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**A SKETCH OF THE LINGUISTIC
GEOGRAPHY OF SIGNED
LANGUAGES IN THE
CARIBBEAN**

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A Sketch of the Linguistic Geography of Signed Languages in the Caribbean^{1,2}

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I. Introduction

“THE Caribbean... is the location of almost every type of linguistic phenomenon, and of every type of language situation. For example, trade and contact jargons, creole languages and dialects, ethnic vernaculars, and regional and nonstandard dialects are all spoken. There are also ancestral languages used for religious purposes..., regional standards, and international standards. And there is multilingualism, bilingualism, monolingualism, diglossia, and a post-creole continuum.”

(Alleyne 1985: 156)

In the Caribbean panoply of linguistic phenomena described by Alleyne, one major set of languages is missing: the signed languages of the various deaf³ communities of the region. Here, as in many other parts of the world, linguistic research into signed languages is still in its early stages: there are certainly many more signed languages in the world than linguists have yet identified, and there remain large areas in which no sign language linguist has worked. But, while there is much that we still have to learn

¹ For the purposes of this paper, I take the Caribbean to include the islands within the Caribbean Sea, in addition Belize, French Guiana, Guyana, and Suriname. Although the paper mentions Colombia, it focuses only on the archipelago of San Andrés and Providencia, located in the Western Caribbean.

² I owe thanks to many people who have helped me in writing this paper. Special thanks to Beppie van den Bogaerde (Kajana signing), Rian Gayle and Bertram Gayle (Jamaica), Carlos Felix Newball and Arelis Howard (Old Providence), and Sabine McIntosh, Jeremiah Williams and James Williams (Guyana) for sharing their knowledge and insights. There are too many members of the deaf community in Trinidad and Tobago who have helped me to understand the sign language situation here for me to thank each person individually, but the work and insights of Leslie Ali, Ian Dhanoolal, Kathy-Ann Drayton, Azim Kallan, Alicia Lamb, Ryan Ramgattan, Bryan Rodrigues and Paulson Skerrit have been particularly valuable to me in writing this paper. Special thanks to Azim Kallan for modelling several TTSL signs for this paper.

³ Given the variety of situations and the lack of available information on which to base such distinctions, I have chosen not to follow the standard practice in sign language linguistics of distinguishing orthographically between ‘deaf’ to refer to audiological deafness, and ‘Deaf’ to indicate membership of a signing community. However, this distinction is used in the community with which I am most familiar, the one in Trinidad and Tobago.

about the signed languages of the Caribbean, we are now able to provide at least a sketch of the linguistic landscape. It is clear that the Caribbean is home to a rich variety of signed languages, some indigenous, some brought from outside; there are complex contact situations of various kinds, both between signed languages, and cross-modally, between spoken and signed languages; new languages are emerging, as others are on the verge of disappearing forever. This paper provides an introduction to some of that variety.

Published work on signed languages and deaf communities of the Caribbean is still relatively scarce. One of the pioneers of sign language linguistics, Bernard Tervoort, mentioned observing what appeared to be an indigenous signed language in Suriname when he passed through in 1970 (Tervoort 1978). Washabaugh, Woodward, and DeSantis produced groundbreaking work on the indigenous signed language of Providence Island (Washabaugh et al. 1978; Washabaugh 1980a; 1980b, 1981a, 1985, 1986; Woodward 1979, 1982, 1987) and Washabaugh also conducted research on Grand Cayman (Washabaugh 1981b). Dolman (1985, 1986), meanwhile, identified another indigenous sign language in St. Elizabeth, Jamaica. Gerner de Garcia (1990, 1994) provided some historical and ethnographic descriptions of the deaf communities of the Dominican Republic, and Frishberg (1987) and Fraticelli (1994) provide some information on the development of the deaf community in Puerto Rico.

In recent years, the volume of work has increased. Surveys by linguists from SIL International have brought together observations from previous studies and contributed new research in sketches of deaf communities across most of the region, including Haiti (Parks 2011), Jamaica (Parks et al. 2011), the Dominican Republic (Williams & Parks 2010), Puerto Rico (Williams & Parks 2012), Trinidad, St. Vincent and Grenada (Parks & Parks 2012), Belize (Epley & Parks 2013), and an overview of the region (Parks and Williams 2011). In Suriname, Kusters' Master's thesis is based on anthropological research among the deaf community of Paramaribo (Kusters 2006), and van den Bogaerde identified another indigenous signed language used in a Saramaccan village in the interior (van den Bogaerde 2005a,b).

Cumberbatch's PhD thesis provides a description of a variety of Jamaican Sign Language (JSL) used in Kingston, Jamaica (Cumberbatch 2012a), and she subsequently provided an overview of the same language Cumberbatch (2015a). There has also been new work on the distinct signed language identified by Dolman in St. Elizabeth (Cumberbatch 2012b, 2015b; Adone et al. 2012). Braithwaite, Drayton, and Lamb (2011) sketch the history of deaf education and language policy in Trinidad and Tobago. Braithwaite (2014) discusses some issues relating to human rights and ethics in researching sign languages in the Caribbean. There is a growing body of work on sign language in Cuba (for example, Eligio de la Puente 1995; Padilla Fernández 2007). Some national governments have also taken

steps towards supporting the documentation and recognition of national sign languages, and there have been sign language dictionaries published in Trinidad and Tobago, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba. Hochgesang and McAuliff (2016) provide an initial description of Haitian Sign Language, and discuss some ethical considerations in documenting signed languages. Braithwaite, Kwok and Omardeen (2015) identify a previously undescribed sign language used in several Wapishana villages in the south of Guyana. Braithwaite (2016) provides a brief overview of sign languages in the region, and Braithwaite and Lamb (2016) discuss the history of Caribbean deaf communities.

This paper makes no attempt to be comprehensive: there is no space for that, and anyway, too much is still unknown. Instead, it provides a sketch of some of what we do know. It aims to be of interest to two distinct groups of readers. To Caribbean linguists who wish to know more about the languages of the deaf communities in the region, it provides an introduction to the current state of knowledge. It is also intended to be of interest to sign language linguists, for whom the map of the Caribbean has been relatively blank. It brings together existing research from across the region, supplemented by some new observations from my own field research in Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada, Guyana, and Providence Island.

The paper starts (Section 2) by describing where the signed languages used in the Caribbean came from. Because all of these languages exist alongside at least one spoken language, and, in many cases, alongside other signed languages in a single territory, language contact is inevitable. Section 3 discusses some instances of contact, both monomodal and cross-modal, considering how this has contributed not only to the creation and development of new languages, but also to language endangerment and death. Section 4 provides some structural comparisons between signed languages of the region, focusing on the lexicon, phonology and word order. Section 5 concludes the study.

