



A PRESENCE IGNORED

The Case of the Black Deaf Community in the US

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RESEARCH QUESTION



- ✦ What are the features of the variety of ASL that people call “Black ASL” ?

ANECDOTAL REPORTS



- ✦ Plenty of anecdotal reports about its existence
 - ✦ “Yeah, I see something different...”
- ✦ Plenty of evidence of differences in individual signs (i.e., lexical variation).
- ✦ Hairston and Smith’s (1983: 55) report
 - ✦ “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.”

ANECDOTAL REPORTS



- ✦ Maxwell and Smith-Todd's (1986) study on based on interviews with Black teachers
 - ✦ Teachers had taught both at The Blind, Deaf and Orphan School for Colored Youths and the Texas School for the Deaf (both in Austin)
 - ✦ Maxwell and Smith-Todd (p.90) reports that
 - ✦ "...these teachers, who experienced both schools, reported differences in the sign language that was used by the students of the two campuses and suggested that the fact that these students were separated from one another as a possible reason for such differences."

AFRICAN-AMERICAN ENGLISH



- ✦ There also exists a 50-year tradition of research on African American English (AAE)
- ✦ Unique features identified at all levels of the language showing that AAE is a distinct variety of English
 - ✦ Sound system
 - ✦ Sentence structure
 - ✦ Vocabulary
 - ✦ (see Mufwene et al. 1998 and Green 2004 for more information)

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- ✦ The details of the socio-historical context in which Black ASL might become a distinct variety are what bring us to this conference.
- ✦ Those details have everything to do with presence and the lack of recognition of presence.

THE FIRST ISSUE



- ✦ How do varieties of language (dialects) come about ?
 - ✦ J. Rickford (1999) explains that “all languages, if they have enough speakers, have dialects- regional or social varieties that develop when people are separated by geographic or social barriers.” (*African American Vernacular English*. Blackwell. p. 320)

GEOGRAPHIC FACTORS



- ✦ Definition of geographic factors:
 - ✦ mere isolation of one community from another; geographic and political boundaries –
 - ✦ e.g. rivers, mountains, swamps, borders; patterns of settlement, where people live
- ✦ On the development of a dialect
 - ✦ “...being isolated from other speakers tends to allow a dialect to develop in its own way, through its own innovations that are different from those of other dialects.” (Language Files, 10th ed., p. 419)

SOCIAL FACTORS



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 - ✦ Socioeconomic status
 - ✦ Age
 - ✦ Gender
 - ✦ Ethnicity

