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The Importance of the Sociohistorical Context in Sociolinguistics: The Case of Black ASL

Abstract

The article discusses the importance of sociohistorical context which is the foundation of variation studies in sociolinguistics. The studies on variation in spoken and signed languages are reviewed with the discussion of geographical and social aspects which are treated as external factors in the formation and maintenance of dialects and those factors often have historical roots. The Black ASL project is reviewed as a case with racial segregation and educational policies as part of the sociohistorical factors in the emergence of Black ASL.

The foundation of variationist sociolinguistics is the sociohistorical context in which people use language.[1] Linguistic factors can contribute to variation in language, but geographical boundaries and social factors also play a role (Wolfam and Schilling-Estes 2006). External factors (e.g., age, location, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, identity) have been examined since the seminal variation studies done by trailblazing figures such as William Labov, Roger Shuy, and Walt Wolfram. However, the term *sociolinguistics* was not originally accepted as descriptive of the discipline: "I have resisted the term *sociolinguistics* for many years, since it implies that there can be a successful linguistic theory or practice which is not social" (Labov 1972, xii). In

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other words, social and geographical factors do not invalidate a linguistic theory as a scientific explanation of language variation. It is also true that a linguistic theory cannot be adequately explained without a social component. As a tool of communication, language is shaped and regulated by the respective social conventions of a community.

Formation and Analysis of Language Varieties

Dialects can be found in all languages if "they have enough speakers, have dialects—regional or social varieties that develop when people are separated by geographic or social barriers" (Rickford 1999, 320). In a linguistic sense, dialects are structurally related varieties that carry certain phonological, lexical, morphological, and syntactic markers (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2006; Edwards 2009). Dialects involve both highly favored standard language varieties and nonstandard language varieties with stigmatized linguistic markers, but this is not always the case in the popular perception of dialects. From the general perspective, "dialect" has two basic meanings: one refers to a variety of speech that differs from the language used by the local, native community; another refers to a language variety that is socially stigmatized (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2006; Milroy 1987). The first meaning can apply to any language variety that differs from that typically used in a community. However, the second meaning excludes standard language varieties because they are perceived to contain no socially disfavored linguistic features. Thus it is not just linguistic differences that distinguish varieties. The marked features of varieties can carry social stigmas that are strongly associated with groups of people who have an unfavorable social status with respect to geographical region, race, ethnicity, class, religion, and even generation.

Dialects are shaped by factors such as geographic isolation, settlement patterns, migration, language contact, economic ecology, social stratification, social interaction, and group and individual identity. For example, geographic isolation leads to the emergence of divergent language forms, some of which may be found in one variety but not in others. "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" (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2006, 28). Geographic isolation also explains

the number of dialects found in different regions of the United States (e.g., Northeast American English, Southern American English, the dialect of the Pacific Northwest, Appalachian English, New York City English, Pittsburghese) (ibid., 105–118).

The geographic distribution of dialects can also be explained by the settlement patterns of the earliest inhabitants of a region. Dialect boundaries may reflect migration from the original settlements, and the contours of migration routes are often defined by natural geographic barriers such as mountains, rivers, and lakes. Settlement patterns may be reflected in the distribution of dialects in areas of the United States where English settlers made their new homes. Other patterns harken back to people who were brought in as slaves (ibid.). Political boundaries such as national or local borders are also a type of geographic barrier that defined both settlement patterns and migration routes. With regard to geographic boundaries, we can identify instances of contact between communities. Such interaction with other language groups plays a role in the formation of dialects, as does economic ecology. The latter may stimulate the "development of specialized vocabulary items associated with different occupations" and may "affect the direction and rate of language change in grammar and pronunciation" (ibid., 30).

With respect to the analysis of social factors, the sociolinguistic construct in analyzing variation has changed in three different "waves" of research methods (Langman 2013). The first wave was initiated with William Labov's quantitative research methods in tabulating forms of speech. The second combined "ethnographic research methods with quantitative" ones with the goal of marking group memberships based on language choices (ibid., 245). Both waves focused primarily on demographic categories that have been shown to influence patterns of linguistic variation (e.g., age, sex, socioeconomic class, race). However, the treatment of these categories as external factors has made them appear to be objective measures (Schilling-Estes 2007). The demographic categories are based on ideologies that may change with time and perception, and the social hierarchy within each category may not fully explain individuals' linguistic choices (Langham 2013). For this reason, the *community of practice* approach (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992; Lave and Wenger 1991) has been introduced as the third wave

in sociolinguistic research. The approach is defined as "an aggregate of people who come together around some enterprise" and which is "simultaneously defined by its membership and the shared practices in which that membership engages" (Eckert 2000, 35).

