



## *Somos Sordos Mexicanos: We Are Deaf Mexicans*

In December 2007, a group of about 80 Deaf and hearing Mexican signers of *Lengua de Señas Mexicana* (LSM) met in Mexico City. The purpose of this small conference was to disseminate the outcomes of several investigations of LSM to the key informants who had provided the raw data for the research. A second purpose was to hold a discussion of topics that the Deaf signers identified as high priority for future linguistic and sociolinguistic work in Mexico. This day-long conference was the first time any researchers of LSM had returned to report their work to LSM signers. Fabiola Ruiz Bedolla made a progress report on the project reported in this book, the life stories of a group of elderly signers, and their recollections of their time at the *Escuela Nacional para Sordomudos* (ENS), in Mexico City. She and I also gave each participant a copy of a book, *Memorias de los ex-alumnos de la Escuela Nacional para Sordomudos*. The book is a Spanish-language collection of remembrances of the former students of the National School for the Deaf, containing each of the life histories of the project participants. Alexis Martinez described the systematic structure of LSM numeral signs. David Quinto-Pozos gave a talk on his research about LSM/ASL contact at the U.S./Mexico border in Texas, and Sergio Peña compared the signs of LSM with the conventional gestures that hearing Mexicans make.

Two other researchers, Dr. Antoinette Hawayek and Ms. Shelley Dufoe, attended the conference but did not present their work. Dr. Hawayek has been studying acquisition of LSM in Mexico, and Ms. Dufoe is a field linguist from the Summer Institute of Linguistics who has lived in Mexico for over 15 years, working on a grammar of LSM and documenting its lexicon. During coffee breaks, lunch, and two sessions set aside for conversation, the group raised numerous topics of concern focused primarily on critiques of deaf education in Mexico. Their commentaries criticized the separation of Deaf children from each other, and their integration with hearing students, the invention and use of signed Spanish, and the absence of LSM in classrooms. The future of LSM itself was discussed.

Toward the end of the afternoon, after many of the elderly attendees had tired and left for home, Luis Sanabria, a well-regarded ENS classmate of many of the elderly signers, went to the front of the room and commented on the importance of research about LSM and Deaf signers in Mexico, and the many topics related to LSM and Deaf signers in Mexico we do not know about. For example, he asked the group, “Are we Deaf Mexicans? Or Mexican Deaf people?” That is, are we Mexican first (*mexicanos sordos*) or are we Deaf first (*sordos mexicanos*)? Luis holds unique status among Mexico City Deaf signers because his Deaf family extends back at least two generations, and forward one generation. He has the distinction of being a descendant of one of the first students to attend ENS in the 19th century. One of Luis’s Deaf sons lives in the United States, and Luis appears in Muciño-Adams’s (2006) video, *Lives of Deaf Mexicans: Struggles and Success*. Luis’s oration invokes culture and community themes familiar to U.S. signers but relatively unfamiliar to Mexican signers.<sup>1</sup> Thus, it was intriguing to follow the conversation he initiated, first because few of the elderly signers in the group had adopted the terminology of culture and community to describe themselves, and second because there was little consensus about whether they should identify themselves as Deaf people from Mexico or Mexicans who

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1. Many of the signers in this video comment on the Mexican government’s lack of recognition of LSM, however LSM was officially recognized and added to the list of Mexican national languages in 2004 (Insituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas, 2008).

were also Deaf. The discussion included arguments in favor of each perspective; most made appeals to *nuestros raices* or “our roots” and where their authentic roots rested. Following the discussion, the participants put it to a vote. Only Deaf people were permitted to vote, and not all of them were willing to. However in the end, with 22 voters, *sordo mexicano* carried the day, with 17 votes. In the end, “Deaf Mexican” was the preferred term.

