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Abstract

This paper explores how language attitudes and ideologies impact perceptions of language varieties in the American Deaf community, with a particular focus on Black ASL, the variety of ASL developed by African Americans in the South during the era of segregation. Results of multivariate analysis show that on a number of dimensions, Black ASL, particularly as used by signers who attended school before integration, is closer to the standard variety taught in ASL classes and used in ASL dictionaries. Nevertheless, despite evidence that their variety is closer to the standard taught in ASL classes, many of the older signers interviewed felt that white signing was superior. Attitudes among the younger signers were more mixed. While a few younger signers said that white signing was better than Black signing, others said that Black signing was more powerful in expression and movement and it had rhythm and style while white signing was more monotonic and lacked emotion. This paper explores the complex mix of attitudes expressed by study participants in the six Southern states in relation to the historical development of this distinctive variety of ASL.

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Attitudes towards Black American Sign Language

Robert Bayley, Joseph C. Hill, Carolyn McCaskill, and Ceil Lucas*

1 Introduction

Information about users' attitudes towards their language provides insight into how people view themselves within their socio-historical context. This paper explores how language attitudes and ideologies impact perceptions of language varieties in the American Deaf[1] community, with a particular focus on Black ASL, the variety of ASL developed by African Americans in the South during the era of segregation. After briefly discussing work on attitudes towards African American Vernacular English (AAVE)[2], we review studies of language attitudes in the Deaf community. We then draw on the rich body of data from the Black ASL Project (McCaskill, Lucas, Bayley, and Hill 2011) to examine the complex factors that influence the attitudes of users of a minority language variety toward their own language.

2 Attitudes towards Language Varieties

Linguists define a "dialect" as a language variety that is structurally related to another variety in regard to phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic features regardless of its socially defined standard or stigmatized status (Wolfram and Schilling 2016). However, many people in the general population do not accept that definition. Rather, they reserve the term "dialect" for language varieties that are viewed as sub-standard in comparison to socially accepted varieties. Language varieties that contain stigmatized or disfavored linguistic features are often relegated to sub-standard status and the stigmatization is always based on the perceived social characteristics of marginalized groups. For example, in Illinois, the South Midland dialect is generally regarded as less prestigious than the North Midland dialect because it contains Southern or rural features such as intrusive /r/ ("warsh" instead of "wash") and a vowel /æu/ (Frazer 1987). As Preston (1996) reports in a study of language attitudes towards northern and southern dialects, for many outside the South, Southerners are generally perceived to be "informal", "undereducated," and "friendly".

AAVE is another highly stigmatized American dialect. According to linguists, AAVE is a legitimate language variety with certain phonological, morphological, lexical, and semantic features that diverge from other English dialects. It is used by African American speakers in urban and rural communities. Not all African Americans use AAVE nor it is exclusive to African-Americans. As with any language variety, anyone can acquire it as long as they have access and exposure. Nonetheless, AAVE users are typically African Americans.

Despite the fact that nearly five decades of research, beginning with Labov, Cohen, Robins, and Lewis (1968) and Wolfram (1969), have shown that AAVE is systematic and fully equal to standard English in expressive power and logical capacity, it is still perceived negatively in social, mass, and entertainment media. For example, many websites feature offensive parodies of AAVE (Ronkin and Karn 1999) and AAVE is represented negatively in entertainment, including popular Disney films (Lippi-Green 2012; Rickford and Rickford 2000). In education, the Oakland, California School Board's decision to use AAVE to teach standard English in the 1990s raised intense controversy and even outrage, particularly among people who had never paid the slightest attention to the city's educational problems (Baugh 2000; Rickford 1999; Vaughn-Cook 2007). As a result of their students' dialect, some educators have viewed AAVE-speaking African American

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[1]In accord with convention, capitalized "Deaf "refers to people who consider themselves culturally Deaf. Lower-case "deaf" refers to audiological status.

[2]We follow Winford (2015) and use the term "African American Vernacular English" (AAVE) to refer to the varieties that diverge from standard English and are spoken by many African Americans as their everyday vernacular.

children as speech-impaired (Obgu 1999) and as verbally deprived (Labov 1972). Finally, as Baugh (1996, 2000, 2007) has shown, people who speak AAVE have been subject to housing discrimination. In the face of the pressure against AAVE, it still exists because it serves as a symbol of cultural solidarity among AAVE speakers. In fact, African Americans' choice of speaking mainstream English with AAVE speakers may be perceived to be condescending and trying to act "White" (Fordham 1999). A choice of dialect in a particular situation is much more than a choice to speak differently. It is a manifestation of social identity and cultural association in every community, including Deaf communities.

