Indexicality and Tibetanness Through Sign: Places and Belonging

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In 2001, in collaboration with an international NGO and a government agency, a group of deaf Tibetans in Lhasa started to document regionally diverse signs, gestures and other forms of communication in use in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Through a collective selection process as well as the creation of new signs and a finger alphabet, they gave rise what is now referred to in sign as TIBETAN SIGN, Tibetan Sign Language (TSL) in English and Bögyi lagda (“Tibetan hand language”) in Tibetan. Based on the multi-lingual and visual TSL dictionaries and textbooks that the group produced as well as the advocacy of the Lhasa-based Tibet Deaf Association (TDA), TSL was soon recognised by the government as the first minority sign language of the People’s Republic of China. At present, however, only a few signers use TSL in an exclusive way. More often it is mixed with Chinese Sign Language (CSL), the teaching medium of the local government Special Schools. And yet TSL and its finger alphabet have been taught intermittently at the Special School by TDA volunteers, notably with a view to promoting deaf students’ literacy in the written Tibetan language. The newly acquired possibility for deaf Tibetans to access the prestigious Tibetan script, the additional legibility of their ethno-linguistic identity by the state, and an of-late overt alliance of some deaf Tibetans with the wider “pure Tibetan language” movement, can be read as indices of a newly emerging and distinct deaf “Tibetanness” (Hofer 2015, 2016).

Against the background of these wider socio-linguistic phenomena and drawing on new fieldwork conducted in early 2016, this paper explores the indexical nature of place signs in TSL. In particular we will look at signs for important sites in the signers’ immediate urban environment of Lhasa, as well as those for regions and locations further afield in the TAR and in China. While TSL signs for important places in China are intimately tied to political and educational experiences and imaginaries, the signs for places in Tibetan areas indicate cultural, religious, and geographic familiarity and proximity. How then do place signs in TSL index ethnic, linguistic and national senses of belonging among deaf Tibetans in Lhasa?