Communities of practice are groups that individuals dynamically construct and participate in as active agents in different settings (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2006), and their membership in local groups explains their linguistic behaviors. The idea of communities of practice has often been more helpful in explaining patterns of variation than, say, the more rigid notions of social class imposed by the researcher (Bucholtz 1999). For example, the linguistic usage and the social behaviors of a wealthy islander may lead outsiders to wrongly conclude that he is part of the working-class community, which engages in the fishing and boating industries (Schilling-Estes 2007, 170). Status alone does not predict the wealthy islander's linguistic usage; his identity as a casually dressed islander who regularly participates in the island community is a good predictor. Another example is given in Eckert's (2000) study of "jocks and burnouts," two groups of high school students. The groups could be loosely classified along socioeconomic lines as middle- and working-class individuals, but their socioeconomic identity alone did not account for their social networks at school. The high school's social network was relevant to the students since most of their time was spent in school. There the students aligned with their social groups, which also explained their linguistic behaviors. Thus, group membership, whether voluntary or coerced, and personal identity have also played a role in the emergence of language varieties.

In addition to geographic and social factors in the formation of dialects, a number of linguistic factors also affect the structure of language. These include rule extension, analogy, grammaticalization, phonological processes (e.g., assimilation), and word-formation processes (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2006). As a result, we see differences between middle- and working-class speech, varieties shaped by social castes, varieties explained by age and gender, varieties accounted for by ethnicity (as in the variety of Spanish used in the Southwest), and varieties based on group memberships in local community networks.

The combination of the linguistic and social factors can be made in "a myriad of ways, resulting in a multitude of dialects" (ibid., 24).

Variation in Sign Languages

With regard to sign languages and Deaf communities, the common question asked by by laypersons is whether sign language is universal (i.e., whether only one sign language exists and is known and used by Deaf people all over the world).[2] The answer, which is most often greeted with surprise, is that there is no universal sign language in the sense that the questioner intends. International Sign (IS) is often used where deaf people of different nationalities gather and participate in sports, conferences, and tourism; it also is used in social media, where deaf people share their videos of signed messages. Even though IS uses the gestural and spatial modality, it is a flexible form of "foreign talk" with a limited set of conventionalized signs, and it is typically combined with iconic signs from the signers' primary sign languages, which offer more lexical and semantic choices (Rosenstock 2008). International Sign is greatly dependent on a shared context that international signers use to accommodate each other (ibid). It is different from sign languages in many respects. In that sense, there is no one naturally occurring universal sign language to which all deaf people somehow have access.

Deaf communities reflect the social diversity that exists in societies (Pray and Jordan 2010, 170). In other words, Deaf communities are microcosms of the larger and mainstream communities in their respective countries. There are reportedly 7,097 living languages in the world, including institutional languages, developing languages, and endangered languages; of this total, only 138 sign languages have been documented (Lewis, Simons, and Fennig 2016). Even so, methodological questions remain about how signed languages are counted: How are those varieties determined as separate languages as opposed to dialects? How are sign languages named in their respective communities, and how do outsiders refer to them? Finally, how many signed dialects are erroneously counted as a standard sign language in a community? (Woll, Sutton-Spence, and Elton 2001, 11–16; Padden 2011, 19–20). When it comes to the sociopolitical nature of signing communities

and their languages, those questions are important with regard to the documentation of signed languages.

As mentioned earlier, signed language varieties can also be explained by the external factors that typically account for variation in languages within larger communities (e.g., region, gender, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status). However, due to the unique histories of Deaf communities, signed language researchers are compelled to include other external factors that are typical of these groups. One main difference between spoken languages and signed languages is the manner in which they are transmitted in their respective communities. Another chief difference has to do with how the population, as well as environmental, regional, and educational factors, all play a role in language transmission and in the social characteristics of Deaf communities. These include the language policies implemented in education for deaf students, age of sign language acquisition, home environment (e.g., Deaf parents in an ASL-signing home vs. hearing parents in a nonsigning home), and the sightedness of the signer, as in Tactile ASL, the variety used by deaf-blind individuals. (See Lucas, Bayley, and Valli 2001 for further discussion of variation in sign languages.)

In this regard, the role of education for deaf students has been a subject of investigation. A clear and strong link has been demonstrated between linguistic variation in ASL and the history of education for deaf students, in particular the language policies implemented at schools for deaf children over the years (ibid.). These policies have 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 strict oralism, which 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.

