American Sign Language

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Today's Episode

- Warm-up Qs
- Bits from the *Ethnologue*
- The Story of ASL
- Some Sign Phonology
- The Sociolinguistics of Sign
Opening Questions

- What is the third largest language in the United States?
- All sign languages are mutually intelligible. True or false?
- Where is Gallaudet University? What is notable about this school?

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according to the Ethnologue:

- **American Sign Language**
  - a.k.a. ASL, Ameslan, The language of the Deaf
  - 100,000 to 500,000 users out of nearly 2,000,000 deaf and 15,000,000 hard of hearing in the US
  - Dialects: Black American Sign Language, regional varieties, Tactile Sign Language
The Story of ASL

- American Sign Language (ASL) ancestors:
  - 19th century sign idiolects
  - Martha’s Vineyard Sign Language (MVSL)
  - Old French Sign Language (OFSL)

- Early Sign Language spread occurs primarily via residential schools.

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The Story of ASL

**Idiolects**

An idiolect is a structured natural language developed independently by the user(s) for in-group communication. For sign language, this term refers to ‘home signs’.
The Story of ASL

Idiolects

*Nell* starring Jodie Foster
Two Sisters in Okinawa
Nicaraguan Sign Language
The Story of ASL

Idiolects

Deaf sisters in Okinawa, Japan.

(Torigoe & Takei 2002)

The first Deaf school in Nicaragua was established in Managua in the early 1980s. As a result, the various idiolects developed into a sign language.
The Story of ASL

Idiolects

An experimental school was established in Bluefields in 1985. Another school in Condega in 1998.

The Story of ASL

Idiolects (tangent)

Sutton Sign Writing
Martha’s Vineyard is an island about 18 miles off the MA coast.
The Story of ASL

Beginning in 1692, Deaf settlers from the Weald in Kent County, England migrated to MV.

Martha’s Vineyard SL
The Story of ASL

Martha's Vineyard Sign Language

- From 1692 to 1950 MV had a high rate of hereditary deafness.
- Nearly all residents were bilingual in sign language and English.
- In the 19th century 1/570 Americans deaf
- 1/155 in Martha's Vineyard; 1/25 in Chilmark (town); 1/4 in Squibnocket (area)
Language Loss

- Intermarriage kept the Deaf population stable.
- When Deaf education was available off-island, those children who attended those schools tended to marry and settle outside of Martha's Vineyard.
- The Deaf population diminished.
- The last deaf Vineyard native died in the 50s.

The Story of ASL

Martha’s Vineyard Sign Language

Encouraged by success at teaching literacy to a Deaf girl, Alice Cogswell, Thomas Gallaudet decides to establish a deaf school.

In 1815, Gallaudet goes to Britain to learn an oral method of instruction. Gallaudet leaves the school in frustration since the school is overly protective of its techniques.
In London Gallaudet meets Abbe Sicard, head of the Institut Royal des Sourds-Muets in Paris, (Founded by Abbe de l'Epeé in 1771) and two of its Deaf instructors, Laurent Clerc and Jean Massieu. Sicard invites Gallaudet to Paris to study the school's method of teaching the Deaf using manual communication.

Gallaudet returns to the US with Laurent Clerc to establish the first Deaf school in the U.S.
The Story of ASL

The First American Deaf School

In 1817 the Institution for Deaf-Mutes is established in Hartford, Connecticut. (Currently the American School for the Deaf)

The Story of ASL

The First American Deaf School

The sign language students and staff utilize consists of a blend of idiolects used in the U.S. prior to 1817, MVSL, and Old French Sign Language.
The Story of ASL

Language Spread

In several countries, Sign Languages historically have spread via residential Deaf schools.

The chart below illustrates some of the ASL language spread (Lucas et al. 2001b, 63):

American School for the Deaf
Hartford, Connecticut (1817)

Boston  NY  Virginia (1839)  Washington (1886)  CA School for the Deaf, Riverside

NY  Kentucky (1830)  Missouri (1851)  CA School for the Deaf, Berkeley (1860)

Indiana (1844)  Louisiana (1852)  Kansas (1861)  Pennsylvania (Clere in 1820)  Maryland (1867)  Quebec

Ohio

The Story of ASL
The Story of ASL

JSL Spread

- First Deaf School in Kyoto in 1878
- Occupation of Taiwan 1895-1945
  (Post Sino-Japanese War)
- Occupation of Korea 1905/1910-1945
  (Post Russo-Japanese War)

JSL

TaiwaneseSL  KoreanSL

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Some Sign Phonology

Phonology

- Typically defined as the study of the sound systems of languages.
- Better defined as the study of the system of relations involving the distinctive features of a language.
Some Sign Phonology

