The Intersection of African American English and Black ASL

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Black ASL as a variety

- Extensive 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).
- Our basic research question: can linguistic features be identified that will show that Black ASL is a distinct variety, as has been done for AAE?
  - Anecdotal reports about the existence of Black ASL, e.g. Hairston and Smith (1983) on “a Black way of signing”
  - Some confirmed differences in linguistic features in Black ASL in our study
# Founding and Desegregation of Deaf Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>1. White School</th>
<th>2. Black Sch./ Dept.</th>
<th>3. Desegregation</th>
<th>Years bet. 1 &amp; 2</th>
<th>Years bet. 2 &amp; 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DC, KDES</td>
<td>1857</td>
<td>1857, dept.</td>
<td>1958</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. Carolina</td>
<td>1845</td>
<td>1868</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>1868</td>
<td>1872</td>
<td>1956</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>1845</td>
<td>1881, dept.</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>1846</td>
<td>1882</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>1854</td>
<td>1882, dept.</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Carolina</td>
<td>1849</td>
<td>1883, dept.</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>1823</td>
<td>1884, dept.</td>
<td>1954-60</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>1885</td>
<td>1885</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>1857</td>
<td>1887</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>1850</td>
<td>1887</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>1858</td>
<td>1892</td>
<td>1968</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>1861</td>
<td>1888, dept.</td>
<td>1954</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>1861</td>
<td>1888, dept.</td>
<td>1954</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>1839</td>
<td>1909</td>
<td>1965 (2 schs)</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
<td>1898</td>
<td>1909, dept.</td>
<td>1962</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>1852</td>
<td>1938</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W. Virginia</td>
<td>1870</td>
<td>1926</td>
<td>1956</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Proximity of Deaf Schools and HBCUs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schools for the Colored/Negro Deaf</th>
<th>Historical Black Colleges/Universities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kendall School for the Deaf</td>
<td>Howard University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina State School for the Deaf &amp; Blind</td>
<td>Shaw University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alabama School for the Negro Deaf &amp; Blind</td>
<td>Talladega College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia School for the Colored Deaf</td>
<td>Hampton University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Virginia School for the Colored Deaf</td>
<td>West Virginia State College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida State School for the Deaf</td>
<td>Florida A&amp;M University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern State School for the Deaf</td>
<td>Southern State University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi School for the Negro Deaf</td>
<td>Jackson State University</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### The History and Structure of Black ASL: The Project at a Glance

- Sites visited in order of the year in which the schools for Black Deaf children were founded:
  - North Carolina (1869)
  - Texas (1887)
  - Arkansas (1887)
  - Alabama (1892)
  - Virginia (1909)
  - Louisiana (1938)

- At each site, groups of signers "over 55" (i.e. who attended school during segregation, n= 58) and groups of signers "under 35" (i.e. who attended integrated schools, n=32), have been filmed in free conversation and structured interviews.
Black ASL Mosaic

- **PHONOCLOGICAL FEATURE**
  - 2-handed vs. 1 handed signs

- **PHONOLOGICAL FEATURE**
  - Forehead location vs lowered

- **PHONOLOGICAL FEATURE**
  - Size of signing space

- **LANGUAGE CONTACT FEATURE**
  - Incorporation of AAE into signing

- **DISCOURSE FEATURE**
  - Use of role shifting

- **LANGUAGE CONTACT FEATURE**
  - Amount of mouthing

- **LEXICAL FEATURE**
  - Vocabulary differences

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**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.
- Evidence that younger signers mouth more, evidence of more contact with hearing people, due to integration and mainstreaming.
  - It is with integration and mainstreaming that we see the most intersection of Black ASL with AAE.

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 and education with hearing students.
DVD showing

• Book with a DVD

• Chapter 7 of the DVD, “The Effects of Language Contact”
  o Features: Mouthing and AAE
    • Video link

Acknowledgments

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• Special thanks to the members of the African American Deaf community who generously shared with us the richness of their experience and language.
The History and Structure of Black ASL: Research Team

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  - Roxanne King and Anika Stephen, Gallaudet University
- **Technical Consultant**
  - Randall Hogue, Gallaudet University
- **Community Representative and Archivist**
  - Pam Baldwin, Washington, DC

Black ASL Project Website

http://blackaslproject.gallaudet.edu/