

Identifying Overlapping Speech Communities through Holographic Methodology:
The Case of Signing Communities in Panama

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Abstract

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In this paper, I offer Holographic Methodology as a new approach for identifying the largely unexplored phenomenon of overlapping speech communities. Based conceptually on recent technological advances in holography, Holographic Methodology visualizes complex social systems as emitting community “hotspots” through social drama on multiple stages. Locating and characterizing these hotspots using ethnographic methods reveals overlapping contours of speech communities in both time and space, similar to what a hologram accomplishes. I illustrate Holographic Methodology with the case of signing communities in Panama. The resulting hologram depicts overlapping Chiriqui and Panamanian Signing Communities using distinct signed languages.

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Introduction

Identifying speech communities can be challenging in complex and dynamic social systems. This is especially true when attempting to identify overlapping speech communities: speech communities that share social and communicative spaces. It is also true when seeking to understand less known or marginalized speech communities such as sign language communities. Yet it is important to undertake this challenge because the identification of speech communities on international stages – such as those acted on by organizations like the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) – can impact the availability of financial resources and organizational support to minority speech communities everywhere.

In this paper, I offer a new process for identifying overlapping speech communities, an area of research that Patrick (2002) identifies as largely untheorized. More specifically I propose Holographic Methodology as a way to identify the borders of distinct speech communities through an ethnographic approach that detects salient social drama being performed on local stages, then interprets it within a broader historical and geographic global context. I also illustrate Holographic Methodology's capability for identifying overlapping speech communities by applying it to complex patterns of membership within sign language communities in the *República de Panamá*¹ (hereafter, Panama).

Using the case of Panama to illustrate the use and benefits of Holographic Methodology is appropriate because Panama is a country characterized by a complex web of identities. Multilingual use of a variety of spoken, written, and signed languages, multicultural expression

¹ Throughout this paper, English transcriptions will be used after initial introduction of Spanish names and labels for ease of reference.

of regional, national and international identities, and affiliation with diverse deaf² and signing communities, disabled and ethnic minorities, are some of the intersecting identities and spaces that sign language users in Panama negotiate daily. Despite this diversity, only one sign language in Panama is currently recognized in the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) 639-3 Registry of Languages (hereafter, ISO 639-3), an international catalogue of the world's human languages. How do we deal with this gap between local and global knowledge? In the following sections, I employ Holographic Methodology to explore how to describe Panama's complex sign language situation in ways useful to researchers, policy makers, and the linguistic communities themselves.

Theoretical Foundation

Several theoretical traditions are foundational to the development of Holographic Methodology's procedures for identifying overlapping speech communities. I discuss below the key ideas that underpin this methodology: speech communities, situational ethnography, language identification, social drama, and multiple stages.

Speech Communities

According to Fuoss (1995), the term "community" has been defined in myriad ways with so little agreement that the options to scholars who continue to study community are to "(a) drop the concept altogether; (b) clearly indicate which of the existing interpretations of community are being used; (c) add additional interpretation...and (d) recognize that different persons use the

² Whereas some parts of the world distinguish between "audiologically" deaf and culturally "Deaf" through capitalization, there are places where deaf people identify themselves as a cultural group without adopting a capital-D "Deaf" label. Because of this diversity of perspectives and conventions for referring to deaf and hard of hearing people globally, I will use "deaf" to refer to both audiological and cultural groups and "culturally deaf" or "the deaf community" rather than "Deaf" when referring to deaf people who embrace a unique deaf cultural identity.

concept differently and investigate what these differences reveal” (p. 81). It is not surprising that with this being the case for “community,” “speech community” is equally as complicated.

The term “speech community” (also referred to as “SpCom”) has been defined in a wide variety of ways, dating back to 1926 when Bloomfield defined a community as a group that shares somewhat similar acts of speech. Since then, it has been redefined to focus on both social groups and linguistic entities. Some of these definitions are as follows: a speech community could be a group of people who interacts through speech (Bloomfield, 1933), a community that shares a common language (Hockett, 1958), people who use a given language or dialect (Lyons, 1970), people who interact regularly using shared verbal signs (Gumperz, 1968), people who reference shared norms used in a fairly constant way (Labov, 1972), a social group that uses a variety of linguistic tools (Hymes, 1972), a community with shared cultural values related to appropriate speech conduct (Philipsen, 1975), a cohesive social group whose language characteristics are of interest to research (Wardough, 1998), “a language based unit of social analysis” (Bucholtz, 1999, p. 203) , or “a socially-based unit of linguistic analysis” (Patrick, 2002, p. 164).

When applied, the concept of speech community, however defined, has been used to describe a broad variety of groups such as large urban communities, small rural neighborhoods, immigrants, women, and particular groups of children. The concept has been foundational for other theories, including the Ethnography of Communication (Philipsen & Coutu, 2005; Philipsen, 1975). Despite this long history of scholarly work referencing, defining, and applying the concept of speech communities, however, “there is remarkably little agreement or theoretical discussion of the concept” as a whole (Patrick 2002, p. 156).

Although the term “speech community” has been contested, rejected, and addressed by other theoretical constructs such as Milroy’s (2001) social network and Meyerhoff’s (2001) community of practice, I believe it can still be used to expand our knowledge about social contexts. Using the most appropriate definition of speech community for a specific context is still worthy of treatment as the term is foundational to other theories and methodologies. Further, as noted above, the identification and labeling of speech communities remains linked pragmatically to financial and political outcomes that make a difference in the lives of minority groups.

