UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Deafness among the Negev Bedouin: an interdisciplinary dialogue on deafness, marginality and context

Kisch, S.

Publication date
2012

Citation for published version (APA):
Kisch, S. (2012). *Deafness among the Negev Bedouin: an interdisciplinary dialogue on deafness, marginality and context*.

Chapter 7:

Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, I revisit my main arguments and indicate new directions for research. In doing so I follow the three lines of inquiry outlined in my introduction to the study of deafness among the Negev Bedouin: (a) I start by revisiting my main arguments related to the study of what I have termed shared signing communities and the comparative study of deafness. In revisiting my second and third lines of inquiry: (b) State services and interventions, and (c) the myth of isolation, I revert to my claims to go beyond the study of deafness. Shifting the focus to the Negev Bedouin more generally and beyond, I indicate two directions for further research into processes of marginalization and de-politicization.

SHARED SIGNING COMMUNITIES AND THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF DEAFNESS AND SIGNING

Within the Negev-Bedouin society the consequences of deafness vary considerably between different Bedouin groups as well as along gender lines. Compared to those groups in which deafness has only recently occurred, this variation is most evidently the result of the long experience accumulated by Bedouin groups with high incidences of congenital deafness. Among the Al-Sayyid and Qderat Bedouin, where high rates of deafness are found over several generations, local sign languages have emerged that provide the foundation of signing communities shared by deaf and hearing. At the same time, there have also developed significant differences between these groups, most evident in their marriage practices affecting the perceived marriageability of deaf men and women.

Some of the challenges posed to deaf Bedouin and their relatives by the medicalization of deafness and by the introduction of formal education are familiar from other parts of the world. And yet, such challenges and the various responses to them are shaped by the differences mentioned above, as well as by their occurrence in times and spaces marked by the tensions between the Negev Bedouin as a disadvantaged minority group and the dominant Jewish-Israeli society, policy makers and service providers.

A growing body of literature is available that illustrates how sociolinguistic expressions of deafness are situated culturally and embedded in particularly historical trajectories (e.g. Monaghan et.al. 2003; LeMaster 2003; Nakamura 2006; Friedner 2011). Nonetheless, Deaf Studies is still largely dominated by binary thinking that contrasts the Deaf and the hearing, and distinguishes the culturally Deaf from others (Senghas & Monaghan 2002; Dirksen and Bauman 2010; Bruggemann 2010). The latter often marked by the Deaf/deaf distinction to highlight cultural identity as distinct from physiological deafness. Whereas the Deaf/deaf distinction is conceptually significant in separating audiological issues from those of sociality, it has contributed to binary thinking, based as it is on a rather uniform and homogenous notion of the culturally Deaf.

The dominance of this notion can be understood in two contexts. First, Deaf Studies is in many ways a transdisciplinary enterprise that emerged from a social movement. Second, much of the ethnographic work addressing deafness has been done within the United States or Europe (Senghas & Monaghan 2002). Grounded mostly on studies of the American Deaf community, Deaf studies recognize deaf peoples' shared experience and history; most significantly, it recognizes deaf people as constituting a linguistic minority, having a "different center" that is anchored in the use of sign language (Padden & Humphries 1988). Consequently, the notions of a signing community is often perceived to be one and the same as a Deaf community.

Among the Negev Bedouin, both the Al-Sayyid and Qderat present the case of signing communities shared by deaf and hearing, where signing is not necessarily a marker of so-called Deaf identity. It is not my intention to undermine the notion of a d/Deaf community where it is applicable, but rather to establish that signing communities do not necessarily neatly coincide with d/Deaf communities.

This dissertation hopes to contribute to the literature that illustrates the multiplicity and specificity of the meaning of deafness and signing, revealing the ways they are embedded in particular practices and contexts. However, it also suggests that the study of deafness among the Negev Bedouin can be relevant to the study of deafness more generally, just as I have benefited from the study of deafness elsewhere.

Since the publication of "Everyone here spoke sign language" (Groce 1985), shared signing communities have often been used to illustrate an utterly different deaf experience, albeit in a similarly binary form. Whereas deaf and disability scholars show how being deaf need not be disabling, this claim is shown most compellingly in a situation where deaf and hearing people recognize and experience the viability of signed communication. But contrasting shared signing communities to d/Deaf communities of the kind that have been most commonly documented limits the possibility both to recognize their shared features and differences, and to examine the complexities and dynamics of each shared signing community.

