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**Deaf academics in the university in the UK** Dr Dai O'Brien, York St John University, UK

This chapter explores how signing deaf academics working in HEIs in the UK navigate their workplaces in which the dominant language is English, and the dominant modality is speech. The translanguaging practices of deaf academics are explored, along with the way in which they preserve their deaf identities in the face of institutional pressure.

There are very few deaf academics in the UK who use BSL (British Sign Language) as their first or preferred language. Some work in established research centres or departments which focus exclusively on signed languages or Deaf Studies. Others work in isolation, with no deaf colleagues, in departments with no specific focus on Deaf Studies or signed languages, for example, teaching BSL within a linguistics or language department. Others are somewhere in between in the sense that they may have a small number of deaf colleagues or hearing colleagues who can sign, but who work in different fields or roles. In a research project focusing on the experience of deaf academics working in HEIs in the UK (see O'Brien 2020a, O'Brien 2020b) deaf academics described varied experiences of working with colleagues and navigating institutional landscapes, but all shared similar concerns about how to be academics while using a language and modality which is not institutionally legitimate (Bourdieu 1991). All participants expressed concern about the barriers they faced in terms of relying on BSL/English interpreters to participate in institutional discourse, and even when those interpreters were available, interpreter mediated communication often created as many issues as it resolved.

This chapter is based on empirical work funded by the Society for Research into Higher Education which was conducted in five different universities across the UK. Walk-through interviews, in which the participants guided the researcher through their workplace while explaining the significance of each location, and eco-map interviews, in which the participants drew maps of their social networks, while explaining them to the researcher, were both utilised. These methods combined gave a rich, in-depth exploration of participants' everyday language practices, and their struggles to promote and maintain a deaf identity which prioritised signed languages in workplaces in which non-English speaking language identities were largely marginalised.

Previous work published from this project has focused on deaf people's experience of space, using ideas from Lefebvre (O'Brien 2020a, 2020b). This chapter focuses on language use in the workplace using concepts of translanguaging and Bourdieu's concept of the legitimate language to offer a new insight into the ways in which deaf people's languaging and identity interact in the university.

## Introduction

The modern university in the UK is one in which the English language is supreme, not just in the sense that academic discourse is conducted in spoken and written English, but also in that modern and foreign language programmes have been shut nationwide as part of cost-cutting exercises and as a result of short-sighted government policies which encourage only degrees which are perceived

to be beneficial to enter high earning professions in the future (Muradás-Taylor, 2023, Fotiadou, 2022). This has a doubly marginalising effect on deaf academics who use signed languages, not just because the esteem of their subject area and employment (most are involved somehow in the teaching or analysis of signed languages) are eroded because of the lack of value placed on learning and understanding languages, but also because the supremacy of English as the language of the academy creates barriers which leaves them unable to fully access the academic discourse.

The concept of liminality and limbo (Bamber et al. 2017) are of some use in understanding the experiences of deaf academics in this context. Their marginalised position through both the erosion of the esteem of their subject area, and the lack of value placed on signed languages mean that some feel in a state of liminality or limbo. These concepts will be explored more below.

Before continuing with this chapter, it is important that I situate myself within the context of my writing and research. My own positionality has, of course, a powerful influence on how I engage with participants and analyse the data they provided, hence the importance of my being explicit about my position in the field, in my work and in this particular project (Hou, 2020).

I am myself a deaf academic. I am white, male, cis, straight and middle class. I went deaf through illness at the age of 5, when I had already acquired English, and then learned BSL in my late teens when I began to become more involved in deaf communities in the UK. I consider myself to be equally fluent in BSL and English, although I am a late L2 learner of BSL. My whiteness and class background have offered huge privilege throughout my life, particularly with regards to my language acquisition. As a child my parents were strong advocates for my education, using their whiteness and middle-class privilege to ensure I had access to my English-medium education in mainstream schools, and providing financial support for BSL lessons.

As a deaf person, I am disadvantaged in the sense that I cannot access spoken or audio information, which puts me at a disadvantage in the workplace because watercooler conversations and corridor talk is inaccessible and I often miss out on social and informal events. I also have to sacrifice a not insignificant amount of time in advocating for and organising my own communication access to ensure I can function in my job in terms of delivering teaching, attending meetings and other duties. This can make the workplace an isolating and marginalizing experience. Despite this, I have had professional success.

