

Black ASL: The Socio-historical Foundations

This paper reports on the initial results of the first large-scale study of the variety of American Sign Language (ASL) commonly referred to as Black ASL, described by Hairston and Smith (1983) as “a Black way of signing used by Black people in their own cultural milieu – among families and friends, in social gatherings, and in deaf clubs.” Based on newly collected data from five southern states – Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, North Carolina, and Texas – we focus on the socio-historical foundations of the variety and address the question of whether the same factors that play a role in the formation of spoken language varieties also played a role in the formation of Black ASL. These factors are both geographical and social. In terms of the geographic factors, we document the history of the establishment and the physical isolation of schools for Black Deaf children as well as the general isolation of the Black Deaf community. While the American School for the Deaf (ASD) was established for white students in 1817 in Hartford, Connecticut, no attempt was made to provide education for Black deaf students until the 1850s and some states did not provide such education until much later. For example, North Carolina established the first school for Black deaf children in 1868, twenty-three years after the establishment of the school for White students, and desegregation was not achieved until 1967, ninety-nine years after the establishment of the Black school and thirteen years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954. Louisiana established a school for White deaf students in 1852 but had no state school for Black children until 1938. In the early 1950s, thirteen states still had segregated schools for Black deaf children and as late as 1963, eight states still did. In terms of social factors, Black Deaf people were clearly subjected to the same discrimination that affected hearing people. Three other key factors are examined in particular: 1) the characteristics of the teachers in schools for Black Deaf children, e.g. hearing or deaf, Black or White; 2) the general climate of oralism in Deaf education; 3) the language the children brought with them to the residential schools. These geographical and social factors provide the foundation for an on-going study of the phonological, syntactic and lexical structure of Black ASL. The on-going project will be described, salient variants will be illustrated, and clips from the data collection activities will be shown.