

Marginalizations of Deaf¹ Characters on the Small Screen: A Multi-Layered Analysis of Theo Dimas' speech in *OMITB*

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Abstract

This paper offers a multilayered linguistic analysis of the intersemiotic translanguaging communication of Theo Dimas, a young Deaf character in the renowned television series *Only Murders in the Building* (Hulu, 2021–). By focusing on his final conversation with his overbearing hearing father, Teddy, the study examines how Theo is portrayed as a marginalized, second-generation Greek-American Deaf. He is a manualist and primarily communicates through American Sign Language (ASL); throughout his limited interactions with other characters, only once do we detect a spoken outburst to convey profound frustration – frustration that is further expressed through physical reactions, contributing to a heightened sense of physicality often, and sometimes problematically, associated with D/deaf characters on screen (see §2; see also Sileo 2024, 2025a, 2025b, 2026).

The core analysis (§3) draws on four theoretical perspectives: 1) discourse and conversation analyses; 2) pragmatic theory – including speech act theory (Austin 1962), conversational maxims (Grice 1975), and politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson 1978); 3) intersemiotic analysis of the interplay between verbal and visual codes – highlighting Teddy's use of Simultaneous Communication (SimComm) and Theo's abrupt, atypical shift into spoken language; and 4) a syntactic-semantic examination of word and sentence choices. This comprehensive framework, which could be extended to broader conversational contexts, sheds light on how linguistic and semiotic strategies shape Theo's characterization, his social and ethnic positioning, and the broader representation of D/deaf identity in the media.²

Keywords: D/deafness; marginalization; multi-layered analysis; media linguistics; disability studies.

¹ In this paper, I am going to use upper-case “D” for culturally Deaf people, identifying with sign languages and Deaf communities, and lower-case “d” for biologically and audiotologically deaf people.

² For a more in-depth study on Deaf people as an ethnic minority – possibly transnational – with their own socio-cultural and linguistic features, please refer to Lane et al. (2011).

1. Introduction

In recent years, the representation of D/deaf characters in cinema and mainstream television has garnered increasing scholarly attention, reflecting broader shifts in media portrayals of minority identities and disabilities, more specifically (Lerner 2010; Foss 2014; Gloeckner 2016; Bednarek 2019). This paper presents a multilayered linguistic analysis of Theo Dimas – a Deaf young man of Greek descent in the series *Only Murders in the Building* (Hulu, 2021-; henceforth, *OMITB*) – as he interacts with his father Teddy. Their interaction stands out for the complexity of Theo's characterization as a white, second-generation Greek-American and, more importantly, as a marginalized and (l)on(e)ly deaf child to an overbearing hearing father.

Theo's communicative acts are predominantly conveyed through American Sign Language (ASL) and his spoken voice is rarely heard – when it does occur, it is only in a moment of tremendous frustration. In order to analyze his speech, a multi-layered approach is going to be used, integrating different theoretical perspectives:

- Layer 1 resorts to discourse and conversation analyses, by focusing on situational and background context, lexical cohesion, and turn-taking;
- Layer 2 employs a pragmatic perspective, including speech acts theory (Austin 1962), politeness and face (Brown and Levinson 1978), cooperative principle and maxims (Grice 1975);
- Layer 3 offers an intersemiotic analysis, due to the presence of two different linguistic codes, a verbal and a visual one, as they overlap in some of Teddy's utterances, when he resorts to Simultaneous Communication, also known as SimComm. The choice of linguistic code is examined also based on its implications;
- Finally, Layer 4 focuses on sy-mantics (as in syntax-semantics) to enable a deeper understanding of how lexical and syntactic choices contribute to the representation of Theo's inner world and ethno-social positioning.

By situating Theo's characterization at the intersection of Deaf identity – i.e., ethnicity –, family history, and scripted content artificiality, this study aims to illuminate the multilayered processes through which mainstream television constructs and communicates marginalized identities. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates in media linguistics and disability studies.

