

# Deaf Studies as a transformed and transformational field: inspirations across disciplines and nations

Annelies Kusters



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Has the field matured?  
Different waves?



Deaf Studies as a **transformed** and  
transformational field: inspirations across  
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For whom?  
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For whom?  
Where?

Which ones?

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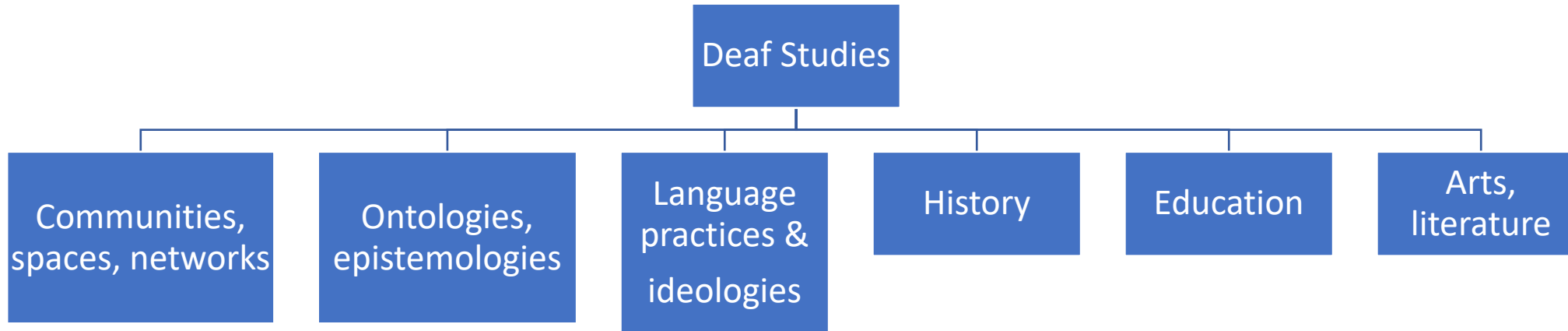
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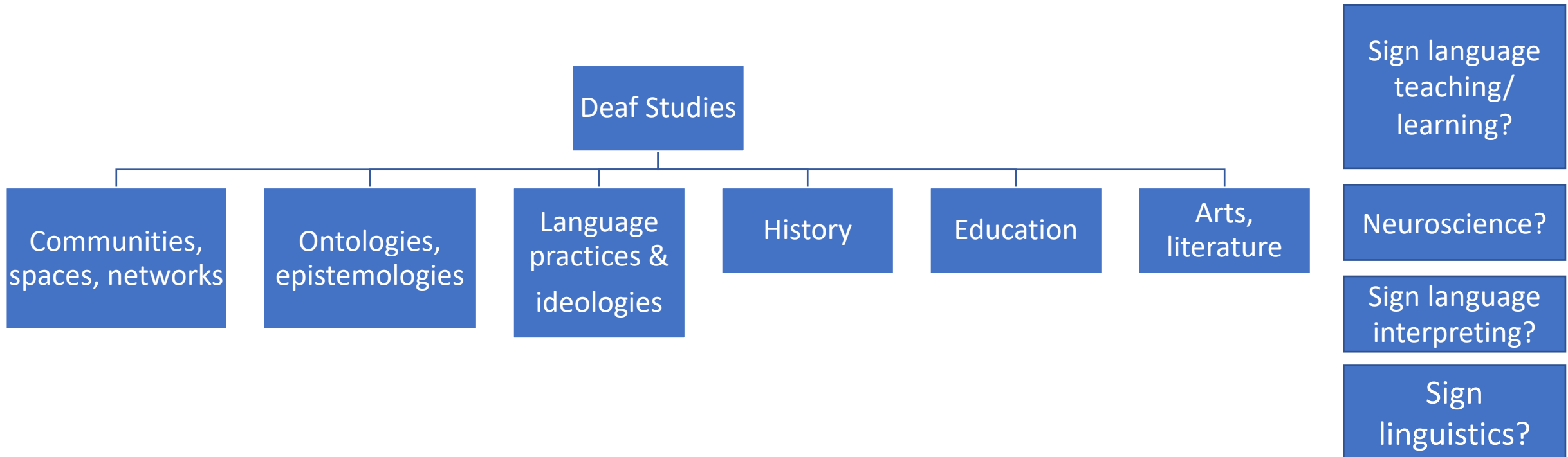
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# Demarcating Deaf Studies

