

# Cultural and Sociolinguistic Features of the Black Deaf Community

Andrea Solomon  
Carnegie Mellon University  
Advisor: Barabara Johnstone

## **Abstract:**

This study looks to obtain a better understanding of the issues surrounding the Black Deaf community by examining the cultural and sociolinguistic features that differentiate it from the larger Deaf community. In the present study, three deaf black participants were asked a series of questions about their experiences within the Black Deaf community as well as their observations concerning Black Deaf signing. It was hypothesized that black signers would utilize more traditional signs. On the contrary, results suggested that Black Deaf signing is becoming more similar to Black English. Culturally, participants identified a divide between the black and mainstream Deaf communities. While the prominence of signing styles characteristic of the segregated schools for the Deaf may be waning, the racial attitudes that prompted this divide seem to be ever-present. This paper complements previous work on Black signing because it reveals its evolution and broadening applicability, providing further support for the establishment and promotion of Black Deaf organizations.

## **Introduction:**

Traditional studies of Deaf<sup>i</sup> culture typically focus on surface issues: differences in cultural norms between Deaf and hearing cultures, history of Deaf education, the difference between Deaf and deaf, and landmarks in the struggle for equal access and equal representation. Sociolinguistics of sign languages has its usual subjects as well: the spectrum from Signed Exact English to American Sign Language, Martha's Vineyard, and justifying ASL as a true language. This study seeks to contribute to the developing field that is the study of ethnic minorities within the Deaf community, most notable the Black Deaf. This paper gives a brief overview of Black Deaf identity, history, signs, and community and seeks to delve deeper by interviewing members of the Black Deaf community about these issues.

The concept of a Black Deaf identity is truly remarkable because its members are influenced by four distinct cultures: African-American, European-American, hearing, and Deaf (Anderson & Grace, 1991). One important aspect of Black Deaf identity is whether one identifies as Black or Deaf first (BLACK DEAF vs. DEAF BLACK). When asked, "Which do you identify with first, your Black culture or your Deaf culture?" 87% of Black Deaf adolescents identified as Black first while the remaining 13% identified as Deaf first. Studies show that those who identify as Black first do so because their color is more visible. According to one participant, "You see, I am black first. My deafness is not noticed until I speak or use my hands to communicate" (Anderson & Grace, 1991). This may also come from a desire to have respect for their ethnicity before their deafness. Finally, those who identified as Black first were often more inclined to discuss Black history. On the other hand, those who identified as Deaf first were more likely to be the Deaf children of Deaf adults.

Moreover, they were often more integrated in the Deaf community and more inclined to discuss Deaf history (Anderson & Grace, 1991).

Black Deaf culture is shaped largely by two communities: the greater Deaf community and the greater Black community. Similar to the greater Black community, Black Deaf face a number of social prejudices, high unemployment and underemployment, stereotypes, educational disadvantages, under-representation in political leadership, and a shared heritage (Mauk, 2009). Though applied differently, these difficulties are essentially the same for the Deaf community with the added challenge of communication troubles. Contrary to a widely held assumption, the community of deafness does not always supersede the existence of racial and cultural differences among deaf people (Anderson & Grace, 1991).

As is the case with many facets of Deaf culture, Black Deaf culture emerged and thrived in the residential school setting. In fact, the history of the Black deaf community is said to begin with the opening of the first residential schools for “colored” children. The first Black Deaf School after the Civil War opened in 1869 in North Carolina, initially named “The Colored Department” and changed later to the “Colored, Deaf, Dumb and Blind Institute” (Shahen, 2009). Though segregated from their white peers, these schools helped students develop a strong sense of pride, a strong language, and opportunities to get to know each other. Different from white deaf schools, black schools used ASL in the classroom. For Black deaf schools with limited funding, an oral education system was found to be costly and time consuming, therefore ASL was the method of instruction. The signing in the classroom has little English influence and with time, a unique form of signing emerged within the Black Deaf community (Maxwell & Smith-Todd, 1986).

