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A sociolinguistic sketch of deaf individuals and families from Nebaj, Guatemala

Characteristics of Nebaj, Guatemala

Nebaj¹ is a municipio² located in the Western region of the Quiché Department of Guatemala. Nebaj is the largest of three towns in the region known as the Ixil triangle, which shares its name with the local Mayan language. The municipio of Nebaj has 106,237 inhabitants³ (INE 2002), with approximately 70% of the population living in rural *aldeas*, or hamlets, surrounding Nebaj. The remaining population – over 30,000 people – reside within the bustling town of Nebaj. Ixiles have been in contact with other Maya groups since the 11th century (Colby and van den Berghe 1969: 40), but the town was more isolated from Guatemala City and Quetzaltenango until a paved road was constructed to Nebaj in 1942 (Stoll 1993: 11).

Nebaj and its *aldeas* were heavily affected by Guatemala's prolonged civil war which officially began in 1960 and lasted through the 1996 signing of peace accords. During the war, more than 200,000 people died or disappeared (83% estimated to be Maya) and more than 1.5 million people were displaced (CEH 2004; Sanford 2003: 149). In Nebaj, many families fled into the surrounding mountains, where they lived for months or years, to avoid the military presence in town. Many of these Ixiles starved in the mountains or were “disappeared” (García 2014; Sanford 2003; Stoll 1993). After the war, Nebaj was the focus of significant aid and intervention from both the Guatemalan government and external Non-Governmental Organizations (Stoll 2013). The town is also home to multiple grassroots community organizations that have advocated for exhumations of massacre victims buried in clandestine graves to be interred in the local cemetery, as well as actively pursuing charges of genocide in the trial of former leader General Efraín Ríos Montt for genocide committed between 1982 and 1983 in the Ixil region (García 2014, forthcoming).

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2 In Guatemala, the 22 primary administrative subdivisions (Departments) are further divided into municipios, most similar to counties in the United States (Stoll 1993; Tax 1963). Nebaj is one of 21 municipios in the Quiché Department.

3 Population estimates vary, but this one is taken from a projection of the 2002 census (INE 2002).

Indigenous Ixil people remain the majority of Nebaj's population today (the indigenous population was estimated to be 88.6%, INE 2011). Inhabitants continue to work 'milpas,' or family-owned plots of land, where they grow corn and other crops. Many men, but also entire families, migrate to the coast of Guatemala for weeks or months each year for wage labor on plantations or *fincas*. This pattern of seasonal migration extends back to the earliest days of the Spanish conquest, when indigenous Mayas were forced to provide free labor under the *encomienda* system enforced by the conquistadors (Colby and van den Berghe 1969). In the late 1960s, Colby and van den Berghe (1969) estimated that 4,000–5,000 Ixiles continued to migrate to coastal plantations for wage labor each month. The migration routes from Nebaj now extend even farther, to Guatemala City and the United States (Stoll 2013; Ibáñez-Holtermann 2011). Many of the families I know have two to four adult relatives who currently live in the US or are in the process of trying to reach the US. These women and men work and send back a percentage of their wages, known as remittances, to family still in Nebaj.

On the streets in Nebaj, it is typical to encounter an eclectic amalgam of traditional and contemporary influences. While most younger women maintain the traditional red woven skirt, or *corte*, they often pair it with a t-shirt from local stores that sell American castoff clothing, and they can be seen, seated "sidesaddle" on motorcycles and scooters, driving through the center of town. In the local market, vendors sell traditional hand-woven huipils alongside stalls filled with neon-colored plastic bowls, chairs and trashcans and mass-produced backpacks that feature American cartoon characters. The language spoken on the streets and in the market is typically Ixil, a Mayan language in the Mamean branch of the language family, spoken natively by approximately 69,000 people living in the municipios of Nebaj, Chajul and Cotzal⁴ (Lewis et al. 2014; Romero 2017). Nebajeños under age 30 are typically bilingual Ixil-Spanish speakers – a consequence of loosely-enforced compulsory school attendance.

⁴ Residents from the towns of Nebaj, Chajul and Cotzal speak three distinct dialects of Ixil that are estimated to be 70–75% mutually intelligible (Lewis et al. 2014). In a detailed study of the three dialects, Lengyel (1991) notes significant variation both inter- and intra-dialect.

