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Abstract

In this article, I discuss the benefits of linguistic ethnography for the study of the communication of deaf individuals who grow up without access to the linguistic resources of a named spoken or signed language in Iquitos, Peru. *Linguistic ethnography* is an umbrella term for a growing methodological and theoretical approach shared by researchers from diverse disciplinary backgrounds. While an array of methodological approaches are used within linguistic ethnography, the methods that I utilize include ethnographic fieldwork and the microanalysis of videorecorded naturally occurring interactions. I use this methodological approach to present the social organization of the lives of deaf youth in Iquitos, as well as an example of the language use of one deaf boy taken from a segment of situated interaction during a bingo game.

IN THIS ARTICLE, I discuss the benefits of linguistic ethnography for the study of the communication of deaf individuals who grow up without access to the linguistic resources of a named spoken or signed language in Iquitos, Peru. *Linguistic ethnography* is an umbrella term for a growing methodological and theoretical approach shared by researchers from diverse disciplinary backgrounds (Creese 2008; Snell et al. 2015). This approach uses “ethnography to ‘open up’

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linguistic analysis and linguistics to ‘tie down’ ethnographic insights” (Shaw et al. 2015, 9 from Rampton et al. 2004). While an array of methodological approaches are used within linguistic ethnography, the methods that I utilize include ethnographic fieldwork and the micro-analysis of videorecorded naturally occurring interactions. Below, I use this methodological approach to present the social organization of the lives of deaf youth in Iquitos, as well as an example of the language use of one deaf boy taken from a segment of situated interaction during a bingo game.

To date, the majority of research on deaf children who live without access to a named language has focused on the structural level of their communication systems, referred to as *homesigns* (Goldin-Meadow 2003). In contrast, I approach the study of deaf children’s language as socially and culturally situated. In doing so, I make two contributions to our understanding of the communication of deaf youth without access to a named language. First, I illustrate that an analytical focus on the achievement of social action unearths the rich communicative capacity of Iquitos deaf youth. The perspective it affords provides important insights on deaf youths’ communication that challenges previous attempts in homesign research to investigate linguistic structures in isolation and out of context. Second, I make the case that the Iquitos context calls for new terminology when referring to deaf youths’ communication. Rather than adopting the terminology *homesign*, I refer to the communication of the deaf youth as *Iquitos local signs*.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Situating Iquitos Local Signs in the Literature

Nyst, Sylla, and Magassouba (2012) argue that two distinct types of homesign (or home sign) have been discussed in the literature: oral and rural home sign. “Oral home sign” research has focused on the linguistic structure of the communication of deaf children who attend oral school programs. Studies of these homesign systems demonstrate that they include basic linguistic structures, including syntax and morphology (e.g., Goldin-Meadow 2003; Goldin-Meadow et al. 1994; Goldin-Meadow and Mylander 1990, 1998) that were not present in the gestures of their hearing mothers (Goldin-Meadow et al. 1994; Goldin-Meadow and Mylander 1990, 1998). These studies

make up the bulk of the literature and are where the term *homesign* emerged. Studies on “rural home sign” come from a more diverse set of research contexts (e.g., Coppola 2002; Fusellier-Souza 2006; Jepson 1991a, b; Neveu 2019). Nyst et al. (2012) note that the rural social setting provides deaf individuals with distinct affordances and relationships to hearing signers in comparison with oral home signers, who grow up in cities and are influenced by oral language ideologies. As a result, “rural home sign” draws to a larger extent from the local gestures used in the wider hearing community than “oral home sign,” which develops primarily within the context of the child’s home (Jepson 1991b; Nyst et al. 2012). Due to the differences between oral and rural home sign, Nyst et al. (2012) argue that the latter should be categorized as language, rather than a mere communication system. However, it is unclear how similar all of the cases of rural deaf individuals discussed in the literature are to one another. There seems to be a range in how much contact these deaf individuals have with other deaf people—from one deaf individual, who only has contact with hearing individuals, to deaf individuals who have “sporadic, unsystematic contact with each other,” also termed *communal homesign* (Zeshan 2010, 228).

Researchers within the linguistic ethnography paradigm have pushed back on the existing homesign literature in two important ways. A trend in the field of emerging sign language research has been to suggest that forms of signing are on a developmental cline with homesign as the beginning stage of language development, national sign languages as the end goal, and village (also called shared sign languages) somewhere in between (Hou and Kusters 2020; Nyst 2012). Green (2014), Hou (2016), and Safar (2019), in their linguistic ethnography research with deaf individuals in a variety of rural contexts, demonstrated that the signing situations that they observed did not fall cleanly into existing categories of homesign or village sign languages. Thus, each author developed a naming convention that forefronts the unique sociolinguistic community they researched. Unlike these studies, however, the Iquitos context shares substantial similarities with the “oral home sign” research from which the term *homesign* was coined (i.e., focus on children in urban settings, whose situation is the result of an educational philosophy). Notwithstanding,

as I will discuss below, I find that the social organization of deaf youth in Iquitos challenges the use of homesign as the terminology of choice in several ways.