## How Should Deaf Mexicans Live?

As in any society, many explanations about Deaf people’s lives, education, language, and roles in society are available to those who want to seek them. Over my years of fieldwork among Deaf signers in Mexico City, I observed a variety of portrayals of Deaf people. I ran into many Deaf vendors similar to those sometimes seen in the United States selling sewing kits, key chains, or alphabet cards explaining, “*Disculpe la molestia. No oigo. No hablo. Vendo este artículo para poder mantener a mi familia. Precio \$10.00 Gracias por su compra.*”<sup>22</sup> These vendors provide a view of Deaf life that is the only version thousands of hearing Mexicans experience firsthand. Deaf vendors came up early in my fieldwork, in 1997, when a friend showed me an article in *Proceso*, the national news weekly. This piece (Ortiz Pardo, 1997) offered a Mexican medical slant on the then-current news about a group of Deaf Mexican vendors, called slaves in the U.S. and Mexican press, who had been discovered in New York City in summer 1997 (De Palma, 1997; Peterson, 1997). Pedro Berreucos Villalobos, MD, the director of the *Instituto Mexicano de la Audición y el Lenguaje* (IMAL) a prominent oral school, clinic, and teacher training center, commented that a great number of Deaf people in Mexico are “*condenados al lenguaje de señas*” (condemned to sign language [quoted in Ortiz Pardo, 1997, p. 40]), and as a result, they are easy to exploit. The article criticizes Mexican public health and special

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2. “Excuse me for bothering you. I do not hear. I do not speak. I am selling this object to support my family. Price ten pesos. Thank you for your purchase.”

education for diagnosing hearing loss too late, for falsely claiming that many Deaf students cannot be oralized, and for offering substandard education with minimal periods of speech and auditory therapy when children should receive this training all day long. Although Dr. Berruecos Villalobos's pointed critique of Mexico's public health and education agencies is well taken, unfortunately, he repeated the myth that many U.S. proponents of oralism also believe: that a policy of permitting sign-medium instruction is "taking the easy way" (*irse por el camino fácil* [p. 40]). He claimed that he knew of no Deaf person who used only sign language who had a professional career, but that there are many oral Deaf people who have completed university degrees. This news article offered a clear recommendation of the way Deaf people in Mexico should be educated, and the best way for them to live, especially to avoid exploitation, enjoying their "human right to linguistic communication with all of their fellow human beings" (Berruecos Villalobos quoted in Ortiz Pardo, p. 40).

Television ads for hearing aids portrayed another version of Deaf life. Adorable children, isolated from their loved ones in lonely silence, received hearing aids, and became whole, able to tell their mothers "*Te quiero mamá*" ("I love you mommy"). One of the ENS signers commented that the ads were "absurd," and marketing obviously pitched "so that the parents can be happy." Deaf people as a social group are also portrayed in various ways. For example, in 2000, I participated in a small conference on deaf education, where I gave a summary of U.S.-based research on sign language and learning. The take-home message was that there is no evidence to support the belief that signing harms Deaf children by interfering with other kinds of learning, the learning of languages, or the development of speech. In the audience was a mid-level bureaucrat of the *Secretaría de la Educación Pública* (SEP), Mexico's national education agency. She was somewhat sympathetic to the idea that change might be needed in education for Deaf children. But she commented that Mexican Deaf people were too contentious about the matter, and since they could not agree among themselves on what was best for Deaf children, SEP officials did not anticipate making policy changes that would support sign-medium schooling or special attempts to group Deaf children together in classrooms.

