VIEWERS' DISCUSSION GUIDE TO

SIGNING BLACK IN AMERICA

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INTRODUCTION

Signing Black in America explores the role of language in the lives of members from the Black Deaf community in the United States. It examines the historical roots of a variety of American Sign Language (ASL) known as Black ASL, its contemporary status in society, its essential role in everyday life, and its important functions in culture and identity.

The documentary is built around interviews with members from the Black Deaf community: Black Deaf signers, professionals, students, and performers. The documentary also features interviews with African American ASL interpreters and both Deaf and hearing linguists.

The educational goals for the film include (1) fostering an understanding and appreciation for the socio-cultural role of language; (2) developing an understanding of the historical roots and natural development of Black ASL; (3) creating awareness about Black ASL and the Black Deaf community; and (4) raising awareness about language prejudice and stereotypes that have often been associated with non-mainstream varieties of language.

The documentary is organized into different chapters based on themes: Roots of Variation, Signing Black, Transformation, Code Switching, Interpreting, and Legacy. The following sections summarize the key terminology used in the film, summarize key points in each chapter, discuss misconceptions, offer fun facts, and provide discussion questions for viewers. This guide concludes with brief biographies of the producers and linguistic experts of the film.

KEY TERMINOLOGY

What is linguistics?
Linguistics is the scientific study of language and its structures. There are many subfields within linguistics including, but not limited to, the following: phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, dialectology, psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics, computational linguistics, historical linguistics, and applied linguistics.

What is a linguist?
A linguist is a person who studies the structure of language.

What is a dialect (or language variety)?
A dialect (or language variety) is a particular form of language that is associated with a region or social/cultural group (e.g. Southern American English, Chicano/a English, etc). Linguists use these terms as neutral labels, devoid of positive or negative connotations. Dialects include:

accent: In spoken languages, an accent is the result of particular pronunciations or voice qualities that make a language sound different. In signed languages, an accent is the result of particular gestures or nuances that make a sign *look* different.
lexicon: A lexicon is a listing of vocabulary that is representative of a certain language or dialect.
grammar: Grammar refers to the particular ways in which language users arrange words and construct sentences.

American Sign Language (ASL):
ASL is a visual and manual language, meaning that linguistic information is conveyed manually and processed visually. It is used predominantly by d/Deaf communities across the United States and in English-speaking parts of Canada (Lucas 4). It is a linguistically complete language, meaning that it has a grammar that is separate from English, though the two languages often co-occur in communities in the United States and Anglophone Canada.

Black ASL:
Black ASL is a variety of ASL used primarily by Black Deaf communities across the United States. Hairston and Smith provide a succinct definition of this particular variety: it is a "Black way of signing used by Black Deaf people in their own cultural milieu--among families and friends, in social gatherings, and in Deaf clubs" (55). In other words, it "paints pictures and expresses messages in ways that just bring another layer and another flavor to the whole notion of what Black language is" (Barnes).

Deaf vs. deaf:
"Big D Deaf" and "little d deaf" are two separate concepts, with the latter referring to the audiological condition of hearing loss and the former referring to a "culturally Deaf" individual who identifies as a member of the Deaf community.

Additional Resources

Hairston, Ernest and Linwood Smith. *Black and Deaf in America: Are We That Different?* TJ Publishers, 1983.

This book offers an in-depth look at some of the issues faced by the Black Deaf community, and it includes an important chapter on signs used in the Black Deaf community.

Lucas, Ceil. *Sociolinguistics in Deaf Communities*, edited by Ceil Lucas, Gallaudet University Press, 1995. Publishers, 1983.

This book contains a rich collection of essays that cover everything from fingerspelling in Langue des Signes Quebecoise (LSQ) in Quebec, Canada to topics related to deaf education to aspects of American Sign Language (ASL) discourse. This book offers readers an invaluable opportunity to assess information on sign language linguistics and its social, political, and educational impact.

Lucas, Ceil and Robert Bayley and Clayton Valli. *Sociolinguistic Variation in American Sign Language*, Gallaudet University Press, 2001.

This book, which provides a complete description of American Sign Language (ASL), serves as the culmination of a seven-year project in which techniques for analyzing spoken language variation were applied to ASL. They found that the phonological, lexical, morphological, and syntactic levels of variation within ASL correlate with many of the same social factors that drive variation with spoken languages: age, socioeconomic class, gender, ethnic background, region, sexual orientation, etc. book offers an in-depth look at some of the issues faced by the Black Deaf community, and it includes an important chapter on signs used in the Black Deaf community.

What's Your Sign for PIZZA? Gallaudet University Press, 2003.

This book celebrates the variation in the way that American Sign Language (ASL) is used by Deaf communities across the United States. This text derives from an extensive seven-year project in which the signs of more than 200 Deaf signers of ASL from seven different regions were analyzed. This text, along with its accompanying CD, contains an explanation of the basic concepts of language and the structure of sign language, and each section of the text concludes with discussion questions.

McCaskill, Carolyn, et al. *The Hidden Treasure of Black ASL: Its History and Structure,* Gallaudet University Press, 2011.

Black ASL, a variation of American Sign Language (ASL), has historically been recognized as a distinct form of ASL via anecdotal reports. This ground-breaking text and its accompanying DVD present the first empirical study that begins to fill the linguistic gaps about Black ASL. The authors consider three main questions: 1) what was the socio-historical reality that madea separate variety of ASL possible? 2) what are the features of the variety of ASL that people call Black ASL? 3) can the same kind of unique features that have been identified in African American Language be identified in Black ASL?

There are companion videos to the book on YouTube. Link: https://youtu.be/gjjktL2oOM0

Stead Sellers, Frances. "How America developed two sign languages -- one white, one black." The Washington Post, 21 Feb. 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/02/21/how-america-developed-two-sign-languages-one-white-one-black/

This article from the Washington Post introduces the topic of Black ASL and highlights The Hidden Treasure of Black ASL and Signing Black in America, giving readers a brief introduction to both. The article also has clickable links to other information pertinent to the book, the documentary, and Black ASL.

Wolfram, Walt and Natalie Shilling. *American English: Dialects and Variation*, third edition, Blackwell, 2016.

This text discusses the social and linguistic factors that have contributed to dialect variation in American English. It explains the functions of dialects and the principles of language variation while using language that is accessible to students and a general audience. It includes an extensive glossary and appendix of dialect features.