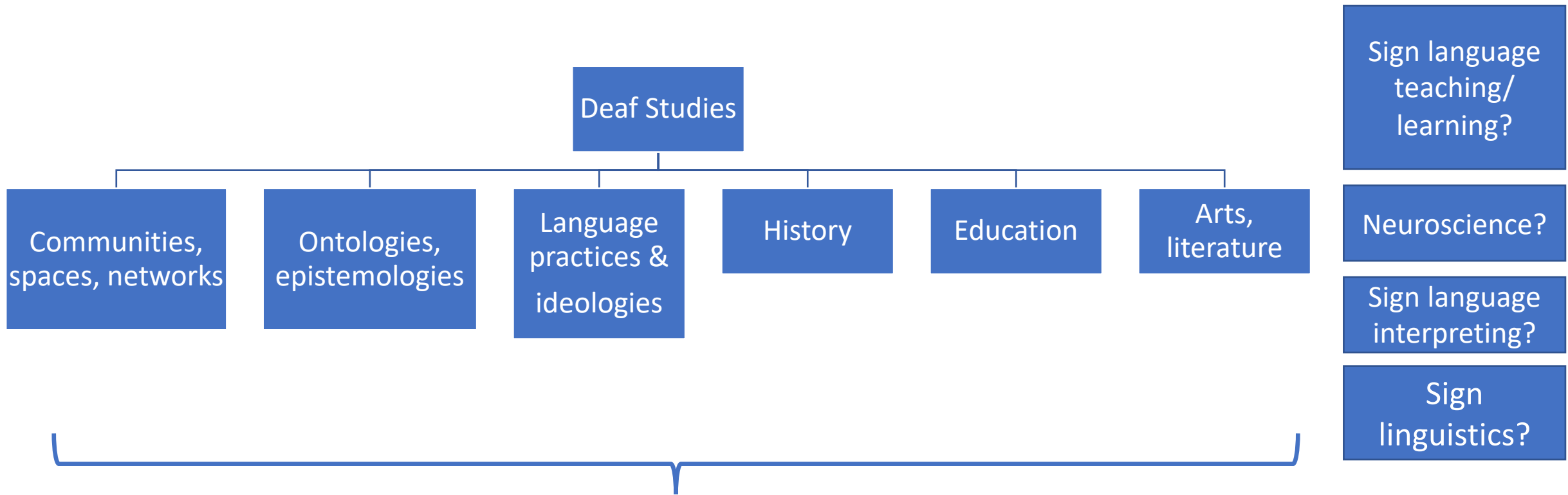


# Demarcating Deaf Studies



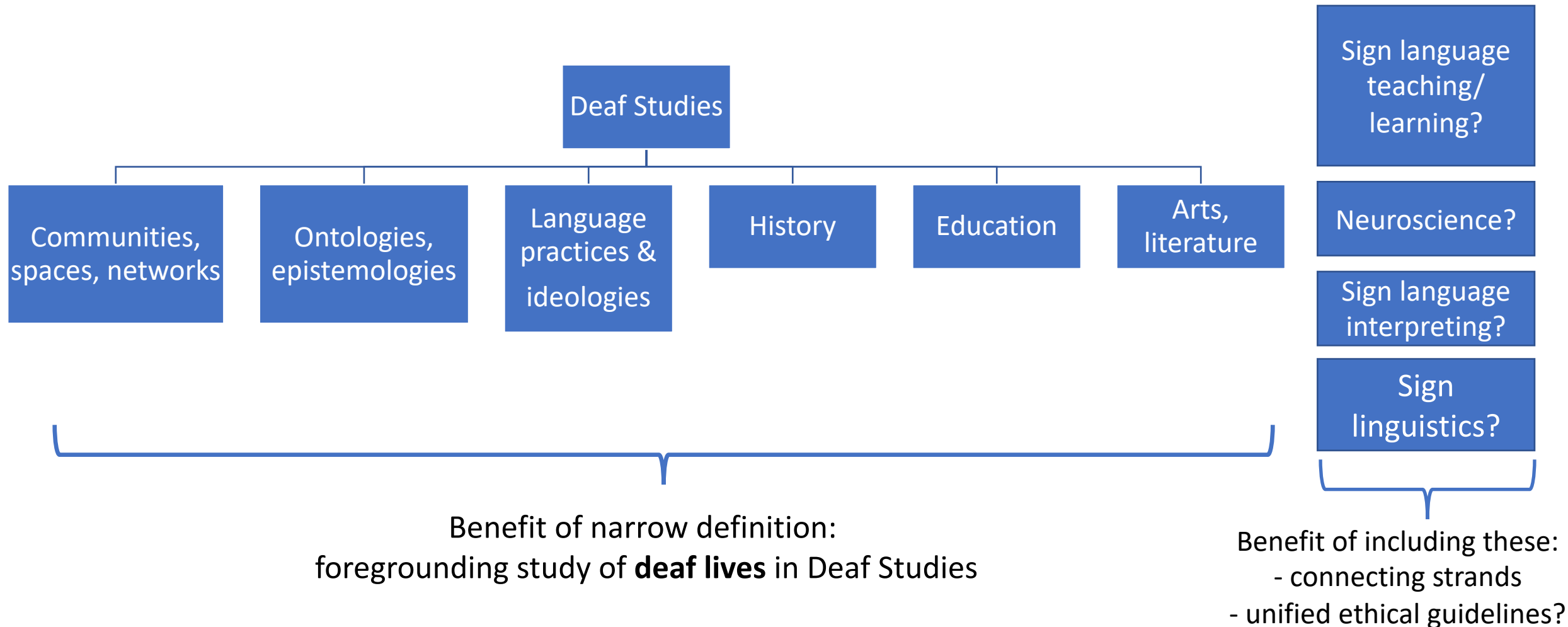


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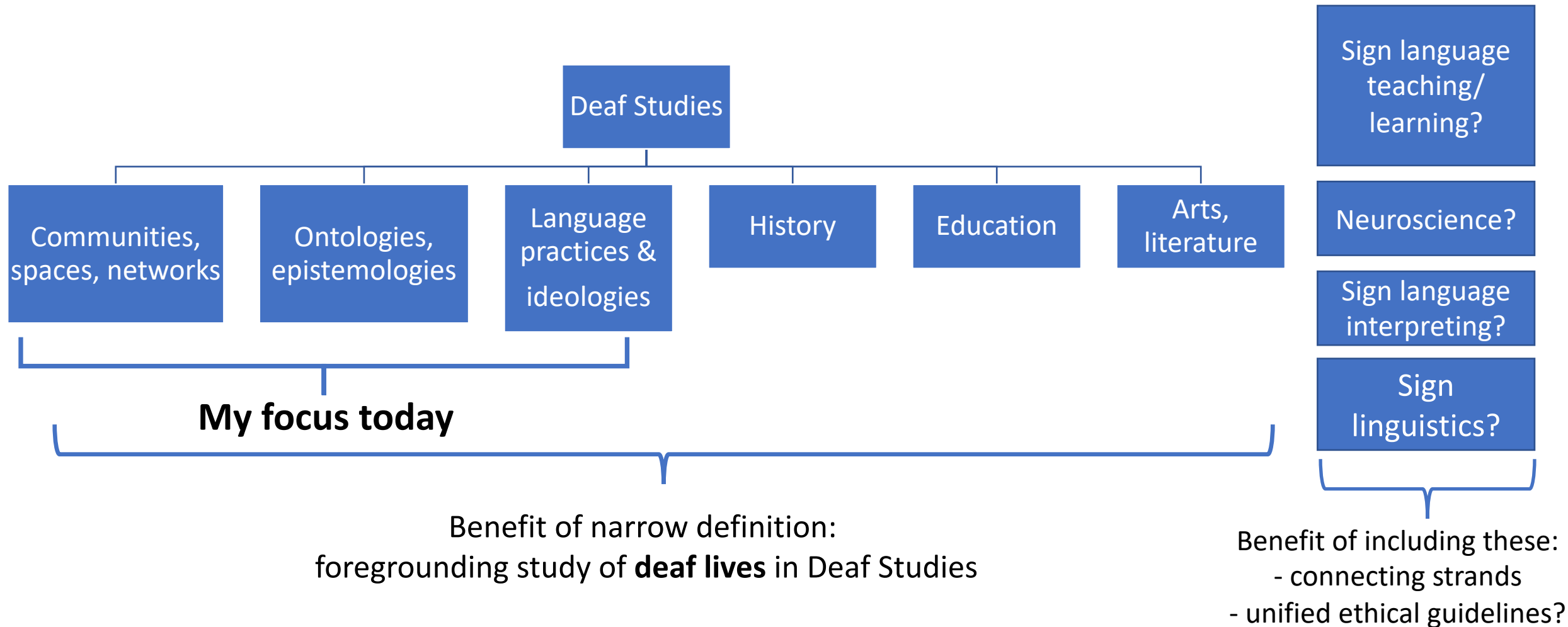


Benefit of narrow definition:  
foregrounding study of **deaf lives** in Deaf Studies

# Demarcating Deaf Studies



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Deaf Studies  
researchers

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graph LR; A[Deaf Studies researchers] --- B[Deaf Studies departments/centres (teaching/research)]; A --- C[Researchers in other institutions/disciplines focusing on deaf themes];
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=> May not always  
identify as Deaf Studies  
researchers!