Another challenge to the existing homesign literature by researchers within linguistic ethnography is the move away from designating linguistic structure as the privileged focus. The field of homesign research emerged in the 1970s with the objective of investigating how the process of language-learning without exposure to a sign language could contribute to our understanding of how all children learn language (Goldin-Meadow 2003). However, this research came from a theoretical approach to language that focused on linguistic structures in isolated utterances (Goldin-Meadow and Feldman 1975). In contrast, research within linguistic ethnography has shifted to a discussion of the deployment of the full range of language resources within an individual's linguistic repertoire (Blommaert and Backus 2013). Kusters et al. (2017), in drawing attention to deaf-deaf and deaf-hearing interactions, argue that semiotic repertoires are both multilingual and multimodal. This has led to a number of recent publications on translanguaging practices and the broad semiotic repertoires of deaf individuals (Green 2017; Kusters 2017; Moriarty Harrelson 2019; Safar 2019; Adami and Swanwick 2019; Tapio 2019). In the methodological approach to linguistic ethnography that I exemplify below, the microanalysis of videorecorded interactions makes available the combination of semiotic resources employed while carrying out social action.

Fieldwork and Positionality

My ethnographic fieldwork in Iquitos from 2013 through 2015 with ten deaf youth consisted of participant observation, videorecording of naturally occurring interactions, fieldnotes, and semistructured interviews with parents, teachers, and government officials working in special education. During the 2014 school year, I observed each student once a week for an entire school day, resulting in approximately twenty visits per student. During 2015, I spent time with the deaf youth in their homes on ten to twelve occasions during a span of six months. I usually stayed for six hours at a time and tried to include a meal, typically lunch. All of these home and school visits were re-

coded with two to three video cameras. Videorecordings are first prepared in the program ELAN by identifying moments in which the deaf individuals were engaged in interaction, and then labeling the ongoing activity, the individuals involved, and the nature of the interactional project. Further coding and analysis are conducted in accordance with the organizing research objectives.

While living in Iquitos, I was not only involved in ethnographic fieldwork, but also became an active community organizer. In line with the interest in linguistic ethnography to improve social life (Shaw et al. 2015), I arrived at my field site in 2013 with the hope of finding a way to use my research as a means to improve deaf education in Iquitos. Ultimately, I was able to use my positionality as a racially white, American, university educated, and hearing researcher to act as an agent of social change in Iquitos, facilitating the formation of an association of parents of deaf children in 2014 and assisting them in the establishment of the first city-wide, public deaf education program in 2016. My involvement helping run the program continues to this day. This work has been primarily with hearing parents, rather than with the deaf community, which came about for a number of reasons.

Iquitos has a large population of deaf adults, who use *Lengua de Señas Peruana* (LSP) and form part of two (sometimes three) associations and three churches in the city. When I initially arrived in Iquitos, I spent a substantial portion of my time interacting with deaf adults in their association and church gatherings. It was due to the graciousness of many of these deaf adults that I gained fluency in LSP. However, there was only one family in the signing deaf community with a deaf child, and deaf adults in general showed little interest in the topic of deaf education. In contrast, within only a few months of my arrival, multiple hearing parents asked me to tutor their deaf child because they were unhappy with his or her education. Rather than tutor, I decided to bring these parents together for a meeting, where they proposed the idea of forming an association.

Since the association's founding, the parents have placed me in a position of authority. Not only was I racially white and university educated, but I was also, in their eyes, an expert on deafness. Parents saw me communicate with their deaf children in their respective local signs, as well as hold fluent conversations in LSP with deaf

adults. While some parents had met other hearing signers in the deaf churches, for most parents, my signing ability was a novelty. Parents also knew I was working with deaf children in schools for my research project. To this day, the parents continue to seek and welcome my active involvement in the deaf education program, which takes me to Iquitos multiple times a year. Having the opportunity to convert my role as an ethnographer into one of an agent of social change has allowed me to gain firsthand knowledge of many aspects of Iquitos life (e.g., fundraising events, registering an association in the public registry, securing teacher contracts) to which I otherwise would not have had access.