Informal survey of deaf people living in Nebaj

During my fieldwork,⁵ I have met seven adults and twelve children who are deaf. I have been told about an additional 9 deaf individuals who live in the urban center of Nebaj or in nearby *aldeas*. To protect their identities, all participants are identified by pseudonyms in this chapter. Some of the children I have worked with tell me that they had hearing aids when they were younger, and one participant showed me his hearing aid, which was missing the battery. It was not clear to me who provided the students with their hearing aids. Some students indicated that they did not like the sound of the hearing aids and stopped wearing them soon after they received them. I have not observed any of the child participants in this study to currently wear a hearing aid regularly. All participants, children and adults, lack enough residual hearing to learn spoken Ixil or Spanish.

Fourteen of the deaf participants in my study have at least one deaf relative (a parent, sibling or cousin). Of the children who are deaf, three (Sara, Rosa and Andres) have an adult relative who is deaf, either a parent (Lucia) or grandparent (Andres). Six of the child participants have a deaf sibling (Jose, Juana, Rosa, Andres) or cousin (Sara, Jose, Juana, Tomas, Diego) who is approximately the same age. Two of the deaf adult participants (Lucia and Andres) are reported to have a deaf sibling as well.⁶ Demographic information from an informal survey of the community, compiled between 2013 and 2017, is presented in Table 1. The local school for special education, Escuela Oficial para Educación Especial de Nebaj, is identified by the acronym EOEE. The school is described in greater detail in the following section.

Table 1: Deaf Individuals in Nebaj and Their Relationships.

Child	Deaf Relatives	Age (first interview)	School Attendance (first year of attendance)
Sara*	<i>mother</i> , Lucia; <i>aunt</i> ; <i>cousins</i> , Juana, Jose	8 (2013)	local school
Rosa*	<i>grandfather</i> , Andres; <i>brother</i> , Andres	7 (2013)	EOEE (2017)
Andres*	<i>sister</i> , Rosa; <i>grandfather</i> , Andres	1 (2013)	na

⁵ I began working in Nebaj in the summer of 2013 and have returned each summer since for a period of 2–6 weeks. For more detail on fieldwork methods, see Horton, this volume.

⁶ I was told by Lucia's husband and Andres' daughter that they each have a sibling who is also deaf, but I have not met either of the siblings in person.

Table 1: (continued)

Child	Deaf Relatives	Age (first interview)	School Attendance (first year of attendance)	
Tomás*	<i>cousin</i> , Diego	10 (2013)	EOEE	
Diego*	<i>cousin</i> , Tomás	13 (2013)	EOEE	
Jose*	<i>sister</i> , Juana; <i>cousin</i> , Sara; <i>aunt</i> , Lucia	10 (2016)	EOEE	
Juana*	<i>brother</i> , Jose, <i>cousin</i> , Sara; <i>aunt</i> , Lucia	14 (2016)	EOEE	
Antonio*		6 (2015)	local school (2017)	
Jacinto*		8 (2015)	local school (2016)	
Alejandro*		10 (2014)	EOEE (2015) local school (2016)	
Eduardo [▲]	unknown	na	attended EOEE, 2013	
Sergio [▲]	unknown	na	attended EOEE, 2013	
Alicia	unknown	na	unknown	

Adult	Deaf Relative or Spouse	Age (first interview)	Employed	Married
Lucia*	<i>daughter</i> , Sara; <i>niece</i> , Juana, <i>nephew</i> , Jose	38 (2013)	yes	yes
Marco	<i>brother</i> , Andres	na	unknown	unknown
Andres*	<i>brother</i> , Marco; <i>grandchildren</i> , Rosa, Andres	78 (2013)	yes	yes
Jairo*		29 (2013)	yes [†]	no
Julio*		26 (2015)	no	no
Francesca [▲]	<i>husband</i> , Ramon	na	unknown	yes
Ramon [▲]	<i>wife</i> , Francesca	na	unknown	yes
Ana [▲]		na	no	no
Sergio	<i>wife</i> , Maria	na	unknown	yes
Maria	<i>husband</i> , Sergio	na	unknown	yes
Miguel	<i>father</i> , Jose	na	yes [†]	unknown
Jose	<i>son</i> , Miguel	na	yes [†]	yes
Emilio	unknown	na	yes [†]	unknown
David	<i>sister</i> , Paz	na	yes	no
Paz	<i>brother</i> , David	na	yes	divorced

