

Why Black American Sign Language (BASL) Matters?

Black Deaf Studies Symposium Proceedings

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Abstract

Dr. Carolyn McCaskill discusses the significance of Black American Sign Language (BASL), highlighting its evolution, cultural importance, and educational impact. She shares her journey in establishing the "Black Deaf People Studies" course, spurred by student petitions for courses about Black Deaf individuals. Dr. McCaskill emphasizes the establishment of the Center for Black Deaf Studies in 2020 and outlines the comprehensive curriculum of the DST 401 course, which covers the history, community, culture, education, and language of Black Deaf people. The presentation also touches on the origins of BASL in segregated schools, its distinct features compared to general ASL, and the importance of preserving Black Deaf heritage and language.

Keywords

Black American Sign Language, Black Deaf Studies, Deaf Studies, Curriculum, Sociolinguistics, Language Preservation

Presentation Transcript

(Slide 1)

Hi, I am Dr. Carolyn McCaskill

Today, I'm giving a presentation on the topic, "Why Black American Sign Language (BASL) matters?" Before I start, I think it is important to acknowledge Dr. Yerker Anderson. His sign name is (Y handshake on the chin).

(Slide 2)

Dr. Yerker Anderson used to be a professor of Deaf Studies before the Deaf Studies Department was established. It used to be a program. Then later became the department of Deaf Studies.

Yerker hired me to teach in the Deaf Studies department. When I was hired, the first thing he said was that the students have petitions. They want to see courses specifically about Black Deaf people.

- Oh! Wow! petitions?

I really started thinking about how to set up these courses. So as I was going through the process of thinking about what I should do, I finally figured out what the course should be. The course was called, “*Black Deaf People Studies*.” That’s the history behind how that course started and I thought it was important to mention that. Later as years went by, in 2020, the Center for Black Deaf Studies was established. That’s a bit of history behind Black Deaf Studies that I wanted to share with you. The Black Deaf People Studies course, DST 401 includes five areas.

(Slide 3)

It involves history, our history, and Black deaf history, which is really important, valuable, and must be preserved. We covered the history, people who were important contributors to our history, and what was involved. We discussed Black Deaf schools, segregation, education, and Black Deaf education from the past to the present. What is involved? Community and culture. Our Black Deaf community and our Black Deaf culture. We analyzed it and we discussed that. In our language BASL, we discussed how Ebonics and Black English impact how we sign. The Black Deaf People’s Studies course touches on all five areas. It was almost like when you go to a restaurant, eat at a buffet, and taste a variety of food. There is a variety of all that is involved.

(Slide 4)

I want to talk about my dissertation. My dissertation had an impact on how BASL emerged. I was in the program Administration Supervisor for Special Education with Dr. William Marshall. I explained my experiences at the Black Deaf school with sign language.

- Dr. William Marshall commented, really, at the Black Deaf school?
- Yes, I remember signs were very different from white [ASL] when I was integrated.
- Dr. William Marshall said, “Oh! Wow, you must write about it.”
- Oh, I see. I decided to go ahead and research it.

My dissertation titled, “Education of Black Deaf Americans in the 20th Century: Policy Implications for Administrators in Residential Schools for the Deaf.”

From that, I gave a presentation attended by Dr. Ceil Lucas, who was a professor in the Linguistics department. She watched my presentation and was astonished. Dr. Ceil Lucas was a long-time researcher and had published books related to language variations. She was shocked and astounded. Dr. Ceil Lucas thought my presentation was masterful.

- Dr. Ceil Lucas asked if I would mind if we collaborated to work together?
- Sure! I was thrilled.

We applied for a grant: The Spencer Foundation and National Science Foundation (NSF) grant. We applied for and received grant money. We conducted research, and the funding helped us to travel and interview Black Deaf people relating to BASL.

(Slide 5)

That BASL team involved four of us. I think it is important to mention that Ceil Lucas is a white woman with white hair. Then there was me and another white, hearing, man named Robert Bayley. Dr. Robert Bayley is an expert in measuring research. We said Black Deaf people typically use a large signing space. How do you measure that? That was Dr. Robert Bayley's specialty. Then the fourth member of the team was Dr. Joseph Hill, the first Black Deaf Linguist. So, the four of us were involved in the team.

