Sociolinguistic Variation in the American Black Deaf Community:

An Introduction to the Status of Past and Current Research

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Abstract

It is widely accepted by linguists that languages exhibit variation in a number of ways. Sociolinguistics is concerned with how languages interact with societies, how different groups use language and how that language changes from group to group. Here the existence of such a variation among the Black Deaf population in the United States is examined in regards to social attitudes, lexicon, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. Too, discussion is offered on the future of such a variation, its potential significance to the perception of ASL, and application of this research for interpreters.

Keywords: sociolinguistic variation, Black ASL, language attitudes, code-switching, prognosis of variation

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It is widely accepted in the field of linguistics that regardless of modality, geography, age, or any number of other factors, languages exhibit variation (Crystal, 2005; Lucas, Robert, Rose, & Wulf, 2002; McWhorter, 2000; Ottenheimer, 2009; Valli & Lucas, 1992). American Sign Language (ASL) is no exception to this pattern. In ASL one may find several different manifestations of linguistic variation based on age, gender, location, and as emergent research shows, ethnicity (McCaskill et al, 2011). The variety of ASL used by the Black Deaf population in the United States is pushing to the forefront of research and study by linguists in and outside the "Deaf World." The current interest on this topic raises certain questions, such as: What constitutes "Black signing" specifically? Why did this variation arise? What are the language attitudes towards this variation? What is the future of this variation? What are the benefits of research in this variation of ASL? And finally, what application does this have for interpreters?

What is Black American Sign Language (BASL)?

Black American Sign Language (BASL) has been studied by several linguists and has been found to have multiple forms of variation from the standard ASL used by most Deaf Americans (McCaskill, Lucas, Bayley, Hill, King, Baldwin, & Hogue, 2011; Valli & Lucas, 1992). ASL exhibits *vertical variation,* or variation across socioeconomic strata, a prime example being BASL. Much like African American Vernacular English (AAVE), BASL experiences a prestige differential from the standard dialect of the language. BASL is often viewed as subpar due to the occasional belief that it is simply "bad" ASL, thereby earning it a

lower standing in the social realm of language use (Guggenheim, 1993; Valli, Reed, Ingram, & Lucas, 1990). BASL also varies from standard ASL on the *lexical* level. BASL exhibits differences in production of individual signs. Woodward (1985) provides examples of differences in sign production for the concepts of MOTHER/ PREGNANT and LICENSE/ DOLLAR. Woodward describes the difference in MOTHER/ PREGNANT as PREGNANT being signed with a 5-hand and touching the chin twice, similar to the common sign for the concept of MOTHER; DOLLAR is signed in the same way as the concept of LICENSE, with two L-hands touching at the thumbs directly in front of the signer. Aramburo also reports variation on lexical variation in the signs for the concepts of SCHOOL, BOSS, and FLIRT (1989). Woodward (1976) further delineates the lexical variation found in BASL into historical variation and synchronic variation.

Woodward (1976) defines *historical variation* as the presence of lexical items in BASL that were formerly included in other varieties of ASL. These lexical items have faded from use in those varieties and remain solely in BASL, and have become identifiers of BASL. To provide an example, suppose ASL had sign A in all of the variations of the language. Over time, all variations except BASL drop sign A and replace it with another sign. This leaves BASL as the only variation with sign A, ergo sign A becomes an identifier of BASL.

Synchronic variation is the variation in lexical items at certain points in time. When studying synchronic variation in BASL one must examine certain times in history when signs are being augmented or created to meet communicative needs. One way of discerning the two is to think of historical variation as evolution—change over time—and to think of synchronic variation as moments in time when the language changed—snapshots, genesis. Woodward

(1976) argues that synchronic variation is the more common of the two genres of lexical variation.

