

Black ASL: The Effects of its Discovery on the Community

Deaf Studies Conference Transformations Proceedings

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Abstract

As a Black Deaf researcher and author, Carolyn McCaskill reflects on her journey on interviewing Black Deaf community members about the use and presence of Black ASL, which resulted in the publication of "The Hidden Treasure of Black ASL: Its History and Structure" with other authors. Her reflections offer important insights on the transformative effects of bringing the Black Deaf experience and perspectives to researching sign language and cultural experiences.

Keywords

Black ASL, Black Deaf, Black Deaf history, Deaf Studies, cultural experiences

Presentation Transcript

(Slide 1)

I'm really excited to be here to explain about Black ASL, its research, and how we did our work. Really, I'm struggling a little bit because I have a lot to share, but my time is limited to 30 minutes so I'll do my best.

(Slide 2)

Okay. Who the authors are. A lot of people have asked me about the book, but I can't take all the glory. It's important to emphasize that it was written by four authors. Dr. Ceil Lucas, who many of you know, has retired from the linguistics department. Dr. Robert Bayley is hearing and has no association with the Deaf community, but he happened to know Ceil through a Linguistic Society of America conference. They had a lengthy conversation and he explained about Black ASL to him. He found it fascinating and joined the project. He does not sign at all, but was interested in being a part of this project. He is skilled at measurement, so he helped us with measuring our research. One of the features was that we said Black Deaf people tend to use a larger space to sign in. Dr. Bayley helped us measure this feature, and we welcomed him as a part of our project. He is a professor of linguistics at the University of California, at San Diego. So it's important to include him. Next, we have Dr. Joseph Hill, who is now a professor at NTID. This is our book. Our book was published in 2011. The book includes a DVD as well. The DVD is 2 hours and 15 minutes long. I'm going to take a moment to promote this book. You can buy this book in the Gallaudet bookstore or on the Amazon website. You also can get the book through Gallaudet University Press. You can buy the book at any of these sites.

In the Black ASL Project, our website contains a lot of information. Our collective research from 2007 to 2011 that was published in the book, and we also have all the interviews that we conducted and pictures of the Black Deaf schools we visited on the website. We have pictures there, as well as everything else. Our presentations are in there. You can visit blackaslproject.gallaudet.edu to find our information there.

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I think it's important to look at this map. That map is of the United States during the time of segregation, prior to *Brown vs. Board of Education*. You can see the states that were actually segregated as required by law; black people were segregated from white people. These states are marked in red. These are the states where segregation took place. And then the states in blue, segregation was optional and limited, but not required. The states marked yellow didn't have any law, so segregation didn't happen there. For the green states, segregation was forbidden. It's important to keep that map and the locations of segregation in mind. So, for our project, we focused on the South because segregation happened in the South, not the North. The education of Black Deaf students and Black hearing students — both groups — started after the Civil War. Before that, they weren't educated. It was forbidden for Black people to read and write. If they were caught reading or writing, they would be punished, killed, or lynched. That was how it was back then. So after the Civil War, hearing Black schools and colleges were established but what about Black Deaf people? Different states began to discuss establishing Black Deaf schools and how to teach them in the future. So, for our Black ASL project, we debated which schools to pick. We chose six. We couldn't choose all 50 states. We picked six schools to focus on where the segregation actually happened. We picked those six schools for a reason. We chose the school in Raleigh, North Carolina because it was the first state to provide education for Black Deaf students, founded in 1869. Next, we chose Houston, Texas. It's actually located in Austin, not Houston, but we chose Houston because our interviews took place there, but not Dallas. We only visited Houston. Little Rock, Arkansas was chosen because a person who was part of our interview team was from Little Rock, which made it easier to contact other Black Deaf people to get together. We contacted Black Deaf people through the community, by someone who knew someone who could make connections and bring people together to make it easier for us. Talladega, Alabama was chosen because Alabama is where I'm from. I attended the school for the Deaf and grew up there. I'm a Southern girl. I'm from Mobile, Alabama! That's my home state. Next, we chose the school located in Hampton, Virginia. The school there should have been closed recently. Actually, it was shut down in 2008. Many people told me that the school there was a must-visit. That school contained an abundance of rich history. The Virginia School for Colored Deaf and Blind Children is the only Black Deaf school founded by a white Deaf man, out of eighteen schools. In New Orleans, Louisiana, we visited — the school was established in 1938, which is very late. New Orleans, Louisiana was the last Black Deaf school to be desegregated, in 1978. Now, it's important to emphasize that in America, we had a total of 18 Black Deaf schools. Out of those 18 schools, 10 schools were located in a physically separate campus from the white Deaf campus. Eight schools had what was called Negro or Colored departments. "Department" is a strange word because it meant black and white students were on the same campus, but they were segregated for school, in the dorm, and meals. Am I clear? Kentucky School for Colored Deaf and Blind was a department.