Using the term "integrated signing communities" in my first publication,[1] I also initially used such contrast to highlight the unique sociolinguistic conditions in shared signing communities. But I soon realized[2] that, I do not wish to subscribe to the notion that deaf people are inevitably integrated under such circumstances, rather, underscoring the unique sharing of signing, identifies the most significant shared feature of how hearing and deaf signers jointly participate in visual language from an early age, leaving room for variation in its actual social consequences in each separate case. Subsequently, I introduced the term *shared signing community* (Kisch 2008a, chapter 2 this volume) to capture these unique sociolinguistic circumstances where sign languages are developed and used by deaf and hearing alike, a fact often downplayed by both linguists and Deaf Studies scholars. The usefulness of this term goes beyond underscoring the sharing of one (or more) forms of speech: as pointed out in Hymes' (1974:51) original definition of a linguistic speech community, members of speech communities also share knowledge of

---

[1] A modified version of this publication (Kisch 2004) makes for chapter 3 of this dissertation.
[2] My exchange with Annelies Kusters in which she shared some of the thoughts later published in her 2009 article were helpful in realizing the shortcoming of this term. I wish to thank her for her critical reading and feedback.

its patterns and rules of use. This is significant in the distinct sociolinguistic realities of shared signing communities, grounded as they are in daily experiences and practices related to deafness and signing. Significantly this also means, for instance, that less fluent hearing signers not only recognize sign language as a proper language but often demonstrate awareness of the pragmatics of signed communication.

In most shared signing communities, deaf and hearing members, are exposed to adult models of deaf and hearing signers in the community, from the second generation of signers onwards. My analysis of the different generations of signers among the Al-Sayyid, however shows that more than half of the second and third generations of deaf signers did not grow up with older deaf signers in their immediate households. This reveals how significant hearing signers are in the generational transmission of shared sign languages. Relevant to the comparative study of sign languages and sign language typology, these findings suggests the need for a closer examination of the possible role of hearing signers in the emergence, development, and maintenance of sign languages, as well as the impact of cross-modal (signed-spoken) language contacts.

High rates of deafness distributed throughout the community, dense social networks and the familiarity with both deaf and hearing signers from a young age – all conspire to facilitate the production and sharing of a unique experiential knowledge of deafness and signing. Given that even among scholarly linguistics it was not until the late 1960s that sign languages were finally accepted as genuine languages, the revealing nature of such experience and knowledge cannot be underestimated.

My work also shows that while the social space shared by deaf and hearing is generally accommodating for deaf people, it also involves a structural sociolinguistic asymmetry; whereas deaf people mostly rely on signed communication, hearing people have access to both spoken and signed modes of communication. In the case of the Al-Sayyid, I have demonstrated that when considering the multiple languages and language modes involved (including writing and more than one spoken and signed language), this asymmetry is not easily reduced to a one-dimensional hierarchy subordinating deaf people. When Nonaka (2009), based on her accomplished study of the Ban-Khor, suggests the term *speech/sign community*, my main reservation about her term is that it ignores precisely this asymmetry, for

most deaf signers do not share the use of spoken language; thus the term speech/sign community partly excludes them.

The remaining models and terms that are used to refer to these cases range from efforts to classify sign-languages to attempts to group whole societies according to their acceptance of or adaptation to deafness. Shared signing communities are then perceived to be a product of *assimilative societies* (Lane et. al. 1996; Bahan & Nash 1996; Lane et. al. 2000) in contrast to the condition of deaf people in what are labeled as *differentiating* or *oppressive societies* (Bahan & Nash 1996; Lane et. al. 2000)*.* Both deaf and hearing refer to the former with idyllic terms (Woll & Ladd, 2003). My analysis of the Al Sayyid signing community shows, to the contrary that social structures and practices in shared signing communities should be examined for how they may both facilitate and restrict deaf people.

This literature considers the integration of deaf people to be the result of a so-called "traditional" character of these societies assumed to be geographically isolated, egalitarian and assimilative, with low occupational and educational differentiation. These accounts evoke the impression of some "natural integration" of the disabled. But such a frame encourages a romanticized and ahistorical approach. In my analysis of the Al-Sayyid, I underscore the dynamic nature of this sociolinguistic landscape, demonstrating how it is precisely the complexity of social structure and arrangement that plays a significant role in shaping this unique social reality.