The segregation of residential schools proved a huge factor in the sociolinguistic differences that emerged between Black and white signers. Black signing is interesting to study because it appears to have been very isolated and had little, if any, adult input. In this case, race, not generation, is a better predictor of sign variation. Compared to modern signing, Black signing is seen as maintaining the older form of signs. This is particularly interesting compared to the relationship of Black English to Standard American English. Black English is often seen to be the more innovative and transformative dialect and yet Black Signing is significantly more traditional than mainstream signing. Additionally, Black signing utilizes more two-handed signs while whites produce more signs on the face. There is also a marked difference in Black body movement with black signers utilizing a wider signing space. Blacks were also observed to be more conservative in regard to lowering forehead located signs (e.g. KNOW). Finally, Black signs seem to employ a wider array of lexical items and have some variation in phonological structure of signs (Woodward & Woodward, 1976). One thing that remains a mystery is the frequency with which Black signs are used (Lucas, Baylay. Reed, Wulf, 2001). A crucial element of Black Deaf history, since the eradication of the segregated school system there is essentially no one to hand Black signing down to and many fear that it will quickly die out.

African American history is hardly taught in schools, thusly not educating Black students about where they come from and why they can be proud of their ancestry. Revisiting the topic of role models in the classroom, although Black Deaf students make up 17% of the student body of educational programs for the deaf, they are exposed to very few Black Deaf teachers who would serve as role models. Furthermore, the number of Black Deaf

professionals employed in these settings is even lower. Commonly, the only Blacks children see are in service positions, cleaning and cooking. This simply reinforces the negative messages sent regarding the competency of Black Deaf. In the absence of Black Deaf role models, schools fail to influence and inspire Black Deaf students to have high aspirations and seek advanced training and employment in a broad array of careers. Consequently, students may fall victim to a number of negative influences including failure or underachievement in school, substance abuse, rebelliousness, delinquency, early pregnancy, mental health problems, diminished employment prospects, etc (Anderson & Grace, 1991). Although the student body of Gallaudet University is currently around 10% black, it did not open its doors to black students until 1950 (86 years after its establishment), and it was not until 1954 that Gallaudet had its first Black graduate, Andrew Foster. Foster is a landmark in the Black Deaf community because after completing his studies he went to Africa and proceeded to open countless schools for the deaf (Shahen, 2009). Even with Andrew Foster as an example, only 9% of Black deaf adolescents go on to post secondary school and blacks are still largely overrepresented in vocationally oriented programs (Anderson & Grace 1991).

As was stated earlier, members of the Black Deaf community essentially have dual membership in both the Black community and the Deaf community. Unfortunately, sometimes these individuals find themselves alone, not fully accepted into either community. Regardless of whether they are accepted or not, society views Black Deaf as members of both communities and thus holds a double prejudice against them. Historically, the greater Deaf community has been known to shun Deaf Blacks, most noticeably by prohibiting Blacks from

joining their clubs. Sometimes exceptions were made as Blacks were allowed to participate in the sports of white Deaf clubs but were denied full membership (Anderson & Bowe, 1972).

The Deaf club is essentially a Deaf person's second home, providing a place where the Deaf can come together, exchange ideas, develop friendships, participate in social events, and have the opportunity to attain a leadership position within the Deaf community. After World War II Black Deaf found themselves in need of a place to meet so they began to form their own clubs, congregations, and organizations. Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, Black Deaf organizations were formed in Washington D.C., Chicago, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Baltimore, and spread nationwide. With a similar mission as the National Association of the Deaf (NAD), National Black Deaf Advocates (NBDA) was founded in Washington D.C. in 1980 by a group of Black Deaf. With the aim of encouraging and promoting the culture and empowerments of Black Deaf Americans, the NBDA provides activities, social gatherings, and workshops to their constituency. The NBDA pushed for involvement by holding their first conference in 1981; soon after the Black caucus was formed as a part of the annual NAD convention. Later NBDA chapters were set-up across the country. With time the NBDA expanded even more, incorporating the Miss Black Deaf America pageant and giving birth to the National Alliance of Black Interpreters (NAOBI) in 1987 (Shahen, 2009). While hereditary deafness is far less common in blacks, a sense of community and camaraderie is still of paramount importance for such a doubly stigmatized group (Anderson & Grace, 1991).

As it can be seen there are a wide variety of aspects of the Black Deaf experience that often go untold in the history of Deaf culture. Given what little research there is, there are still a number of unanswered questions. Realizing the transformative nature of this era,

characterized by a newfound sense of Black pride and a growing sense of equality, why do Black Deaf remain segregated from the greater Deaf community? To what degree do Black signs still exist? Do Black signs act as a method of maintaining racial identity? How does the larger Deaf community view Black signs? Is there any pressure to “sign white”? The best way to explore answers to these questions as well as to ascertain how one’s upbringing impacts their perspective on these issues is to conduct personal interviews with members of the Black Deaf community.

