

**Research Article**

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**CODAs and SIGN LANGUAGE**  
**CODA'LAR ve İŞARET DİLİ****ABSTRACT**Gül Karahan<sup>1</sup>Veli Duyan<sup>2</sup>**CORRESPONDENCE**<sup>1</sup>Independent Researcher. ORCID: 0000-0002-

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The aim of this research is to explore the meaning of sign language for CODAs through a qualitative design and phenomenological approach.

The study group of the research consisted of 15 female and 15 male CODAs. The data of the study were collected through in-depth interviews with the participants using a semi-structured interview form and data analysis was conducted using MAXQDA 2020 software. In the research, it was determined that CODAs attribute a special meaning to sign language beyond being a means of communication. Sign language has a central place in their lives, both because of the emotional connection they have established and because it enables them to have a profession and a job. The fact that it enables them to make the deaf visible in society, to help the deaf, to take part in various social responsibility projects for the deaf are important dynamics in the process of making sense of sign language.

Sign language is also the language they prefer to use extensively. Language use preferences in their daily lives are structured on the basis of habits. As children of deaf parents, the lives of CODAs, as part of the deaf community, involve interaction with both the deaf and hearing community, and the findings of the study show that the participants are heavily engaged with the deaf community. One of the important findings of the research is that CODAs intensely feel a sense of belonging to the deaf community.

**Keywords:** CODA (Children of Deaf Adults), Deaf Community, Sign Language, Phenomenology.

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### ÖZET

Bu araştırmanın amacı nitel desen ve fenomenolojik yaklaşımla CODA'lar için işaret dilinin anlamını keşfetmektir. Araştırmanın çalışma grubunu 15 kadın ve 15 erkek CODA oluşturmuştur. Araştırmanın verileri katılımcılarla yarı-yapılandırılmış görüşme formu kullanılarak yapılan derinlemesine görüşmeler yoluyla toplanmış ve veri analizleri MAXQDA 2020 programı kullanılarak yapılmıştır. Araştırmada CODA'ların işaret diline bir iletişim aracı olmasının ötesinde özel bir anlam yükledikleri belirlenmiştir. İşaret dili hem kurdukları duygusal bağ nedeniyle hem de meslek ve iş sahibi olmalarını sağlayan niteliğiyle yaşamlarında merkezi bir yere sahiptir. Sağırları toplumda görünür kılmalarını, sağırlara yardım etmelerini, sağırlar için çeşitli sosyal sorumluluk projelerinde yer almalarını sağlıyor olması işaret dilini anlamlandırma süreçlerinde önemli dinamiklerdir. İşaret dili aynı zamanda kullanmayı yoğun olarak tercih ettikleri dildir. Gündelik yaşamlarındaki dil kullanım tercihleri ise alışkanlıklar temelinde yapılanmaktadır. Sağır ebeveynlerin çocukları olarak, sağır toplumun bir parçası olan CODA'ların yaşamları hem sağır hem işiten toplumla etkileşimi içermekte, araştırmanın bulguları katılımcıların yoğun olarak sağır toplum ile ilişki içinde olduklarını göstermektedir. Araştırmanın önemli bulgularından birisi de CODA'ların yoğun olarak sağır topluma aidiyet hissettiklerini ortaya koymuş olmasıdır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** CODA (Sağır Ebeveynlerin İşiten Çocukları), Sağır Toplum, İşaret Dili, Fenomenoloji.

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## INTRODUCTION

CODA is a concept that refers to hearing children of deaf parents and is used not only in the literature but also in everyday life, and its awareness is spreading rapidly with the increased visibility of the deaf community.