I witnessed a heartrendingly surreal enactment of Deaf lives in late 2007, on a morning television program broadcast live in Mexico City. During a segment on deaf education, the program's beautiful hostess introduced a panel of experts, including several medical doctors and audiologists, and the director of a sign-medium primary school. An invited studio audience of parents of Deaf children and young adults sat on risers on a stage. Although the program's hostess announced that her goal was to explore all points of view, the medical bent of the panel was unavoidable, and the benefits of speech training and the use of available technology for auditory stimulation became the focus of the panel. When the gracious hostess moved into the studio audience, the ironies that only live television can display splintered the panel's story line. One mother told about her five-year-old Deaf daughter who had been attending an oral training program at a private school. The mother collapsed into sobs when she described her child's suffering. Daily, the child came home from school angry, sullen, completely miserable, and still not speaking. Despite her daughter's undeniably derailed development, the mother's self-reproach over her role in her child's anguish, the cost of the intensive private training, and the difficulties the years of waiting for her child to speak had caused in their family life, the mother remained deeply committed to speech, the only way to guarantee her daughter the happy future assured solely for those who speak and hear normally. Achieving this future was worth any price, despite the mother's sorrow over her child's unhappiness. Following her, the parents of an oral Deaf adult proudly told the hostess about his persistence during the costly and intense period of his speech training, his success with speech, and his current efforts to find work. He was oralized but essentially uneducated and barely literate. They passed the microphone to the son, who delivered an unintelligible spoken testimonial to oralism, leaving the hostess, other members of the studio audience, and perhaps millions of viewers like me, thoroughly confounded.

Versions of Deaf people's lives constructed by outsiders are easy to find in most societies, and as I observed in Mexico, they have in common portrayals of Deaf people and their loving families as courageous in the face of sadness at having a disabled child and persistent in pursuing remedies for the missing abilities to speak and hear. Deaf people bravely live with the lowered expectations and poverty that come with limited

opportunities for education. Meanwhile, experts fail to grasp specific adamantine realities—detecting sound is not hearing, uttering words is not acquiring language, and being trained to emit comprehensible words is not education. Exploited people sell sewing kits on the subway not because they sign LSM but because an avoidable linguistic and cognitive disability has been imposed on them by their society.

In short, I witnessed a range of familiar outsider definitions of Deaf people, people with a defect that cut them off from others, forced them to suffer, and made them easy targets for exploitation. From my work experiences in the United States, I know these superficialities to be flawed, despite the fact that I was curious about their Mexican renderings. Accordingly, I aimed to gain access to and document the meaning of Deaf lives in Mexico from the insider point of view, that of signing Deaf people. This path led me to other depictions of Deaf people, and new sets of borders drawn among groups. The general and often repeated perspective of the Deaf people that I met in Mexico was that Deaf Mexicans do not form one large community, as they perceive to be the case in the United States. As a result, I learned from Deaf signers about specific categories that they belong to, and others that they reject. Not surprisingly, people who joined or started one club contrasted themselves with those who were committed to other clubs. It was common to be told, in cautiously phrased comments explicitly couched as respectful, about those who recruited their fellow Deaf people into groups of vendors, and got them into trouble in Mexico and in the United States. Older Deaf people worried that young Deaf people had no moral compass, used drugs, joined gangs, and earned money through criminal activities. Signers who had attended ENS told about unschooled Deaf people, or *los ignorantes*, some of whom were their siblings or relatives.

Roman Catholic Deaf people viewed Deaf Protestants as markedly different, or, as one informant delicately commented, “I know who they are, but I don’t know them.” Others were particularly dismissive of Deaf people who affiliated with religions viewed as “not Mexican,” such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, or evangelical Protestant Christians. Likewise, language attitudes were always on display. Although *Lengua de Señas Mexicana* (LSM) is used throughout the republic, Deaf people in Mexico City routinely commented on the difficulties of understanding the

signing of Deaf people from other cities, and the problems understanding young Deaf signers in Mexico City, who operate with a different mind-set. Looking beyond Mexico's borders, Deaf Mexican signers expressed their view that LSM was obviously and inherently beautiful, in contrast to the regrettable ugliness of American Sign Language (ASL) and especially ASL signers' practice of excessive fingerspelling. Fingerspelling attracts the attention of the ENS signers. It marks a frontier between LSM and ASL, but among LSM signers it is also viewed as evidence of schooling, dignity, and good manners, quite distinct phenomena. As a result, *el deletreo* (fingerspelling) also distinguishes between intelligent signers, like the ENS signers themselves, and those who are not intelligent, primarily younger Deaf signers but also any unschooled Deaf person. Just as hearing parents, journalists, and medical doctors offered a tangled description of Deaf lives for public consumption, grasping the meaning of being a Deaf signer in Mexico City in the 20th century from a Deaf insider's perspective proved to be a long and complicated task.