Before proceeding, a note is in order regarding language names. As well as the languages themselves, naming conventions for signed languages have been imported from outside the region. Thus, most of the languages are referred to by the name of the place in which they are spoken, followed by 'Sign Language' (or equivalents in other spoken languages, as in *Langue des Signes Française*), and typically abbreviated. This easily can lead to confusion; for example, the acronym 'JSL' has been used to refer to Jamaican Sign Language (Cumberbatch 2012a) and Japanese Sign Language (Ktejik 2013). And the acronym 'PISL' has been used to refer to Providence Island Sign Language (Nyst 2012) and Plains Indian Sign Language (Davis 2010).

Table 1. Names, acronyms, locations and types of signed languages mentioned in this paper

Type	Name	Acronym	Location ⁴
Rural	Jamaican Country Sign / Konchri Sain	JCS	St. Elizabeth, Jamaica
Rural	Kajana signing	n/a	Kajana, Suriname
Rural	Providence Island Sign Language	PISL	Providence Island, Colombia
Rural	Old Caymanian Sign Language	n/a	Grand Cayman
National	Colombian Sign Language	n/a	San Andrés Island; Providence Island
National	Cuban Sign Language / Lengua de Señas Cubanas	LSC	Cuba
National	Dominican Republic Sign Language	DRSL	Dominican Republic
National	Haitian Sign Language	HSL	Haiti
National	Jamaican Sign Language	JSL	Jamaica
National	Puerto Rican Sign Language	PRSL	Puerto Rico
National	Surinamese Sign Language	SSL	Paramaribo, Suriname
National	Trinidad and Tobago Sign Language	TTSL	Trinidad and Tobago
Imported	American Sign Language	ASL	Trinidad and Tobago; Cuba; Jamaica; Dominican Republic; Puerto Rico; Cayman Islands; St. Lucia; Grenada; Guyana
Imported	British Sign Language	BSL	Trinidad and Tobago; Jamaica
Imported	French Sign Language / Langue des Signes Française	LSF	Guadeloupe; Martinique; French Guiana
Imported	Sign Language of the Netherlands / Nederlandse Gebarentaal	NGT	Suriname, Aruba, Curaçao, Bonaire

Given the potential for confusion, Table 1 provides a list of the languages mentioned in the paper, along with abbreviations I have used to refer to them. The names used in this paper reflect common usage in the

⁴ Note also that the data listed in column 4 of Table 1 include only those locations mentioned in this paper. Several of these languages are used in other locations in the region too.

academic literature, which may not correspond to community preferences. For example, the indigenous sign language of St. Elizabeth Parish in Jamaica is referred to by Dolman (1985, 1986) as Country Sign. Cumberbatch made the decision to refer to the language using the orthography for Jamaican Creole (Cumberbatch 2015b), hence 'Konchri Sain'. Some members of the deaf community of Jamaica have objected to this change, on the grounds that this orthography is not generally known within the deaf community, and that it is based on the sounds of spoken language.⁵ For that reason, I have used the English orthography here. Some communities may not have needed a name for their language, while others may have more than one name. In Trinidad and Tobago, the language which preceded the arrival of American Sign Language (ASL) in the country, and which is referred to in this paper as Trinidad and Tobago Sign Language (TTSL), is referred to by many older signers using the sign in Figure 1. Younger signers tend to refer to it, using the ASL manual alphabet, as T-T-S-L, T-S-L, or sometimes T-T-S.



Figure 1. Older signers' variety of the sign for Trinidad and Tobago Sign Language (TTSL)

Note also that this is not intended to be a comprehensive list of all the signed languages which have been used or are currently in use in the region. Such a list would be much longer. There are certainly more indigenous signed languages which are not mentioned here: researchers from the Netherlands have recently identified what appears to be another rural signing community in Suriname,⁶ and I have seen evidence in Guyana of what appears to be a language quite distinct from the ASL used by many younger signers in Georgetown.

Other international signed languages have been used in the Caribbean too: a native signer of Japanese Sign Language has spent a

⁵ Rian Gayle, personal communication (circa 2014).

⁶ Beppie van den Bogaerde, personal communication (circa 2014).

significant amount of time in Trinidad and Tobago over the last decade or so, and a user of Finnish Sign Language was one of the first teachers at the first deaf school in St. Lucia (Nieminen 1990). Indeed, it is quite conceivable that further research might find traces of the influence of Finnish Sign Language in St. Lucia. This and other languages are left off the list for the simple reason that the paper has nothing more to say about them.

Many sign language communities in the Caribbean are very small: in Providence Island, for example, Washabaugh (1986) identified a total of 20 deaf signers, although the total signing community, which includes a large proportion of the hearing population, is certainly larger. In such contexts, a single signer can have a huge influence on the linguistic development of a whole community. The influence of British Sign Language (BSL), for example, which can still be seen today in the language of older signers in Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago, seems to have been the result of the influence of a single native BSL signer, Frederick Gilby (see Section 2.2).

2. The origins of Caribbean signed languages

Just as every community of hearing people in the world has its own spoken language(s), wherever there are communities of deaf people, there are signed languages. The proportion of people in any population who are born deaf varies considerably across space and time, and is affected by many factors such as genetics and the prevalence of various kinds of infectious diseases. There is no doubt that there must have been deaf people in the Caribbean since before the arrival of Europeans, though I know of no direct evidence, and no signed language has been traced back that far. Fraticelli (1994: 208) points out that the introduction of chickenpox and other diseases brought by the post-Columbian influx of foreigners, which had such disastrous effects on the indigenous populations, would probably also have resulted in a higher incidence of deafness.

While we can be confident that there have been deaf people in the Caribbean for hundreds of years, the presence of deaf people does not guarantee the existence of deaf communities and signed languages. For that, deaf people must have the opportunity to come together regularly, and various factors may prevent this from happening. In some places, deaf people may be scattered across a wide geographical area without the opportunity to meet. In St. Lucia, for example, it seems that no deaf community existed prior to the foundation of the first school for deaf children in the 1970s. Instead, deaf people seem to have largely stayed

close to their family homes, and communicated to hearing family and neighbours using home signing systems (Nieminen 1990).