In current discussions in the literature, deafness is defined in two different ways: medical and cultural. Using the word deaf with a lower case letter is an audiological based definition used to refer to hearing impairment and corresponds to the medical definition of deafness. Capitalizing the word Deaf is one of the ways Deaf people identify themselves as a separate culture. This use, which is an opposition to the labeling of deafness as a disability (stigma), is a statement that deafness is a subculture (Clason, 2019). The use of Deaf, which corresponds to the cultural definition of deafness, expresses a perspective and stance on the deaf community. It positions the person referred to within a subculture of deaf people rather than groups of people with disabilities and forms the basis for understanding the deaf community, which has different dynamics beyond being deaf. The deaf community as a subculture includes deaf people as well as their deaf or hearing children, parents and other relatives (Singleton and Title, 2000). As children of deaf parents, CODAs are part of the deaf community and their lives involve interaction with both the deaf and hearing community.

Sign languages, which are the means of communication for deaf communities, are natural languages whose historical origins date back to the beginning of human history. CODAs are children who acquire sign language as their mother tongue and usually through the language acquisition process like deaf children of deaf parents, although there are sometimes variations depending on family structure. Mother tongue is the language that a child acquires from his/her family and the community in which he/she lives. language acquisition describes the child's acquisition of language in the natural environment where he or she is exposed to that language (Uçak, 2026). Since CODAs acquire both sign language and spoken language as their mother tongue in the language acquisition process, they are defined as bilingual individuals in the literature; and since they are naturally positioned both within the deaf culture, which is a subculture, and within the mainstream culture, they are defined as bicultural individuals in the literature.

Human society is unthinkable without language. Language is an integral part of an individual's identity (Byram, 2006). Defining language as "the most fascinating talent in nature, an ordinary and unique skill", Fischer (2020) points out that language is a universal ability and states that any living being that transmits information to other living beings, regardless of the era, uses some kind of language. According to Corballis, who argues that sign language is closer to the origins of language than spoken language, the fact that wherever

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there is a deaf community in the world, a sign language naturally develops there is one of the proofs of this closeness (Corballis, 2003). Sign language is a non-verbal, visual-based and three-dimensional communication channel. Sign languages are not the expression of spoken languages with signs; they are independent of spoken languages with their own structure and rules (ASL Dictionary, 2022). Sign language users perceive this language visually. Having their own grammar and vocabulary, sign languages have a rich internal structure that expresses not only concrete meaning but also abstract meaning (Macurová, 2001, cited in Klimentova & Hynkova, 2017).

Positioning sign language as an independent and natural language with its own rules makes it possible to evaluate sign language from a sociological and anthropological perspective, in the context of its relationship with culture and society. As a community that uses its own language, the deaf community is a community that defines its life according to this language and formulates its thoughts through the use of this language. Sign language is the most important element that binds the deaf community together (Filer & Filer, 2000) and to reject sign language is to reject the deaf (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996). For the deaf, using sign language primarily means the freedom to be themselves. Therefore, accepting sign language as a language and as the language of the deaf community is perhaps the first step towards understanding the deaf community.

Sign language, whose origins date back to the beginning of human history, was recognized as a language and taught in schools only in the 18th century. However, in 1880, the International Congress on Education of the Deaf convened in Milan banned the teaching of sign language in deaf schools with a majority decision, and the ban was implemented in the USA, European countries and many other countries around the world. The process of re-acceptance of sign language came to the fore after the Second World War. In 1960, William C. Stokoe's studies on the structure of sign language, which proved that ASL was a real and natural language with its own grammar and syntax, formed the basis of Gallaudet University's acceptance of American Sign Language as a re-teaching language. In the 1970s, Stokoe's studies restarted the process of transition to education and training with sign language in addition to verbal education in the world (Corballis, 2003; Gallaudet, 2022).

In Turkey, Turkish Sign Language was taught in schools for the deaf in the early years of the Republic, but sign language education was banned nationwide in 1953 with an understanding based on the methodology adopted after the Milan Conference. Despite the transformation in the world in the 1970s and the introduction of sign language education in deaf schools and the widespread understanding that sign language is also taught to non-deaf people, the ban continued in Turkey. In official education, Turkish Sign Language was liberalized with a law enacted in 2005, 52 years after it was banned (Akalın, 2013; Akalın, 2020; Kemaloğlu & Kemaloğlu,

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2012). Sign language is not only a natural language used by deaf individuals in their families and close relationships, but also an important element for the deaf community and one of the basic components of deaf culture. Today, sign language is recognized as a natural and real language in almost every country in the world and in our country.