Deaf signers are also aware of and express attitudes about signing varieties (Baer, Okrent, and Rose 1996). In the American Deaf community, there is a perception that a standard ASL exists. The earliest recognition of the standard ASL variety can be traced back to 1834 when the schools for the Deaf were opened following the pattern set by the American School for the Deaf (ASD), which had opened in 1817 (Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan 1996). Graduates of the ASD were hired as teachers and were the agents of ASL transmission and dissemination, as were deaf students (Lucas, Bayley, and Valli 2001). In 1965, Croneberg explicitly stated: "the body of signs used at Gallaudet, then, must contain the main base of what we call standard ASL" (134).

At the opposite end of the signing spectrum is Manually Coded English (MCE), which belongs to a category of English-based signed communication systems including Seeing Essential English (SEE 1), Signing Exact English (SEE 2), and Linguistics of Visual English (LOVE). MCE is not a natural language as is ASL, but it is still used in some educational settings for deaf students with the goal of developing better English skills. With written and spoken English and ASL co-existing in the community, a variety called 'contact signing' has emerged with the varying degrees of mixture of features of ASL and English, with some MCE features (Lucas and Valli 1992). With the use of MCE, contact signing, and ASL in the American Deaf community, attitudinal issues have emerged surrounding the nature of ASL.

One of the issues concerns the differences in perceptions of ASL. For example, in Lucas and Valli's (1992) study of contact signing, one clip was perceived differently by two racial groups of Deaf participants. Only 37 percent of the white participants identified it as 'ASL', while 82 percent of the black participants identified it as 'ASL' (70). The discrepancy in judgments between white and black participants could be based on signers' decisions to focus on different linguistic features. Hill (2012) explores this discrepancy in perceptions between black and white signers in a large study that benefits from the statistical analysis absent from Lucas and Valli's study. He examines the linguistic and social factors that influence ASL signers' perceptions of signing across the full range, from ASL signing to English-like signing. The linguistic factors include handshape, non-manual signals, morphemic movements, choice of signs, syntax, and prosody in signing. The social factors include age, race and age of ASL acquisition. Hill suggests that different social groups within the Deaf community might have different standards, although he finds considerable (but not unanimous) agreement among a wide range of signers of different social groups about what constitutes "strong ASL." He further suggests that ASL is on the way to standardization.

From the point of view of the scientific study of language, no language variety is better than any other in terms of linguistic structure or expressive power. It is natural for language varieties to differ from one another on numerous dimensions as a result of geographic and social factors. Social perceptions can influence the prestige of language varieties in a society, as shown in the examples of northern and southern dialects of American English, AAVE, and the spectrum of signing between ASL and MCE. Black ASL is no exception, as the next section will show.

3 Black Deaf Signers' School Histories and Language Use

The data upon which the current chapter is based come from the Black ASL Project, conducted by the authors between 2007 and 2011 (McCaskill et al. 2011). The project sought to provide empirical evidence of differences between black and white signing that had been noted anecdotally, but never fully examined in a systematic manner. Because the conditions for the development of a separate variety of ASL existed in the U.S. South, where African American and white Deaf children attended segregated schools, in some cases well into the 1970s, we collected

data from 76 African American signers in six southern states: Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia. An additional 20 participants at the meetings of the National Black Deaf Advocates were involved in the study as well. Most Deaf children are born to hearing parents and residential schools have traditionally served as primary sites for the transmission of ASL. We therefore divided participants into two age groups: the older group of 44 participants, ages 55 and older, and the younger group of 32 participants, ages 35 and younger. The age division was motivated by developments in language policy in deaf education in the early 1970s with the passage of Public Law 94-142 (the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975) and in the change of communication methods from oral to signed, which may or may not include ASL (Lucas et al. 2001: 35).

