

## Introduction



Without a doubt, the question asked most frequently by laypersons as they turn their attention to sign languages and Deaf communities is whether sign language is universal (i.e., whether only one sign language is known and used by Deaf people all over the world).<sup>1</sup> The answer, which is most often greeted with surprise, is that there is no universal sign language in the sense that the questioner intends it. There have been attempts to devise and implement systems that can be understood by deaf people in situations such as international conferences (Rosenstock 2003), with decidedly mixed results. However, there is no one naturally occurring universal sign language to which all deaf people somehow have access. There are basically as many sign languages as there are viable Deaf communities, as well as sign languages that exist alongside the spoken languages of the majority communities. These sign languages are also differentiated internally according to social criteria in the same way that spoken languages are. That is, varieties of sign languages exist, and the social factors that help define them include both those that play a role in spoken-language variation—region, age, gender, socioeconomic status, race—and others that are unique to language use in Deaf communities. The latter include the language policies implemented in deaf education, the home environment (e.g., Deaf parents in an ASL-signing home vs. hearing parents in a nonsigning home) and the sightedness [or not] of the signer, as in Tactile ASL, the variety used by deaf-blind individuals.

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1. The use of uppercase “Deaf” here indicates cultural deafness, as opposed to the strictly audiological condition indicated by lowercase “deaf.” Both uses are conventional in the literature on deafness.

This book and its accompanying DVD describe a project about one such variety of American Sign Language (ASL) used by African American signers and usually known as Black ASL. (The symbol  indicates a link to a relevant section of the DVD.) Hairston and Smith have stated that 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” (1983, 55). There is abundant anecdotal evidence that such a variety exists. For example, one of the senior members of the research team, Carolyn McCaskill, talks about “putting my signs aside” when she arrived at the newly integrated Alabama School for the Deaf (ASD) in Talladega in 1968. She had previously attended the segregated Alabama School for Negro Deaf (ASND) and was one of about ten Black deaf students (five females and five males) who transferred to the school. She and the other students found classroom communication very challenging. They were very surprised to find how different the signing was at their new school and how difficult it was at first to understand the White students and the teachers. The teacher asked them, “What are you signing?” and the students asked her the same question. She and the other Black deaf students felt as if they were signing two different languages and in a foreign land. Ironically, the school for Black children and the school for the White children were located within a few miles of each other. As another example, a young hearing man from a Black deaf family (a Coda, ‘child of deaf adults’) who teaches ASL at a community college remarks, “Oh yeah—the way I sign in class and the way I sign at home are totally different.” Black Deaf participants and interpreters attending meetings of the National Black Deaf Advocates (NBDA) have been known to observe, “I see something different—different from other signing.” Thus, although we have had only fairly small-scale studies (see, e.g., Aramburo 1989; Guggenheim 1993; Lewis 1998), we do have numerous anecdotal accounts that a distinct dialect exists.

Since William C. Stokoe’s (1960) pioneering work, linguists have recognized that natural sign languages are autonomous linguistic systems, structurally independent of the spoken languages with which they may coexist in a given community. This recognition has been followed by

extensive research into different aspects of ASL structure and accompanied by the recognition that, as natural sign languages are full-fledged autonomous linguistic systems shared by communities of users, the sociolinguistics of sign languages can be described in ways that parallel the description of the sociolinguistics of spoken languages. On Stokoe's pioneering work, Garretson (1980) remarked that, "To know, once and for all, that our 'primitive' and 'ideographic gestures' are really a formal language on a par with all other languages of the world is a step towards pride and liberation" (vi). A *formal language* by definition includes sociolinguistic variation and distinct subsystems or varieties. As of this writing, we have clear empirical evidence of one such variety of ASL, the Tactile ASL used by deaf-blind signers, which is distinct in its phonology,<sup>2</sup> morphosyntax, lexicon, and discourse structure from "sighted ASL" (Collins and Petronio 1998; Collins 2004). There is a widespread perception in the American Deaf community that Black ASL exists, and (mostly) anecdotal reports indicate that it is as distinct from the ASL used by White signers as vernacular African American English (AAE) is from middle-class White English (as seen earlier). However, empirical studies of Black ASL based on natural language have not previously been conducted. This book and DVD are the first steps to filling that gap in our knowledge. In the following pages, we address four main questions:

1. What sociohistorical reality would make a separate variety of ASL possible?
2. What are the features of the variety of ASL that people call "Black ASL"?<sup>3</sup>

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2. The term *phonology* is used in sign linguistics to describe the same area of linguistics that it refers to in spoken language studies (i.e., the study of the basic units of the language, in this case handshape, location, palm orientation, movement, and facial expressions).