### **METHOD**

The aim of this research is to explore the meaning of sign language for CODAs through a qualitative design and phenomenological approach. The sub-objectives of the study are to understand whether they prefer sign language or spoken language when communicating and how this preference is structured, how they describe their relationship with the deaf community and the hearing community, and their sense of social belonging.

#### **Research Design**

Qualitative research design and phenomenological approach were used in the study. The phenomenological approach defines the common meaning of people's experiences of a phenomenon or concept and is a descriptive study that integrates what is experienced and how it is experienced and discusses the essence of individuals' experiences. Data are collected from individuals who have experience with the phenomenon and through in-depth interviews with them (Creswell, 2017). In this study, data were collected from and through in-depth interviews with CODAs in relation to the purpose of the study.

#### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The target group of the study consisted of CODAs in Turkey who know sign language and are over the age of 18. In this study, "Coda" refers to hearing individuals who have both deaf parents. Purposive sampling was used to create a study group within the target group.

For the study group, a specific number of interviews was not determined at the beginning of the research, and interviews were continued until the saturation point was reached. The saturation point is the point at which no new information is received from the sampling units and at this point, the inclusion in the sample is stopped (Shenton, 2004). Special attention was paid to the gender distribution of the participants forming the study group and the balance was constantly maintained during the data collection process. Thus, at the end of the process, the study group consisted of 30 CODA participants, 15 women and 15 men.

The data were collected through in-depth interviews with the participants using a semi-structured

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interview form. In the process of analyzing the research data, the research process steps used in qualitative research were followed and MAXQDA 2020 program was used to analyze the research data. First of all, the audio recordings of the in-depth interviews were transcribed, the data obtained were organized and the database created was uploaded to the program. The data were read over and over again, and after obtaining a general understanding of the database, data-specific coding was performed.

### **Ethical Matters**

For this research, an application was made to the Ethics Committee of Ankara University Rectorate and the research was initiated after the decision of the Committee No. 17/280 that the research was ethically appropriate.

### **FINDINGS**

In this research, the data obtained from the participants were coded, similar codes were brought together and grouped under categories and a code map was created.

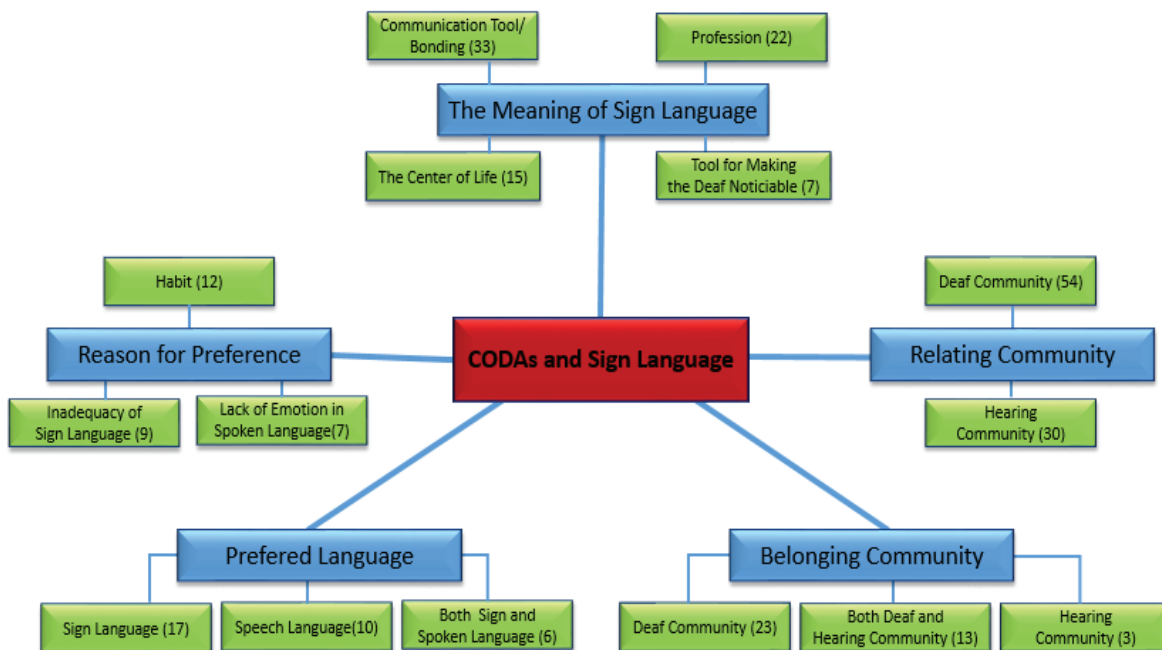
As seen in Figure 1., 5 categories were obtained under the theme of CODAs and Sign Language as a result of the analysis. These categories are; (1) the meaning of sign language, (2) the society with which the relationship is established, (3) the society to which one feels belonging, (4) the preferred language and (5) the reason for preference. Findings related to each category are presented below.

