3

Sign Language in Action

‘Harry Potter does not know who he is. He arrives at Hogwarts to find that he is a hero in the wizard world, after living as a “nobody” in the muggle world. This parallels the different status given to people depending on the “center” (hearing, deaf, wizard, and muggle)… Another parallel is the tendency that wizards (and perhaps all humans) have to establish binary relationships as in “us and them.” The urge to create taxonomies that define the world as either wizard or muggle reflects a common outlook that many minorities use to define their own world. This compartmentalization of everything as either Deaf or hearing, Black or White, gay or straight, and so forth demonstrates the power of identity especially as it applies to the worldview of minorities.’ (Czubek & Greenwald, 2005)

Sign language in action is a term that we have coined to encompass how sign languages are used in everyday life. In Chapter 2, we framed the notion of sign language in action against the backdrop of the fields of Deaf Studies and applied linguistics and by introducing the concept of applied sign linguistics. In this chapter, we will discuss the concept of sign language in action in depth, exploring sign language identity, attitudes and policy. Initially, we will explore the notion of sign language and identity to highlight the relationship between deaf people as a linguistic and cultural minority group and the wider majority of non-deaf people. By describing attitudes towards sign languages, we can then provide a context for considering how sign language policy and planning is shaped by attitudes towards deaf people from within and outside the deaf community.

3.1 Sign language and identity

In Chapter 2, we introduced the concept of deaf culture and the fact that due to the recognition of the linguistic status of sign languages, deaf sign
language users are considered to be members of a linguistic and cultural minority group rather than a disability group. There are problems, though, with such a binary distinction, as there are still tensions in how deaf people identify themselves that affect social inclusion and exclusion (Skelton & Valentine, 2003). The key to the notion of ‘deaf identity’ is the relationship between the use of sign language and the wider ‘hearing world’, whose construct of deafness is typically very different from that of deaf sign language users. As discussed in Chapter 2, the field of Deaf Studies emerged in the 1980s in order to give status to deaf people and their language and identity rather than reduce them to the level of their hearing loss. Although it has been suggested that the emergence of the field of Deaf Studies has been centric to the U.S. (Myers & Fernandes, 2010), it has still provided a wealthy forum for discussion and exploration of sign language, culture, community and sign language in action.

Over this period (1980–present), the body of academic knowledge about sign languages, deaf people, their identity (identities), their culture(s) and their relationships has given rise to a notion of ‘Deaf epistemologies’ (Hauser, O’Hearn, McKee, Steider & Thew, 2010; Paul & Moores, 2012). Although Supalla (2013) believes that Paul and Moores’ (2012) focus on ‘deafness as specialised knowledge’ is too narrow, it is a useful umbrella concept to explore the knowledge that we share about sign language and identity and how that knowledge has been framed differently over time.

In the next section, we describe the language that has been used by Deaf Studies and applied sign linguistics scholars to assert changing deaf epistemologies and, given our applied linguistic focus, the integral part that sign language plays in these epistemologies. What follows, then, is discussion of signed languages as embodied languages, the notion of deaf citizenship and the nature of deaf and hearing identities in relation to sign language and the deaf community.

### 3.1.1 Language to talk about sign language and identity

The language used to talk about deaf people and research involving deaf people is important, especially given the ‘fuzziness’ of deaf identities (Young & Temple, 2014). The work of Deaf Studies scholars in the 20th century used language in a certain way to defend the position of deaf sign language users and their linguistic and cultural identity and to reclaim a forgotten history (Bauman & Murray, 2009, 2010). Recognition of the full linguistic status of sign languages was transformative in enabling researchers to shift perceptions of deaf people as ‘outsiders in a hearing world’ (Higgins, 1980) to people with a sense of belonging, who identify with one another based on shared experience and the use of a sign language, regardless of how well they actually know each other; a situation described by Schein (1989) as being ‘at home among strangers’.