I am privileged in the sense that I can use both spoken and written English fluently, although I cannot make sense of other people's spoken utterances. If I speak, it is often assumed that I can hear or otherwise understand others' speech, which is not the case. Taking a wider, political perspective, speaking can also imply that speech is inherently 'better' than sign, a stance with which I fundamentally disagree. Speaking can also imply that all deaf people can communicate unproblematically through speech, which again is not the case. This places me in an overtly political position in my languaging practices in my workplace and in my everyday life. I can speak, but I often choose not to.

In my personal life, I tend to use speech only with people I know and trust, and other interactions such as in shops I tend to use gesture or written English. In work, I prefer to use BSL, often through interpreters if working with people who do not sign, and only speak as a last resort, although I usually re-organise or drop out of commitments if no interpreters can be booked. I recognise that I am immensely privileged in being able to do that.

My language repertoires place me in a privileged position, but it is a position that I am constantly interrogating. This, in part, is why I am writing this chapter. It is based on empirical data gathered

from a research project funded by the SRHE, but the topic of language and identity is one which I live every day.

## Bourdieu and the legitimate language

The esteem in which English is placed can be interpreted using Bourdieu's concept of legitimate languages (Bourdieu 1991), which explains how one language is esteemed above others in specific contexts yet in such a way that this esteem is either unrecognised or only tacitly recognised (Bourdieu 1993). While Bourdieu focused mostly on varieties of the same spoken language (for example the French spoken by upper class academics as opposed to that spoken by working class manual workers), the same framework can be used to understand the different legitimacy held by different languages, for example, Bourdieu also writes about the institutional legitimacy of Béarnese versus French. However, these languages still share a modality – speech. Therefore, those of us who use different modalities (such as signed languages) face the battle of not just getting recognition for our language, but also the mode in which it is delivered and understood.

Sometimes the disadvantages of working through a less valued modality and language can be challenged by the status of the language user. Deaf academics working within HEIs have some capital, bestowed on us thanks to our role, to challenge the legitimate language, and to try and get signed languages recognised as legitimate –

*Most of the conditions that have to be fulfilled in order for a performative utterance to succeed come down to the question of the appropriateness of the speaker – or better still, his (sic) social function – and of the discourse he utters.*  
Bourdieu 1991 p. 111

This recognition is limited. Use of signed languages might be accepted in specific circumstances in the academy (e.g. if teaching a signed language, or if accompanied by a signed/spoken language interpreter, or if all people in an interaction have equal understanding of signed languages) but outside those contexts, signed languages are still not valued to the extent of English.

Spoken English in academic contexts retains its power as a legitimate language even when it is not understood (Bourdieu 1991 p.113). Indeed, sometimes speakers' capital is enhanced when they are not understood, for example in lectures and conference papers we sit through in which we say to ourselves 'this presenter must be so clever, I don't understand half of what they say'. The burden of understanding is placed on the receiver, not the producer, of the English speech. English speech therefore retains its power over deaf people, even when it is not understood, simply because of the institutional force behind the language and modality. We see this in every day decisions made by universities which are circulated in English with no translation into signed language and yet deaf academics are expected to understand and follow those inaccessible policies. Signed languages do not retain their power over hearing people when they are not understood. If interpreters are not available for meetings, the meetings are either delayed or they go ahead without the deaf person's presence (Chua et al. 2022), leaving the deaf person in a state of liminality or limbo (Bamber et al. 2017) with no way to access or contribute to their work environment or practice. This limits what can be achieved through the medium of signed languages and brings in the necessity of sometimes relying on translanguaging approaches when interpreters are not available or not desirable.

The relative powers of languages are also tied to the capitals associated with the users of that language. It is sometimes the case that HEIs find it more cost effective to employ nondeaf signers (Robinson and Henner, 2017) or to employ deaf people with speech privilege when fluency in signed languages is desired, because it removes the cost of accommodations such as interpreters and

makes things 'easier' for the institution. It is also often the case that deaf people in HEIs are automatically seen as 'sign language teachers' simply because of the 'general expectation that any deaf faculty at a university *just* to teach [sign language]' (Robinson and Henner 2017), placing them in a state of limbo (Bamber et al. 2017) as there is no way for them to transcend these perceptions. Therefore, there is a perception that deaf people can only hold or utilise certain types of capital, and that capital is only valuable in certain contexts (O'Brien and Emery 2014). As is clear from these examples deaf people are often seen in HEIs as only holding linguistic capital in signed languages (rather than recognition of their wider cultural capital as befits their status as academics (Bourdieu 1991)) and this linguistic capital is seen as only valuable in the classroom. Again, this acts to exclude deaf academics from taking part in the scholarly community in the HEI through the delegitimization of signed languages in the HEI.

