

Black ASL as a Separate Variety

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TISLR 2010
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Black ASL project at a glance

- The objectives of this four-year project are:
 - To create a filmed corpus of conversational Black ASL as it is used in the South. The focus is on the structure and history of Southern Black ASL because that region is where the most radical segregation occurred in the education of Black and White deaf children, creating the conditions for the development of a separate language variety.
 - To provide a description of the linguistic features that make Black ASL recognizable as a distinct variety of ASL and of the history of the education of Black Deaf children.
 - To disseminate the project findings in the form of teaching materials and instructional resources.

Basic Questions for the Project (1)

- What are the features of the variety of ASL that people call “Black ASL”?
- There are many anecdotal reports about its existence
 - “Yeah, I see something different...”; and, we have considerable evidence of differences in individual signs (lexical variation).
- Hairston and Smith (1983)
 - there is “a Black way of signing used by Black deaf people in their own cultural milieu- among families and friends, in social gatherings, and in deaf clubs” (55).

Basic Questions for the Project (2)

- There also exists a 50-year tradition of research on African American English (AAE), with unique features identified at all levels of the language – phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon – showing that AAE is a distinct variety of English (see Mufwene et al. 1998 and Green 2004 for reviews).
- Can the same kind of unique features that have been identified for AAE be identified for Black ASL, to show that it is a distinct variety of ASL?

Formation of Language Varieties

- How do varieties of language (dialects) come about ?
 - J. Rickford (1999) explains that “all languages, if they have enough speakers, have dialects-regional or social varieties that develop when people are separated by geographic or social barriers.” (African American Vernacular English. Blackwell. p. 320)

Geographic factors

- Isolation of one community from another; geographic and political boundaries
 - e.g., rivers, mountains, swamps, borders;
- Patterns of settlement, where people live (or are allowed to live).
 - “... being isolated from other speakers tends to allow a dialect to develop in its own way, through its own innovations that are different from those of other dialects” (Language files, 10th ed., p. 419).

Social factors

- Language varieties can be defined by factors
 - Socioeconomic status
 - Age
 - Gender
 - Race
 - Ethnicity
- Examples of social factors
 - Differences in working-class and middle-class language
 - Caste-defined differences in India
 - AAE
 - Southwest Spanish

Founding and Desegregation of Schools for the Deaf (1)

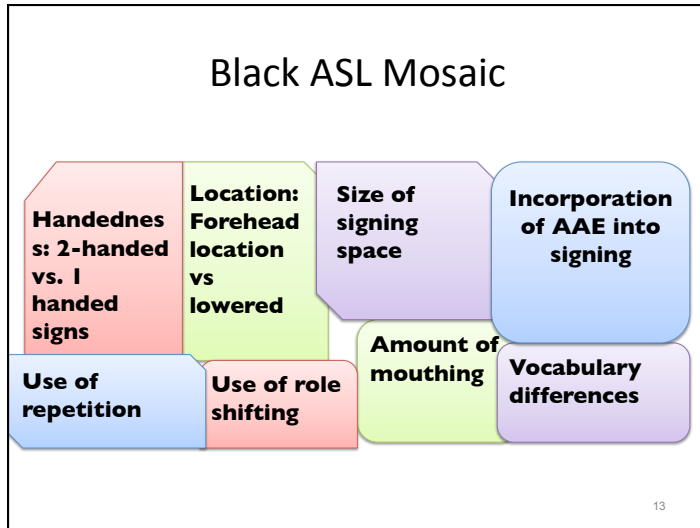
State	1. White school	2. Black sch./ dept.	3. Desegregation	Years bet. 1 & 2	Years bet. 2 & 3
DC, KDES	1857	1857, dept.	1958	0	101
N. Carolina	1845	1868	1967	23	99
Maryland	1868	1872	1956	4	84
Tennessee	1845	1881, dept.	1965	36	84
Georgia	1846	1882	1965	36	83
Mississippi	1854	1882, dept.	1965	28	83
S. Carolina	1849	1883, dept.	1966	34	83
Kentucky	1823	1884, dept.	1954-60	61	70
Florida	1885	1885	1965	0	80

Founding and Desegregation of Schools for the Deaf (2)					
State	1. White school	2. Black sch./ dept	3. Desegregation	Years bet. 1 & 2	Years bet. 2 & 3
Texas	1857	1887	1965	30	78
Arkansas	1850	1868	1967	23	78
Alabama	1858	1892	1968	34	76
Missouri	1861	1888, dept	1954	37	66
Kansas	1861	1888, dept	1954	27	66
Virginia	1839	1909	1965 (2 schs)	70	56
Oklahoma	1898	1909, dept	1962	11	53
Louisiana	1852	1938	1978	86	40
W. Virginia	1870	1926	1956	56	30