1.1 Methodological Approach and Data Selection

Methodologically, this research is designed as a qualitative, micro-analytical case study situated at the intersection of media linguistics and multimodal discourse analysis. The data selection process was highly purposive. *OMITB* was chosen due to its mainstream success and its prominent inclusion of a culturally Deaf character portrayed by a Deaf actor. Within the series, the specific interaction between Theo and Teddy in Season 2, Episode 4 (S2E4) was selected as the primary dataset because it represents the climax of their communicative and relational tension. Unlike other scenes, this specific excerpt encapsulates a rare and dense convergence of multiple linguistic codes – ASL, spoken English, and SimComm – culminating in Theo's highly unusual spoken outburst. This unique concentration of intersemiotic translanguaging makes this scene the ideal case study to apply the proposed four-layered analytical model, as it effectively exposes the power imbalances, the face-threatening acts, and the marginalization dynamics that this study aims to investigate.

Specifically, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

- (RQ1) How does the overlapping of ASL and spoken language shape power dynamics between D/deaf and hearing characters?
- (RQ2) What pragmatic and semiotic strategies are employed to construct Theo's marginalized identity within the scripted dialogue?

2. Deaf Representation on the (Small) Screen

In recent years, the critical analysis of Deaf representation in mainstream media has gained significant momentum through the lens of Deaf Studies. Authentic Deaf narratives often have to negotiate with or resist hearing-centric frameworks, a dynamic widely observed in Deaf literature (e.g., Peters 2000). This critical approach is increasingly necessary for contemporary audiovisual products as well. For instance, recent scholarly work has highlighted how acclaimed films like *Sound of Metal* (2019), despite their inclusive intentions, can still reflect a 'hearing gaze' or commodify Deaf experience (Sileo 2024, 2025a, 2025b, 2026). Building directly upon this existing critical framework regarding cinematic representations, this paper seeks to extend the same analytical scrutiny to the serial television format. Using Theo Dimas as a case study, the present analysis investigates how linguistic and pragmatic mechanisms can still perpetuate marginalization.

A 2022 survey conducted on a sample of one thousand D/deaf individuals residing in Anglophone countries (the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, and Australia) reveals increasing awareness within the audiovisual industry regarding D/deafness and its representation: since 2019, Hollywood appears to have initiated a process of greater inclusivity, as evidenced by the production of high-profile films centered on D/deaf characters or on the theme of D/deafness.³ Much of this progress is attributed by respondents to the film *CODA* (2021), identified as a turning point for the inclusion of numerous D/deaf creatives, both before and behind the camera.

Despite these positive developments, the Deaf community remains among the least represented groups in the media, surpassing only the blind community. Underrepresentation, coupled with misrepresentation, in fiction directly influences public perception and the treatment of D/deaf individuals in real life. This is particularly significant in the United States, where the majority of hearing individuals report sporadic

³ Available at <https://www.nrgmr.com/our-thinking/entertainment/the-state-of-deaf-representation-in-media-and-entertainment/>. Accessed 2 July 2025.

or nonexistent interactions with D/deaf people – often less than once a month, or never (based on the mentioned survey). In this context, media assumes a crucial role in shaping public opinion. This phenomenon can be understood by resorting to Cultivation Theory (Shrum 2017), which posits that prolonged exposure to media, particularly television, gradually shapes an individual's perception of reality. The ensuing “cultivation effect” (Shrum 2017) leads heavy viewers of television – to which one might add cinema – to adopt beliefs and attitudes that align with the repeated patterns, images, and values presented in the media⁴. Therefore, if D/deaf people are consistently underrepresented or stereotypically portrayed in audiovisual fictional content, it can ‘cultivate’ a distorted or limited understanding of the community among the mainstream hearing public, influencing their real-life behaviors towards D/deaf individuals.

Several scholars have conducted studies on the qualitative – or mis-representation – and quantitative – or under-representation – of D/deafness in the media. Using Clark's (1969) “four-stage evolutionary model” of minority representation in mass media, Gloeckner (2016) examines the portrayal of deafness in American primetime television. This model outlines a progressive trajectory:

1. non-recognition by the dominant culture;
2. ridicule, where minorities are depicted as caricatures;
3. regulation, in which minorities are present but constrained by majority norms;
4. respect, where minority characters are portrayed equitably as fully integrated individuals.