CHAPTER 1: INTRO (0:00-4:38)

This section offers a short introduction to Black ASL and the community who uses it.

KEY CONCEPTS

What does it mean to "sign Black?"
Black ASL is a variety of ASL that is used primarily by Black Deaf communities in the United States. It differs from standard ASL in a variety of ways. Signers who use Black ASL often *code switch* between Black ASL and standard ASL as social context and interaction dictate.

The parameters of ASL
Words in a spoken language can be broken down into syllables, and these syllables can be further broken down into even smaller speech sounds. This is what Ceil Lucas is alluding to when she mentions *manner of articulation*, *place of articulation*, and *voicing*. These *phonetic* concepts are used to describe speech sounds. Similarly, signs, just like words, can be broken down into smaller parts. Instead of breaking down into speech sounds, however, signs can be described in terms of *handshape, movement, location, palm-orientation*, and *non-manual signals*. Changing one parameter can result in a different sign, a dialectal variation of a sign, or a meaningless gesture.
More information about the five ASL parameters can be found here.

"Black ASL paints pictures and expresses messages in ways that just bring another layer and another flavor to the whole notion of what Black language is."
-Candas Barnes, interpreter

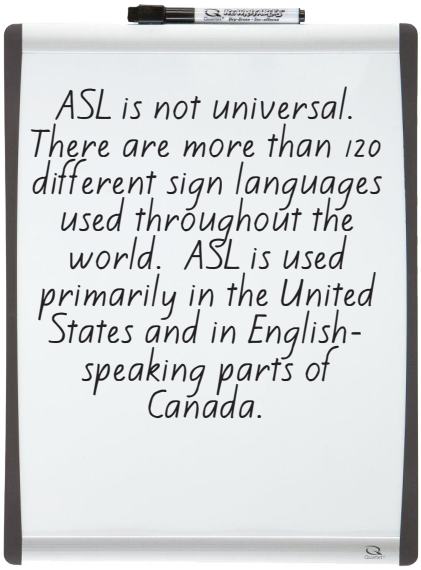
"We have a unique way of expressing ourselves...our race, our culture...how we feel is shown when we communicate."
-Michai Hanly, ASL performer

COMMON MISCONCEPTION

people may think

Video: Sign Language isn't universal

the truth is



LINGUISTIC CONCENSUS: Black ASL is a variety of ASL that is used primarily by Black Deaf communities in the United States.

FUN STUFF

Deaf people can enjoy music as much as hearing people do! The scenes in the documentary of performers on stage came from an ASL open mic night at Busboys and Poets near Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., the world's only university with programs targeted specifically for students who identify as d/Deaf or hard of hearing. (Learn more about Gallaudet University here: https://www.gallaudet.edu)

Check out this YouTube video of Amber Gallaway Gallego demonstrating how ASL interpreters are bringing music to the d/Deaf! (Even rap music can be interpreted for the d/Deaf. Watch an ASL interpreted rap battle of a Wiz Khalifa song, featuring Amber Gallaway Gallego, here. One of the other two rap battle participants is a Deaf woman, and she shares her story about the experience here.)

Mandy Harvey lost her hearing later in life, but that did not stop her from continuing her musical career. Watch her America's Got Talent debut performance. If you like what you see, you can subscribe to her YouTube channel too!

Signing Black in America features several ASL performers in interviews and performances. You can see more of them online:

Wade Green - check out this video in which he shares his story and his work with Inspiringhands

Kasiem Walters, aka DEHPE$HCII, is a CODA (Child of Deaf Adult) performer, and has a YouTube channel with interviews and ASL covers

Warren "WaWa" Snipe is a Deaf musician and the musical mastermind behind "Dip Hop," hip hop through deaf eyes. Check out his website and his YouTube channel to learn more!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-VIEWING

1. How would you describe the way that you communicate? Do you have a name or a label for it? How do you think others would define the way that you communicate? ***TEACHER TIP:*** *If students are unsure where to start, consider creating a list of words on the board to describe dialects. Start with terms like "nasal" or "twangy" and let students go from there.*
2. Think about when you are speaking to someone you don't know on the phone. Can you identify anything about the person based solely on the sound of their voice and the way that they speak? Do you think you could guess their race, ethnicity, gender, or age? How might similar information be communicated when signing?

ACTIVE VIEWING

1. What are some of the descriptions given of Black ASL?

POST-VIEWING

1. In the film, Warren "WaWa" Snipe mentioned that one's background and upbringing can be seen in one's signs. Based on what you learned from the film and from your own personal knowledge and experience, how do you think someone's language relates to their cultural background and upbringing?
2. Several people in the film discussed how personality can be expressed through language. Can you think of some examples in your own life of how you express your personality through your language?
3. Do you think that having different languages and different language varieties is beneficial or divisive? Would a global language, used by all people, be good or bad? Why or why not?

Additional Resources

More about the Language & Life Project and their work on language diversity can be found on their website, languageandlife.org

Here is a short BuzzFeed YouTube video that can help answer common questions people have about being d/Deaf.
Deaf people answer commonly googled questions about being Deaf
To take a deeper dive, check out this second video from the same two people:
I'm Deaf, but I'm not...

To learn more about Deaf culture, check out this article from Gallaudet's website: American Deaf Culture.

Interested in reading more about ASL? Check out this information about Learning American Sign Language from the National Association of the Deaf and this information about ASL from the National Institutes of Health.

ASL Linguistics has a YouTube channel with a playlist of videos that help break down linguistic aspects of ASL.

You can take a course on the Linguistic Structure of ASL online via Dr. Steven Surrency's YouTube channel. Dr. Surrency is a professor in the Department of Communication Science and Discorders at the University of South Florida.

CHAPTER 2: THE ROOTS OF VARIATION (4:38-7:27)

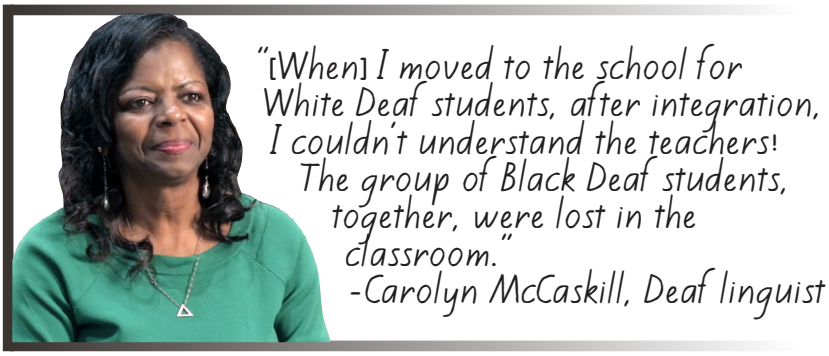
This section briefly discusses the historical context that led to the development of Black ASL in the United States.