Certain kinds of societal attitudes can also make it difficult for deaf communities to form. In such a culturally diverse region, there is undoubtedly considerable variation in such attitudes, and Woodward (1982) argued that the attitudes towards deaf people in Providence Island were “relatively positive”. It is not unusual, however, for the birth of a deaf child to be viewed as something shameful, or as a result of divine punishment of the mother. Sadly, such attitudes persist in parts of the region to this day, with the result that some deaf individuals are kept at home, denied access to education, and crucially, also denied the opportunity to meet other deaf people and to acquire an accessible language. Deaf individuals, deprived of linguistic input, grow up alingual, or relying on systems of gestures or home signs. No deaf community develops, and no sign language, beyond the scattered systems of gestures and home signs in those families with deaf members.

2.1 Rural sign languages

In some communities, however, there exists a sufficiently high proportion of deaf people that a signing community emerges. Probably the earliest Caribbean signed language about which we have a fair amount of information is used on the Colombian island of Providencia, or Old Providence, as it is known to most Providencians. Washabaugh (1986) identified 20 deaf people in the total population of around 3,000. Deafness in Old Providence is associated with both syndromatic and non-syndromatic genetic factors (Tamayo et al. 1998). A consequence of this high concentration of deaf people was the emergence of a unique sign language, used not only by the deaf Providencians, but also by the hearing (Washabaugh 1979).

The situation in Old Providence is not unique. Recent interest in rural sign languages has led to the publication of a volume collecting together work on various rural signing communities around the world (Zeshan & de Vos 2012). The Caribbean is home to several communities of this kind. Dolman (1985, 1986) describes the deaf community living in the St. Elizabeth parish of Jamaica near the villages of Top Hill and Junction. The language, known in the literature as Jamaican Country Sign (JCS) or Konchri Sain, was used quite widely, by both deaf and hearing people of the area, though contact with other signed languages in the last three decades means that it is now highly endangered (Cumberbatch 2012b).

In other cases, glimpses of similar languages have been fleeting. As reported by Doran (1952), a high incidence of deafness in Grand Cayman is reflected in census data going back as far as 1911, and Washabaugh

(1981b) found evidence for the presence of a large deaf population going back before this. As in Old Providence, a signed language seems to have emerged in Grand Cayman, including, unusual for such rural varieties, a unique system of fingerspelling (i.e., manually representing the letters of the Roman alphabet). As in St. Elizabeth, contact with JSL and ASL disrupted the transmission of Old Caymanian Sign Language. The extent to which the language developed, and continues to be used is not currently known, though Washabaugh said as far back as 1981 that “[a]ctual signing by the deaf is full of variations, some due to recent borrowing from other sign languages” (Washabaugh 1981b: 123).

Tervoort describes coming across an Amerindian village in Suriname⁷ in which a signed language was being used, in 1970. He wrote: “My strong conviction after watching them and communicating with them for some time was that upon scrutiny they might well have turned out to be native and monolingual signers of a purely visual communication system” (Tervoort 1978: 199). He was unable to do any further research on this apparent language, nor has any linguist since, although van den Bogaerde observed a Surinamese village sign language in the Saramaccan village of Kajana (van den Bogaerde 2005a,b).

2.2 Schools

Outside of these small communities in which deafness was sufficiently high for a sign language to emerge, the development of deaf communities has often depended on the establishment of institutions, especially schools, to provide a meeting place for generations of deaf children. These schools laid the foundations for new deaf communities, and from them several new signed languages sprang. Most famously this happened in Managua, Nicaragua (Senghas et al. 2004), but it turns out that Nicaraguan Sign Language is not unique in the way that it emerged, and that very similar developments have also taken place across the Caribbean. As well as leading to the birth of entirely new signed languages, it was through deaf schools that several established sign languages from outside the region were introduced. In order to understand the sign language landscape of the Caribbean, therefore, it is crucial to understand the histories of deaf education.

The establishment of the first schools for deaf children in the Caribbean took place at different times and in different places during the course of the twentieth century. The earliest schools were established in Cuba and Puerto Rico during the first decade of the twentieth century (Fratelli 1994; *The Deaf in Cuba* 1906). Over the late 1930s and 1940s,

⁷ Tervoort provides no further information on the location or ethnic group of the village.

the first schools were established in Jamaica, Trinidad, Haiti, and Suriname. Furthermore, a major Caribbean rubella epidemic in the early 1960s led to a spike in the number of deaf babies being born, and greater awareness of the need for educational provisions for such children.⁸ The decade that followed saw the opening of the first schools in Guyana, the Dominican Republic, Dominica, and Barbados.

The language policies in deaf schools have varied considerably. Often, schools were established by missionaries from outside the region, who brought teaching approaches and language policies with them. Sometimes, this meant the use of a signed language from outside the region. The first teacher of the deaf in Cuba was a deaf American missionary, Mrs. Corey, who brought ASL with her ("Mrs. Corey and the Deaf of Cuba" 1914). ASL was also introduced elsewhere at various times. As in Cuba, a deaf American teacher used ASL when the first school was established in the 1970s in St. Lucia (Nieminen 1990), and ASL has continued to spread across much of the region, as it has across much of the world. Other imported sign languages reflected former or ongoing colonial relationships: French Sign Language (LSF according to its French acronym) has been used in deaf education in French Guiana, Martinique, and Guadeloupe, and Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT according to its Dutch acronym) is used in Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, and Suriname (Parks & Williams 2011).

The first deaf schools in Jamaica and Trinidad were established largely as the result of the work of Frederick Gilby, an Anglican priest and native signer of British Sign Language (BSL), who had worked in deaf education all his life in Britain, and later in South Africa. In the first years of the school in Jamaica, Gilby taught using BSL, and BSL was also used for a short time in the first school in Trinidad (Case 1948). Soon after Gilby left, however, the schools switched to an alternative language policy, which discouraged the use of any signed language. As a result, the impact of BSL in Trinidad and Jamaica seems to have been limited, though traces can be found in Trinbagonian signing in Trinidad and Tobago today.

For most of the middle part of the twentieth century, across much of the region, deaf schools in the Caribbean adopted oralist approaches, which focused on the development of speech and writing, and often completely banned the use of any sign language. The negative views of signed languages were consistent with international trends in deaf education which saw the primary goal as teaching deaf students to speak and lip-read, and which saw signed languages as a threat to this goal. No doubt, local norms and attitudes also played an important role. Roberts (2007: 181), describing attitudes in West Indian classrooms generally, makes the following observations:

⁸ Karmody (1969) describes the rubella outbreak in Trinidad between 1960 and 1961, and Ali, Hull, and Lewis (1986) describe another major outbreak there in 1983–84.