The participants who were 55 or older attended segregated residential schools and lived in dormitories. Before the 1960s, approximately 80% of Deaf students attended residential schools (Lane et. 1996). Each state had one or a few specialized schools for deaf and hard of hearing children and the distance was too far for the children and families to travel daily, hence the need for dormitories. The schools played a larger role in the critical years of language, social, and identity development than did the families of the children because the children stayed at the schools through the year except for scheduled breaks. This educational experience was normal for the older participants as former students at the residential schools; however they were segregated by race. For 38 out of 44 older participants at the segregated schools, the social isolation based on their deafness and their race defined their educational reality and, before desegregation, education for many ended at the 8th grade. It was much more difficult for them to continue through secondary education. After the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the other older participants were part of the generation when desegregation eventually began to take effect during their primary and secondary education so their experiences were, in some ways, different from their older peers based on the extent of contact with white Deaf peers.

The participants who were 35 or younger attended school after racial integration and thus had the possibility of contact with White ASL and other forms of communication. By the 1960s, integration had started to become a reality for students of different races, but some schools and communities were still resistant and they engaged in the structural and economic forms of discrimination that maintain the racial disparity in education to this day. Despite the challenges, secondary education was a possibility for many Black Deaf students in the period when racial integration had become the norm. However, mainstreaming laws were also enacted during this period. These laws encouraged the placement of deaf and hard of hearing students in regular educational settings. Since the 1960s, the percentage of Deaf students attending residential schools has steadily declined. In 2010, the percentage was around 24 (Gallaudet Research Institute, 2011). In the Black ASL study, 27 out of 32 younger participants attended racially integrated residential schools. The other participants were mainstreamed. People between the age of 35 and 55 were not targeted because education and language policies were constantly changing. Hence, their educational reality is not as definable as that of the older and the younger groups.

4 Black ASL Data on Language Attitudes, ASL Acquisition, School Language Varieties, and Teachers

Data for the Black ASL project includes sociolinguistic interviews conducted by Deaf African American members of the research team as well as a variety of elicitation tasks. In this chapter, we focus on comments in the interviews and on several phonological variables that show that, in some respects, the signing of Deaf African Americans is closer to the standard language taught in ASL classes than the signing of their white counterparts.

During the interviews, we asked participants specific questions about their use of language such as when they learned to sign, the languages they used in school, the signing skills of the teachers, older signs that were unique to school and region, and their perception of the difference

between Black and White signing.[3] Table 1 shows the responses to the questions about where and how participants learned to sign.

	55 and older	35 and younger
Where they learned signs		
At school	36	21
At home	1	6
At both	1	2
How they learned signs		
Teachers only	11	0
Teachers and classmates	10	5
Socializing with classmates	3	9
School resources (flashcards, interpreters, books)	4	1
Deaf family	2	5
Non-Deaf family	0	1
Other Deaf adult (non-family)	2	1

Table 1: Signers' ASL acquisition (Reprinted by permission from McCaskill et al. 2011, Table 4.1).

Most of the signers, regardless of age, learned to sign at school. Eleven older signers reported that they learned directly from their teachers while ten other older signers reported that they learned from teachers and classmates. Four older signers said that they learned to sign from other sources such as flashcards and books. Only two signers had Deaf language models to learn from.

Younger signers who learned to sign at school also learned from teachers and classmates. One young signer mentioned an interpreter as a language model. Younger signers who learned at home acquired sign language from Deaf families, but one signer reported that a hearing family member was a language model.

Table 2 shows the number of responses to the question about the racial demography of students at school.

School demography	55 and older	35 and younger
Only Black	38	0
Mostly Black	2	0
Only Black, then mixed	0	4
Mixed	0	26
Mostly White	1	2

Table 2: Race of students at signers' former schools (Reprinted with permission from McCaskill et al. 2011, Table 4.2).

Forty out of 41 older signers reported that their schools had only or mostly black students. One older signer, however, attended a white school. In contrast, most younger signers attended racially integrated schools. Four younger signers reported that they were racially segregated at first and then were allowed to be in racially mixed environments with white peers. Two younger signers reported that they went to school with mostly white students.

Most older signers reported that they had only or mostly black teachers, but seven older signers had only or mostly white teachers. Seven signers reported that they had only white teachers and later had both black and white teachers. Many participants reported that they had

[3] In Tables 1-4, the number of responses may not add up to the total number of signers. Participants were interviewed in groups so if their fellow signers who were alumni of the same school answered the questions, they might not have answered.

hearing teachers and nine from the older and two from the younger group, had Deaf teachers. Table 3 shows responses to the questions about racial identity and hearing or Deaf identity of teachers.