In Deaf communities, educational and age factors are clearly related as a result of mainstreaming laws, which encourage the placement of deaf and hard of hearing students in regular educational settings. One large-scale sociolinguistic study of ASL (ibid.) found that age served as an external constraint based on the division of a three-generation age group (ibid.). According to the language policy

in place at the time these students were in school, the three age groups were as follows: 55 and older, who were subjected to the oralist policy; 26–54, who were instructed via the combined method; and 15–25, who had used ASL as the medium of instruction in the classroom. The age divisions were motivated by legal developments in the education of deaf children in 1975 with the passage of Public Law 94-142 (the Education of All Handicapped Children Act) and by the change of communication methods from oral to signed, which might not included ASL (ibid., 35).

In Italy, a similar trend emerged in late 1970s with the passage of legislation on the mainstreaming of children with disabilities, including deaf and hard of hearing children (Geraci et al. 2011, 532). The same holds also for New Zealand as of the 1980s, when the mainstream placement of deaf and hard of hearing children became increasingly popular (McKee and McKee 2011, 492). The legal, educational, and communicative developments in education for deaf children have had a pronounced effect on the communication background of generations of deaf and hard of hearing people. The age division proved to be statistically significant for all of the phonological and the syntactic variables examined (Lucas, Bayley, and Valli 2001).

African American Basis for a Variety of ASL

The Black ASL project explores the specific linguistic and sociolinguistic factors that might qualify Black ASL as the variety of ASL that is used in Black deaf communities in the United States in the same way that Tactile ASL has been shown to be a variety of ASL employed by deaf-blind users.[3] 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" (Hairston and Smith 1983, 55). People say, "I see something different—different from other signing." Following the anecdotes, the goal was to describe what that "something" is and which factors have contributed to its formation.

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 these

differences focus primarily on black signers in the South. These differences have been discussed, for example, as a consequence of school segregation in the South (Stokoe, Casterline, and Croneberg 1965). Responses to a 134-item sign vocabulary list indicated "a radical dialect difference between the signs" of a young North Carolina black woman and those of white signers living in the same city (ibid., 315). Other studies of Black ASL (ibid.) took place on a primarily smaller scale. They include work on phonology (Lucas, Bayley, and Valli 2001; Woodward, Erting, and Oliver 1976; 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).

Given this historical background, the objectives of this four-year project were as follows:

- To create a filmed corpus of conversational (vernacular) Black ASL as it is used in the South. The South was chosen because that is where the most radical segregation occurred in the education of black and white Deaf children.
- To provide a description of the linguistic features that make Black ASL recognizable as a distinct variety of ASL.
- To chronicle the history of the education of black Deaf children.
- To disseminate the findings in the form of teaching materials and instruction resources.

Based on the findings reported in Lucas, Bayley, and Valli (2001) with the age division, the hypothesis was that that the kind of school attended by the signers would have direct bearing on their language use. Signers for the project were therefore recruited according to whether they attended segregated or desegregated programs, meaning signers who were 55 or older and by definition went to segregated schools and signers who were 35 or younger and attended integrated schools. A few of the participants first attended segregated schools and then moved to integrated ones so this was taken into account in the sociolinguistic analyses.

Data were collected in six sites, selected according to when the schools for deaf children were founded: Raleigh, North Carolina;

Little Rock, Arkansas; Houston, Texas; Talladega, Alabama; Hampton, Virginia; and New Orleans, Louisiana. Raleigh, Talladega, Little Rock, and Hampton are the sites of former schools for black deaf children, and all but Hampton were the sites of integrated schools for deaf children at the time of data collection. Houston and New Orleans have large and stable black Deaf communities. In addition, attendees at the regional 2007 National Black Deaf Advocates (NBDA) conference were filmed in informal conversations. The NBDA is an advocacy organization whose annual conference in August 2007 was attended by approximately three hundred black Deaf people. All of the interviews were conducted by the black Deaf researchers, to come as close to natural language as possible. Filming occurred during free conversations with the researchers absent. These were followed by structured interviews focusing on language use and school history.

Studies of variation in sign languages have shown us the importance of some factors not usually found in spoken language studies: the nature of education for deaf children vs. residential schools and oralism, the nature of the family (e.g., deaf signing families vs. hearing nonsigning families), and, as demonstrated with the Black ASL project, the social reality of segregation and discrimination. This leads to the basic research question: Can the same kind of unique features that have been identified for AAE (African American English) be identified for Black ASL, to show that it is a distinct variety of ASL? And to that end, we analyzed the use of eight specific linguistic features that serve to differentiate Black ASL from the ASL used by white signers (figure 1).