Alabama School for Colored Deaf and Blind was a real school located on a separate campus from the white school for the Deaf. North Carolina School for Negro Deaf and Blind was located in Raleigh, while the school for Deaf white children was in Morganton, about two hours or three hours away. It's important that you understand the difference between departments and institutions. Black Deaf schools were called either Negro or Colored, in the past. We kept with the name "Negro" or "Colored." It's not offensive, just an old name.

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The picture here... How did we collect our research? We divided the participants in two groups. One group was aged 35 or younger, and the other was 55 or older. The group of 35 or younger attended what was called mixed schools, which meant the Black and white students were together. Those who were 55 and older were definitely segregated from white Deaf students. The oldest Black Deaf person we interviewed was 87 years old, who shared in detail many wonderful memories. When we conducted interviews, we used free conversations. As you know, when Deaf people get together they're like family, and they shared stories and memories. "Girl, you know that man and I used to date! That man, girl!" Their stories were captivating. It was a free conversation without me telling them what to talk about. They did this on their own, chatting as we filmed. The free conversation method was useful, because we would see signs that could be easily missed or not seen in a long time. So that's free conversation. Secondly, we conducted structured interviews focusing on their school experiences, who their teachers were — and were they Black or white? Who taught them sign language? Did they learn from other students, or did they have classes? We used a list of questions to ask them. When we did our interviews, it's very important to emphasize who the interviewers were. Me, Dr. Joseph Hill, and Roxanne Dummett; we three are all Black and Deaf. Okay. There was one time when Ceil walked by, and the Black Deaf people went quiet. So Ceil went back to hide. If they saw Ceil, the mood shifted and they changed because they didn't know who she was. Ceil decided to stay away, and watch the discussions via camera or from a distance behind a door. That really changed things. So anytime you get involved in a project and interview Black Deaf participants, have a Black Deaf person interview them because it will change the dynamics. When they are interviewed by a white person, Black Deaf people will think white is right. White is better. White is smart. White is good. It changes things.

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All right. We started our interviewing in 2007, and continued until maybe 2010, when we stopped to focus on the DVD and published our book. From watching interviews repeatedly, we made many observations and came up with eight main features of Black ASL. I think there should be nine features, but because of limited time, we chose eight. We might add a ninth in the future, and a tenth, because Black ASL is evolving and changing. In the future we can add more features of Black ASL. But for this time, we chose eight features. We noticed two-handed signing versus one-handed signs. Examples are signing "grandma", "grandpa," or "I don't know" with two hands. Those same phrases can be signed with one hand. Black Deaf people tend to sign with both hands for words. Another feature we observed was forehead location versus lowered. Examples of signs that could be signed by the forehead or lower are "why," "I don't know," or "know." Black Deaf usually sign near the forehead, following how the ASL dictionary localizes the signs.