# The Foundation of Deaf Studies

- Field has existed since late 1970s, mainly UK and USA
- Foci during early Deaf Studies:
  - 1. Overturning medical/deficit model of deafness**
  - 2. Description and validation** of deaf communities and cultures (*Deaf clubs and schools as central places; checklists of cultural traits*)
  - 3. Addressing and challenging oppression** (*oralism, audism, liberation, empowerment*)

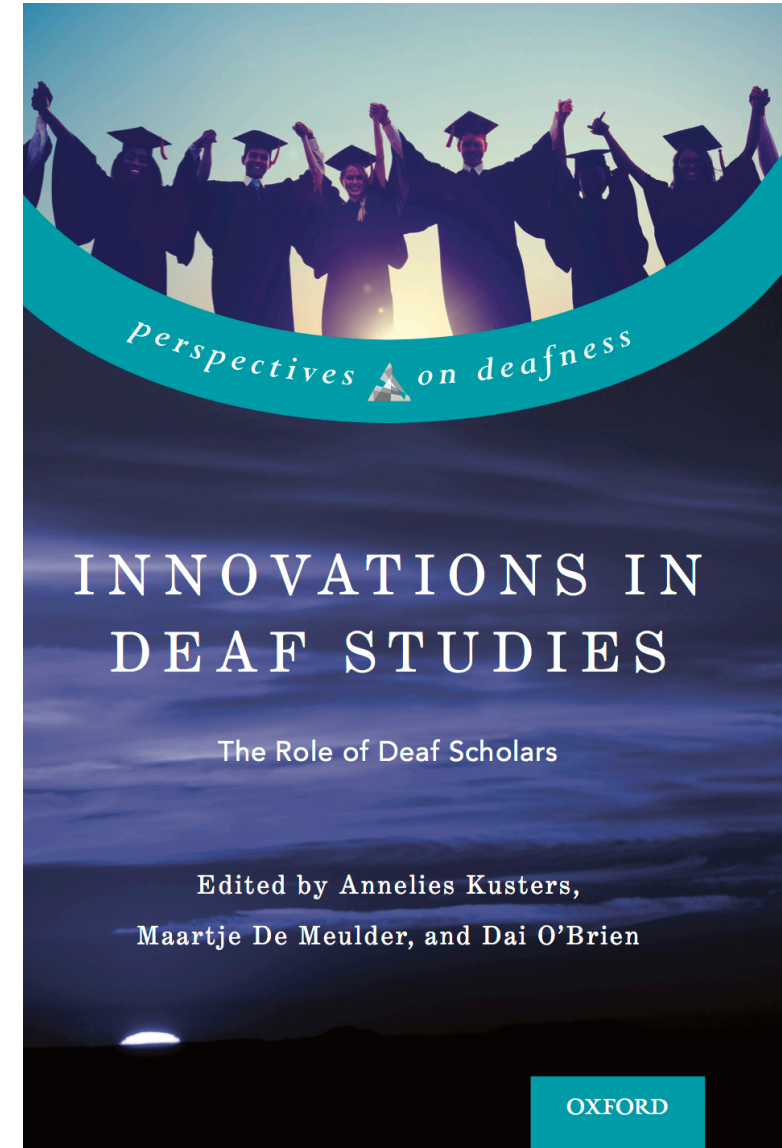
# What is Current in Deaf Studies?

- **Underrepresented** and underprivileged groups (race, gender, sexual orientation, class, ...)
- **Language** ideologies and everyday language use, multimodality
- Deaf **spaces**/networks
- **Rights and development**: citizenship, human rights, group rights, language rights, sustainable development
- Study of deaf **sameness/differences** in international contexts

# Deaf ontologies

= deaf ways of being

What kind of research do deaf scholars produce, informed by their experience of being deaf?






# Deaf Studies: White and Western?

- Deaf Studies: white/Western discipline?
  - White people disregarding non-white experiences
  - White people doing research in non-white contexts/countries
- Impacts:
  - Methodologies
  - Theoretical frameworks (eg. "deaf culture")
- Unequal power relationships (within research and in general)
- Evolutionist/teleological perspectives (eg. deaf identity = "being developed", one way)

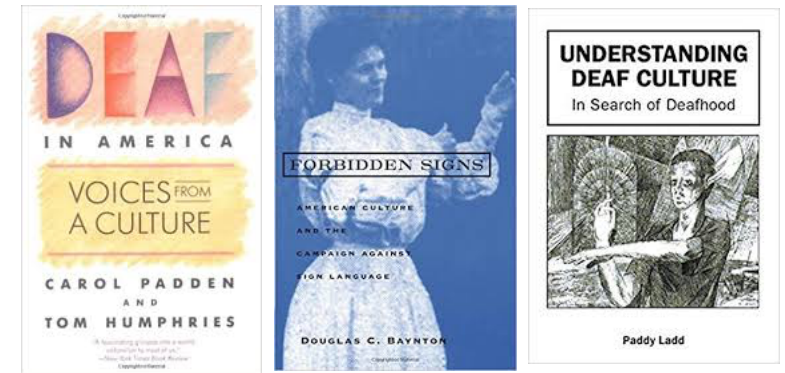
# Deaf Studies as a transformed and transformational field: **inspirations** across disciplines and nations



- How/who can Deaf Studies inspire?
- Where do we get inspiration for Deaf Studies research?

# Example: Research Guided by Foundational Framework of Deaf Studies

- **Background:** list with thesis topics for MA in Anthropology: topic “deaf culture”
- **Context (2004)**
  - First steps in “deaf world”
  - First steps in Deaf Studies research
- **Reading:** Deaf Studies classics
- **Theme:** “Deaf culture in Surinam”
  - Picked Surinam because of Dutch heritage
- One deaf school in the country (in Paramaribo), residential



# Methodology:

- Participant observation in school, boarding school, club for adults, social events
  - 370 pages of field notes in 2,5 months
- Interviews with deaf children, deaf adults, educators

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## Interview questions examples (**checklist style**):

- *Would you prefer **marrying** a deaf or a hearing person?*
- *Do you think deaf people are **disabled**?*
- *What are **differences** between deaf and hearing people?*
- *Do you have **jokes** about hearing people? About deafness?*
- *Is there a lot of **gossip**?*
- *Do you know the concept “deaf culture?” What does it mean?*

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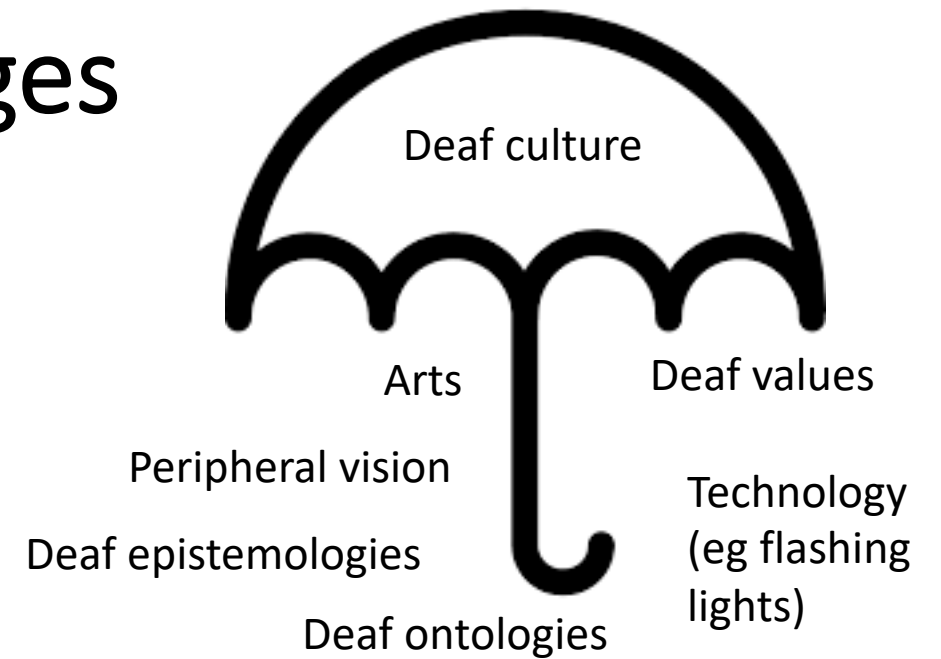
Brief answers, not understanding (especially children)