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.



"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

Hearing schools and Deaf schools integrated immediately and simultaneously.

the truth is

Hearing schools and schools for the Deaf did not integrate at the same time. The Louisiana School for the Deaf, for example, did not integrate until 1978, over two decades after Brown v. Board of Education.

LINGUISTIC CONCENSUS: 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 teh development of Black ASL?

POST-VIEWING

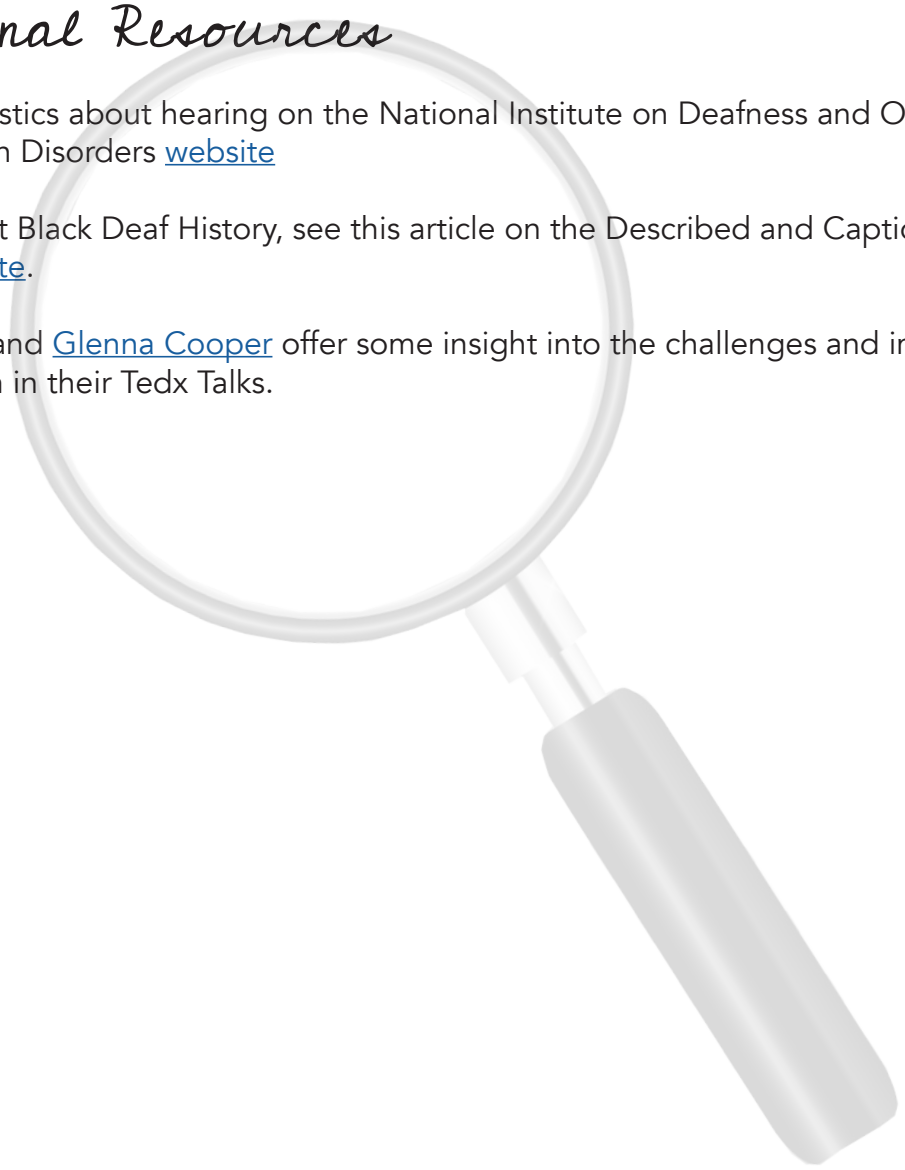
1. In the film, Carolyn McCaskill mentioned that she first learned sign language at 12 years old when she began attending the Alabama School for the Negro Deaf. Since deaf children are typically born to hearing parents--over 90% of deaf babies are born to hearing parents!--it is common for deaf individuals 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

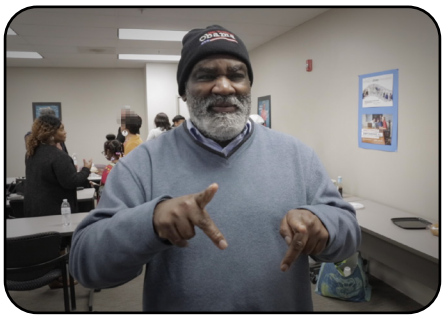
Check out statistics about hearing on the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders website

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.



CHAPTER 3: SIGNING BLACK (7:27-11:50)



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.

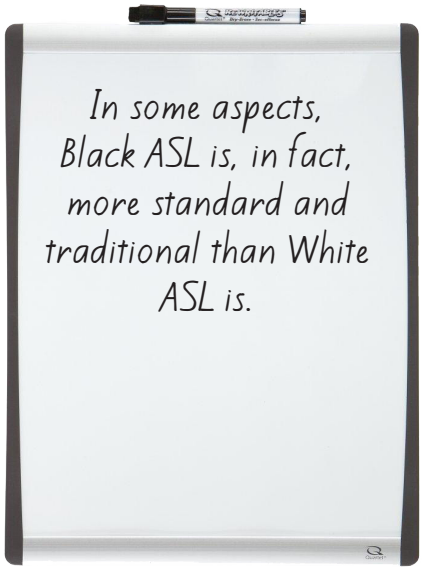
"Black ASL is evolving. Language evolves over time."
-Carolyn McCaskill, Deaf linguist

"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

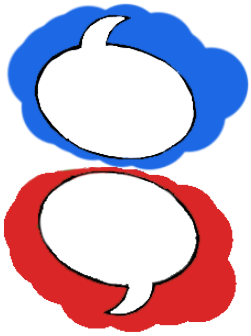
people may think

the truth is



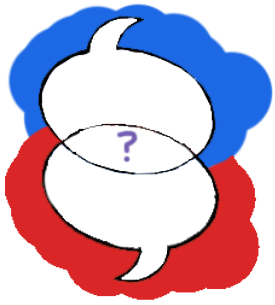
LINGUISTIC CONCENSUS: Segregation, which led to linguistic isolation, played a large role in the development of Black ASL.