In the following section, I exemplify my approach to linguistic ethnography through a description of the social organization of the lives of deaf youth in Iquitos based on my ethnographic fieldwork, followed by the microanalysis of a segment of situated interaction between a deaf boy, Luis, and his hearing neighbor. The ethnographic perspective situates deaf youths' interactional moments within the social relationships, activity frameworks, and larger social, cultural, and political period in which they live. Then, the detailed microanalysis of moments of situated interaction—what Erving Goffman (1983) refers to as the interaction order—provides insights into the way in which the deaf youth use a wide range of communicative resources to navigate and construct the social worlds in which they live.

A Linguistic Ethnography Approach to the Study of Iquitos Local Signs

The Social Organization of the Lives of Iquitos Deaf Youth

Iquitos is the largest city in the Peruvian Amazon and the capital city of the political department of Loreto, as well as the hub of economic and social services in the region. During my time in Iquitos, I have identified more than fifty deaf youth who grew up without access to spoken Spanish or LSP. The ten with whom I worked from 2013 to 2015 (see table 1) lived within all four municipal districts in the city. They ranged in age from six to seventeen years old at the start of my research. Family household size ranged from three people to nine people, with one student living in an orphanage with more than one hundred children. None of the deaf children had ever had their

TABLE 1. List of Deaf Students Involved in the Social Lives of Deaf Youth Project from 2013–2015

Name	Age in Jan 2014	Household size (inc. child)	Grade in 2014 ^a (mainstreaming)	Interactions with deaf
Mateo	17	3	4th grade of secondary	None
Estefany	15	5	6th grade of primary	Jehovah's Witnesses church (1 yr)
Luis*	13	6	4th grade of primary	Special educ school (1 yr)
José*	12	9	4th grade of primary	Special educ school (1 yr)
Jeremy*	11	4	4th grade of primary	Special educ school (1 yr)
Andrés	10	9	4th grade of primary	Deaf mom and dad
Melanie	10	8	3rd grade of primary	Jehovah's Witnesses visited house
Caterina	9	+100 orphanage	3rd grade of primary	Special educ school (1 yr)
Manuel	9	3	3rd grade of primary	None
Franco	6	6	1st grade of primary	None

Note. ^aThe regular education system in Peru consists of six years of primary school and five years of secondary school. *indicates that students were in the same main-stream classroom.

hearing level diagnosed, used hearing assistive technology, or received speech therapy. Families in Iquitos showed no embarrassment about their deaf child (e.g., Polich 2005). Children were taken to the store, sent to the bodegas to make purchases, and played outside with their neighborhood friends. In Iquitos, life spills into the streets in the afternoons and on weekends. Children often play with those on their block or street, many of which are unpaved.

All the deaf youth with whom I worked were attending mainstream regular education classrooms, where they were typically the only deaf student, did not come into contact with deaf adults, and were provided no support services, such as interpreters, to access the language of the classroom (Goico 2019a). In 2014 and 2015, there

were only two classrooms in the city with multiple deaf students; the one I observed had three deaf students. Due to the size of Iquitos, the large number of schools, and the lack of any restriction on where one had to live to attend a school, the hearing students in the deaf child's classroom were typically not the same children as in the deaf child's neighborhood. Thus, the schools were distinct social communities from deaf youths' neighborhoods and homes. None of the eight teachers whose classrooms I observed knew LSP, although two teachers had taken one basic sign class. Teachers from the special education school in the district supervised the deaf students, typically visiting them once a week for 30 minutes. The special education teachers did not know LSP and were not trained in deaf education.¹

Other than the three students in the same classroom, the remainder of students with whom I worked had never met one another. Nevertheless, most of the deaf youth had met another deaf individual during their childhood but did not have frequent and sustained interactions with deaf or hearing signers to learn LSP. Before entering mainstream classrooms, four of the deaf children had spent one year at a special education school, where there were other deaf students who also did not know LSP. Three students had some interaction with deaf adults. Andrés had deaf parents, but he only lived with his mother. His mother had minimal interactions with a deaf church when she was a teenager and did not know LSP. Melanie received weekly visits from one deaf and one hearing signing adult from the Jehovah's Witness church. Estefany had briefly attended the Jehovah's Witness church. At the time of my research, none of the students had interactions with the deaf churches, other than the Jehovah's Witness church, or the deaf associations.

Although the deaf youth had typically met another deaf individual, most of the hearing individuals in their families, neighborhoods, and schools had not. Hearing individuals consistently told me that they did not know any deaf people other than the deaf child and had never communicated with another deaf person. Most families were very engaged with their deaf child, although in one household, the grandparents who raised their deaf grandson rarely communicated with him outside of basic topics such as eating and household chores.

However, no families accommodated the deaf child during spoken interactions among hearing individuals. Hearing individuals varied dramatically in how they mixed the manual and oral modalities; some used speech primarily, many mixed speech with sign, while others used almost exclusively the manual modality (Goico 2019b). Regardless, hearing individuals’ speech patterns were not the result of medical or educational ideologies about how to communicate with deaf children, rather, the communicative patterns were a manifestation of individual assumptions and beliefs.