SOCIAL FACTORS

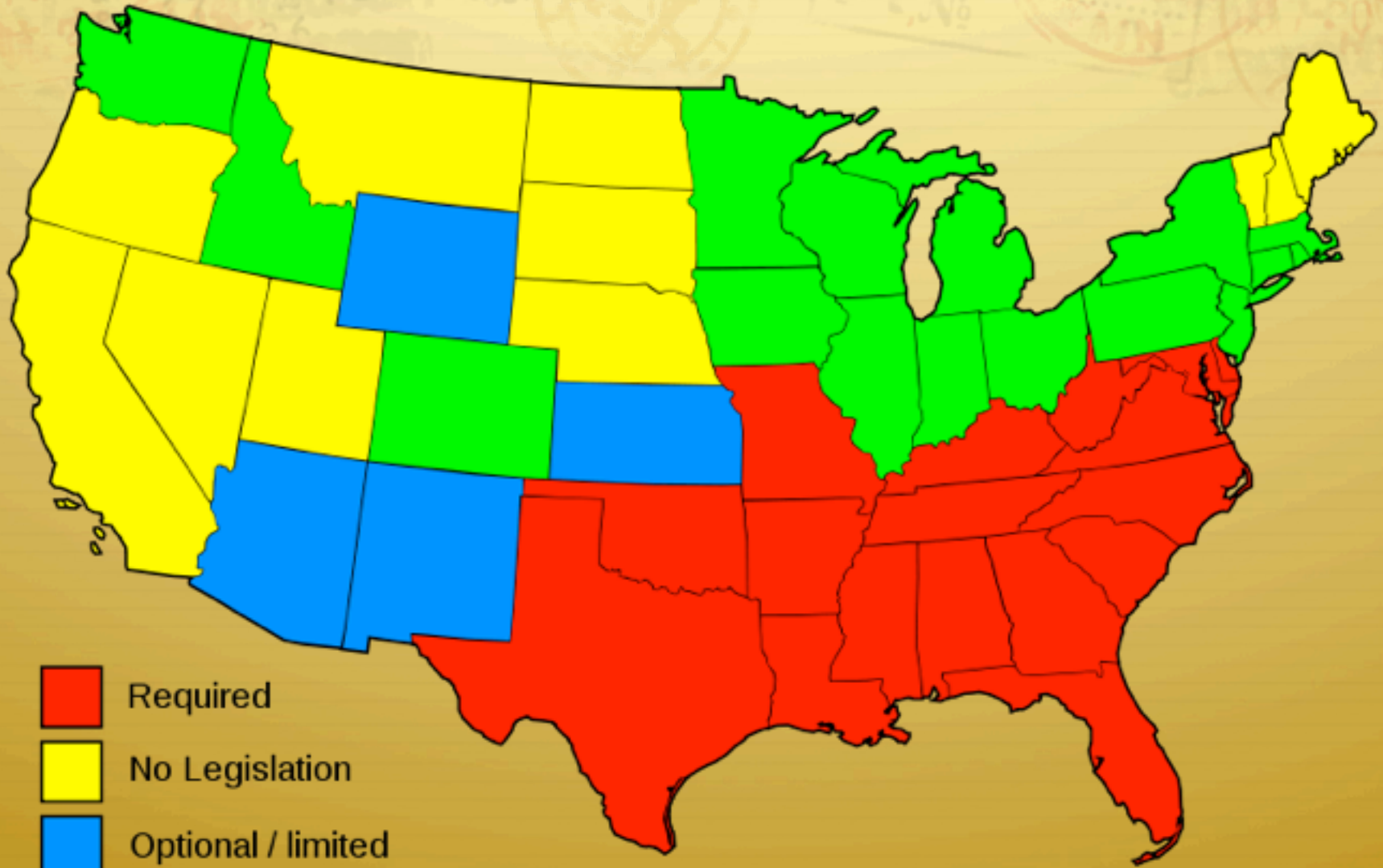


- ✦ Language varieties can be defined by factors
 - ✦ Socioeconomic status
 - ✦ Age
 - ✦ Gender
 - ✦ Ethnicity
- ✦ Examples of social factors
 - ✦ Differences in working-class and middle-class language
 - ✦ Caste-defined differences in India
 - ✦ AAE versus Standard English

