

Why History Matters: The Impact of Education and Research Decisions on Black ASL

Black Deaf Studies Symposium Proceedings

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Abstract

Since the publication of The Hidden Treasure of Black ASL (2011), Black ASL is celebrated across mainstream and social media, boosted by the subsequent academic publications and presentations of Black ASL and the 2020 release of the documentary Signing Black in America which is currently available on YouTube. However, this is not the first study of Black ASL as there are previous publications that have studied or mentioned Black ASL - formerly called "Southern Black Signing" because of the geographical origin of the segregated schools for the deaf in the southern U.S. states. Unlike the Black ASL project initiated in 2007, the studies of Black ASL in the 1970s through 1990s did not receive the similar amount of attention from the public or at least the professions related to sign language, interpreting, sign language, and deaf education. The discrepancy between the amounts of scholastic attention decades apart is associated with the intersection of racism and audism - the systems of oppression based on race and communication competence - which explains the socio-linguistic and -historical factors in the development of Black ASL and constrains the academic pipeline of Black Deaf scholars in social science.

Keywords

Black American Sign Language, Segregation, Integration, Audism, Racism, Linguistic Diversity

Presentation Transcript

History is critical. And for our Black ASL project, we looked at the features of Black ASL and wanted to know where it came from. So we needed to go back to the past. And where Black ASL emerged from and how it came to be. And we didn't look at schools all over the United States, but only schools that were in the segregated South.

And that's where Black ASL emerged from those segregated Deaf schools in the South. From Texas to Maryland. And we have got publications and findings that we have created that are related to these schools.

And now I will talk and walk you through our project and presentation. But I want to go back to the research and history to see what people did or did not do in their research regarding Black ASL and what the impact was of the lack of research or the decisions that were made about research that influenced what we decided to do.

Our Black ASL team started in 2007. And at that time, we knew that there had to be some relationship between the schools that we were going to study. And we looked at six different schools. Again, because of budgetary limitations and limitations of time, we were not able to study all of the schools. But we wanted to look at Black ASL through lenses of interviews and oral history in a number of different states.

And we went to schools that had been segregated. And some of those schools had also been integrated. And we talked to Black Deaf people about their educational experience in the segregated schools and the integrated schools.

And we created the book to document the history and then disseminated it. And also, we have a video that's still available for anyone who wants to access it on YouTube for free.

And there's a series of nine videos that represent each of the chapters in the book. And you're able to do a comparison between what's written and what's in the video. And there are two forms of Black ASL based on the two groups of people that we interviewed. As you can see, Black ASL had two different forms. One of them that we studied was primarily based on people who were in segregated schools for the Deaf. And you could see their use of signs and the forms that they created as a result of segregation.

But we are aware that Black ASL started as early as 1869. And there is still Black ASL, but it has and is evolving over time. Big changes actually started in 1954 when the Supreme Court in the Brown versus Board of Education decision decided that schools could no longer be segregated and needed to be integrated.

When integration happened, it had an impact on Black ASL. Black children were sent to the white schools and had to follow the language that was being used there. Then the mainstream movement happened, and that was another evolution that impacted Black ASL, including the development and maintenance of Black ASL as a language.

Based on what happened with Black ASL, there were two different events, which are the changes in the education system and the mainstreaming that happened. And both

events had profound impacts. So we're going to look at the overarching challenge, which is the system of oppression.

Clearly, we have audism, and we also have racism. And both of those cannot be dissociated. They have to be looked at together through a frame that we call intersectionality. And that particular term, people think it means identity and separating out identity. And yes, that is one way of thinking about it. But we also have to think about it as the system of oppression. And if people have multiple identities, they may operate in privilege depending on which identity is pronounced or centered at a given time. But the system of oppression can affect people's lives. And we have to look at how that happens.

There are dominant and subordinate oppressions that happen in people's lives. And we consider those when we think of intersectionality.

When we think of the system of audism, which discriminates upon people based on their ability to hear or not hear, our world was designed for people who can hear. And we know that. It's based on sound and verbal communication. Language and speech is what is considered. And when sign language was determined to be a language, some people said yes, it is a language. But other people disagreed, saying that the term language refers only to spoken languages.

And for some people in the world, their ideology was very strong, and their belief was that visual languages had no value. And they oppressed sign languages and marginalized it. And it had a severe impact on Deaf education.

And our next slide is going to show you how this ideology of looking at visual languages had an impact on the education of Deaf people in the United States.

As we think about Deaf people, more often than not, they acquire sign language in residential schools for the Deaf. And most of those students were born into families of people that could hear and didn't know sign language. The families of people who knew sign language, who were generationally Deaf, passed on their language to their children. And that's where ASL as a language and a culture began to be determined and to flourish.