As unique as shared signing communities might be, they do not exclude the possibility of deaf sociality. Triggered by different factors, shared signing communities demonstrate different forms of deaf sociality. They cannot be considered as embryonic Deaf communities, particularly where deaf sociality is enhanced by encounters with national sign languages and pre-existing (mostly national) deaf institutions. Such institutions often promote what Friedner (2010; 2011) calls "global Deafness" referring to concepts of a universal Deaf culture and community.

My data suggests that young deaf Bedouin from shared signing communities rearticulate such notions in different ways than those growing up in families where deafness has newly occurred. For instance, in recent years several young deaf Bedouin men have been cultivating the idea that they have a responsibility towards young deaf Bedouin women to marry them and redeem then from remaining unmarried or marrying to an elderly man as his second or third wife. Young deaf men from shared signing communities seem

less compelled by this idea; even when they entertain the idea of a deaf bride, they do not employ this same logic. As I have illustrated, the perceived marriageability of deaf men and women varies in different Bedouin communities, and, as in any social configuration, established social arrangements and expectations may very well prove to get in the way of innovation. As can new social arrangements. Hence my insistence that practices in shared-signing communities need to be examined for how they may both restrict and facilitate deaf people.

Among the Negev Bedouin the emergence of a new sense of Deafhood is partly related to the encounters with pre-existing deaf institutions, to which deaf Bedouin men and women are differently exposed and engaged. My data illustrates how such subject positions vary along gender lines, and further indicates the significance of gender in the comparative study of deaf sociality.

DEPOLITICIZATION, STATE SERVICES AND INTERVENTIONS

The case of deafness among the Negev Bedouin provides a unique insight to the encounters between various state agencies and the Negev Bedouin. I have analysed some of the unintended consequences of state interventions that target deafness and consequently single-out deaf people, leading to the gradual stigmatization of deafness, the emergence of new disparities between deaf and hearing and the intensification of gender disparities.

The first schools established by the state of Israel for the Bedouin population in the late 1960's were not designed to accommodate both hearing and deaf students (as many among the Al-Sayyid and Qderat naturally expected). Introduced in the early 1980's special schooling for deaf students – was thus the first state intervention that singled out deaf people. This educational structure transformed the sociolinguistic landscape of the Al-Sayyid, reducing the social space shared by deaf and hearing signers so distinctive of shared signing communities. While also somewhat enhancing the educational opportunities of deaf people separate and mostly vocational deaf schooling restricted the structure of opportunities—of deaf people compared to their hearing peers—and created differential vocational and life trajectories. However, these processes also transformed deaf people's social networks, and gradually gave rise to new forms of deaf sociality.

Other obvious interventions that targets deafness are the introduction of various medical procedures and technologies. Communities with high rates of

deafness attract the attention of medical researchers and practitioners who unwittingly impose the medical model of disability, by offering various procedures such as genetic counselling to reduce the incidence of deafness or intrusive surgical intervention for Cochlear Implants. For the Bedouin shared signing communities this is especially ironic, considering their unique experiential knowledge, grounded as it is in the familiarity from a young age with well-integrated deaf adults and signed communication. I have argued that in these communities deafness is not considered to require cure and is not easily subjugated to its medical model.

And yet, it is precisely in this context that the underlying premises of such interventions are accentuated: those promoting them need to repeatedly and explicitly proclaim deafness as undesirable, even devastating in order to render their interventions necessary and meaningful. While the medical discourse does not easily impress its logic on local perceptions of deafness, medical discourses are translated and partially reproduced locally. This process can be understood in terms of the inequality of languages (Asad 1986), referring to the permeability of local discourses to dominant and authoritative forms of discourse, moreover the eventual stigmatization of deafness is the result of heightened efforts to promote the medical model in light of local resilience.

The data I have collected since the first Bedouin child was implanted with a cochlear implant in 1998-indicate another direction for further investigation. Further research into the promotions of these medical procedures can provide insight into processes of disablement as well as into less familiar modes of its contestations. My data indicates that hearing and deaf members of the shared signing communities of Al-Sayyid and the Qderat were initially more resilient in response to medical authority promoting surgical intervention by questioning it in different ways than did other Negev-Bedouin. However, in particular Cochlear Implants – typically presented as a remarkable success of modern medical-technology (Blume 1999, 2000) – are gradually becoming more acceptable also among the Al-Sayyid. Such process raise important questions related to the perceptions of self, "progress", and technology[3] .