One time, during a gathering and interview session, an older Black Deaf man was chatting with a hat on, and every time he signed “I know” he would reach above his hat to sign it. He could have signed that nearer his forehead or lower, in different ways, but he signed, “I know” by reaching above his hat. That was interesting. Another feature is the size of signing space. My students tend to say that I tend to sign big. Our signing style is big, which we’ve noticed. Incorporation of AAE in signing is another feature. AAE is African American Vernacular English, or Black English, Black street talk, or any of the other many names. But in short, we call it Black English (AAE). Okay. From our study, we noticed that Black older Deaf people did not use AAE. Younger generations were more likely to use AAE in their signing. Examples include “What’s up?”, “Wassup?”, “My man!”, “Girl, please!”. Black would say it like this, and “Are you talking to me?” with expressions and hand movements. That attitude is why I think we should include a ninth feature in the Black ASL Mosaic. Emphasis on attitude use is not there now. Even though we incorporate AAE and wording, you can’t say “What’s up?” in a relaxed tone. You can’t say that. It’s not the same as “Man, what’s up, what’s up?” You’d say it in a different way with a certain attitude. The fifth feature is the use of repetition, like saying “Oh, yeah, I’ll leave soon” repeatedly. Another feature is the use of role shifting. We compared white Deaf people’s signing with Black Deaf people’s signing to see similarities or differences. That’s how we identified whether certain features were similar to white Deaf people’s signing or if it was typical of Black Deaf people. We found mixed results for the use of role shifting. There’s not much of a difference in role shifting between Black and white Deaf people’s signing styles, meaning they were basically the same. Next, another feature is the amount of mouthing used while signing. We observed how often they would incorporate their mouthing in their signing, and whether they mouthed very often, occasionally, or not at all. We found mixed results again, but for older Black Deaf people they would keep their mouths closed the whole time. Younger Black Deaf people had a mix of English use. Schools and mainstream settings had an influence on this. Younger Black Deaf people who came from Deaf families were more likely to not mouth at all, as they were influenced by family members who signed in the same manner. The last feature is vocabulary differences. There is a difference in vocabulary use. There is a list of words from the Black community with words like “My sweetheart, my boo.” “That’s my boo.” Why “boo”? That word means “my sweetheart, my man, my woman.” Another example is “bad.” The word “bad” doesn’t mean bad in a negative way, but it means something is cool, in a good way. The vocabulary is different. Another example is “phat,” like “Girl! That man is phat!” What’s another word? Someone shared “stuck.” Oh, yes. That’s more of a sign. There is a difference between signs and vocabulary. Someone shared that sign, “stuck”. I’m curious. How many of you sign “pregnant,” by the stomach area like this? Black Deaf people sign it with the same sign for “stuck.” If pregnancy is accidental or unplanned, it’s signed that way. I think that needs more research to analyze why some use the sign for “stuck” for “pregnant.” I noticed that in the South, that sign is common. I’ve seen some white Deaf people sign it that way. I want to ask those white Deaf people if they interact with Black Deaf people. Schools for the Deaf with Black students may have influenced them. That’s a possibility. I’ve noticed that the sign “stuck” for the word pregnant is mostly used by Black Deaf people. Okay, for vocabulary differences, that comes from interacting with the community. We internalize it in our signs. That makes it very unique when we Black Deaf people interact with our friends and community. When white Deaf people notice the difference in a word or sign they aren’t familiar with, that’s because of the community we’re involved in, or our family uses different vocabulary terms and we integrate it

in our signing. Like I said, we identified eight features for now and we can add more in the future.

(Slide 6)

How much time do I have left? Oh, 10 minutes! All right. Perceptions. We talked about attitudes to our sign. Attitudes can be positive or negative. Like myself, I'm from Alabama. Alabama had a school for Negro Deaf and Blind students. I was assimilated with white Deaf students. I felt embarrassed about my signs. I didn't know any better back then. I put my usual signs aside and took on white signs. Okay, so from our study, we learned that some Black signers have negative attitudes towards their traditional signs. Some of them said that whites are better, more high-class, and smarter. Some said Blacks make more facial expressions, are slow, and are different. The attitudes and perceptions toward signs.

(Slide 7)

Hello! I'm Christine. Hello! My name is Ericka. We are taking a course called Black Deaf People Studies from Dr. Carolyn McCaskill. We are talking about the standard sign in ASL compared to Black ASL. For example, "pregnant," "pregnant;" "chicken," and I sign "chicken;" "flirt," and I sign "flirt;" "what's up?" "what's up?" "my bad," "my bad." Thank you. I've already mentioned a bit about this, but the perceptions — the perceptions towards sign language are a bit different between the Under 35 and Over 55 groups.