Before the 1960s, many of these residential schools were established, and parents were allowed to put their Deaf children in schools closer to home. But later, they started sending their children to mainstream programs where there were communication practices that didn't favor the use of ASL. And this caused ASL to no longer flourish in

the way that it had in the past. Deaf children's language acquisition was being obstructed.

So as the children went to the residential schools for the Deaf, the numbers significantly decreased down to 25%. And there were differences that happened in terms of the use of sign language. And because of the system of audism and then when you add racism to that, there was a different experience that happened for those students.

Racism is deeply embedded into American culture, history, practices, the legal system, the educational system. It is pervasive. It's as if it's the air we breathe. We can't remove ourselves from it because it surrounds us at all times and in all places.

Racism has led to the privilege that white people have, and white supremacy is something that is around us all the time. So when you look at the next slide, you will see the impact on Black Deaf children that was different from the impact on children who were white and Deaf.

Having said that, we had the segregated schools, the white schools for the Deaf and the Black Deaf schools for the Deaf. And white students were often able to continue and live in neighborhoods with their families. But after 1954, the Federal mandate required schools to be integrated. And Federal law had to be followed. So the Black Deaf students who originally had been able to attend school nearer to their homes now had to go to school with white Deaf students where the signing styles were different. And they assumed that the white signing was better and no longer valued their own Black sign language.

So Black ASL began to reduce in prominence. When Black Deaf people were at home, they continued to use Black ASL. But then when they went to school and interacted with the white Deaf students, they started to integrate their signing styles. And it really caused them to no longer sign the way that they did.

And that's why we see two styles of Black sign language. We know that African American English, AAE, was really involved with Black Deaf people signing, and it still is. And you could see the differences in the culture and the differences in the ways that it influenced the language. But as we progressed and continued our study, we have learned that there just hasn't been enough that we have researched yet.

We have talked briefly about the educational history and how the Deaf schools were established. In Connecticut, we know that the American school for the Deaf was established in 1817, resulting in over 200 years of ASL history. But what we later

realized is that Black ASL has a very long history as well, which is about 150 years in length. During that time, for example, in 1913, there was a group of white Deaf people, including George Veditz, who wanted to preserve ASL visually. And he saw that ASL was being banned and saw the prevalence of the oral movement and wanted to make sure that ASL remained intact.

At that time, Black people were segregated. So we don't know if there was any preservation of Black ASL. But what we do know is that in 1965, a dictionary about American Sign Language was published, and it shows that we could analyze ASL, including the different parts and structure. This has left us wondering about what happened to Black ASL at that time.

Then in 1984, another book was published, the Signs Across America, where people traveled throughout the United States to collect variations on ASL and saw different signs for different words. For example, birthday has a number of different ways of expressing it, as I'm showing you here in my signing. And there are other words for different states that have different representations, but people wanted to know what happened to Black ASL. And was it included in this Signs Across America project?

When our book was published, these two books were published, one in 1965 and the other one in 1984. When the 1965 book, the dictionary of American Sign Language, was published, the work was collected through a variety of interviews. And they used the list of ways of documenting the signs that were created. They had Deaf assistants. And one of them was a gentleman named Cronberg. When he met a Black Deaf woman and asked her some questions, he asked her the same questions that he had asked of the other people he met. But he realized that her signs were different, and he then realized it was probably a result of the segregation that was happening, because this woman was from North Carolina. And he became interested in the research. But unfortunately, the research team decided to keep things simple. And they didn't want to include that in the book. And they made -- it was a decision that caused a missed opportunity. And they said that they hoped people would continue to study this interesting variation, and they were sad that they had not done so.

And then in the 1970s, this is the next study of the language that happened. A gentleman named Woodward, Dr. James Woodward, started studying the Black Deaf community and its sign language. What was published in 1965 focused on North Carolina and Virginia. But Woodward started studying the Deaf community in Georgia and Louisiana. And through his studies, he was able to find that there were variations in the signs. And he published three different documents. One of them focused on the hand styles and the signs that were made and how the hands were facing when a sign

was created. For example, if you see the sign for LEMON or this sign for LEMON, and he looked at the variation based on whether it was related to the face or a different positionality of the hands,

And how it was produced, including whether signs were one handed or two handed. Woodward found that there were variations that used two hand signs with -- in the Black Deaf community versus white Deaf community, which used more one-handed signs.

And we were able to corroborate his research in the research we did in the Hidden Treasure of Black ASL. And we wanted to see what had continued or changed based on what we did. And we hoped that we would see the work continue and proliferate from there. But unfortunately, there was an opposite effect.