- ### Timing of Establishment and Integration
- The average number of years between the establishment of the White school and the establishment of the Black school (or department) is 33
 - Striking exceptions: Kentucky (61), West Virginia (56), Virginia (70) and Louisiana (86).
 - The average number of years between the establishment of the Black school (or department) and desegregation is 72.8
 - The striking exceptions are Washington, DC (101) and North Carolina (99)
 - Note that Louisiana is only 40 because there was no school for Black children until 1938 and desegregation did not occur until 24 years after Brown v. Board of Education

- ### Conditions favoring the formation of Black ASL
- Factors identified
 - Geographic separation and isolation of school locations
 - Social division based on race
 - Complicating factors
 - Who the teachers were
 - The general context of oralism
 - What kind of language the children were bringing to school

- ### Current study
- Sites
 - North Carolina (1869); Texas (1887); Arkansas (1887); Alabama (1892); Virginia (1909); Louisiana (1938)
 - National Black Deaf Advocate (NBDA) conference in St. Louis, Missouri in 2007
 - Participants
 - Signers over 55 who attended segregated schools
 - Signers under 35 who attended desegregated schools
 - Data collection
 - Filming free conversation, interviews, and word elicitation
 - Interviews that focus on language use and school history
 - Analysis
 - Analyzing the tapes for specific linguistic features and for accounts of language use and school history



- ### Handedness: previous studies
- In Woodward and DeSantis (1977), Frishberg (1975), and Lucas et al. (2007), factors have been identified as significant:
 - Contact with face and body
 - Preceding and following signs
 - Grammatical category
 - Parts of the target signs
 - Outward movement, high/low location, complex movement
 - Social factors
 - Race, age, and region

- ### Handedness: our study
- Signs that can be produced with 2 hands or 1 hand unremarkably
 - Sign examples: REMEMBER, DON’T-KNOW
 - Data Analyzed
 - 818 tokens from free conversations, interviews, and NBDA conversations
 - Multivariate analysis with Varbrul

Results (application value = 1 handed)

Factor Group	Factor	N	%	Weight
Contact	Contact	286	44.8	.603
	No contact	532	29.3	.444
Preceding sign	Pause or 1 handed	565	39.6	.554
	2 handed	253	23.7	.381
Following sign	1 handed	256	45.3	.598
	Pause	288	33.0	.492
	2 handed	274	26.6	.416
Age	Young (35–)	349	39.5	.552
	Old (55+)	469	31.1	.461
Total	Input	818	34.7	.336

Log likelihood = -497.783, chi-square/cell = 0.9063.

Handedness: results

- Black signers use more two-handed variants than White signers
- Older Black signers use more two variants than younger Black signers
- Younger signers tend to use 1-handed signs.
- When compared with White signers in an earlier study (Lucas et al. 2001), Black signers always prefer 2-handed signs over 1-handed.

Location: previous studies

- Frishberg (1975)
 - There is an historical tendency for signs to “move down” to the central signing space.
- Liddell & Johnson (1989)
 - “many signs which are produced with contact at the SFH [side of forehead] location in formal signing may be produced in casual signing at the CK [cheek] location. Similarly, signs produced at the CK location (including those moved from the SFH location) may be produced at the JW [jaw] location. These same signs also appear at times without contact in the area immediately in front of the iNK [ipsilateral neck] location (253).

Location: previous studies

- Lucas et al. (2001)
 - Grammatical function is strongest constraint
 - Noun, verb, adjective disfavor lowered forms, preposition and interrogative favor lowered forms.
 - Preceding location
 - Body favors lowered forms, head disfavors.
 - Following contact
 - No contact favors lowered forms, contact disfavors.
 - Social factors
 - White signers, both working class and middle class, slightly favor lowered forms (Varbrul weight .555).
 - Middle class Black signers disfavor lowered forms (.445).
 - Working class Black signers disfavor lowered forms (.314).