An Interactional Example²

The segment of interaction is presented in transcripts organized in a comic strip fashion. I typically filmed with multiple cameras, and therefore I try to use the best image from the camera angles available. Each image is marked with a letter in order to be able to reference individual images within the discussion. Next to the image letter is a time code taken from the recording. Arrows indicate gaze direction. I present the written transcript underneath the images, with sign glosses in capital letters, additional bodily information in parentheses, and Spanish words in italics. A forward slash (/) is used to indicate when communicative resources are produced simultaneously. An interpretive translation is in bold underneath the written transcript. Table 2 lists the transcription conventions.

TABLE 2. Transcription Conventions

SMALL CAPITALS	Sign gloss
<i>Italicized</i>	Spanish words
(description)	Description of additional bodily information
/	Indicates that communicative resources are produced simultaneously
└	Overlap in speaker turns
—	Utterance/action is cut off
PT.REFERENT	Point.referent
SIGN ^{NAME}	Indicates the directional reference of the sign
(number.number)	Gaps or pauses in seconds and tenths of seconds
bold	Interpretive translation

In 2014, when I began observing Luis in school, he was thirteen years old and the youngest of seven siblings in his family. His three oldest siblings lived outside of Iquitos in the cities of Piura, Trujillo, and Lima, and one sister lived in Iquitos but not in her parents' home. Still living at home with Luis were his two sisters who were closest to him in age. The sister older than him had a cognitive disability, and the next oldest sister, Julia, lived in the house with her one-year-old son. During my fieldwork, Luis's parents often traveled for work, leaving Julia as the primary caregiver for her two younger siblings. Although the number of individuals living in the house was rather small, there were often many visitors. Julia's partner was regularly at the house, along with the older sister still living in Iquitos and her children. There were also neighbors frequently stopping by to hang out, and a young cousin who would drop in and park himself in front of the television set. A great-aunt and her family lived in one of the neighboring houses, and a cousin also lived nearby with her children.

A common pastime in Iquitos was playing bingo with friends. One afternoon in April 2015, I was visiting Luis's house. After we finished lunch, two of his neighbors and their children stopped by the house to hang out, and we ended up playing bingo together at the table in the front room. The organization of the participants around the table can be seen in figure 1. Starting from the left, with the woman with her back to the camera and moving around the table clockwise, the participants were neighbors Marta and Pamela, Luis, myself, Sara, Luis's sister Julia, and Marta's son Tony.

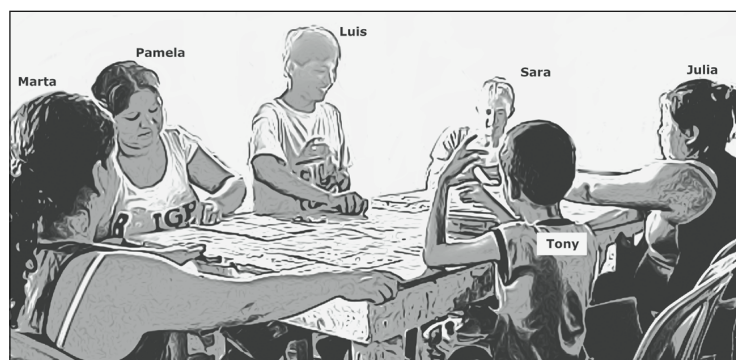


FIGURE 1. The configuration of the participants during the bingo betting.





<p>a) 20:54.687</p>  <p>1 Lui PT.COIN The money, I'm taking—</p> <p>2 Jul</p> <p>3 (1.1 - Luis stares at coin)</p>	<p>b) 20:55.203</p>  <p>(vocalization/reaches for the coin)</p> <p>└ (throws in coin) Here's my coin.</p>
<p>c) 20:56.554</p>  <p>4 Lui (pushes away the coin Julia threw) (pulls the first coin towards him) Not this coin, I'm taking the money.</p>	<p>d) 20:57.255</p> 

FIGURE 2. Transcript of lines 1–4 of the bingo betting.

In the segment of interaction presented in the transcripts in figures 2–4, I discuss how Luis navigated betting in a game of bingo. Between each round of bingo, the participants placed ten *céntimos* (cents) in the center of the table, and the winner of the match would win the sixty cents from that round of betting. This betting was complicated by the fact that very few people had ten-cent coins. Therefore, the amount of money in the center of the table often did not equal sixty

cents, and instead the participants were maintaining a running tally of who owed how much to whom. For instance, I did not have any ten-cent, twenty-cent, or fifty-cent pieces; I only had a one *sol* coin (the equivalent of ten ten-cent pieces). Thus, after each game we kept track of whom I owed ten cents. As I illustrate in the interactional example depicted in the transcripts in figures 2, 3 and 4, Luis capitalized on the structured nature of the bingo game to take charge of coordinating among the hearing players how much he owed.

