Variation in Black ASL:
Two hands or one, high or low?

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Basic Questions for the Project (1)

- What are the features of the variety of ASL that people call "Black ASL"?

- There are many anecdotal reports about its existence: "Yeah, I see something different…"; and, we have considerable evidence of differences in individual signs (lexical variation).

- Hairston and Smith (1983): 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

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Basic Questions for the Project (2)

- There also exists a 50-year tradition of research on African American English (AAE), with unique features identified at all levels of the language – phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon – showing that AAE is a distinct variety of English (see Mufwene et al. 1998 and Green 2004 for reviews).

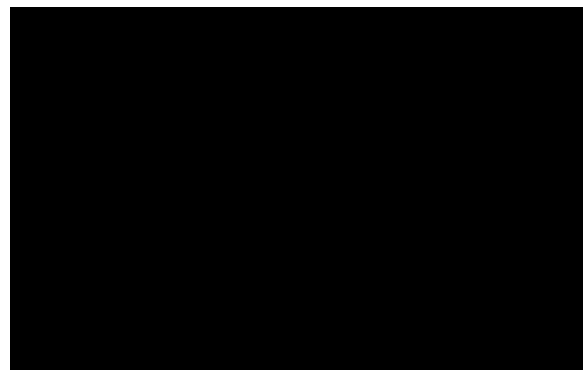- Can the same kind of unique features that have been identified for AAE be identified

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Research Question

- Are a preference for 2-handed signs and a preference for forehead level signs two of the features of Black ASL? (Other possible features include the size of the signing space, amount of voiceless mouthing, frequency of use of constructed action and constructed dialogue, clausal repetition and lexical variation.)

Examples

- 2-handed and 1-handed signs:
  - 2-handed: REMEMBER, DON'T-KNOW
  - 1-handed: REMEMBER, DON'T-KNOW
- Forehead level and lowered signs:
  - At forehead level: BLACK, EDUCATION, TEACHER
  - Lowered: BLACK, TEACHER

Examples from the Data

The project at a glance

The objectives of this four-year project are:

1. To create a filmed corpus of conversational Black ASL as it is used in the South. The focus is on the structure and history of Southern Black ASL because that region is where the most radical segregation occurred in the education of Black and White deaf children, creating the conditions for the development of a separate language variety.

2. To provide a description of the linguistic features that make Black ASL recognizable as a distinct variety of ASL and of the history of

SITES VISITED,

in order of the year in which the schools for Black Deaf children were founded (6 of the 18 schools or departments established for Black children)

North Carolina (1869)
Texas (1887)
Arkansas (1887)
Alabama (1892)
Virginia (1909)
Louisiana (1938)

Signers and Data Collected at Each Site

- Groups of signers "over 55", i.e. attended school during segregation (N = 63)
- Groups of signers "under 35", i.e. attended integrated schools (N = 33)
- All filmed in free conversation and in structured interviews. The interviews focused on language use and school experiences

Concerning types of 2-handed signs

- Type 1: Can be produced with only 1 articulator: WANT, DEER, TIRED, STILL, HORSE, SICK, FINISH, NOW, DON'T-KNOW, THING, PONDER…
- Type 2a: Cannot [usually] be produced with only 1 articulator: SHOES, SOCKS, STAR, WORK, CHURCH, CAN'T, PAPER, SCHOOL, CHEESE…
- Type 2b: "usually": some two-handed signs can be produced with a substitute base –

One focus of this presentation

- Signs that can be produced with 2 hands or 1 hand unremarkably; i.e. we did not not count signs in Type 2.
- **Questions concerning this variable:**
  - Do Black signers favor 2-handed signs?
  - What are the linguistic constraints on such signs?

Earlier studies of handedness (1)

- Woodward and DeSantis (1977):
  - Analysis of a small set of two-handed signs (CAT, CHINESE, COW, DEER, and DONKEY).
  - Significant factors: outward movement, high/low location, complex movement, age, race, and home location.
  - African American signers tend to use 2-handed signs more than Caucasian signers of the same age.
- Frishberg (1975):
  - Diachronic study of two-handed signs.
  - Over time, two-handed signs that contacted the face reduced to be produced with one hand.

Earlier studies of handedness (2)

- Lucas et. al (2007, NWAV), Comparison of Black and White
  signers:
  - handedness of preceding and following signs (2-handed favors 2-handed target).
  - contact with face or body (contact favors 1-handed forms).
  - grammatical category (N, V, Adj, Adv disfavor 1-handed, "other" (HOW, NONE, WHAT) favor 1-handed.
  - region: Massachusetts favors 1-handed (vs. Kansas/Missouri, California, Louisiana) .

Coding for handedness

1. Dependent variable: 1 handed, 2 handed;
2. Contact or not with the face or the body;
3. Handedness of preceding and following signs: 1-handed, 2- handed, pause;
4. Age: young (under 35); old (over 55);
5. State: North Carolina, Louisiana, Alabama, Texas, Arkansas and Virginia;
6. Gender;
7. Kind of school attended: segregated, integrated, mixed (first segregated, then integrated), don't know.