		55+	35–
Race	Black	20	0
	Most Black	5	0
	Both	0	12
	Most White	1	9
	White	6	6
	Black at one school, White at another school	0	6
	White at beginning, then mixed	7	0
Deaf or hearing	Deaf	7	2
	Most Deaf	2	1
	Both	0	5
	Most hearing	2	12
	Most hearing, but then moved to school with both	0	2
	Hearing	23	8

Table 3: Teachers' identities at signers' former schools by age group (Adapted by permission from McCaskill et al. 2011, Table 4.3).

As expected, some younger signers had black and white teachers while other signers had only white or mostly white teachers. Like the older signers, most had hearing teachers. Seven signers had both hearing and deaf teachers (five reported 'both', two reported 'most deaf', and two reported 'most hearing but then moved to school with both').

A few younger and older signers had teachers who were skilled in ASL, but most signers reported that teachers were not signing ASL. Some signers said that teachers communicated through fingerspelling and some other said that teachers signed in SEE. Also, some signers said that their teachers were not skilled in signing. Table 4 summarizes the comments from participants about their teachers' signing skills.

		55+	35-
Teachers' signing	Mostly fingerspelling	2	3
	Unskilled signing	8	9
	Basic signing, simultaneous communication, total communication	3	2
	Signed Exact English	11	7
	ASL signing	8	4
	Some of everything	0	4
Comparison of black and white teachers' signing	The signing is different	14	19
	The signing is similar	0	1
	Undecided	0	2

Table 4: Signers' comments about teachers' signing skills by age group (Adapted by permission from McCaskill et al. 2011, Table 4.4).

In the later part of the interviews, the participants were asked a few questions about the difference between black and white signing. Forty-six signers, divided equally between the two age groups, responded to these questions. Overwhelmingly, signers said that black and white signing differ. Only one signer, from the younger group, said that black and white signing are similar.

5 Black Deaf Signers' Attitudes towards Black ASL

During the coding and analysis phases of the interview data, we noticed a number of common themes emerging related to education and race. The themes were based on the general observations during the analyses that focused on the phonological forms including the lowering of signs like KNOW and the handedness of the signs, lexical variation, and the discourse practice of Black ASL. Our findings, based on comments made by participants, are summarized below.

5.1 Theme 1: "White Deaf Education is Better."

The older signers often stated that their own school was inferior to white deaf schools. They said that their schools had fewer recreational activities, sports, and materials than white schools and their own teachers' signing skills were not as good. They also complained that they did not learn much at school. Some older signers who transferred to white schools reported school materials and assignments were much more difficult than the ones they had in the black deaf schools. Also, the signers who transferred reported that white teachers' signing was so different from their own they could not understand. Some of these signers assumed that the signing was better in the white schools because it was more complex and had a more extensive vocabulary.

Even long after court-ordered desegregation following the 1954 case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, some younger signers complained about education in their racially mixed schools, which formerly had been segregated. For example, one Virginia group had a long discussion about education at their school in Hampton. They felt that the Hampton school was not as good as the Model Secondary School for the Deaf in Washington, D.C. since the racial composition of the school was mixed. One important difference to note was that they did not say that white deaf education was better, but it was still worth noting that even though the formerly segregated school had been desegregated, education had not improved for the students, in their opinion. One young man from Virginia commented, "They really didn't teach us the grammar and the structure of the English language. In school, we never learned how to write an essay. We didn't even learn about … job references or how to list and organize them. It was just the very basics. In fact, most of the time, we just played around in class."[4] As we shall see, signers' opinions about the nature of their educational experience appear to have affected their views of ASL varieties, including their own.

5.2 Theme 2: "White Signing is Better and More Advanced."

Most older signers said that white signing was better because it differed in vocabulary and complexity. One Louisianan signer said that white signing was better because "it was difficult to understand." She was not alone in that sentiment. Many other older signers shared this perception. It may be related to their perception of education. They felt that if it was challenging to understand, then it must be better. One Texas signer said that black signing was "more gestural" and white signing was "more clean," but she added that black Deaf people were not ashamed of their language. The last statement was striking because all signers seemed willing to set aside their signing to adopt white signing and many older signs that they used at the segregated school were no longer in use.