This delegitimization of signed languages can impact on the formation of the academic identities of deaf scholars. While people have 'as many identities and selves as there are people with whom we interact' (Bradley 2016, 377), it is important to have a professional, academic, identity which is resonant with the institutional and collegiate values of the HEI in which you work (Ennals et al. 2016), and which, in language terms, gives you a linguistics sense of emplacement (Salö 2015). The security this offers also means that any sense of liminality caused by communication barriers is a transitional one (Bamber et al. 2017), it lasts only until the barriers are removed and full participation is enabled. Otherwise, these barriers could produce a sense of limbo (Bamber et al. 2017), resulting in identities which are either dissonant with or rejecting of the expectations and demands of their academic role (Ennals et al. 2016). Alternatively, this sense of limbo could lead deaf scholars to present a façade of conformity (Cha et al. 2019), which can lead to low wellbeing and disengagement from work. A key factor in developing positive identities in the workplace is collegiality and being valued by others (Ennals et al. 2016, Ashforth and Schinoff 2016). But without access to the legitimate language through which to communicate and collaborate, this collegiality can be limited.

However, for some, this is an overly reductive view of their language use (legitimate or illegitimate language) in HEIs and does not explain the complex ways in which deaf academics use language within their HEI. While it is true that English is the legitimate language of the university, there are ways of using other language competencies to make meanings clear. One way to explore these is to look at them through the lens of translanguaging and the semiotic repertoire.

## Translanguaging and the semiotic repertoire

Translanguaging has been a popular framework recently through which to analyse deaf people's use of different parts of their linguistic or semiotic repertoire. Translanguaging has been defined as 'the deployment of a speaker's (sic) full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages' (Otheguy et al. 2015, 283), which matches well the common experience of deaf people's languaging practices. Traditionally, Deaf Studies and sign linguistics work has focused on defining named (sign) languages and drawing boundaries between them (Kusters 2020). This policing has often resulted in mixed modality utterances (such as those combining elements of spoken and signed languages) being derided as inferior use of language. This despite the fact that for many deaf people, this mixture of languages and modalities is often the most common form of languaging and communicating with others, both deaf and hearing. Translanguaging is used to communicate across languages and modalities to achieve understanding between those who do not share a common

language or modality. Often this is through a mixture of sign, gesture, writing, and speech or mouthing.

Deaf education policies are often written with the expectation of a single dominant modality, hence oral/aural programmes which often devalue signed languages, ignore them completely, or attempt to supplant them with English-based sign systems (Scott and Henner 2021, Snoddon and Weber 2021). This has certainly been the case in the past in the UK (Ladd 2003, O'Brien 2021). However, in more recent years, there has been a more variable approach, with some schools being much more open about multimodal approaches to educating deaf children. However, there is no standardization of this approach across the UK.

Because of the variable nature of deaf education, it may be that deaf people have been educated orally, and hence have limited fluency in signed language, or they have been educated in signed languages and hence have limited fluency in spoken language. It could be that they are equally fluent in both modalities. Or it could be that they have been deprived of language and hence have limited fluency in any modality. As a result, many deaf people, even if they consider themselves monolingual in sign, are often very experienced in adapting their register to other deaf people, indeed, often seeing this as a 'moral process' (Moriarty and Kusters 2021, Green 2014). It is no great stretch for many of them to take these practices into the hearing world or their professional contexts and apply them there.