BASL is divergent from ASL in aspects of societal value and on the lexical level. Moving further into the divergence of the two, BASL and ASL bifurcate on the *phonological level.* Guggenheim (1993) provides evidence of this type of variation in the difference in sign space between ASL and BASL. Guggenheim video-recorded conversations between Black Deaf signers and then had them evaluated by three judges. One of these judges identified a particular conversation as BASL based on the fact that it involved a "larger, 'more open' signing space" (p. 66). Woodward (1976) presents evidence of phonological variations in the handedness of signs, meaning production involving one hand versus two hands. Woodward also presents evidence of divergence in the placement of signs. This refers to the location on the body at which signs are produced. Woodward's analysis of the data reported shows variation among black signers from different states, from which it can be concluded that BASL exhibits *horizontal variation,* meaning variation based on geography. In his work, Woodward shows that black signers from New Orleans and from Atlanta exhibited different behavior from both each other and from their white counterparts regarding sign production on the face versus on the hands.

All of these variations in language use raise the question: is BASL a legitimate dialect of ASL? In order to answer this question, one must first look to what defines a dialect. In her text *The Anthropology of Language,* Ottenheimer (2009) defines dialects as "mutually intelligible varieties of a language" (p. 277). Speakers of two different dialects can understand each other to a large extent. McWhorter (2000) further explains dialects as divergent forms of a language that have enough dissimilarities to be recognized as different from one another, but with enough in common to not be recognized as two different languages. McWhorter also argues that dialects

vary from one another in all of the same ways that languages vary from one other, but to a lesser degree. Dialects will vary on five main measures: the lexicon, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. If McWhorter's work is applied to a visual language will BASL be divergent from ASL in all of these ways? It has been shown that BASL does demonstrate lexical variation (Guggenheim, 1993; McCaskill et al., 2011; Valli & Lucas, 1992; Woodward, 1976; Woodward, 1985), phonological variation (Guggenheim, 1993; McCaskill et al., 2011; Woodward, 1976), morphological variation (Guggenheim, 1993) and semantic variation (Woodward, 1985). Guggenheim's (1993) work noted that BASL had not been shown to exhibit *syntactic* differences. Syntax is the area of linguistic analysis focused on the arrangement of lexical items to form phrases and sentences (Ottenheimer, 2009). McCaskill et al. (2011) showed that BASL *does* exhibit syntactic variation in that BASL users tend to employ repetition three times more frequently than non-BASL users (2011). The work of McCaskill et al. provides evidence that BASL is divergent from ASL on all five main measures of linguistic variation as set forth by McWhorter.

A final thought on the linguistic definition of BASL is the possible parallel between BASL and AAVE. Through personal communication, the author has noticed at least one instance of cross-lingual dialectic contact and transmission between BASL and AAVE. The concept of trippin/TRIPPIN is a lexical item in AAVE that means to overreact or to behave absurdly. Through the author's own experience socializing in the Black Deaf Community and working as an ASL interpreter, it has been observed that there is an equivalent sign for this concept produced by making a bent V handshape with the dominant hand placed at the temple, which is then moved away from and back to the temple twice. This sign is combination of the handshape used in the sign for the concept of TO TRAVEL and placement on the temple, representing a

mental or cognitive overtone. This observation is supported by McCaskill et al. in data collected from subjects in Alabama (2011). It will be interesting to see what further research unveils about possible similarities between BASL and AAVE.

Why Does BASL Exist?

The field of sociolinguistics is not solely concerned with the structural (syntactic, phonologic, morphologic, lexical, and semantic) attributes of language, but also with the 'how' and 'why' of language use. It is this inclusive nature of the field that brings sociolinguistic researchers to ask: Why does variation occur? With the particular case of BASL, researchers report that there is one major contributing factor to the development of a Black variety of ASL— access. The major principle for the appearance of BASL in the research is lack of access, specifically access to other (white) Deaf Students and to visual language models.

Education in the United States, particularly in the South, was segregated until the 1960s and 70s,. Black and white students were not found in the same classrooms, and Deaf education was no exception (Anderson, 2006; McCaskill et al., 2011). It was common practice for Black schools for the Deaf to be located in a separate on-campus building or at a separate off-campus location from the state school for the Deaf. The facilities were certainly separate, though not equal. Valli et al. (1990) support this with data from interviews they conducted: "As for education, the participants generally agreed that the educational opportunities available to Black Deaf people were not comparable to those available to white Deaf individuals" (p. 62). Linguists who have studied BASL contribute the development of BASL largely to this physical separation of students (Guggenheim, 1993; McCaskill et al., 2011; Valli & Lucas, 1992; Woodward, 1976). Due to the lack of interaction between the white Deaf students and Black Deaf students, the Black Deaf students are responsible for the various dialectical variations that characterize BASL.