Location: our study

- Our focus here is on signs such as KNOW, DON'T-KNOW, WHY, FOR, TEACH, IMAGINE, EDUCATION, SUSPECT, REMEMBER, SEARCH.
- In citation (i.e. dictionary) form, such signs are signed at the level of the forehead but in actual use they can also be signed at lower levels ranging from the face to the space in front of the signer.
- Data Analyzed
 - 877 tokens from free conversations, interviews, and NBDA conversations

Location: Results, Linguistic Constraints (App. Value= lowered variant)

Factor Group	Factor	N	%	Weight
Grammatical category	Compound	47	48.9	.716
	Noun	111	39.6	.602
	Preposition/interrog.	107	35.5	.582
	Adjective/adverb	60	21.7	.464
Preceding contact	Verb	552	25.0	.448
	Body, contact	150	29.3	.562
	Body, no contact	419	27.7	.505
	Head, contact	106	26.4	.492
	Head, no contact	54	22.2	.379
Total	Input	877	29.2	.260

Location: results

- Black signers use more non-lowered variants than White signers
- Older Black signers use non-lowered variants than younger Black signers
- Regional differences
 - Texas, Alabama, Virginia, and North Carolina signers use more lowered variants than Arkansas and Louisiana signers

Signing space: previous claims

- Lewis et al. (1995: 24)
 - Mention the use of space in description of a person’s answer to a question as to why he is wearing African American clothing
- Aramburo (1989: 115)
 - Reports that when Black Deaf Signers converse with Black Deaf Signers, they use larger signing space than they do with Black hearing, White Deaf, and White hearing signers
- Tabak (2006)
 - Discusses black children’s signing at the BDO (Blind, Deaf, Orphan) school in Austin, TX
 - Reports that the signs produced by BDO students were larger than those of their white peers
 - Describes no data as the basis for this observation

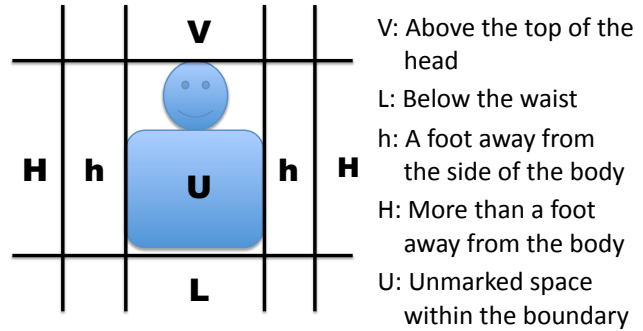
Signing space: our study

- Videos of Black and White signers were randomly selected and 50 signs/signer were analyzed as follows.
- Grammatical category of signs were coded
 - Noun, adjective/adverb, plain verb, depiction/locative verb, indicating verb, function signs
- Intensity of signs
 - Tensions in the arms, torso movement, eye gaze at the co-interlocutor
- Genre
 - Elicited narrative: retelling of wordless cartoons with a lot of action
 - Free narrative: stories spontaneously told by signers
- Imposition of a transparent grid on all videos

Signing space: elicited narrative example



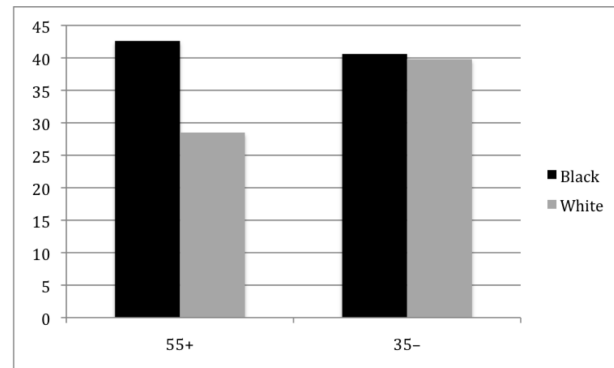
Signing space: location code



Signing space: results

- Linguistic factors
 - Grammatical category is significant for both Black and White signers
 - Depicting and locative verbs and indicating verbs were most likely to extend beyond the unmarked space.
 - Adjectives and adverbs slightly favored the use of a marked variant by Black signers but slightly disfavored by White signers.
 - Plain verbs, nouns, pronouns, and function signs were most likely stayed within the boundary of the unmarked space.
 - Little difference in the results of intensity of signs between Black and White signers

Signing space: Race by age



Percentage of signs beyond the usual signing space

Role-shifting

- Previous research
 - Metzger and Mather (2004)
 - The use of constructed dialogue and constructed action of Black and White signers
 - Indication that Black signers use them more often than White signers
- Our study
 - 24 elicited narratives and 21 free narratives
 - 7 different events
 - Constructed action (CA); constructed dialogue (CD); constructed action/body partitioning (CABP); constructed dialogue/body partitioning (CDBP); constructed action/constructed dialogue (CACD); constructed action/narrative (CANA); constructed dialogue/narrative (CDNA)
- Result
 - Some indication that Black signers use more constructed dialogue, however, the data show a great deal of individual variation. Further research is needed.