---

[3] I have presented some of my data and analysis on this topic in two conference papers:

Although state services and interventions that target deafness occur in the more general context of neglect and discrimination, the politics of such specialized interventions are often overlooked. Studying deafness among the Negev Bedouin compels me to identify sites and processes of de-politicization.

Studies, policies and public discourses related to the Negev Bedouin often suffer from de politicization. De-arabization (Yonah, Abu-Saad and Kaplan 2004), a preoccupation with "Bedouin culture" and the constructing of a sense of ethnicity, are probably the most evident instances. However, I suggest investigating those instances that take place in domains perceived to be most remote from politics, thereby rendering these processes of de-politicization most effective.

Decisions about whether to use hearing aid or undergo surgery for a Cochlear Implant (CI), or where a deaf child should be schooled, whether spoken or signed language should be used for instruction- occur to many as questions that should be left for experts to answer. However, the context of such interventions reveals that they cannot be understood in a void. They must be understood as existing in time and space marked by discrimination and distrust. How can parents residing in an unrecognized settlement relate to the state's sudden concern with the wellbeing of their children (or potential progeny) - for instance, by offering genetic counselling or funding the implantation of an extremely expensive hearing device - when the same state seems indifferent to the fact they have no running water or electricity and their children have to cross an open sewage stream to reach school. Clearly it would be misleading to evaluate compliance to such interventions without considering those circumstances; nevertheless, more often than not this is the case.

Yet, politics resides in more than the mere circumstances and political climate that frame such interventions. My materials suggest several additional aspects of de-politicization. Chapter 6 addresses the de-politicization that is involved in seemingly benevolent lay encounters where ideologies profoundly ingrained in mainstream dispositions are frequently reproduced. Chapters 3

"Notions of 'Progress' and 'Rehabilitation': the introduction of CI among the Negev Bedouin. Annual conference of the Society of Disability Studies. Seattle, June 2007.
""A Five Star Hotel in the Desert – With No Water or Electricity": Cochlear Implants among the Negev Bedouin" European Association for the Study of Science and Technology and 4S. Rotterdam, Aug 2008.

and 4 reveal the politics concealed in the priorities that lead to certain interventions but not to others. Considered separately, many interventions seem well intended, but come to light as problematic when considering the priorities behind them or their differential accessibility. As for the latter, most services are not available in Arabic. Communication in Hebrew too often implies that women particularly mothers are excluded. When they are neither informed nor instructed directly, they are also too often left outside of the decision-making regarding their lives and their children's lives. Similarly, chapter 5 illustrates that while gender disparities are perceived to be solely a "cultural problem", the lack of improved schooling within the Negev in fact, perpetuates gender disparities.

Politics is perhaps best revealed by analysing the priorities that engender certain interventions rather than others. During the 16 years I have been conducting research among the Negev Bedouin, the state has funded several medical and educational projects to reduce the occurrence of deafness (so far with little success, one might add). The logic of state incentives and coverage is that of most welfare states: the hope to lower future costs by supporting students with special needs and adults that might potentially place a burden on welfare expenditures. Besides, cochlear implants, relatively expensive devices, are aggressively promoted through manufacturers' programs for global penetration (Komersaroff 2007).

However it is important to realize that literate deaf people who have received a proper level of education, can readily participate in the labour market as well as utilize universally-available services, so they need not become clients of special welfare services. It is significant that during those same 16 years, only minor improvements have been made to the level of education available to deaf students. Despite the fact that they have typically received over 10 years of (poor) schooling, the majority of the Bedouin deaf adults now in their 20's and 30's have very poor literacy skills. Little to no investment was made to assure better education in the future by establishing training programs for teachers for the deaf or for other professionals that could provide services in Arabic or sign language.