FACTORS AS THEY PERTAIN TO BLACK ASL

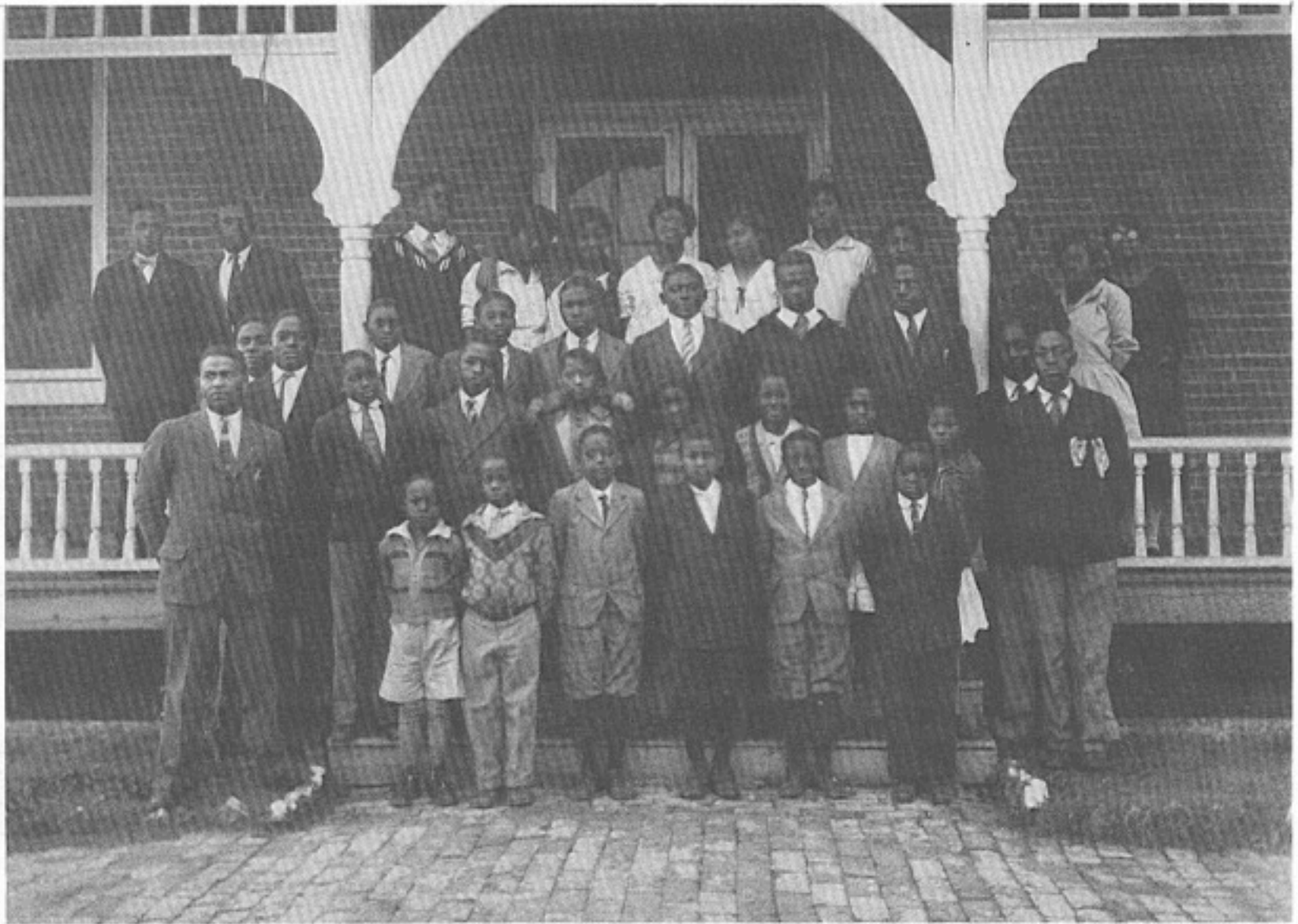


- ✦ Geographical factors relating to Black ASL
 - ✦ Physical isolation of the schools for Black deaf children
 - ✦ Both separate schools and departments were established
 - ✦ in some cases, the “Colored Department” was on the same campus with the white school (e.g. Kansas, Missouri)
 - ✦ in some cases, this department was physically separated (e.g. Georgia, Mississippi)
- ✦ Social factors relating to Black ASL
 - ✦ Separation based on race



**Educational Segregation in the US
Prior to Brown v Board of Education**

Source: Wikipedia



Students in front of original "Negro" Department " building on ASD campus in 1929

* USED WITH PERMISSION OF GLENN B. ANDERSON, LITTLE ROCK BLACK DEAF ADVOCATES



Students and teachers in front of Jenkins Hall on ASD campout in 1932

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BLACK AND WHITE DEAF SCHOOLS: FOUNDING AND DESEGREGATION, TABLE 1

State	White school (1)	Black school/ dept. (2)	Desegregation (3)	Years bet. 1 & 2	Years bet. 2 & 3
DC, KDES	1857	1857, dept.	1958	0	101
N. Carolina	1845	1868	1967	23	99
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

BLACK AND WHITE DEAF SCHOOLS: FOUNDING AND DESEGREGATION, TABLE 2

State	White school (1)	Black school/ dept (2)	Desegregation (3)	Years bet. 1 & 2	Years bet. 2 & 3
Texas	1857	1887	1965	30	78
Arkansas	1850	1868	1967	23	78
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 schs)	70	56
Oklahoma	1898	1909, dept	1962	11	53
Louisiana	1852	1938	1978	86	40
W.Virginia	1870	1926	1956	56	30

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- ✦ 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 (101) and North Carolina (99)
 - ✦ Note that Louisiana is only 40 because there was no school for Black children until 1938 and desegregation did not occur until 24 years after Brown v. Board of Education

RACE AS A SOCIAL FACTOR: EDUCATION



- ✦ Black deaf people were affected by the same racial discrimination of the era that affected Black hearing people
 - ✦ The same social isolation and marginalization due to ethnicity that contributed to the development and maintenance of AAVE
- ✦ Separate education for black deaf children
 - ✦ Some states had laws requiring that Black students only be taught by Black teachers (Doctor 1948)
 - ✦ Tennessee passed such a bill in 1901 (Gannon 1981).

