**Black southern signing**

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**ABSTRACT**

Recent research in American Sign Language (ASL) has concentrated on demonstrating that ASL, a language channelled through the manual-visual modality, has linguistic properties similar to those of oral languages, except for physical sound. The absence of sound, however, really presents no theoretical problem since ASL has a formational level of structure analogous to, but not dependent on, the phonological component of oral languages (Stokoe 1960; Battison 1974).

This paper will discuss a relatively new area of research in Sign linguistics, ethnic-social variation. Because of attitudes and educational policy, Black signers in the South have developed different varieties of signing from Whites. Concentrating primarily on Black signs in Georgia, this paper will discuss some of the lexical and formational (phonological) variation observed in old and young Black signers. (Sociolinguistic variation; sign languages; linguistic change; minority group languages.)

**I. INTRODUCTION**

Croneberg (1965) did some preliminary dialect geography type of interviewing with White deaf informants in Virginia and North Carolina. Croneberg's hypothesis was that residential schools heavily influence lectal variation in signs. He interviewed one Black deaf woman from Raleigh, at that time the site of the North Carolina Black deaf school. Later he stated: 'The use of the same 134

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[1] I would like to dedicate this paper to Adra and to all the other children of Southern Black deaf communities in the hope that she and they will have pride and preserve the languages and traditions of her parents and their generation.

[2] The production of this paper was supported in part by NSF grant SOC74-14724. I would also like to thank Carol Erting, Susan DeSantis, and Susanna Oliver for sharing in the work that helped build the major portion of this paper.

[3] This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Linguistic Society of America, December 1974, New York. I feel that the placement of this paper in a section on neurolinguistics was unfortunate. Prestigious professional groups such as the Linguistic Society of America should recognize a responsibility to foster linguistic and cultural integrity. Such responsibility should include the placement of future papers on oppressed minorities in appropriate sections of meetings.

[4] Although there has been some token integration, the educational system has actually changed little since Croneberg (1965: 315) pointed out: 'North Carolina, like several other states, has one school for white deaf children (Morgantown) and another school for Negro deaf children (Raleigh'). For example, it was only during the 1974–5 academic
item vocabulary list that had been used with all other informants revealed a radical dialect difference between the signs of this young woman and those of white deaf persons living in the same city. A study of ASL dialects of the Negro deaf will constitute an important part of a full-scale sign language dialect study. 

(Croneberg 1965: 315).

Apparently few people took Croneberg seriously, since the literature on sign language only occasionally even mentions this area of study. For example, Meadow (1972: 22) in an otherwise rather in-depth discussion of 'Sociolinguistics, Sign Language and the Deaf Sub-Culture' points out: 'Stokoe (1965) reports another aspect of dialect variation, related to the apparent lack of contact between Negro and non-Negro deaf individuals. This would be an additional area for the sociolinguistic study of deafness.'

While this paper is still an extremely sketchy account of some characteristics of Black Southern signing, perhaps it will alleviate some of the neglect of an extremely interesting minority and their language variation.

2. TYPES OF VARIATION

We have observed lexical as well as phonological variation in Black Southern signing that differs from White Southern signing and from White and Black Northern signing. There is probably grammatical variation also, but because all the researchers who have observed Black Southern signing are white, hearing, non-native signers, we have not as yet been perceptive enough to notice it. The situation is also compounded by the fact that Black signers attempt to approach White signing in conversation with White signers and also attempt to approach English when in contact with hearing people.

2.1. Lexical variation

Although lexical variation is comparatively easy to study, it is really not as linguistically interesting as phonological (or grammatical) variation, since it is quite doubtful how rule-governed (and therefore generalizable) lexical knowledge is. We find examples of two types of lexical variation in Black Southern signing: historical and synchronic. Historical variation here means forms that were present in the past in other lectal varieties of ASL but that now remain in Black Southern signing. An example of this type of variation is PREGNANT, made by touching the 5 hand twice on the chin. Black Georgia signers still use this sign. White Georgia signers at one time used this sign, but now use the sign common to many other parts of the country that is made with interlocking hands extending from the trunk.

Synchronic lexical variation in Black Southern signing is more common than
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historical variation, probably because of the isolation of Black and White schools in the South.\textsuperscript{5} Two examples of synchronic variation are CORNBREA, made by placing B hands together and moving them from side to side, and WHITE (PERSON), made by placing a B hand palm inwards near the side of the face and closing and opening the B hand twice. CORNBREA has never been used by White signers in Georgia. They use a phonologically unrelated sign. WHITE (PERSON) which is homophonous but not semantically related to the Northern and Southern White sign for Mexico has not been used by White signers with one noted exception. A White deaf counselor working with uneducated Black deaf in Atlanta once used the sign to me in a conversation about the Georgia residential school system. When questioned about the use, he stated that his Black clients used that sign, so he had picked it up for use in restricted situations. WHITE (PERSON) is a particularly interesting sign because it is only used in Georgia by uneducated Black signers. However, it is also used by some Blacks in Louisiana and on the Eastern Shore. This suggests that there may be similarities in certain Black signs in a number of Southern states. The amount of similarity is an important area for future research.