This paper adopts Patrick’s (2002) definition of a speech community as a “socially-based unit of linguistic-analysis” (p. 2). Patrick’s definition is particularly useful in this context because he focuses on a distinctly linguistic end through recognition of language’s social context without overcomplicating the process with detailed identification of particular linguistic or cultural tools. By applying this socially-based definition to situations where interaction and membership in multiple speech communities is complex, investigators can hone in on specific ways that communication reflects and constructs social boundaries that reflect individual membership in multiple communities (Goebel, 2006). Identification of distinct overlapping speech communities as socially based units of linguistic-analysis is the central goal in the development of Holographic Methodology.

Situational Ethnography

The concept of “culture” has been integral to traditional ethnography (Fetterman, 2010; LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). Westbrook (2008), however, argues that this more traditional perspective is changing toward one in which ethnography investigates “situations” (also called assemblages or constellations) in contexts that are difficult to define but are based on the

collective “significance of convergences...within contemporary societies” (p. 42). In other words, ethnography can move beyond analysis of culture as a primary unit of analysis or even several cultural dimensions as multiple units of analysis (e.g., “communicative events” as the units of analysis in Ethnography of Communication) to investigate converging, complex situations that are often difficult to define. Westbrook argues that meaningful ethnographic conversations can investigate situations rather than cultures, exploring the lived realities of the conversation participants as processed through researchers’ perspectives.

Situational ethnographic inquiry offers a way to conceptualize units of analysis holistically, combining local and global standpoints that other methodological processes consider essential (e.g., Ethnography of Speaking, Ethnography of Communication, and Autoethnography). Situational ethnography, however, offers a different emphasis than these other methodologies by incorporating the unique temporality and spatiality of each situation without *a priori* assumptions of concrete speech communities or cultures as originating frameworks that can be divided and then incorporated into a neat “global metatheory of human communication” (Saville-Troike, 1989, p. 2). By understanding speech communities as flexible and dynamic, with complex patterns of membership, languages in use by these communities can also be seen as overlapping without clearly determined concrete boundaries.

Language Identification

Language identification is a socially constructed process where counting languages and determining their boundaries is reflective of social and communicative practices (Blum, 2005). Language names such as “Spanish” and “French” are socially constructed ideas. Whereas they point generally to communities of people who share mutual intelligibility, they are not based on anything concrete or unchanging. It is often unclear where one language begins and another ends

linguistically, and cultural and social factors impact how language communities conceptualize their own borders.

Contemporary linguists have pursued the study of language identification and classification for over 100 years, but there is no singularly accepted methodology for defining distinct languages. Linguistic methods have compared basic vocabulary, grammatical structure, the correspondence of sounds, and intelligibility (Campbell & Poser, 2008). Sociolinguists, on the other hand, have argued for the importance of social context in describing language variation, incorporating language attitudes, individual and group identities, population shifts and mobility, and social networking patterns in efforts to identify, describe, and classify unique language forms (Chambers, Trudgill, & Schilling-Estes, 2002).

In the last 50 years, one way that languages have been recognized and conventional names assigned is by linguists and other invested parties submitting language request forms to the ISO 639-3. The information in this registry is foundational to the “Ethnologue: Languages of the World” (an encyclopedic reference work for the worlds’ languages and hereafter Ethnologue). Ethnologue is a public source of knowledge about languages globally and is used as an official source of knowledge (by organizations such as UNESCO) for creating international policies and thereby impacting international social structures (Kamusella, 2012; Skutnabb-Kangas et al., 2003).

Although these language registries and categories may be useful at times, they can also be quite problematic. As Lightfoot (2006) points out, “A closer analogy to language is the notion of race...racial divisions are social constructs, essentially biological fictions, but nonetheless used for social purposes. So, with languages, as people usually talk about them” (p. 18). Thus, language identification processes foundational to language categorization are often (if not

always) connected to social and political practices involving stakeholders from diverse backgrounds, all of whom have something to gain and lose in the outcomes (McCarty, 2011).

Language identification researchers navigate among competing privileges, rights, and responsibilities for everyone involved. Competition often comes with conflict, and conflict with drama being enacted in a number of contexts. The means by which language and speech community boundaries are socially constructed is fundamental to understanding the linguistic landscape currently at play in local and international contexts. Holographic Methodology, as introduced in this paper, helps researchers identify language and speech community boundaries as constructed by their members as a way to inform institutional language identification processes.

Social Drama

Social life as drama's early theorization was led by scholars such as Burke (1945) who considered "dramatism" in language use and human action, Goffman (1959) who considered the "dramaturgy" of self being performed on multiple social stages (e.g., public front and private back stages), and Turner (1974) who increased focused on liminal borders created and maintained within and between communities. According to Turner's (1974) social drama theory, social dramas are "public episodes of tensional irruption" (p. 33). They occur because expected social norms and understandings are somehow being broken and negotiated. According to Fuoss (1995), "when a social drama occurs, certain of the externally articulated communities or internally articulated positions within a community are highlighted by the crisis and imbued with a heightened intensity...Cultural performances may inscribe a community's self-image, an image of the community's other, or some combination of the two" (pp. 82-83). These moments of

heightened intensity can be seen in the communicative patterns of a speech community, including the specifics of their language use in both structure and topical choice.