**Method:**

Ceil Lucas’s method of personal interviews conducted in American Sign Language was used as a model for investigation. Gallaudet University, the world’s first school for the advanced education for the deaf and hard of hearing was identified as a nucleus of knowledge in the area of deaf studies. Participants’ affiliation with Gallaudet proved especially beneficial because their experiences there seemed to magnify the divide they described as existing in the larger Deaf community. Additionally, those interviewed were particularly well versed in the linguistics of Black Deaf signing as well as the academic development of the Black Deaf community.

A series of interview questions were devised to address a number of issues relevant to the topic. First participants were asked a few questions to ascertain information about their background including where they grew up, at what age they were diagnosed with hearing loss, and their linguistic background. Other topics covered in the interview were features of black culture and identity as well as Deaf culture and identity, The interview concluded with a discussion of contemporary and widely understood characteristics of Black Deaf signing and

the Black Deaf community on Gallaudet's campus. See Appendix A for a complete list of interview questions. The interview questions were used as a foundation for creating dialogue and stimulating storytelling. Interviews were conducted predominately in American Sign Language and detailed notes were taken directly following each interview. One participant occasionally chose to supplement his signing by the use of voice. Considering that the interviewer was hearing, participants often amended their signing, using English word order in an attempt to increase the level of understanding.

**Participants:**

Arthur Everette

Graduate 2006

Coordinator, Keeping the Promise of Educating Black Deaf Males

Nathalie Pluviose

Masters Student

Staff, Multicultural Student Programs

Joseph Hill

Doctoral Student in the Department of Linguistics

Black ASL Project

**Results:**

The goal of this research project was to discover in what ways Black Deaf signing differentiated black Deaf from the mainstream Deaf population culturally and linguistically. It was hypothesized that present-day black signing would be reminiscent of conventional



black signing, incorporating more traditional elements. These elements include a more restricted signing space, the use of more 2-handed signs (which have recently been abbreviated to one-handed), and a more traditional body placement of signs (e.g. KNOW on the forehead instead of on the jaw). Understanding that the core of sign production is based on five parameters: palm orientation, handshape, location on body, movement, and nonmanual cues, it was hypothesized that the most radical difference would be observed in handshape and location.

To test these hypotheses, interviews were conducted with present and past students of Gallaudet University, the deaf university in Washington, D.C. and the forerunner in the field of Deaf Studies. Interviews began with background questions to assess individual's personal experiences and how they grew to be a member of the Deaf community. Next, questions explored participants' relationship with the great black community, notably as experienced by a deaf person. Finally, the interview concluded with a discussion of contemporary and widely understood characteristics of Black Deaf signing and the Black Deaf community on Gallaudet's campus.

The participants from Gallaudet were from a wide array of backgrounds, each with a unique story as to how their deafness impacted their lives as well as how they managed to come to Gallaudet. One participant spent their childhood in the Caribbean, losing their hearing at the age of 6 and beginning to sign at age 7. Another was born deaf into a deaf and hard of hearing family. Not exposed to sign language until he saw his older sister using it with a friend, he lipread for a good portion of his life. Another participant lost his hearing

around age 4 and completed most of his education in mainstream schools with deaf programs. He too was trained in using his voice and lipreading.

When asked about present-day signing features characteristic of the Black Deaf community, most often participants identified idioms. What was unexpected and unique about these idioms was that they did not embody the elements of traditional signing expected, but rather were often signed interpretations of Black English. From personal experience and everyday interactions participants were able to recognize that black Deaf signers often utilize a larger signing space as well as a more dramatic range of body movement when signing. The idioms identified were “I’d hit that” made with a B-handshape (Image 2) tapping the top of an S-handshape (Image 1). Characteristic of Texas, “my bad” was signed similarly to the sign for COUGH with a S-handshape repeatedly hitting the signer’s chest. A similar sign was also used for “my boy.” “I feel you” was signed as is standard, however embodied a new sentiment. A more literal translation was used when signing “I know that’s right” while a augmentation of the American Sign Language “POOH” mouthing was utilized as a complement as is the case with “slammin’ clothes.”