Deaf people's translanguaging practice is not just linked to use of different languages in the sense of switching between different signed languages (as happens in International Sign, see Kusters 2020), but also different modalities (sign, speech, writing) and use of tools such as pen and paper, typing or picture searches on a smartphone, or pointing and gesture, the use of the body, and reference to environment. This has been defined as using an expanded semiotic repertoire (Pennycook 2017, Kusters 2021), grounded in deeply valued cultural-historical roots (García et al. 2021). Even the decision to work with or not work with interpreters, and the choice of which interpreter to work with, is part of deaf people's semiotic repertoire. If deaf people know that a specific interpreter has strengths in a particular aspect of communication (maybe familiarity with technical language, the ability to convey humour), or that they know a particular interpreter can convey their languaging effectively, then they are more likely to work with them. The selection of interpreters in this way can answer what Busch (2021) calls 'the crucial question', that is, 'what makes somebody's acquired individual resources available and accessible as spatial repertoires unfold' (196). In this case, careful selection of interpreters with specific skills can enable deaf people to utilise the full extent of their linguistic repertoire.

## Legitimate language and the semiotic repertoire

The common rule of the HEI that English is the legitimate language of official business comes into contact and conflict with the need (not simply desire) of deaf people to use the full range of their semiotic repertoire to communicate effectively and thus establish a particular academic identity. In this zone of conflict between personal and institutional language policies, there are both restrictions and opportunities for freedom in the way in which deaf academics use language in the workplace.

Bourdieu writes that 'we never learn language without learning *at the same time* the conditions of acceptability of this language. In other words, learning a language means learning at the same time that this language will be profitable in this or that situation' (1993, p.62). Learning which element of their semiotic repertoire is acceptable in what situation in the university is an ongoing challenge for deaf academics. It is also something which is ripe for subversion, but to what degree?

Deaf academics can, using their own capital as lecturers, as experts, as researchers, insist on using their multi-modal repertoires to attempt to set up their own 'empire within an empire', as Bourdieu (1993, 63) puts it, where their own linguistic capital is valued. For example, in classes where signed languages can be both the topic and the medium of instruction, or research meetings where all members of the team are fluent in sign. However, these self-contained markets often do not survive contact with the more powerful linguistic marketplace of the university at large. In these wider spaces the primacy of speech is enforced. While the deaf academic could use their full semiotic repertoire, since none of the players in this wider market are competent to understand this repertoire, it must be conventionalised through an interpreter rendering it into spoken English, the legitimate language, with all the loss of meaning and status that this process of interpretation implies (Bourdieu 1993, p.81).

Below, I will explore some of the enclaves of freedom in which deaf academics can resist oppression, create identity, and find (or lose) a sense of belonging through their practices of language in the university.

## Methods

The methods for this project have been discussed in some depth in O'Brien (2020a, 2020b), but briefly, the data upon which this chapter is based were gathered from a number of deaf academics working in HEIs around the UK. Two methods were utilised – walk-through interviews, in which interviews were conducted as the participant led the researcher on a walking exploration of their workplace (O'Brien 2020a); and eco-mapping interviews, in which an interview was conducted while participants constructed an eco-map of their HEI networks on paper (O'Brien 2020b). Both interviews were conducted in BSL and were captured on video using a camcorder.

The walkthrough interviews not only gathered data on the participant's beliefs about language in the workplace (along with many other themes and topics) but also offered the opportunity in some interviews to actually see the participant's languaging in practice as we navigated their workplace. Examples of interaction with people who couldn't sign BSL, stories recounting translanguaging, examples of multimodal communication on campus, were all recorded and discussed during these interviews.

The ecomap interviews offered opportunities to discuss languaging practices in work, and to discuss how the deaf academics' languaging was understood and valued (or not valued) in their workplace. The nature of the mapping exercise allowed for insight into more structural concerns, as they were visually representing the structure of their workplace on paper. This allowed them to see and explore the structural nature of the way language practices in HEIs are constructed in a way that the more immediate nature of the walkthrough interviews prevented.

Both methods expanded the semiotic repertoire available to both the interviewer and participant. We were no longer simply restricted to the languages we each knew, but the methods were explicitly designed to expand our linguistic repertoires to include the environment with all its spatial and other sensory elements, or through use of pen and paper, to allow us to bring distant locations and experiences to the here and now.

Both of these methods also offered many opportunities for translanguaging using the full range of linguistic repertoires in the interviews themselves. The walkthrough interview recordings show evidence of the extensive use of pointing and gesture both with me as interviewer and with other people as we navigated the HEI campus. The ecomap interview also provided opportunities to use written English and drawing as well as gesturing and referring to the drawn map to supplement or

replace signed utterances. It is also interesting that there were some examples in the interview interaction where translanguaging was used. In some cases, research participants used our shared semiotic repertoire (Kusters 2021) to combine both BSL and spoken/mouthed English in novel ways. This offered some challenges in representing these instances of translanguaging on the page. Some examples of this creative languaging are presented below.