## The Focus: Deaf Mexicans in Mexico City Who Attended ENS

Out of the many entwined groups and boundaries found among Deaf people in Mexico, for purposes of this book I focused on one place, Mexico City, and a specific kind of Deaf person—one who had either attended the ENS or was married to someone who attended. This made the group of people with whom I conducted fieldwork and from whom I elicited life stories an elderly group. This fact created some specific constraints to data collection but also offered the satisfaction of knowing that I was documenting both their life stories and their variety of signing, that the elderly Mexican signers' legacy would be preserved. I was moved by Leah Cohen's (1994) touching reflection on her grandfather Sam's life and death. She wrote:

When I go looking for Sam, it seems I come up only with papers, sheaves of dry correspondence about him and for him but never by him... Sam's own motions—the words of his hands, the path of

his body as it worked the court<sup>3</sup>—are traceless; once realized and finished, they left no mark. (p. 82)

The ENS signers have left their mark in the life stories they narrated for this project, and I accepted the obligation to help them extend it to a broader audience.

The life stories range across many topics, but I focused the elicitation so that all participants described their early encounters with LSM, and their schooling, along with whatever they wished to tell about their lives. ENS opened in the 1860s and was closed in 1967 (although a further bureaucratic closing occurred in 1972) so the elderly signers whose lives I describe here truly are the remaining members of an undocumented ENS-rooted group of Deaf people in Mexico City that had a life span of about 100 years. Students who came from other parts of the country to attend ENS tended to remain in or near Mexico City, so it is likely that the group I describe in this book represents a portion of the last group of Deaf Mexicans who were educated with other Deaf signers in the school setting provided by ENS, and who had first contact with LSM from other Deaf signers in a school context. I have located few former ENS students in other regions of Mexico and the United States, although of course they exist.

My goal is to explore the lives of *sordos mexicanos*, people who are Deaf and Mexican, and to disseminate their life stories, their experiences, and the narratives constructed through their collective remembering to a broad audience. To be known to other people is the ENS signers' aspiration as well, particularly to be known to other Deaf people, and especially Deaf people in the United States. My specific wish is that by reporting the ENS signers' narratives I can highlight both their Mexican life ways, and the ways their lives have been Deaf, including the ways that their Mexicanness has undergone adaptations and adjustments to take account of their being Deaf signers.

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3. Sam Cohen was a basketball player, and Cohen is referring here to the basketball court.





*Fabiola Ruiz Bedolla and her mother María de los Ángeles Bedolla.*

The title of the book, *The People Who Spell*, comes from one of the key informants, María de los Ángeles Bedolla. Known as Gela, she was relating her views on a topic important to elderly Deaf signers, the current state of deaf education in Mexico. The primary point of first contact with LSM for her age cohort was ENS or students from ENS. Her opinion, which is shared by most of the other ENS signers, is that her cohort signs well and shows that they are both intelligent and *bien educados*, or well brought up, by employing fingerspelling of some Spanish words as part of LSM. They are *esos sordos que deletrean*, those Deaf people who spell. They are cultured and educated.