As mentioned, the linguistic features answer only part of the research questions. The social factors do have a part in the formation of language varieties as in the case of Black ASL so we need to understand the sociohistorical reality of Black ASL.

Starting in 1869, during the segregation era in the United States, schools for black deaf children, which were established as separate campuses or departments in seventeen southern and border states, were physically isolated. Some departments were generally on the same campus as the school for white children, as in Kansas and Missouri, whereas the other departments were physically separated, as in Georgia and Mississippi. In seventeen Southern and border states,

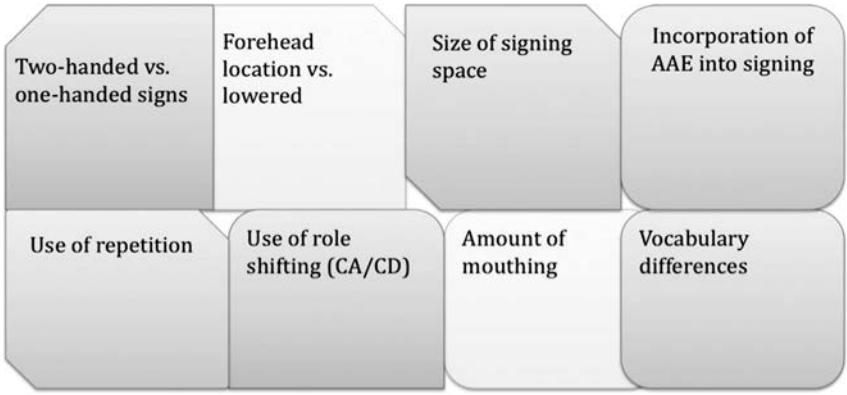

Figure 1. Possible distinguishing factors of Black ASL (from McCaskill et al. 2011).

schools for deaf children followed the patterns of segregation that characterized the public schools. These schools were designed to house both black deaf and black blind students. In the 1950s, thirteen states were still operating segregated schools for deaf students, and most were located in the South. As late as 1963, eight states still maintained separate facilities (Hairston and Smith 1983).

Table 1 shows the states that had schools or departments for black Deaf students (listed by state). The second column shows the year that the school for white deaf students was established. The third column shows the year that the school or department for black Deaf students was established, and the fourth column shows the year the schools were desegregated. The fifth and sixth columns, respectively, show the time between the founding of schools for white and black students and between desegregation and the founding of schools for black children. The average number of years between the establishment of the white school and the establishment of the black school (or department) is 33. In some states, however, the time was considerably longer. Kentucky waited 61 years, West Virginia, 56 years, Virginia, 70 years and Louisiana, 86 years. The average number of years between the establishment of the black school (or department) and desegregation is 72.8. The striking exceptions are Washington, DC, with 101 years, and North Carolina, with 98 years. Note that the time between desegregation and the establishment of a school for black children in Louisiana was only forty years because there was no school for

TABLE 1. Black and White Deaf Schools: Founding and Desegregation

State	1. White school established	2. Black school/ department established	3. Desegregation	4. Years between establishment of Black and White Schools	5. Years between establishment of Black schools and desegregation
DC, KDES	1857	1857 (dept.)	1958	0	101
N. Carolina	1845	1868–1869	1967	24	98
Maryland	1868	1872	1956	4	84
Tennessee	1845	1881 (dept.)	1965	36	84
Georgia	1846	1882	1965	36	83
Mississippi	1854	1882 (dept.)	1965	28	83
S. Carolina	1849	1883 (dept.)	1966	34	83
Kentucky	1823	1884 (dept.)	1954-60	61	70
Florida	1885	1885	1965	0	80
Texas	1857	1887	1965	30	78
Arkansas	1850/1867	1887	1967	37	80
Alabama	1858	1892	1968	34	76
Missouri	1861	1888 (dept.)	1954	37	66
Kansas	1861	1888, dept	1954 (?)	27	66
Virginia	1839	1909	1965 (2 schools)	70	56
Oklahoma	1898	1909, dept	1962	11	53
Louisiana	1852	1938	1978	86	40
W. Virginia	1870	1926	1956	56	30

black Deaf children until 1938 and desegregation did not occur until twenty-four years after *Brown v Board of Education*. Some states accepted students from other states for educational instruction. Blacks from West Virginia were sent to school in Overlea, Maryland (Jowers 2005). The Louisiana participants in this project explained that formal education was not available to them until 1938. The only options for blacks were to attend school in Mississippi or to attend public school without support services such as interpreters or note takers in the classroom, or to remain at home.