Not the best approach to gather data in this context

- Themes and places that emerged as important (**from conversations/listening/participating rather than interviewing!**)
  - **Key deaf places** in Paramaribo
  - **“Holland”**: Colonial heritage; import of signs; migration; holidays
  - **Emancipation/Empowerment/Participation** (teaching sign language, driver’s licenses, employment, leadership in alumni association)
- Struggle with **“deaf culture”** concept
  - ~~checklists~~
  - In Surinam: unfamiliarity with concept
- **“Deaf culture”** as **processual** concept

# Deaf Culture Concept: Challenges

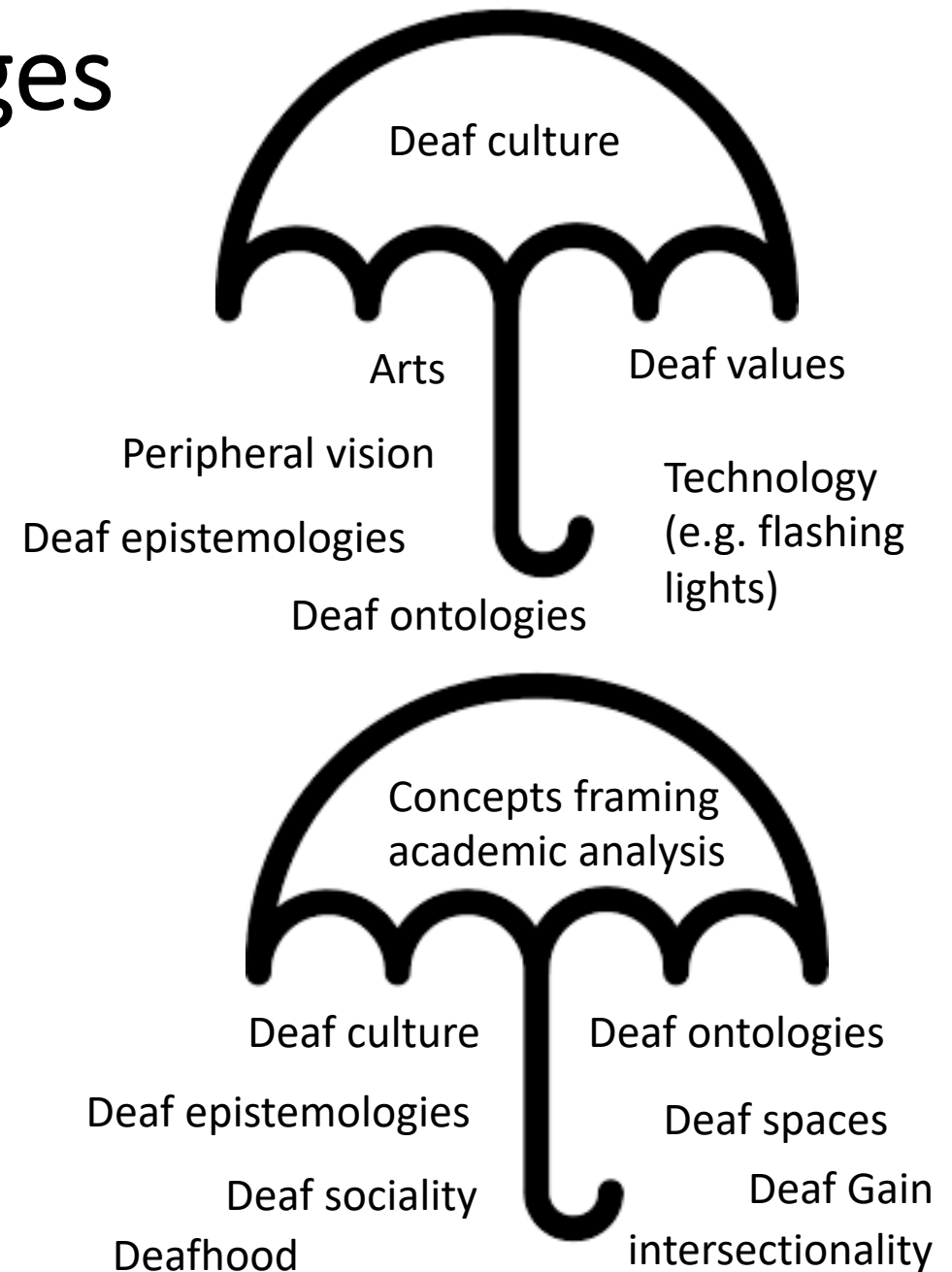
- Overused?
- Too broad?
- Static?
- Deaf vs hearing culture?
- Deaf cultures?





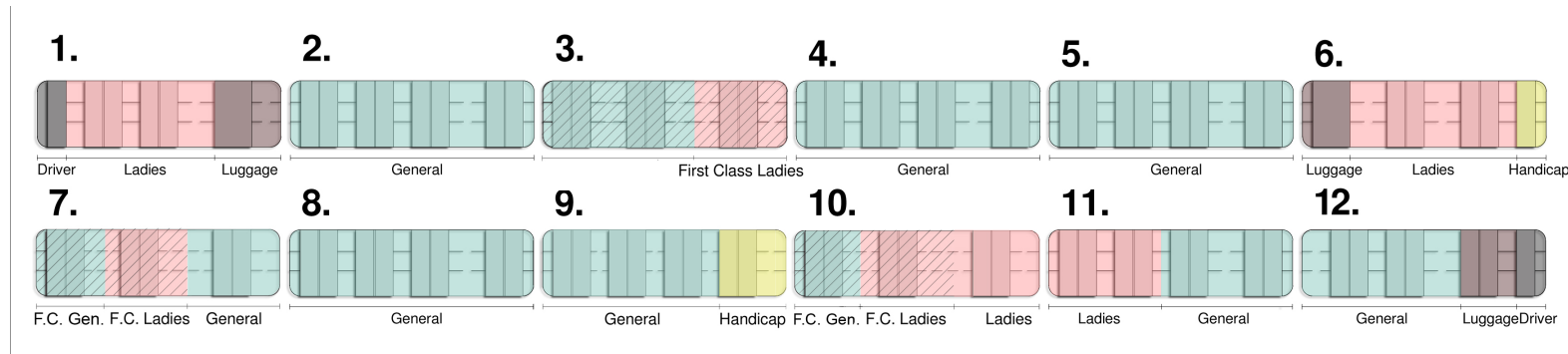
# Deaf Culture Concept: Challenges

- Overused?
- Too broad?
- Static?
- Deaf vs hearing culture?
- Deaf cultures?
- Experimenting
- Narrowing? (arts/theatre?)