RACE AS A SOCIAL FACTOR: ORGANIZATION

- ✦ National Association of the Deaf (NAD)
 - ✦ founded in 1887 and at first, welcomed African American members
 - ✦ however, the by-laws were changed in 1925 to exclude them
- ✦ Tabak (2006: 97) states:
 - ✦ “The National Association of the Deaf (NAD), the National Fraternal Society of the Deaf, and Gallaudet College all excluded African-Americans until the latter half of the twentieth century. These organizations showed no interest in the struggles of African-American Deaf even when those struggles were identical with their own. In fact, they spurned African-Americans who expressed interest in joining their institutions.”

RACE AS A SOCIAL FACTOR: ORAL VS MANUAL

- ✦ General climate of oralism
 - ✦ In 1817, deaf education started out with ASL as the medium of instruction in 1817
 - ✦ By 1880, the oral method of instruction was well established in the White schools
 - ✦ But, oral education was not extended to Black students on the same basis as to white students (Baynton 1996)
 - ✦ A 1940 survey by Settles in the American Annals of the Deaf shows that in 11 of 16 schools or departments for Black deaf students, the approach is still entirely manual (i.e., signing)

RACE AS A SOCIAL FACTOR: ORAL VS MANUAL

- ✦ Baynton (1996) states that
 - ✦ In 1920, 3/4 of the children at the Texas White school are being taught orally, while fewer than 1/3 of the children at the Black school are being taught orally (p.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” (p. 180)

RACE AS A SOCIAL FACTOR: ORAL VS MANUAL

- ✦ On the BDO in Texas, Tabak (2006: 111-112) states that
 - ✦ The BDO was ignored by white oralists
 - ✦ The consequences of the anti-signed language policies are less visible in the signing of black deaf students
 - ✦ American Sign Language flourished at the BDO for more than seven decades
 - ✦ Each new class of students learned their sign language from the older students.
 - ✦ However, Black deaf students were often put on vocational tracks as opposed to academic ones.

CONDITIONS FOR THE FORMATION OF BLACK ASL

- ✦ Factors are similar for spoken language and signed language varieties
 - ✦ Geographic separation/isolation
 - ✦ Social separation/isolation
- ✦ Complicating factors
 - ✦ Who the teachers were
 - ✦ The general context of oralism
 - ✦ What kind of language the children were bringing to school
- ✦ These factors point to a complex picture that we are seeing reflected in our results

A PRESENCE IGNORED



- ✦ A Black Deaf community has been systematically excluded from the mainstream of American Deaf Life
- ✦ Their presence has been either marginalized or ignored
 - ✦ Physical separations of schools
 - ✦ Debate about oralism for deaf school
- ✦ Ironic result of such exclusion
 - ✦ a more conservative and standard form of the sign language in some of its aspects

THE CURRENT PROJECT



✦ Sponsors

- ✦ The Spencer Foundation and the National Science Foundation

✦ Project's goal

- ✦ Provide a description of the linguistic features that make Black ASL recognizable as a distinct variety
- ✦ Site visits, according to schools for black deaf children
 - ✦ North Carolina(1869), Texas (1887), Arkansas (1887), Alabama (1892), Virginia (1909), and, Louisiana (1938)

THE CURRENT PROJECT



✦ Participants

- ✦ Signers over 55 who attended segregated schools
- ✦ Signers under 35 who attended desegregated schools

✦ Data collection

- ✦ Filming free conversation, interviews, and word elicitation
- ✦ Interviews that focus on language use and school history

✦ Analysis

- ✦ Analyzing the tapes for specific linguistic features and for accounts of language use and school history

✦ Video example

BLACK ASL MOSAIC (ATTESTED AND POSSIBLE FEATURES)

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Use of repetition
Forthcoming

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BLACK ASL MOSAIC (ATTESTED AND POSSIBLE FEATURES)

Size of signing space
Preliminary Results

Incorporation of AAE into signing
Forthcoming

Use of repetition
Forthcoming

Use of role shifting???

Amount of mouthing???

Vocabulary differences
Forthcoming

BLACK ASL MOSAIC (ATTESTED AND POSSIBLE FEATURES)

Forehead location vs lowered
Results reported

Size of signing space
Preliminary Results

Incorporation of AAE into signing
Forthcoming

Use of repetition
Forthcoming

Use of role shifting???

Amount of mouthing???

Vocabulary differences
Forthcoming

BLACK ASL MOSAIC (ATTESTED AND POSSIBLE FEATURES)

2-handed vs. 1 handed signs

Results reported

Forehead location vs lowered

Results reported

Size of signing space

Preliminary Results

Incorporation of AAE into signing

Forthcoming

Use of repetition

Forthcoming

Use of role shifting???