*Participant in ongoing study of homesign systems in Nebaj

[▲]I have met with this person, but they did not ultimately become a participant in the ongoing study

[†]A group of deaf adult men who work together to transport goods between from vendors' homes and the market

Table 1 includes demographic data about child and adult homesigners from Nebaj. The children who are deaf range from 18 months to 18 years of age. Most of the child homesigners I have worked with for the past five years were between the ages of 9 and 12 years old. I have worked with some of these children and their families since 2013 and I began working with others as recently as 2016. All of the school-aged children attend a school. Most children in Nebaj begin attending school between ages seven and nine. One child participant (Andres) is too young to attend school. Several of the child homesigners (Juana, Eduardo and Sergio) no longer go to school regularly, either because they are too old or do not want to attend. Four of the homesigners (Sara, Antonio, Jacinto and Alejandro) go to local elementary schools near their homes (typically within walking distance). As far as I have been able to tell through informal conversations with their parents, they do not receive any special services at school and attend classes with other hearing students.

Four of the homesigners attend the same school together, the local school for special education (EOEE), described below. Currently the four regular attendees are: Rosa, Jose, Diego and Tomás. Rosa just began attending EOEE in 2017, after sporadically going to her local school for two years. Juana, Jose's sister, used to attend EOEE regularly from 2013 through 2017, but she stopped wanting to go to school in 2017, preferring to stay home and help her mother. Diego and Tomás are now almost too old to continue going to school at EOEE. Tomás, who used to attend daily now only goes to school 3–4 days each week and sometimes stays home or works in his father's sewing shop.

There are at least fifteen deaf adult homesigners in Nebaj. I have met eight of the adult homesigners, and have been told about seven additional adult homesigners. In Table 1, I present additional demographic information about each of the adult homesigners, including their marital status and whether they are employed. Most of the adult homesigners I have worked with did not attend school, but approximately half are employed and half are married, in some cases to other deaf people. I discuss the integration of deaf adults into the larger community further in a later section of this chapter.

Formal education and literacy in Nebaj

School attendance is widespread across Guatemala, however, a recent survey estimates that 29–35% of people in the municipio of Nebaj are illiterate (INE 2014), and until recently many teachers at the 477 local schools were monolingual

Spanish-speaking ladinos.^{7,8} As such, all classes in the schools in town were taught almost exclusively in Spanish, although the majority of students enter as monolingual Ixil speakers.⁹ Today there are more teachers who are Maya, bilingual speakers, and Ixil is offered as a course in later elementary years.

As noted in the previous section, the deaf children I work with who attend regular schools do not receive interpreting services and they do not attend the same schools, so they are the only deaf student in their class and sometimes in their school. Even at the EOEE school, where several deaf students are enrolled, interpreting services are not provided, though some teachers are aware of LENSEGUA¹⁰ and supplement their verbal instructions with signs. The deaf adults I have worked with have very low literacy skills, although some can write their names. Few of the deaf adults in Nebaj attended school, and some family members reported that this was because of their hearing loss.

The Escuela Oficial para Educacion Especial de Nebaj (EOEE)

The deaf students at EOEE sign with each other and also with other hearing students at the school, which enrolls any student with a disability. The number of students at the school varies substantially from year to year; in 2013, there were nine deaf students, seven of them male. In 2014, this number dropped to five deaf students, four of them male, and in 2015 and 2016, there were four deaf students, three of them male.

7 Ladino is the term used in Guatemala to refer to people who do not identify as indigenous. Ladinos typically speak Spanish and adopt Western styles of dress. They may or may not speak Ixil, but communicate predominately in Spanish. Historically, they are “mestizo,” of mixed European and indigenous descent (Stoll 1993; Colby and van den Berghe 1969).

8 Based on a report published in 2008, Nebaj had 477 schools of various levels including pre-primary, primary and basic. There were 1,307 teachers and 43,879 students at the time of the report (de la Cruz et al. 2008).