However, it seems there is more institutional responsiveness to 'internal' and 'cultural' factors involving intermarriage or supposedly culturally selective compliance to services (such as prenatal testing or audiological testing). The appeal of such factors reveals a common development and modernization approach. James Ferguson (1994), in his classic study of the

development industry (in Lesotho), describes it as an "anti-politics machine". Among others he points out the de-politicization effects of stereotypical ideas about so-called traditional societies and the avoidance of contemporary factors such as migration. Additionally the avoidance of structural factors conveniently allows displacing responsibility for a project's 'failure' onto the target population refusing to 'advance'. Accordingly, I found that the evaluations of interventions to reduce deafness often focused on the Bedouin population's supposed (non)compliance and (un)awareness. Deafness is then treated as a symptom of Bedouin society's "developmental lag" perceived to be manifested in their general "traditional" character and phenomena such as, "cultural beliefs" (or "superstitions"), intermarriage, illiteracy or the subordinate position of women. It is in this context that in chapter 3, I analyse the discursive function of local accounts of deafness: releasing them from the narrow question of knowledge or ignorance, allows recognizing that they are offered in response to concern with the implications of the genetic intervention program, as attempts to negotiate and challenge it.

Let me clarify that whereas the need to reduce the occurrence of deafness is controversial, it seems much less so for many incomparable fatal congenital diseases. Certainly there is room to address intermarriage practices as one or the factors responsible for the alarmingly high infant mortality rates among the Negev Bedouin. Yet I would argue that elevating the general level of education, and especially providing all Bedouin students a basic high school level in mathematics and biology that allows understanding basic concepts such as probability, and recessive and dominant genetic patterns, would not only be far less patronizing and more empowering, my data suggests it would also be more effective in informing the marriage and medical screening choices made by young Bedouin men and women. Such investments in education would not address young Bedouin as a problem, but rather would be a materialization of their civil right to equal educational opportunities.

Another instance of de-politicization takes place during Bedouins' the actual encounters with professionals involved in interventions and provision of services. The authority of professionals rests on assumptions about (scientific) rationality and political neutrality. In most social contexts, encounters with professionals entail an a-symmetry in status and authority. But, the impact of this asymmetry increases along lines of class, educational gaps or other factors that define the access people have to information, or to relevant institutional settings.

Where ethnic minorities are concerned, professionals often belong to the dominant ethnic group in society. In their interactions with Bedouin clients, my data indicates that many Jewish-Israeli professionals rely on various cultural stereotypes that they apply indiscriminately because they are unaware of the diversity and dynamics within Negev Bedouin society. The most evident case of cultural stereotypes that were applied unanimously to Negev Bedouin society concern patriarchy and gender, as mentioned earlier.

These encounters are not only influenced by the assumptions and dispositions held by the providers of services, but also by those of the receivers. Many Bedouins treat experts with awe, uncritically submitting themselves to the authority of professionals' assumed neutrality. However, I have also illustrated how in the case of genetic counselling and reproductive health, the social and cultural meaning of medical procedures can be equally-if not more dramatically-constituted horizontally through interaction among patients, or what call "lay encounters". As illustrated in chapter 6, in the more obviously political contexts, such as those concerning reproductive health, encounters may be characterized by profound distrust. Thus, attitudes may result in uncritical compliance or unwarranted distrust. Either way, people's ability truly to consult the expert and to share their doubts and hesitations are severely hampered.

For their part, experts may displace "the problem" to the individual: reproaching parents for not caring properly for their children, having too many children, being unable to speak the language, or missing appointments, et cetera. Critics might respond by relocating the problem onto the individual service provider: the doctor who does not speak Arabic, the teacher that assumes all Bedouin women are wed against their will, or the counsellor that fears to make house calls. While individuals located in power positions should be held responsible for their failures or malfunctioning, the performance of many well-intended professionals reveals what are foremost malignancies of structural indifference and neglect. Ignoring the categorical nature of this discrimination hampers the possibility for social action, debate and possible change on the part of those receiving no or poor services, as well as on the part of professionals. Intentional or unintentional de-politicization forecloses denies new space for political action and change.

MARGINALIZED RATHER THAN ISOLATED

The third line of inquiry that informed my investigation was provoked by the recurrent references to the Al-Sayyid as an "isolated community". Some scholars have categorically labelled shared signing communities as "isolated deaf communities" (e.g. Washabaugh 1979, 1981a); others have listed isolation as one of the preconditions for the formation of shared sign languages (Lane et. al. 1996).