In the classroom situation in the West Indies, proper posture has traditionally been stressed and the use of hands and arms discouraged as supplements to or replacements of speech. In the case of the head, nodding and shaking of the head are not disapproved of generally in the society, but in child-adult interaction and in the classroom situation as replacements for speech, they are discouraged.

Ironically, this approach created a fertile environment for the creation of completely new signed languages, especially in places where there were residential schools in which deaf children spent much of their lives together outside of the classroom. In Trinidad, although BSL was used to some extent in the first few years, teaching soon switched to the oralist approach. Deaf people who were at the Cascade School for the Deaf during the 1950s and 1960s recall having to keep their hands behind their backs during class, and being taught lip-reading and undergoing speech drills. Once classes were finished and they were together in the dormitory, however, they signed to each other. Since they had never been taught a signed language, they improvised, and over several years, a new language emerged, passed on and enriched by successive cohorts (Braithwaite et al. 2011).

In Jamaica, the situation was very similar. In an essay written in 1948, the first West Indian teacher of the deaf, Florette Case, who was headmistress of the schools for the deaf in both Jamaica, and then in Trinidad, quotes a letter from the headmistress of the school in Browns Town, Jamaica, complaining that, despite the efforts to impose oralism, the older children “have evolved such a system of signing that teaching lip-reading is a hopeless task” (Case 1948: 39). It seems that in Jamaica, there may well have been a signing community near to Kingston even before the establishment of the first deaf school. However, more research is needed to establish the extent to which any pre-existing signed language influenced the development of signing in the first deaf schools.

Similar stories appear at different times and in different places. Mabel Haynes, an American who worked at the deaf school in Havana at the beginning of the twentieth century, wrote that the children she taught would often sign to each other when her back was turned, noting that they did not use the ASL which had been introduced by her predecessor in the school, but rather “signs of their own origin” (“Mrs. Corey and the Deaf of Cuba” 1914: 168). As it turned out, the influence of ASL in Cuba was quite short, and an oralist policy was adopted for much of the twentieth century. As a result, another indigenous sign language, Cuban Sign Language (LSC), incubated and flourished. In Suriname, in addition to Kajana signing and NGT (not to mention the language glimpsed by Tervoort), a Surinamese

Sign Language has also been identified, associated with the Kennedy School and members of the deaf community in Paramaribo (Kusters 2006: 99).

Having helped to establish the first schools in Trinidad and Jamaica, Gilby travelled to Guyana (then British Guiana) and Barbados. He was unable to raise sufficient funds to establish schools, but did help to set up clubs for deaf adults. What language(s) these adults used when they met, how long these clubs lasted, and the extent to which these languages continue to be used today are all questions which require further research. The fact that we know of meetings of deaf people prior to the establishment of deaf schools in these places is significant because it suggests the possibility of signing varieties which pre-date the schools. Of course, it is possible that there are members of those early clubs still alive, so it may yet be possible to investigate such questions.

Although sign languages were imported from outside, there is no doubt that these changed on Caribbean hands almost immediately. Nieminen, one of the first teachers in St. Lucia, reports that the children would quickly alter the ASL signs used by their teacher, Clyde Vincent (Nieminen 1990: 57):

Many signs that Clyde teaches change in the children's language into easier ones, like *what* and *who*. It's hard to remember the difference between the words *what* and *who*. And why do the[y] sign in such a complicated manner?⁹ So *what* and *who* are signed in the children's sign language just by touching the lips with the forefinger.

The children also quickly introduced their own linguistic innovations there, as in Cuba (Nieminen 1990: 57):

Fa-fa is a sign one of the children has invented and the other children have adopted so strongly that there's no point explaining to them what the American sign for 'far' is like.

Schools provided a point of arrival for signed languages from outside the region, but they also provided routes for signed languages from one part of the Caribbean to spread to another. We know, for example, that Barbadian children attended Cascade School for the Deaf in Trinidad during the period in which Barbados lacked a deaf school. When they left

⁹ Nieminen does not describe the 'target' ASL forms for 'who' and 'what', and there are several variants in that language. What does seem to be clear from her description is that the children's modified versions were phonetically simpler than the ASL equivalents. It is easy to imagine that such changes might have been guided by phonological considerations such as ease of articulation. It would be interesting to investigate the ways in which the ASL varieties which have developed out of situations such as these differ from ASL used in the US, and to see how different the developing varieties of ASL used around the world now are.

Cascade and returned to Barbados, they took whatever linguistic systems they had acquired with them. Again, although some of these people may still be alive, no research has yet looked into what happened next, and whether the language that developed in Trinidad went on to spread in Barbados. Similarly, the deaf schools in Jamaica served a fairly wide area: before a deaf school was established in Grand Cayman, it was quite common for deaf children to go to Jamaica to be educated, where they learned JSL¹⁰ (Washabaugh 1981b: 129).

Religious missionaries have played a very significant role in shaping the geography of signing in the Caribbean. For example, missionaries from Puerto Rico established a school in the Dominican Republic, and it has been suggested that sign language in the Dominican Republic has been heavily influenced by a Puerto Rican variety of ASL as a result (Gerner de Garcia 1990: 261). The introduction of signed languages by missionaries and others continues to take place. The Jehovah's Witnesses have been particularly active in many parts of the region over recent years, and make use of ASL, NGT and LSF materials in their congregations, depending on the area. Attitudes of missionaries to indigenous sign languages seems to have varied: in some cases, missionaries seem to be open to learning and using rural or national sign languages, whilst in others, an imported language is insisted upon. Gerner de Garcia (1994: 112) reports that "[t]he missionaries now working in the Dominican Republic do not accept indigenous signs. They correct the Dominicans' use of indigenous signs, offering the ASL sign as the 'right' one." More research is needed to determine whether missionaries in other parts of the region brought similar attitudes.

Educational policies in Caribbean deaf schools have shifted, sometimes very abruptly, between very different approaches. In the 1970s, the popularity of oralism waned, and ASL was introduced to many schools which had previously adopted oralist approaches. In Trinidad and Tobago, this meant that the underground sign language of the deaf children (which was evidently not well understood by their hearing teachers) suddenly came into contact with ASL. On top of that, signing codes based on the lexicon of ASL, but with grammatical features altered in an attempt to represent the grammar of a spoken language, are widely used by educators in Trinidad and Tobago and across much of the region.

¹⁰ Interestingly, (Washabaugh 1981b: 129) wrote that "[t]he Jamaican signs that I have seen [...] may be a West Indian variety of British Sign Language." The variety of Jamaican Sign Language described by Cumberbatch (2012a), is extremely close to American Sign Language (itself mutually incomprehensible with British Sign Language). This highlights the need for close investigation of variation within signing communities: it may be that there are varieties of Jamaican Sign Language which differ considerably from the JSL described by Cumberbatch (2012a).