Doña Gela's comment captures the elderly ENS signers' view that the school provided learning, first access to LSM, and experiences and education that allowed them to take their places as dignified, proper Deaf Mexicans. However, in their account, life for Deaf people in Mexico has changed for the worse over their lifetimes, primarily because they, as a class, have been betrayed by the government, by doctors, and by the system of schooling. Their criticisms have a basis in reality. To the extent that schooling for Deaf children is available in Mexico, it cannot

be assumed that it will use signing. It is very likely that Deaf students will be integrated with either hearing children in government-supported *Secretaría de la Educación Pública* (SEP) schools, or with children with other disabilities, in special education schools, *Centros de la Atención Múltiple* (CAMs). As a result, younger Deaf people, who have limited access to both schooling and to other Deaf people, are less likely to master LSM as it is used by the intelligent Deaf people, or to show abilities in Spanish, spelling, writing, or reading. From the vantage point of an elderly ENS signer, being a Deaf person who spells is only one of several important differences between the older generation of ENS signers and the younger generation of Deaf people, which has not received the attention it needed and deserved from the education system. The betrayal of the promise of deaf education in Mexico, a pledge that reaches back to the 19th century presidency of Benito Juárez, is a theme that weaves through the life stories of the ENS signers.

## The Lure of Life Stories

When I began this project, I had already felt the pull of life stories. My final paper for my MA in linguistics from Gallaudet University in 1984 told the life story and post-retirement reflections of Henry Stack, a Deaf man from Vancouver, Washington, who was raised in Missouri in a large family of Deaf siblings, parents, aunts, and uncles. I was taken with Hank's responses through his life as a Deaf American to the expectations generated by the American frontier myth of rugged individualism.<sup>4</sup> Hank's narrative nudged me toward considering the reality that ASL signers in the United States are both culturally Deaf and culturally American. I began to think about American culture, a move that surprised me. Like many fish, it took me a long time to comprehend that swimming in an American Anglo-Saxon and Northern-European watery heritage was just as much a cultural phenomenon as being Japanese in Japanese water

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4. I am grateful to Kelly Stack for introducing me to her curmudgeonly, entertaining father. Hank continued to teach ASL, host parties, surprise people and annoy them, and enjoy himself in Vancouver, WA, and Portland, OR, until his death at 84, in 2002.

or French in French water. It was only a short step to speculate that Deaf people in other countries, who may or may not identify themselves as culturally Deaf, probably also share something with the other people of their nationality, even the hearing people. The ENS signers and their life stories offered me a chance to consider what it might mean to be both Deaf and Mexican.

However, the case of the ENS signers drew my attention for pressing reasons beyond my personal interests and personal connections to them. First, their lives span important changes in Mexico, from the massive 20th century migration from the *provincias* to Mexico City and that city's expansion to one of the world's most highly and densely populated cities, through the 1985 earthquake that destroyed parts of the city, through social shifts that have altered family life and introduced technologies that created new employment opportunities while eliminating other kinds of livelihoods, to the beginnings of changes in society's response to deafness. The last brought to an end the French-influenced tradition of educating Deaf children in a special school where signing was tolerated and replaced it with a 20th century medical/rehabilitative oral emphasis that was very compatible with the late-century enthusiasm for "inclusion" of Deaf with non-Deaf students when that wave hit Mexican special education policy makers. The ENS signers are appalled witnesses to changes that have had an impact on Deaf Mexicans. Because of these changes, the many collectives of Deaf Mexican adults in Mexico City and in the Republic of Mexico are unlikely to be pulled together by schoolmates who have been signing since they were early adolescents in school, the typical way these groups were formed and maintained in the past. Accordingly, my first goal was to document the lives of this community, whose common experience of going to school together is a relatively rare possible life for today's Deaf Mexicans.

I also wanted to document the variety of signing that hypothetically originated at ENS in the 19th century and developed through the next 100 years of daily use among Deaf signers. An archived set of DVDs, accompanying transcriptions, and detailed metadata about the signers will never replace interactions among signers as sites of a living culture, but having records of LSM as it was signed at the turn of the 21st century by lifelong signers will provide historical and linguistic uses. Currently,

the way that education for Deaf students is organized in Mexico limits routes of LSM transmission across generations. Few young Deaf children have access to native signers in any contexts; education is delivered primarily through spoken Spanish, and a high proportion of Deaf signers are very late learners of LSM. LSM materials are limited, and unlike in the United States, there are no large publishing companies that specialize in creating LSM materials, although there are a few individuals or small groups who publish materials. There is no evidence that LSM is either moribund or obsolete. Nonetheless, current circumstances do not favor vibrant language health, widespread transmission, or rich elaboration across the entire population of people who live their lives as signers. The videotaped life histories of the ENS signers will serve as a record of a variety of signing that may become very narrowly distributed as other varieties may arise.

