

This section looks at the evolution of Black ASL and the differences that exist between generations of signers, as well as some of the current changes occurring in Black ASL.



KEY CONCEPTS



African American English (AAE) or African American Language (AAL)

AAE (or AAL) refers to, in its broadest sense, African American speech. It is difficult to define because it is not a singular variety of language made up of a bounded set of linguistic features. For linguists, it is common to think about the language variety not as a single entity but as a continuum where some speakers are more vernacular and others are more standard. It is also important to acknowledge that speakers can navigate along this continuum as the social context dictates. A comprehensive definition of African American speech would take into account the differences in varieties across regions, classes, generations, genders, individual speakers, and styles of speaking.

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 are changes that relate to social or psychological changes, such as geographical divisions, social barriers, or language contact situations.

Generational changes

One way of studying language change is by examining the variation in language among different generations of language users. Young people often use language features that distinguish them from older people.



"Black ASL is not just one language, one group, one dialect. There are many different forms, and it depends on the region in which one is located."
-Joseph Hill, Deaf linguist

"... all that extralinguistic information that they put on the sign that you don't normally see White signers put on it, you go, 'What is that?'"
-John Lewis, interpreter

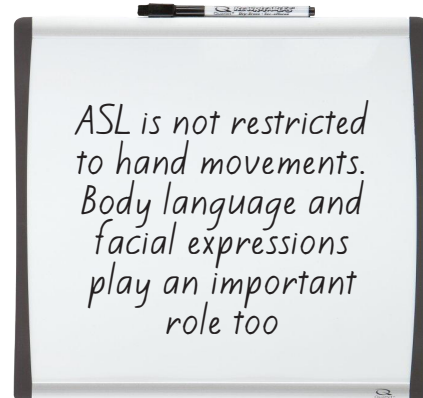


COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

people may think



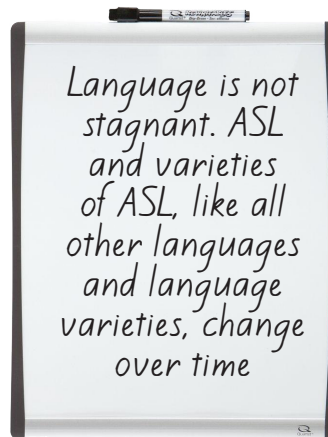
the truth is



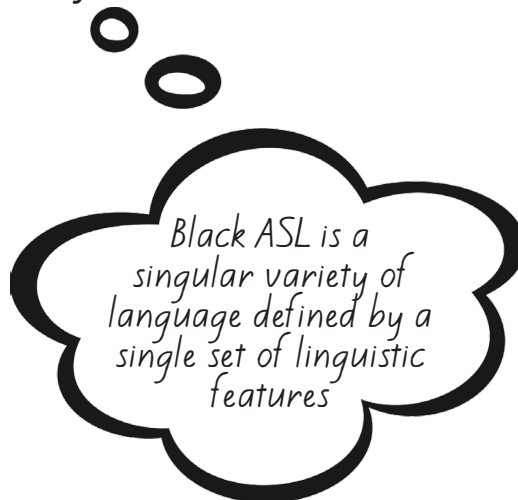
people may think



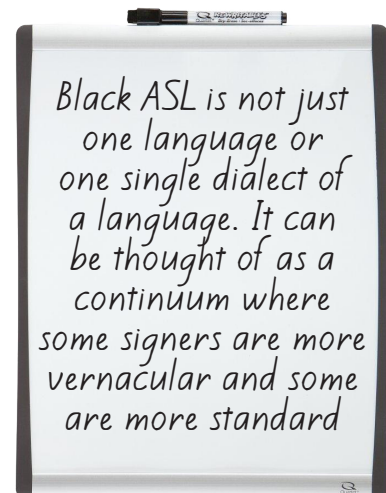
the truth is



people may think



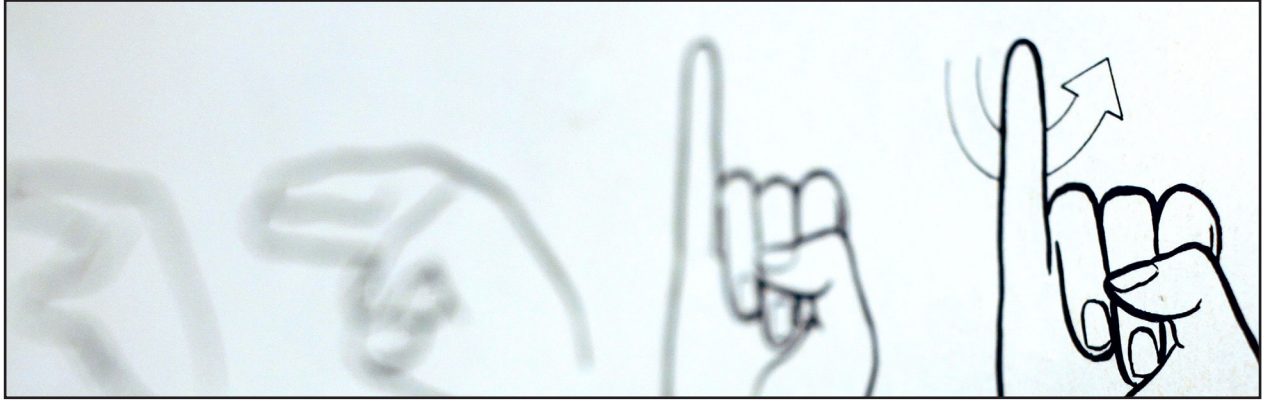
the truth is



LINGUISTIC CONSENSUS: Black ASL, like all other languages and language varieties, is constantly changing and evolving.

FUN STUFF

Deaf people can have accents too! For hearing people, an accent is a variation in how a word sounds. For Deaf people who sign, an accent is a variation in how a sign looks and moves. Check out this [video](#) to learn more!



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-VIEWING

1. Can you think of words or expressions that you use that your parents or your grandparents don't use? Where did you learn those words or expressions? Conversely, can you think of words or expressions that your parents or your grandparents use that you do not? Why do you think that you do not use those words or expressions?
2. Can you think of some words or expressions that you use that originate from a different language or culture?

ACTIVE VIEWING

1. What are some examples from the film of signers of Black ASL adding extra linguistic information onto their signs?
2. What are some of the examples in the film of geographical differences in signs?

POST-VIEWING

1. Joseph Hill gave the example of signers of Black ASL using a phrase with specific syntax from African American Language: "I know that's right!" He explained that there already exists a signed phrase that indicates the same concept of agreeance, yet signers of Black ASL may still opt to sign "I know that's right!" instead. Why do you think that is? What do you think is important about certain culturally-derived phrases?
2. Several individuals in the film explained geographical differences in signs. Can you think of any geographical differences in your language? **TEACHER TIP:** If students are unsure of where to begin, consider the following words: pop vs. soda, crayfish vs. crawdad, trunk vs. boot, etc.) evolve over time?

Additional Resources

[Link](#) to an article from Babbel online magazine about how language evolves.

For more information about African American Language, check out the [Talking Black in America](#) project website.