Different approaches to deaf education have yielded different, and often entirely unanticipated linguistic results. Approaches which tried to ban signing led to the creation of new signed languages, and educators who were passionate supporters of signing have played a role in the decline of indigenous sign languages by importing established sign languages from outside. Washabaugh's (1981:132) comment about Grand Cayman is fairly true for much of the region:

...what... educators... should know is that their eclecticism, while it may ultimately be for the good, leaves behind its own rough wake through which the deaf must navigate.

The "rough wake" is a very complicated linguistic situation in which indigenous rural signed languages, other emerging indigenous signed languages, and signed languages imported from outside the region co-exist in contact. The following section further describes the nature and the outcomes of some of this contact.

3. Language Contact

The signed languages of the Caribbean provide examples of a wide range of contact phenomena. As Quinto-Pozos and Adam have observed, not only do signed languages exhibit most of the same patterns of language contact seen in spoken languages; moreover:

Particular aspects of the visual gestural modality contribute to the list of attested language contact phenomena in unique ways and thus create a list of outcomes that do not typically characterize spoken language contact situations (Quinto-Pozos & Adam 2013: 380).

The Caribbean has seen a wide variety of sign language contact situations that are not mutually exclusive. Contact may be monomodal, i.e., between signed languages, or multimodal, i.e., between a signed and a spoken language. Contact may occur between a rural sign language, an indigenous urban sign language and an established sign language introduced to the region from outside. Contact may occur between a single sign language and different spoken languages, or between different signed languages and a single spoken language. Furthermore, as a result of contact between deaf and hearing communities, deaf signers may use the same gestures as hearing non-signers, and these gestures may be incorporated into their signed languages. This section describes some examples of these and other sign language contact situations in the Caribbean.

3.1 Contact between speech and sign

One major way in which elements of a spoken/written language may be incorporated into a signed language is via a system of fingerspelling. Manual alphabets provide ways of representing the letters of a written language. Like signed languages, they are arbitrary, and vary: the BSL and ASL alphabets, for instance, are quite different from each other.

Influenced, perhaps, by the focus on teaching literacy skills to deaf children, teachers in schools for deaf children have used manual alphabets in the Caribbean for a long time. In Trinidad and Tobago, the ASL manual alphabet was introduced into the school for the deaf not long after it was opened in 1943. Even signers who went to school quite soon after the school was opened remember being taught to fingerspell and many have sign names which incorporate a letter from the manual alphabet. This is rather surprising, because otherwise, ASL was not used in Trinidad until the 1970s, and indeed, apart from using the manual alphabet to spell out English words, signing was banned at the school during this period. The language developed by deaf children in the dormitories of the school at this time incorporated the ASL manual alphabet in various ways which will be described in the following sub-sections.¹¹

3.1.1 *Lexicalized fingerspelling*

Battison (1978) describes how the letter-by-letter spelling out of a word using the ASL manual alphabet may transform over time so that it conforms to the phonological constraints of ASL, and becomes a lexicalized sign. There are signs which are, as far as I know, unique to Trinidad and Tobago, which are based on the same process of lexicalized fingerspelling. These include BOY (Figure 2), SATURDAY and the toponym, COUVA. As a result of the phonological changes which have taken place, the fingerspelling origins of BOY and SATURDAY, are not entirely transparent, though several older signers in particular, do identify them as such.

¹¹ It seems that the BSL manual alphabet was never used in Trinidad and Tobago; at least its influence on the lexicon of TTSL seems to have been minimal. There are borrowed forms, such as BSL MOTHER, which are etymologically based on the BSL manual alphabet, but this etymology seems to obscure to even the oldest Trinbagonian signers, except for those who have had some additional experience of BSL.



Figure 2. The sign BOY derived from lexicalized fingerspelling¹² (TTSL)

3.1.2 Initialization

Many other signs also incorporate the handshape corresponding to the initial letter of the corresponding word in the spoken language. For example, the TTSL sign BROTHER is made with a B handshape, and the TTSL sign SISTER is made with an S handshape. This is known as initialization in the sign language linguistics literature, and is again a common feature of many established sign languages, including ASL (Padden 1998).

As we have seen, the linguistic boundaries within the deaf Caribbean are quite independent from the boundaries between spoken languages: ASL is used in St. Lucia and the Dominican Republic, despite the fact that the main spoken languages of these countries are different. The differences in spoken languages do sometimes result in variations in the signed languages however. The ASL sign MONDAY, which is widely used, in Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada, Jamaica and St. Lucia, is an initialized sign, based on the M handshape. In the Dominican Republic, while its location and movement contour are the same, it is formed with an L handshape, reflecting the Spanish word *lunes*. Gerner de Garcia (1990: 271) provides several other examples of this kind for Dominican Republic Sign Language, and the same effect has been observed in Quinto-Pozos' (2002) description of Mexican Sign Language near the border with the USA. Even in those signed languages in the region which make use of manual alphabets, these

¹² Note that this sign appears to be based on a distinctive Trinbagonian form for the letter 'O' which closely resembles the ASL letter 'F'. Much more could be said about the use of fingerspelling and manual alphabets in TTSL. For reasons of space, I provide only a very brief sketch here.

processes do not seem to be universal; however, Frishberg (1987: 105) claims that while initialization is seen in place names, there were no lexicalized fingerspellings in Puerto Rican Sign Language.

3.1.3 Mouthings and other spoken language influences

A second way in which spoken languages can affect signed languages is through mouthings (mouth actions accompanying the manual elements of signs), which are derived from spoken language words (Boyes Braem & Sutton-Spence 2001). Given the focus on speech in many Caribbean deaf schools for much of the 20th century, it is not surprising that aspects of lip movements of spoken words have also had an influence on the development of signed languages. In TTSL, the sign COIN incorporates an obligatory mouth movement, which seems to be derived from the word 'bob'. From a diachronic point of view, the semantics of the spoken word (referring specifically to a 25-cent coin), and the sign (used for any coin) are distinct. Synchronically, many TTSL signers are not aware of the etymological source of the mouthing.

Another TTSL word illustrates another way in which a spoken language may influence a signed language. In Trinidadian speech, it is common to refer to the capital, Port of Spain as '*Tong*' (< English *town*), nearly homophonous with 'tongue'. The TTSL sign TONG, which involves pointing to one's tongue, is clearly based on this spoken language pun, see Figure 3.