Communication scholars have found the concept of social drama useful. Philipsen (1992) defines social drama as being “a communicative form in which significant cultural symbols are made salient” (p. 134). Carbaugh (1996) describes social drama as “a communication form that responds to violations by publicizing them, and motivating actions in response to those violations” (p. 204) In sum, social drama can be used to understand the construction and maintenance of identity through recognition of areas of social interaction marked by social tension or conflict manifested in particular spaces and stages. Communication of social dramas indicates where the community members’ most salient identity expression is occurring.

Multiple Stages

Goffman’s (1959) use of multiple stages in social drama is especially useful for investigating overlapping speech communities and members’ complex identity affiliations. When observers of social drama view local stages as contexts of communicative social interaction, they can investigate identity expression being performed by individual social actors on these multiple stages. Taking multiple stages into account, community boundaries can begin to emerge by observing shared norms that unite and social tensions that split speech communities. As multiple cultural spaces meet, community borders are established communicatively in time and space, contextualized within a historical and global framework.

The process of Holographic Methodology requires researchers to uncover the social dramas being communicated on a variety of local stages and identify the ways that they may be communicating liminal spaces of identity that mark self from other. These salient spaces of social tension mark places where individual and community identity are being constructed and

maintained. Complex community membership patterns may be less problematic to the process of speech community and language identification when researchers recognize that social actors on multiple stages may identify with a single united speech community and multiple distinct speech communities simultaneously, thus representing overlapping speech communities.

To tie these theoretical pieces together, the Holographic Methodology that I propose uses situational ethnographic methods to gather information about the communicative social dramas being enacted on multiple stages in local speech communities and uses broader geographical and historical contextual information to assist in the identification of overlapping speech communities. A detailed description of Holographic Methodology follows.

Holographic Methodology

Imagine a firefighter standing in the doorway of a fire-filled room trying to rescue a family pet on the other side of the flames. Recognizing the pet's importance and need to be rescued, the firefighter pauses because she is not exactly sure what type of pet it is, where it is located, or how best to grasp it. She does know that it is alive, moving, and needing attention but it is nearly impossible to predict where it will be at any given time. In addition, it is not clear whether there is only one pet or more than one. When the location of a pet is recorded, time has already passed, and it may no longer be in the same place or more pets may have arrived. When the exact time is known, the exact location or number of pets is not.

In the same way, social system researchers must take both time and location of an object of study into account, but they cannot know both simultaneously as they are in dynamic process rather than static position (Giddens, 1979; Hall, 1993). As philosophers Heraclitus and Cratylus are attributed to say, "it is impossible to step twice into the same river...one could not do it even once" (Stern, 1991, p. 579). In other words, in order to understand the lived reality in a target

social system, we must account for movement across both time and space, as speech communities are constantly changing in both dimensions. In addition, overlapping speech communities occupy both distinct and shared spaces, and these spaces do not stay static. Social processes move communities toward and away from each other. Use of labels (e.g., language names) alone may be misleading, and researchers must navigate the need for clear social units of analysis without over-essentializing the diversity present within them.

When identifying speech communities, it is advantageous to explore people's realities inductively rather than base researcher approaches on prior assumptions (Fetterman, 2010; LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). Similarly, firefighters benefit from being able to see their living targets so that they can rescue them. Recent technological developments in holography are increasing visibility in ways not possible through previous methods used for image creation. As will be described below, these advances in the "hard" science of holography serve as the conceptual basis for the social science approach of Holographic Methodology.

In ground-breaking research, Locatelli et al. (2013) show how it is possible to visualize target objects behind flames accurately using technology that uses a sensor and decoder to sort through all available information before discarding nonessential information. Through their holographic approach, "easy detection of live moving people is achieved through both smoke and flames, thus demonstrating the capability of digital holography" (p. 5379). This approach uniquely removes from the sensor a lens that traditionally helped focus the image but often concentrated on the wrong target: the flame.

In the new digital holographic approach, unfocused information gathered from the room with the lensless sensor can subsequently be decoded to focus on what matters most to the viewer: the active target object. The resulting holographic image is multi-dimensional and

moving, more accurately displaying the target object's reality. To summarize, holography can create moving holograms of target objects from within a fiery room by capturing the target item's concentrated points of energy over time, from a variety of spaces, with a lensless sensor that disregards the flame's image and allows sight of the target's "hotspots."

Holographic Methodology takes its inspiration from these latest approaches to digital holography to propose a multi-step approach to identifying potentially overlapping speech communities within complex social environments. Holographic Methodology has five steps in the process of creating the active image: Approach Target, Apply Sensor, Identify Hotspots, Decode Meaning, and Construct Hologram. The Target is the community of interest. This might be a country, a region, or other geographic, social, or linguistic entity. Next is to apply the Sensor. This step is the use of ethnographic data collection techniques, allowing researchers to collect a broad array of data from the target social system.

As discussed above, speech communities can be conceptualized as emitting social energy in spaces where social drama occurs. This happens over time and on various stages. So, researchers apply the Sensor with the goal of seeking out and gathering information about situations where social drama is most salient: They look for Hotspots. Once the Hotspots are identified, researchers decode their meaning by interpreting local social drama through the broader perspectives that national, regional, and global stages might provide. The result is a dynamic, multi-dimensional "hologram" that is the visualization of the speech community and this can lead to identification of multiple overlapping speech communities. See Figure 1 below for a visual representation of this Holographic Methodology process.