9 Stoll (1993) suggests that immediately prior to the US-backed coup in Guatemala in 1954, revolutionary movements were leading to more indigenous school teachers. I do not know whether teachers at schools in the more rural aldeas surrounding Nebaj are more likely to be indigenous and speak Ixil, the experience of a Spanish-only classroom is based on a personal communication with a resident of Nebaj (Informal Interview, September 2017).

10 In the only published survey of Guatemalan Sign Language, Parks and Parks (2008) report that in Guatemala City, the association for the deaf, ASORGUA, uses the acronym LENSEGUA (Lengua de Señas de Guatemala). The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) uses GSM (ISO 639-3) as the official acronym.

Deaf students who attend EOEE are in the same class, and have been together in this class for at least three years. Prior to this, older deaf students were in a class together and one or two deaf students who were younger were in a different class with other hearing students. This was partly in an effort to address disciplinary issues between two deaf students who were siblings and partly based on the ages of the students. As mentioned above, there are illustrated dictionaries of LENSEGUA at the school, but none of the teachers surveyed at the school indicate that they know LENSEGUA and they report that they do not use the language when communicating with deaf students. While the deaf children who attend the school are familiar with the manual alphabet of LENSEGUA, I have only observed them using the alphabet sporadically in the classroom, primarily during interactions with teachers. The teachers report that they do not know all of the letters in the manual alphabet.

To provide instruction, teachers use the white boards at the front of the classroom, where they write sentences for students to copy into workbooks. Teachers frequently supplement instructions with manual signs and deictic gestures towards the board or other visual aids in the classroom (Figure 1c). These visual strategies to support the deaf students (who comprise approximately half of the class) are provided somewhat inconsistently, but the teachers frequently approach the deaf students separately to provide additional spoken instruction in Spanish or Ixil, supported by pantomiming an example of what the students need to do to complete the activity.

Deaf students rely on their peers as well, imitating what they are doing or copying their work directly, after they see that the teacher has stopped providing instructions. However, it is not always the case that deaf students are the ones copying hearing students. Since some of the deaf students have been attending the school long enough that they are intimately familiar with the routines of the classroom work and know what to do with very little prompting from the teacher, they often begin working on a writing activity before the teacher has finished giving instructions. This prompts hearing students to copy the work of deaf students once the teacher finishes her lesson.

Although the deaf students primarily interact with each other, they also actively engage with the other students in their class and at the school during recess and snack times. The hearing students use some of the same manual signs they observe deaf students using with each other, but the interactions between deaf and hearing students are abbreviated and punctuated by frequent misunderstandings and clarifications. The male deaf students play marbles and card games together during recess periods, leading to lengthy signed conversations and arguments.



Figure 1: Photos from the EOEE school. (a) LENSEGUA manual alphabet, posted above the door to the school kitchen (upper left), (b) a teacher indicating to students that they should look at their notebooks and copy down words from the board (upper right), (c) a classroom (lower left) and (d) the courtyard where students spend recess (lower right).

Guatemalan Sign Language and Deaf people in Nebaj

Based on informal conversations with all of the deaf people I have met and their hearing relatives, deaf people in Nebaj have minimal or no exposure to Guatemalan Sign Language, abbreviated as GSM or LENSEGUA. The first school for the deaf in Guatemala was founded in 1946. Based on a survey from 2008, there are ten schools for the deaf across the country. Three of these schools use an oral teaching philosophy, focused on teaching their students spoken Spanish. The remaining schools use a philosophy termed “total communication”, including oral training and teaching in sign. I have not been able to visit any of these schools, they are located in Guatemala City, Huehuetenango, Quetzaltenango and other towns at least a half day from Nebaj by bus (Parks and Parks 2008: 8).

The Asociación de Sordos Guatemaltecos (ASORGUA, the national association for the Deaf) has published two illustrated dictionaries of LENSEGUA (De Leon 2001; Bámaca et al. 2008), and there are copies of these volumes at the EOEE school. Teachers at EOEE refer to these dictionaries sporadically, and some years the manual alphabet of LENSEGUA has been posted at the school (see Figure 1a). In the classrooms, teachers use some signs that are illustrated in the LENSEGUA dictionary, but also use signs that are local, and familiar to the students at the

school. These signs do not appear in the dictionaries of LENSEGUA, but are familiar to all of the hearing teachers at the school. When I asked acquaintances in Nebaj who do not have regular interactions with deaf people, they also recognized these gestures and could explain their meaning. For example, a sign that involves pointing to one's eye to indicate that the student should pay attention to or look at something (see Figure 1b).