Although signs of progress toward greater dignity and authenticity in representation can be observed – while some minorities remain trapped in the stage of ridicule (Gloeckner 2016) – under- and misrepresentation of D/deafness in mainstream media remains

⁴ Short (2013) notes that Americans spend an average of five hours per day watching television, with most of this time devoted to primetime programming. Such intensive consumption of audiovisual content has a tangible effect on how the public perceives minorities off-screen.

problematic.⁵ A colonizing⁶ and pathologizing⁷ approach seems to persist, portraying D/deafness as a vulnerability often linked to dehumanizing imagery (Avon 2006; Foss 2014; Sileo 2024, 2025a) and limiting characters to stereotypical roles.⁸ More importantly, entertainment television rarely portrays the lived experience of hearing loss as a “gain” (Foss 2014, 18), failing to highlight the cultural, linguistic, and identity benefits associated with belonging to the Deaf community, whereas cinema rarely depicts the experience of hearing loss per se – with such exceptions as *Sound of Metal* (2019). Despite several historical milestones between 1987 and 2013 that impacted the community, deafness continues to be depicted primarily as a disability rather than as a cultural and ethnic difference comparable to racial or linguistic diversity (Fosse 2014, 18).

3. Marginalized Deafness in *OMITB*: Theo Dimas

Theo Dimas starts off as a secondary character and remains so until the end – Season 5 is being shot as this paper is in the making, so one cannot be sure about his return and what it may entail for his development. He gains the limelight only for one episode, when he is

⁵ From the 1930s to the 1960s, D/deaf characters were frequently shown as silent, fragile, and dependent, whereas the 1960s and 1970s saw renewed interest in D/deafness, fueled by the recognition of ASL as a legitimate language and the civil rights movements; a more significant shift occurred with Deaf actress Marlee Matlin’s Oscar win in 1987 for *Children of a Lesser God* (Foss 2014).

⁶ The metaphor of colonization, as discussed by Ladd (2003) and Batterbury, Ladd, and Gulliver (2007), alongside calls to decolonize D/deaf education (Anglin-Jaffe 2015), has been extensively examined by scholars and applied to this context. Deaf women, more specifically, have frequently been portrayed as objects of “male colonization” (Nelson 2011, 192), as exemplified in such films as *Johnny Belinda* (1949) and *The Piano* (1993).

⁷ Foss (2014) identifies two main models of media representation: the pathological model and the cultural model. In the former, D/deaf characters are passive and dependent, with D/deafness portrayed as an obstacle to overcome. Such characters often serve – and are exploited – as narrative devices for the development of hearing protagonists, as seen in films like *Four Weddings and a Funeral* or the TV series here analyzed. By contrast, the cultural model depicts D/deaf characters as autonomous, fully integrated into the narrative, and clearly identified as members of a distinct culture. These characters use their own native sign language fluently and represent D/deafness as an integral part of their identity.

⁸ “Demonstrated in feature films *Hear No Evil* (1993) and *Dead Silence* (1997), the power struggle of silence versus sound, and even deafness versus hearing, is evident. This is also seen in films made for television. Beginning with *Silent Victory* (1979), [...] *Love Is Never Silent* (1985), *Trapped in Silence* (1999), *Bridge to Silence* (1989), and *Locked in Silence* (1999). Using titles with words such as ‘trapped,’ ‘bridge,’ and ‘locked’ further reinforces the ideology that deafness is a condition to be escaped from or cured of” (Avon 2006, 190).

discovered to be the unwilling perpetrator of Chloe's murder – happened ten years before – which triggered a series of unpleasant events. Our first sight of him is in S1E2, during the – deaf-unfriendly – board meeting held in honor of late fellow resident Tim Kono. Theo reappears in the ensuing episode, where it becomes apparent that he is not very proficient at lip-reading – a skill often assumed to be mastered by all D/deaf individuals. S1E7 is entirely focused on him, but soon after this he temporarily exits the storyline while awaiting trial for involuntary manslaughter and grave robbing. In S2E4, he is spied on while he “destroys” his father “in silence”: this moment symbolizes Theo's severing of ties with his family of origin – or, more precisely, with the only remaining member of the family, since his mother abandoned them many years earlier due to both her husband's infidelities and her inability to cope with deafness.

Let us begin by providing some situational context for the most relevant interaction involving Theo: he and Teddy are in their living room, where the former expresses concern about the upcoming manslaughter and tomb robbing trial – here, the endophoric use of “this” in “we can fix this” refers directly to that issue. From S1E7, we know that Teddy bribed late Tim Kono to accuse one of Chloe's friends (i.e., “Everything [he] did [...] to protect” his son); the scapegoat has just been released after serving 10 years in prison. Unlike his father, Theo is consumed by self-blame and guilt over “what happened ten years ago,” an exophoric reference that relies on extensive interpersonal background knowledge shared both by the interlocutors and by dedicated viewers.