Amount of mouthing???

Vocabulary differences

Forthcoming

SIGNS: 2-HANDED VS 1-HANDED



- ✦ Do Black signers favor 2-handed signs?
- ✦ What kinds of things make a sign 2-handed or 1-handed
 - ✦ the sign before
 - ✦ the sign after
 - ✦ contact of the sign with the face or body
 - ✦ age (young vs. old)
 - ✦ location (our 6 sites)
 - ✦ male vs. female
- ✦ Some examples from our tapes: REMEMBER, DON'T-KNOW

2-HANDED VS 1-HANDED RESULTS

- ✦ 1-handed signs tend to happen when there is contact with the face or body
- ✦ If the sign before or the sign after is 1-handed, the target sign will also be 1-handed- and vice-versa with 2-handed signs.
- ✦ Younger signers tend to use 1-handed signs.
- ✦ When compared with White signers in an earlier study (Lucas et al. 2001), Black signers always prefer 2-handed signs over 1-handed.

SIGNS: FOREHEAD OR LOWERED LOCATION



- ✦ Do Black signers prefer forehead signs?
- ✦ What kinds of things make a sign stay at the forehead or move down
 - ✦ the grammatical function of the sign
 - ✦ the sign before
 - ✦ the sign after
 - ✦ age (young vs. old)
 - ✦ location (our 6 sites)
 - ✦ male vs. female
- ✦ Some examples from our tapes: EDUCATION, TEACHER, BLACK

LOCATION RESULTS



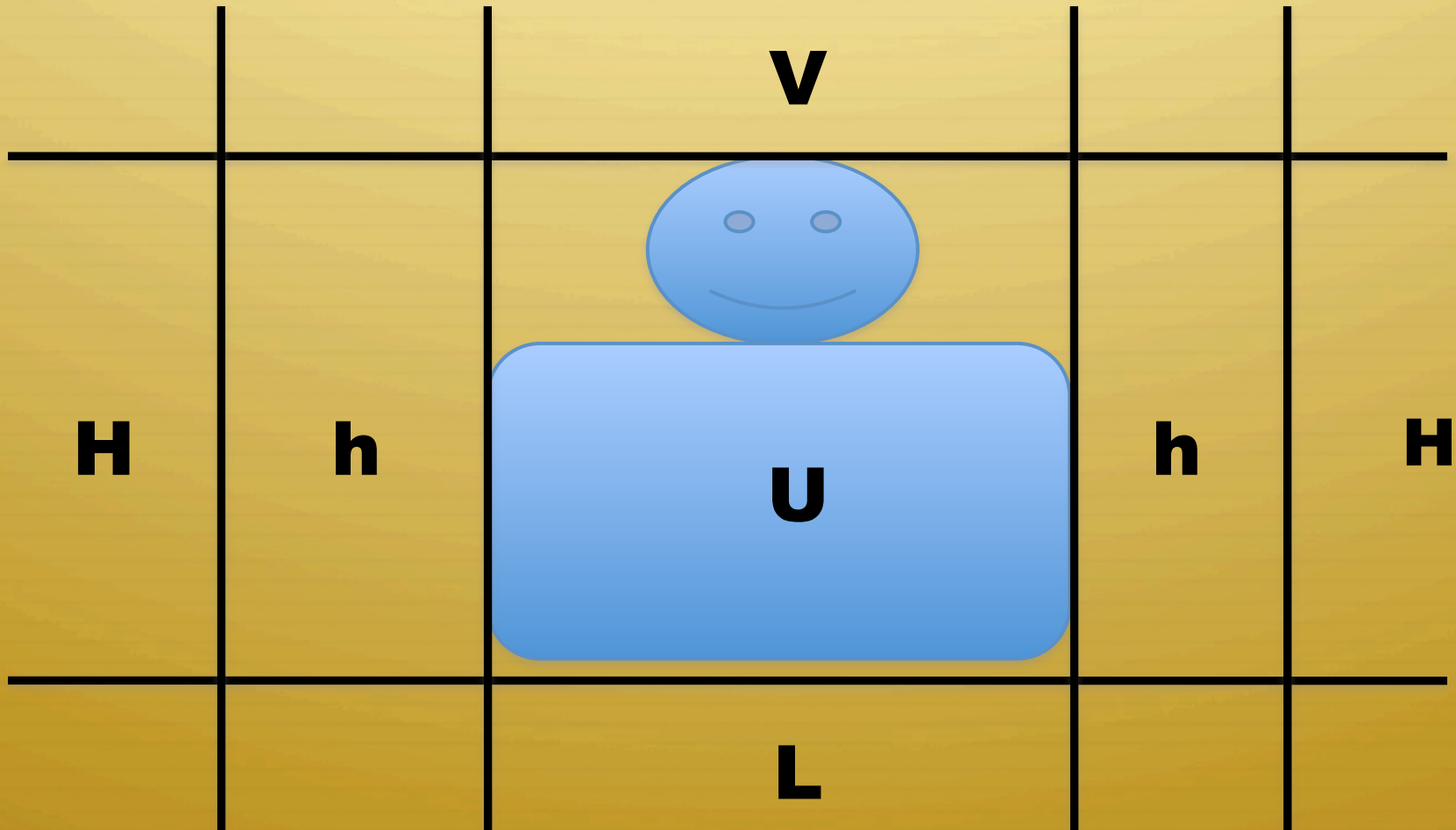
- ✦ Lowering of the signs: Grammatical Categories
 - ✦ Compounds (THINK^MARRY, “believe”), nouns, prepositions (FOR) and question words (WHY) tend to lower
 - ✦ Adjectives, adverbs and verbs do not
- ✦ Body Contact
 - ✦ If the sign before is made on the body, the target sign tends to be lowered
 - ✦ If the sign before is made on the head, the target sign will not be lowered
- ✦ Younger signers tend to lower their signs