A few younger signers believed that white signing was better than black signing, but not for the same reasons discussed by the older signers. One young Louisiana participant said that white signing was better than black signing because black signing had a thuggish or "street" component that would be inappropriate in some settings, for example, WHAT'S-UP NIGGA? But another Louisiana signer disagreed and said that both black and white signing had proper and improper forms. Most younger signers made positive comments about black signing, which leads to the third theme.

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[4] All signers' comments were in ASL. Because of space limitations, we have only provided the English translations of quotations.

5.3 Theme 3: "Black Signing is Different from White Signing Based on Style, Attitude, and Culture."

While both older and younger signers agreed that black signing differed from white signing, younger signers offered more positive comments about black signing. A group of Texan signers said that black signing was more powerful in expression and movement and it had rhythm and style while white signing was more monotonic and lacking emotion, "not fun to watch", as one of the signers mentioned. Also, this group said that black signers were able to show their true selves in their signing and white signers were snobbish. Nevertheless, one member did say that white signing was polite and courteous in comparison to black signing.

One North Carolina signer made an interesting observation about ASL discourse. She said that black Deaf people do not maintain eye contact during a conversation. In general, maintaining eye contact has an important discourse function in ASL conversation and breaking eye contact is considered impolite. Another North Carolina signer remarked that black Deaf signers tried to behave like black hearing people with similar manners and expressions. She commented: "At school I see Blacks using more body language, more facial expressions, whereas with whites, they use less. They lack affect. Both have the same signs, but in my experience, how Black people use the language is different. It's all in their body language." She continued: "Without question, Black culture is very expressive. Looking back, that's how it is, that's how it was. It's obvious. You just see it."

5.4 Theme 4: "Younger Black Deaf Signers Sign Differently with People Depending on Situation and People."

Younger signers showed awareness of diversity in signing styles and said that they changed their register depending on the situation and the social characteristics of their interlocutors. One Louisianan signer observed that when he socialized with older black Deaf signers, he knew that they signed differently so he tried to accommodate to their signing; when he was with his peers, he signed like them. An older woman from Louisiana attributed her difficulties to communicating with white signers to the quality of white signing rather than to the fact of linguistic difference: "They signed well. They were better than Blacks." One Texan said that when she was at school or work, she was signing 'white' to give a professional appearance as opposed to signing 'black', which was more 'street' as one Virginian remarked. She went on to discussion how her signing with whites depended on the attitudes of the interlocutor: "It depends on the white person. If they're small minded, then I chill, use some simple, shallow conventional signs, but if they're cool, a white person who's accepting and laid back, then it's on, I'm for real." A Virginia group of signers commented that the signing at their school in Hampton was more uniform than the signing at the Model Secondary School for the Deaf.

Both older and younger signers agreed that there was a difference between black and white signing, but they offered divergent reasons for the difference. Older signers held a negative view of black signing based on their experience in segregated schools with fewer activities and resources and with teachers' who had poor signing and teaching skills. Younger signers held a more positive view of black signing as a result their increased metalinguistic awareness and positive black cultural expressions.

6 Attitudes, Perceptions, and Linguistic Realities

Although many participants in the Black ASL Project expressed negative attitudes towards Black ASL or felt that white signing was more "standard", a close analysis of the data shows that, in fact, in many respects black signing is closer to the standard variety taught in ASL classes than white signing elicited in a similar manner. Examples of two phonological variables illustrate the point.

The first example concerns the location of signs like KNOW,[5] which in citation or dictionary form is produced at the temple or the forehead, but that can also be produced a lower location. In addition to KNOW, examples include verbs of perception and thinking such as BELIEVE, DECIDE FORGET, and REMEMBER, nouns such as FATHER and MOTHER, prepositions such as FOR, and interrogatives such as WHY. Results from the Black ASL Project as well as earlier work (Bayley and Lucas 2015; Lucas, et al. 2001) show that African American signers consistently produce a greater percentage of signs in citation form than do their white counterparts. Table 5 summarizes results by age group from four different studies. In the first column after the list of signing varieties, the total number of signs that were produced in either citation or lowered form is listed for each variety. In the next three columns, the percentage of the lowered form of signs in a group of signs produced by the respective groups (35-, 55+, and combined) is listed for each variety.