The book, "Hidden Treasure of Black ASL: Its History and Structure," was published in 2011. We recently updated it last year. It was updated to paperback. The hardcover book had a DVD that was 2 hours and 15 minutes long. The paperback books have no DVD, but our videos are on YouTube now. Anyone can have access to it. So that picture you see, The Black ASL Project is also on YouTube and Google. All of our past interviews you can see there. You can click on the Black ASL Project if you want more information. We share it with everyone.

(Slide 6)

How is Black ASL defined? What is the theory that Black ASL originated from?

Really, Black ASL is a variety of different forms of ASL. BASL emerged when Black Deaf people entered into the segregated schools for the Deaf African Americans during the pre-civil rights era. In America, there were a total of 18 Black Deaf schools, including Washington, DC, and Kendall School. BASL really shows the difference from ASL used by mostly white signers. There is a difference in lexicology, phonology, and discourse syntax. In some geographic areas, Black ASL is a more conservative dialect, with a specific number of phonology factors

I recognize the tendency of Black ASL to deviate from the standardization of what has been taught in ASL classes used by those who sign or tend to follow the ASL dictionary that most white teachers tend to use.

The Black ASL Project ran from 2007 to 2013. The Black ASL team visited six states.

(Slide 7)

See the map? Why did we go to those specific states? The segregated schools. That map shows where segregation happened.

Do you see the red on the map? In America, segregation was required by law. The yellow areas on the map were not required to be segregated. The blue areas on the map had the option to be segregated or not. The green area of the map had no stipulations.

We chose six states. Why did we choose those six states? 1. Raleigh, North Carolina, was the first Black Deaf school established after the Civil War. It was the same with hearing Black students. Hearing Black students were prohibited from learning to read and write. It was illegal just as it was for Black Deaf students. North Carolina was the first established Black Deaf school.

Then we chose Houston, Texas. Even though the Black Deaf school was in Austin, Texas, we picked Houston because of the large number of Black Deaf people that lived there, and I used to live in Houston. So, I knew the people in the area. We picked Little Rock, Arkansas because one of the interviewers attended that school. She's from Little Rock. So, she knew the people in that area. So, it was easy to meet Black Deaf people to interview.

We picked Talladega, Alabama because I'm from Alabama. So, I knew the community and I knew the school. So, it was easier.

Next, we picked Hampton, Virginia. It was really an interesting history behind the school, and it was closed in 2008. Really there were two schools open until 2008. Then they closed. So, a friend told me you must interview in Hampton, Virginia. We decided to go ahead. Wow! It was worth it because one white Deaf man established the Virginia School for Colored Deaf and Blind. So, we decided to go ahead and interview in Hampton, Virginia.

The last school was New Orleans. We chose Louisiana, New Orleans. Because the school was the last Deaf school to be integrated in 1978. Oh, it was really late.

So, we picked six Deaf schools. We could have chosen more but the timing and the money were limited. We didn't go to schools in the North. We didn't go to schools in the West or the East. Only the South because that is where segregation happened.

It is really important to continue this research because people kept saying, "You need to interview this person from California," or "You need to interview that person from Detroit." Yes, because Black Deaf people sign differently in different states, but our research focused on the South only where segregation happened. I tried to encourage other people to do their research. I think it's important.

As for the Black Deaf, Negro Deaf school, I think it important to mention that some people called it Negro, some people called it Colored. In the past, Black people were called Negros. First, they were called Colored. Then later, they were called Negro. So, with the school, it was the same concept.

The Virginia School for Colored Deaf and Blind and the Arkansas School for Colored Deaf and Blind. Many of the Black Deaf schools had schools for Blind students established next to them. The North Carolina School for Colored was the same. I show that picture because it's important. Many times, pictures do not show both schools. So, I think it's important to mention the schools called Colored or Negro, and also, it is important to show the picture to show that we still exist. And we feel a sense of pride about our schools.

(Slide 8)

Now we will talk more about Black ASL. Did you see the Black ASL mosaic? What was involved? The Black ASL team identified 8 features of Black ASL.

We say two hands vs one hand. For example, DON'T KNOW (two-hands), WHY (two-hands), HAVE (two-hands), GRANDMA (two-hands), GRANDFATHER (two-hands). Two hands. We find that Black Deaf people tend to sign with two-hands, DON'T KNOW, WHY, CAN. Then DON'T KNOW (one-hand), WHY (one-hand), HAVE (one-hand), WANT (one-hand), CAN (one-hand). Also, we noticed strong two-hand usage with Black Deaf people for the following signs: DON'T KNOW, WHY, HAVE, WANT. We typically saw this based on our research.

