



# **The Hidden Treasure of Black ASL: Its History and Structure**

**Book & DVD**

**by**

**Carolyn McCaskill, Ceil Lucas,  
Robert Bayley & Joseph Hill**

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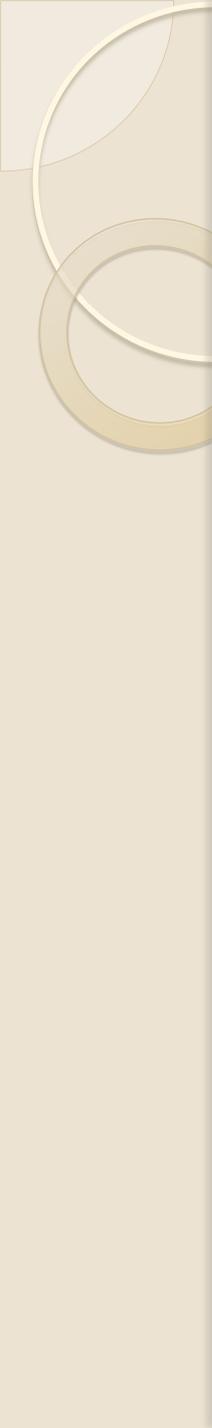
# THE HIDDEN TREASURE OF BLACK ASL

Its  
History  
and  
Structure

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

In collaboration with  
Roxanne King,  
Pamela Baldwin, and  
Randall Hogue





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# 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).

## Project Questions and Goals 2

- 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

## Project Questions and Goals 3

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...

## Project Questions and Goals 4

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*)

# Factors in the development of language varieties 2

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.

# Geographic Factors in the Formation of Black ASL

- 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 I

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

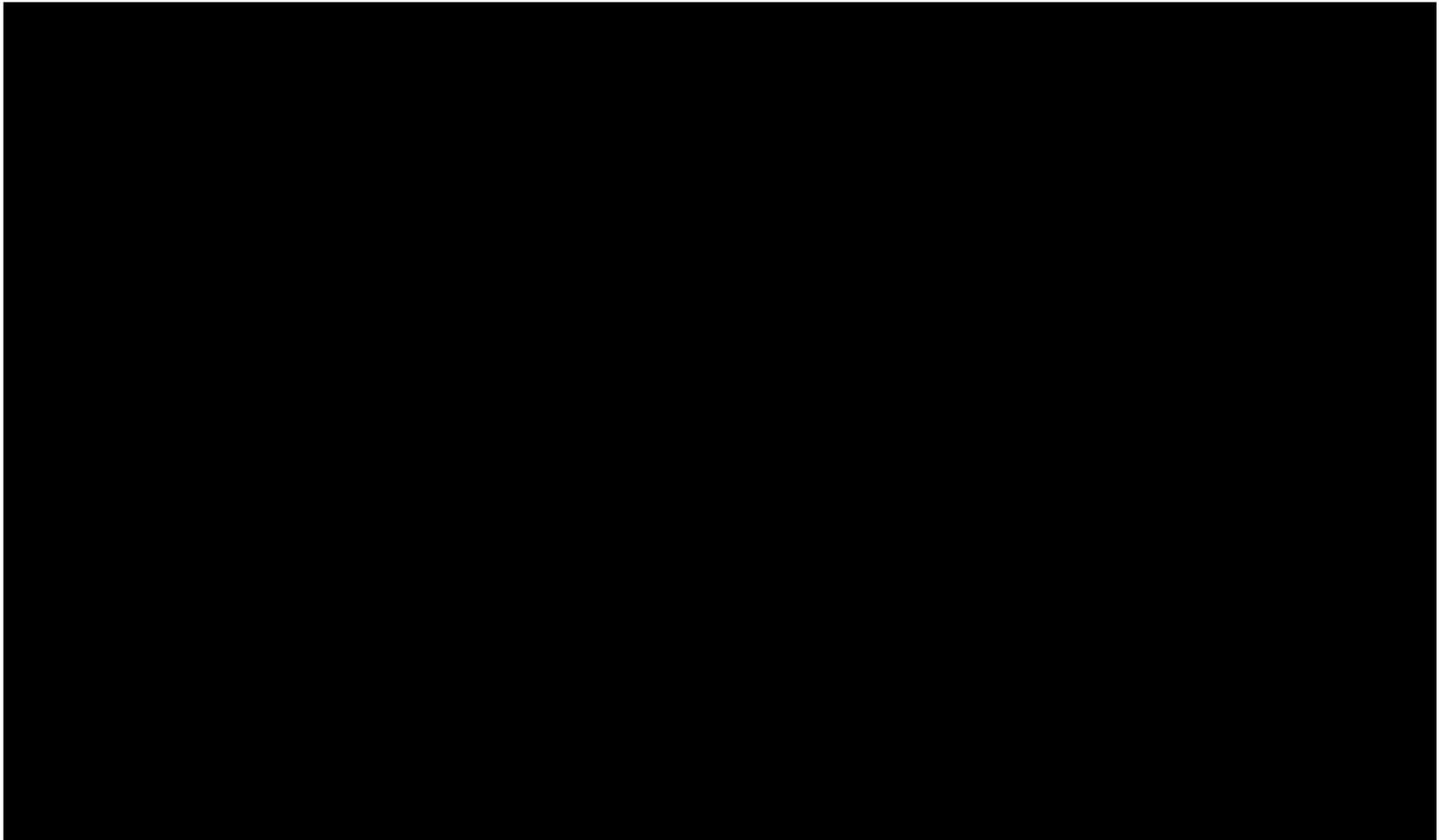
# Black & White Deaf Schools: Founding and Desegregation 2