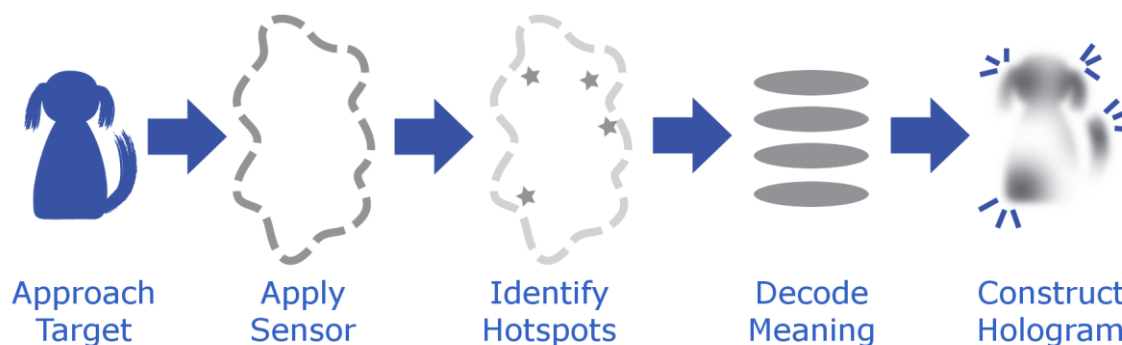


Figure 1: Holographic Methodology

Applying Holographic Methodology to the Panama Case

In this next section, I apply Holographic Methodology to the case of sign language use in Panama. In particular, I describe the application of each step of Holographic Methodology to better illustrate the use and potential benefits of this approach to identifying overlapping speech communities within a complex social system.

Approach Target: Signing Communities in Panama

The country of Panama is located in Central America, with Colombia to the southeast and Costa Rica to the northwest. There are an estimated 6,000 deaf people in Panama but roughly two-thirds of these live in rural areas with minimal language access; the remaining 2,000 are the potential users of signed languages, although the exact size of the country's signing community is unknown (Parks, Williams, & Parks, 2011). These signers reside primarily in the most populous areas of the country: the Chiriqui province in the southwest and the Panama province in the center. For the remainder of this paper, I refer to the area surrounding Chiriqui's provincial capital, David, as the Chiriqui region and the area around the national capital, Panama City, as the Panama City region.

As noted earlier, *Lengua de Señas Panameñas* (LSP, hereafter Panamanian Sign Language) is the only indigenous sign language recognized internationally within Panama's

national borders, according to the ISO 639-3 (Lewis, Simons, & Fennig, 2013). Panamanian Sign Language was officially documented by the international linguistics community as distinct from other signed languages as recently as 2007 (Holbrook, 2007). It is used predominantly in the most populous part of the country surrounding the national capital of Panama City, a city referred to by people within the nation-state as Panama and its people as Panamanians. For a map of Panama City and David within Panama's national borders, see Figure 2 below.



Figure 2: Panama Map

Apply Sensor: Ethnographic Data Collection

The Panama project was part of a larger initiative funded by an international language development organization from 2006 to 2011. The research team's primary goal was to identify all distinct signed languages and their communities in the Americas. Research included literature reviews and long-distance research in 46 countries in the Americas and ethnographic fieldwork in 15 of these countries. The overarching sociolinguistic research questions in Panama, as in the other countries, included items such as these: What signed languages are used? How much sign language variation exists? What variables are causing sign language variation? How similar are signed languages within Panama to other known signed languages? What language attitudes are present toward different sign varieties? In Panama, the research team explored these themes

through existing literature, email and Skype conversations with people familiar with Panama's sign language context, and two weeks of rapid appraisal ethnographic fieldwork which .

Ethnographic fieldwork for this study was based on methodologies adapted from scholars who have conducted language variation research such as Bickford (1991), Kluge (2000), and Parkhurst and Parkhurst (2007). During rapid appraisal fieldwork, the research time conducted eight semi-structured sociolinguistic interviews, four in Panama City and four in David, with five males and three females between the ages of 33 and 49. They recorded seven video recordings of sign language vocabulary lists and personal narratives. They explored community attitudes through group discussions and participant observation at two dozen signing events, including locations such as deaf associations meetings, deaf sporting events, deaf schools, signed religious meetings, and other informal meeting places such as the Albrook Shopping Mall in Panama City or the Central Park in David. This multi-faceted ethnographic fieldwork, in combination with literature reviews and follow-up conversations, form the Sensor that gathered the information needed to reveal salient points of social drama: the Hotspots of signing communities in Panama.

Identify Hotspots: Situations of Social Drama

Following ethnographic fieldwork in October 2009, qualitative and quantitative analysis of the data was conducted by the three researchers involved in the rapid appraisal. The research team identified spaces of social drama by the community's communicative content and practice. Indicators included the topics participants chose to discuss and the time spent talking about these topics relative to other topics.

Three Hotspots, places in the local community where social tension was being enacted through this communication, emerged and were confirmed in follow-up conversations with contacts in Panama. These included a) linguistic recognition of Chiriqui Sign Language as

distinct through dictionary creation in Chiriqui and the use of separate interpreters at national events; b) political representation of the *Asociación de Sordos de Chiriquí* (hereafter, Chiriqui Deaf Association) as distinct from the *Asociación Nacional de Sordos de Panamá* (hereafter, the National Association of the Deaf of Panama); and c) distinct ethnolinguistic networks based on differing ethnic affiliations, perceptions on the intersection of audiological status with sign language use in local signing community membership, and social networks with within, across, and beyond national borders in the Panama City region, Costa Rica, and other Central American and global associations. Each of these Hotspots is described in greater detail below.

