

*This section examines what it means to “sign Black” and touches upon some of the differences between White ASL and Black ASL. It also briefly explores some of the ramifications of having segregated schools, which was discussed in more detail in the previous section.*

## KEY CONCEPTS



### Signing space

Signing space refers to the space surrounding the signer where most of the signs are produced. Signers use this area, which is often a relatively square space in front of the body, to physically position signs in space and time.

### Language contact

Language contact occurs when speakers of different languages or language varieties interact and, as a result, influence each other. In this case, specifically, the film discusses the linguistic isolation that resulted from racially segregated schools and the subsequent language contact that resulted from integration.

### The evolution of language

All languages change over time. There are both language internal causes and language external causes. Language internal causes of change are changes that come from within the linguistic system, whereas language external causes of change are changes that relate to social or psychological changes, such as geographical divisions, social barriers, or language contact situations.



*“Black ASL is evolving.  
Language evolves over  
time.”*

*-Carolyn McCaskill,  
Deaf linguist*

*“There is a myth that White ASL is  
better and that Black ASL is not so  
good, which is ironic given that  
Black ASL is more traditional  
and more standard, in some ways,  
than White ASL is.”*

*-Ceil Lucas, linguist*

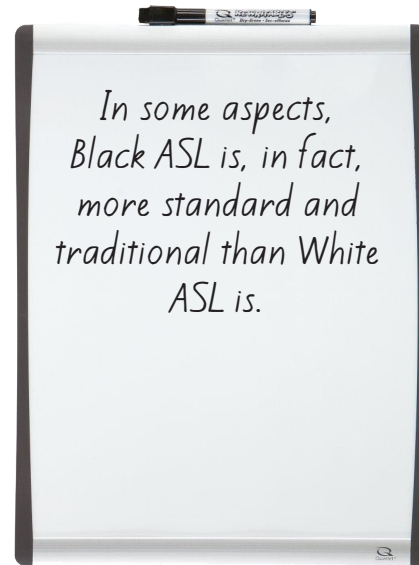


## COMMON MISCONCEPTION

people may think

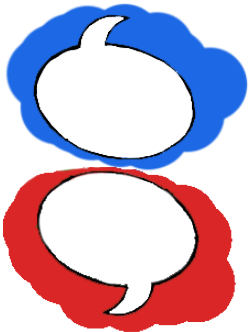


the truth is



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

## FUN STUFF



This [animation](#) helps explain how linguistic isolation can lead to the development of separate languages and language varieties... ..and [this one](#) is about what happens when languages are in contact.

This [video](#) provides a specific example of a situation of language contact between Spanish and Quechua.



The clip at the end of the segment is of Michai, one of the Deaf performers interviewed for the film. You can watch another one of her performances here: [Michai Hanly on YouTube](#)



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## PRE-VIEWING

1. When considering how languages and language varieties develop, geographical and cultural segregation play a large role. Think of this simplified example: imagine that you, as someone living in the United States, move to a state that is on the different side of the country than your current state. Although your new neighbors, classmates, and people you come in contact with will communicate in English, do you think they will use the exact same vocabulary and grammar that you do? **TEACHER TIP:** Consider the following sentences: *"The car needs washed" vs. "The car needs to be washed" or "I'd like a pop" vs. "I'd like a soda"*
2. Do you communicate the same way that your parents or your grandparents do? Even though you might use the same language, there are likely still some differences! Can you think of some examples?

## ACTIVE VIEWING

1. Can you give an example of how Black ASL preserves some of the older, traditional forms of signs?
2. Why do older signers from the Black Deaf community tend to exhibit more signs from Black ASL than do younger signers from the Black Deaf community?
3. What role did integration play in the development and preservation of Black ASL?

## POST-VIEWING

1. Why might some people think that standard ASL is better than Black ASL? Are some languages intrinsically better than other languages? Why or why not? Who determines what language is "better" and what language is "worse"?
2. Carolyn McCaskill mentioned that Black ASL, like all languages and language varieties, is evolving. Can you think of some examples of how you have personally seen your language evolve?

## Additional Resources

This figure from *The Hidden Treasure of Black ASL* lists the possible distinguishing factors of Black ASL. These features, aside from the incorporation of spoken African American Language and vocabulary differences, are also used by White signers, so the major difference between ASL and Black ASL is *not qualitative* but *quantitative*.

Two-handed vs. one-handed signs	Forehead location vs. lowered	Size of signing space	Incorporation of AAE into signing
Use of repetition	Use of role shifting (CA/CD)	Amount of mouth-ing	Vocabulary differences

Fig. 1. Table from MCaskill et al. *The Hidden Treasure of Black ASL: Its History and Structure*, Gallaudet University Press, 2011.

Watch the YouTube companion videos to the Hidden Treasure of Black ASL [here](#).