#### **1. The Meaning of Sign Language**

The Meaning of Sign Language category was expressed with 4 different codes in line with the participant expressions; (1) Communication tool/connection, (2) Profession, (3) Center of life and (5) Tool for Making Deaf People Visible.

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Figure 1. Code Map



**1.1. Communication Tool/Bonding**

Participants interpret sign language primarily as a means of communication and a way of connecting. It is seen in the narratives that sign language has a very fundamental place in the lives of the participants. The participants' expressions point to the meaning of sign language as a means of communication and bonding with their parents, relatives and the deaf community. Emphasizing the emotional bond they establish with sign language, the participants intensely expressed the meaning they attributed to the fact that it enables them to bond with their parents. P7 explained this situation as follows: *“Sign language means my mother and father for me. Why because I can establish my bond with them through sign language.”* The findings show that sign language has an integrity of meaning far beyond being a language for the participants. In P4's statement, *“I have an emotional connection with sign language because it allows me to communicate with my parents and*

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*also with my uncle.*”, it is seen that they attribute meaning to the fact that it is the way they can access their parents and sometimes their uncles, aunts, uncles, aunts, grandparents, and that it enables them to connect with them as a means of communication.

### **1.2. Profession**

Participants intensively stated that sign language is their profession and that they make a living as professional sign language interpreters. P23 expressed this situation as follows, *“It is my source of livelihood, I mean, the biggest part of it is my source of livelihood.”* In addition to the fact that sign language interpreting is a regular job that provides economic income, P25 said, *“Right now, for one thing, my life status is thanks to sign language. You know, thanks to sign language, I am in a very special place and I have a high status.”* As seen in this statement, they stated that it provided them with their status. In the statements collected under this code, the participants stated that the meaning of sign language for them is that it is their profession, and that their profession constitutes an important part of their lives.

### **1.3. The Center of Life**

As seen in the statements of P6 *“Sign language is everything for me.”*, P10 *“Sign language is my life.”*, P16 *“Sign language is at the center of my life.”*, the participants stated that sign language occupies a big place in their lives and that their lives are shaped on the basis of sign language, that they are integrated with it and that they see it as the center of their lives.

### **1.4. Tool for Making the Deaf Noticeable**

Some participants stated that they attach importance to sign language in order to make deaf people noticeable in society and that they work for this purpose. They stated that the meaning of sign language is that it is a means to do something for the deaf community, which is very important to them, and to draw attention to their social existence.

## **2. Relating Community**

In line with the participant statements, the category of the community with which the relationship was established was expressed with 2 different codes, namely (1) deaf community and (2) hearing community.