Hotspot 1: Sign language recognition. Members of the Chiriqui Signing Community report another sign language indigenous to Panama, other than the currently internationally recognized Panamanian Sign Language. They call their sign language *Lengua de Señas de Chiriquí* (LSH, hereafter Chiriqui Sign Language) and describe it as differing from Panamanian Sign Language linguistically and in domains of use. Members of both the Panamanian Sign Language and the Chiriqui Sign Language communities report being comfortable with these language labels because “Panama” and “Panamanian” designate regional rather than national boundaries, areas surrounding the capital city rather than all of the nation-state.

The Chiriqui Signing Community reports that, whereas many of the signers in David have learned to communicate in Panamanian Sign Language, most Panamanian Sign Language users do not understand Chiriqui Sign Language. In order to meet communication needs, national events may provide interpretation between Spanish and both Chiriqui Sign Language and Panamanian Sign Language. In addition, preliminary lexical similarity results comparing 215 vocabulary items indicate sign varieties from the Chiriqui region are less similar to sign varieties from the Panama City region than other similarities between sign varieties determined to be

linguistically distinct (e.g., Jamaican Sign Language from Jamaica and American Sign Language from the United States) (Parks, 2011).

A dictionary is being developed that records Chiriqui Sign Language as distinct from others nationally (e.g., the Panamanian Sign Language dictionary published by the National Association of the Deaf of Panama in 1990) and internationally (Parks et al., 2011). The development of these distinct dictionaries shows that communities do not anticipate sharing a literature in the near future. Members of both communities indicated consistently that they do not believe Chiriqui Sign Language and Panamanian Sign Language should unify into a single standardized variety, as shown by the statements of these two deaf and signing individuals in Chiriqui and Panama City regions:

“No. We should respect different signing. I’m used to David signs and plan to use those signs because they are real Panamanian signs.” (Female, Age 49)

“No. There are differences and I want to respect them. I do think the best signs are here in Panama City.” (Deaf male, Age 33)

Yet, even with these differences recognized within Panama, social tension exists regarding which sign languages should be recognized as indigenous to Panama. Imagining the signing community within Panama as multiple speech communities instead of a single one may make advocacy for national initiatives more difficult, but it also more closely reflects the way that the signing communities identify themselves. Visualizing the signing community within Panama as a single speech community instead of multiple may lead to marginalized minorities within the nation-state, but it also more closely follows current international perspectives and policies regarding deaf communities. In this environment, competing perspectives, values, and needs impact international recognition of Panama’s signing communities and languages and result in social dramas on the local stages.

Hotspot 2: Political representation. According to the Chiriqui Signing Community, the Chiriqui Deaf Association is distinct from the deaf association based out of Panama City, the National Association of the Deaf of Panama. Some social tension exists, however, regarding who resides as the rightful governing body of the Chiriqui Deaf Association and the use of the term “national” in the National Association of the Deaf of Panama’s name. Whereas the Panamanian Signing Community indicates that the association meeting in David is one of the National Association’s branches, Chiriqui Deaf Association members indicated that Chiriqui and Panamanian associations maintain distinct geographical and linguistic boundaries:

“We don’t talk much with the Panama Deaf Association. They have their own area of responsibility and we have ours.” (Deaf female, Age 40)

“The David association was set up specifically to address the issue of a different sign language.” (Deaf male, Age 43)

The Panamanian Signing Community and the National Association of the Deaf of Panama are recognized globally as being representative of the deaf and signing peoples of the nation-state through membership with the World Federation of the Deaf. Close geographical proximity of the National Association of the Deaf of Panama with national policy makers in the capital city affords easier networking opportunities in which to advocate for deaf and sign language rights within the nation-state. Thus, political representation of signers within Panama becomes a subject of social drama and a local Hotspot as signers across the nation-state compete for the right to represent all signers in Panama.

Hotspot 3: Ethnolinguistic networks. Signers in Panama have multiple relational networks, such as familial ethnic communities, relationships formed through the use of a signed language, and networks relating to signing and/or deaf cultural identities. Some of these relationships motivate belonging based on biological ties, familial roles, and ethnic affiliation.

These networks for signing individuals, however, are usually not linguistically-based, because many families in Panama (as in most countries around the world) do not learn to sign with their deaf family members.

In contrast, deaf people and other signers may feel that networks in which they easily communicate, those that also sign, function as a type of adopted family. Signers in Panama may also identify as members of signing communities on multiple geographical levels. They may identify with the city they live in (e.g., David), a regional signing community (e.g., Chiriqui Signing Community), a national signing community (e.g., Panama), and even be part of networks that cross national borders or are internationally assembled. These multiple memberships are complex and form the ethnolinguistic networks that individual signers in Panama negotiate daily.

The Chiriqui Signing Community interacts with several other signing communities outside of the Panama nation-state, including the Costa Rican community of *Lenguaje de Señas Costarricense* (LESCO, hereafter Costa Rican Sign Language). The Chiriqui region borders Costa Rica on its western edge, and members of both signing communities cross the border to interact with each other frequently. The Chiriqui Signing Community also relates with other signing communities in multinational and global contexts. Although the National Association of the Deaf of Panama is listed as the only national member of the World Federation of the Deaf, the Chiriqui Deaf Association is connected to other international associations such as the Central American Deaf Federation (Parks et al., 2011).