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This is "A Powerful Deaf School History," a story about a Black Deaf man that appeared recently, last August, on Facebook. I was thrilled to see that, because it spreads more information, documenting Black Deaf history on video. I was thrilled to see that. You can click on Facebook, it's called "A Powerful Deaf School History." This video explains about Florida School for the Deaf segregation, where the dorms were, and where students slept and ate.

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This photo is from Kentucky School for the Deaf in 2011. About 75 Black Deaf students from Kentucky School for the Deaf from 1935 to 1955 didn't get their high school diplomas. They didn't...until 2011. Administrators decided to do the right thing, so to speak, out of guilt from holding onto them for so long and contacted Sharon White, the president of the Kentucky Association of the Deaf, to contact those recipients. Some of them had passed away so family members accepted the degree for them. This was a special program to give former Black students their high school diplomas. Some were elderly, walking with canes. But they were thrilled. They weren't resentful that the school held back their diplomas. That man you see, he was so grateful. They were thrilled to get a piece of paper. That woman was so grateful. They were all lined up for that special program just to get their high school diplomas. Can you imagine? 1935. That's so long ago. And it wasn't until 2011 that they finally got their high school diplomas.

(Slide 10)

Okay. This was just published. The Segregated Georgia School for the Deaf by Ron Knorr and Clemmie Whatley was recently published in 2018. I was thrilled to see that. More and more books are being published, and adding more to the body's awareness about the history of Black

Deaf people. On the Beat of Truth by Maxine Childress Brown is a fascinating book. Maxine is a CODA and an interpreter. Her father was arrested and blamed for something he was innocent of and didn't do. He went to court and the interpreter couldn't understand him because his sign language was from Raleigh, North Carolina. So in court, the judge was frustrated and asked him, "Who can understand you?!" He answered, "My daughter." They asked how old she was, and she was 10. They brought her in to interpret for her father, all because the interpreter was taken aback and could not understand him. He used Raleigh Sign Language commonly used by Black Deaf people there. This book explains that story.

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The books you see here include our research and who was involved in the book. John Rickford is a scholar of Black English, AAVE. Do you remember when a young man, Trayvon Martin, was killed? Okay. Zimmerman was in court, and Travin's girlfriend was sitting in court speaking Black English. The court didn't understand her. Really, who was on trial? Linguistics was on trial, so to speak, instead of Zimmerman. John Rickford discusses Black English and what the girl was saying and what she meant. I mention him because he's very supportive of our work. He was involved with our work on Black ASL.

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In Philadelphia, there was a newspaper article discussing how Philadelphia had its own regional accent. I was thrilled to see this although it wasn't part of our Black ASL work. This validates what we've been doing in our work. "Do you mind shutting up? you asked. I can't shut up! I have more.

(Slide 13)

The Washington Post has been interviewing us over time about Black ASL and using two hands versus one, facial expressions, AAE in sign language, and all that. That's the Washington Post.

(Slide 14)

I just have to tell you this. I have to, I have to tell you about this. "Talking Black in America." A man named Walt Wolfram is another linguistics scholar at North Carolina State University and he has been researching about talking Black in America and how Black people tend to speak. He became interested in Black Deaf people using Black English in sign and contacted Ceil and I and did an interview in June 2018 at Gallaudet and then again last fall. This time, an interpreter and Black Deaf families were involved. PBS will show this in 2019. I will share this information with the community about this in Spring 2019. We are finished with the interviews.

(Slide 15)

When we completed the Black ASL project, we were going forward when we met nine individuals from Black Deaf families. People have said that Black Deaf families don't exist. Bullshit. Excuse my French. Black Deaf families do exist. We interviewed 25 people, and there are more. Those Black Deaf individuals were from several generations of Deaf families, some from four, five, or six generations of Deaf families. We've interviewed them. We will do a DVD and a book. We will share the DVD first in 2019 to show Black Deaf families and what the

differences between white Deaf families and Black Deaf families are. What inspires Black Deaf families? How do they teach their children? More information like that will be shared.

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We couldn't have done our interviews without the support of the National Science Foundation and the Spencer Foundation, whose support is gratefully acknowledged. We received funding from them and used that money to travel, visit six states, pay people for their participation, and help recruit people for interviews, and publish the book. So I really want to recognize those two groups that helped with funding.

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