Sign languages in Africa
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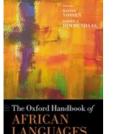
68   Sign Languages 🔓

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Abstract

African sign languages present a rich field for linguistic research. Locally evolved sign languages include an old village sign language like Adamorobe sign language (Ghana), and the very young village sign language of Bouakako (Côte d'Ivoire). They also include the emerging national sign language of Guinea-Bissau, following the establishment of the first deaf school in 2004, and the young family sign language of Berbey in Mali. Studies on locally evolved sign languages find structure and characteristics that seem to be typologically rare, based on the current set of (mainly Western) sign languages studied. In many countries, the sign language situation is highly multilingual, with deaf schools using a sign language that either originated in a Western country or was heavily influenced by one or more Western sign languages. More sign language research is badly needed to establish, improve, and expand facilities to provide deaf citizens with access to society.

Keywords: Adamorobe, Ghana, sign language, deaf school, structure, characteristic Adamorobe, Ghana, sign language, deaf school, structure, characteristic

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68.1 Introduction

STUDIES on sign languages, the natural languages of deaf communities, over the past decades have shown that sign languages are full-fledged languages, with independent grammars and lexicons.[1] However, most of the sign languages studied so far are (1) of Western origin and (2) used by large deaf communities that evolved around deaf schools. Little is known about African sign languages, many of which evolved outside the context of deaf education. The few studies that have been done on African sign languages reveal unique features, such as (a) the absence of a system of entity classifier predicates expressing motion and location in Adamorobe sign language (Nyst 2007) and (b) association of gender in kinship terms to the ipsi- and contralateral locations on the chest (Wilkinson 2009). These and other findings underline the need for further descriptive studies on African sign languages. Such studies are not only relevant for (sign language) typology, but for a number of other domains in linguistics as well, including language contact, change, shift, acquisition, creation, and emergence. The African continent houses numerous sign languages in highly diverse social settings, each with its own relevance for current issues in linguistics.

This chapter gives an overview of the main types of sign languages found on the African continent, outlining the linguistic and societal issues they can contribute to.

68.2 Emergence and creation

With limited access to deaf schools in many parts of Africa, the establishment of the first school for the deaf in an area typically leads to the evolvement of a new signing community. Often the initiators of such schools provide the school with a sign language, e.g. the sign ↳ language used in other deaf schools in the country. Another common phenomenon is that the sign language of the country of origin of the foreign initiators or supporters of the school gets to be used as the sign language of instruction, as is the case, e.g., in the Gambia, where sign language of the Netherlands is used at the school for the deaf (Brandstetter 2009).

Where the initiators do not favor the use of sign language in education, this may actually provide room for the (continued) development of a local sign language in and around the deaf school (though typically outside of the classroom setting). Apparent examples of this scenario are the schools for the deaf set up by Dutch Catholic missionaries in Malawi and Tanzania (Tabora). Such schools now provide a possibility to study the structure, use, and transmission of a local sign language in the (broader) context of deaf education, as well as the impact on it of a policy discouraging the use of sign language in education.

Where sign linguists have been involved in the establishment of deaf schools, typically a third scenario is found in which the spontaneous development of a local sign language is fostered. This has been the case in Guinea-Bissau (Martins and Morgado 2016) and—albeit short-lived—in Mali (Pinsonneault 1999). In some cases, the linguistic point of departure for this development was the collection of home sign systems deaf pupils brought from their homes, as, e.g., in Mauritius (Gebert *et al.* 2006). Like the newly emerged Nicaraguan sign language (Kegl *et al.* 1999), Mauritius's sign language appears to undergo rapid restructuring (Adone 2005). The majority of African signing varieties and communities, however, have arisen spontaneously, outside a context of deaf education.

68.3 Sign languages outside the context of deaf education

Signing communities that evolved outside a context of deaf education come in various types. Some of these communities evolved or have their point of gravity in urban settings, e.g. in the signing communities in Kano, northern Nigeria (Schmaling 2000, 2011), and in Bamako, Mali (Nyst 2010; Pinsonneault 1999). An extensive corpus of the latter sign language is accessible at the Endangered Language Archive in London.

Whereas urban deaf communities typically have over fifty signing members, signing communities in rural areas are typically much smaller (but see Jirou 2000 for an account of a minute signing community in the city of Mbour, Senegal; and Nyst *et al.* 2012 for a small signing community in Douentza, Mali). Many—if not most—deaf people in rural areas do not have regular contact with a community of deaf signers. They do typically have some signed communication with their hearing environment, to highly differing degrees, and as such can be referred to as home signers. Nyst *et al.* (2012) describe the results of a survey of deaf people, including home signers, in the Dogon rural area in Mali, together with reflections on the comparability of rural home signing and the home signing of deaf children raised in an oralist[2] tradition in the United States and other countries. In addition ↳ to home signers, the same survey encountered various small signing communities. One of them consisted of a family with three generations of deaf members. Families with hereditary deafness are not uncommon and are found in other parts of Africa as well, e.g. the (extended) family. A high incidence of deafness may start off in one family and gradually spread across the community, as in the case of the Ivorian village of Bouakako, Tano (2016). The sign language of Adamorobe, an Akan village in Ghana, probably followed the same scenario, as it has had a high incidence of hereditary deafness for as long as anyone can remember (Nyst 2007). Another micro-community encountered during the survey in the Dogon area appeared to have a high incidence of deafness following an outbreak of meningitis. The consistency and fluency of the signing appeared to be much higher in the micro-community with hereditary deafness than in the one with non-hereditary deafness (according to the intuitions of the native signers leading the survey). The comparison of these two communities can reveal how patterns of transmission, shaped by genetic conditions, impact on sign language structure and use. Outbreaks of meningitis and other infectious diseases notorious for causing deafness occur at regular intervals in the entire dry area between Senegal in the west and Somalia in the east, the so-called "meningitis belt". Thus, communities with a high incidence of non-hereditary deafness and a spontaneously evolved sign language may be common in other parts of this belt as well.