LOCATION RESULTS, CONT.



- ✦ Lowering of the signs: Location
 - ✦ Texas, Ala., Va., and NC signers tend to do that
 - ✦ Ark. and LA. tend not to
- ✦ As with 2-hand-1-hand signs, Black signers always prefer forehead signs over lowered signs
 - ✦ This result is compared with White signers in an earlier study (Lucas et al. 2001),

SIZE OF SIGNING SPACE



SIGNING OUTSIDE THE BOX: RACE BY AGE (PERCENTAGES)



LANGUAGE PERCEPTIONS OF BLACK ASL



✦ Language Perceptions

- ✦ People's awareness and impression of a language with respect to its use and status in a society
- ✦ A person's perception can be positive, negative, or both
- ✦ The perception is based on a person's experience and worldview

✦ Perceptions of Black ASL

- ✦ Answers are based on interview questions

LANGUAGE PERCEPTIONS OF BLACK ASL

School Experience

- ✦ Where and when did you learn to sign?
- ✦ Did/do you go to school Black students only?
- ✦ Were/are your teachers Black or White?
- ✦ Were/are your teachers deaf or hearing?
- ✦ Did/do your teachers sign? Did they sign ASL?
- ✦ Did the Black teachers sign like Black people or White people?

Signing Perspective

- ✦ Do you think Black people sign differently from White people?
- ✦ Can you explain how it's different?
- ✦ Can you think of specific signs that are different?
- ✦ Are there older signs that you don't see much anymore?
- ✦ Do you sign differently with Black people than with White people?
- ✦ What are some signs that are unique to this area or to this state?

LANGUAGE PERCEPTIONS OF BLACK ASL

“Under -35” Group	“Over 55” Groups
“White ASL is more advanced”	“Whites were more advanced and better”
“Black use a lot of space; White use little”	“More news and vocabulary in White”
“More facial expression, more powerful in Black ASL”	“More education”
“Different style in Black ASL”	“White is faster; black is slower like turtle”
“Attitude in Black ASL”	“Made fun of my signs so I changed to white ASL”
“White signers with sealed lips; Black signers mouth”	
“White signers are more snobby”	
“Ebonics-influenced ASL”	

RESEARCH TEAM



✦ Project Co-Directors

- ✦ Carolyn McCaskill, ASL & Deaf Studies, Gallaudet University
- ✦ Ceil Lucas, Linguistics, Gallaudet University
- ✦ Robert Bayley, Linguistics, UC Davis

✦ Graduate Research Assistants

- ✦ Joseph Hill and Roxanne Dummett-King, Gallaudet University

✦ Technical Consultant

- ✦ Randall Hogue, Gallaudet University

✦ Community Representative

- ✦ Pam Baldwin, Washington, DC

Welcome Intro Presentations Blog

The Black ASL Project

Text and DVD COMING SOON!



Black ASL project team members, back row from left to right: Pamela Baldwin, Joseph Hill,

BLACK ASL PROJECT WEBSITE

<http://blackaslproject.gallaudet.edu/>

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