# Example: Mumbai trains

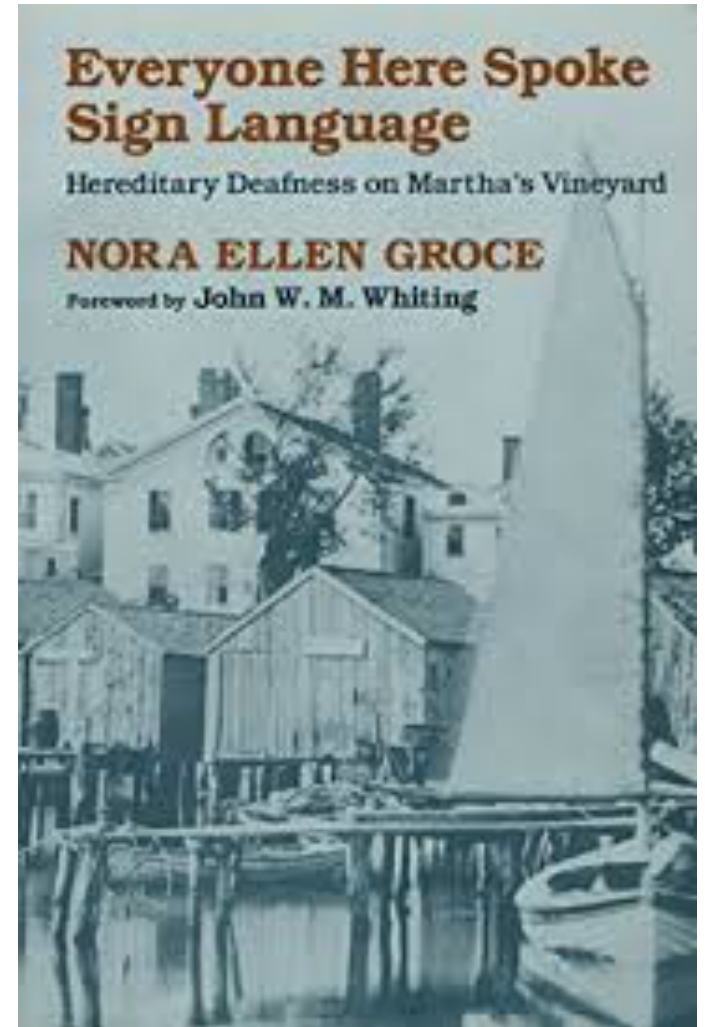
- Trip to India in Nov 2006 (camp/tourism): observed deaf navigating Mumbai => MSc Deaf Studies dissertation



- Deaf people socializing in so-called “handicapped compartments” in Mumbai trains => Dissertation topic narrowed down
- Inspired by “deaf geographies”
- Value of longitudinal perspective: follow up research in 2013-2014
  - focus on relationship deaf & disabled
  - focus on intersection of deaf & (trans)gender

# Example: Shared Signing Communities

- Past: Martha's Vineyard
- Well-known present examples:
  - Chican, Mexico
  - Bengkala (Desa Kolok), Bali
  - Al-Sayyid Bedouin, Israel
  - Adamorobe, Ghana
- Some researchers stated that: “no deaf culture”, “no deaf community”, “no deaf-only activities”
- Deaf experiences = ?



Adamorobe, Ghana  
PhD research  
2008-2009

Deaf culture?

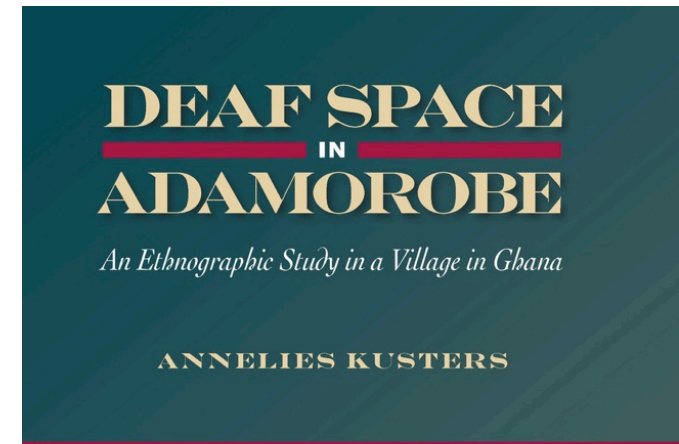
Deaf people: part of wider village and hearing family whilst also setting up deaf spaces to engage in deaf sociality



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# Deductive research



# Inductive research



# Deductive research



Risk: Persistent and often uncritical use of founding concepts (e.g. Deaf culture)

# Inductive research



# Deductive research



Risk: Persistent and often uncritical use of founding concepts (eg. Deaf culture)

# Inductive research



Risk: no theory may emerge + time-consuming

**But we don't have enough of this in Deaf Studies!**



## **Distinction between academic and everyday use:**

Even if we experiment with new concepts in academia, “deaf culture”, “deaf community”, “deaf world” etc. are widely used in everyday discourses in some deaf communities!

**Important to acknowledge that + study how the concepts are used! (deaf epistemologies)**

# Also: Engage with Current Mainstream Theories/Concepts

- Examples:

- Translanguaging
- Linguistic repertoires
- Superdiversity
- Intersectionality
- Mobilities
- Geography of disability
- Translocality