Deaf-hearing interactions in Nebaj

In terms of communicative interactions between deaf and hearing people, the microcosm of the EOEE school appears to generalize to the larger community of Nebaj. In the school, deaf students freely interact with other hearing students but also engage in longer exchanges with each other where possible. Deaf people in Nebaj do not generally appear to seek the company of other deaf people over family and neighbors who are hearing.¹¹ One exception to this is a group of deaf men who work together in the local market to transport vendors' goods from their homes to market stalls. When working in the market, the deaf men have abbreviated signed conversations with hearing customers and vendors and are able to negotiate their responsibilities and errands with relative ease. I have observed the group of deaf men to have lengthy conversations with each other, involving teasing and what appears to be rapid, fluent signing.

Gestural exchanges between deaf and hearing Nebajeños is not limited to people who interact regularly, or to adults. I have observed interactions between deaf and hearing people, both adults and children in public and private spaces. Roberto, one of the deaf students at the EOEE school, used to work as a *lustrador*, or shoe shiner, in the central park in town. One day, while shining a customer's shoes, Roberto had an extended conversation with the man. Although he was hearing, the customer did not hesitate to engage with Roberto using improvised signs and also by acting out parts of his story.

¹¹ This situation is similar to Maya communities described by Johnson 1991 (in Yucatan) and Fox Tree 2009 (in Nahualá, Guatemala) where they observe a general lack of Deaf solidarity. This is partly attributable to the social structure of the Nebaj community, in which the family is typically the most central unit of social interaction, similar to other Maya communities (Gaskins 1999). See Friedner (2014) and Kusters (2014), however, for alternative constructions of deaf communities in Bangalore, India (Friedner) and the Adamorobe village in South-Ghana (Kusters).

Deaf employment and social integration in Nebaj

Some deaf adult men in Nebaj are employed, with many working in the local market to transport goods from vendors' homes to their market stands. Many of the deaf men also have families with children (see Table 1). The deaf adult women primarily stay at home, although one works outside of Nebaj doing seasonal farm labor and one occasionally works outside her home making tortillas and doing laundry. Three of the deaf women have children, although one is unmarried and one is divorced.

Attitudes towards deafness and signing

Hearing parents are reluctant to speculate about the possible source of their children's deafness when asked directly. Even in families with multiple generations of deafness, some adults I spoke with did not assume that a grandchild's deafness would be related to his grandfather's deafness. In other ethnographic accounts of Maya communities in Guatemala, researchers have commented on the taboo against discussing childhood illness and disability (Fox Tree 2009: 329).

In conversations with local hearing people in Nebaj, some suggested to me that children are born deaf because something bad happened during the pregnancy or when the child was young. Parents of deaf children express concern that their children will not be able to find a job when they grow up, or could be injured, for example, if they are near a road and are not able to hear an oncoming car. Additionally, some of the people I talked with in Nebaj did not refer to deafness as a lack of hearing, but a disinclination or inability to speak, using the phrase “no tiene boca” (they have no mouth). They often insist that a person can hear, but chooses not to speak and instead communicates with their hands.

Deaf Nebajeños are thus integrated into the larger social fabric of the community, although this varies significantly by age and gender, as well as whether the family lives in town or in a more rural *aldea*. The number of related deaf individuals in Nebaj would indicate a genetic trait for deafness in some of these families, though this has not been confirmed. In ongoing work Horton (forthcoming) is examining the role of multiple generations of signers in contact within a family versus children who sign together at a local institution, like the EOEE school, on the emergence of sublexical/morphophonological structure and lexical richness in these shared homesign systems. The chapter in this volume on shared homesign systems from Nebaj presents an analysis of the lexicons of some of the child signers in this sample, with particular attention to iconic strategies used for denotation as well as the role of deictic signs and emblems from the surrounding hearing community.

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