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 mouthing	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.

CHAPTER 4: TRANSFORMATION (11:50-17:09)

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.

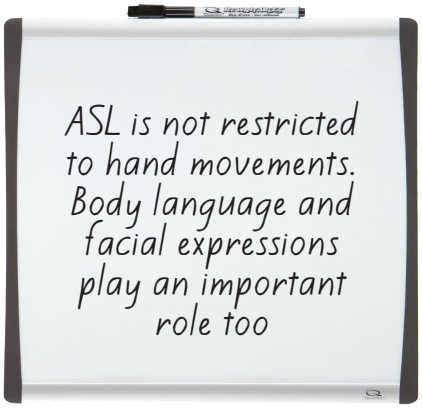
"Black ASL is not just one language, one group, one dialect. There are many different forms, and it depends on the region in which one is located."
-Joseph Hill, Deaf linguist

" ... 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

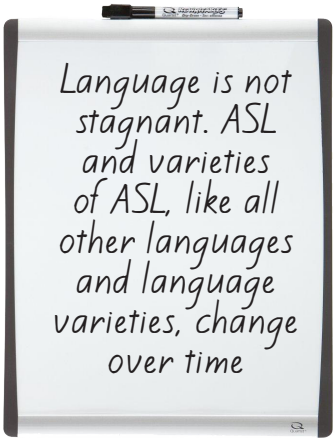
people may think

the truth is



people may think

the truth is



people may think

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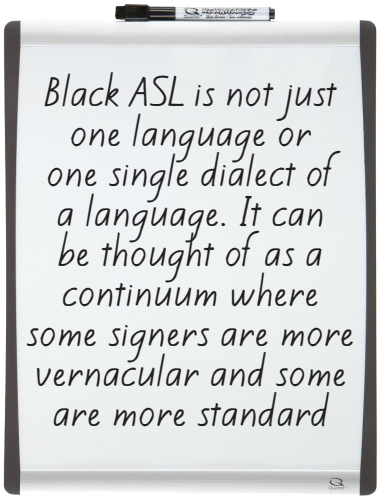
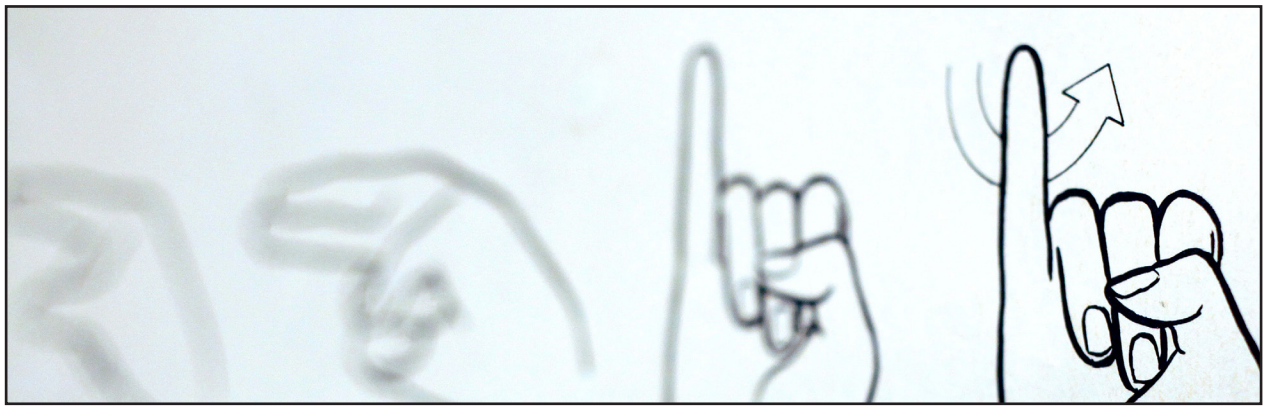


LINGUISTIC CONCENSUS: Black ASL, like all other languages and language varieties, is constantly changing and evolving.

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?