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### **1.1. Deaf Community**

The participants stated that they have been in contact with their deaf relatives, deaf friends of their parents, deaf neighbors and their children since their childhood, and that they come together with deaf people through deaf associations. P12 expressed this situation as follows; “It has been like this since I was a child, I mean, I have more deaf friends around me than my normal friends, as friends. It is the same now, it was the same in my childhood. I have CODA friends.” They stated that their professional choices also increased these relationships, and that after they started working as sign language interpreters, their relations with the Deaf community increased and they established more relationships with the Deaf community.

### **1.2. Hearing Community**

The hearing community code was expressed with less intensity than the Deaf community code. Some participants stated that they had made friends with hearing individuals since their childhood, that there were no other deaf families or children in their environment, that they were always intertwined with the hearing community, especially during the school period, and that for this reason, they established more relationships with the hearing community. In the narratives of the participants who stated that the society they relate with is the hearing society, the emphasis on the fact that their environment consists of hearing individuals and therefore they naturally relate with the hearing society can be seen in the narrative of P3, “It was always like this, school, school, I mean, when I came home, there were only two deaf people in my life. Other than that, everyone at school, my teachers, my friends, they were all on the hearing side.” (P3).

## **3. Belonging Community**

In line with the statements of the participants, the category of the society to which they felt belonging was expressed with 3 different codes: (1) deaf society, (2) hearing society and (3) both deaf and hearing society. Belonging is a state of relationality that expresses connectedness and nurtures a sense of being ourselves.

### **3.1. Deaf Community**

In the category of the society to which the participants felt belonging, expressions related to the codes of the deaf community were intensely expressed. P13 said, “I feel closer to the deaf, I feel close, belonging, close.” P8 said, “For example, if I talk to the deaf, I feel more relaxed, I mean, talking people stress me more.

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A decorative graphic consisting of a blue downward-pointing arrow shape with a red and white border.

Talking communities, for example, always give me trouble. Well, I mean, I feel more comfortable, I mean, there is no reason for this.” In their narratives, the participants intensely expressed that they felt that they belonged to the deaf community, stated that they felt more comfortable when they were together with the deaf community, and defined the sense of belonging they experienced as being close and finding themselves. It is seen that the deaf culture, in which they have been involved since their childhood, has created a space in which they feel comfortable and can move easily.

### **3.2. Hearing Community**

A small number of participants stated that they felt that they belonged to the hearing community. Some participants defined themselves as closer to the hearing community and expressed that they preferred to be together with hearing people. However, it should be noted that these expressions are much less distinct and less sharp than the expressions gathered under the code of the deaf community. Although participants expressed that they felt they belonged to the hearing community, they also emphasized their strong ties with the deaf community.

### **3.3. Both Deaf and Hearing Community**

The other code expressed by the participants is the code for both deaf and hearing society. As in P28's statement “Since we grew up in the same time periods and under the same conditions with both communities, I feel very comfortable in both.”, some participants stated that they felt comfortable when they were together with both communities, that they were close to both communities and that they could adapt to both communities. In their narratives, it is seen that they attribute this to the fact that they have lived a life intertwined with both communities since their childhood.

## **4. Preferred Language**

The preferred language category was expressed with 3 different codes in line with the participant statements; (1) sign language, (2) spoken language and (3) both sign and spoken language.

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### **4.1. Sign Language**

Participants intensively stated that they prefer to use sign language in their daily lives. They stated that sign language is their mother tongue, that they express themselves more comfortably in sign language, that they have difficulty in finding the equivalent of what they want to say in spoken language, but that they can easily express themselves in sign language, that they think in sign language and even see their dreams in sign language, and that they like and prefer sign language more. P16 stated the following on this subject: “*Sign language. Because I know that when I use sign language, I express everything I want to say very easily. I feel very comfortable when I use sign language. But when I chat in a normal friend environment, I may experience stumbling or expression problems.*”.