It has been over 30 years since I began to learn ASL. I have spent those years working in deaf education settings in North America, conducting research on ASL in education, and on the sociocultural contexts in which ASL is used, transmitted, and commented upon. I began to learn LSM in 1996, and I started making regular trips to Mexico City in 1998.<sup>5</sup> My colleague in this research, Fabiola Ruiz Bedolla, has lived her entire life, more than 30 years, as a hearing child of Deaf Mexican parents. She is a native-born *defeña*,<sup>6</sup> a native speaker of Spanish, and a native signer of LSM. While she and her five siblings were growing up, her parents were active members of the ENS-affiliated social group of signers in Mexico City. She grew up with ENS signers as her godparents,

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5. I funded some research expenses myself, however I received research support from several sources. They are the National Science Foundation, the Endangered Languages Documentation Project, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, the University of Nebraska Lincoln Research Council, the University of Nebraska Teachers College Dean's Office, and the UCSD Committee on Research. Although these institutions funded my research, I am solely responsible for the work reported here, including the final translations of the ENS signers' narratives, their interpretation and analysis, and conclusions based on them. The research was conducted with the approval of the Institutional Review Boards of both the University of Nebraska, Lincoln and University of California, San Diego.

6. A resident of Mexico DF, or *el DF*. The letter names for D and F are nominalized to create the noun *defeño/a*.

her aunts and uncles, her parents, and her parents' close friends, *compadres* and *comadres*. Fabiola and I have both read widely in the U.S.-dominated fields of deaf education and psychology. Each of us has crossed the border to experience the foreign country next door, and the Deaf people on the other side, and we have both traveled internationally to conferences where we have come into contact with Deaf people from other nations. Our shared sense is that even though the common experience of living as a signing Deaf person surrounded by hearing, nonsigning people shapes lives in powerful ways across the globe, the specific differences between nations and cultures also have an impact on the ways Deaf people organize their lives individually and in communities.

In telling the ENS signers' life stories, I want to challenge readers to expand their assumptions about Deaf people's lives. Through considering Deaf people in Mexico as Deaf and also Mexican and subject to the circumstances, culture, and values of Mexico, I urge readers to consider the ways that Deaf people in the U.S. are Deaf and also American. Living as a Deaf person cannot by itself override the other cultural and ethnic factors in one's life, although it will color those factors. Further, living in a developing nation may make a Deaf person so different from one living in the industrialized world that the common experiences of Deaf life are no longer mutually intelligible. The Mexico City Deaf people are Deaf but they are also Mexican, primarily of *mestizo* (a blend of Southern European and New World native DNA, with a touch of African DNA) heritage, Roman Catholic, and residents of a nation that cannot manage to offer the obligatory nine years of schooling to its entire population, much less special education adequate to serve the needs of Deaf students. Not insignificantly, they are also close neighbors of the United States, a sometimes uneasy position to be in. A famous Mexican saying attributed to Porfirio Díaz goes, "Poor Mexico. So far from God and so close to the United States." By relating the stories of Mexican Deaf people I hope not only to describe ways of life that contrast with those of U.S. Deaf people, but also to push readers to consider what it means to be both Deaf and American, Deaf and Canadian, or Deaf and Mexican. If we are to take culture as a rich and explanatory account of Deaf communities, then we cannot avoid taking culture as a rich and key account of the larger national communities of which Deaf communities are a part.