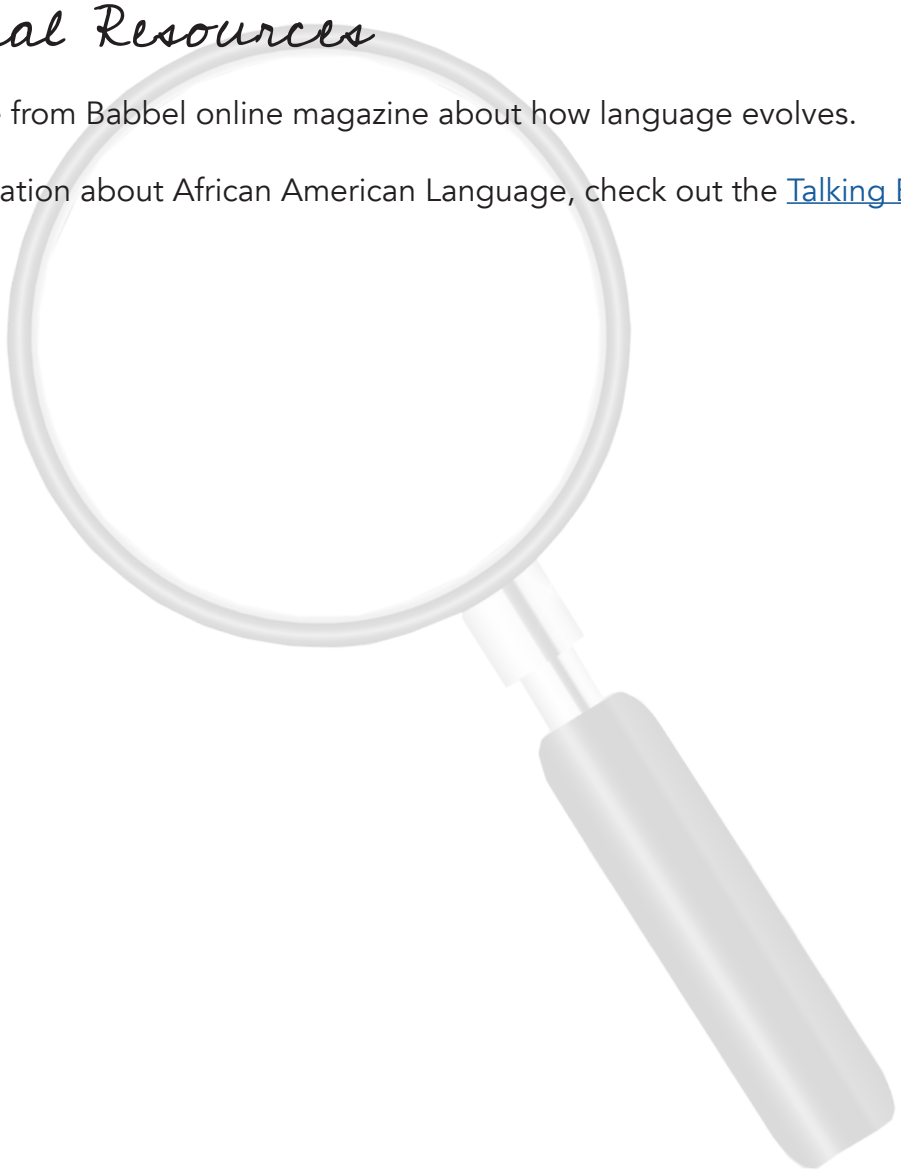
POST-VIEWING

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.



CHAPTER 5: CODE SWITCHING (17:09-20:24)

This section examines code switching and how signers of Black ASL navigate communication among not only the Black Deaf community but also the broader Deaf community in the United States.

KEY CONCEPTS

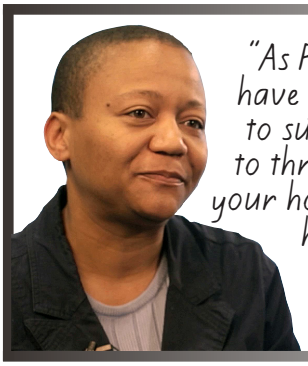
Code switching
Linguists use the term "code switching" to refer to the alternating use of two or more languages or language varieties by one individual. Signers of Black ASL often code switch in different settings and around different people in order to minimize negative consequences and maximize positive outcomes. To learn more, check out this link to a segment about code switching from *Talking Black in America:* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VpLQmyS7-jw

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 an imagined square space in front of the body, to physically position signs in space and time.

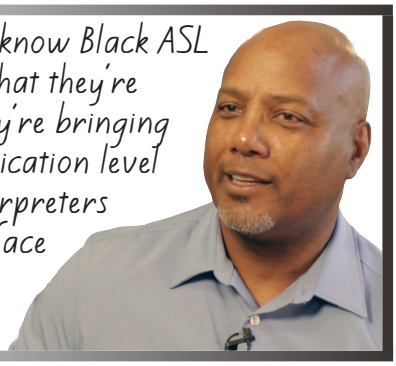
Language as access
In some contexts, language can provide access and foster inclusion. Black ASL can, for example, build solidarity among its signers because it signals shared aspects of identity and marks them as in-group members. To put it differently, hearing or seeing someone use a familiar language can often produce feelings of comfort, acceptance, and solidarity.

Language as a barrier
In some contexts, language can be a hindrance, specifically when society stigmatizes and rejects the language variety. This stigmatization restricts access by building barriers. These barriers can range from hurt feelings to serious consequences related to inclusion and exclusion. Systemic barriers related to language include limitations on opportunities for education, jobs, and housing.

Linguistic discrimination
Linguistic discrimination is the unfair treatment of an individual based on the individual's language use. People often justify discrimination against a language variety and its speakers with the false belief that the language variety is "bad English" or is reflective of some sort of deficiency (e.g. educational, intellectual, moral, etc). A common theme of many stigmatized varieties is that they are spoken by marginalized groups (e.g. working-class people, racial minorities, women, etc). Racism and classism are often hidden beneath a false linguistic justification.



"As People of Color in America, we have grown up in a society where, to survive, you have to learn how to thrive in your home culture and your home community, and you also have to learn how to thrive in broader American society." -Folami Ford, interpreter



" ... Interpreters who know Black ASL actually have more that they're bringing because they're bringing a bicultural communication level that many White interpreters can't scratch the surface on." -John Lewis, interpreter

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

people may think

You communicate in the same manner in every single situation.

the truth is

You do not communicate in the same manner all the time in every single situation. The language you use is socially and contextually variable.

people may think

Signers who use Black ASL can code switch into standard ASL; therefore, there is no need for Black ASL at all!

the truth is

Just because signers of Black ASL can sign in standard ASL does not mean that there is no reason to use Black ASL.

LINGUISTIC CONCENSUS: People utilize a variety of languages, language varieties, and styles to gain access and build solidarity in different settings and communities.

FUN STUFF

Watch this Key & Peele skit about CODESWITCHING and then examine code switching through a SPOKEN WORD by Jamila Lyiscott. Additionally, watch this video clip about LINGUISTIC DISCRIMINATION as it applies to fair housing.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-VIEWING

1. Have you ever felt an immediate sense of camaraderie with a person just from hearing or watching them communicate? Why? Was it, perhaps, that they reminded you of home or made you feel like you both shared a similar background or had some shared aspects of identity?
2. Have you ever been in a specific situation or around specific individuals and suddenly felt self-conscious about the way that you communicate? What happened? Where were you, and who was with you? Why do you think that you felt self-conscious?
3. Do you think that you communicate the same way all the time? For example, do you communicate with your friends in the exact same way that you communicate with your parents? What about if you were to conduct a national press conference? Would you communicate the same way in that situation that you would if, say, you were communicating with your best friend?

ACTIVE VIEWING

1. Why do signers of Black ASL (and, more broadly, individuals who use a language variety other than the "standard" or "mainstream" language of their society) feel the need to code-switch?
2. What is "academic ASL"?

POST-VIEWING

1. Do you think that there will ever come a time when code switching is not necessary? A time when all languages and language varieties are valued equally? Why or why not?
2. Why are certain varieties of language praised while others are denounced? Why do we associate language varieties with character traits? How do the characterizations of certain languages or language varieties relate to the social and historical situations of the people who use them? TEACHER TIP: How do different traits become associated with different languages? For example, think about Disney movies. Why does the villain often have a British accent? Why are Latinx characters often portrayed as either sensual or silly? Why are Southern characters often given deep Southern accents and silly roles?