Repetition: results

- Marked difference between Black signers and White signers
- Marked difference between older and younger Black signers, with more repetitions among the older signers
 - this seems to be a feature of Black ASL that is changing.
- Repetition serves a pragmatic function is supported by the fact repetitions in all grammatical categories are predominantly declarative statements rather than questions.

Mouthing

- Tabak (2006)
 - Graduates of BDO (the Texan institution for Black deaf children along with Black blind and orphan children) mouth less than graduates of TSD (Texas School for the Deaf, historically white)
 - Seems to be a personal observation
- Our study
 - Instances of voiceless mouthing of English
 - Full mouthing
 - Light mouthing
 - initial consonant or a consonant and vowel combination
 - » Examples: 'pay attention' mouth just the initial 'p' and the initial 'a' in the phrase; the initial consonant and vowel in 'wife', 'wi'
 - No mouthing
 - 26 ten minute conversations from a set of 95 clips
 - 7 for older Black signers, 6 for younger Black signers, 7 for older White signers, and 6 for younger White signers.
 - Categorization of tokens
 - Noun, adjective/adverbs, verbs/predicate, WH words, function words, phrases, reactive tokens

Mouthing: results

- Nouns were the most frequently mouthed, followed by plain verbs and predicates, phrases, and finally adjective and adverbs.
- Some function words were mouthed, as well as a small number of WH words.
- Some evidence that older Black signers mouth less than other signers, however, further research is necessary with a larger sample size.

Contact with AAE

- Borrowing of expressions from AAE, e.g. “Girl”, “My bad”
- Examples spontaneously produced in interviews and free conversations in our videotaped
- Black signers incorporate AAE lexical items into their signing.
 - STOP TRIPPING
 - STUPID #FOOL
 - WHASSUP
 - GIRL, PLEASE
 - #DANG
- Younger Black signers incorporate more AAE lexical items than their elders, possibly due to media exposure.

Lexicon: signs for common items

- Previous study: Woodward et al. (1976)
 - examined a subset of signs including MOVIE, RABBIT, LEMON, COLOR, SILLY, PEACH, and PEANUT that can all be produced either on the face or on the hands
 - Found that White signers produced more of the face variants than did Black signers.
- Our study
 - Differences in Black and White signs for common items and concepts, e.g. MOVIE, COLOR, RABBIT, AFRICA [added by us]
 - Elicitation method
 - Pictures of the items
 - Results
 - Lexical variation persists, but younger Black signers use fewer “Black variants than their elders”

Lexicon: older signs

- Lexical items varied by regions
- Collected from free conversations and interviews
- Selective lexical variation examples
 - Noun: SODA, SHOES, SCHOOL, CORNFLAKE, BATHROOM, MOVIE, TOWEL, BIRTHDAY
 - Verb/Predictate: FLIRT, PEE, SHARP (as in ‘sharp dresser’)

Conclusion

- Back to the question:
 - Can the same kind of unique features that have been identified for AAE be identified for Black ASL, to show that it is a distinct variety of ASL?
 - The answer is yes and no.
- In Black ASL, we have not identified unique other than the incorporation of AAE and lexical items.
- Thus far, the differences between Black ASL and White ASL are quantitative rather than qualitative.

The History and Structure of Black ASL: Research Team

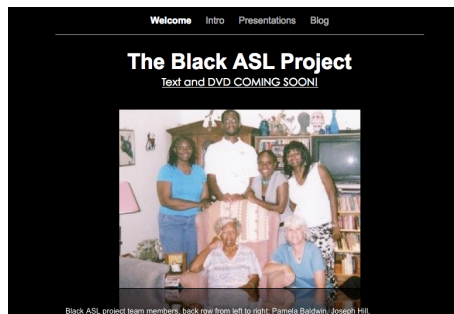
- Project Co-Directors
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 - Robert Bayley, Linguistics, UC Davis
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- Undergraduate Research Assistants
 - Stephanie Johnson and TaWanda Barkley, Gallaudet University
- Technical Consultant
 - Randall Hogue, Gallaudet University
- Community Representative and Archivist
 - Pam Baldwin, Washington, DC

Acknowledgments

- The research reported here was funded by the Spencer Foundation and the National Science Foundation, whose support is gratefully acknowledged.
- Special thanks to the members of the African American Deaf community who generously shared with us the richness of their experience and language.

Black ASL Project Website

- <http://blackasproject.gallaudet.edu/>



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