Next, sign location, either upper or lower. WHY? (upper), can also be signed WHY? (lower). WHAT FOR? (signed upper near the head) WHAT FOR? (signed lower), Black Deaf people have a strong tendency to sign in the upper head area, WHAT FOR? There was one older man in our research telling stories that used his head to tell the stories. He would sign DON'T KNOW high above his upper head area. He could have signed

DON'T KNOW lower, but instead, he signed DON'T KNOW high above his head. It was interesting to watch that sign stay in the upper area and not move. It was so interesting.

The next feature discussed was the size of the signing space. We tend to sign big, instead of signing in a small space. We have a strong tendency to go outside of the signing box/signing area. While white ASL signers have a tendency to sign small inside the box signing area, we Black ASL signers have a strong tendency to sign big, whew! Check, yes! That issue with signing big sometimes can be problematic, especially for the Black interpreters. Some people have a tendency to criticize them for signing big and would prefer that they not do it. However, that's how Black Deaf people tend to sign. Signing big is very clear and it makes sure that you see our signs. So, check yes.

Next, AAE is incorporated with Black ASL. AAE means African American English or Black English, either way. Black Deaf people tend to include AAE in our signs. For example, WHAT UP? (white ASL and lower) WAT SUP, GIRL?!? (Black ASL signed big and upper) or MY BAD (white ASL), MY BAD, MY BAD (Black ASL signers) Or, FINISH, YOU TRIPPIN', STOP TRIPPIN', FINISH (Black ASL), that is Black English in our signs. Check, yes. Black Deaf people socialize with their families and their communities that use AAE. So Black Deaf people incorporate AAE into Black ASL

Another feature Black ASL uses is repetition. For example, YES ME LEAVING, YES GIRL, ME (I'm) LEAVING GIRL, ME (I'm) TOLD YOU GIRL, ME (I'm) LEAVING, ME LEAVING, so 1, 2, 3, 4 times of repeating. Make sure you get it. Do you get it? You get it?!? So, repetitive, clarification, get it? So, check, yes.

Next, role shifting, shoulders move to the right of the first character and then move to the left of the second character Tend (in Black ASL), check, yes. However, for this feature, there are mixed results, meaning not all do this. We compared our study with others to see if all Black Deaf people typically do the same as white Deaf people. There were mixed results.

The next feature we discussed is mouthing. Some used mouthing. Some didn't move their mouths at all, while some mouthed, signing all the way. Were they using the English? Which one? We noticed a strong tendency with older Black Deaf people to sign without moving their mouth. ME GO HOME LAST NIGHT, ME TIRED, WORK (3x) HARD. We noticed the mouth didn't move, no mouth movement, no English.

In the past, at the Black Deaf schools, most supported signing, not the oral methods. You noticed white Deaf schools had strong oral methods or some signs, but Black Deaf

schools mostly supported signing. The attitudes in the past tended to look down on signing. So fine, let the Black Deaf people sign. So many of us still strongly use our signs.

Ok, the use of vocabulary was different. So, yes, check. Similar to what I mentioned previously, what sup? Trippin', My bad, different, different words.

So, we identified eight different (phonemical) features in Black ASL. We discussed the attitudes and facial expressions with attitudes like GIRL (with pursed lip and sided eyes attitude), GIRL PLEASE (with little neck roll attitude), (snapping fingers with neck roll). What? (with slow shoulders shrugs and palm up hand open then close)

Those types of attitudes we didn't analyze as a feature. That is why I encourage more people to pick up where we left off in the study to continue this research because I think it is an essential part of the language. It impacts how people perceive Black ASL. There could possibly be a ninth feature. We identified eight. We could add number 9 but the Black ASL team already finished the research. So, I think it is important for other people to follow up and pick up on our research. Also to expand more. There is a lot more that needs to be done.

