

Signers' Perceptions of Black ASL



While the sociohistorical foundation of Black ASL described in chapter 2 helps us understand how a separate variety of ASL might develop as a result of geographic and social factors and the analyses of specific linguistic features in chapters 5 through 8 help us define this variety in precise ways, information about users' perceptions provides insight into how people view themselves within the sociohistorical context and what they think about language use. As we will see, it is not uncommon for users' perceptions to differ from linguistic reality.

PERCEPTION OF LANGUAGE VARIETIES

Linguists define a *dialect* as a language variety that is structurally related to another variety in terms of phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic features regardless of its standard or stigmatized status, which is socially defined by a society (Wolfram 1991). However, the definition is not shared by the general population, whose definition of *dialect* is usually reserved for language varieties that are considered substandard in comparison with those that are socially acceptable. Language varieties with stigmatized or unfavorable linguistic features are often relegated to substandard status, and the stigmatization is always based on the social characteristics of the marginalized groups. This has been investigated

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extensively. For example, in Illinois, the South Midland dialect is viewed unfavorably in comparison with the North Midland dialect because of particular linguistic features that resemble something a southerner or a farmer might use: an intrusive /r/ (“warsh” instead of “wash”) and a vowel /æu/ (Frazer 1987). Southerners are generally perceived to be “informal,” “undereducated,” and “friendly” as reported in a language attitude study on northern and southern dialects (Preston 1996).

African American English (popularly known as Ebonics) is another example of an American dialect that is highly stigmatized. According to linguistic studies, AAE is a legitimate language variety with certain phonological, morphological, lexical, and semantic features used by African American speakers in urban and rural communities (Wolfram and Thomas 2002). Not all African Americans use AAE, nor is it exclusive to African Americans. As with any language variety, anyone who has sufficient access and exposure can acquire it. Nonetheless, the typical AAE users are African Americans.

Despite the fact that AAE has been shown to be a legitimate language variety, it is still perceived negatively in the United States in the social, mass, and entertainment media. For example, the Internet contains many sites that feature offensive parodies of AAE (Ronkin and Karn 1999), and AAE is negatively represented in entertainment, including popular Disney films (Lippi-Green 1997; Rickford and Rickford 2000). In education, the Oakland (California) School Board’s decision to use AAE to teach standard English in the 1990s raised intense controversy and even outrage, particularly among people who had never paid the slightest attention to the city’s educational problems (Baugh 2000; Rickford and Rickford 2000; Vaughn-Cook 2007; Winford 2003; Wolfram 1998). As a result of their dialect, some educators have viewed AAE-speaking African American children as speech impaired (Obgu 1999) and as verbally deprived (Labov 1972a). Finally, as Baugh (1996, 2000, 2003) has shown, people who speak AAE have been subject to housing discrimination. Even in the face of the adverse perception of AAE, it continues to exist because it serves as a symbol of cultural solidarity among AAE speakers. In fact, African Americans’ choice of speaking mainstream English with AAE speakers may

be perceived as condescending and trying to act “White” (Fordham 1999). A choice of dialect in a particular situation is much more than just speaking differently. It is a manifestation of social identity and cultural association in every community, including Deaf communities.

Deaf signers, who are also aware of and express attitudes about signing varieties in the American Deaf community (Baer, Okrent, and Rose 1996), have a perception that a standard ASL exists. The earliest recognition of a standard ASL can be traced back to 1834, when further schools for the deaf were opened after the first deaf school, the American School for the Deaf (Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan 1996), was founded. Graduates of the ASD were hired as teachers and served as agents of ASL dissemination, as did deaf students. Croneberg (1965) has explicitly stated that “the body of signs used at Gallaudet, then, must contain the main base of what we call standard ASL” (134).

At the opposite end of the signing spectrum is manually coded English (MCE), which belongs to a category of various English-based signed communication systems (e.g., Seeing Essential English [SEE 1], Signing Exact English [SEE 2], and Linguistics of Visual English [LOVE]). Although MCE is not a natural language as is ASL, it is still practiced in some educational settings for deaf students with the goal of developing better English skills. With written and spoken English and ASL coexisting in the community, a variety called “contact signing” (Lucas and Valli 1992) has emerged; “contact signing” utilizes features of both ASL and English (and of MCE) to varying degrees. With the use of MCE, contact signing, and ASL in the American Deaf community, issues of perception have emerged surrounding the nature of ASL.

One of the issues concerns the differences in perceptions of ASL. For example, in Lucas and Valli’s (1992) study of contact signing, one clip was perceived differently by two racial groups of deaf participants. Thirty-seven percent of the White participants identified it as “ASL,” while 82 percent of the Black participants identified it as “ASL” (70). This discrepancy could be based on signers’ decisions to focus on different linguistic features, although we lack evidence for a definitive statement. However, we may soon have more definite evidence. This kind of discrepancy in perceptions

between Black signers and White signers is being explored by Hill (2011) in a large study that benefits from the statistical analysis lacking in Lucas and Valli's study. Hill is examining the linguistic and social factors that influence ASL signers' perceptions of signing across the full spectrum from ASL signing to English-like signing. The linguistic factors in Hill's study include handshape, nonmanual signals, morphemic movements, choice of signs, syntax, and prosody in signing. The social factors include age, race, and age of ASL acquisition.

