

This section briefly discusses the historical context that led to the development of Black ASL in the United States.



KEY CONCEPTS



Segregation and Integration

Before the Civil War, there were no schools for Black Deaf children in the South. More broadly, there was no formal education at all for Black people in the South. After the Civil War, schools for both Black people and Deaf people began to emerge. Although the war ended in April 1865, the first school for Black Deaf children was not opened until 1869 in Raleigh, North Carolina. This school, like most other schools at the time, was racially segregated. Schools did not begin to integrate until 1954 with the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Linguistic Isolation

For a population to develop its own language variety, there has to be some sort of separation. When people are apart, they diverge both culturally and linguistically. In the case of Black Deaf children, they had few opportunities for interaction with White Deaf children until integration, which created a situation of linguistic isolation and divergence. Today, despite no longer facing challenges related to segregation, the language variety that developed in the Black Deaf community continues to diverge from White ASL. In part, this is also due to the significance of Black ASL as an important identity marker.

Code-switching

Linguists use the term “code switching” to refer to the alternating use of two or more languages or language varieties by one individual. Signers of Black ASL often code switch in different settings and around different people in order to minimize negative consequences and maximize positive outcomes.



“[When] I moved to the school for White Deaf students, after integration, I couldn’t understand the teachers! The group of Black Deaf students, together, were lost in the classroom.”

-Carolyn McCaskill, Deaf linguist

*"The way their language developed [in the segregated schools] was varied. They became very innovative with signs, creating vocabularies and creating ways of signing and ways of expressing themselves."
-Joseph Hill, Deaf linguist*

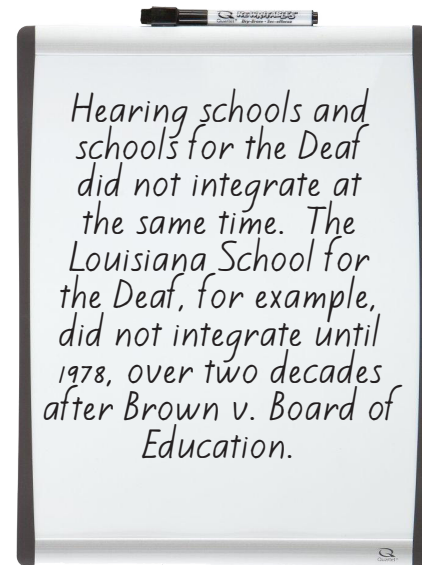


COMMON MISCONCEPTION

people may think



the truth is



LINGUISTIC CONSENSUS: Segregation, which led to linguistic isolation, played a large role in the development of Black ASL.

FUN STUFF

All of the scenes from this "Roots and Variations" section were filmed on the campus of [Gallaudet University](#), the only university in the world that offers programs specifically for students who identify as d/Deaf or hard of hearing.



The first school in the South to be opened for Black Deaf children was in 1869 in Raleigh, North Carolina: the North Carolina State School for the Colored Blind and Deaf. For more information about the school today, check out the school's [current website](#).



Many of the factors that influenced the development of African American Language (AAL) were the same factors that led to the development of Black ASL. Another documentary by the Language & Life Project, entitled *Talking Black in America*, discusses this (and more!) in more depth. More information about the documentary can be found on talkingblackinamerica.org

One of the concepts discussed in this section is the connection between language and identity. Check out this [Ted Talk](#) with Robyn Giffen to learn a little bit more about this connection.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-VIEWING

1. Have you ever felt embarrassed about the way you communicate? Why or why not?
2. Has anyone ever commented on the way that you communicate? What did they say? Was it positive, negative, or neutral? How did it make you feel? How did you respond?
3. How do you learn a language? How did you learn the language(s) that you use today?
4. Why might it be important to learn about the history of a language variety? What are some ways that language can give you access and some ways in which it can be a barrier?

ACTIVE VIEWING

1. What are some factors that contributed to the development of Black ASL?
2. How did segregation, specifically, lead to the development of Black ASL?

POST-VIEWING

1. In the film, Carolyn McCaskill mentioned that she first learned sign language at 12 years old when she began attending the Alabama School for the Negro Deaf. Since deaf children are typically born to hearing parents--over 90% of deaf babies are born to hearing parents!--it is common for deaf individuals to not learn a signed language until later in life. How, then, do you think that deaf children might communicate with their families if nobody in the family knows a signed language? What might be some consequences of not having adequate exposure to language at an early age?
2. Matreece Watson mentioned that Black Deaf students felt "less" than White Deaf students and that the Black Deaf students felt like the White Deaf students had a better language. Are some languages intrinsically better than other languages? Why or why not? What might make some people think that one language is better than another language?
3. When Carolyn McCaskill's Black friends told her she signed like a White person, she immediately indicated that she would rather sign like a Black person than a White person. Why do you think it was important for her to keep her Black signs?

Additional Resources

Check out statistics about hearing on the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders [website](#)

For more about Black Deaf History, see this article on the Described and Captioned Media Program [website](#).

[Nyle DiMarco](#) and [Glenna Cooper](#) offer some insight into the challenges and importance of Deaf education in their Tedx Talks.