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	1887	1967	37	80
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

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:

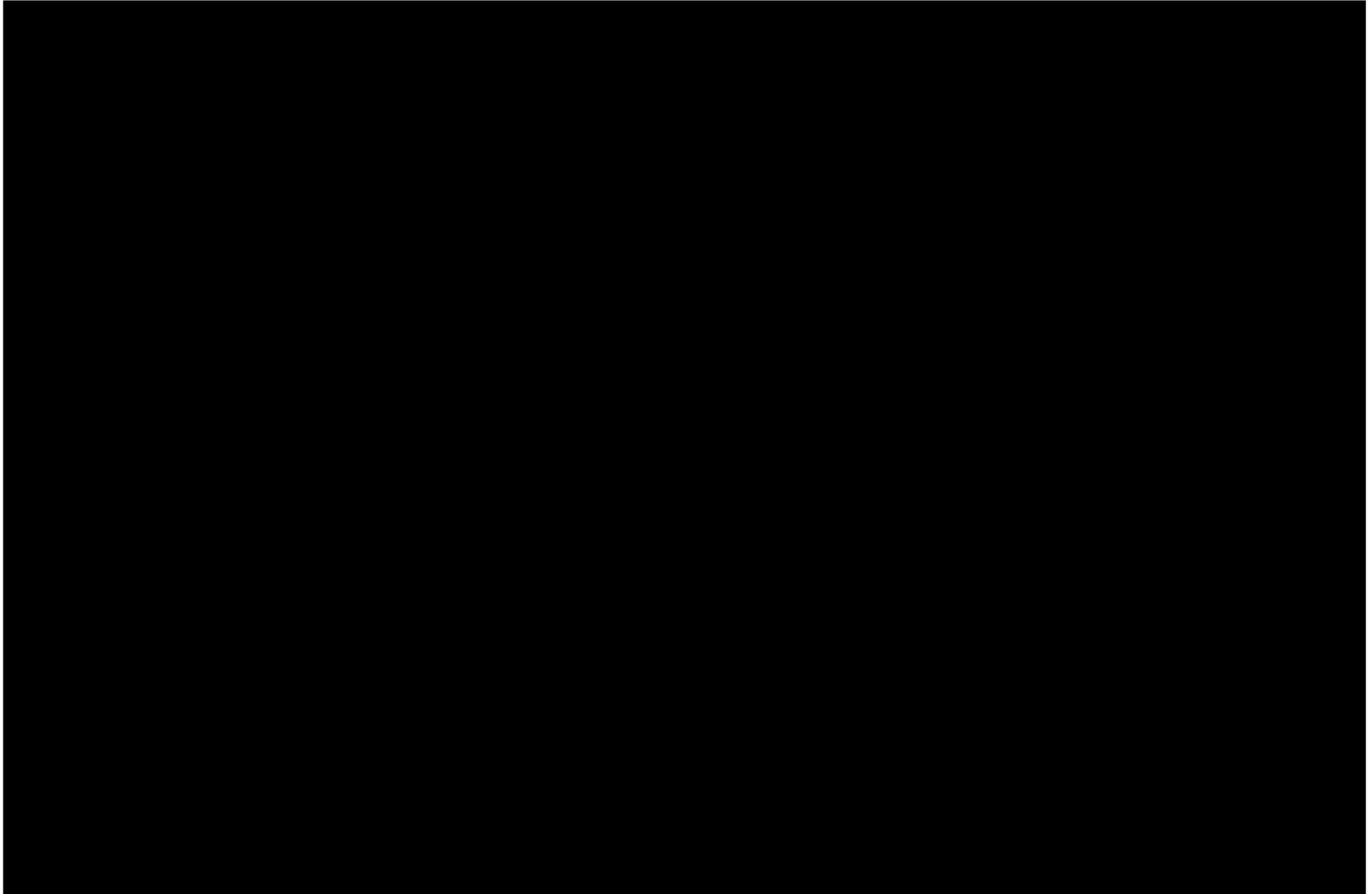
- North Carolina (1869)
- Texas (1887)
- Arkansas (1887)
- Alabama (1892)
- Virginia (1909)
- Louisiana (1938)

# The History and Structure of Black ASL: The Project at a Glance 3

- 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.

**From the DVD:**

## **Chapter 3: How We Did the Study**



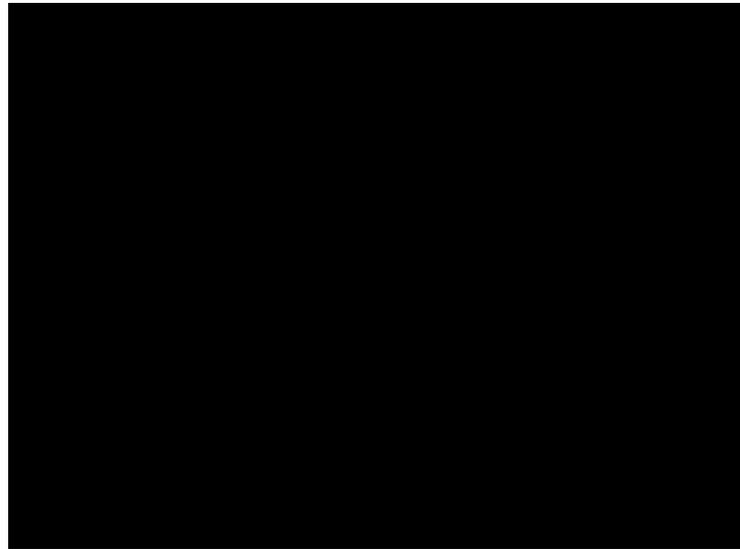
From the DVD:

## Chapter 4: Perceptions

We looked at participants' perceptions of language use.