Results (application value = 1 handed)

Factor Group	Factor	N	%	Weight
Contact	Contact	286	44.8	.603
	No contact	532	29.3	.444
Preceding sign	Pause or 1	565	39.6	.554
	2 handed	253	23.7	.381
Following sign	1 handed	256	45.3	.598
	Pause	288	33.0	.492
	2 handed	274	26.6	.416
Age	Young (35–)	349	39.5	.552
	Old (55+)	469	31.1	.461
Total	Input	818	34.7	.336

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Discussion: Handedness (1)

- Unlike other variables discussed in Lucas et al. (2001), grammatical category is not significant. This contrasts with Lucas et al. (2007), which was based on a substantially larger data set.
- It may be that "number of articulators" is dealt with differently than other parameters such as handshape and

Discussion: Handedness (2)

- **As for the social constraints:** Woodward and De Santis (1977) found that Black signers and older signers favored 2-handed signs, observations born out here.
- Type of school is not significant. However, type of school overlaps completely with age. All signers 55 and older attended segregated schools.

Variation in Location

- Our focus here is on signs such as KNOW, DON'T-KNOW, WHY, FOR, TEACH, IMAGINE, EDUCATION, SUSPECT, REMEMBER, SEARCH.
- In citation (i.e. dictionary) form, such signs are signed at the level of the forehead but in actual use they can also be signed at lower levels ranging from the face to the space in front of the signer.

Previous Studies of Location (1)

- Frishberg (1975). There is an historical tendency for signs to "move down" to the central signing space.
- Liddell & Johnson (1989): "many signs which are produced with contact at the SFH [side of forehead] location in formal signing may be produced in casual signing at the CK [cheek] location. Similarly, signs produced at the CK location (including those moved from the SFH location) may be produced at the JW [jaw] location. These same signs also appear at

Previous Studies of Location (2)

Lucas et al. (2001):

- Grammatical function is strongest constraint: noun, verb, adjective disfavor lowered forms, preposition and interrogative favor lowered forms.
- Preceding location: body favors lowered forms, head disfavors.
- Following contact: no contact favors lowered forms, contact disfavors.
- White signers, both working class and middle class, slightly favor lowered forms (Varbrul weight .555).
- Middle class Black signers disfavor lowered forms

Location: Coding for this Study (1)

- Linguistic (internal) constraints
  - grammatical function: noun, verb, adjective, adverb, compound, preposition/interrogative;
  - Preceding event: hold, sign, pause;
  - Preceding location: head, body;
  - Preceding contact: contact with head or body or not;
  - Following: same as preceding.

Location: Coding for this Study (2)

- Social (external) constraints:
  - Age: 35 and under, 55 and older;
  - Region: North Carolina, Louisiana, Arkansas, Alabama, Texas, Virginia;
  - Gender;
  - Kind of school: segregated, integrated, mixed (first segregated, then integrated), don't know.

Location: Results, Linguistic Constraints (App. Value= lowered variant)

Factor Group	Factor	N	%	Weight
Grammatical	Compound	47	48.9	.716
category	Noun	111	39.6	.602
	Preposition/interro	107	35.5	.582
	Adjective/adverb	60	21.7	.464
	Verb	552	25.0	.448
Preceding	Body, contact	150	29.3	.562
	Body, no contact	419	27.7	.505
	Head, contact	106	26.4	.492
	Head, no contact	54	22.2	.379
Total	Input	877	29.2	.260

Location: Results, Social Constraints (App. Value= lowered variant)

Factor Group	Factor	N	%	Weight
Region	Texas	140	43.6	.650
	Alabama, Virginia, North Carolina	454	28.6	.529
	Arkansas, Louisiana	283	23.0	.405
Age	35–	390	36.4	.587
	55+	487	23.4	.430
Total	Input	877	29.2	.260

Log likelihood = –496.154, chi-square/cell = 0.9314. Factors that did not
differ significantly from one another have been combined where appropriate.

Discussion

- Results for both variables provide evidence of a change in progress. Although all groups studied here use more 2 handed forms than 1 handed forms and fewer lowered forms than citation forms, younger Southern African Americans use more 1 handed forms and more lowered forms than older Southern African Americans.
- Comparison with the results of earlier studies (Lucas et al. 2001, 2007) indicates that Southern African Americans use fewer 1

2 handed vs. 1 handed signs: Comparison with previous research

Region/ethnicity	% 1h	n
South, African	35	818
Lucas et al. 2007 (Louisiana, California, Massachusetts,		
African American	44	1113
White	50	1145

state and ethnicity (Lucas et al. 2007)

California		Louisiana		Kansas/Missouri		Mass.	
Eth	% 1h	Eth	% 1h	Eth	% 1h	Eth	% 1h
AA	42	AA	39	AA	38	AA	56
W	47	W	42	W	50	W	61
Total	44		40		45		59

Total n = 2258

Location (lowering): Comparison with previous research

Region/Ethnicity	% –cf	n
African American, South	29	877
Lucas et al. (2001)		
Working class African American (Louisiana, California, Missouri,	40	455
Middle class African	55	257
White (7 states)	56	1882

Conclusion

- **With respect to the variables examined here**, the results, along with the results of our earlier studies, suggest that the difference between Black and White ASL is **quantitative** rather than **qualitative.** African American and White signers vary in their use of lowered variants and one handed variants of signs that can be produced with two hands. However, African Americans in the South, particularly older African Americans who attended segregated schools, are more likely to use traditional non-lowered forms and two handed

The History and Structure of Black ASL: Research Team

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