Theo's translanguaging intersemiotic conversation with his father⁹ (S2E4)

TEDDY: [<i>Off screen</i>] Theo, stop obsessing. Stop obsessing, please! We can fix this, alright? You just have to trust me! Theo? Theo! [<i>On screen; SimComming</i>] Everything I did was to protect you.

⁹ The transcript resorts to the following symbols: numbers enclosed within round brackets refer to the duration of pauses in speech and “--” signals interruption. Interestingly, this conversation totally lacks overlapping, which subtracts to the spontaneity and plausibility of it.



THEO: [*In ASL*¹⁰] I don't care if it was to protect me! Stay away from me!
TEDDY: What? Don't say that. (0.5) You're my boy!
THEO: [*In ASL*] My lawyer said I should have told earlier my side of the story of what happened ten years ago.
TEDDY: What? (1) You got your own lawyer now? [*Theo turns his back on him*] Theo!
[*Teddy faces Theo again and stops signing, just pointing his finger at this son*] Theo! I'm the only one who's been looking out for your interests! I --
THEO: [*Only verbalizing*] -- You're killing me! [*He forcefully pushes Teddy, causing him to fall back and sink into the armchair. Theo grunts while verbalizing*] (2) I have no life anymore! [*Theo falls back and sits on a small table opposite the armchair*]
TEDDY: [*Resumes SimComm*] Theo. (1) I'm sorry. (1) I love you (0.5) so much. You're (0.5) all (0.5) I care about in this world. (1) [*Places a hand on Theo's left shoulder*] Theo --
THEO: [*Rejects his father's touch. In ASL*] -- [Non intelligible]
[*Theo leaves. Teddy cries*]

Layer 1: Discourse and Conversation Analyses: Power imbalance in turn-taking

Teddy dominates the conversation by resorting to SimComm, i.e., speaking and signing simultaneously, thereby controlling both the flow and content of the interaction. This dynamic is heavily skewed in favor of verbalization, as SimComm is known to prioritize oral content at the expense of the signed message (Strong and Stone 1987). Theo, who is not an oralist, responds primarily in ASL with minimal verbalization, creating a marked asymmetry in communication modes. This imbalance marginalizes Theo's voice, as – to a hearing eye – his native language (ASL) is consistently overshadowed by Teddy's spoken words and persistent verbal commands – most notably in his repeated calling of his son's name, as if Theo could actually hear him, even when he is turned away.¹¹

¹⁰ Interpretation of ASL uttering's content is drawn from "Can someone please tell me what Theo is signing? (from "Only Murders in the Building" s02e04) : r/asl at https://www.reddit.com/r/asl/comments/vx49cd/can_someone_please_tell_me_what_theo_is_signing/?show=original. Accessed 6 July 2025.

¹¹ Theo's turning his back on Teddy and signing "Stay away from me!" are clear non-verbal acts of resistance, signaling emotional distancing and rejection of Teddy's control. His limited verbal outbursts ("You're killing me! I have no life anymore!") further express his frustration and sense of suffocation.

Such behavior can be interpreted as an interruption, likewise oral interruptions occurring when he begins to verbalize and, later on, when he pushes his father's hand away. In contrast, Teddy demonstrates an ability and willingness to recognize and respect transition-relevant places (TRPs) in his son's speech. This stands in stark contrast to Teddy's frequent repetitions and urgent tone of voice, which signal a need to control the conversation. His repetitions – while contributing to lexical cohesion – also function as attempts to assert authority and maintain dominance, simultaneously restricting the young man's capacity for full self-expression. This dynamic justifies Theo's interruptions as inevitable should he wish to genuinely convey his own views and emotions.