*Image 1:*  
S handshape  
Source: Enhanced Learning



*Image 2:*  
B handshape  
Source: Enhanced Learning



It must be noted that the idioms identified as distinctively black were identified within the confines of a college community. Understanding that the signing tendencies of black students at a world-renowned deaf university may differ from that of the general black Deaf populace, questions were asked to explore differences in signing practices. Regional differences were recognized as well as differences in education level. Participants also brought up a tendency to “sign white” when in mixed company. When speaking to members of the great black deaf community, particularly those with a lower level of education, participants expressed some difficulty in understanding their signs as well as communicating with them in general. One participant pointed out a number of modification he makes to his signing style in an effort to be easier to understand to his audience, fitting within what he assumes to be their preferences. These changes include signing lower in the signing space, signing more simply, and signing in a more English style. It was unclear as to what aspects in particular of the outsiders’ signing proved difficult to understand. For further study it would be interesting to explore this difficulty further, discovering what features of outsiders’ signing prove the most challenging and incomprehensible to students at Gallaudet, particularly within the black community.

Culturally, every participant seemed to have a different path toward discovering his or her black identity. In their childhood there was always a fleeting memory of a black elementary school teacher, but no substantial black role model in the educational setting. The same can be said for Deaf teachers and role models. Participants found their parents, particularly their mothers, to be their strongest role models growing up. One participant was raised by a hard of hearing mother in a family of deaf and hard of hearing sibling; in that case

his family proved to be shining examples as well as create a sense of normalcy. When asked where they acquired most of their knowledge of black history, two participants acknowledged that this did not occur until their college years. However one participant did mention learning about black history in their youth through the black family reunion, black history month, and attending predominantly black churches and schools. All these things considered, this participant still did not feel connected to the greater black community because of barriers in communication. If anything, considering the gender scheme of the education system, he felt most connected to black women as compared to black men.

When I asked about the environment on Gallaudet's campus there was a mixed response. One participant found himself at Gallaudet after realizing that he could get better grades at a university where he had full access in regard to communication. Finally he found a place where he could live up to his full potential and not be limited by communication barriers. Other participants found themselves drawn to Gallaudet for its superior status in the realm of Deaf studies, particularly in research and ASL instruction. However, it was not long before participants discovered that in many ways academic success went hand in hand with social support. An all black fraternity, Zeta Sigma Psi, was established on Gallaudet's campus in 2000; however, it faded out of existence in 2007. Though there were other organizations like the Black Student Union that were more directed toward cultural events, minority students still sought out the support they so desperately needed. As a black male undergraduate at Gallaudet, one participant felt that he and black males in general were without the support system necessary for success on campus. The participant observed how black men were recruited to play sports and after four years on the court they found

themselves to have the academic standing of a first-semester sophomore. It is in this way that some participants saw black men as being taken advantage of for their athletic skills without having their scholastic aspirations nurtured with the same amount of attention and dedication. Moreover, the attrition and graduation rates of black students were resounding evidence that a change was needed.

In an effort to fill this void, Keeping the Promise of Educating Black Deaf Males was founded to “provide avenues for increasing, encouraging, and supporting the inclusion and educational success of Black Deaf Males.” In opening an organization for them, it was the hope that black students would become aware of the resources available to them and use them to their advantage in their quest for earning a degree at Gallaudet. Appropriately, the sign for Keeping the Promise is made by making a cross with the forearms in front of the body and a K handshape made with the right hand and a P handshape with the left. It appears to be no coincidence that the sign closely resembles the sign DEFENSE or PROTECT. As time passed, Keeping the Promise was expanded, opening itself up to women and Latinos. However, one critique of the administration mentioned by a participant is the inadequate amount of funding Keeping the Promise receives. According to him, it all falls back to the 3 Cs, “Commitment without Currency is Counterfeit.” Currently Keeping the Promise graduates 96% of its black male participants, however many black students end up leaving Gallaudet end up leaving before receiving their degrees.

It appears as if the cultural divide that exists at Gallaudet is not unique compared to other universities. The overarching commonality intended to unite members of the campus and larger Deaf community often proves insufficient when pitted against larger social

divisions. One participant says, “I know I shouldn’t see black and white but I do;” recognizing the salience of race within the Deaf community. However it must be recognized that all members of the black community at Gallaudet did not experience this stark divide. One participant found a great deal of support within his academic department. In his case the universal experience and academic interest surrounding Deaf Studies did in fact supersede any racial differences.

