The Hidden Treasure of Black ASL: Its History and Structure

Book & DVD
by
Carolyn McCaskill, Ceil Lucas, Robert Bayley & Joseph Hill

Gallaudet University Press 2011
THE HIDDEN TREASURE OF BLACK ASL

Carolyn McCaskill, Ceil Lucas, Robert Bayley, and Joseph Hill

in collaboration with Roxanne King, Pamela Baldwin, and Randall Hogue
Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction
Chapter 2: The Socio-historical Foundation
Chapter 3: How We Did the Study
Chapter 4: Perceptions
Chapter 5: Phonological Variation
Chapter 6: Variation in Syntax and Discourse
Chapter 7: The Effects of Language Contact
Chapter 8: Lexical Variation
Chapter 9: Conclusions
The Basic Question for Our Project:

What are the features of the variety of American Sign Language (ASL) that people call “Black ASL”?  

• There are many anecdotal reports about its existence: “Yeah, I see something different…”

• We have considerable evidence of differences in individual signs (lexical variation).
Hairston & 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).

There also exists a 50-year tradition of research on African American Vernacular English (AAVE) showing that AAVE is a distinct variety of English (see Mufwene et al. 1998 and Green 2004 for reviews).

- Unique features have been identified at all levels of the language:
  - phonology
  - morphology
  - syntax
  - lexicon
Can the same kind of unique features that have been identified for AAVE be identified for Black ASL, to show that it is a distinct variety of ASL?

That is the focus of our project.

BUT, there is a question that needs to be asked BEFORE we try to answer the basic research question…
What was the socio-historical reality that would make Black ASL possible?

That is, what conditions might have lead to the creation of a distinct African American variety?
How do language varieties come about?

“All languages, if they have enough speakers, have dialects – regional or social varieties that develop when people are separated by geographic or social barriers.”

(Rickford 1999, African American Vernacular English)
Both *geographic* and *social* factors are involved:

- **Geographic factors:**
  - *isolation* of one community from another
  - *boundaries* – either geographic and political in nature, 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).
Factors in the development of language varieties 3

- **Social factors:**
  - socioeconomic status
  - age
  - gender
  - ethnicity
  - identity

Hence, we see differences in working-class and middle-class language, caste-defined differences in India, varieties shaped by age and gender, and varieties shaped by ethnicity, e.g., AAVE and Southwest Spanish.
Schools for Black deaf children were physically isolated.  

- Both separate schools and departments were established in southern and border states.
- In some cases, the “Colored Department” was on the same campus as the white school (e.g. Kansas, Missouri).
- In other cases, this department was physically separated (e.g., Georgia, Mississippi).

With respect to physical isolation, consider the charts on the next two slides:
# Black & White Deaf Schools: Founding and Desegregation

<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>
</tbody>
</table>
## Black & White Deaf Schools: Founding and Desegregation

<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>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>
From the DVD:
Chapter 2: The Socio-historical Foundation

TEXAS
Conditions favoring the formation of a variety of ASL known as Black ASL?

- The factors that have played a role in the formation of spoken language varieties have certainly been present: geographic and social separation and isolation.

- However, there are complicating issues, including:
  - who were the school teachers (hearing or deaf, Black or White);
  - general pressure to switch to oral instruction (and to suppress signing in the classroom);
  - the nature of the language(s) the children brought to school (ASL? home sign systems? a different variety of ASL?).

- These factors point to a complex picture that we are beginning to see reflected in our results.
The History and Structure of Black ASL: The Project at a Glance

Objectives of this four year project:

◦ Create a filmed corpus of conversational (vernacular) Black ASL as it is used in the South.
  • We focus on the South because that is where the most radical segregation occurred in the education of Black and White Deaf children.

◦ Provide a description of the linguistic features that make Black ASL recognizable as a distinct variety of ASL (e.g. greater use of 2-handed signs, larger signing space).

◦ Chronicle the history of the education of Black Deaf children.

◦ Disseminate the findings in the form of teaching materials and instruction resources.
The History and Structure of Black ASL: The Project at a Glance 2

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)
Signers at each site were grouped according to age:
- “Over 55” – attended school during segregation
  - \( N = 58 \)
- “Under 35” – attended integrated schools
  - \( N = 32 \)

Filming occurred during the following:
- free conversation
- structured interviews
  - focusing on language use and school history.
We looked at participants’ perceptions of language use.