As such, these methods address two of the three perspectives mentioned by Busch (2021) for analysis of semiotic repertoire. While of course there is a degree of overlap between each, it could be said that the eco-map interviews focus more on the way in which ‘communicators position themselves and align with each other’ (Busch 2021, 191) (while of course, the interview also allowed for analysis from the other two perspectives), and the walk-through interviews offer rich possibilities for analysis through ‘bodily-emotional experiences’ and how people ‘experience and evaluate their communicative resources in relation to others and language ideologies’ (Busch 2021, 191).

Themes were analysed using thematic analysis. While, of course, I brought some of my own experiences and beliefs to the analysis, and also brought some ideas from my reading to the data, most of the themes came from the data itself. I did not seek to impose external themes on the data I collected, instead immersing myself in the video recordings, notes and transcripts I created until I felt that I could develop themes (Braun and Clarke 2022).

As explained in O’Brien (2020a), the tiny number of deaf academics working in HEIs in the UK makes it impossible to share information about participants in this study. Even the smallest piece of information would be sufficient to identify participants. Hence quotes from interviews are presented below without attribution. All interviews were conducted in BSL, the translation into English is the author’s own.

## Legitimate language as oppression

While all participants in the research had many examples of where the status of English as the legitimate language caused feelings of being oppressed, it was interesting to see that sometimes they simply didn’t notice the workplace being actively oppressive on a day-to-day basis. Instead, many of the oppressive barriers and systems they faced were so commonplace, so every-day, that they in effect became wallpaper to their working environment. One participant mentioned that in a prior workplace ‘having to walk through a room filled with people I can’t communicate with’ was simply a part of their everyday life. Another example was the response I received when asking them about the absence of visual fire alarms or lack of other technology to make their workplace accessible. Usually, these queries were met with a wry laugh or sardonic comment about the cost of technology and the comparative value of their lives. It was clear that the underlying institutional discourse was that HE was not a place for deaf or disabled staff.

This oppression was also about lack of access to cultural norms. Not only the norms of the workplace, but those of hearing society in general. An example which frequently arose was the rules of privacy. For deaf people, if you wish to talk with someone about a sensitive topic in BSL, you would remove yourselves from the room to ensure that no-one else could see your conversation and thus ensure you had privacy. But many participants noticed that this wasn’t necessarily the case for hearing people. This can become an issue for deaf people in a shared office space who need to make phone calls through an interpreter – how much of these conversations should be ‘private’? How can this privacy be ensured? How can deaf people access the implicit, unspoken rules which enforce those expectations? In this way, oppression was not just about how you chose to express yourself, but also about when and where you were allowed to express yourself. Without access to these rules,

and no way to adapt to or conform to them, it is unclear how the transition from not-belonging to belonging, or the navigation of the liminal space the deaf people found themselves in can occur. Without this crossing of a threshold to acceptance, there is a risk that deaf people become stuck in a permanent liminal space or limbo (Bamber et al. 2017).

Working with interpreters was one way in which participants were able to use their full semiotic repertoires in the workplace. Working with interpreters is often assumed to be an easy fix for deaf people in hearing workplaces, although the preceding paragraph shows that this is by no means true. In fact, sometimes interpreters can be more of a brake on interaction than a facilitation. O'Brien (2020b) talked about the need to 'invest' in interpreters, in terms of providing prep, providing subject specific knowledge, and so on, and hope that this investment is returned by a smooth interpretation which provides access to what is going on. However, this takes time, and when it does not pay off, this time and effort has been wasted. The need to work around the availability of interpreters can also be oppressive. Some tasks simply cannot be done without interpreters. Even something as simple as ringing a doorbell and waiting for a signal that a door has unlocked to access different areas on campus might need to be put off until an interpreter is present.