### **4.2. Speech Language**

The other code expressed by the participants with less intensity than sign language is the code for spoken language. In their less intense narratives, the participants stated that they prefer to use spoken language in their daily lives. They stated that they express themselves better and more comfortably in spoken language and that using this language makes them happier, as in K14’s statement “*Actually, I am happier in Turkish.*”

### **4.3. Both Sign and Spoken Language**

Another code expressed by the participants with less intensity is the code for both sign and spoken language. As can be seen in P28’s statement “*Neither of them is dominant, I think I am very comfortable with both, I think I can express myself very comfortably. There is no difference.*” Some participants stated that they prefer both sign language and spoken language in their daily lives. It was determined that the participants who expressed this code grew up exposed to both languages and were in active and continuous relationships with community members who use both languages in their lives.

## **5. Reason for Preference**

The reason for preference category was expressed with 3 different codes in line with the participant statements; (1) habit, (2) inadequacy of sign language and (3) lack of emotion in spoken language.

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### **5.1. Habit**

Regarding the language they prefer, the participants stated that they prefer that language mostly because it is a habit. The findings show that the participants tend to use the language they use more intensively depending on environmental factors, in other words, depending on the intensity of their interaction with the society using the language, the habits acquired with the effect of repetition are decisive. P23 expressed this situation as follows, *“I mean, we got used to it, I mean, I can say that for myself, because I got used to it. I communicated with sign language, I got used to it, that’s how I grew up, so you get used to whatever language you grow up with.”*

### **5.2. Inadequacy of Sign Language**

Participants who prefer spoken language in their daily lives stated that they prefer spoken language because sign language is insufficient. They explained the reason for this preference with factors arising from the language itself, emphasizing that sign language may be insufficient for deeper expressions or require indirect expression. In their narratives, the participants emphasized that the vocabulary of sign language is small, that it is more difficult than spoken language, and that terms in fields such as law and medicine have no equivalent in sign language. P7 expressed this situation as follows, *“The answer I give to questions about what is the biggest problem when translating Turkish into sign language is this: Only 30% of the words to be explained in Turkish have a representation in sign language.”*

### **5.3. Lack of Emotion in Spoken Language**

Participants who prefer sign language in their daily lives stated that they prefer sign language due to the lack of emotion in spoken language. Participants stated that they use more intense facial expressions in sign language, that facial expressions enable them to express emotions more clearly and that they prefer to use sign language for this reason. They stated that sign language is a language that can be used effectively in the expression of emotions, that it enables them to experience that emotion and make the other party experience it at the same time while signaling what they feel, and that spoken language cannot provide the intensity needed for emotional expressions. P5 expressed this situation as follows: *“Because I think people communicate more comfortably because gestures and facial expressions come into play there. For example, there is saying “I love*

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*you”, and there is emphasizing it. That’s how he uses his gestures, it increases the effect there.”.*

**DISCUSSION**

For the participants, sign language has a very fundamental place in their lives as it is the tool they use to communicate and connect with their parents, extended family members and the deaf community. The results of the study conducted by Gürboğa and Kargin (2013) with 100 participants over the age of 25 and examining the communication methods/skills used by deaf people in different environments show that deaf people mostly use signs in the dimension of understanding and self-expression at home, shopping, friendship relations, public transportation vehicles, and workplaces. The results of the study indicate that they marry deaf people and prefer to communicate with non-deaf family members at home by signing (Gürboğa & Kargin, 2003). The data of this study also show that the participants communicate with sign language at home and with their family members. In the narratives of the participants, it is seen that they have an emotional connection with sign language, that they attribute a special meaning to the fact that it enables them to communicate with their parents, and that sign language has an integrity of meaning far beyond being a language for them.

The findings of the study show that CODAs have a more intense relationship with the deaf community. It is seen that CODAs have been in contact with their deaf relatives, deaf friends of their parents, deaf neighbors and their children since their childhood, and they come together with the deaf community through deaf associations. Activities organized by deaf associations such as picnics, trips, meals or invitations were the time periods when the participants were in intensive contact with the deaf community. In the findings, it is seen that the participants who had more contact with the hearing community had hearing friends since childhood, there were no other deaf families or children in their environment, they were always intertwined with the hearing community, especially during the school period, their environment consisted of hearing individuals, and therefore they naturally established contact with the hearing community. Hoffmeister (2007) states that all CODAs grow up in deaf families, but not all CODAs grow up in the deaf community. This study supports Hoffmeister’s finding. All of the participants of the study grew up with deaf parents, but some of them had very limited exposure to the deaf community. In addition, the results of another study revealing that most of the CODAs define their identities mostly through the language they use, shows that there are great differences among CODAs in how much they are related to hearing or deaf communities (Pizer et al., 2013).