2.2. Phonological variation

Phonological variation, as mentioned earlier, is more linguistically interesting in general than lexical variation, since it deals with more generalizable phenomena. The particular phonological data available on Black Southern signing is also more interesting than the lexical data, since it includes not only data from citation forms and free conversation, but also data from questionnaires based on intuitive judgments of informants. These questionnaire data supply concentrated, easily quantifiable information on each informant in relation to variation in the use of a specific phonological rule. Because these questionnaires are based on scattered but apparently systematic data we had on videotapes, they allow for an easy test of hypotheses about lectal differences.

2.2.1. Non-quantitative data. Before getting into the data on intuitive judgments, I would first like to discuss some of the data from citation forms and free conversation. Woodward & Erting (1974) stated that Black Southern signing had not undergone certain phonological changes that had occurred in other lects in the areas of centralization, symmetry, and morphological preservation discussed by Frishberg (1973). For example: 'In some Georgia Black signers, YOUNG has not been centralized towards the chest. It is still done on the waist... DIE/DEAD/KILL is still executed with one hand in citation form by Louisiana Black signers... Louisiana Black signers and some Georgia Black signers do

\textsuperscript{5} Even though large physical separation has been common, e.g. Louisiana, North Carolina, and Virginia have had Black and White schools in separate cities, social isolation has occurred without this large physical distance. The Georgia residential schools until the two campuses were merged this year were one mile apart.
STEAL with the old grasping motion, instead of with the more modern Bent-V hand shape. Thus for these signers, the hand shape of the sign has not yet conformed to "a morphologically meaningful shape, from a more pantomimic shape" (Frishberg 1973: 10) (Woodward & Erting 1974: 9).

While there tends to be a retention of older phonological forms in the areas of centralization, symmetry, and morphological preservation for some Black Southern signers, in the area of fluidity, which includes assimilation, some Black signers appear to have gone towards a more complete assimilation of two-handed signs than have White signers. For example: the sign that some Black signers use for TOMATO has assimilated hand shape, orientation, and movement. No White signers have assimilated movement in this sign. Originally TOMATO was an obvious compound of RED and SLICE-A-FRUIT. The Black sign has not only made both hands completely symmetrical, but has also lost the RED which conditioned the assimilation of hand shape and orientation.

Unfortunately, the above data was not quantifiable because we did not have exactly the same linguistic information from each informant. More recently, quantitative data has been collected for five phonological variables: Face-to-Hand Variation, 2-Hand-to-1-Hand Variation, 8-to-9 Variation, the Rule of Thumb, and Elbow-to-Hand Shift. Thus far, data from only the first two of these variables have been analyzed. However, both variables show quantitative differences in use between Black and White signers that were interviewed.

2.2.2. Quantitative data. In 1974, 45 Southern informants were presented with variant forms related to these phonological variables. The informants responded on questionnaire forms as to which variant(s) they use. The informants vary according to three social variables: whether they are from New Orleans or Atlanta, whether they are below or above the age of fifty, and whether they are Black or White. 13 of the informants are Black. In 1975, 30 additional informants (22 Black and 8 White) were interviewed about 2-Hand-to-1 Hand Variation. This increased the number of Black informants for this variable to 35. While the number and sample of informants does not allow for generalization to the whole population, some interesting trends have emerged that should be tested further.

2.2.2.1. Face-to-Hand Variation (Woodward, Erting & Oliver 1974). Some signs that are made on the face by Northern signers are produced on the hands by some Southern signers. A group of seven signs that were noted to undergo this variation have been tested with the informants. The signs were found to be implicationally ordered at a 92.2 per cent rate of acceptability. Table 1 shows the pattern and the number of informants in each lect.

Lectal membership was related to region ($\chi^2 = 19.86, df = 1, P<0.005$)
and race ($\chi^2 = 4.27$, $df = 1$, $P < 0.05$). New Orleans signers grouped primarily into lects 1–3 which use more face variants, and Atlanta signers grouped primarily into lects 4–8 which use more hand variants. White signers grouped primarily into lects 1–4 which use more face variants. Black signers were about equally divided between face (lects 1–4) and hand (lects 5–8) variants.

2.2.2. 2-Hand-to-1-Hand Variation (Woodward & DeSantis ms.). Some signs on the face that were made with two hands in the past are now made with one hand (Battison 1974). Eight signs that were noted to undergo this variation were tested and found to be implicationally ordered at a 92.3 percent rate of acceptability. Table 2 shows the pattern and the number of informants in each lect. + means the informant has the two-handed variant only, − means he/she does not.