3. Just as you can have racial or gender discrimination, you can have linguistic discrimination against people for the way that they communicate. What are some ways that linguistic discrimination affects people? Why do you think it is so difficult to combat linguistic discrimination? How do you think people feel when they are repeatedly told that their language or language variety is inferior?
4. Do you think it would be appropriate for Deaf students to study Black ASL (or, more broadly, for students to study any other non-standard language variety) in a scholastic setting? Why or why not?

Additional Resources

For more information about code-switching, watch this Tedx Talk and this video by Professor Renée Blake from New York University, who also serves as an associate producer for *Talking Black in America*. This video and this video also discuss and demonstrate code-switching.

For more information about language as a barrier and language as access, we suggest watching Talking Black in America, a feature length film by the Language & Life Project that discusses African American Language.

CHAPTER 6: INTERPRETING (20:24-25:02)

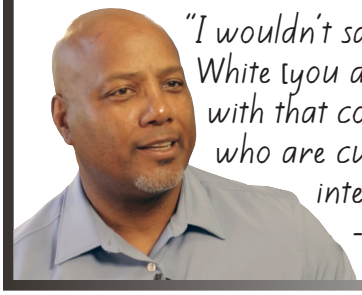
This section looks at the field of interpretation.

KEY CONCEPTS

What is interpretation?
The Commission on Collegiate Interpreter Education (CCIE) defines interpretation as the "art and science of receiving a message from one language, understanding it, contextualizing it, analyzing it for intent, and rendering it into another language." See more here

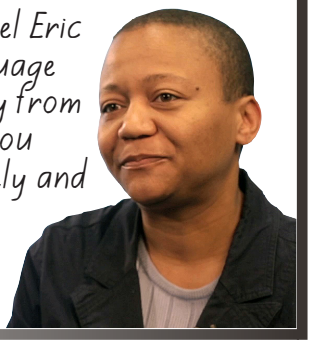
What do interpreters do?
Interpreters of any language, whether it is spoken or signed, have a multi-faceted job that requires them to balance impartiality for what they are to interpret with enough investment to ensure an accurate and successful communication. They are, in other words, necessary intermediaries who are asked to maintain neutrality and confidentiality while also ensuring a successful communication between individuals of different languages and potentially different cultures.

Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID)
The field of ASL-English interpretation began as a profession with the establishment of the RID in 1964. Today, the RID is a national members-only organization that strives to "advocate for best practices in interpreting … and for the highest standards in the provision of interpreting services for diverse users of languages that are signed or spoken." (See more here) Today, possessing RID certification is a valued credential for ASL interpreters as it provides verification of an interpreter's abilities and, in some states, it is required in order to be eligible to provide interpreting services. Additionally, to maintain certification, members' skills are continuously monitored throughout the span of their career via continued education and compliance with the RID's Code of Professional Conduct.



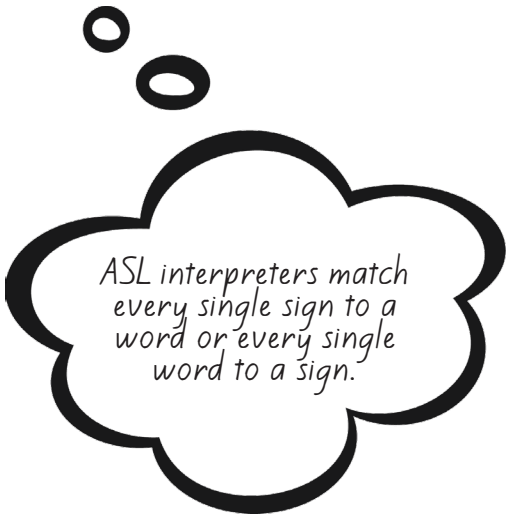
"I wouldn't say it's a matter of how Black or White [you are] ... It's 'What is your experience with that community?' ... You want people who are culturally competent to actually interpret in those environments."
-John Lewis, interpreter

"I think of, like, a Cornel West or a Michael Eric Dyson, where you're very academic language one minute and the next it's, like, homeboy from around the corner and on the block. If you don't know how to interpret that effectively and interpret all of the cultural nuances that are there, you won't be effective as an interpreter." -Folami Ford, interpreter

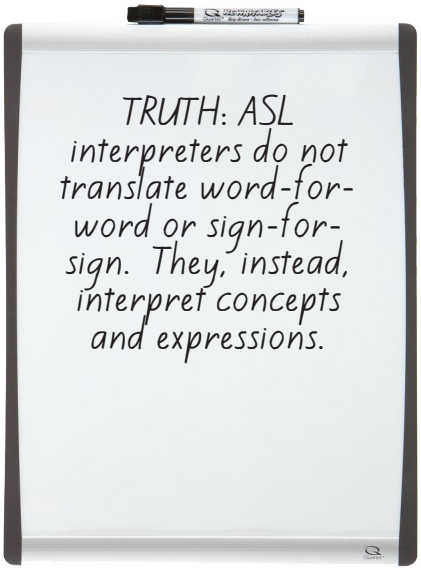


COMMON MISCONCEPTION

people may think



the truth is



LINGUISTIC CONCENSUS: A knowledge of the community and culture associated with the languages being interpreted is crucial to be effective as interpreters.

FUN STUFF

This section features a clip of Michael Eric Dyson speaking at Aretha Franklin's funeral. The clip is included to showcase how individuals can be, as Folami Ford says in the film, "academic language one minute" and then "homeboy from around the corner and on the block."

This comedic video clip highlights what a "day in the life of an ASL interpreter" can sometimes be like.

Matt Maxey was born with a severely profound hearing loss and outfitted with hearing aids at 2 years old. He founded DEAFinitely Dope based on providing support via music interpretation to those who felt marginalized and ignored by mainstream America. This video will give you a glimpse into how music is interpreted for the Deaf community.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-VIEWING

1. Have you ever been to an event (or watched a tv show or movie) that was not in a language that you knew? Did you ever feel like you were missing something that the speakers/signers of the language were not? Explain.
2. If you speak two or more languages, can you think of any words, concepts, phrases, or expressions in Language One that do not have an equivalent in Language Two? Give some examples.

ACTIVE VIEWING

1. What are some of the examples given by the interpreters of why having knowledge of and experience with the Black Deaf community and Black Deaf culture is vital when interpreting for Black Deaf consumers?

