, I contend, are crucial to our understanding of the circumstances unfolding today. In this book I examine a number of key historical events so that we can better apprehend the way in which Vietnamese Deaf people are now conducting their social organizing work (Rabinow, 2003, p. 67).

The material forming the core of this book is based on a year of ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in 2008 and 2009 in the southern Vietnamese cities of Hồ Chí Minh City and Biên Hoà as part of my doctoral dissertation research. A second data set comes from an additional five months of ethnographic research I conducted between 2012 and 2014 in connection to trips made to Việt Nam for work as an international trainer on a Deaf education–related project.

On a fundamental level, it was *interpreting* that brought me to Việt Nam for the first time in June of 2007 and that provided the critical basis for the study's ethnographic methodology. I initially came to Việt Nam at the invitation of the director of one adult Deaf education project (which I call the Education Project or EP), who asked me to teach EP staff members an introduction to signed/spoken-language interpretation while I was in Việt Nam conducting preliminary fieldwork. In 2007, signed/spoken-language interpretation was almost nonexistent in Việt Nam—a situation that has changed dramatically over the last nine years. Outside of the EP there were no schools, training centers, or organizations that employed skilled bilinguals providing signed/spoken-language translation. Moreover, according to anecdotal reports, such bilingualism was rare in the general population. Within the EP, staff members providing these services had not had an opportunity to study interpreting theory or methods. However, they had had a unique opportunity to interact with Deaf people on a daily basis and to learn HCMSL and related sociolinguistic perspectives from them during those interactions. Such knowledge is a requisite aspect of interpreting practice, in which interpreters co-construct meanings with interactants in two languages based on an appreciation of the respective forms of language, experiences, and values of both groups.¹⁷ For signed/spoken-language interpretation, such appreciation includes a critical understanding of (mis)conceptions about Deaf people and signed language, knowledge of official institutional structuring of Deaf people's opportunities (and often social stratification), Deaf people's diverse preferences for addressing the conditions they encounter, and critical

17. I follow Alexandra Jaffe (1999, 2009) in using *interactant* rather than other descriptors such as *interlocutor*. *Interactant* is a broad term that indicates the salience of multiple features of interactions, not simply what is signed or said but also how people use their bodies and the immediate setting to shape sociolinguistic exchanges.

reflection on one's own privileges as a member of the dominant spoken-language group (if one is a hearing interpreter) or as a natively-signing bilingual (if one is a Deaf interpreter).

Prior to coming to Việt Nam I had worked as a community-based American Sign Language–English interpreter for fifteen years and studied anthropology in order to analyze language and power issues emerging in such work. This background informed my approach to the interpreter training I prepared to give EP staff members in 2007 and the questions I wanted to explore ethnographically. At the heart of both of these endeavors was a concern with Deaf people's signed language–based social participation and hearing people's roles in promoting or constraining such involvement—both interpersonally and institutionally. Thinking of participation in the context of signed/spoken–language interpretation raised the following questions:

- In what ways do Deaf and hearing people routinely interact in Việt Nam—in homes, schools, and other sites?
- What kinds of communication practices do Deaf and hearing people enact in these sites, and how are these practices perceived?
- How do Vietnamese Deaf people see their social relationships with one another and with hearing people, and how do such perceptions and relationships inform Deaf people's approaches to particular social projects?

Preliminary findings led me to conduct fieldwork in 2008 and 2009 in three kinds of sites: (1) the classrooms and administrative offices of the EP; (2) the classrooms and administrative offices of five special schools for Deaf students; and (3) one Deaf association in Hồ Chí Minh City. In addition to these main research sites, I also interviewed personnel from various ministries and hearing family members of Deaf people, attended disability-centered events in which Deaf people participated, visited businesses and organizations that provide employment or services to Deaf people, surveyed HCMSL students, and tracked the appearance of Deaf people in televised and print media. Additional insights were developed by presenting at a conference titled “Living with Hearing Loss,” hosted by a community-based organization run by and for people with disabilities, continuing to collaborate with the EP to give interpreter training sessions in their offices, and collaborating with the EP and the Deaf Culture Club to host a two-day interpreter-training workshop for special school personnel.

Following completion of the PhD, I joined a team of international education research and training specialists associated with Gallaudet University in Washington, DC, to provide pro bono consultation to the World Concern Development Organization (WCDO), which was then preparing to launch an early childhood education and language-training project in Việt Nam (Intergenerational Deaf Education Outreach–Việt Nam; hereafter, IDEO Project). In 2012 WCDO hired me as an international trainer for that project. My primary responsibility was to train hearing people to facilitate communication between Deaf mentors and family members in early childhood education sessions with Deaf children. The trainees had minimal exposure to a VSL but had expressed, during candidate screening sessions, their dedication to learning and using a VSL to promote family communication and Deaf children's school

readiness. Accordingly, the training program (for aspiring interpreters) focused on preinterpreting skills and extralinguistic communication practices that promote involvement by family members in establishing and maintaining joint attention with Deaf mentors and Deaf children. For this work I made four trips to Việt Nam, between December 2012 and August 2014. Each four-to-six-week trip consisted of two to three weeks of training activities, after which I conducted research activities.

WCDO's IDEO Project brought the training team into contact with the highest-ranking educational decision makers in Vietnamese special education administration and research. In addition, the team engaged with approximately 70 Deaf community leaders from four provinces in north, central, and southern Việt Nam; 50 hearing people dedicated to acquiring or expanding the use of VSLs; and approximately 150 hearing families with Deaf children. Although I did not conduct research on these training activities, such interactions nevertheless deepened my appreciation of the perspectives and interests of Deaf community leaders, aspiring VSL(s)-Vietnamese interpreters, family members of Deaf children, national educational leaders, and international development personnel.

As we carried out the various activities that contributed to these two data sets, interpretation and translation played some role in every interaction, often involving explicit discussion of multilingual and multicultural issues. Such interpretive considerations and discussions inform the analysis I pursue throughout the book; however, the responsibility for the conclusions remains my own.