Signers in Chiriqui and Panama City identify typically as members of deaf and signing communities on a variety of local to global levels. Whereas the Panamanian Community indicated a stronger unified identity based on their audiological deafness and a lack of support from hearing people, the Chiriqui Community indicated more involvement and support from

hearing people and felt stronger connections to all signers, regardless of audiological status. Chiriqui Signing Community leaders indicated at their deaf association meetings and through individual interviews that they wanted to be recognized as a unique ethnolinguistic community in every social sphere in which they networked and felt that they had shared membership in both their cross-border interactions with Costa Rica and their national interactions with the Panamanian Signing Community. The Panamanian Signing Community, in contrast, saw greater value in a united national community that could also have a single voice as a national member in international organizations such as the WFD. These conflicting desires exhibit the third Hotspot as social drama about competing ethnolinguistic networks on local, national, regional, and international levels filled social communicative events.

In conclusion, the local community's social drama was enacted consistently in these three Hotspots: sign language recognition, political representation, and ethnolinguistic networks. Qualitative and quantitative ethnographic data gathered during fieldwork pointed to these spaces as being most important to the signers in the Chiriqui and Panama City regions in communication of their identities and the negotiation of their relationships in complex spaces. Chiriqui and Panamanian signers expressed shared membership as a national community yet, in the case of social actors in the Chiriqui region, saw themselves as a distinct community from that of the Panama City region. When exploring the nature of the signing communities in Panama, these Hotspots can be better understood by contextualizing the local stage within its historical and geographical context. In Holographic Methodology this step is labeled as the Decoder.

Decode Meaning: Contextualizing Local Stages

In this section, I discuss the historical and global context for the social dramas being performed on the local signing stages in Panama. For each Hotspot, understanding its placement

in time and space helps the researcher to better appreciate how communication of individual and community identities can lead to an understanding of Panama's signing communities as overlapping; this step helps to decode the meaning of what was found.

Decoding Hotspot 1: Sign language recognition. The social nature of language identification processes holds true for all languages, regardless of the mode of communication, but has been a matter of discussion for signed languages only since the early 1960s when signed languages first joined the linguistic discussion in a serious way. Work in the United States (most prominently that of William J. Stokoe at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C.) and Europe initiated the formal recognition of American Sign Language (ASL) and other signed languages being used by deaf and hard of hearing people as linguistically "real" languages (Bauman, 2008; Mathur & Napoli, 2011). Since then, identification of distinct signed languages globally has played a central role in advocating for human rights and the protection of ethnolinguistic diversity (Lucas, 2001; Nonaka, 2004).

Similar to many other areas in the social sciences, the historical development of sign language scholarship has emerged within modernity and its emphasis on the nation-state. Thus, it is not very surprising that the sign language studied at Gallaudet University in Washington D.C. was labeled "American Sign Language," and labeling of signed languages around the world follows other nation-state names. For example, 137 sign languages appear in *Ethnologue*, the majority of which are named after either nation-states (e.g., Madagascar Sign Language) or the people that constitute that nation-state (e.g., Peruvian Sign Language) (Lewis et al., 2013). Branson and Miller (1998) argue that this emphasis on national sign languages results from the need for deaf cultural communities to exert agency and pursue basic linguistic and human rights within their nation-states but warn that, in the process of pursuing human rights through national

sign languages, other sign languages may be overlooked and their signing communities minoritized.

Signed languages are also negotiated in international contexts that view signed languages as national artifacts. For example, the World Federation of the Deaf accepts only one national deaf association per country at the top level of membership and no country has listed published dictionaries related to more than one sign language variety within their nation-state (World Federation of the Deaf, 2013). This is noteworthy, as dictionaries are significant tools for standardizing regional sign varieties into national sign languages. In addition, sign language policies established by the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) have discussed the national sign language as the language of deaf people, stating that “Deaf children have the right to be educated...in a bilingual (or multilingual) environment. The national [emphasis mine] Sign Language should be the language of instruction for most academic subjects” (WFD Scientific Commission on Sign Language, 1993, p. 50).

The WFD plays a significant advisory role with the United Nations, advocating for deaf rights and preservation and use of signed languages globally. In addition, both the WDF and the United Nations use information in the Ethnologue and ISO 639-3 when constructing their understanding of signed languages (Kauppinen, 2006; Skutnabb-Kangas et al., 2003). Kamusella (2012) argues that, although an international code does not necessarily mandate a language’s recognition in the nation in which it is used, it “does have the effect of providing a form of administrative assertion by a duly authorized body on behalf of the global community that a language is a language” (p. 73).

Sign language identification practices have become increasingly contested and naming processes more complex. Awareness has spread regarding the importance of language users to

retain agency in decisions about how they will be labeled in the global conversation. The growth of international media, increased internet access, and other forms of globalized communication has made it possible for more people to engage with the process of language identification and naming. As they share opinions about the best way to pursue identification of distinct speech communities and the naming of distinct language entities, the process becomes more richly nuanced and the potential variety of perspectives increases.

Excitement for “discovering” new human languages may also inspire scholars to identify and name a new signed language before full investigation is completed or even begun. Concern for human rights, especially those of linguistic minorities and deaf communities, may motivate quick promotion of a sign language variety as distinct and perhaps needing legal protection and support by national and international policies. At other times, identification and naming may be considered carefully, but fluid identities and social changes impact the accuracy of the process. In light of complex and competing motivations and ethical concerns, identification of speech communities and their languages should be held loosely. New information, new contexts, and new stakeholders change the global linguistic landscape commonly.