POST-VIEWING

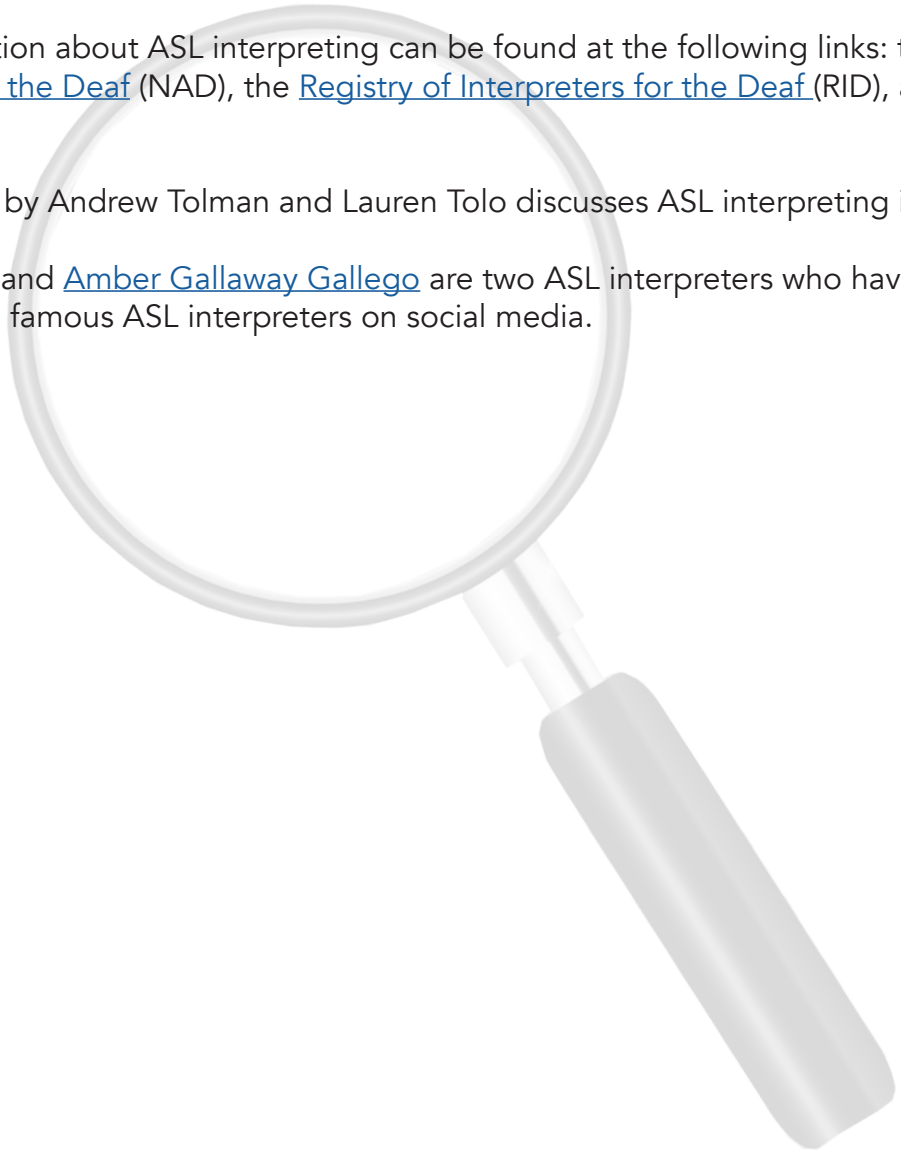
1. In the film, interpreter John Lewis said being able to interpret for the Black Deaf community is less a matter of how Black or White an interpreter is and more a matter of how experienced an interpreter is with the Black Deaf community and with Black Deaf culture. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?

Additional Resources

More information about ASL interpreting can be found at the following links: the National Association of the Deaf (NAD), the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID), and Gallaudet University.

This Tedx Talk by Andrew Tolman and Lauren Tolo discusses ASL interpreting in more depth.

Michael Scott and Amber Gallaway Gallego are two ASL interpreters who have, in various ways, become famous ASL interpreters on social media.



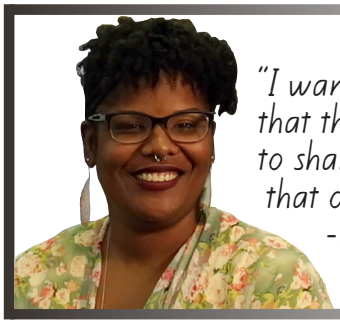
CHAPTER 7: LEGACY (25:02-26:38)

This section looks towards the future and discusses how the Black Deaf community would like to see Black ASL understood and treated.

KEY CONCEPTS

Embracing Black ASL

As has been mentioned multiple times in the film, Black ASL has historically been characterized as "less than" White ASL. Newer narratives, however, have begun to characterize Black ASL as "hip" or "cool," a cultural object of value. While it is heartening to see that positive perceptions of Black ASL are emerging, it is important to embrace Black ASL for more than just its "coolness." More education and greater public awareness regarding Black ASL will allow people to understand it better and embrace it as a valuable, systematic, legitimate, culturally and historically grounded language variety.

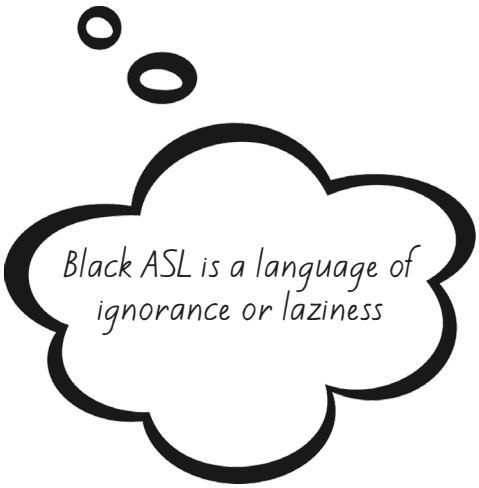


"I want people to recognize this, that this is what we live for ... to share our story and to show that our experience is valid."
-Felicia Williams, educator