*To get into the finance offices, the doors are always locked. You have to phone the person you're visiting using a phone on the wall and ask them to come and let you in<sup>1</sup>. It's rubbish. Not accessible at all for deaf people. At some point I'm going to email and complain. I'd either have to go with an interpreter, or ask the interpreter to phone them and say I'll be there in exactly 10 minutes and can they let me in? ... It's frustrating.*

Other work, such as making phone calls, conducting meetings, teaching, all need to be timetabled around the availability of interpreters, rather than to the convenience of the deaf person (O'Brien 2020b). It is very rare for Access to Work to fund full-time interpreter support, and even if the funds are available, it's unlikely that a deaf academic would be able to find interpreters to cover their entire working hours.

Indeed, the very act of booking interpreters can eat into non-work time, meaning that deaf academics are at a disadvantage in terms of the time they are able to switch off from their job.

*...it means that maybe when I'm on holiday, I have to check the interpreter bookings a couple of times so that I can confirm bookings so that when I get back to work everything will run smoothly.*

Even when interpreters are present in the workplace, they are often not around for chance encounters with colleagues.

*I'd like to ask [the interpreter] to come [to the coffee room] in case there are hearing staff here. I think twice there's been a need for me to ask the hearing*

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<sup>1</sup> This quote is a good example of how this participant was able to use translanguaging to make it clear what was happening. They used BSL role shift to show the location of the phone on the wall, picking up the receiver, and then they mouthed clearly in English 'I am here', before reverting to BSL to describe a finance person coming to answer the door. Many of the translations into English in this chapter mask complex translanguaging that the participants naturally used to make their points. Where appropriate, I will use footnotes to flag these up.

*staff to hold on while I pop out to fetch the interpreter here... I think for the hearing person involved it must have been a bit of an odd experience!*

Therefore, their work patterns are structured not by their own preference or needs, but by the inaccessible languaging practices of the university at large.

It is important to note that the buildings of the university are designed and built for hearing people – the architecture precludes signed conversation in many ways and many places. The video recordings of the walkthrough interviews I conducted were full of long periods in which we were not able to converse. Often there was simply no room in corridors to walk side by side and converse in BSL; at other points there were so many obstacles such as furniture, bins, fire extinguishers, pinch-points in corridors, that it was too risky to chat: if we watched one another signing rather than watching where we were going, we would have walked into something. This in itself had an oppressive effect on our experience of the space, it prevented us from communicating, from expressing our deaf selves. Hearing, speaking people who do not rely on maintaining eye contact do not experience the same effect from these elements of the architecture of the campus.

The presumption of speech and the lack of consideration for signed language is also visible in the office space and equipment that is provided – every desk had a phone, a computer, sometimes a webcam, but often not enough filming space for corresponding in BSL.

*For example, I couldn't go to a conference recently, but I filmed something and sent it off. But I had to go to the lab, where I had to set up the camera, the lights and everything. It became this big thing... I have to organise a time to go and do it. But really, for our, for my work... I think it's important that we sign, record things. I want it to be quick, not a big thing. I want to be able to move my seat, record, and be done, and carry on with work.*

Deaf academics involved in this research all felt that their working environment was to some extent oppressive because of the assumptions about language which were built into both the culture and the physical space of the university. One participant summed this up by saying 'if the room is badly designed, hearing people can grit their teeth and get on with it. Deaf people can't do their jobs at all. That's the difference.'

## Translanguaging as resistance to legitimate language

It is important to note that deaf participants in this research were not simply passive victims of oppression. They were able to skilfully navigate these language environments in order to find or create spaces of resistance.

As a response to the oppression felt in the wider university, some deaf academics had their own tactics to carve out spaces which protected, rewarded or otherwise sustained their semiotic repertoire. Some talked about their offices (either shared with other deaf people, or sole-occupancy) as signing spaces – a deaf space which was not impinged upon by the legitimate language and modality, spoken English. These signing spaces were established using visual symbols, for example, posters, pictures, white gloves, and other things on the walls; but also, by arranging furniture in ways which specifically accommodated for the use of visual languages (i.e. by ensuring clear lines of sight, minimising glare from windows, and so on).

Others talked about the importance to them of being seen to use BSL around campus. This could be in being seen to teach BSL as a subject, or to use BSL as a medium of instruction, and being seen to

use BSL in meetings. In sum, being visible as a signing deaf person. This was a political statement for them, in resisting the norm of the legitimate language, or trying to promote BSL as an alternative legitimate language in certain contexts, to build an 'empire within an empire'. However, there was also a strategic engagement with English and other visual semiotic resources in building these 'empires'.