Luis had won the previous round of bingo, therefore, this segment of bingo betting started with him closing out the previous round. The transcript in figure 2 begins in line 1 with Luis pointing to the money (figure 2a), then producing a vocalization while reaching out to grab the money (figure 2b). As Luis reached for the money, Julia threw a ten-cent piece onto the center of the table (figure 2b). Luis paused to look at the money before pushing her coin into the middle for the next round of betting (figure 2c) and continuing to take the original coin (figure 2d). In lines 1–4, Luis did not look at the other players around the table. However, Luis was the only deaf person at the table; his decision to use his voice in line 1 suggests that he was putting his action of collecting the pot on record for the hearing individuals, and thereby closing off the previous bingo round.

In the existing homesign literature, actions that manipulate objects would not be considered for analysis since they are not deemed quintessentially linguistic (Goldin-Meadow and Feldman 1975). Yet, Luis's choice to use his voice to call attention to his action indicates that he performed it with "manifest deliberate expressiveness," which Kendon (2004, 15) refers to as a visible bodily action that is produced for the purpose of expression and not just a practical aim. Even observing just this initial moment of situated interaction, it becomes apparent that Luis's individual linguistic knowledge of grammatical structures would not be sufficient to navigate this social interaction (Hymes 1974). Instead, as Luis demonstrated in the closing off of the previous bingo round, a "true linguistic competence" requires the ability to employ communicative resources for social aims (Haviland 2011, 289). To accomplish this social action, Luis used sign, vocalization, gaze, visible bodily action, and the manipulation of objects in his environment (Goodwin 2000).

After closing out the previous round, Luis moved into coordinating who owed how much to whom (figure 3). The reason for this was that Luis needed to determine what he owed and to whom, so that he could take it into account in his ante for the next round. As seen in figure 3a–d, Luis managed to get Pamela’s attention, establish that he owed her money, and coordinate that he was putting money into the pot for her in only 2.2 seconds. Again, he accomplished this by efficiently incorporating the coin into his visible bodily actions (Goodwin 2000). In figure 3b, Luis performed a summons—a conversational opener used to coordinate attention and entry into a state of talk (Schegloff 1968)—by tapping on her arm with the back of his hand. Simultaneously, Luis held the coin in his hand and placed it in Pamela’s field of view (Clark 2003). In doing so, Luis effectively called for Pamela’s attention but also provided Pamela with preliminary information about the conversation that he was calling her attention to open.

Along with Luis’s efficiency in accomplishing the work of coordinating that he owed Pamela money, I want to draw attention to Pamela’s demonstration of her communitive skill. Figure 3a depicts Pamela’s gaze prior to Luis calling her attention, when Luis was just beginning to pick up the coin. Only 0.6 seconds elapsed from when Luis first began to pick up the coin and when he touched her arm; by the time their skin made contact, Pamela was already looking down at Luis’s hand (figure 3b). To accomplish this, Pamela did not wait until she felt Luis’s hand to shift her gaze toward him but began moving her gaze toward him as he moved his hand toward her arm. While there is substantial evidence of the rapid speed of turn-taking across languages (Stivers et al. 2009), it is not necessarily the case that hearing individuals, especially nonfamily members, will choose to provide a deaf person with the eye gaze required to communicate in the visual modality (Green 2014). However, the speed at which the summons-answer sequence unfolded illustrates how attentive Pamela was to the visual modality in which she interacted with Luis.

Upon seeing Luis’s action, Pamela built her next utterance on what he had done. In line 8 (figure 3d), Pamela responded to Luis by holding up three fingers and wiggling them, indicating that he owed her thirty cents. Luis showed his acknowledgment with a head

a) 20:57.750



5 Lui (picks up the coin)

b) 20:58.418



HEY.TAP / (shows coin) / (head nod)

Hey,

6 Pam | (begins to turn gaze to Luis's hand) (glances at Luis's hand)

c) 20:58.971



7 Lui (holds up coin)
this coin, I'm putting it in.

8 Pam



(puts coin in the center of the table)

| THREE / (wiggles fingers)
30 cents.