One theme that emerged:

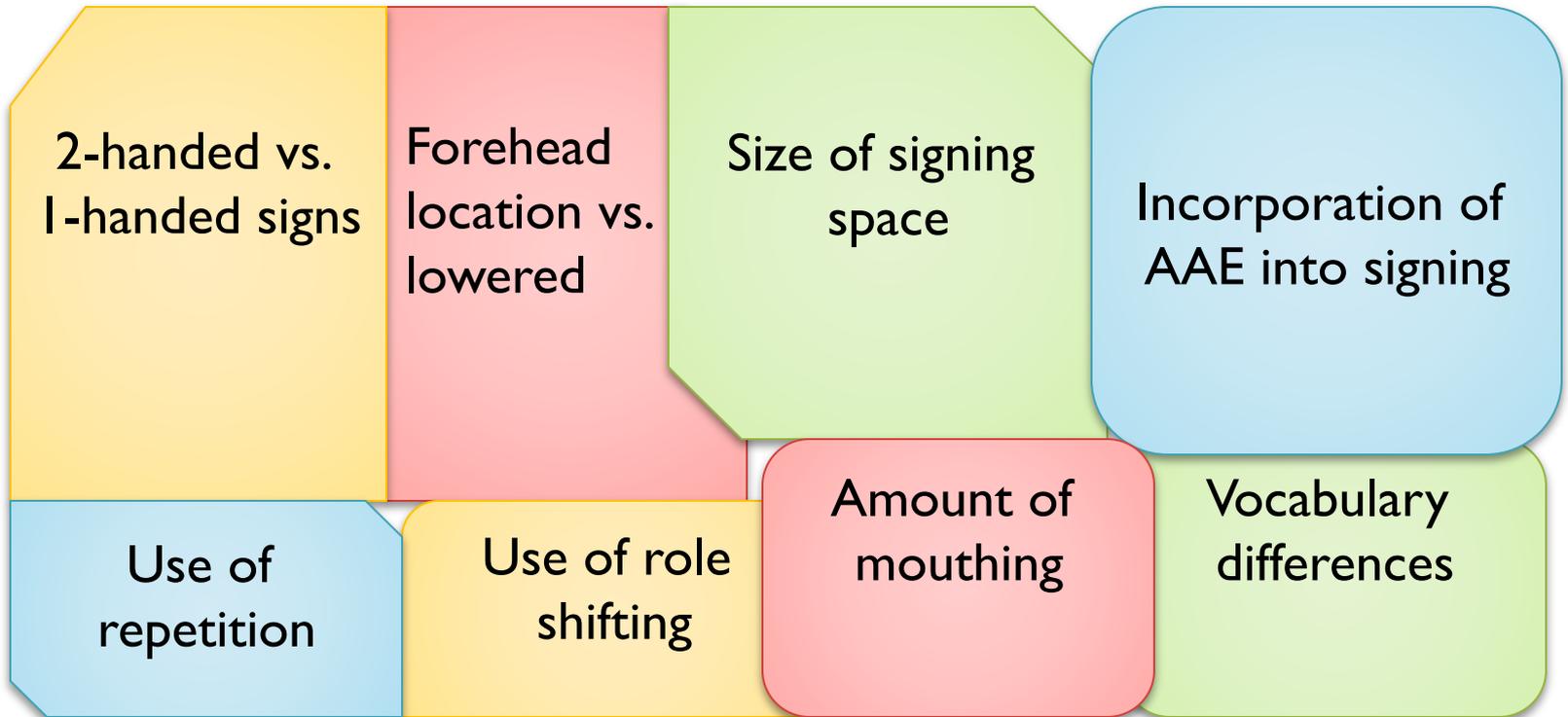
**“White Deaf education is better than Black Deaf education.”**