### **Discussion:**

Results from this study indicate a marked change in the characteristics that define Black Deaf signing. Previously understood as a series of older version of signs, often utilizing both hands, oriented toward more traditional parts of the body, and utilizing a wider signing space, Black Deaf signing has transitioned, becoming more reflective of trends in Black English. This would seem to imply that segregation within the Deaf community was the primary influencer in Black Deaf signing, but rather that the hearing black community had the greatest impact on Black signs. Regardless, this distinct difference in signing provides additional support for the necessity of Black Deaf organizations like the National Alliance of Black Interpreters (NAOBI) and the National Black Deaf Advocates.

As mentioned earlier, the Black Deaf community is said to be influenced by at least four distinct cultures: African-American, European-American, Hearing, and Deaf. This observed transformation in Black Deaf signing may be a further indication of the comparative impact of the mainstream Black and Deaf cultures on the Black Deaf community. These results may indicate a predominance of the Black influence. In regard to identification

participants erred on the Black side, recognizing it is their most salient characteristic. Recognizing this, these participants in particular sought to engage in activities to uplift the Black Deaf and give light to their evolving history.

For further study it would be useful to ascertain the opinions of a wider variety of participants. Because it was difficult for members of the Deaf community in Pittsburgh to identify even one consistently involved black member of the local Deaf community, the research for this paper was conducted elsewhere. Even using Gallaudet affiliates had its costs and advantages. There is some degree of selection bias concerning black individuals who decide to attend a world-renowned Deaf university. One could speculate that they would be more likely to identify with the deaf culture. Comparatively, their level of education could impact their interactions with members of the Black Deaf community outside of Gallaudet. Also, a wider spectrum of ages would really provide the foundation for an analysis of the change of Black Deaf signs over time. While participants were extremely knowledgeable about the field, the generalizability of the findings may be limited. The internal validity of the study could be improved by conducting an observational study. Previous research has found that participants often utilize code-switching depending on the gender, race, and hearing status of the experimenter. An observational study where participants were asked to have conversations with members of different races would dispel some of the conditions that elicit code switching.

**Conclusion:**

While this study takes a look at only a small sect of the Black Deaf community, it highlights an important transformation of Black Signing as well as an unfortunate stagnation in the development of the Black Deaf community. While participants had a strong sense of Black and Deaf identity, that alone was not enough to ensure success in an environment like Gallaudet. However with the continued establishment and promotion of programs like Keeping the Promise, the National Alliance of Black Interpreters, and National Black Deaf Advocates, members of the Black Deaf community can celebrate their cultural and linguistic differences and find strength within themselves, assuring success in both the great Deaf and greater hearing communities.



*Notes:*

<sup>1</sup> Deaf (capital D) is used to refer to the cultural identification of Deaf – use of American Sign Language, involvement in the Deaf community, advocate of Deaf rights, etc. while deaf (lower-case d) is used to refer to the medical condition of deafness.

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## Appendix A – Interview Questions

- Background
  - How old were you when you were diagnosed with a hearing loss?
  - Do you have any deaf relatives?
  - How old were you when you learned Sign Language?
- Education
  - What type of school did you attend? (mainstream or residential)
  - What was the primary method of instruction? (oralism, sign language, simultaneous communication)
  - How was Sign Language viewed by your education system?
- Black Culture
  - Where did you acquire your knowledge of black history?
  - Have you ever felt that you were discriminated against or treated differently not because you are deaf but because you are black?
  - In school did you ever have any black teachers or role models who you felt you could look up to?
  - Who would you identify as the role models in your life?
- Deaf Culture
  - Who are some deaf leaders you identify with?
  - When in school, were you taught deaf culture in class?
- Making Comparisons
  - How does black culture and the black community differ from deaf culture and the black deaf community?

- Do you feel black deaf culture is alive and strong in the black deaf community?
  - What do you see as the most significant barrier black deaf individuals have to overcome in order to be considered equal with the black community and also with the deaf community?
  - Which do you identify with first, your black culture or your deaf culture?
  - Language/Culture
    - Do you feel there is a difference between black and white deaf signing? Where do you think these differences come from?
    - Do you think there is a divide between the black deaf community and the mainstream deaf community? Where do you think this separation comes from?
    - Can you think of any examples of signs that vary between the groups?
    - Do you regularly attend a deaf club? What is the demographic make-up of that club?
    - Do you notice the black deaf self-segregating themselves from the greater deaf community?
-