The Al-Sayyid in particular, have repeatedly been portrayed as isolated and remote. As illustrated in the previous chapters, the Al-Sayyid are neither socially nor geographically isolated. Indeed although consanguinity rates are high (with over 60% of marriages between relatives), they are not sweeping, for many marriages involving non-kin. Nor are the Al-Sayyid confined to their settlement and social networks are far from restricted to kin networks. Many (deaf and hearing) men daily travel out of the village to work, to attend high-schools or universities; some men and women join weekly prayers in Jerusalem, yet others have travelled abroad for higher education or for pilgrimage. Despite the high unemployment and poverty rates, most Bedouin men are enrolled in wage labour, albeit in the lower strata of the Israeli labour market, daily or weekly commuting to work all over the country. The village of Al-Sayyid lies only 15 km away from Beersheba, Israel's fourth largest metropolis. For over 30 years, deaf students have attended deaf schools in Beersheba, as well as a vocational boarding school in the central region of Israel.

Despite all this, the Al-Sayyid are repeatedly portrayed as a remote, isolated, and insular community. The most extreme example is Fox's book "Talking Hands: What Sign Language Reveals About the Mind", that goes so far as to present the Al-Sayyid sign language as one that "no outsider had ever seen before" (Fox 2007:272). On the publisher's website the author is presented as "One of the only few journalists in the world to have set foot in the village"[4]. More than publicity stunts of commercial publishers; comparable misconceptions persist in the academic debate where most scholars are led to believe the Al-Sayyid constitute an isolated community. It is consistently labelled as isolated, remote, and insular - and is some cases even as "closed"

---

[4] http://www.talkinghandsbook.com/theauthor.html last accessed 4 July 2012.

(Meir et. al. 2010b) and "self-containing" (Goldin-Meadow 2005). I suggest that these are more than merely uncritical applications of social concepts by linguists.

Such a narrative resonates with one with which anthropologists are all too familiar: the classic case being "lost tribes" that typically use an unknown language, whose speakers are ignorant of the outside world that, therefore, has very little impact on their lives. Also the early tendency of anthropologists often treated societies as closed systems isolated from neighbouring groups, the global and even national level. In the anthropology of the Middle East, such an "isolationist" tendency was reinforced by the analytical model of segmentary political systems (Marx 1980; Abu-Lughod 1989). However, for contemporary anthropologists the sighting of so-called "lost tribes" is fortunately no longer a scholarly practice (Kirsch 1997); rather, the very production of this narrative itself has become another cultural phenomena to study. Such studies reveal that the cultural passion to exotify involves treating societies as if they exist independently of historical time (Fabian 1983), often ignoring people's agency as well as their structural constraints. By the erasure of colonial and post-colonial relations, exotification also functions to mask contemporary power relations and political responsibilities (Lutz & Collins 1993).

In the linguistic context, there seems to be an enlightenment-like scientific enthusiasm: "isolated cases" function to support claims for a "pure case", supposedly free of distorting variables. The portrayal of emerging sign languages as insular nourishes hopes of witnessing "a naturally occurring forbidden experiment" (Fox 2007:130); that is to say, witnessing the birth of human language. The term *forbidden experiment* refers to 18th and 19th century naturalists' and philosophers' preoccupation with the question of human nature, on the one hand and the rise of humanism that prohibits production of knowledge by for instance isolating pre-lingual humans in the hopes of discovering "natural language" (Shattuck 1980).

Depiction of the Al-Sayyid as remote and isolated conveniently corresponds to the myth of- and desire to- discover such an alleged "linguistic vacuum" (Fox 2007:13, 280). But the Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language (ABSL) did not emerge in a "linguistic vacuum", nor can it be reduced to a "Language out of nothing...developing without a language model" (Meir & Sandler 2008:292). The main linguistic feature that challenges this reduction is the inherent bilingualism of all hearing signers (see chapter 4).

All hearing signers, bilingual in the local sign language and the local spoken dialect of Arabic, have spoken language as a readily-available language model. In this respect, no shared sign language can be considered to develop without a language model.   I have introduced the term *shared signing community* precisely to emphasize that sign languages arising in these circumstances are shared by deaf and hearing, a fact too often downplayed by both linguists and deaf studies scholars. Deaf Al-Sayyid are also increasingly bilingual. Schooling has introduced most deaf signers to a second (sign) language as well as to some literacy in Arabic or Hebrew. Improved access to internet and television with sign language interpreters further enhances their exposure to other sign languages. In fact, most young adult deaf signers now prefer to communicate in Israeli Sign Language.