9 Lui (head nod)
Yeah.

e) 21:01.254



10 Pam PT.1 PT.1
(You owe) me 30 cents.

f) 21:02.341



THREE


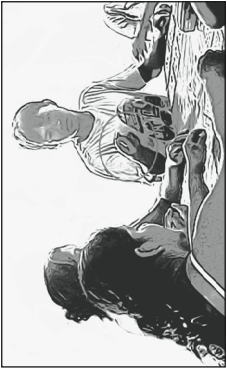


11 Lui

| (Luis pulls coin back and touches another)
Not this coin, but this—

FIGURE 3. Transcript of lines 5–11 of the bingo betting. *Not all images are included.

nod in line 9 that is not depicted in an image. Luis then turned back to look at Pamela (figure 3e), and she reiterated how much he owed her with two points to herself and the sign *THREE*. In Pamela's utterance, there is evidence of a local resource from hearing gesture that has been adopted in their local Iquitos sign. Hearing individuals in Iquitos count beginning with the pinky finger for one, continuing with the ring finger for two, and so on until reaching the thumb at five. I frequently saw this form of counting used, for example, in schools as children were solving math problems. During the bingo game, the group consistently employed this counting system to refer to money, using their fingers to represent the corresponding multiple of ten, as can be seen by Pamela's use of three fingers to represent thirty cents. Further examples of this are found in the continuation of the interaction in figure 4, including Pamela confirming this interpretation by lifting the pinky finger while simultaneously producing the translation *diez* (ten).

Following Luis's successful coordination with Pamela, Luis then questioned whether he also owed Marta money (Figure 4), providing a clear example of his signing skill. In line 11, Luis reconsidered which coin to put in the center of the table (figure 3f). Luis's uncertainty continued in line 12 with a 1.5 second stare at Marta (figure 4a). Then Luis pointed to Marta (figure 4b) and signed *SIX* (figure 4c, d). As figure 4d shows, Luis strategically modified the sign *SIX* in order to incorporate the act of giving, the giver, the givee, and what is given into one sign. Luis initially signed *SIX* while gazing at Pamela and with no movement of his hands (figure 4c). Then Luis looked at Marta as he pushed the sign *SIX* from his body toward Marta, while also nodding his head in her direction (figure 4d). Thus, with only one sign, he produced the utterance "*I owe sixty cents to Marta.*" This statement was modified into a question using other bodily resources. When Luis produced the point to Marta in figure 4b he scrunched up his nose briefly to demonstrate uncertainty. Then when he produced the signs for *SIX*, he widened his eyes and slightly lifted his eyebrows to indicate that he was asking a question. In this one short utterance, Luis combined manual signs, the use of space, gaze, head movement, facial expression, and eyebrow movement. This utterance is a clear example of how semiotic resources mutually elaborate one another in

<p>a) 21:04.123</p> 	<p>12 Lui (1.5 – stares at Marta) 13 Lui</p>
<p>b) 21:05.402</p> 	<p>PT.MARTA/(nose scrunch) Hmmm, Marta</p>
<p>c) 21:06.441</p> 	<p>14 Lui ^{SIX} 60 cents, I (owe) 60 cents to Marta?</p>
<p>d) 21:06.948</p> 	<p>^{SIX}_{Marta}/(eyebrow raise)/(head nod)</p>