The absence of overlapping speech in this intense and heartfelt father-son exchange further highlights the contrasting features of Teddy's elocutionary style – but, at the same time, has to do with the artificiality of scripted content language. As previously noted, this absence undermines the interaction's plausibility and credibility. It is coupled with a near-complete lack of fillers, interjections, tag questions – except for “alright” – and other discourse markers such as “I mean” and “you know”, which are heavily present in non-scripted or natural conversation and oddly missing here. These “carriers of orality” (Pavesi 2008) are commonly used in spontaneous speech not only to sustain and verify that the communication channel remains open – the phatic function of language as defined by Jakobson (1960) – but also to fill pauses and maintain the floor for as long as possible. This is a strategy typically employed by long-winded speakers who aim to avoid reaching TRPs, thereby delaying handing over the turn to their interlocutor.

Layer 2: Pragmatics and impoliteness: Face-threatening speech acts and Theo's actions

Teddy's commands (e.g., “Stop obsessing, please!”) function as directive speech acts aimed at changing Theo's behavior. However, given the emotional context and Theo's rejection, these acts can be face-threatening, challenging Theo's autonomy and identity. Teddy's positive face claim (“We can fix this, alright?”) conflicts with Theo's negative face – he now

has his own lawyer and demands that his autonomy be acknowledged and respected, a request the co-speaker refuses to honor. Teddy alternates between directives and expressive speech acts, as when he apologizes and expresses his unconditional love for Theo (“I’m sorry. I love you – so much. You’re – all – I care about in this world”) in an attempt to repair relational damage and reaffirm his protective role. Yet, these caring expressions coexist with his controlling tone, creating a tension between the two. From a pragmatic standpoint, Teddy’s conversational dominance – achieved through repetitions and the refusal to yield TRPs – can be interpreted as a blatant violating of Grice’s maxim of quantity. By providing continuous, overwhelming verbal input, he deliberately violates cooperative principles not to advance the exchange, but to assert authority and restrict Theo’s communicative space.

Theo asserts his independence by emphasizing that he has a lawyer and wants to tell his version of events. These acts challenge Teddy’s narrative and authority, highlighting Theo’s newly gained agency, which promises liberation from patriarchal imposition but simultaneously increases his loneliness and marginalization as he awaits trial and a possible lengthy prison sentence. His physical withdrawal – signaled by turning away from his father, a gesture that in Deaf culture signifies the end of a conversation – underscores his emotional and communicative distancing.

Regarding compliance with Grice’s (1975) four cooperative maxims, consider the following exchange:

TEDDY: You’re my boy!

THEO: [*In ASL*] My lawyer said I should have told earlier my side of the story of what happened ten years ago

Theo’s reply is completely irrelevant to Teddy’s expressive speech act; it can be seen as an unpreferred response and, moreover, carries an implicature – the fact that Theo has hired his own lawyer, which is new information for Teddy. Similarly, Theo’s utterances, “You’re killing me! I have no life anymore!”, though emotionally charged, appear somewhat

tangential to the factual discussion about the lawyer and past events, thus violating the maxim of relation. Most importantly, these statements flout the maxim of quality through exaggeration and hyperbole.

Layer 3: Intersemiotic analysis

Theo responds by using a minority code that the mainstream majority cannot fully understand, which emphasizes his exclusion. The hearing viewer may feel closer to Teddy, and this is exactly what happens with one of the main characters, Oliver, who observes the interaction without understanding what Theo is signing – because he is not fluent in ASL. Theo's abrupt verbalization could be interpreted as a scripted narrative device to accommodate this on-screen viewer, a reaction filled with despair and pain that would not come naturally to a manualist Deaf signer like him. To an audience unfamiliar with Deaf culture, like Oliver and the public, this may not seem incongruous. Moreover, it can be argued that this choice – which somewhat distorts Theo's character – seems to cater to the expectations of the hearing audience, for whom the animalistic grunting of a non-oralist deaf person might be even more striking.

Layer 4: Sy-mantic analysis

"You're – all – I care about in this world" breaks the sentence into fragments, highlighting emotional intensity but also a controlling, almost possessive tone. Teddy's syntax favors short, imperative clauses ("Stop obsessing," "Theo! Theo!"), which create a rhythm of insistence and urgency. The repetition functions syntactically to dominate the conversational floor and pressure Theo. His limited verbal utterances are short and emotionally charged ("You're killing me!"), syntactically simple but pragmatically and semantically powerful though somewhat hyperbolic: the semantic choice and the tense selected underline how painful the situation has been for a while and how it seems never to end.