3. We use the term *variety* throughout to avoid the negative connotations associated with the term *dialect*. As linguists, we are of course aware that we all speak or sign one dialect or another, but in popular usage, the term *dialect* has come to be associated with language varieties that diverge from and are somehow less worthy than a "standard" language.

3. Can the same kinds of unique features that have been identified for African American English be identified for Black ASL to show that it is a distinct variety of ASL?
4. If unique features exist, what are they, and what are the linguistic and social factors that condition their use?

## HOW LANGUAGE VARIETIES COME ABOUT



In order to describe Black ASL as a distinct variety of ASL, we should examine whether the sociohistorical conditions that Black and White Deaf people have experienced might have led to the emergence of a separate variety. This requires one more step back to ask how language varieties come about in general, whether signed or spoken. In a study of African American English, Rickford states, “All languages, if they have enough speakers, have dialects—regional or social varieties that develop when people are separated by geographic or social barriers” (1999, 320). There are a number of geographic and social factors involved in the formation of language varieties. Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2006) state that “Dialects are most likely to develop where we find both physical and social separation among groups of speakers” (29). They discuss the factors involved in dialect formation, which include settlement patterns, migration, geographic features, language contact, economic ecology, social stratification, social interaction (e.g., social practices, speech communities), and group and individual identity. Settlement patterns have both to do with where people come from and where they settle. For example, “the initial patterns of habitation by English speakers from various parts of the British Isles, as well as by emigrants and enslaved peoples who spoke languages other than English, are still reflected in the patterning of dialect differentiation in the United States today” (30). Wolfram and Schilling-Estes go on to explain that, once settlements are established, dialect boundaries may reflect migration from these points and that geographic features such as mountains, rivers, and lakes are important insofar as they shape migration routes. Geographic isolation of course plays a role, as Bergmann, Hall, and Ross

point out in *Language Files*: “[B]eing 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” (2007, 419). Wolfram and Schilling-Estes further observe: “The most effective kind of communication is face-to-face, and when groups of speakers do not interact on a personal level with one another, the likelihood of dialect divergence is heightened” (2006, 32). Political boundaries such as national or local borders also need to be considered. Contact with other language groups also plays a role in the formation of dialects, as does economic ecology: “Different economic bases not only bring about the development of specialized vocabulary items associated with different occupations; they also may affect the direction and rate of language change in grammar and pronunciation” (34). Socioeconomic status has a well-documented role in the formation of varieties, as do social networks (Milroy 1987) (i.e., with whom people interact and talk on a daily basis).

A very useful construct is that of *communities of practice* (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992; Lave and Wenger 1991). Eckert (2000) defines such a group as “an aggregate of people who come together around some enterprise” and as “simultaneously defined by its membership and the shared practices in which that membership engages” (35). Communities of practice (CofP) are “dynamic and fluid” groups in which individuals “are seen as active agents in the construction of individual and group identity, rather than simply as passive respondents to the social situations in which they find themselves” (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2006, 38). The idea of the CofP has often been more helpful in explaining patterns of variation than, say, more rigid notions of social class imposed by the researcher (Bucholtz 1999). Finally, group membership, whether voluntary or coerced, and personal identity have also been seen to have played roles in the emergence of language varieties.

Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2006) also identify a number of linguistic factors such as rule extension, analogy, grammaticalization, phonological processes (e.g., assimilation), and word-formation processes (i.e., factors in dialect formation having to do specifically with the structure of language). As a result of these social and linguistic factors, we see

differences between middle-class and working-class speech, varieties shaped by social class, age, gender, and ethnicity, as in the case of the Spanish used in the Southwest. As Wolfram and Schilling-Estes state, “These linguistic and social factors may come together in a myriad of ways, resulting in a multitude of dialects” (24).

Of course, varieties can also lose some of their distinctive characteristics when users of different dialects come into regular contact with each other. For example, in the United States, dialects on the East Coast tend to reflect the varieties of English brought by the original settlers. In the West, however, these differences became less distinct as settlers from north and south mingled on the frontier. In a similar way, we might expect to see differences between Black and White ASL become less noticeable as a result of the integration of residential schools and the increase in integrated mainstream programs. In several of the following chapters we address the question of whether Black and White ASL are becoming more similar or are maintaining their linguistic distinctiveness.