*I'm happy to be seen signing in public, I want to be visible, for people to think, oh, sign is something we have here! I've made a display poster for in the corridor, because when we moved here, I felt it important to show what we do. It's a "planting the flag"<sup>2</sup> thing, [we] are always concerned about our visibility. If there's a school meeting, one of us always goes. Especially if I bring an interpreter, it helps to make sure they remember we are here!*

This visibility had other advantages as well. As discussed above, communicating through interpreters can be advantageous to the deaf person because for many hearing academics it is a novelty. This means that contact with deaf people through interpreters often sticks in their minds, creating connections which can be utilised in future.

These tactics to make themselves visible and to create and maintain signing spaces in the HEI could be interpreted as attempts to leave the liminal state by forcing an incorporation (Benvenuti et al. 2022) of signed languages. However, it is not the 'liminar' who decides whether or not they are allowed to leave the liminal period or space (Pagan 2019), but the others who control the field. Unless the wider institution is open to the incorporation of wider language repertoires beyond speech, this tactic may have limited impact or success.

Some participants decided which parts of their repertoire to use not only to ease communication for themselves, but to support other deaf people in the institution, or to make a political point. One academic talked about the fact that they are speech privileged, meaning that they can speak English clearly. They argued that to hide this, to pretend to be a monolingual signer, would be to deny part of their identity. However, if there was another signing deaf person present, particularly one who did not share their speech privilege, they would not use spoken English. Instead, the show of solidarity and challenging of the legitimate language through supporting another with less access takes priority.

Others reflected that the strength of spoken English in discourses in HE is such that resistance to legitimate language through use of BSL can sometimes be interpreted as exclusionary, 'because this was a proper deaf space, some hearing people felt put off by that? Like they weren't welcome?', rather than an opportunity for the hearing academics to expand their own semiotic repertoire to communicate in a mutually accessible way. This reflection showed the limits of resistance. While it was felt that small pockets of resistance were possible, that some small changes could be made, there were definite limits to the extent to which deaf people were able to use their full semiotic repertoire in formal contexts. Indeed, some felt the resistance of the wider field to embracing a wider semiotic repertoire was such that they said, 'You can't expect to survive as a deaf academic unless you "show willing" to engage with hearing academics'.

Sometimes the willingness to engage mentioned in the quote above was reciprocal. It is common for deaf people in the UK to refer to someone having a 'good attitude' when talking about someone

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<sup>2</sup> This English phrase was enacted literally in BSL, using constructed action to show a flagpole being driven into the ground and a flag unfurling. This translanguaging gave the English phrase a much more active, possessive meaning than simply uttering it in English would have.

who makes the effort to communicate. Good attitude is not linked to someone's ability to sign, but rather the respect offered in an interaction and the time taken to communicate. Good attitude is valued, because as Green (2014) states, 'it is not that communicating directly with each other is valuable DESPITE the work involved, but rather BECAUSE OF it' (p.455) (capitals in original). However, as many participants said, 'good attitude' does not mean asking the deaf person to teach you BSL. There is a very big difference between putting the effort into a mutually beneficial situation of communication, and expecting a deaf colleague to put in extra, unpaid labour to teach BSL.

## Languaging as belonging

Some participants reported that, the places in which they felt most comfortable and felt more of a sense of belonging in their HEI were places in which they were allowed to use their full semiotic repertoire. These spaces were almost all found outside formal academic environments, with *cafés* being a commonly cited site of belonging in terms of the languaging that was used and accepted. Participants seemed to feel that these informal spaces lent themselves well to mixing sign, speech or mouthing, gestures, and text to communicate, establishing a local language ideology which allowed such flexibility to thrive (Blackledge and Creese, 2017). The feeling seemed to be that the people working in those spaces were also more able and willing to use flexible communication methods in return, which happened much less in more formal settings where the legitimate language held sway. These areas often also had TVs showing news or current affairs programs, and deaf participants had often asked for the channel to be changed to one where in-vision BSL interpreters were used, or for the subtitles to be turned on. This created an accessible, multi-modal language environment which gave a sense of belonging.

In the eco-map interviews, some participants made a point of adding individuals with who were able to communicate with gestures as well as speech. These were not necessarily people who had knowledge of or fluency in signed language, but rather people who made the effort to adapt to communicate more fluently with their deaf colleagues. The ability of colleagues to use an expanded semiotic repertoire that stretched beyond just speech was an important factor in helping some deaf academics to feel at home in their institution.