4. Wrapping up

This conversation exemplifies how Theo is marginalized both linguistically and relationally, despite Teddy's apparent attempts to communicate through SimComm – an intersemiotic translanguaging choice that arguably functions less to facilitate the flow of conversation and more to accommodate the hearing witness observing them, whether Oliver himself or the viewing and hearing audience. The dominance of spoken language, Teddy's repeated commands and tone of voice, and Theo's behavior reveal a power imbalance that restricts Theo's agency and expression and threatens his negative face, triggering his – implausible – physical and verbally hyperbolic outburst. The interaction highlights broader themes of D/deaf marginalization, parental control, and the struggle for comprehension and sympathy within families where D/deaf and hearing members negotiate different linguistic and cultural worlds – more importantly, where deafness entails loneliness, and loneliness pushes an emotionally needy son to get along with his overbearing father to the point of committing crimes with and for him.

Oliver's presence is crucial also for another reason: his subjective perception and impression of the encounter may contribute to fostering a partial perspective on this father-son encounter and on their relationship as a whole. In fact, he later recounts witnessing the event to his friends by using the words, "I saw a deaf son silently destroy his father". This statement reflects his interpretation of the events, shaped by the fact that Theo is deaf and primarily communicates through sign language rather than speech. Oliver's use of the word "silently" emphasizes the communication barrier and the absence of spoken words, which may lead him to perceive the interaction as a quiet yet destructive act. Over the previous episodes Theo has already been associated with destruction, when he violently pushed Chloe during altercation, causing her death.

The "deaf" son to whom Oliver refers is actually the first victim in the entire narrative, burdened by debt toward his father, not only for failing to leave him alone in this world as

his mother did (“I’m the only one who’s been looking out for your interests!”) but more importantly, for covering up the crime Theo committed. This indebtedness has served as Teddy’s leverage over his son, pushing Theo into further criminal acts such as grave robbing and kidnapping. This is Teddy’s notion of “protecting” his son. Conversely, Theo expresses that he was “killed” by his father – through emotional, psychological, or symbolic violence which has proved excruciating for his whole being. This highlights a profound trauma and a deeply conflicted father-son relationship. In this narrative as in many others, the idea of “killing” a parent is metaphorical, symbolizing a struggle to break free from that parent’s authority, control, or oppressive influence. This struggle can occur without uttering a single sound, demonstrating that not only words but also signs can “kill”. Moreover, since Theo has already unintentionally caused a person’s death, this may amplify perceptions of his animality and physical violence, aligning with ongoing onscreen depictions of Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) individuals (Sileo 2024, 2025a, 2025b).

After severing ties with his only family, he is now completely alone and wishes to make up for his past evil deeds. In S2E7, he approaches Mabel to redeem himself and assists her in her private investigation to find Arconia’s murderer, putting himself at risk. Despite his efforts, by the end of the episode, he returns to his solitude, while Mabel re-joins the original trio’s embrace – a circle from which Theo remains excluded. In other words, the show failed to seize the chance to promote the cultural model mentioned above, although some attempts had been made with the Theo-centered episode, where verbal communication is entirely absent except for the final line – “We did it!” – uttered by Charles, who finally managed to find the password to access Tim Kono’s computer.¹² Theo resurfaces from his silence in S3E7, where we get acquainted with a smiling and smart version of him: we get to know that his friendship with Mable is standing still and that she has been learning

¹² Through this episode, we learn much more about Theo’s backstory and about Teddy’s learning ASL, in contrast with many hearing parents of D/deaf children, thus implicitly criticizing the ostracizing attitudes often found in hearing families with D/deaf members but also showing off what a nice person and a good father he is.

ASL to better communicate with him while she gets his help in her private investigation into a new Arconia murder. In this episode, Theo's signing is subtitled for viewers who are not fluent in ASL. Unfortunately, this Deaf character is once again exploited for the sake of the plotline, side kicking for a hearing one while being left out of verbalized conversation when third parties come onto the scene.