In the Signs Across America, that work was critical because it compared other states and focused on just two states as opposed to all of the signs in different states. They could easily have incorporated Black ASL, but they chose not to. They had a statement in their introduction that they wanted to represent the entire Deaf community in the country and that should mean that the Black Deaf community was also a part of the community, but on the same page of the introduction, they did not include them because many of the Black Deaf signs in the research were different from the white signs in the southern states. And that was why they decided to exclude them.

Their reason for the exclusion was that the sociolinguistic researcher Woodward did the study on Black ASL, so they decided to leave it to him and focus on their own goal of preserving ASL variation around the United States. They were afraid that Signed English would influence ASL so they had to preserve it, and Black Deaf signs were not part of their priorities. 499 13:42:58 As you can see, for people who made decisions to study Black ASL or not to study Black ASL, in the first ASL study in 1960s there was a mention of Black ASL in the essay so that was a formal recognition of Black ASL, but they had decided not to study it.

In the 1970s, they decided to make some study of it and there were four different publications, which I have collected. Then in the 1980s, it was a major period of the body of work and cultural revolutions in the Deaf community, for example, Deaf President Now, and with ASL teaching and publications proliferating. And at that time, the Signs Across America project came into being. They could have included Black ASL, but again, decided not to.

And from that time until our research, it had plateaued. And that really potentially hurt and created a challenge in the research history.

Fortunately in 2007, we started finding more and more publications, not just books, but articles that were being disseminated, which created more work and more research and more results for people to be able to use. And many people were starting to create articles, and as you can see, the number significantly increased. And I think it will continue to significantly increase as a result of the work that we have been doing.

And our research decision has made an impact on research history.

We can see what has happened with education, with research, and we see people could have decided to preserve and do research. And a few did. But most of them did not.

And the impact of that on research and history for Black Deaf people is really tremendous. And so we decided that we're going to create something for the future with education, for the future related to research and related to preservation. We have got to create something now with the knowledge base, our skills, and the technology that we have.

For example, publication is key. This is one way to build the body of research and research history. With our Black ASL project, publishing our book, creating articles, people have been able to find our work and learn more and more about Black ASL and do their own work based on our work.

Also, the Black ASL team at the time that the book was published, the price was very, very expensive. And later, Gallaudet University Press decided to create a paperback version of the book. And now the price has become more affordable, which is wonderful, meaning that more people are able to access the research, to read it, and the video, again, originally was a DVD and it wasn't widely available. And no one uses DVDs anymore. And now it's available on YouTube, which means that people are able to have access to it widely, both in bilingual forms, English as well as ASL. Additionally, various articles have come out from journals that one used to have to subscribe to. And if you worked at a university, you were able to find them. If you were not part of a university system or the academy, you didn't necessarily have access.

So we wanted to find a way to have open access fees to make it available for all to be able to read and learn. And that is part of the goal that we have for our project.

We have been very, very fortunate in our collaboration with a team from North Carolina. It's a team of people who can hear. And the name of that team is the Language and Life Project. It's at North Carolina State University.

And they filmed different language communities related to the variations of English. African American Vernacular English to document that body of language. Or southern dialects which they made a documentary of. And indigenous people to document their languages.

And eventually, they found us, and we were able to collaborate with them. And we created a film called Signing Black in America, which is 30 minutes. And it has gotten a lot of attention from people and motivated a lot of people to learn more about Black ASL. And it has had a huge impact on the community widely. More people have discovered our work and come to appreciate that work. And we appreciate our opportunity to collaborate with this team.

Because of our publication and the documentary film, more and more news stories and articles have been done about Black ASL. Our research, our work, and one of the things that has had the most prominent contributions to Black ASL is a native ASL user who is on Tik-Tok. Nikia Smith, is a Black young woman who has Black Deaf grandparents and is in Texas. And she shows the signs of older Black ASL. And people have become fascinated by it. And the videos have gone viral. And that has shined a spotlight on our work. And people want to learn more about us and have been able to find our work in black ASL. And that kind of attention can help us. And it's fortunate to have researchers who are able to look into that body of work and do more work with it.

Now, let's talk about the next steps and what our takeaway is.

Black ASL has been around for at least 150 years. And each time, people could have documented or described it. A few did. Most did not. And that means that there's still a lot that we didn't know until very recently.

And with our decision as the Black ASL team, we have helped to increase the body of knowledge and to fill in some of the gaps. So now it's your turn. We need people like you with your skills, your knowledge, your expertise, and technology that you can afford to use. It's our time to fill these gaps.

And resist the forces of racism and audism.

Thank you.

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