Figure 3. The initial and terminal parts of the sign TONG (TTSL)

Spoken languages have also influenced Caribbean sign languages at the level of syntax through the widespread use by teachers of varieties of signing, such as Signing Exact English, which are organized to conform to

grammatical principles of spoken languages. Kwok (2015) provides evidence that some deaf adults in Trinidad and Tobago who went to school at a time when Signing Exact English was first introduced, continue to exhibit word order patterns associated with English / Trinidadian English Creole,¹³ and are less likely to employ word orders such as SOV, which are ungrammatical in these languages.

Beyond these examples, there is currently very little information about the influence of spoken languages on the signed languages of the region. Much work also remains to be done investigating the relative influence of different spoken languages and language varieties on Caribbean signed languages, and on the relative prominence of different types of influence (for example, fingerspelling vs. mouthing).

3.2 Contact between signed languages

As described above, there are many Caribbean countries in which more than one signed language has been used. This section provides some examples of sociolinguistic outcomes of contact between signed languages.

In Suriname, the village sign languages observed by Tervoort and van den Bogaerde coexist with Surinamese Sign Language (SSL) associated with the deaf community in Paramaribo, NGT used in schools, and ASL, which has been used in some religious congregations. The existence of several languages in a country does not, of course, necessarily entail that they are in contact. Although SSL, NGT, and ASL are all seen in Paramaribo, and have presumably been in contact, the distant village sign languages seem to have remained in isolation from the others, save, perhaps, from contact with the occasional sign language linguist.

A particularly common kind of contact between signed languages in the Caribbean has been between an indigenous language and one imported from abroad. In Trinidad and Tobago, TTSL developed between the 1940s and 1970s. In 1975, ASL was introduced at Cascade School for the Deaf, and the two languages have been in contact ever since. The relationships between SSL and NGT, or JSL and ASL seem to have been similar. The spread of large international languages, perhaps especially ASL, has only increased over recent years through the development of the internet, smartphones and social media. On a recent trip to San Andrés and Old Providence, for example, I met signers of PISL and LSC who had also had some exposure to ASL through electronic media.

¹³ Since both of these spoken languages, as well as Signing Exact English, employ the same basic word order (SVO), it was not possible to determine whether one had a particularly strong influence.

The results of this contact in Trinidad and Tobago have been complex, and are not yet fully understood. Some signers regard themselves as multilingual, able to distinguish quite clearly between ASL and TTSL, and aware of switching between the codes. Generally, it seems that TTSL is more likely to be used in deaf-only contexts, while in conversations with both hearing and deaf participants, ASL tends to be preferred, often with some influences from spoken language. This reflects the linguistic history of the deaf community, described above: TTSL developed in the deaf school as a mode of communication among deaf pupils, and was never learnt by their hearing teachers; it was only when ASL was introduced, that hearing professionals began to sign. TTSL tends to be used among older signers, while younger signers may be more likely to use ASL, and those who went to school, or who attend certain religious congregations are more likely to be proficient in ASL than those with more limited educational histories who might have learnt TTSL through contact with other deaf people. Some signers do not perceive a clear difference between codes, and view TTSL as a Trinbagonian variety of ASL. These signers are typically younger, and their judgments may reflect the emergence of a mixed language.

While Suriname's village sign languages may have been isolated from the languages used in the capital, in other cases, rural sign languages have come into contact with languages used in schools and urban centres. The founding of a school in St. Elizabeth, Jamaica, has led to contact between Jamaican Country Sign (JCS) and ASL. The American missionary Lois Dungan wrote a memoir in which she recalls an incident in which a signer who used only CS had to go to court:

...the deaf man did not know sign language [i.e. ASL]; his communication was only in country signs, a totally different dialect of signs. So I took with me to court a deaf worker from CCCD who knew the country signs. He interpreted the deaf man's country signs into sign language; I in turn interpreted the sign language into English for the judge (Dungan 2000: 45).

Some signers only used JCS, some only ASL, and some were bilingual. In fact, the situation is even more complicated, once we factor in the complex relationship between ASL and JSL. The ultimate result of contact between JCS, ASL and JSL looks likely to be the disappearance of JCS. Even when Dolman was writing, he foresaw the likely consequences of the opening of the new school: "with the school's continued success a language and even a way of life are likely to be lost forever" (Dolman 1986: 241).

Language death is not restricted to Jamaica. In his description of Old Caymanian Sign Language, Washabaugh (1981b) attributes the fact that younger signers had stopped using this language owing to (among other things) the fact that they went to school in Jamaica and learnt JSL instead. In Providence Island, a special school was established in 1999, with

teachers receiving some training in (completely unrelated) Colombian Sign Language.¹⁴ Although graduates of the school still seem to favour PISL, the spread of Colombian Sign Language and its institutionalization pose clear threats to the future of PISL. Elsewhere, it is clear that the spread of ASL throughout much of the Caribbean poses a threat to the futures of many indigenous signed languages, as it does elsewhere in the world.

Language death is not the only outcome of contact between signed languages in the Caribbean, and language contact has not only been between indigenous languages and those imported from outside. Deaf communities from across the region have been in contact for many years. One important occasion for contact has been school summer camps, organized by schools and religious groups. Although there is insufficient research to know what effect this contact has had, one possibility is that it may have contributed towards dialect levelling. A brief research trip by hearing and deaf researchers from Trinidad and Tobago to Grenada revealed that deaf Grenadians not only used ASL, but also incorporated some lexical items which are thought to have originated in Trinidad and Tobago, such as the verb LIME. See Figure 4 below.

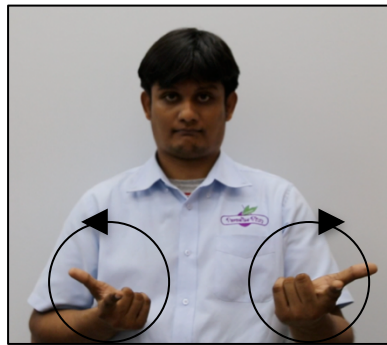


Figure 4. The sign for LIME with hand motion indicated (TTSL)

There has also been significant and ongoing contact between deaf people in Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana, and some borrowing has taken place.

¹⁴ Observations on the situation in Providence Island are based on a trip made by the author in January 2015.

3.3 Signed languages and gestural systems

Apart from contact between two signed languages, elements from gestural systems used by communities of hearing and deaf people alike, may be used by deaf people, either as co-sign gestures, or may be incorporated into the sign languages.

Mabel Haynes, an American teacher in Havana at the beginning of the twentieth century, observed that the children in her class would use gestures which were familiar to “almost all Cubans,” adding that “[n]early all Cubans gesticulate a great deal when talking, and it is even considered that it is impossible for one to talk without using the hand freely” (“Cuba’s Deaf” 1915: 198).