Another issue is the perception of ASL and English (including SEE, lipreading, and written and spoken English) as good or bad language. Kannapell (1989) conducted a sociolinguistic study on the attitudes of deaf Gallaudet University students toward ASL and English, as well as the social factors contributing to the attitudes. She found that the pertinent social factors are the number of years spent at a Deaf school, the age of sign language acquisition, the age of onset of hearing loss, and the hearing status of parents and siblings. She also found that the students who were culturally Deaf favored ASL over English, whereas the subjects who were hard of hearing or deaf but preferred oral communication were more favorably disposed toward English and its signing forms. Students, both deaf and hard of hearing, expressed their opinions about ASL and English, which included the belief that ASL is a language but that it lacks proper grammar like English. Some students also felt that ASL has a bad effect on English skills and that while ASL is important for deaf children, speech must be taught in order for them to be able to fit in with mainstream society. Some students believed that ASL is used by less educated deaf people (Kannapell 1989, 203).

From the point of view of the scientific study of language, no language variety is better than any other in terms of linguistic structure or expressive power. It is natural for language varieties to differ from each other on numerous dimensions as a result of geographic and social factors. Social perceptions can influence the prestige of language varieties in a society, as shown in the examples of northern and southern dialects of American English, AAE, and the spectrum of signing between ASL and MCE. Black ASL is no exception, as the next section shows.

BLACK DEAF SIGNERS' SCHOOL HISTORY AND LANGUAGE USE

During the interviews, we asked the participants specific questions about their use of language, such as when they had learned to sign, the languages they used in school, the teachers' signing skills, older signs that were unique to school and region, and their perception of the difference between Black and White signing.¹¹ Table 4.1 shows the number of responses to the questions about where they had learned to sign and how.

Most of the signers, regardless of age, learned to sign at school. Eleven older signers reported that they learned directly from their teachers while ten older signers reported that they learned from teachers and classmates. Four

Table 4.1. Signers' ASL Acquisition

	55 and Older	35 and Younger
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where they learned signs		
at school	36	21
at home	1	6
at both	1	2
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how they learned signs		
teachers only	11	0
teachers and classmates	10	5
socializing with classmates	3	9
school resources (flashcards, interpreters, books)	4	1
deaf family	2	5
nondeaf family	0	1
other deaf adult (nonfamily)	2	1
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11. In tables 4.1–4.4, the number of responses may not add up to the total number of signers. Participants were interviewed in groups, so if their fellow signers were alumni of the same school and had already answered the questions, they might not have answered.

Table 4.2. Race of Students at Signers' Former Schools

School Demography	55 and Older	35 and Younger
only Black	38	0
mostly Black	2	0
only Black, then mixed	0	4
mixed	0	26
mostly White	1	2

older signers said that they learned to sign from other sources, such as flashcards and books. Only two signers had Deaf language models to learn from.

Younger signers who learned to sign at school also learned from teachers and classmates. One young signer mentioned an interpreter as a language model. Younger signers who learned at home acquired sign language from Deaf families, but one signer reported that a hearing family member was a language model.

Table 4.2 shows the number of responses to the question about the racial demography of the students at school.

As table 4.2 shows, 40 out of 41 older signers reported that their schools had only or mostly Black students. This was expected because the schools were segregated. One older signer, however, attended a White school. In contrast, most younger signers attended racially integrated schools. Four younger signers reported that they were racially segregated at first and then were allowed to be in racially mixed environments with their White peers. Two younger signers reported that they went to school with mostly White students.

Table 4.3 summarizes responses to the questions about racial identity and the hearing or Deaf identity of teachers.

Most older signers reported that they had only Black or mostly Black teachers, but seven older signers had only White or mostly White teachers. Seven signers reported that they had only White teachers and later had both Black and White teachers. Also, many participants reported that they had hearing teachers, and nine (seven from the older group and two from the younger group) had Deaf teachers.

Table 4.3. Teachers' Identities at Signers' Former Schools

Race of teachers	55 and Older	35 and Younger
Black	20	0
most Black	5	0
both	0	12
most White	1	9
White	6	6
Black at one school, White at another	0	6
White at beginning, then mixed	7	0
deaf or hearing teachers		
deaf	7	2
most deaf	2	1
both	0	5
most hearing	2	12
most hearing, but then moved to school with both	0	2
hearing	23	8

As expected, some younger signers had Black and White teachers, while other signers had only White or mostly White teachers. Like the older signers, most had hearing teachers. Seven signers had both hearing and deaf teachers (five reported “both,” two reported “most deaf,” and two reported “most hearing but then moved to school with both”).

Table 4.4 summarizes the comments from participants about their teachers' signing skills.

A few of the younger and older signers had teachers who were skillful in ASL, but most of the signers reported that their teachers were not signing ASL. Some signers said that their teachers communicated by fingerspelling, and others said that their teachers signed in SEE. Also, some of the signers said that their teachers were not skilled in signing.