Sometimes true belonging was not realised, but the deaf participants were still able to position themselves in such a way as to feel like they were contributing positively and not feel alienated from their workplace.

*So I feel in the middle... in -l-i-m-i-n-a-l<sup>3</sup> space, somewhere in the middle... Yeah. Sometimes... sometimes it's hard, yes. But at the same time I feel like it can be an opportunity. That's why I consider my work to be happening in this liminal space because I can try to help hearing people understand the deaf world, but also help the deaf people to educate hearing people. So this sense of liminality, I feel... I should make the best of it, use it, use my particular position.*

In the quote above, the participant framed their liminality as a positive thing. This is reminiscent of other work in which liminal spaces are said to be creative (Rae 2022, Benvenuti et al. 2022) and can

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<sup>3</sup> This was another example of translanguaging. The participant in question described what they meant in BSL ("in the middle") then fingerspelled and mouthed the English word they felt best represented their intention ("-l-i-m-i-n-a-l-"). While fingerspelling is part of BSL, it is often used to, as in this case, show borrowings from a written language. The participant's meaning was perfectly clear from their BSL, but they wanted to add the English word through fingerspelling it to ensure that their precise intention was reflected.

lead to a sense that the marginality associated with liminality can be transcended somehow by 'making the best of it' and using it to advantage.

Some participants responded that their university departments or research groups had clear communication policies which were enforced to ensure that the workplace was accessible for deaf colleagues. However, these could cause some friction when people either didn't understand the policy itself or understand why it was in place. This was particularly the case when nondeaf or non-signing people took it upon themselves to enact or enforce a policy based on their own limited experience, without reference to what the deaf people they worked with actually wanted.

*You're still learning. You still need to learn that just because one deaf person says that doesn't mean all deaf people are the same... that deaf person wasn't from the UK either, so... [BSL sign: COMPLEX English mouthing: "the politics..."]<sup>4</sup> The politics are so complicated. Still, it's so complex. So, one of my deaf colleagues was really frustrated and was saying, what can we do about this?! And I was like, because I've been through this so many times, I said "well, it's got to be deaf led. Simple as that".*

Feelings of belonging were not just created by being able to communicate with colleagues but also through physical surroundings which were supportive of signed communication. As discussed above, some of the built environment was oppressive in the sense that it did not offer conditions suited to communication in BSL. Spaces which were appropriate visual language such as teaching rooms or offices with space for clear lines of sight, natural lighting and opportunities for visual privacy were valued. Conversely, spaces which were not accessible or felt unsafe, for example, without visual fire alarms, left participants feeling unvalued and uncomfortable.

## Conclusion

Deaf academics use translanguaging to challenge the legitimate language of the university and create their own distinct identity as people, as researchers, as academics collectively and individually. This use of translanguaging in this way is sometimes successful, sometimes not. Sometimes it helps smooth interaction between non-signing colleagues, sometimes it throws up additional barriers (particularly those linked to emotional labour/compulsive time commitments). Sometimes it helps to build an academic identity which is resonant with the HEI in which they work, other times the identities they developed were dissonant or even rejecting of the values of the HEI (Ennals et al. 2016). Sometimes it allows the deaf academic to transcend a feeling of stuckness, or liminality, in the workplace, sometimes it does not, and they end up in a state of permanent liminality or limbo (Bamber et al. 2018).

However, it is clear that this use of translanguaging is not naive, nor is it something that the research participants did without awareness of the possible consequences for them. These participants clearly showed a "linguistic sense of emplacement" (Salö, 2015, 2019), which is to say, they showed a "fine-tuned ability to sense and anticipate the valorization of linguistic goods in different markets, which reflexively allows agents to align their linguistic practices in relation to present and upcoming exchanges" (Salö, 2015, 517). It is clear from the interview extracts above that participants were not

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<sup>4</sup> This is another example of translanguaging within the interview. The sign COMPLEX was articulated in BSL at the same time as the participant mouthed "the politics" in English. There is a sign for POLITICS in BSL, but the participant did not use it, preferring instead to simultaneously use BSL and English.

merely reactive in their workplaces but were proactively creating identities and spaces for themselves and their language practices to tackle marginalisation that they may feel subject to.

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