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Lectal membership was related to age ($\chi^2 = 5.17$, $df = 1$, $P < 0.05$) and race ($\chi^2 = 6.89$, $df = 1$, $P < 0.01$). White signers above forty-seven primarily grouped in lects 1–6, which use more old two-handed variants; White signers below forty-seven primarily grouped in lects 7–9 which use fewer of the old two-handed variants. Black signers under forty-seven primarily grouped like the
older White signers in lects 1–6 with more of the older two-handed variants. There were not enough older Black informants to include in a test of significance.

3. SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS
From the previous discussion we have seen that Black Southern signing differs from White signing on the lexical and phonological levels. Some lexical and phonological variations are examples of older historical forms as in the older sign for PREGNANT, the use of older non-centralized, non-symmetrical, and non-morphologically preserved signs, and the greater quantitative use of older two-handed signs made on the face. It has been much rarer to find comparatively historically newer forms in Black Southern signing like TOMATO. The newer forms apparently occur only in the area of fluidity or, more specifically, assimilation of compound signs. We have also seen that lexical and phonological variation may be synchronic as in the examples CORNBREAD and WHITE (PERSON). Face-to-Hand Variation has been noted by Woodward, Erting & Oliver (1974) as synchronic but, more specifically, an example of a stagnant rule (Fasold 1973) that probably once was historically salient but that is now indicative only of social marking.

From this data, several important questions emerge: What is the status of Black Southern signing in relation to ASL? How might this relationship be incorporated in a grammar? What will the future of Black Southern signing be? Unfortunately, because of the present sparseness of data, it will be impossible to give definitive answers to these questions. However, at least some hypotheses can be set forth.

3.1. The Status of Black Southern signing
As White hearing researchers we have faced some problems in effectively penetrating Southern Black deaf communities. There is still a large amount of understandable distrust which has hampered a real in-depth study of the communities. Also as mentioned before, it is difficult to record Black signs because the signers switch toward White English signs with us. We have a beautiful example on videotape of two supposedly 'low-verbal' (the best translation of which is non-English) Black deaf signers. Both haltingly hypercorrected their Pidgin Sign English (Woodward 1973b; Woodward & Markowicz 1975) signing MY BE NAME BE...and laboriously proceeding to spell their names. I immediately cut off the camera and signed not to use 'straight English sign' but just to 'converse'. As soon as I got the camera on, they launched into one of the most animated 20-minute story-telling scenes I have seen. The problem, however, is how much of their signs were really the way they would normally converse among themselves? All of the other people in the room were White, and there was a White deaf counselor interviewing them.

At any rate, estimated amounts of intelligibility are still interesting. I was
very happy understanding my one-fourth or so of the story, but the White hearing interpreters present, some of whom had deaf parents were not that pleased that one-half or more of the story was beyond them. More recently I showed this example to Carol Padden, a Research Assistant at the Linguistics Research Lab who is deaf of deaf parents. She understood about 70 per cent of the story. One wonders if under other situations, the intelligibility might not have been considerably lower.

Anecdotal accounts of intelligibility from White deaf informants vary from: 'Black signers sign different, they sign confused and too fast. I can't understand them', to 'Black signers sign differently from Whites. I understand most of their signs, but if I don't understand, I ask them. They explain and then I understand.' From these statements as well as other observations, it is likely that there is a continuum from Black signs that are quite different from White ASL lects to Black signs that are fairly understandable to Whites. Naturally there are also Southern Black signers who sign exactly like Whites.

3.2. Incorporating Black Sign Variation into a Grammar of ASL

Traditional linguistic theory has little to offer in handling this kind of continuum-like variation, especially if it is superimposed on the Sign-to-English diglossic continuum (Stokoe 1970; Woodward 1973a) that exists in the White deaf community. Core-appendage grammars just can't describe much less explain lectal variation that occurs at a relatively deep level of structure (Bickerton 1973). A polylectal grammar making use of implicational analysis and variable rules with weighted features presently seems the only feasible solution.

3.3. The Future of Black Southern signing

Since we are still rather uncertain about statuses of varieties of Black Southern signing, it is difficult to say much about the future of the varieties. Blacks have picked up more White signs after leaving residential school, generally as one informant put it 'to better herself'. It is unfortunate that these negative attitudes exist, but they are seemingly widespread.

I once asked a Black woman receiving vocational training when she learned signs. She replied that her interpreter just taught her. Being surprised by her fluency, I asked if she hadn't attended a residential school. She said yes. I then continued with, 'You mean you didn't use signs at the residential school?' She answered, 'Yes, but now I'm learning correct signs'.

These attitudes have been reinforced during the merging of various schools. Integration is great, but only when both groups are equal. Assimilation with a pressure to leave behind language and culture is not integration. There are other names for it. The only report I have on the most recent merging, that of the two Georgia schools, is an anecdotal one that older Black students are adopting White signs, but the younger ones are not. It is difficult to say what the future will bring.
REFERENCES