### *African American English*

African American English<sup>4</sup> (AAE) is a very well-documented variety of English that illustrates the role of these geographic and social factors in the formation of a language variety. It is also directly relevant to the project described in this book. More than fifty years of research findings have documented the structure and use of AAE in rich detail. In addition, AAE has been shown to be a rule-governed and systematic variety of English distinct in its structure from other varieties of English, a variety that acquired its distinctiveness over a long period of time and as a result of the

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4. The variety of English spoken by African Americans in the rural South and inner cities of the North has been referred to by a number of names, including Black English Vernacular (BEV), African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and, most recently, African American English (AAE), the term we have adopted here. These terms all refer to a distinct dialect that differs in structure and pronunciation from general U.S. English spoken by members of all racial groups, including, of course, many African Americans.

interaction of many historical and social forces.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, not only linguists but also both Black and White laypersons recognize AAE as distinct from other English varieties. While laypersons and linguists may use different labels to identify this variety (e.g., Ebonics), they nevertheless easily and clearly perceive it to be distinct from middle class White English, as well as from other varieties of English. Moreover, many empirical descriptions of AAVE structure and use solidly confirm laypersons' perceptions of distinctiveness.

### *Another Variety of ASL: Tactile ASL*

Research on other varieties of ASL is also relevant to the present volume, most notably the work on what is known as Tactile ASL, the variety of ASL used by deaf-blind people, specifically those with the genetic condition Usher syndrome I. Individuals with this condition are born deaf and later, usually in their teenage years, start losing vision in varying degrees due to retinitis pigmentosa, a hereditary condition that is characterized by progressive loss of peripheral vision and eventually leads to central vision loss. Crucially, most deaf-blind people in this category grow up using ASL and are fluent signers by the time they begin to lose their sight. A variety of ASL has emerged in this community that accommodates the loss of sight at all linguistic levels: phonological, morphological, syntactic, and discourse. One of the consequences of the loss of sight is that deaf-blind people no longer have access to the numerous ASL grammatical and discourse markers produced on a signer's face. Remarkably, these nonmanual (facial) markers are produced on the hands in Tactile ASL. For example, the raised eyebrows required for yes/no questions or the nodding required for back-channeling are produced manually (see Collins and

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5. See Mufwene et al. (1998) and Green (2004) for reviews of the AAE literature. Edwards (2008) and Wolfram (2008) provide succinct outlines of the main distinctive features of AAE phonology and grammar, while Green (2002) provides a detailed analysis of AAE linguistic structure. Rickford and Rickford (2000) offer a nontechnical discussion of AAE and its place in African American life and culture.

Petronio 1998 and Collins 2004 for fuller accounts). As mentioned, features of Tactile ASL appear at every level of the language, and there is a vigorous community of deaf-blind signers who use Tactile ASL. Tactile ASL qualifies as a clear example of a variety of ASL. In addition, research has demonstrated the existence of tactile varieties of other sign languages such as Swedish Sign Language (Mesch 2000) and Norwegian Sign Language (Raanes 2006). The project we describe here explores the specific linguistic and sociolinguistic factors that might qualify Black ASL as a variety of ASL in the same way that Tactile ASL has been shown to be a variety of ASL. People say, “I see something different—different from other signing,” and it is our goal to describe what that “something” is and which factors have contributed to its formation.

## SO WHAT ABOUT BLACK ASL?



We return now to the physical and social factors that Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2006) describe as playing a role in shaping language varieties. As for settlement patterns, migration, and geographic isolation, the physical and social segregation and oppression that have affected the Black hearing community and contributed to the emergence of AAE have also affected the Black Deaf community. In the chapter on race, deafness, and ASL in his book on the history of ASL, Tabak (2006) lists physical isolation and geography as two of three factors that “have served to increase the variability of American Sign Language among African-American Deaf” (98).<sup>6</sup> The reality that unites physical and social segregation and oppression is the establishment of separate schools or departments for Black deaf children. As chapter 2 explains, such schools and departments were established in seventeen states and in the District of Columbia.