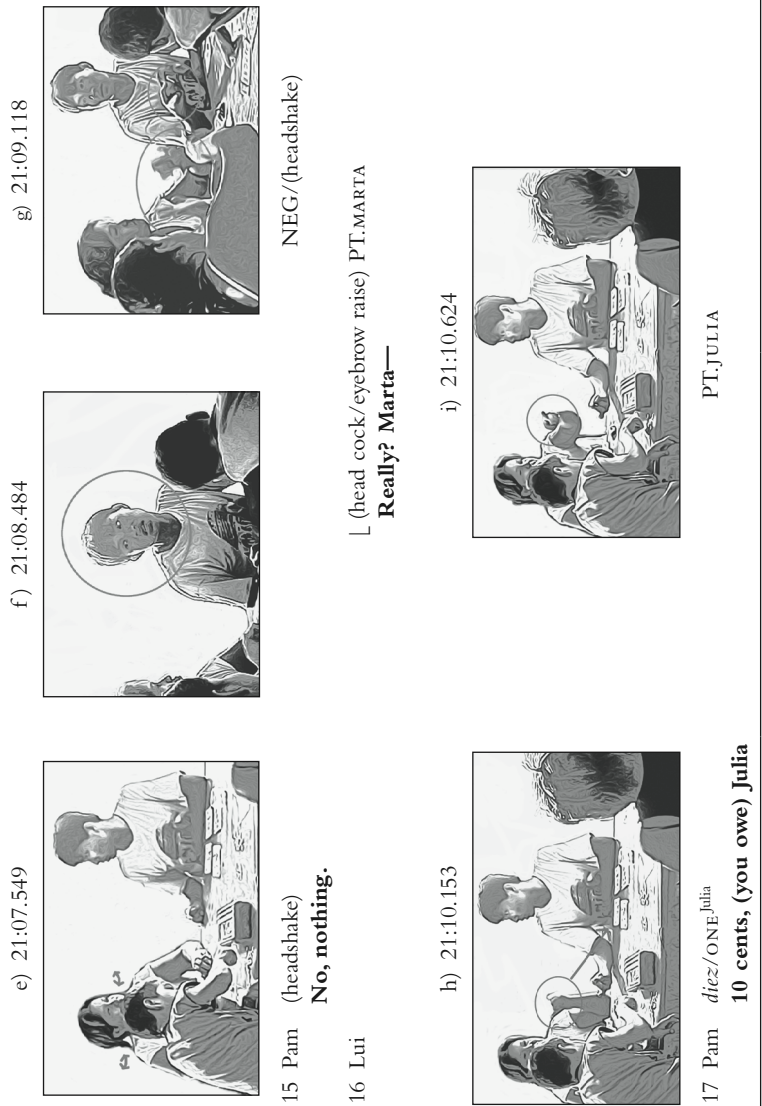


FIGURE 4. Transcript of lines 12–17 of the bingo betting.

moments of situated interaction; any one resource taken in isolation is partial and incomplete (Goodwin 2007). Pamela's prompt response demonstrated that she had no trouble interpreting Luis's combination of semiotic resources, and her own utterance also incorporated the use of space when she pushed her sign ONE toward Julia (figure 4h).

Discussion

Studying Local Sign Use as Situated Social Action

In the previous section, I exemplified the linguistic ethnography approach that I employ through the example of a microanalysis of how social action was accomplished between a deaf boy and his hearing neighbor. Due to the richness of situated interaction, taking social action as a starting point provides a number of important insights on the communication of Iquitos deaf youth. First, it is evident that Luis is able to effectively capitalize on the scripted nature of the bingo game to use his communicative skills to accomplish social aims. Luis achieves this through the combination and layering of multiple semiotic resources. In just this small segment of interaction, there is evidence of Luis building his utterances out of signs, vocalizations, bodily actions, gaze, facial expression, use of space, and the incorporation of objects. Other researchers have made similar findings on the strategic use of semiotic resources employed in deaf-hearing and deaf-deaf interactions. Kusters (2017), in her work on deaf-hearing customer interactions, shows how gesture and the use of objects are important resources to navigate these everyday encounters. Green (2017) illustrates the strategic deployment of lexical signs and pantomimic re-enactments in a storytelling episode. Both Moriarty Harrelson (2019) and Safar (2019) describe deaf individuals' combination of a variety of communicative resources, including drawing. Taken as a whole, this research calls into question the prioritization of the linguistic in much of the homesign literature (Goldin-Meadow and Feldman 1975).

One semiotic resource that is apparent in the bingo betting interaction is the use of conventionalized gestures, also known as emblems or quotable gestures (Kendon 1992). Despite the fact that the ten deaf youth with whom I worked had not met, they all used a shared set of vocabulary that was developed from the gestural resources in the



FIGURE 5. The sign for drink or beverage in Iquitos local signs.

Iquitos hearing community. Aside from the counting system illustrated in the bingo betting interaction, other examples included sticking the index finger into the neck, which is literally translated in Iquitos to mean “*aguja*” (needle) and is used to say that someone is “broke (having no money).” Another sign adopted from an emblem in use in Iquitos is the L-handshape tipped toward the mouth to refer to a “beverage” or the act “to drink” (figure 5). This sign came from an emblem used in the Iquitos Spanish-speaking community to mean a “beer” or to the act “to drink beer.” The deaf youth extended the meaning of this gesture to refer to drinking all kinds of beverages. On one occasion, while I was out in the city with a family and their deaf son, the boy used the sign to say he wanted a soda. A hearing person saw the sign and made a joke about the child being too young to be drinking beer. Thus, this demonstrates that although signs the deaf youth use may be adopted from gestures used in the Iquitos hearing community, the use of these forms in Iquitos local signs may be expanded or adapted (Mesh and Hou 2018). These communicative

resources, which are picked up from the sociolinguistic environment, are likely an important foundation in the development of Iquitos local signs.

Finally, the analytical focus on social action also draws attention to Pamela's skill as a hearing signer. She was visually attuned to Luis's communication, demonstrated no difficulty interpreting his utterances, constructed her utterances primarily using visible bodily action, and used a number of the same communicative resources as Luis, including the number system and the use of space. Within my research in Iquitos, I also have evidence of hearing signers creating new signs, socializing the deaf child into appropriate forms of communicating, and displaying metalinguistic knowledge of accurate sign formation (Goico 2019b). Much of the existing homesign literature has focused on the homesign system as unshared. Yet, a focus on situated interaction makes evident how Iquitos local signs are cocreated with hearing interlocutors.