The data from several studies show a similar pattern in the case of variation between signs that can be produced with one or two hands such as DEER. FINISH, HORSE, NOW, PONDER, SICK, TIRED, and WANT. Whether a signer uses one or two hands does not change the meaning of the sign. However, the two-handed variant is considered to be more traditional and standard, which is also a citation form. As the data in Table 6 show, in almost every case studied, African American signers are more likely to choose the two-handed variant than are their white counterparts. In the column after the list of signing varieties, the total number of signs that were produced in either one-handed or two-handed form is listed for each variety. In the next three columns, the percentage of the one-handed form of signs in a group of signs produced by the respective groups (35-, 55+, and combined) is listed for each variety.

Study	Number of tokens	Younger % lowered	Older % lowered	Total % lowered
Southern Black ASL	877	36	23	29
Louisiana Black ASL	157	44	26	38
Non-southern Black ASL (three sites)	355	50	32	47
White ASL (seven sites)	1,882	60	49	53

Table 5: Location: Comparison of Results for Southern Black ASL, Louisiana Black ASL, and White ASL: age by lowering (% –cf). (Reprinted by permission from McCaskill et al. 2011, Table 5.7).[6]

Study	Number of tokens	Younger % one handed	Older % one handed	Total % one handed
Southern Black ASL	818	40	31	35
Louisiana Black ASL	258	43	24	39
Non-southern Black ASL (three sites)	855	46	44	45
White ASL (four sites)	1,145	57	37	50

Table 6: One-Handed vs. Two-Handed Signs: Comparison of Results for Southern Black ASL, Louisiana Black ASL, non-southern Black ASL, and White ASL: (% One-Handed) (Reprinted with permission from McCaskill et al. 2011, Table 5.2).[7]

[5] In accord with convention, we use capitals for ASL signs. Thus, KNOW refers to the ASL sign, not to the English word with which it corresponds.

[6] Data for northern Black ASL and White ASL are from Lucas et al. (2001). Data from white signers were collected in California, Kansas, Louisiana, Maryland, Virginia, and Washington State. Data from non-southern African Americans were collected in California, Massachusetts, and Missouri. Results for Louisiana ASL are from Bayley and Lucas (2015). Older signers in all studies are 55 or older.

[7] Data in Table 6 are from the same studies as the data in Table 5. The only difference is that Table 6 includes White ASL data from only four sites in California, Kansas, Louisiana, and Massachusetts.

Examples could be multiplied. However, the data shown in this section illustrate the point that perceptions, even those sometimes held by users of a particular variety, can diverge from linguistic reality. In the cases of the phonological variables discussed here, Black ASL is closer to the commonly perceived standard than the corresponding varieties used by white signers. Note, however, that in nearly every case, younger black signers use a higher percentage of the lowered and one-handed variants than their older black counterparts.

7 Conclusion

The comments from participants in the Black ASL Project, combined with the detailed analysis of sociolinguistic variables, reveal a complex set of attitudes toward their unique language variety. On one hand, comments by older signers, perhaps influenced by the poor educational facilities and opportunities they experienced during the period of segregation, suggest that they associated their own variety with the problems they encountered in inferior schools. In fact, many of the older signers had abandoned the lexical forms they had used when they were younger and adopted the signs used by the white Deaf community. Nevertheless, quantitative analysis of a number of sociolinguistic variables reported in McCaskill et al. (2011) shows that in some respects older black signers were more likely to choose the standard forms taught in ASL classes than either younger black signers or white signers of any age.

Younger black signers expressed more positive attitudes towards black signing and also showed considerable evidence of the incorporation of AAVE into their signing (Lucas, Bayley, McCaskill, & Hill 2015). With respect to several of the sociolinguistic variables examined by McCaskill et al. (2011), however, the younger black signers used more –cf variants than the older black signers and in that respect were more similar to their white counterparts. Nevertheless, as Hill (2012) notes, differences between black and white signing remained, particularly at the lexical level. Hill notes how expressions borrowed from AAVE such as DANG ("I feel you" or "I know that's right") and GIRL PLEASE are regarded as English in the mainstream American Deaf community, although they are acceptable in Black ASL.

We began this article with a discussion of how attitudes toward language varieties provide a window into how people view themselves and others within their socio-historical context. The attitudes and perceptions expressed by participants in the Black ASL Project are complex and differ considerably by age group. Younger signers, in particular, express pride in black styles of signing and readily incorporate items from AAVE into their signing. Although there is evidence that in some respects black signing is converging with white signing as a result of greater contact, there is also evidence that indicates that younger black signers are continuing to develop a distinct variety that reflects the reality of their own lives.

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