Until well after the Supreme Court’s 1954 ruling in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, which made segregation illegal, Black children’s contact

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6. The third factor that Tabak lists is the existence of temporal variation in any language, such that older Black Deaf signers sign differently from younger ones. That is, like all living languages and dialects, Black ASL changes over time.

with White people was for the most part limited to the school context. This is quite different from the integrated school environments that the younger signers in our study experienced. However, as chapter 4 explains, younger and older signers alike show a clear sense of group reference and personal identity as “Black Deaf” and can explain differences between Black signing and White signing. As Wolfram and Schilling-Estes state, “Sometimes, group membership is voluntary and negotiated by the individual and the various groups to which they seek to belong, and sometimes it is rooted in established social strictures (e.g., class or gender groups) and is not completely a matter of choice—or at least [a] very easy choice” (2006, 41). Attendance by Black deaf children at segregated schools or departments was clearly a matter of discrimination and racism and never a matter of choice, but the result was a strong sense of group membership and personal identity.

As for linguistic explanations of the existence of language varieties, in chapters 5, 6, and 7 we explore specific features pertaining to phonological variation, variation in syntax and discourse, and the outcomes of language contact, specifically that between ASL and AAE. Chapter 8 focuses on the lexical variation in our data, both as produced by the signers who participated and as they discussed it. We are, of course, aware of an abundance of lexical differences between Black and White signers, and we account for those in our data. However, our goal is to take the analysis beyond lexical variation to other linguistic features such as handedness (i.e., use of two-handed signs or their corresponding one-handed variants), the size of the signing space, the lowering of signs (for example, from the forehead to the face or the space in front of the signer), and the use of voiceless mouthing, clausal repetition, constructed action, and constructed dialogue, as well as the incorporation of AAE into the signing. What we propose is a mosaic of features.

Figure 1.1 shows eight features that may serve to differentiate Black ASL from the ASL used by White signers. Six of the features (all except for lexical differences and the incorporation of AAE into the signing) are features of the ASL used by White signers, so what we are talking about is not a qualitative difference between Black signers and White signers

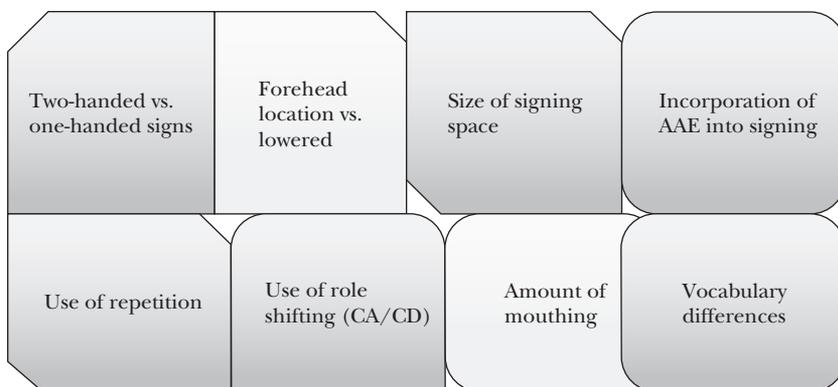


Figure 1.1. Possible distinguishing features of Black ASL.

but rather a quantitative one—that is, all ASL signers use these features, but Black signers may use them to a greater or lesser degree. When someone says, “Yeah, I see something different,” what they may be seeing is some combination of these eight features. According to Tabak (2006), “Nor can one point to a particular linguistic idiosyncrasy that is unique to the signed language of African-Americans—at least not in the sense that there exists a phrase or a grammatical convention that is shared by all African-American Deaf and no others” (98), and, in terms of six of the features in the mosaic, he is correct. However, his remark is evidently based entirely on his own personal observations since he does not report on any empirical data as a basis for this remark. His remark also overlooks a significant amount of lexical variation that distinguishes Black ASL from other varieties, as well as the incorporation of AAE features into Black ASL, something that, while it may subsequently be borrowed by White signers, clearly originates with Black signers. Furthermore, as we will see, the difference between Black signers and White signers in the use of repetition is quite striking, making it something that is almost unique to Black signers. Interestingly, Tabak does list lexical variation—“some differences in vocabulary”—as well as the size of the signing space and voiceless mouthing as differences between the students at the school for Black deaf children in Texas and the school for White deaf students. The

size of the signing space and voiceless mouthing are two of the features in our mosaic. Again, Tabak's remarks here seem to be based entirely on his own observation, as no source of data is reported. Burch and Joyner (2007) also report descriptions from two interviewees who commented on the signing at the Raleigh school. Although the interviewees referred to major differences between "Raleigh signs and ASL," Burch and Joyner do not provide any examples.