Reconsidering the Term Homesign

The term homesign was originally developed to describe the manual communication of deaf children who attended oral schools and were not exposed to a national sign language (Goldin-Meadow 2003). Nevertheless, much of the research on populations without access to a named language has been with adults in rural contexts in the global South. In recent years, a number of authors have questioned whether the overarching term homesign fits all these cases, with some authors choosing to modify the term (Neveu 2019; Nyst et al. 2012; Zeshan 2011) and others selecting alternative terminology (Fusellier-Souza 2006; Green 2014; Hou 2016; Safar 2019). However, Iquitos's urban context is a marked contrast to these rural communities, requiring further discussion regarding terminology.

The population with whom I worked is made up of children and youth who live in an urban center and whose lack of access to a sign language has largely been the product of an educational philosophy (Goico 2019a). In this regard, the group is similar to the primary homesign literature (Goldin-Meadow 2003). However, it is difficult to make strong comparisons between the populations because we know very little about the social worlds of oral homesigners. Thus, I

argue against using the term *homesign* and choose instead to refer to the communication in use among deaf youth as *Iquitos local signs*. The primary reason I adopt this terminology is because *homesign* would be a misnomer in the Iquitos context. Based on the presentation of the social organization of Iquitos deaf youth, it is clear that their social lives extend beyond the home. Even the youngest child with whom I worked, who was six years old in January 2014, was part of multiple interactional communities. I observed him in his first-grade classroom, but he had attended school since he was three years old. In the afternoons, he and his siblings ran around the largest market in Iquitos while his parents worked at their stall, and in the evenings, he played with the neighbors on his street. Additionally, the interactional example provides insight on how social life is organized in Iquitos. Neighbors regularly visit each other in the afternoons and spend extended time together conversing or playing games. I also choose to adopt terminology other than *homesign*, to move away from the presentation of the deaf children as the sole inventor and user of the sign system. My research demonstrates that deaf youth in Iquitos are part of a (primarily hearing) signing community and that deaf and hearing signers share semiotic resources, some of which they adapt from the resources already available in the wider hearing community.

I have adopted the alternative term *Iquitos local signs* for a number of reasons. In keeping with the naming practices of many signing communities, I situate the signing in the sociocultural context using the city's name: Iquitos. The term *local sign*, I borrow from Green (2014).³ *Local sign* was the term hearing individuals in the village where Green worked in Nepal used to refer to the signed communicative practices of deaf and hearing individuals. In Iquitos, hearing individuals refer to the signing practices of deaf youth as *mímicas* (mimes), and deaf signers say that these individuals have no signs. Neither of these emic perspectives capture the richness of the signing practices of both deaf youth and their hearing interlocutors. The term *local sign* has the benefit of referring to a particular area, as well as the practices of both deaf and hearing people without indicating the same degree of standardization as national sign languages. One disclaimer in my use of the term is that I am not suggesting that Iquitos local signs have the same degree of conventionality as Green (2014) described in her use of the term. As

I mentioned previously, there are shared resources among deaf youth who have never met one another, however, I use the plural form, *local signs*, to stress that I see these deaf youth as pertaining to different social (and signing) communities across the city.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed the situation of deaf youth in Iquitos, Peru, who grow up without access to a named language. Through the microanalysis of a short segment of interaction, I have argued that a linguistic ethnography approach contributes in two important ways to the existing homesign literature. First, I argue that an approach to the study of Iquitos local signs that investigates the achievement of social action unearths the rich communicative capacity of deaf youth. In the interactional example between Luis and Pamela, I bring to light their ability to accomplish social aims through the combination of a variety of shared communicative resources. Second, I find that the terminology *homesign* needs to be reconsidered. Despite similarities in the social context of Iquitos deaf youth and oral deaf youth, based on the analysis of the social organization of the lives of ten deaf youth and moments of situated interaction, the communication of deaf youth is not limited to the home and cannot be classified as unshared. I propose the alternative terminology, *Iquitos local signs*.

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Notes

1. One special education teacher in Iquitos was fluent in LSP, which he learned from his work with the Jehovah's Witness Church.
2. The interactional example comes from material used in my doctoral dissertation (Goico 2019b).
3. Green (2014) discusses another emic term *natural sign*, which is used by deaf users of Nepali Sign Language (NSL) to refer to signing that is neither

NSL nor a foreign sign language, including the communicative practices between deaf individuals who do not know an existing sign language and their hearing interlocutors. Although definitionally, this term may be closer to the situation in Iquitos than *local sign*, I choose not to use it because of the loaded nature of the term *natural*.

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