5. Conclusions

This study aims to contribute to media linguistics and disability studies by shedding light on how media narratives can both reflect and shape societal attitudes toward D/deafness, influencing public perceptions and the lived experiences of the DHH. The character of Theo Dimas in *OMITB* provides a multifaceted and poignant representation of Deaf identity, one that intricately intertwines issues of ethnicity – in that he belongs to an ethnic group, the Deaf community, to which no other character belongs and of which the hearing mainstream majority has very limited knowledge and awareness –, family dynamics, and social marginalization within Arconia's microcosm. Through a multi-layered analysis of his pivotal interaction with his father Teddy, this study has highlighted the complex communicative tensions and power imbalances underpinning their relationship. Teddy's dominant use of SimComm and verbal language, contrasted with Theo's reliance on ASL and minimal spoken utterances, reveals a fundamental asymmetry in their modes of communication. This imbalance marginalizes Theo's voice, both literally and figuratively, reflecting a broader societal tendency to prioritize hearing norms and oralist approaches, a 'colonizing' approach that seems hard to defeat.

The discourse and conversation analyses demonstrated how Teddy's repeated commands and insistence on controlling the conversational floor serve to restrict Theo's agency and threaten his negative face. These behaviors not only reflect paternal authority but also symbolize the hegemonic pressures D/deaf individuals often face within hearing families and communities. Theo's rare verbalizations, marked by emotional hyperbole



("You're killing me! I have no life anymore!"), emerge as desperate attempts to assert his autonomy and emotional pain in a context where his primary language is systematically overshadowed to the advantage of oral speech. From a pragmatic perspective, Teddy's speech acts oscillate between directives and expressions of love, creating a tension between care and control that complicates their relational dynamics – standing in stark contrast to the profound psycho-physical and social harm inflicted on his own son. The intersemiotic analysis highlights how Theo's translanguaging from a minority linguistic code inaccessible to the majority – of characters and viewers alike – serves both as a powerful marker of identity and as a site of exclusion. Hearing audiences – Oliver, at the least – tend to align and sympathize with Teddy, as he witnesses "a deaf son destroying his father in silence". The dynamic becomes even more complex due to Theo's occasional spoken utterances, which come across as hearing frames and concessions to hearing norms, expressions of acute frustration. Such moments risk problematizing the authenticity of his linguistic portrayal – already jeopardized by the paucity of discourse markers¹³ and other "carriers of orality" (Pavesi 2008) – and may unintentionally reinforce the misconception among uninformed viewers that D/deaf people default to verbalization under distress, when losing control over their own communicative choices. Sy-mantic examination of the interaction highlights how it is dominated by Teddy's fragmented and imperative speech patterns in a controlling and urgent tone, while Theo's simpler, emotionally charged utterances underscore his vulnerability and isolation in a metaphorical and literal silence imbued with his indebtedness to his father. Theo's eventual physical and communicative withdrawal, marked by turning his back on Teddy and finally leaving the scene, signifies a rupture in their relationship and a rejection of the paternal authority that has both protected and constrained him.

¹³ Their absence, coupled with the absence of overlapping speech, in this exchange contributed to an interaction that, while emotionally intense, lacked the natural flow of spontaneous conversation, reflecting the strained and asymmetrical nature of their communication or, more plausibly, the artificiality of scripted content, which is supposed to replicate natural speech.

The multi-layered analysis conducted in this study provides substantial evidence to answer the research questions formulated in the introduction. Regarding the first research question (RQ1), the findings confirm that the systematic use of Simultaneous Communication (SimComm) by the hearing character acts as a tool of linguistic dominance. The analysis of turn-taking and speech acts reveals a profound power imbalance that restricts the Deaf character's agency, thereby confirming the hypothesis that oralist norms continue to marginalize Deaf voices even in inclusive settings. In relation to RQ2, the study highlights a tension between inclusive intentions and stereotypical execution. While the show incorporates ASL, Theo's sporadic and emotionally charged verbalizations suggest that the production still prioritizes the hearing audience's perspective. This confirms that the representation of Deaf identity in *OMITB* remains partly trapped in a 'colonizing' framework, as initially suspected.

While the show makes important strides in representing Deaf culture and language – particularly through the casting of a Deaf actor, the inclusion of ASL, and the filming of a “silent” episode (S1E7) in which audiences are allowed to walk in a deaf person's shoes for around 40 minutes –, it also reveals ongoing challenges in media portrayals of deafness. Theo's character, though complex, is often sidelined and instrumentalized within the plot, reflecting the broader issues of under- and misrepresentation in mainstream media. His sporadic verbal outbursts and the framing of his character through the lens of trauma and criminality risk reinforcing stereotypes of D/deaf individuals as physically violent or socially marginalized.

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