(Video Clip)

- *BASL is not what you think. BASL is not the same as ASL. (Picture of Evon Black, with wording on the screen saying. This is Evon, current President of National Black Deaf Advocates (NBDA), picture of NBDA logo)*

(Video of Evon smiling at the DC Capital signing ILY to the audiences below)

- *My beautiful people (overwhelmed with joy.) My beautiful soul (smiling so gleefully)*

(Picture of the southern states in white except for Arkansas in green with wording on the screen say "Born and raised in Arkansas")

(Picture of Evon Black, with wording on the screen saying "A native BASL user")

(Picture of Evon Black with four different black deaf people)

(Picture of Evon Black on some special occasion)

(Picture of four different black deaf people, with wording on the screen says, “What makes BASL?”)

- BASL is typical to what? Strong facial expressions, body language, and signing are big. It's our black culture where Black Deaf people understand and have knowledge about Black Deaf culture.

(Picture of Black DeafBlind with two different Black Deaf people at the event)

(Picture of three Black Deaf people at formal occasion), (Picture of three Black Deaf people at the conference)

(Picture of several Black Deaf People dancing).

- BASL is the same as other dialects, such as signing and talking. No! Not true! Really, it's based on the regions and language varieties from hearing families to school, to church, or to peers.

(Picture of Evon Black, with the wording on the screen say “Examples of BASL variations”)

- In a few regions in the South, in states, signs are varied (in the Southern States). Well-dressed, sharp, Black, Deaf people.

(Picture of the Black Deaf people in formal dress during the 1960s era with Evon Black's hand on)

- Arkansas, whoo! B-A-I (bad in BASL), DC, whoo! FINE (fingers wiggle), M-I-A-M-I, hard (close fist BASL for HARD), NYC, tight (F handshape on the mid of the mouth across to opposite side).
- To let you know the degree of well-dressed, featured expressions, for example, who! B-A-D (bad in BASL) or B-A-I (bad in BASL), it reflects how well our Black Deaf people dress.

(Picture of the large group of Black Deaf People with the wording on the screen BASL is proudly embraced by Black Deaf Community)

- So what is BASL? So, what do you think? (smiling). Peace Out!

(Slide 9)

Dr. Carolyn McCaskill – Now, there are some questions to consider about BASL that many people have been asking a lot of questions, but I picked a few questions to respond to.

Did Black ASL come from Deaf Black families? Black Deaf families had strong heritages that passed down BASL from generation to generation that kept Black ASL going, yes. There is one Black Deaf family from Texas that had several generations of Black Deaf people. This family, Nakia Smith, you probably heard of her on TikTok. She explains about her grandfather and how he told stories about BASL to preserve the language. It is important. So yes, Black Deaf families keep Black ASL alive by passing it on from generation to generation, yes.

Is Black ASL from the segregated Black Deaf communities? Yes, especially Black Deaf schools. Now, all Black Deaf schools are closed and all schools are integrated. You'll see Black ASL in the Black Deaf community so it will still keep going. So, yes.

Is Black ASL influenced by African American English? Yes, it is. The language, the Black English, the Black Deaf people, their families, the communities, their churches and how they talk with each other, how they pick up the language. One good example is my son who is a CODA (Child of the Deaf Adult) and many times he would be talking, he would say A-I-I-G-H-T (Carolyn looked perplexed at her son) Aiight? What's that? That is not a word. I need an interpreter. I need a translation from him.

I found out that he meant AIIGHT, a BASL term. Black Deaf youth would say AIIGHT (BASL), their sign AIIGHT (BASL) what does AIIGHT (BASL) mean? Oh, it means "alright, ok."nOoooh! You see? So, that's an example of how the language becomes integrated within the community. Black Deaf young people keep the language going.

One other word they say is dope. Dope? (Carolyn looks perplexed) Dope? Mean drugs? No, "that's dope" means impressive. It means good. Ahh ooh, I learned from the Black Deaf youth. I'm older and I'm old school, too. So, I'm behind with the current terminology. I tend to use older vocabulary but when I hang out with the young, ooh, I pick up on the language.

So Black American English is a very important influence on the BASL signs. Yes. Do they have Black ASL classes? No, but I believe that BASL courses will be established in the future. People are interested and want to learn. The only way to learn Black ASL is to socialize with people who use it. But I believe that class will emerge eventually in the near future, yes.

(Slide 10)

The impact of BASL is like an umbrella, how it branches out. Our history, the explanation about school segregation, oral history, interviewing, recording and explaining the history

Culture, our get togethers, our community, there are several different aspects connected with our culture such as our values and our ways of being.