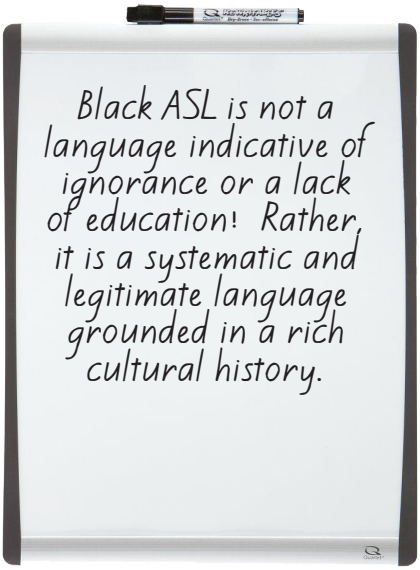
"It's soul; it's unity; there's history; there's culture. All of that is encapsulated into this thing we call 'Black ASL'....when you understand Black ASL, you see us."
-Shentara Cobb, student

COMMON MISCONCEPTION

people may think

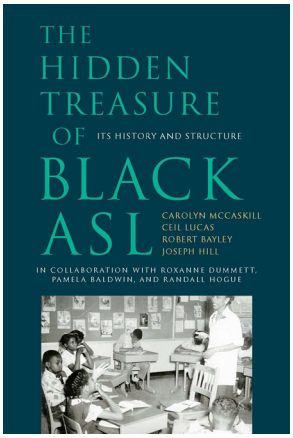


the truth is



LINGUISTIC CONCENSUS: Black ASL should be understood not as something that is "less than" White ASL but as something that has a rich history and culture--something that is valued.

FUN STUFF



Seminal research on Black ASL was shared with the public in 2011 in a book called *The Hidden Treasure of Black ASL*. The authors of this book were involved in the production of *Signing Black in America*. The book can be found here or here!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-VIEWING

1. One of the overarching themes of the film is that language is intrinsically related to both culture and identity. How, or why, do you think that is? Try to think of some examples with your own language, culture, and identity.
2. If you regularly use more than one language or dialect, do you think that the way you act shifts, depending on the language you are using at the time?

ACTIVE VIEWING

1. What are some of the reasons provided that explain the importance of Black ASL to the Black Deaf community?

POST-VIEWING

1. Has your initial impression or opinion of Black ASL changed since watching the film? Why or why not?
2. Why do you think it is important to learn about the history and structure of different language varieties?

Additional Resources

For more information about Deaf culture and ASL, SignDuo on YouTube (Ryan, who is Deaf, and Ellen, who is hearing) posts videos pertaining to Deaf/hearing relationships, learning ASL, and much more.

Rikki Poynter is a Deaf YouTuber who makes content about d/Deaf awareness, accessibility, closed captioning, etc. Watch her videos here.

Nyle DiMarco, a Deaf model, actor, and activist, has a YouTube channel, which can be found here. (Nyle DiMarco was also a contestant on Dancing with the Stars. One of his performances can be seen here. Watch until at least the 1:09 mark for a glimpse into how DiMarco might experience the performances.)

Jessica Kellgren-Fozard is a Deaf YouTuber who makes videos about deafness, disability, LGBTQ+ awareness, and vintage fashion. Her videos can be found here. (Note that Jessica uses British Sign Language, not American Sign Language.)

Switched at Birth, a show that aired on Freeform from 2011-2017, revolves around two teenage girls who were accidentally switched at birth. One of the girls, Daphne, is Deaf. The show involves many Deaf actors and brings awareness to Deaf culture. Find out more here.

Marlee Matlin, a Deaf actress (who also appeared in *Switched at Birth*), discusses cochlear implants, ASL, and Deaf culture in a video that can be found here.

MEET THE LINGUISTS & PRODUCERS

Danica Cullinan, *Director of Photography / Editor*, Documentary Producer for the Language & Life Project. Ms. Cullinan is a two-time Emmy award-winning producer of television documentaries, including Talking Black in America (with Neal Hutcheson), Cedars in the Pines, Spanish Voices, and First Language: The Race to Save Cherokee (with Neal Hutcheson). She has a background in sociolinguistics, information and library science, and film production, and she directs many of the outreach and engagement activities of the Language & Life Project.

Neal Hutcheson, *Director of Photography / Editor,* Documentary Producer for the Language & Life Project. Mr. Hutcheson is a three-time Emmy award-winning producer of television documentaries, including Talking Black in America (with Danica Cullinan), Mountain Talk, Coresounders: Living from the Sea, The Carolina Brogue, Indian by Birth: The Lumbee Dialect, The Queen Family: Appalachian Tradition and Back Porch Music, Voices of North Carolina, and First Language: The Race to Save Cherokee (with Danica Cullinan). His work has appeared on PBS, the Sundance Channel, the History Channel, A&E, and the Documentary Channel.

Walt Wolfram, *Executive Producer*, William C. Friday Distinguished University Professor of Linguistics at North Carolina State University. Wolfram has pioneered research on social and ethnic dialects since the 1960s, including AAL. He is interested in disseminating sociolinguistic information to the public via documentaries, museum exhibits, books, and other materials on language diversity. Wolfram has extensive experience in public outreach and the production of audiovisual materials to complement his sociolinguistic research. In addition to having authored over 300 academic publications, he has served as executive producer for 14 nationally and regionally distributed broadcast programs under the Language & Life Project.

Dr. Joseph Hill, *Associate Producer*, Assistant Professor in the Department of ASL and Interpreting Education at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology. Dr. Hill's research interests include socio-historical and -linguistic aspects of Black ASL and attitudes and ideologies about signing varieties in the American Deaf community. Dr. Hill is one of the authors of The Hidden Treasure of Black ASL.

Dr. Ceil Lucas, *Associate Producer*, Professor Emerita of Gallaudet University and Editor of Sign Language Studies at Gallaudet University Press. Dr. Lucas is known for her significant contributions to the field of sign language linguistics. Lucas was a professor in Gallaudet University's linguistics department for over 30 years before retiring in 2014. Dr. Lucas is one of the authors of The Hidden Treasure of Black ASL.

Dr. Carolyn McCaskill, *Associate Producer*, Professor in the Department of ASL & Deaf Studies at Gallaudet University. Dr. McCaskill is the second Black Deaf female to have earned a Ph.D from Gallaudet University. (The first Black Deaf female to have done so is her sister, Dr. Angela McCaskill!) She has been a professor in the ASL & Deaf Studies department at Gallaudet University since 1996, and she has served as the coordinator of the Deaf Studies program since 2005. Dr. McCaskill is one of the authors of The Hidden Treasure of Black ASL.