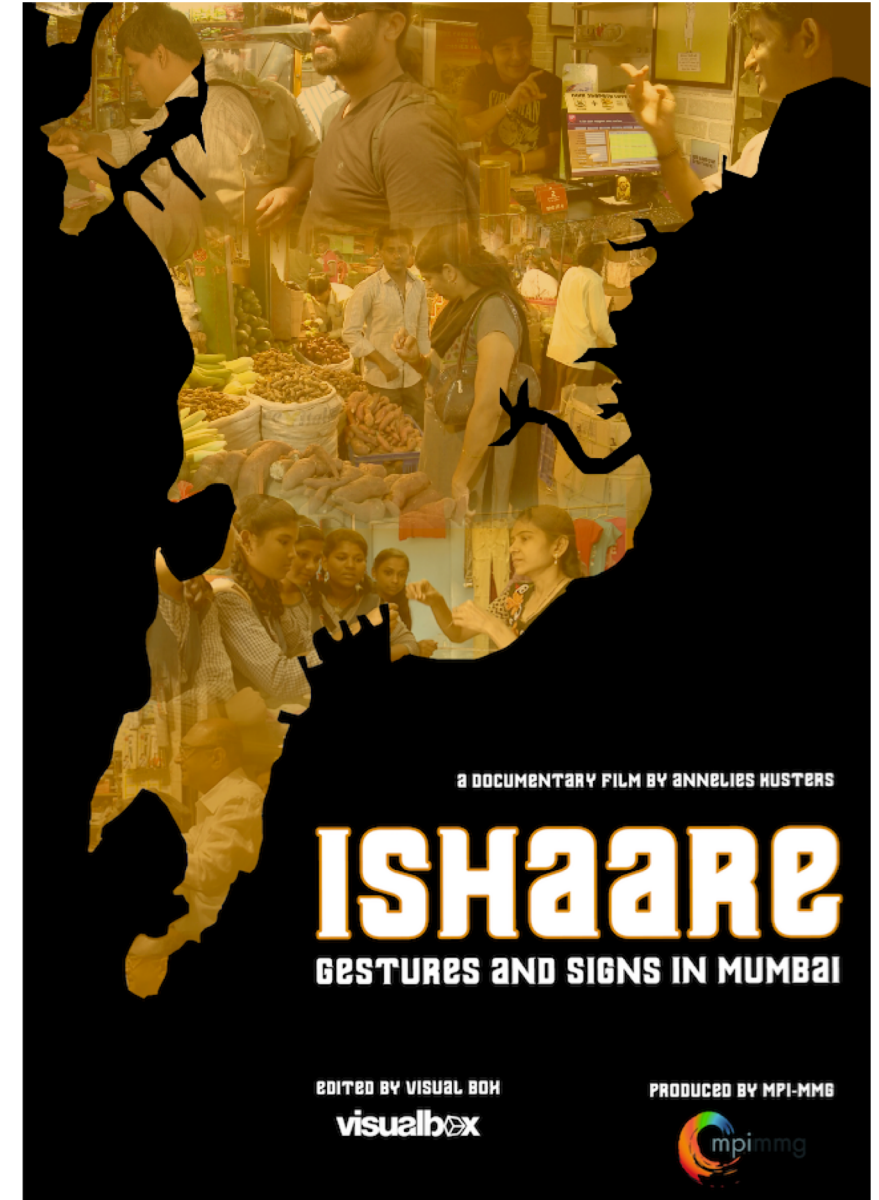
- And inspire other disciplines!
- How?
  - Publishing
  - Networking (small events attended by experts are ideal for networking!)
  - Get funding for events and invite experts
  - Period(s) of study/work in non-deaf universities/research centres



# Example: Research in Mumbai

- Postdoc in Germany, institution focusing on study of diversity, eager to fund a film
- Focus on customer interactions: shops, restaurants, transport. Six deaf people (one deaf blind) who sell and buy, order or serve, and travel.
- Meta-linguistic reflection on gesture-based translanguaging: study of language ideologies
- Creation of ethnographic film: *Ishaare: Gestures and Signs in Mumbai* (online!)

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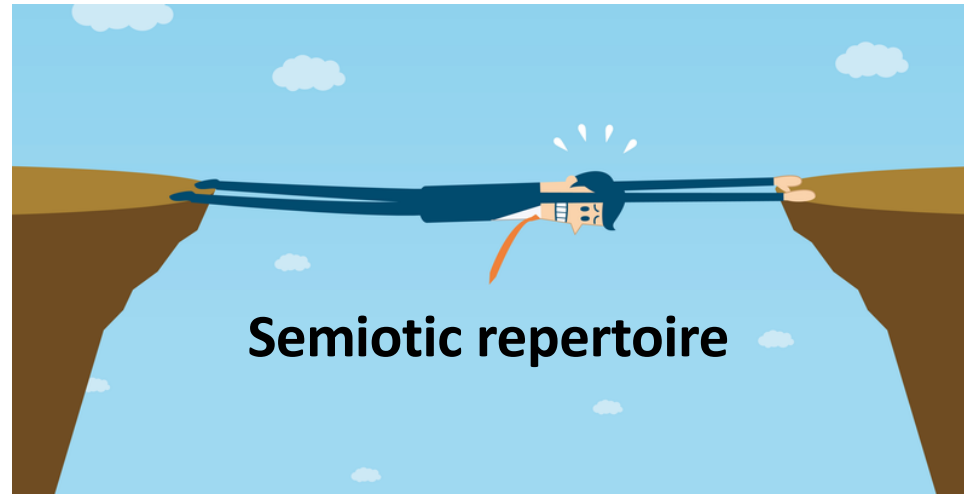




Studies of  
multimodality

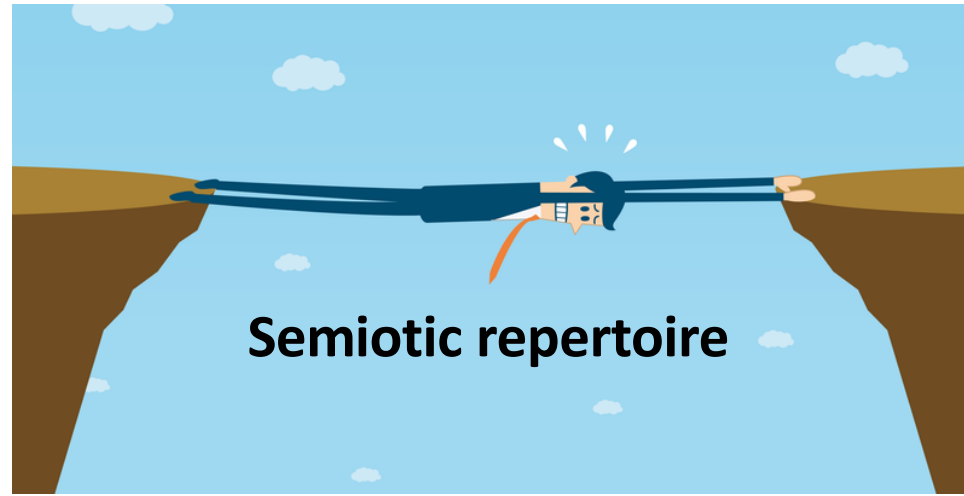
Studies of  
multilingualism/  
translanguaging

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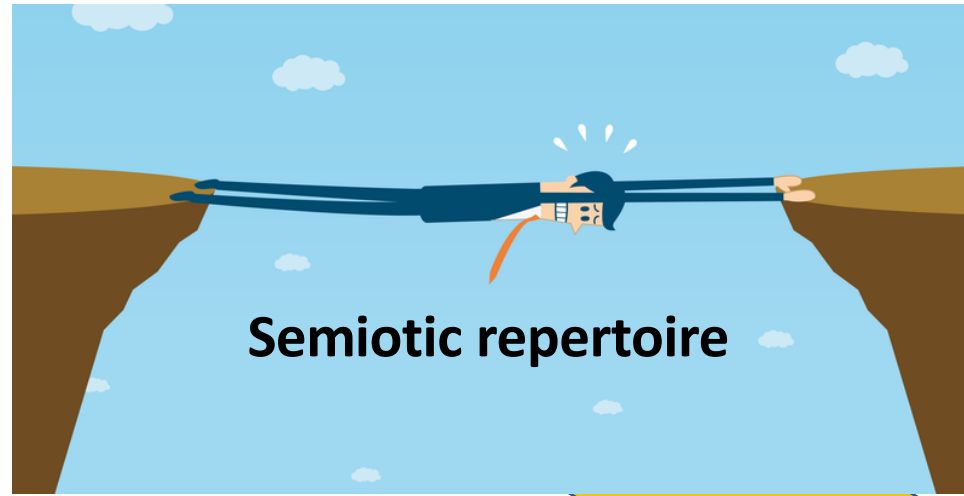


Studies of  
multilingualism/  
translanguaging

People's repertoires  
are multimodal,  
whether they are  
using spoken or  
signed languages!