In the case of Panama, identification of signed languages has been a recent process. As noted above, Panamanian Sign Language was not recognized internationally until 2007, and no other sign language has been internationally affirmed as indigenous to Panama since. Yet, with this international context in mind, decision making about the recognition of Chiriqui Sign Language is part of a complex social process that must take into account competing ethical concerns among stakeholders, including a speech community’s opportunity to access international resources through WFD and UNESCO, assumptions about nationalism’s impact on

language naming of Panamanian Sign Language, and the ways that language affiliation within Panama impacts political representation in different geographical spaces.

Decoding Hotspot 2: Political representation. Even before signed languages were accepted as “real” languages by linguists, people working with deaf communities recognized the communities as having a unique way of life and means of communication (Bauman, 2008). Whereas deaf identity has generally been discussed in relation to two features – audiological status and sign language use – its complexity has also been theorized and discussed in relation to notions of ethnicity, race, nationhood, disability, linguistic minorities, indigenous people, among other social categories and models (Davis, 2008). With so many intersecting identities and stakeholders, it is no wonder that there is conflict as to what traits give an individual or institution the right to represent a group. Researchers can better clarify speech communities by recognizing the complexity of the membership constituting groups that use signed languages and understanding how their identities may both overlap and be distinctly present in different spaces.

Early conceptualization of deaf cultural identity in the United States identified “core” members of the deaf cultural community as satisfying four behavioral and attitudinal traits: audiological deafness, use of a signed language, social affiliation with other deaf people, and political involvement with deaf initiatives (Cokely & Baker-Shenk, 1991). In the years that followed, people began to question whether deaf cultural identity could be determined and/or described adequately by a list of traits, yet many of these traits have remained central to discussion of deaf cultural communities. For many, deaf cultural identity included many intersectionalities of identity that could not be reduced to single ethnic, racial, ability, gender, or other list of single identities.

That said, the study of signed languages is tied to more people's identities than just the deaf cultural communities. For example, Children of Deaf Adults (CODAs) may be fluent users of signed languages and also consider the use of signed language as a core part of their identity construction as individuals and a community. Other audiotically hearing people may choose to learn sign language to interact with deaf family and friends or become casual or professional sign language interpreters and also consider it a part of their personal and professional identities. Thus, when identifying speech communities, it is crucial to identify the qualities that the actors in the community in focus consider important for membership.

Regardless of where researchers may think community membership boundaries lie, the local social dramas expressed on multiple stages may indicate something new. Deaf communities may be distinct from signing communities because the former includes an auditory component, and the latter may not. Alternatively, as appears to be the case within Chiriqui and Panama City signing communities, a distinguishing characteristic between communities may be that individual traits considered important for gaining membership in the speech communities, such as one's audiological status, differ.

Another distinction between Chiriqui and Panamanian signing communities is the intelligibility of languages being used in each community. The Chiriqui Signing Community uses a language that is reportedly unknown by the signing community in the Panama City region, leading the Chiriqui Signing Community to believe that political representation cannot be adequately accomplished through a joint entity.

Within Panama, determination of who has the right to represent a speech community politically appears to be negotiated by speech communities based on factors of audiological deafness, linguistic intelligibility and shared language resources such as dictionaries, and

geographical location, among other potentially yet-to-be-defined factors. Nevertheless, the social dramas performed in Panama should also be placed in a broader context. The Chiriqui and Panama Signing Communities may also be considered a single speech community, as they are already currently defined as a national community by the identification and naming of Panamanian Sign Language, the adoption of a single national community by some influential international organizations, and by application of Panama's national policies to the signing community as a whole.

Decoding Hotspot 3: Ethnolinguistic networks. Even though signed languages are visual languages, the use of signed languages in physical spaces may be overlooked because they are not everywhere, all the time, but rather relate to the acquisition and interaction patterns of the communities who use them. Some signing communities are, for example, integrated into an ecologically unique and often isolated village community that may be unrecognized by broader society (Nonaka, 2004). Other signing communities may envision themselves as crossing geographically proximal national borders, such as the ASL Community in the United States and Canada. Still other signing communities may envision themselves as crossing quite distant national borders, such as the ASL Community in the Caribbean country of Grenada with the aforementioned North American countries who also use ASL. Additionally, even for signing communities that do self-identify with a particular nation-state, community borders may not map directly onto those held by the broader spoken language community because of greater concentrations of signers in specific urban environments and specific interaction spaces such as deaf associations that are not frequented by the spoken language community.

In addition to the complex patterns of membership based on the integration of sign language into broader social life, there are many other aspects that are also important to keep in

mind as signers negotiate complex memberships through history and across space. These include, but are not limited to, the negotiation of multiple signed and spoken languages, the impact of ethnic and familial backgrounds on sign language users and the way they conceptualize their multiple intersecting cultural and linguistic identities, the political environment of a location and how sign language users are seen and classified (e.g., as a linguistic minority, disabled, or some other category), changes in global language policies and ethnic identifications, increased mobility and greater contact of signers over the internet.

Panama's negotiation of all of these—and other—ethnolinguistic identities are evident and show that even though there are spaces of shared identity by Chiriqui and Panamanian signing communities such as identifying as signers, as a national community, and as marginalized people, there are also distinct identities, including the ways that they conceptualize community membership, the distinct regional networks they have across and within national borders, and the ways that they identify with the ethnic familial backgrounds of their local spaces. The combination of these shared and distinct spaces suggest the possibility of Panama's signing communities being overlapping speech communities.