In Trinidad and Tobago, there is a system of gestures used by anyone taking the public transport taxi system. Although clearly having iconic bases involving pointing, these gestures have been conventionalized, and need to be learned by newcomers to the country. Unsurprisingly, deaf people are just as familiar with this gestural system as hearing people are. The toponym LAVENTILLE may be based partially on the gesture used to indicate to a taxi that one wishes to go to Laventille, an upward point.

Washabaugh (1979: 197) provides more examples from Old Providence:

[T]he signs FAMILY, LENGTH, and STINGY are but a few of the signs of PSL [i.e., Providence Island Sign Language] that also serve as gesticulations (“emblems”) in the hearing community. It is possible that these gesticulations of the hearing were recorded by the deaf and incorporated into their signing.

4. Crosslinguistic Comparisons

There is not yet sufficient descriptive work on the signed languages of the Caribbean for us to be able to make many close comparisons between the languages and language varieties across the region. Some broad observations based on the existing research literature can be made. The following sections provide some discussions focusing primarily on lexicons, phonology and word order.

4.1 Comparison between rural and national signed languages

Many researchers who have studied rural sign languages of the Caribbean have questioned whether or not they should be considered “fully fledged” languages, or whether the social circumstances out of which they have emerged may have limited their development.¹⁵ Van den Bogaerde, for example, reporting on her second trip to the signing village in Suriname, wonders whether the signing in Kajana should be characterized as a language, as opposed to a communal home signing system (van den Bogaerde 2005b). Similarly, Washabaugh (1981b) suggests that the signing in Grand Cayman had insufficient opportunity to fully develop before newly-arrived varieties such as JSL and ASL supplanted it.

In Providence Island too, Washabaugh (1985: 150) was of the opinion that PISL was “not completely developed.” Research on PISL has emphasized that it is highly context-dependent. This is manifested, according to Washabaugh, Woodward, and DeSantis (1978) in (1) a large number of pointing signs, (2) extensive use of non-manual channels and (3) a relatively small lexicon, including small inventories of colour terms, kinship terms and question words. These features appear to be shared with other rural sign languages in the region and beyond (Nyst 2012); for example, van den Bogaerde (2005b) observed that Kajana signing appeared to have no colour terms at all—pointing is used instead. Pointing is also used in both JCS and PISL to indicate several colours, and JCS also has a small inventory of colour terms (Adone et al. 2012: 75). In addition, JCS and PISL both make extensive use of non-manual elements. Adone et al. (2012) observe that YELLOW, BLUE and RED are manual homophones in JCS, which are distinguished by mouthings derived from spoken language.

Since similarities between and among these languages are almost certainly not a result of contact, further studies of such languages, within the region and beyond, may provide us with valuable new insights into such longstanding and hotly debated topics as the effect of culture, social structure and modality on language development and language creation.

¹⁵ There is currently much discussion about categories such as “home signs” and “fully fledged languages,” how these terms should be defined, what the differences are, and whether other intermediate categories, such as Zeshan's (2011) “communal home signs,” should also be distinguished. Interested readers could consult Zeshan and de Vos (2012) and Nyst (2012) for more on this topic.

4.2 Lexical comparisons

Almost no work has been done comparing the lexicons of the various varieties of signed languages across the region. However, we should not be surprised to find reasonably high levels of lexical similarities even between unrelated languages. Currie, Meier, and Walters (2002) found that between Japanese Sign Language and Mexican Sign Language, a Swadesh list yielded lexical similarity of 23% despite the fact that these two languages are neither related, nor have a history of contact. Such similarities are likely to be attributable to a large extent to the iconicity often characteristic of signed languages. For this reason, we must be cautious about jumping to conclusions on the basis of lexical similarities. To illustrate, the signs ILL and HUNGRY in PISL, reported in Washabaugh (1980a: 299), are very close to signs with the same meanings used in TTSL. Yet, in the absence of any other good evidence of contact, it is safer to assume that such similarities are simply coincidental. Nieminen (1990) reached the same conclusion when she observed children in St. Lucia using a sign which was identical to the one used in her native Finland.

Of course, where contact between communities has happened, borrowing is a possible source of similarities. Washabaugh observed some lexical similarities between the signing in Providence Island and Grand Cayman, putting these similarities down to a combination of factors: “I would hazard the guess that both borrowings and cultural similarities account for the similarities of signs” (Washabaugh 1981b: 123). Given the early influence of BSL, the most likely explanation for the signs FATHER, LIKE and NAME in TTSL, which are all identical to BSL signs with the same meanings, and none of which are strongly iconic, is that they are borrowings.

Despite the potential for uncertainty about the reasons for identical or similar signs, including apparent coincidence, borrowing, or iconicity, lexical comparisons do provide a useful way of establishing a rough measure of the relatedness of two signed languages. A 100-word Swadesh list comparison between TTSL and ASL, for example, revealed a similarity of around 50% (there are further methodological issues which make the precise number somewhat debatable), comfortably low enough to establish them as separate languages using the metric proposed by Parkhurst and Parkhurst (2003).¹⁶ Given that we have a reasonably good understanding of the historical development of TTSL, and its relationship to ASL, this result is not surprising, nor particularly revealing. Nonetheless,

¹⁶ The list itself was also adjusted to take into account iconicity effects by, for example, excluding body part words, which are often formed in unrelated sign languages by signs derived from pointing to the body part in question.

for signed languages in countries for which very little information exists, this approach could provide a useful starting point for researchers.

4.3 Phonology

There is significant phonological variation among the signed languages of the Caribbean. Generally, it seems that the rural signed languages of the region make use of a smaller number of handshape distinctions than both imported sign languages and other indigenous varieties, in line with findings from other rural sign languages from outside the region. Cokart and van den Bogaerde (2012) report that the handshapes used by signers in Kajana appeared to be extremely lax.

The handshape inventories of signed languages which emerged out of deaf schools tend to be quite large. This is partly a result of the influence of the use of manual alphabets in schools, and means that they may make use of handshapes which are typologically marked, and which one might otherwise not have expected to find in the phonological system of a young language. For example, the R handshape (index and middle fingers crossed), which is crosslinguistically quite rare, is common in TTSL, both in signs which have been derived via initialization or lexicalization of fingerspelling, and in those which have not. The handshape appears for example in the signs RED, in which it is clearly a result of initialization, SET (Figure 5), in which its presence seems to be a result of initialization, although the origin is obscure, and ENEMY, in which initialization does not seem to be involved.¹⁷

¹⁷ It seems that there is not a straightforward English synonym for SET: its meaning is something like 'taken', as in 'this seat is taken'. The gloss SET was provided by a native signer. The reason for thinking that SET involves initialization (at least etymologically) is that it is produced with an obligatory mouthing which, while its origin is also obscure, seems (to native signers) to be based on a spoken word beginning with /r/. ENEMY, on the other hand, seems to be derived from FRIEND, in which the handshape clearly has an iconic/gestural origin.