Gestures	Signs	Objects	Drawing
Speech	Body posture	Smell	Writing
Emoticons	Tattoos	Pictures	Facial expression

Studies of  
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Contributing to  
current  
debates/theory!



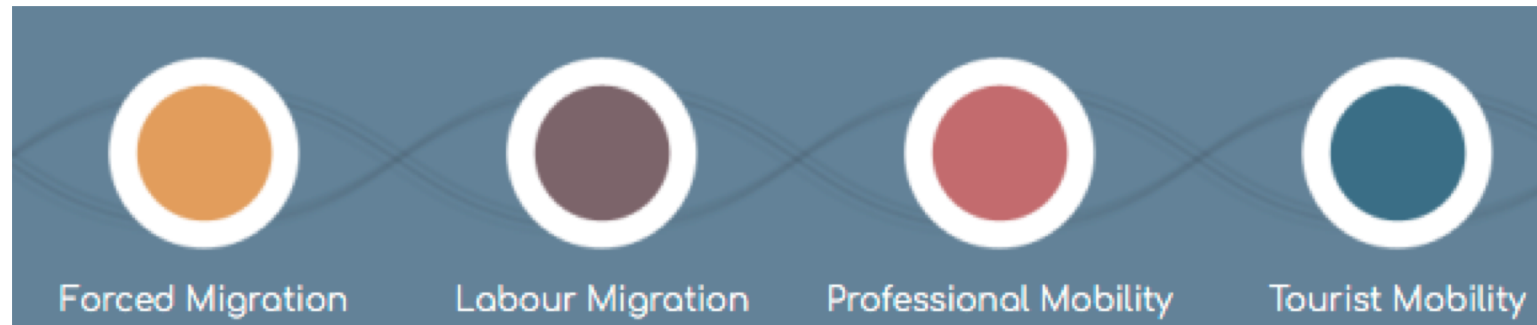


European Research Council  
Established by the European Commission



## Deaf mobilities across international borders: Visualising intersectionality and translanguaging

ERC Starting Grant - 2017-2022



# Intersectionality

- Early Deaf Studies: the question “what comes first?” (eg deaf first or black first)
- The question of “what comes first” is problematic in itself!  
Complex realities: **intersectionality**
- Crenshaw (1989):
  - multiple inequalities experienced by working-class black women
  - gender-race-class triumvirate: being doubly/triply oppressed because of patriarchy, racism, classism
- Later: addition of other dimensions in intersectionality theory: sexuality, religion, age, disability, etc.
- But problematic if it comes to merely mean “multiple identities”!

*Cho, Crenshaw &  
McCall 2013: Toward  
a field of  
intersectionality  
studies: Theory,  
applications, and  
praxis*

“**what makes an analysis intersectional**—  
whatever terms it deploys,  
whatever its iteration,  
whatever its field or discipline—

is its adoption of an intersectional way of thinking  
about the problem of sameness and difference  
and its relation to power.

This framing—conceiving of  
categories not as distinct  
but as always permeated by other categories,  
fluid and changing,  
always in the process of creating  
and being created  
by dynamics of power—

emphasizes what intersectionality **does**  
rather than what intersectionality **is.**” (p 795)