Analyses of the community to which the participants feel belonging, which includes community loyalty and relatedness states that nurture their sense of being us, point to the deaf community intensely, both the deaf and

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A decorative graphic consisting of a blue and red curved shape pointing downwards, resembling a stylized arrow or a decorative flourish.

hearing community to a much lesser extent, and rarely only the hearing community. The results obtained by Seven and Göl-Güven (2016) from their qualitative research with 2 male and 2 female CODA participants are that CODAs express that they feel that they belong to both deaf and hearing communities, and they presented this as the most striking finding of their research. In another study, “Between the deaf and the hearing world, which one do you belong to?” when asked, it was stated that all five CODAs answered “both”, although two tended towards the Deaf World (Gobbo, Gan, Zheng, 2022). However, the findings of this study, as explained above, do not support the findings of the aforementioned researchs, showing that the participants intensely felt belonging to the deaf community. The number of participants and the sampling method are considered to be effective on this result, because in this study, there were participants who stated that they felt that they belonged to both deaf and hearing communities, but this code was expressed much less intensely. On the other hand, the results of this research are similar to Preston’s research. Preston (1994) stated that CODAs who grew up with deaf parents see the deaf culture as their “home” and feel themselves as a part of this culture.

The findings show that the participants intensively prefer to use sign language in their daily lives and that the first factor shaping their preferences regarding which language to use is their habit. Participants who prefer to use spoken language in their daily lives explained the reason for their preference with factors arising from the language itself, emphasizing that sign language may be insufficient for deeper expressions. This evaluation of sign language should be considered together with the education provided by Deaf schools, the time the deaf community spends together in common areas, the literary and artistic works of the deaf community, and academic scientific studies. It is clear that factors such as the prolonged banning of sign language, the limited areas of use and the lack of academic studies have many disadvantages for sign language from a developmental perspective.

## CONCLUSION

CODAs acquire sign language as their mother tongue at the language development stage through their relationship with their parents. The findings obtained show that the meaning of sign language is intensely a means of communication/connection for CODAs, then it means having a profession for them, they place sign language at the center of life and sometimes use it as a means of making deaf people visible. Sign language has a central place in their lives both because of the emotional bond they establish and because it enables them to have a profession and a job. Due to these dramatic effects on their lives, they perceive sign language as the

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center of their lives, even as their life itself.

Sign language is also the language they prefer to use intensively. Language use preferences in their daily lives are structured on the basis of habits. They tend to use whichever language they use more intensively, in which community they have spent more time and used the language of that community more often.

As children of deaf parents, CODAs are part of the deaf community and their lives involve interaction with both the deaf and hearing community. The findings of the study show that the participants are heavily engaged with the deaf community. CODA children generally interact with their parents' deaf friends, deaf neighbors and their children from early childhood. The fact that they have chosen sign language interpreting as a profession as adults is an important factor in the continuation of this intensity of interaction. Their interaction with the hearing community varies depending on environmental factors.

In their relations with the deaf community, the close relations they establish through deaf associations is a noteworthy context. The association spaces where the deaf community comes together or the organizations attended by the members of the association are the time periods in which the deaf community is in intense relationship. When it comes to their sense of belonging and the states of relatedness that nourish the sense of being themselves, they intensely feel belonging to the deaf community. When they are in the deaf community, they can act together and with a sense of "we", they can easily communicate in these times that they define as finding themselves, and they prefer to be with deaf people. Being a child of deaf parents has an impact on their whole lives, and it is seen that the community experiences, as well as the community they spend more time with, are an important factor in their sense of belonging.

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