The social and geographical factors that would make for the emergence of separate variety were in place. Two other factors played major roles: 1) who the teachers were that taught in the black schools and 2) the role of oralism. Historically, African American educators have been the largest group of professionals to provide leadership within the community. Throughout the 19th and the first half of the twentieth century, African American educators in African American private and public schools held themselves responsible for the educational achievement of the children and adults attending their schools (Franklin 1990; Neverdon-Morton 1989) and viewed education as the way to achieve individual enrichment as well as social progress (Weiler 1990). In the early years of deaf education in the south, there was a mixture of black and white and deaf and hearing teachers, at least at some schools. In North Carolina, for example, the superintendent from 1896 to 1918 was John E. Ray, a hearing advocate of deaf teachers and sign communication. He hired deaf faculty, both black and white, including brothers Thomas Tillinghast and David Tillinghast, Blanche Wilkins, and Thomas Flowers. Wilkins and Flowers were both black and provided obvious role models for the students (Burch and Joyner 2007, 21). African American teachers were important for the children they taught because the children needed to see that teachers of color could exist, and that people of color could assume leadership positions as well as serve in many other roles (King 1993).

Furthermore, after the 1880 conference in Milan, Italy, on deaf education, the oral method of education came to be highly favored, to the exclusion of sign language. Oralism, the belief that spoken language is inherently superior to sign language, played an important role

in Deaf education. Even though Deaf education in the United States began in 1817 with sign language as the medium of instruction, by 1880, the oral method of instruction was well established in the white schools (Lane et al. 1996). "[T]he rise of oralism . . . motivated schools across the country to replace deaf teachers with hearing instructors who would speak to students rather than sign with them" (Burch and Joyner 2007, 21). However, oral education was not extended to black Deaf students on the same basis as it was to white Deaf students. According to Settles (1940), 11 of 16 schools or departments for black Deaf students surveyed still used an entirely manual approach (i.e., signing) (Baynton 1996). In 1920, three-fourths of the children at the Texas white school were being taught orally, while less than one-third of the children at the black school were being taught orally (ibid., 46). "Because of the continued use of sign language in the classroom, however, the ironic result of this policy of discrimination may have been that southern deaf African-Americans, in spite of the chronic underfunding of their schools, received a better education than most deaf white students" (ibid., 180). Nevertheless, although some African American children received more comprehensible instruction than white children, they were still placed in vocational rather than academic tracks. Moreover, the facilities for white children were far superior to those for black children. Wright, for example, describes a visit to the school for white blind children: "[W]e were given a tour of their campus and the differences between their school and ours were unbelievable. . . . [S]eeing such a difference in how the White children were treated and how we were treated at the Black state school left us depressed and angry" (1999, 179–80).

Oralism did have an impact on the education of some our study participants who were forbidden to use ASL and forced to use speech in the classroom even though their speech was unintelligible. One school in this study, the North Carolina School for the Colored Deaf and Blind, supported the oral method and forbid both teachers and students to use ASL in the classroom. Participants in the study said that it drastically hampered their learning and affected their academic achievement. However, outside of the classroom, students continued to use ASL.

Summary: Case of Geographic and Social Factors in the Formation of Black ASL

Black ASL is considered to be a distinct variety of American Sign Language based on the specific *linguistic features* (figure 1) and how the features are shaped by *social* and *geographic factors*, including the following:

- segregated schools
- different stances on oralism
- the nature of the language brought to school
- the wide range of teacher signing skills

Just as with any language variety that is subjected to linguistic and social changes, it can be seen that Black ASL is changing as a result of desegregation beginning in 1954 and mainstreaming that was starting to be widespread in the 1970s. Another factor to be considered concerns the language the children brought with them to the school. There were a considerable number of black Deaf signing families whose children brought their language with them to school. These children no doubt served as sign models, as did white children from Deaf families (Lane et al. 1996). There were also many children from hearing nonsigning families. Several participants from Louisiana, Alabama, Virginia, and Texas were from multigenerational Deaf families. In the interviews, they discussed learning signs from their parents and their grandparents. This is a ripe area for systematic research as there has been very little work on black Deaf parents and their Deaf children. This indicates that social factors hold as much weight as linguistic factors and the centrality of the sociohistorical context needs to be recognized in understanding this variety of ASL.

Notes

1. A preliminary version of this article was copresented with Ceil Lucas at the symposium titled Crossing Linguistic and Modal Boundaries: New Approaches to Sociolinguistics, which was held in Hannover, Germany, Nov. 20–21, 2014.

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

3. The Black ASL Project is a language project that aims to describe the linguistic features of a variety of American Sign Language used by African American signers. The project is supported in part by the Spencer Foundation and the National Science Foundation #BCS-0813736.

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