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Understanding Ghanaian sign language(s): history, linguistics, and ideology

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SUMMARY

This study delved into the multifaceted world of signing in the urban deaf community in Ghana, where the term “Ghanaian Sign Language” (GSL) serves as a cover term for a variety of signing forms. Signers within the deaf community use a range of terms, such as SPONTANEOUS, ILLITERATE, GESTURE, DEAF WAY, PRETEND, BROKEN, CODE, ENGLISH, NATURAL, or HARD to characterise their signing. The book examined aspects of the historical, linguistic, and ideological dimensions of GSL.

Chapter 1 sets the stage by introducing GSL as an umbrella term encompassing three distinct signing varieties: ENGLISH, BROKEN, and LOCAL. The chapter also offers an introduction into other aspects of GSL. Chapter 2 traced the evolution of GSL from the introduction of deaf education and ASL signs in 1957 by Rev. Andrew Foster. It highlights the contributions of deaf Ghanaians, associations and GSL's resilience, especially when official bans on sign language were imposed in the context of oralism in deaf education. Chapter 3 presented a lexical study to explore the relationships between ENGLISH, BROKEN, LOCAL, and their connections with ASL as a foreign sign language. It also includes a comparison with locally evolved village sign languages (i.e., Adamorobe Sign Language and Nanabin Sign Language). It revealed an interesting aspect of GSL where one form of signing is lexically related to ASL, while the other aligns with locally evolved sign languages. Chapter 4 shifted the focus to size and shape expressions in GSL, describing their structural characteristics. A comparison of Size and Shape Specifiers (SASS) in GSL with size and shape gestures shows considerable similarities. The chapter revealed that body-based SASS, prevalent among gesturers, were integrated into GSL. Chapters 5 and 6 explored language ideologies and the sociolinguistic landscape within the deaf community. Signers' preferences and judgments related to body-based and space-based SASS are unveiled. The ideological exploration underscored the division between high-prestige and low-prestige varieties within GSL. Signs associated with foreign languages (such as English or ASL) are esteemed for having high prestige. In contrast, locally evolved signs are valued for their native roots but often have lower prestige. Furthermore, in Chapter 5 that signers tend to specifically associate certain signs (e.g., body-based SASS) with particular language variants was uncovered. Chapter 6 extended this exploration by identifying diverse labels within the sign language landscape. Moreover, GSL is presented as a pluridimensional continuum characterized by triglossia. Chapter 7 synthesised the findings and implications drawn from the preceding chapters. GSL is historically traced to the introduction of ASL signs and Signed English in deaf education. The ban on sign language in deaf educational history spanning over two decades fostered the emergence of a local sign variety, now recognised as LOCAL. An indirect outcome of oralism was the proliferation of deaf basic schools

nationwide. The book further posited the emergence of school-lect as a hypothesis linked to the oralist approach. These school-lects merge and level at the sole secondary deaf school in the country. The subsequent revival of sign language in the late 1980s ushered back Signed English, now known as ENGLISH. The book posited a hypothesis that the coexistence of both ENGLISH and LOCAL led to the development of the signing variety referred to as BROKEN. Furthermore, it highlights the prevailing prestige of ENGLISH and its overshadowing (eclipse) of other GSL variants, namely BROKEN and LOCAL. The integration pathways of SASS gestures into GSL are also scrutinised, along with hypotheses regarding the adoption of size and shape gestures.

In conclusion, this comprehensive exploration of GSL landscape has unveiled the multifaceted nature of sign language usage, language ideologies, and linguistic diversity within the Ghanaian deaf community in the urban contexts. It has shed light on the complex history of GSL, from its humble beginnings as a banned signing system to the dynamic coexistence of ENGLISH, BROKEN, and LOCAL, each with its unique place and prestige in the GSL landscape. Integrating body-based SASS gestures into GSL (particularly ENGLISH) has provided insight into the adaptability of established sign languages to the surrounding gestural environment. The signing in the GSL landscape is part of a pluridimensional continuum, representing a multilingual scenario characterised by the fluid use of different variants in diverse settings. Recognising this complexity is essential for the effective teaching and learning of GSL, ensuring that the diverse needs and preferences of the deaf community are acknowledged and addressed. This work contributes to our understanding of GSL and is a valuable resource for those seeking to engage with and promote the rich linguistic heritage of deaf Ghanaians in the urban deaf community.