White Deaf students had more access to standard ASL as they were located on the main campuses of the schools for the Deaf.

Black Deaf students experienced a lack of access to visual language models, which also contributed to the development of BASL. Segregated schools created two separate sets of educators, one set of teachers for the white Deaf and one set for the Black Deaf. After the 1880 Conference of Milan, there was an immense paradigm shift in Deaf education around the world. The emphasis shifted to an oral method that focused on teaching Deaf students to speak and lip-read, and discredited the use of sign languages in the classroom (Moores, 2010). After this paradigm shift the number of Deaf teachers of Deaf students plummeted. Woodward (1985) states that there were approximately 10 Black Deaf teachers in the United States in 1981. While the data was collected approximately 20 years post-desegregation, it is logical to conjecture that the number of Black Deaf teachers in schools for the Deaf earlier in the century was not that much greater. Black Deaf students experienced a disparity in their access to education and to visual language models and without instructors who were native or fluent users of sign language, Black Deaf students were faced with the responsibility of shaping language to meet their communicative needs.

How is BASL Regarded Socially?

Linguists assert that all languages are conglomerates of dialects, and that each dialect will have strong language attitudes tied to it (Crystal, 2003; McWhorter, 2000; Ottenheimer, 2009). Some dialects will be viewed with prestige, and may even been referred to as the "standard" dialect of a language. Others do not fare as well and are attributed the negative connotations of being substandard, limited, primitive, vulgar, etc. These negative language attitudes are often associated with dialects of minority cultures.

In his article on Black Deaf teachers, Woodward states that the sign variations of Black Deaf individuals are often perceived as "deficits" instead of ethnic variation (1985). Woodward focused on the perceptions of BASL by those who would be considered "out-of-group," that is, the perceptions of people who are not themselves BASL users. The response from these individuals was largely negative, offering critiques about the speed, clarity, and appropriateness of BASL. Guggenheim (1993, p.55) presents the views of some African American signers, or those considered "in-group" on their own language use:

> Even some African American signers, themselves, have a negative attitude toward this [black] variety of sign language. They may feel, for example, that the ASL used by European American people is more "correct" and attempt to use more European American signs . . . "among themselves [the Black students] retained their signed dialect and signed Black (Hairston & Smith, 1983, p. 56)."

The behavior exhibited by the BASL users in Guggenheim's study of switching between BASL and more standard ASL is known as code-switching. *Code-switching* is the practice of one individual using more than one language or more than one variety of language based on certain criteria such as other people, situations, topics, and so forth (Ottenheimer, 2009). The use of code-switching does not imply a deficit in both, or either language variety; rather, it often signifies the speaker's recognition of certain factors that cause them to deem it necessary or appropriate to switch language varieties (McWhorter, 2000). Examples include the code-switching of Hispanic Americans between English and Spanish, and African Americans switching between the standard variety of spoken English in the United States and AAVE, both depending on their audience and the topic of the conversation. Code-switching is employed for a number of reasons, ranging from forming group identities to excluding "out-of-group"

individuals from the true discourse of a conversation (Crystal, 2003; McWhorter, 2000; Ottenheimer, 2009). Valli et al. support code-switching being dependent on certain circumstantial factors (1990). In their data, both white and Black signers made different sign choices based on the ethnicity of their audience.

Code-switching is a common practice among individuals of a minority linguistic group who find themselves in need of direct communication with members of the majority linguistic group. Many of these individuals manage to maintain proficiency in both codes, and membership in both groups. However, there is concern in the field that prolonged contact of two dialects may eventually lead to the disappearance of minority dialects (Harrison, 2007).

What Does the Future Look Like for BASL?