### *Earlier Research*

Research on all aspects of the structure and use of ASL and other sign languages has progressed continuously since Stokoe's work in the 1960s (see Brentari 2010 and Emmorey and Lane 2000 for overviews). Researchers have also noticed differences between Black and White signing for at least forty years. Linguistic descriptions of the differences between Black and White signing focus primarily on Black signers in the South. For example, in his appendices to the 1965 *Dictionary of American Sign Language* (DASL), which he coauthored with William Stokoe and Dorothy Casterline, Croneberg discusses these differences as a consequence of the segregation of deaf schools in the South. Based on responses to a 134-item sign vocabulary list, he reports "a radical dialect difference between the signs" of a young North Carolina Black woman and those of White signers living in the same city (315). Other studies of Black ASL, which are described in detail in the chapters dealing with specific linguistic features, are mostly small scale. They include work on phonology (Lucas, Bayley, and Valli 2001; Woodward, Erting, and Oliver 1996; Woodward and DeSantis 1977), lexical variation (Aramburo 1989; Guggenheim 1993; Lucas, Bayley, Reed, and Wulf 2001), language attitudes (Lewis, Palmer, and Williams 1995), and parallels between Black ASL and African American speech styles (Lewis 1998).

The role of deaf education in the development of ASL varieties has also been a subject of investigation. Lucas, Bayley, and Valli (2001) showed a clear and strong link between linguistic variation in ASL and the history of deaf education, in particular the language policies implemented at schools for the deaf over the years. These policies ranged from the use of ASL in the

classroom beginning in 1817 at the first school, the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut, through the strict oralism that was enforced in most schools from the 1880s through the early 1970s (to the exclusion of sign language in the classroom), to the various “combined” methods of signing and talking simultaneously implemented in the 1970s, and finally back to the use of ASL in the classroom in many schools today. The signers who participated in the research of Lucas, Bayley, and Valli (2001) were divided into three age groups according to the language policy in place at the time they were in school: 55 and older (oralist), 26–54 (combined method, and also the period when Stokoe was beginning his research and ASL was starting to be recognized as a real language), and 15–25 (in the project sites, which used ASL as the medium of instruction in the classroom). This division proved to be statistically significant for all of the phonological and the syntactic variables examined.

Much of the prior work on Black ASL was undertaken some years ago. Most of the more recent work has focused on the signing of single individuals or small groups, often in interview situations, which may influence how the participants sign. While building on these earlier studies, the project described in this book provides a more comprehensive description of Black ASL based on a broader sampling of southern Black Deaf communities. By including a broad sample of Black men and women of different ages who live in a range of communities, this volume documents an important aspect of Deaf culture and illustrates a little-studied aspect of the African American experience.

To answer our research questions and to provide a full account of the history and structure of Black ASL, we have taken three major areas into account, as seen in figure 1.2.

We looked, of course, at the sociohistorical foundation: the history of education for Black deaf children and the social conditions that would make the emergence of a variety of ASL possible. We also conducted basic sociolinguistic analyses of eight specific linguistic features to understand what the variety looks like structurally. However, we also took into account our participants’ perceptions of education and language. We found a number of recurring themes emerging both from the free conversations

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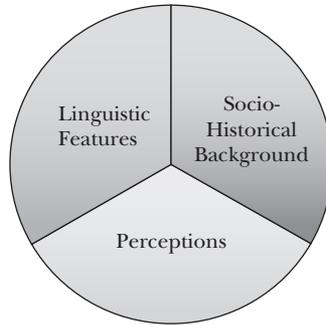


Figure 1.2. Main topics addressed in this study.

and the interviews. The picture would not be complete without these, as they relate directly to the sociohistorical foundation; in addition, their perceptions are both similar to and different from the linguistic findings.

Finally, a word about the title of this book and the DVD, *The Hidden Treasure of Black ASL*. When we started the project, we knew that it would be interesting, but we did not realize how very rich all aspects of it would be—the history of education for Black deaf children in the United States, the perceptions and memories of community members, and the results of our linguistic analyses. We were constantly amazed at what we found, and we realized that this is a story that has not yet received a full telling by any means. We often felt that we were discovering hidden treasures. This is what we offer now, with the strong hope that others will want to continue exploring all aspects of this story.