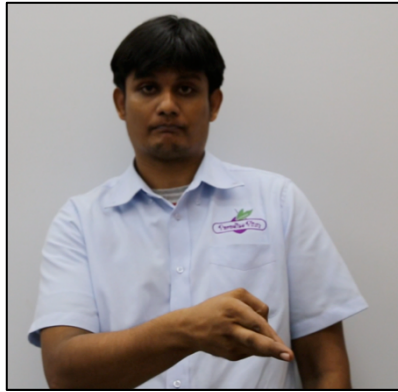


Figure 5. The sign for SET (TTSL)

There are phonetic/phonological variations within particular communities. For example, the handshape in the TTSL toponym ARIMA is articulated differently by signers under 50, compared to those over 50. See Figure 6 below.

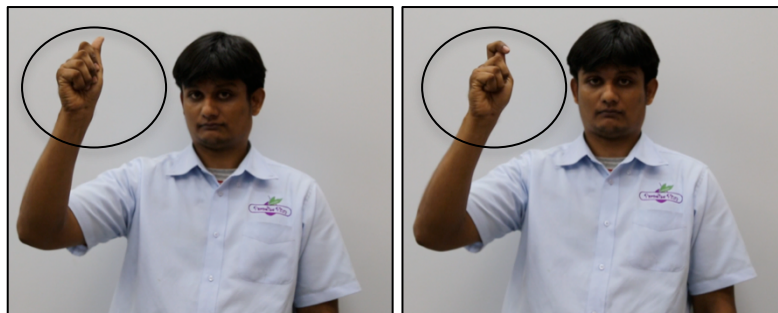


Figure 6. The sign for ARIMA (TTSL). Left: The sign typically used by signers over 50; Right: The sign typically used by signers under 50

This difference in accent (and others) is sometimes remarked upon by members of the community, and there have been some efforts by younger community leaders to encourage the use of the older variant among younger signers.

Generally, the signing space used in both rural sign languages, national sign languages, and in Caribbean varieties of ASL, appears to be larger than in ASL. In this and other respects, Caribbean varieties of ASL

may have more in common with Black ASL (McCaskill et al. 2011), perhaps as a result of contact in their past.¹⁸ Larger signing space is also a feature associated with younger sign languages generally although more work is needed before we can draw any conclusions. Further to the potential contact with Black ASL, it would be interesting to know more about other varieties of ASL brought to the region over the past century or so and how they also potentially influenced Caribbean ASL and other signed languages in the region.

4.4 Word Order

Syntax is perhaps the area of structure about which least is known for Caribbean signed languages. Recent research on signed languages around the world indicates that SVO and SOV word orders appear to be overwhelmingly common (Napoli and Sutton-Spence 2014). From what little we know, there seems to be significant variation in the basic word orders of signed languages of the Caribbean. Washabaugh (1980a) argued that PISL does not use word order to encode arguments, but that word order is determined according to a topic-comment order. Initial research on TTSL suggests that it allows both SVO and SOV word orders, with SOV less common among younger signers (Kwok 2015). According to Cumberbatch (2012a: 314), JSL is predominantly SVO.

4.5 A Caribbean Sign Language

There is a diploma programme at The University of the West Indies, currently running at its campuses at Mona, Jamaica and St. Augustine, Trinidad with the title “Caribbean Sign Language Interpreting.” This title has caused some confusion among members of the deaf communities in both places, and among potential students. What, they wonder, is Caribbean Sign Language? Since I have been responsible for coordinating the delivery of this programme in St. Augustine, it is a question I have had time to consider, and this paper was written partly in order to provide a well-justified answer. My answer is that the title of the programme is structurally ambiguous, and it should correctly be interpreted as [[Caribbean] [sign language interpreting]], not [[Caribbean Sign Language] interpreting]; that is, there is no “Caribbean Sign Language.” The term would not be not useful, in my view, either as the name for a particular

¹⁸ Thanks to Rian Gayle for suggesting this comparison to me.

language, nor as the name of a group of related language varieties. I hope that the reasons for saying this are clear enough from the descriptions above of the complex linguistic situations which are found in the deaf communities of the region.

Having said this, the discussion above has also shown that ASL in particular is used across much (though not all) of the Caribbean, and that there has been a fairly long history of contact between deaf communities from around the region. As a result of this, ASL often functions as a *lingua franca* between deaf people from different countries. We may even wish to talk of a distinctive Caribbean variety of ASL, although much more research is needed before it would be possible to delineate and justify such a term. Nonetheless, we should bear in mind that even when two Caribbean people are conversing in ASL, it may not be the first language of either one, nor indeed their preferred language.

The only research that has been done in this area indicates that there are variable levels of ASL comprehension. For example, Parks and Parks (2010) found a higher degree of ASL comprehension in the Dominican Republic than in Jamaica. Many factors are likely to influence a particular signer's ASL competence, including their educational and family background, their membership in religious and other organisations, and the history of the introduction of ASL into the community to which they belong.

Conclusions

This paper has shown that Caribbean deaf communities exhibit considerable linguistic diversity. New signed languages have been born in the Caribbean region; in schools, in remote communities, in villages and towns. Some have grown to become national languages; others have struggled to survive contact with languages imported from Europe and North America. In the deaf communities of the Caribbean, there is monolingualism, bimodal bilingualism and multilingualism. At the same time, too often, there are still deaf people who are not part of any deaf community, who are denied access to a signed language, and who remain largely alingual.

Many forces which have acted on spoken languages have also affected signed languages, including: language contact; movement of people around the region; and the arrival of missionaries, educators, and others from abroad. There are several additional factors which have had profound effects on the development and distribution of signed languages in the Caribbean: rubella outbreaks, incidences of genetically inheritable deafness, the opening of special schools for deaf children, and the changing language policies in those schools.

Signed languages in the Caribbean have been overlooked, ridiculed, banned, and only sometimes embraced. Their existence, their diversity and their survival in the face of a variety of pressures is a testament to the resilience of the communities who forged them, and to their importance in the rich linguistic heritage of the Caribbean region.

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