CHAPTER 16

OUR SIGNS MATTER: PROTECTING SIGN LANGUAGE IN ADAMOROBE (GHANA)

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ABSTRACT

The linguistic documentation of sign languages sometimes present a challenge with respect to the question of who to involve in the documentation process. This paper presents a way of meeting this challenge in the linguistic documentation of an endangered sign language. In documenting Adamorobe Sign Language (AdaSL), a village sign language in Ghana, the research team and the local signers, work together; each group providing their expertise in the data collection and annotation. The linguistic research team provides the linguistic insight and the local signers provide the language data, sociolinguistic information and contribute to data annotation. The whole team works on creating language materials, for example a sign database and resources for teaching, which will be made available online when the project is completed. The paper also discusses the need for language documentation in Adamorobe to preserve the endangered sign language from possible extinction. Education and empowerment of deaf societies are enlisted as means to bridge the gap between deaf and hearing research groups and ultimately protect village sign languages.

Keywords: Sign language, language documentation, deaf community, deaf empowerment, language endangerment, language preservation.

INTRODUCTION

One question that has never ceased to amaze me is, *what do you need sign language for?* I am still startled when people look at me in surprise for the fact that I decided to choose sign language as my language choice for research. There are many reasons. Sign language remains understudied compared to

277

spoken languages. Moreover, very little research has been done to date on sign languages in Africa compared to sign languages elsewhere in the world. Human language is multifaceted, and occurs in two modalities: spoken and signed. The ability to understand the language in the visual-gestural mode is important to fully understand the capacity for human language. Several years of *researching* and *using* signed language led me to realise the joy and pleasure it brings to see Deaf communities empowered to act. My research focuses mainly on Ghanaian Sign Language (GSL) and Adamorobe Sign language (AdaSL), both used in Ghana. In this paper, I seek to present on a collaborative research between local signers in Adamorobe and its contribution to documenting AdaSL.

Linguistics studies on sign languages began in the 1960s when William Stokoe presented his seminal study (Stokoe 1960) that established American Sign Language (ASL) as a full-fledged human language. There has been much research since this ground-breaking study, and the linguistic structure of sign language on all levels has been demonstrated without doubt (see e.g. Pfau et al. 2012; Sandler & Lillo-Martin 2006). Sign languages are natural human languages and although they remain much less researched than spoken languages, there is evidence that the future of the linguistic enterprise in sign language research is very bright. Most of the linguistic research on sign languages has been done on American Sign Language (ASL), but the landscape of research has extended across all areas of the globe. The increasing amount of research developing in the field is testimony to the potency and viability of sign language linguistics as an academic research field. One common misconception among hearing non-signers is that all deaf people sign the same and sign language is a universal language. The reality is that sign languages develop naturally in deaf communities, and there are hundreds of sign languages around the world. This includes national (urban) sign languages like American Sign Language (ASL) or Ghanaian Sign Language (GSL), as well as village sign languages like Adamorobe Sign Language (AdaSL) used in rural communities with a high genetic incidence of deafness. Sign languages differ in their lexicon and grammatical structure, and one sign language will not be intelligible to a user of another sign language.

Over the centuries, many deaf people (and others with disabilities) around the world have had their rights systematically abused and some were even considered not worthy to partake in communal activities (Lang 2010, Miles 2004, Baldwin & Johnson 2000). Many deaf people were lost in their own world and no attempt was made to reach out to them. Parents with deaf children hid them from the public

and they were not educated like their contemporaries and other deaf youth were sexually abused (Sullivan et al. 1987). The infamous Milan Conference held in 1880 resulted in making oralism (speech), instead of manual communication, the mode of education in deaf schools around Europe (Vermeerbergen 2006). Miles (2004) reports on deafness in African histories from 1450s-1950s. The historical record that was compiled from previous documentation revealed the role that deafness played in the lives of those that lived around that period. In this report, deaf people took on a range of roles within society, from heroic roles like chiefs and judges to submissive roles as entertainers and servants. In Asonye et al. (forthcoming), a paper on deafness in Nigeria, it is revealed that deaf stigmatization begins within the families and extends to the community, and is more intense in the early days of the deaf child to early adulthood.