One theme that emerged:

“White Deaf education is better than Black Deaf education.”
Linguistic Features

We analyzed 8 different linguistic features that might define Black ASL as a distinct variety.
Black ASL Mosaic

- 2-handed vs. 1-handed signs
- Forehead location vs. lowered
- Size of signing space
- Incorporation of AAE into signing
- Use of repetition
- Use of role shifting
- Amount of mouthing
- Vocabulary differences
2-handed signs can become 1-handed.

Here are some examples from our data:

- 2-handed vs. 1-handed signs
- Forehead location vs. lowered
- Size of signing space
- Incorporation of AAE into signing

Use of repetition
Signs produced at the forehead can be lowered.

Here are some examples from our data:
From the DVD:
Chapter 5: Phonological Variation

• The “usual” signing space is between the shoulders and from the top of the head to the waist. Claims have been made that Black signers use a larger signing space than do White signers.

Here are some examples from our data:

- 2-handed vs. 1-handed signs
- Forehead location vs. lowered
- Incorporation of AAE into signing
- Amount of mouthing
- Use of role shifting
- Use of repetition
- Vocabulary differences
- 2-handed vs. 1-handed signs
- Forehead location vs. lowered
- Incorporation of AAE into signing
- Amount of mouthing
- Use of role shifting
- Use of repetition
- Vocabulary differences
Variation in Syntax and Discourse

• How can syntax and discourse vary?:
  • repetition of *lexical items, phrases, or sentences*
  • use of *constructed dialogue (CD) and constructed action (CA)*

• We tested:
  • the hypothesis that Black signers make more use of repetition than do White signers, and
  • the claim that Black signers use more constructed action and constructed dialogue than White signers.
From the DVD:
Chapter 6: Variation in Syntax and Discourse

**Repetition**

- Use of repetition
- Use of role shifting
- Incorporation of AAE into signing
- Amount of mouthing

**CA and CD**

- 2-handed vs. 1-handed signs
- Forehead location vs. lowered
- Size of signing space
- Vocabulary differences
The Effects of Language Contact

Mouthing:
- Anecdotal accounts and informal observation that Black signers mouth less than White signers.

African American English (AAE):
- Incorporation of AAE lexical items and phraseology into Black ASL.

From the DVD:
Chapter 7: The Effects of Language Contact

- 2-handed vs. 1-handed signs
- Forehead location vs. lowered
- Size of signing space
- Incorporation of AAE into signing
- Use of repetition
- Use of role shifting
- Amount of mouthing
- Vocabulary differences
We looked at:

- Lexical variation spontaneously produced
- Lexical variation discussed by the participants and their responses to interview questions
- The results of lexical elicitation

**Lexical Variation**

- 2-handed vs. 1-handed signs
- Forehead location vs. lowered
- Size of signing space
- Incorporation of AAE into signing
- Use of repetition
- Use of role shifting
- Amount of mouthing
- Vocabulary differences
From the DVD:
Chapter 8: Lexical Variation

Lexical Elicitation
What We Found

• Black ASL is a distinct variety of American Sign Language.

• Black ASL is defined by specific linguistic features and shaped by social and geographic factors.

• Also, not surprisingly, Black ASL is changing as a result of desegregation and mainstreaming.
Black ASL Mosaic

- 2-handed vs. 1-handed signs: ✔
- Forehead location vs. lowered: ✔
- Size of signing space: ✔
- Incorporation of AAE into signing: ✔
- Use of repetition: ✔
- Use of role shifting: Mixed Results
- Amount of mouthing: Mixed Results
- Vocabulary differences: ✔
The History and Structure of Black ASL: Research Team

- **Project Co-Directors**
  - Ceil Lucas, Linguistics, Gallaudet University
  - Carolyn McCaskill, ASL & Deaf Studies, Gallaudet University
  - Robert Bayley, Linguistics, University of California, Davis

- **Graduate Research Assistants**
  - Joseph Hill, University of North Carolina, Greensboro
  - Roxanne King, Gallaudet University
  - Anika Stephen, Gallaudet University

- **Technical Consultant and Web Master**
  - Randall Hogue, Gallaudet University

- **Community Representative**
  - Pam Baldwin, Washington, D. C.
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.
The Black ASL Project

Text and DVD COMING SOON!
Click HERE to see the book’s cover!

Black ASL project team members, back row from left to right: Pamela Baldwin, Joseph Hill, Roxanne Dummett, Carolyn McCaskill, front row Mary Herring Wright (interviewee) and Ceil Lucas

Visit our website:
blackaslproject.gallaudet.edu