Like the young sign languages in newly started school communities, sign languages of "deaf families" and communities with a recent increase in the incidence of deafness open a window on the dynamics of the emergence and/or radical change of sign languages.

68.4 Language change and contact

The sign languages that were imported to Africa some decades ago, together with deaf education, enable us to examine the nature and degree of change they have undergone as compared to historical or contemporary varieties of those sign languages in the country of origin. The most widespread sign language of non-African origin is beyond doubt American Sign Language (ASL). This sign language[3] was initially introduced by an American missionary, Rev. Andrew Foster, and has remained popular to this day for various reasons which are strikingly parallel to the reasons for the popularity of former colonial languages (see Okombo 1992). Although various African deaf communities keep being exposed to US variants of ASL, changes away from US variants are implemented in various ways. New signs are created to complement the lexicon with items for local concepts, such as food items, place names, or festivals. In French-speaking countries, a variety of ASL is used that has been adapted to French (Tamomo 1994). Kamei (2006) has coined the term "Langue des Signes Franco-Africaine" for these varieties. In addition, several US signers of ASL have commented that West African varieties of ASL seem to have preserved more archaic forms, an interesting issue for further study. In various countries more than one foreign sign ↳ language was introduced which merged into one main variety, e.g. the sign languages of Eritrea (Moges 2015) and Uganda (Lule and Wallin 2010). Studies of such sign languages with various lexifier languages can cast new light on the field of language contact, potentially changing our understanding of language creolization and language mixing. Some foreign sign languages were imported from neighboring countries, rather than from non-African countries. Several deaf Ugandans attended deaf schools in Kenya for reasons of security and the lack of secondary education for the deaf in Uganda. Upon their return they brought with them Kenyan Sign Language (KSL) signs, some of which became part of Ugandan SL. Another example is found in the school for the deaf in Wajir, in the North-Eastern Province of Kenya, where most of the deaf pupils are Somali refugees and where Somali SL is used among the deaf students (Evans Namasaka, p.c.).

68.5 Multimodal communication

The average incidence of deafness is estimated at between 0.2% and 0.4% for African countries, as compared to 0.01% and 0.1% for Western countries. Together with limited access to hearing aids, this means that having a deaf signer in one's regular interactional environment is much more common in Africa than in the West, generally speaking. As a consequence, more people may have basic signing skills in Africa than in Western countries. In addition, the predominance of oral, mostly face-to-face communication over written communication in parts of Africa, often in multilingual settings, may favor the use of gestures in general. It is a highly interesting question how these factors interlock with patterns in multimodal communication. Sorin-Barreteau's (1996) account of an extensive repertoire of conventional gestures known by hearing speakers of Mofu-Gudur in Cameroon suggests that the impact can be considerable.

68.6 Language policies and applied benefits

Research on African sign languages can benefit society importantly. Firstly, the full participation of deaf citizens in society is often complicated by a lack of access to information, particularly in industrialized societies. To improve access to information in schools, job settings, and society more generally, sign language facilities such as interpreters and sign language teachers are indispensable. However, to develop adequate training programs and materials for them, knowledge about the phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon of a country's sign language is essential. It is crucially important that linguistics departments join forces with National Associations of the Deaf to set up such training facilities, leading not only to skilled interpreters but also offering an opportunity to deaf people to further their education up to university level, where they are heavily underrepresented at present.

Much in parallel to local spoken languages, the potential of using local sign languages in education is often

overlooked. Signers in rural communities typically do not have access to ↳ special education, as many

countries have just one or two deaf schools in urban centers. Cynically, the lack of education affects deaf children twice as hard as hearing children. For deaf children, education not only means access to information but also a place to meet deaf peers and role models. The challenges for opening a school for the deaf in remote areas seem to be many, including finding a teacher and his or her salary. The high incidence of deafness in remote areas, however, comes with an overlooked opportunity, i.e. the relatively regular interaction with deaf signers leads to basic signing skills in many hearing people, including teachers. Saturday or afternoon classes for deaf children in existing schools can serve as a meeting ground for deaf children and as a means to convince government agencies and community members of the need for and benefit of a more established deaf school.

Finally, research on African sign languages creates awareness about their linguistic status, as such empowering deaf communities to use their native language to more fully participate in society.

68.7 Conclusion

Little is known about the rich diversity in sign languages in Africa. This is striking, as the types of sign languages used provide valuable opportunities for examining old and new questions in linguistics pertaining to the domains of language contact, change, creation, and transmission. More importantly, research on African sign languages directly benefits deaf communities and, as such, society at large.

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Notes

1   For an overview of sign languages in West Africa, see Nyst (2010). For an overview of historical references to signers and sign language in Africa, see Miles (2004). For an overview of dictionaries of African sign languages, see Schmaling (2011).
2   The term "oralist" refers to the ideology of interacting with deaf people avoiding signing in favor of speech.
3   Or at least its lexicon, in the form of signed English; ASL signs with English grammar (Oteng 1988).

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