

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 made a 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.