Linguists hoping to identify independent developments within a language tend to dismiss as negligible this exposure to spoken, written, and other sign languages. Moreover, many linguistic publications on ABSL simply fail to mention the fact of widespread bilingualism and schooling among Al-Sayyid signers. In chapter 4, I argue that it is imperative to consider the possibility of contact-induced change so as to acknowledge this complex and dynamic sociolinguistic landscape.

Not all linguists ignore these complexities of young sign languages. Some sign language linguists express concern about the evolutionary concepts regaining ground in sign linguistics, concepts that have long been refuted in general linguistics (Nyst, 2012 Russo & Volterra 2005; Fusellier-Souza 2006). In direct response to publications on Nicaraguan Sign Language (also supposedly emerging out of scratch), two Italian scholars express their reservations, concluding that emerging sign languages "must not be considered as experiments of a language "in vitro"… completely self developing original language",   Rather, they call for careful evaluation of "social, pragmatic and environmental aspects … in each case … and each developmental stage of the acquisition" (Russo & Volterra 2005:56b). Even so, researchers of ABSL maintain that "emerging sign languages provide natural laboratories for the study of some fundamental theoretical issues in language evolution, emergence and development." (Meir et. al. 2010a:276). This tendency is amplified in the popular media and in the book written about the ABSL research project, where the author speaks of "The natural Forbidden Experiment that Al-Sayyid is" (Fox 2007:284). She also writes that the linguistic research team asked her to keep the community's locale

confidential[5], warning that this "traditional community might be overrun with curiosity-seekers and members of the news media" (Fox 2007:2). It seems however that beyond a concern with the privacy of the people studied, this approach might be motivated by an attempt to maintain one's "natural laboratory".

Isolated neither linguistically nor socially, many among the Al-Sayyid are however marginalized. Recognizing this fundamental difference between isolation and marginality is grounded in different disciplines' notion of context. The case of the Negev Bedouin, the Al-Sayyid Bedouin in particular, illustrates that marginality can imply quite the opposite from isolation. Whereas Isolation suggests autonomy, marginalization involves asymmetry within multiple power relations and dependencies.

The socially, economically and politically marginal position of the Negev Bedouin in general makes them more dependent on-rather than autonomous from-the surrounding social and political structures. Bedouin men reliant on the Israeli labour market must inevitably learn Hebrew. Low literacy rates, despite an average of 10 years of schooling, are sociolinguistic manifestations of bad schools and marginality.

On the front cover of Fox's book about the ABSL research project is a large-font text printed over the background of a yellowed desert view seen from the Al-Sayyid hill top. Taken from a distance, the nearby road junction is hardly detectable on the picture nor are the large gas station and McDonald's that are only a 10 minute drive away. The cover text reads: "In a remote village where everyone speaks sign language, scientists are discovering the essential ingredients of all human language- and uncovering the workings of the human mind" (Fox 2007). Though living in a village overlooking the McDonald's at the nearest road intersection, does not imply it is part of one's culinary world, living in the shadow of the "double arches" does shape social lives in various ways. Yet many would considerate it irrelevant.

Our world is not neatly or naturally divided into research topics and their relevant environments; hence context is by definition boundless. Context is not just a question of scope, Fabian (1995) argues for a dynamic and

---

[5] "Consider Al-Sayyid a kind of signing Brigadoon (although it is very real, and I have seen it), a place utterly impossible for any outsider to find" (2007:2).

dialectical notion of context as a property arising through interaction and practice, rather than being another "thing in itself".

Accordingly, contextualizing is itself a practice of power, of inclusion and exclusion. It can be seen as a practice allowing to construct material in a particular way (Hobart in Dilley 1999: 21). Recognizing this calls for reflexivity with regard to our own (as well as our collaborators') choices of contextualization. It is in this context that I understand de-contextualisation as evidenced by an insistence to depict the Al-Sayyid as isolated, remote and insular. Whether the erasure of context is the result of romanticized wishful thinking or blindness enhanced by enlightenment-like enthusiasm, it is a reminder for anthropologists of the significance (and frustrations) of interdisciplinary dialogue and the need for addressing our work to neighbouring disciplines-not to mention making it accessible to the general public.