# Linguistic Features

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

# Black ASL Mosaic

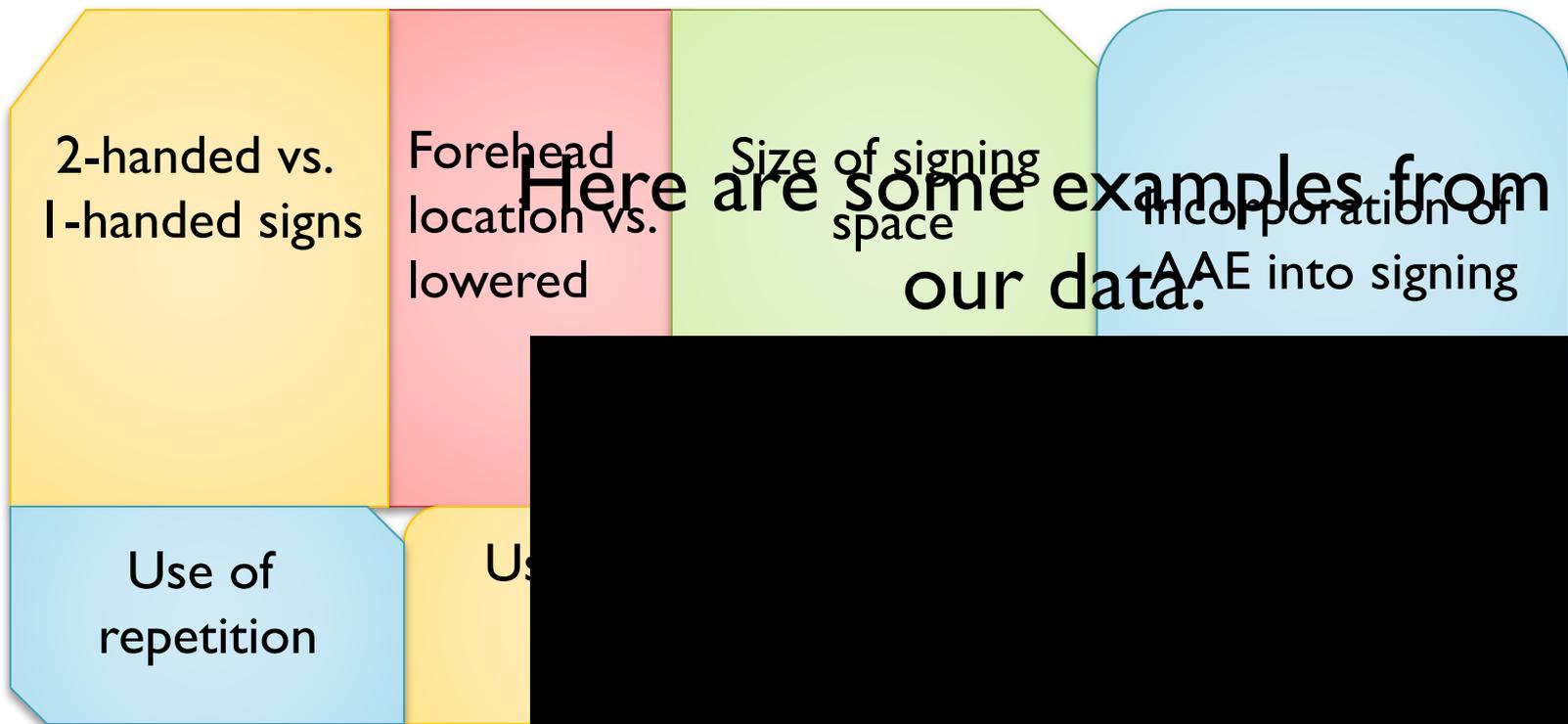


From the DVD:

# Chapter 5: Phonological Variation

## Black ASL Mosaic

2-handed signs can become 1-handed.



From the DVD:

## Chapter 5: Phonological Variation

Signs produced at the forehead can be lowered.

2-handed vs. 1-handed signs

Forehead location vs. lowered

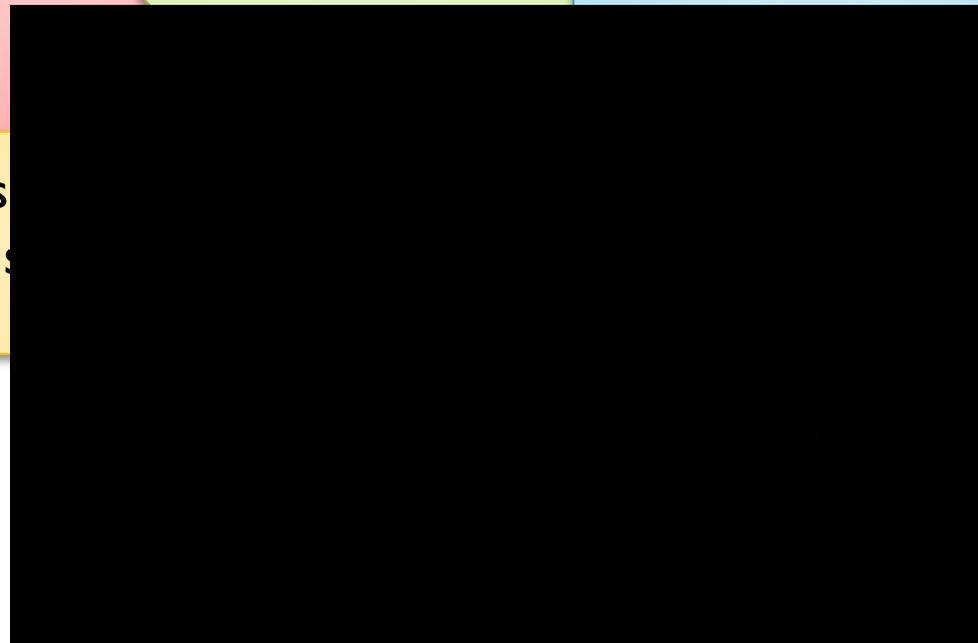
Size of signing

Incorporation of AAE into signing

Here are some examples from our data:

Use of repetition

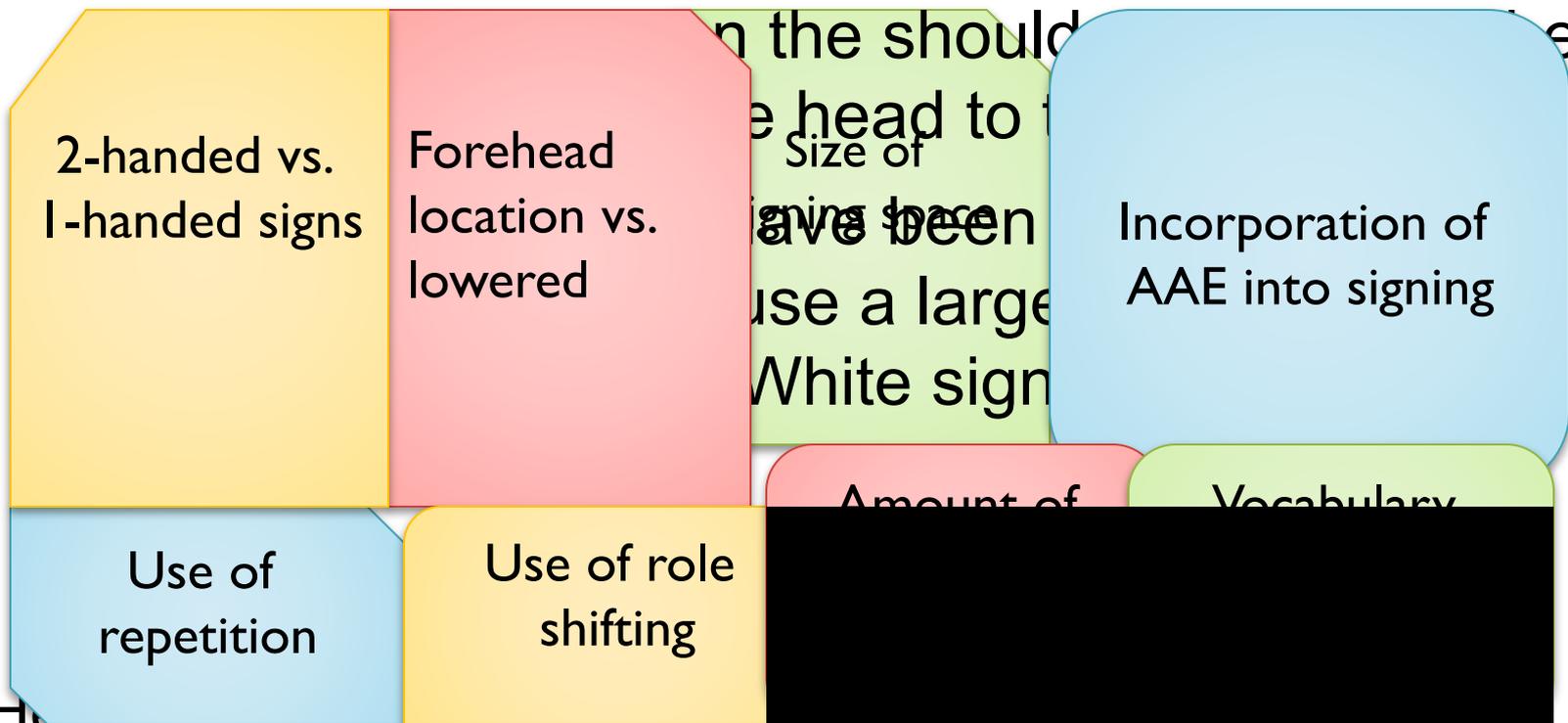
Use



# From the DVD:

## Chapter 5: Phonological Variation

- The “usual” signing space is



Here are some examples from our data:

# Variation in Syntax and Discourse

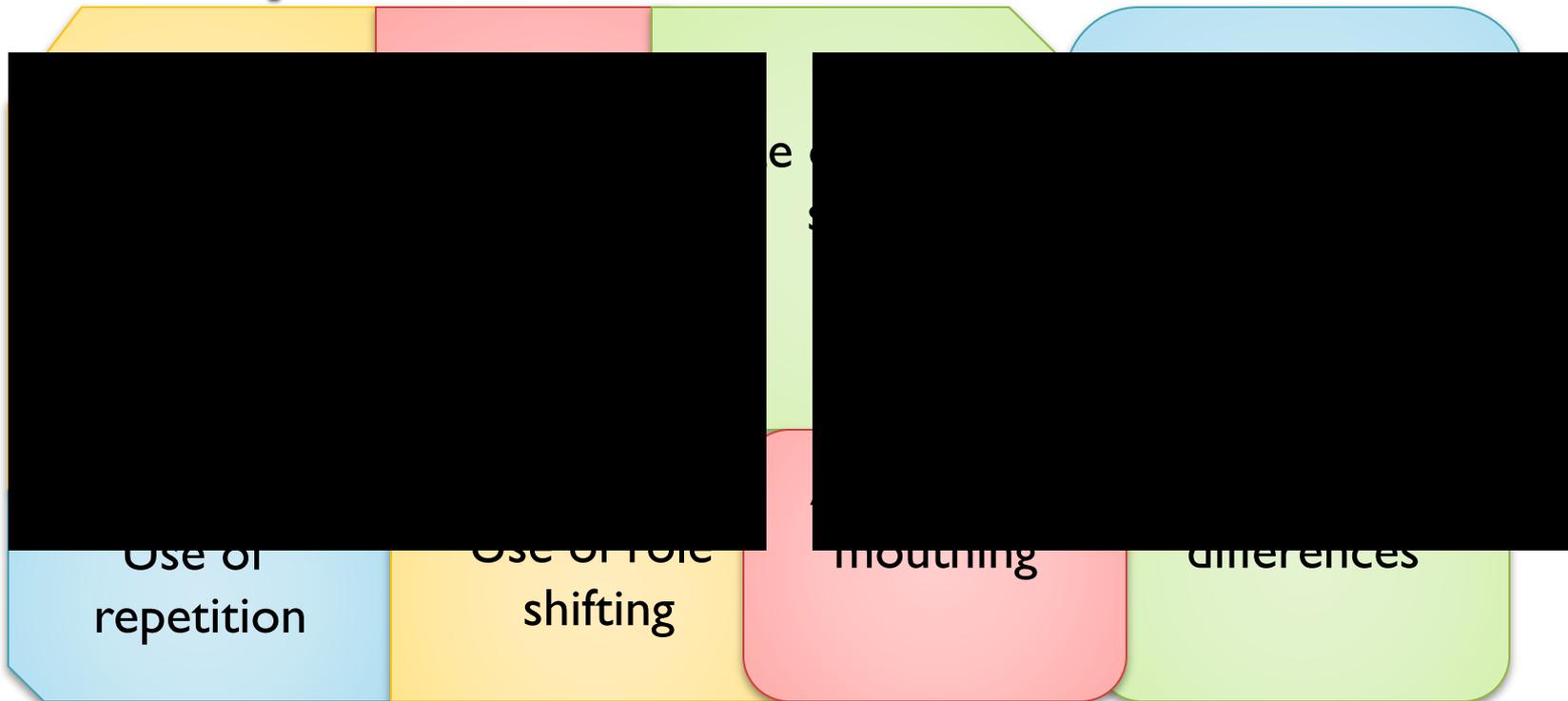
- How can syntax and discourse vary?:
  - repetition of *lexical items, phrases, or sentences*
  - use of *constructed dialogue (CD)* and *constructed action (CA)*
- We tested:
  - the hypothesis that Black signers make more use of repetition than do White signers, and
  - the claim that Black signers use more constructed action and constructed dialogue than White signers.