As people continue to use languages over time and across space it is impossible for languages to remain static. "The important thing to remember about change is that, as long as people are using a language, that language will always undergo change" (Ottenheimer, 2009, p. 276). Languages are in a perpetual state of transformation. Consider the English language of the 1700s in which there would be no words for things such as *computers*, *microwaves*, *space shuttles*, or *DNA,* as these are all words that have entered the lexicon in recent years. Also, consider the use of the personal and possessive pronouns of the time, *thee*, *thy*, and *thou*. None of these lexical items appear in active language use today, except in language of frozen register. BASL exhibits this historical variation, as previously discussed (Woodward, 1976).

Ottenheimer identifies language change as being either external or internal (2009). *External change* is the change in language caused by the interaction between two languages and through borrowing by the users of differing languages. The example of TRIPPIN and of the signers in Guggenheim's study having the tendency to adopt more standard ASL signs are

congruent with external change. Another likely influence on external change in BASL is the power struggle in which it finds itself with ASL. Guggenheim reports that African American signers often feel pressure to produce a more standard variety of ASL (1993). They have been able to maintain proficiencies in both ASL and BASL, but for how long will this behavior continue in the face of the definite power imbalance seen in the social reception of BASL? Ottenheimer (2009) deems external change the more rapid form of change. *Internal change* is comprised of the changes made by speakers of a language on their own language use. The phonological variation of sign space and handedness of signs are examples of internal change as they were not influenced by contact with another language or by borrowing from speakers of another language.

While the signing of Black Deaf individuals has maintained a dialectical difference from standard ASL, a major concern among linguists and Black Deaf Community members is that BASL will ultimately disappear. The integration of schools, negative language attitudes towards BASL, and the fact that a large number of students who attended segregated schools for the Black Deaf are reaching old age or have already passed on, all restrict the time that linguists have to study, capture, and preserve this dialect.

Why Should We Research BASL?

Documentation of BASL is one of the only, and definitely most thorough, examinations of dialects and sociolinguistic variation in ASL. Though in the eyes of some ASL has already been legitimized as a language, there is still a prevalent belief that it is simply "English on the hands" or that "sign language is universal." Proving yet another instance in which ASL exhibits the same level of complexity of spoken languages, such as documentation of dialects, can only serve as a catalyst to minimize and ultimately eliminate this fallacy. By analyzing BASL on the

lexical, phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic levels, researchers reinforce the authenticity of ASL as a language.

There are also other incentives for studying BASL. Harrison explains this brilliantly: "Language disappearance is an erosion or extinction of ideas, of ways of knowing, and ways of talking about the world and human experience" (2007, p. 7). The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis states that language shapes the way in which people interpret and experience the world (Ottenheimer, 2009). If language truly does shape the way in which people interpret and experience the world and if researchers can locate and study BASL then they may be able to view of the world through the eyes of the Black Deaf Community. Understanding a group's language use allows for better understanding of that group and the world in which they live.

BASL represents a richness for this field and for the language of ASL that should not be left unexamined. BASL is a treasure trove of information to be researched and reported and added to the collective body of knowledge on sociolinguistic variation, ASL, and the untold stories of Black Deaf Americans. Further research into this subject is not only warranted, but desperately needed.

How Does All of This Affect Interpreters?

The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) describes one aspect of the task of interpreting as rendering the "words, inflections and intent" of a speaker into the "mode of communication preferred by the [D]eaf consumer" (n.d.). The description includes the inverse of this process in that the interpreter has to "comprehend the signs, inflections and intent" that the Deaf consumer produces and "speak them in articulate, appropriate English" (n.d.). Finally, the description includes the ability to successfully facilitate communication across the cultures of the consumers with whom interpreters work. By this description, interpreters must understand both

the language and culture of their hearing and Deaf consumers in order to best perform their

work. The study of BASL allows interpreters to accomplish both of these responsibilities for

Black Deaf consumers. Having an increased cultural awareness paired with a heightened

competence in BASL equips interpreters to successfully work between the language and culture

of the Black Deaf population in the United States and the languages and cultures of other

consumers.

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