Next, our community organizations such as NBDA (National Black Deaf Advocate), NAOBI (National Alliance of Black Interpreters), and an interpreter's organization.

Next there is communication. I mentioned BASL and explained our language. So, that's like an umbrella branched out.

So, it is really important to recognize the impact of BASL. All of these impacts will help BASL to continue to live on.

(Slide 11)

The Black Deaf community, who are we? Who? Black Deaf people are a minority within a minority. It's the same with the Deaf in general. There is a smaller group inside the Deaf minority that are Black Deaf. So, a minority within the minority. The Black Deaf community can be described as a group of individuals who live in a hearing and color-conscious society. We know that, in general, we live in the hearing community, we know that. Also, we know that people can see the color of our skin. People see me when I walk down the street; they notice a woman who is Black. Some people say, "Ohh, I don't see color." But we know people recognize color.

Youngkin, back in 1990, wrote that one way of describing Black Deaf individuals is to feel like we are trapped between two worlds. We say I'm Black, and I'm Deaf, but it is interesting how we are perceived in the hearing community.

- The hearing black people would say, "Oh you're Black," But when you start to stutter with your hands up and are unable to communicate, then they say, "Oh you belong over there in the Deaf community."
- "Me?" (looking perplexed) "Oh, I belong over there?"

The Black hearing people nod their heads "You," start to stutter with hand up and shaking head, "Communicate," (grimace face) (pointing the person, then point at the ear while making grimace face) (hand up then point over there [Deaf community])

- “Me? Ohh,” I belong to the the Deaf community. Now, when I socialize with the Deaf, the Deaf would say, “Ahh, yes but you are Black, you belong” (pointing over there to the Black community).
- “Me?” (confused) “Oh I belong to this? (Black community)” (with side eyes). I am stuck between two worlds.

The hearing world is not accessible. The Black Hearing community doesn’t have Black signing accessibility. The Deaf community, “Ahh, you” (pointing the back of the palm back and forth indicated the person is black.) I’m confused with both worlds. So, which one do I belong to? I’m stuck between two worlds.

(Slide 12)

The Signing Black in America documentary started and was produced by North Carolina State University. The professor’s name was Walt Wolfram. He did a story about how Black people talk. He developed a program relating to language. Then, when he was showing their story (documentary), one Black Deaf man watched it. He raised his hand to get the professor’s attention. He asked, “What about Black Deaf people?” The professor said, “Oh good idea.”

So, the Talking Black in America team decided to come to Gallaudet. They were fascinated with how Black Deaf people sign. So that is how they came up with “Signing Black in America,” that was back in 2017. So, he continued to pursue it until 2019. The documentary was shown on PBS too. Now, they have it on YouTube.

So, signing Black in America really spotlighted the history of how Black ASL developed and the research related to how Black Deaf people code-switch. Additionally, how the interpreters who watch Black Deaf people sign recognize how to interpret and know when that Black Deaf person is ready to code-switch. I thought that was really an important impact, the role of Black ASL. How that really impacts our lives.

(Slide 13)

Black ASL really matters and it is essential. I strongly feel that more research is needed on Black ASL. I feel strongly that there is not enough and I hope to encourage more people to pick up on the research. BASL has clearly evolved from the past during the segregated time until now. It is clearly evolving, just like any language evolves. ASL is evolving as well.

From old ASL to current ASL, the same with BASL, it is clearly evolving. It is important to preserve our oral history and continue to interview to record people about their

experiences, about their signs. I think it is very important to preserve it. We here at Gallaudet continue, from the Center for Black Deaf Studies (CBDS), one of our goals is to preserve the oral history of Black ASL.

It is important to share our story. Heritage to pass on to the younger generation of Black Deaf signers. We want them to feel proud, feel good, and have positive self-esteem about themselves and their language. So, it is important to continue conducting research. My quote is that “Black ASL helps validate the Black Deaf community. It gives them a sense of who they are, their language, their history, their culture, and their experience. And I want the world to know about us. I want the world to know that we, Black Deaf people matter, we are important!

(Slide 14)

My favorite quote by Marcus Garvey says, “A people without knowledge of their past history, origin, and culture is like a tree without roots.”

I think it is important that people know their history, where they’re from, and their past ancestors. They have some heritage to pass on to future generations. But most importantly, it is important to know that Black ASL and Black American Sign Language matters!

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