From the DVD:

## Chapter 6: Variation in Syntax and Discourse

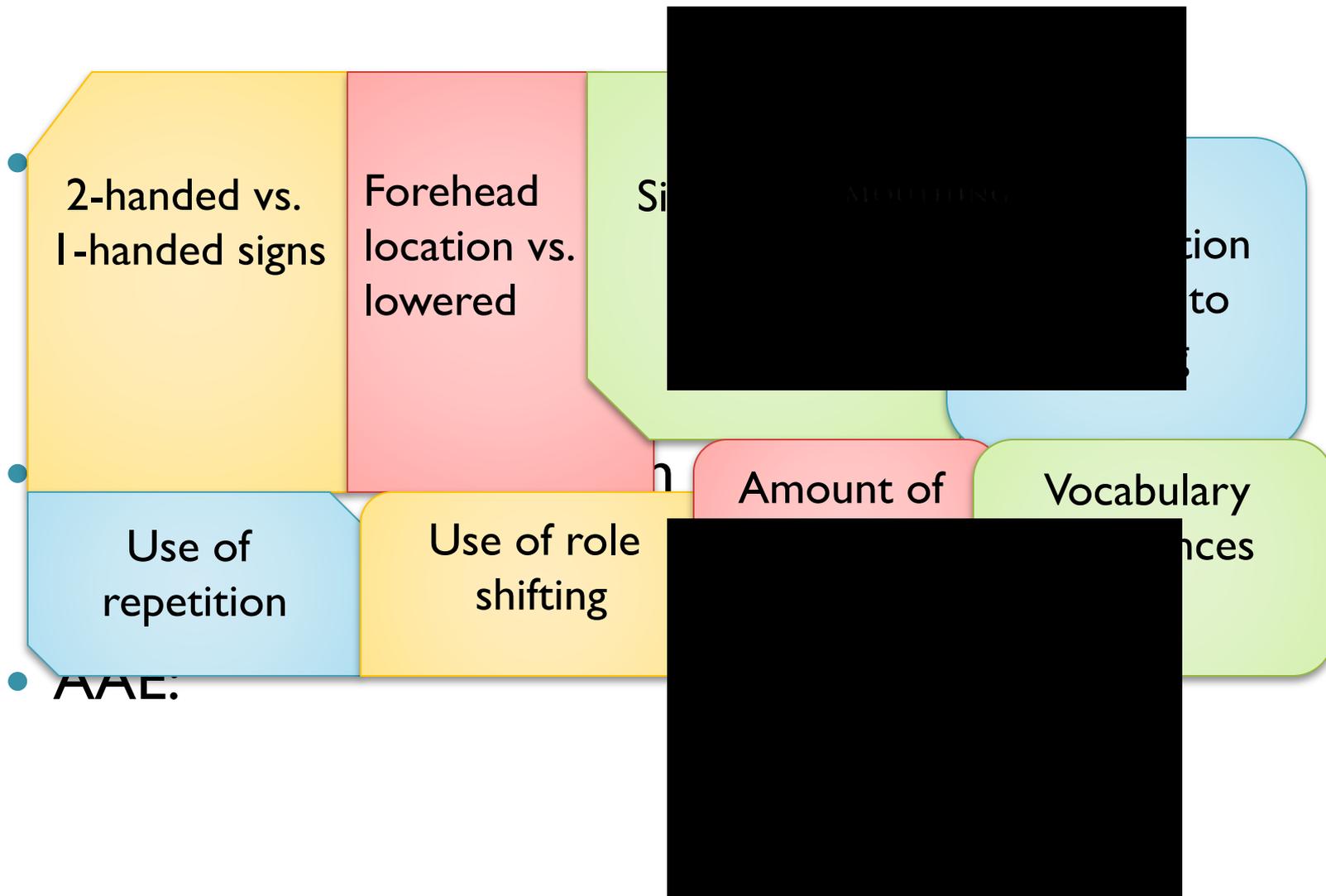
### Repetition

### CA and CD



From the DVD:

# Chapter 7: The Effects of Language Contact



# Lexical Variation

- We looked at:

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

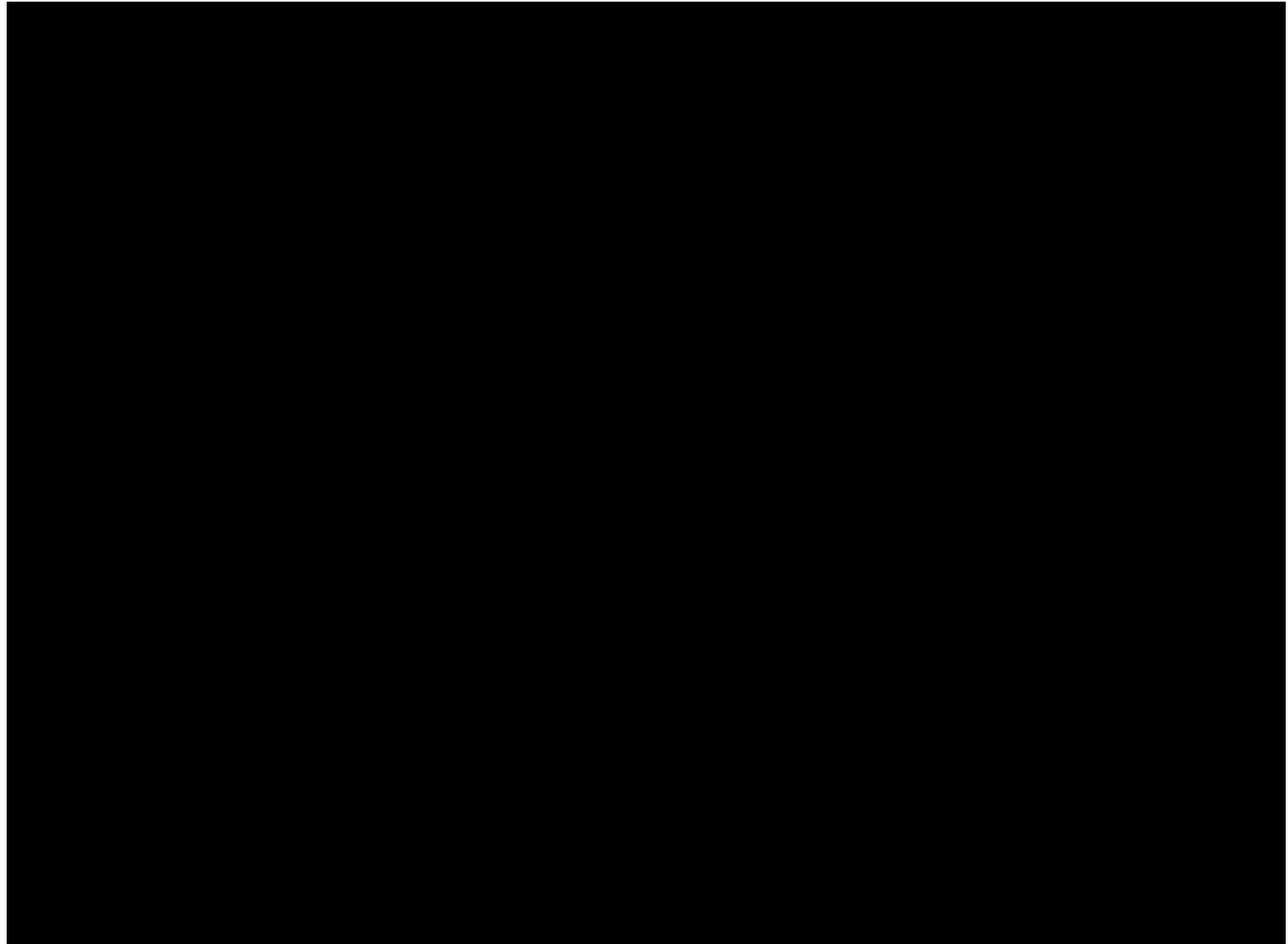
Amount of  
mouthing

Vocabulary  
differences

From the DVD:

## Chapter 8: Lexical Variation

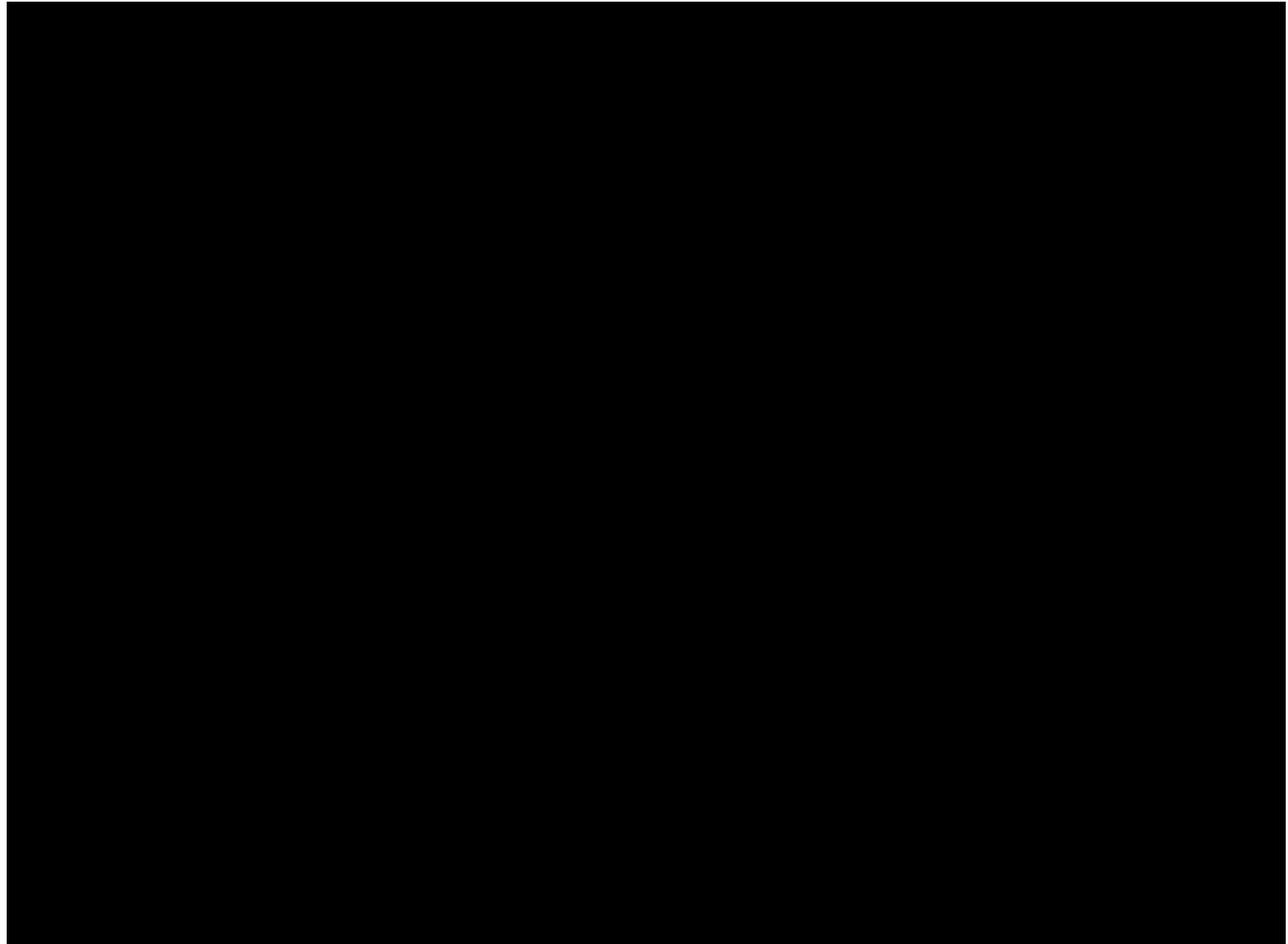
# Natural Discussion



From the DVD:

## Chapter 8: Lexical Variation

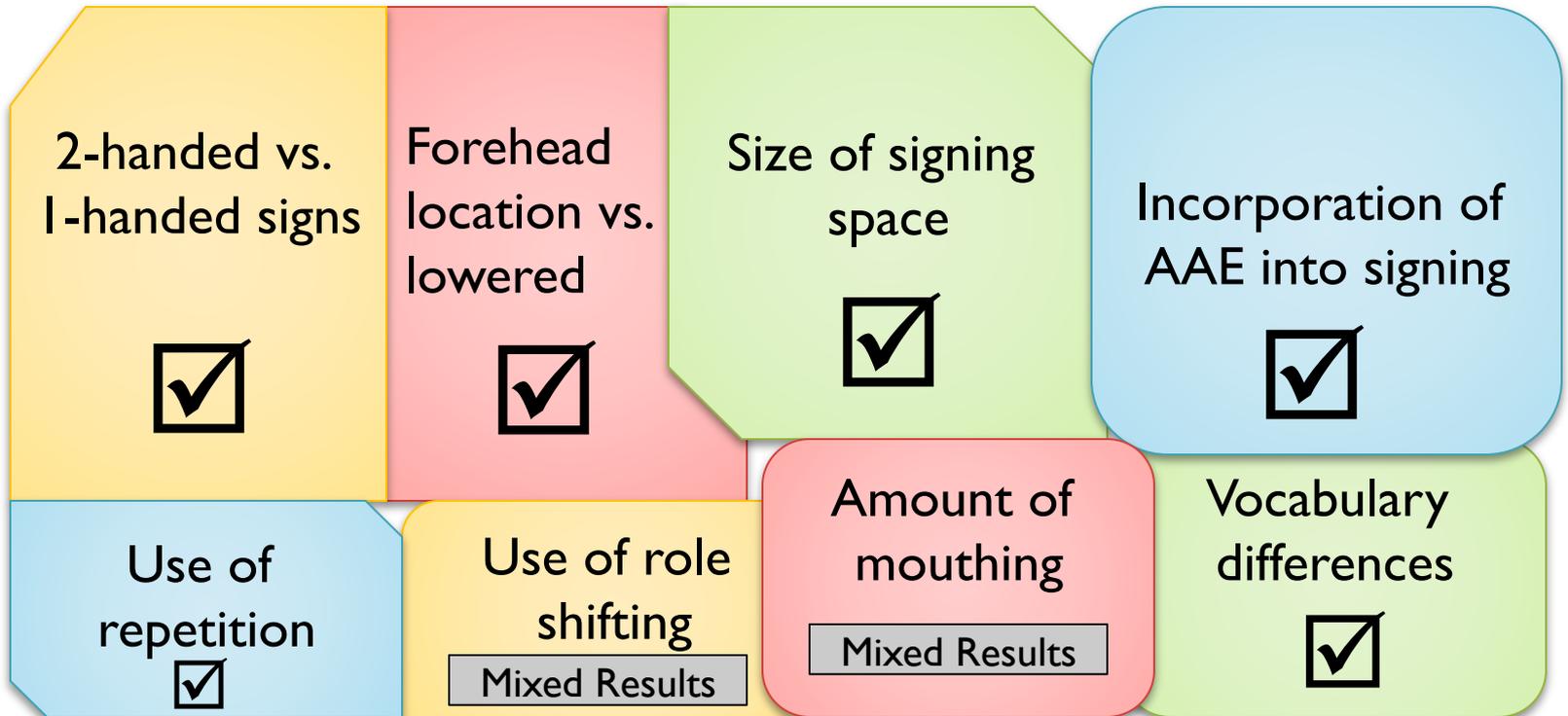
# Lexical Elicitation



# 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



# 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.

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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 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](http://blackaslproject.gallaudet.edu)