Construct Hologram: Overlapping Signing Communities in Panama

After encountering the signers in the Chiriqui region, the research team was then faced with the question of whether the region's signing context should be recognized on a broader, international stage as distinct from Panamanian Sign Language (officially identified in the ISO 639-3 in 2007) or any other sign variety in the world. In other words, is the social system in the Chiriqui region a distinct subject, its own speech community? In this final section, I describe how the Hologram that emerges through applied Holographic Methodology shows signers in Chiriqui and Panama City regions can be conceptualized as overlapping speech communities that

use distinct languages in the current social and historical environment. Figure 3 illustrates this process below.



Figure 3: Overlapping Speech Communities among Panama Signers

As documented in 2009, members of the Panamanian and Chiriqui Signing Communities envisioned the Chiriqui region's sign variety as distinct from the Panama City region's sign variety, calling the former Chiriqui Sign Language (based on the region of its primary use) and the latter Panamanian Sign Language (based on the city of its primary use). Based on interviews and participant observation, signers in both Chiriqui and Panama City regions acquire their signed languages in deaf schools, deaf associations, churches, and from friends. Signing spaces such as deaf associations, sporting events, festivals, religious meetings, central parks, and in casual public meetings are common to both locations. Both signing communities studied here are connected with international entities. They understand themselves as participants in a global sign language landscape distinct from other speech communities within the nation of Panama, or other signing communities that exists across national borders, internationally and transnationally, such as the Costa Rican Signing Community or internet-based communities. In these ways, the deaf and signing experiences of the Panamanian and Chiriqui Signing Communities share some similarities and a common stage with little social drama. In this regard, why not ignore the Hotspots and consider them part of a single speech community?

There are significant perceived and real differences as revealed through the application of Holographic Methodology. As researchers investigated the attributes of the three Hotspots related to linguistic recognition, political representation, and ethnolinguistic networks, evidence emerged that supports the argument that these are, in fact, overlapping speech communities.

For example, national attitudes toward sign language use point to the presence of two varieties through availability of different sign language interpreters for people from Chiriqui and Panama City regions at national events. Signers in Chiriqui typically identify as members of deaf and signing communities on a variety of local to global levels. Whereas the Panamanian Signing Community indicated a stronger identity basis from being deaf and a lack of support and involvement from hearing people, the Chiriqui Community suggested more involvement and support from hearing people than the Panamanian Deaf Community. Based on preliminary lexical similarity analysis, Chiriqui sign varieties and Panamanian sign varieties are less similar to each other than other sign varieties determined to be linguistically distinct.

During this research project, Chiriqui Signing Community leaders indicated at their deaf association meetings and through individual interviews that they wanted to be recognized as a unique ethnolinguistic community in every social sphere in which they networked. In these ways, social drama points to distinct social spaces, distinct speech communities. Thus, the result of applying Holographic Methodology to the Panama case was a hologram that allowed identification of the Chiriqui Signing Community and the Panamanian Signing Community as overlapping speech communities.

Conclusion

Holographic Methodology can help to visualize through situational ethnography how speech communities occupy both distinct and shared stages through the social dramas being

enacted on multiple stages. The concept of speech community, rather than being taken for granted or abandoned, can be defined and applied to the specific context at hand to help make sense of complex social units of analysis. In particular, overlapping speech communities can help us understand a current situating of language communities in international discourse.

Accessing basic life opportunities as linguistic minorities often rests firmly in national and international recognition of their existence. International and national legislation that allows space for only one national signed language is potentially problematic for those who do not identify with the national signed language and may thereby feel invisible. Recognizing overlapping speech communities helps highlight the inherently social nature of language identification and the ways that competing motivations might lead to differing perspectives of speech communities boundaries.

In this preliminary case study of Panama, applying the Patrick's (2002) concept of speech community helps us begin to make sense of complex social dramas that communicate about community identities. Holographic Methodology can give us a different image of the ways that the Chiriqui and Panamanian Signing Communities both coexist and occupy distinct and shared stages, with varying needs for resources and recognition depending on the particular social needs of the current time and particular space.

Changing social environments may also make it desirable to adjust how speech community boundaries are conceptualized. For example, if national deaf education policies were to change and support the use of multiple sign varieties in all classrooms, it is possible that the signing communities of Panama may conceptualize their signing varieties in a different way, with different borders, and perhaps different names.

In addition to potential changes within the overlapping speech communities themselves, it is important to note that Holographic Methodology still involves researcher positioning and points of view. Seeing the Hologram requires both actor and object in relationship. Whereas care may be taken to minimize the impact of the researchers on the process, researchers are never passive observers, nor do they have a completely objective outlook. As Patrick (2002) states, “we ought not to assume SpComs exist as predefined entities waiting to be researched. . .but see them as objects constituted anew by the researcher’s gaze and the questions we ask” (p. 41). Instead of ignoring positioning, investigators can manage their relational position actively to the speech communities and understand that they are not “discovering” overlapping speech communities but rather working with available information to create them.

Our research team’s positioning was one of three members of varying audiological status and signing fluency, between the ages of 20 and 40, male and female, single and married, all based in the United States and working toward a common initiative to identify distinct language communities and their language development needs through an international non-profit organization. Local signing community members worked with our team on the ground, functioning as cultural guides, language interpreters, and co-researchers. It is from this collective positioning and through the application of Holographic Methodology that we identified the presence of two overlapping signing communities in Panama, Chiriqui Sign Language and Panamanian Sign Language.

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