- Distinctive features
- Minimal pairs
- Phonological constraints

Some Sign Phonology

- Distinctive features of signed languages (Stokoe 1975[65], Batteson 1978):
  - Handshape – hand configuration
  - Location – “point of articulation”
  - Movement
  - Orientation
  - NMS – Non-manual signs
Some Sign Phonology

Some Minimal Pairs

- Movement
  - *kodomo* ‘children’/ima ‘now’
  - *Friday/furniture*

- Location
  - *shigoto* ‘job’/otukaresama ‘well done’
  - *father/mother/fine*

- Handshape
  - *tokui* ‘skilled’/yoi ‘good’
  - *attitude/lazy*

- Orientation
  - *yasumi* ‘a break’/kyuukei ‘a short break’
  - *plane/I luv you*

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Some Sign Phonology

- Contrasts in handshape inventories

- Unmarked (common, expected)
  - segments similar
    - *5 B 1 A S O*

- Marked (uncommon, distinctive)
  - segments differ
    - *feel, poor thing, empty*
    - *oniisaN ‘brother’, oneesaN ‘sister’*
The Sociolinguistics of ASL

Linguistically stigmatized (Why?)
- 90% of Deaf born to hearing parents.
- Many people don’t understand signing as ‘real’ language. (It’s all iconic, right?)
- Non-sign language users believe that speaking is essential to the lifestyles of Deaf people.
- Many falsely see ASL as a barrier to literacy.

The Sociolinguistics of ASL

Language Prestige

1880 The International Congress on the Education of the Deaf held in Milan, Italy. The members declared Oralism as the preferred methodology for Deaf education.
The Sociolinguistics of ASL

Language Prestige

Alexander Graham Bell was a huge proponent of Oralism. In 1871 he taught 'visible speech' at the Deaf school in Boston.

The Sociolinguistics of ASL

Language Prestige

Functional split between ASL and English:

- Sign language disallowed in school
- Oralism enforced strictly
- Students socialize secretly in sign language
The Sociolinguistics of ASL

Language Prestige

William Stokoe’s research on ASL in the 1960s led the change in attitudes about the linguistic status of ASL. From the 1980s onward, there has been a greater acceptance of the use of sign language in the classroom.

The Sociolinguistics of ASL

Language Prestige

US Deaf Schools’ dominant methodology

19th Century -- Signing
↓
Early 20th Century -- Oralism
↓
1980s to now -- Signing
The Sociolinguistics of ASL

Language Prestige

- ASL has covert prestige.
- Other dialects of ASL exist in a diglossic relationship with Standard ASL.
  (A diglossic situation exists when varieties of a language are distinguished by functional domains)

(The Sociolinguistics of ASL (tangent))

Princess Bempong, a Deaf second generation American, will become valedictorian of Samuell High School in Dallas, TX.

(Dallas Morning News, Nov. 29, 2003)
The Sociolinguistics of ASL

Dialect variation

ASL has different dialects. Most noted for their distinctive features relative to standard ASL are Hawaiian SL and Black ASL (BASL).

BASL developed as the result of segregation. After the Civil War, schools for Deaf, Black children were gradually established.
The Sociolinguistics of ASL

Dialect variation

Continuing policies of segregation until integration in the 1960s and 1970s kept the White and Black students apart for the next century.

(Gannon)

The Sociolinguistics of ASL

Dialect variation

Black Deaf schools

North Carolina (1869)

South Carolina (1876)

Georgia (1882)

(Gannon 14)
The Sociolinguistics of ASL

Dialect variation

Features of BASL

- 1965 Croneburg reports large lexical and possible grammatical differences between the signs of a woman from a Black Deaf school and White Deaf people in Raleigh, North Carolina.
- 1976 Woodward notes lexical and phonological variation in BASL. *Cornbread* and *white person* appeared as lexical variants. Phonologically, BASL seemed to undergo different changes than ASL.
- 1989 Aramburo reports that BASL contains more exaggerated facial expressions and body movement along with a larger signing space.

The Sociolinguistics of ASL

Dialect variation

- *flirt* the citation form followed by BASL form

- *boss* the citation form followed by BASL form

(Aramburu)
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Dialect variation
- There exists an ASL-BASL diglossia with indirect social pressure bearing on the BASL signers to conform to the 'standard' ASL dialect.
- Croneburg notes that variation in signs occurs along with differences in status among deaf in certain regions.
- Within the Deaf community, signs produced by prosperous Deaf, especially Gallaudet University signs, are considered superior to the signs used by locals (Stokoe 319).

Language Shift
Efforts at forcing signers to speak have largely resulted in negative outcomes:
- Lip-reading not effective; most Deaf communicate with non-signers via writing.
- Failure to develop communicative competency in sign language slows further education.
- Some Deaf never learn to sign until later in life.
- BASL has been largely wiped out.
Conclusion

Think back on these issues:

- Language contact
- Language spread
- Language prestige

References