Table 4.4. Signers' Comments about Teachers' Signing Skills

Teachers' signing	55 and Older	35 and Younger
Mostly fingerspelling	2	3
Unskilled signing	8	9
Basic signing, simultaneous communication, total communication	3	2
Signed Exact English	11	7
ASL	8	4
Some of everything	0	4
Comparison of Black and White teachers' signing		
The signing is different.	14	19
The signing is similar.	0	1
Undecided	0	2

Later in the interviews, the participants responded to a few questions about the difference between Black and White signing. Forty-six signers, divided equally between the two age groups, responded to these questions. Overwhelmingly, they said that Black signing differs from White signing. Only one signer (from the younger group) said that Black signing and White signing are similar.

BLACK DEAF SIGNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF BLACK ASL

The signers' interview responses were very rich. Here we describe a number of themes that emerged from them.

"White Deaf Education Is Better."

A common statement from the older signers was that their own school was inferior to White deaf schools. They said that their schools had fewer recreational activities, sports, and materials than White schools and that their

own teachers' signing skills were not as good. They also complained that they did not learn much at school. Some older signers who transferred to White schools reported that the school materials and assignments were much more difficult than the ones they had in the Black deaf schools. Also, the signers who transferred reported that White teachers' signing was so different from their own they could not understand it, and they assumed that the signing was better because it was more complex and had a more extensive vocabulary.

Even long after court-ordered desegregation following the 1954 case of *Brown vs. Board of Education*, some younger signers complained about the quality of education in their racially mixed schools, which had formerly been segregated. For example, one Virginia group had a long discussion about education at their school in Hampton. They felt that the Hampton school was not as good as the Model Secondary School for the Deaf (MSSD) in Washington, D.C., where they later transferred. One important difference was that they did not say that White deaf education was better; however, even though the formerly segregated school had been desegregated, in their opinion the quality of education there had not improved.

"White Signing Is Better and More Advanced."

Most older signers said that White signing was better because it differed in vocabulary and complexity. One signer from Louisiana said that White signing was better because "it was difficult to understand." She was not the only person with that sentiment. Many other older signers shared this perception as well, which might be related to their perception of education: If it was challenging, then it must be superior. One Texas signer expressed the opinion that Black signing was "more gestural" and White signing was "cleaner," but she added that Black deaf people were not ashamed of their language. The last statement was striking because all of the signers seemed willing to set aside their signing to adopt White signing; in fact, many of the older signs that they had used at the segregated school were no longer in use.

A few of the younger signers believed that White signing was better than Black signing, but not for the same reasons given by the older signers. One young participant from Louisiana said that White signing was better

than Black signing because Black signing had a thuggish or “street” component that would be inappropriate in some settings (e.g., WHAT’S-UP NIGGA?) However, another Louisiana signer disagreed and said that *both* Black and White signing—not just Black signing—had proper and improper forms. Most younger signers held a positive discussion about Black signing, which leads to the third theme.

“Black Signing Is Different from White Signing Based on Style, Attitude, and Culture.”

While both older and younger signers agreed that Black signing is different from White signing, the younger signers offered more positive comments about the former. A group of signers from Texas said that Black signing was more powerful in expression and movement and that it had rhythm and style, whereas White signing was more monotonic and lacking in emotion—“not fun to watch,” as one of them mentioned. Also, this group said that Black deaf signers were able to show their true selves in their signing and that White signers were snobbish. It may seem that this group was critical of White signing, but one member did say that White signing was polite and courteous in comparison to Black signing.

One North Carolina signer made an interesting observation about ASL discourse. According to her, Black deaf people do not maintain eye contact with signers during a conversation. In general, eye contact is an important discourse function to maintain in a conversation between ASL signers, and breaking eye contact is considered impolite. Another North Carolina signer remarked that Black deaf signers tried to behave like Black hearing people with similar manners and expressions.

“Younger Black Deaf Signers Sign Differently Depending on Situation and People.”

Younger signers showed an awareness of diversity in signing styles and said that they changed their register depending on the situation and the social characteristics of their interlocutors. One signer from Louisiana observed

that when he socialized with older Black deaf signers, he knew that they signed differently, so he tried to accommodate to their signing; when he was with his peers, he signed like them. One Texan said that when she was at school or work, she was signing “White” to give a professional appearance (as opposed to signing “Black,” which was more “street,” as one Virginian remarked). A group of signers from Virginia commented that the signing at their school in Hampton was more uniform than that at the Model Secondary School for the Deaf.

In conclusion, both older and younger signers agreed that a difference exists between Black signing and White signing, but they offered divergent reasons for the variation. Older signers held a negative view of Black signing because of their experience in segregated schools, where fewer activities and resources were available and their teachers had poor signing and teaching skills. Younger signers held a more positive view of Black signing as a result of their increased metalinguistic awareness and positive Black cultural expressions, but they said that Black signing was more “street” compared to White signing, which was polite and courteous (i.e., more standard). In the following chapters, our linguistic analyses show that, in contrast to these perceptions, Black ASL has some linguistic features that conform more closely to standard, prescriptive forms of ASL than does White signing.