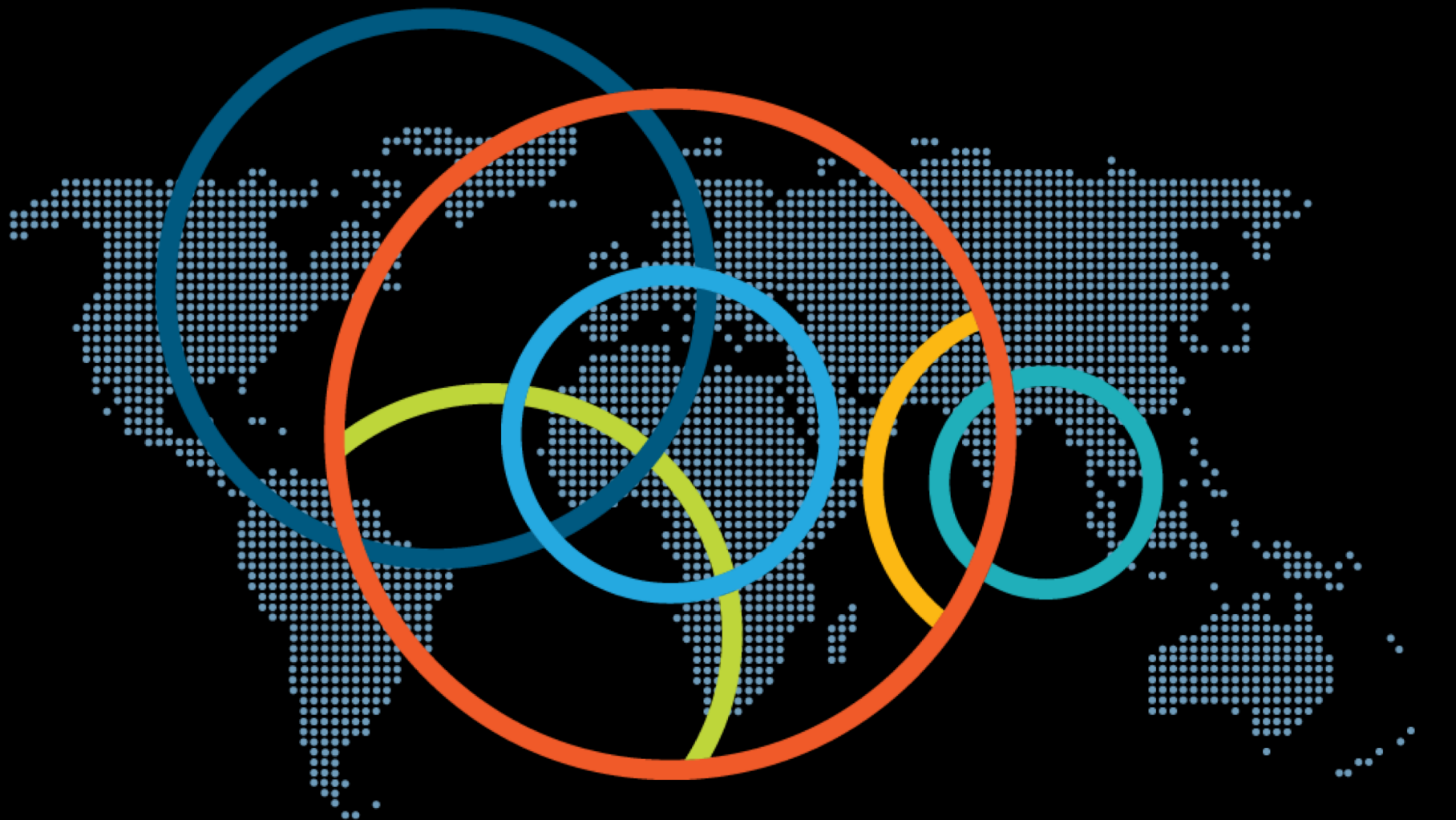
# INTERSECTIONALITY



# INTERSECTIONALITY



# TRANSLANGUAGING



# Deaf lives?






**How does the sitcom  
'Small World' reflect  
linguistic diversity in the  
British Deaf  
Community?**

**With Jordan Fenlon**

Combined expertise in linguistics  
of BSL + expertise in lang.  
ideologies



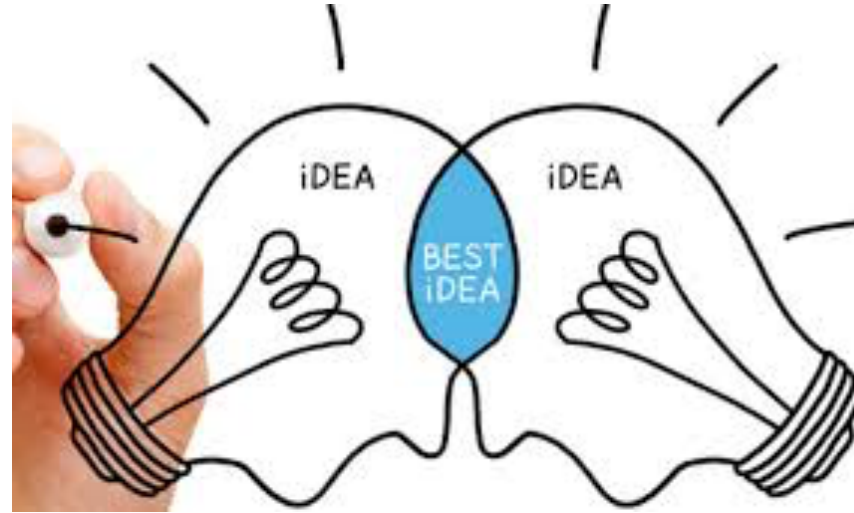
**Sign language policy in  
mixed deaf-hearing  
families**

**With Jemina Napier and Maartje  
De Meulder**

Own experience of family  
communication

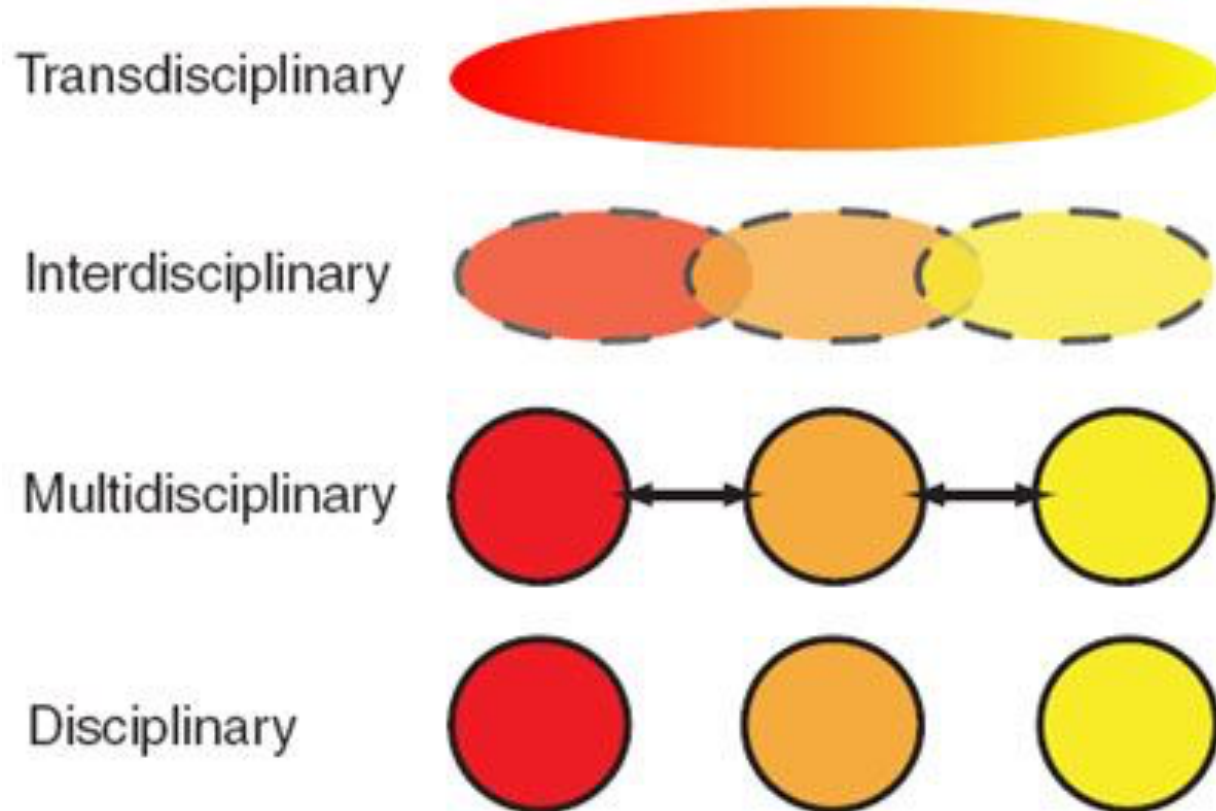


# Collaboration



- Cross-fertilization and collaborative projects
- Be open to collaboration with people focusing on other disciplines even if you initially feel dislike (e.g. theoretical sign linguistics and disability studies are often avoided by Deaf Studies scholars)

# Deaf Studies as a Field, Today



- Deaf Studies: traditionally **multidisciplinary**
- But has been turning around in circles (referring mostly to other Deaf Studies work!)
- Only recently more **interdisciplinary**: infiltrating mainstream academy (journals!), co-organized events, keynotes
- Should we strive more for **transdisciplinarity**? (dissolving boundaries between conventional disciplines)

# Does it (Still) Make Sense to Talk About Deaf Studies as a Field?

- NO,
  - Not an isolated monolithic body (anymore)
  - Outside of US: not always beneficial to brand oneself solely as a Deaf Studies scholar (very few Deaf Studies departments/centres/courses), for:
    - Employment opportunities
    - Research funding

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- YES,
  - Bringing together different approaches to research on deaf lives
  - There are (still) theories/concepts/discussions that are specific to Deaf Studies
    - E.g. methodology, ethics, deaf ontologies
  - Importance of courses, edited volumes, journal issues, conferences  
*(e.g. summer schools, Global Deaf Studies conference in Berlin, 2021, organized by HU Berlin and MobileDeaf)*

# Deaf Studies as a transformed and transformational field: inspirations across disciplines and nations

New concepts/theories  
Inductive  
More deaf researchers



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Deaf lives  
Other lives/fields  
Visual methods/filmmaking:  
data, dissemination

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Not just multidisciplinary  
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International  
Transnational

Be mobile (not necessarily internationally!)

Observe

Literature research

Collaboration

New approaches to old themes

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