The history of deaf discrimination around the world (Lang, 2010; Plann, 1997) reveals the struggles of deaf lives in the *quiet years,* when sign language was prohibited in schools. After decades of linguistic battle, sign languages have become recognised and respected as full-fledged human languages, and have also slowly found their way back into deaf education. This has drastically affected deaf lives, as societies around the world have come to accept deaf people as equal part of the society[1]. Language and communication is embedded in deaf societies and the study of deaf communities must ultimately involve not only the study of their languages but also language documentation. Sign languages just like spoken languages risk endangerment and extinction, and there, documentation is thus an important goal. One famous example is the Martha's Vineyard sign language that was actively used by a community in Massachusetts (USA). This community is recorded to have had an active sign language that was used by both deaf and hearing people and this sign languages existed for over 200years before becoming extinct (Groce, 1988).

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[1] Discrimination against deaf people is not entirely out of the system. In most African countries, deaf education is left to rot as the government concentrate on the mainstream educational systems. Personal visits to several deaf schools in Ghana and Nigeria confirms this assertion.

1.   ADAMOROBE IN PERSPECTIVE

Adamorobe is in the Eastern Region of Ghana and the community is noted for the high rate of genetic deafness. The major spoken language in Adamorobe is the Akuapem Twi dialect of Akan. Other languages that are used by few minorities of the community are Adamorobe Sign Language (AdaSL), Ghanaian Sign Language (GSL), Ga, Ewe, Krobo and English. The linguistic diversity of the community is a result of migration of people into the community for work, marriage and other social factors. AdaSL is an indigenous village sign language used in Adamorobe (Edward, 2015a; Nyst, 2007). Village sign languages develop within small communities or villages with a high incidence of hereditary deafness (Meir et al. 2010). The Adamorobe community is noted for its unusually high incidence of hereditary deafness at an estimated 1.8% of the total population (Edward, 2015a) which is a reduction from 2% in 2001 (Nyst, 2007). The reduction is believed to have resulted from the laws instituted by their former chief that prevented marriage between two deaf people (Nyst, 2007; Kusters, 2012) or the migration of different people into the community (Edward, 2015b). Adamorobe had a marriage law in the past that prevented deaf-deaf marriages (Kusters, 2012; Nyst 2007) and the reason for this could be attributed to the genetic counselling given based on medical research on deafness in Adamorobe carried out in 1972. (c.f. Nyst, 2007). Although this law is not as binding as it used to be, it has resulted in several childless marriages among deaf couples in Adamorobe.

AdaSL is independent of GSL and of the surrounding spoken language Akan, though there is some influence of Akan on AdaSL structure. Akan is a Kwa language which is known for its noun classes, grammatical nouns and serial verb constructions (Osam 1993:153, Osam 2003:2). Miles (2004:536) reports that deaf Adamorobeans"are the first substantial historical group of African people known to have used a formal sign language". Deaf adults in Adamorobe communicate by clicks, mouthing and hand signs. AdaSL uses a lot of serial verb constructions, similar to what is found in Akan, and in contrast to GSL and many other sign languages (Nyst, 2007). GSL and Nigerian Sign Language (NSL) are ASL-based sign languages (through the missionary work of Andrew Foster) and both languages are mutually

intelligible with few lexical and structural differences2. GSL and NSL are urban sign languages and actively used in educational settings and in all informal and formal interactions that involve deaf people. In contrast, AdaSL is only known and used in Adamorobe; outside the village community, the language for the deaf is GSL. In terms of socio-cultural and socio-economic factors, the situation of AdaSL is very similar to that of Bura Sign Language which is used in the Hausa community in the North-East of Nigeria (Blench & Warren, 2005). Adult signers in both sign languages (AdaSL & Bura SL) have limited education, and in both communities, deafness is caused by a genetic mutation. AdaSL is an endangered sign language because over the years, deaf children from Adamorobe have attended a boarding school for the Deaf in Mampong-Akuapem, which uses GSL and the children are gradually shifting from AdaSL to GSL (Edward, 2015b; Nyst, 2007). Visits to the community over the last year have revealed a gradual decline in the use of the sign language (c.f. Edward, 2015b).

Vernon and Andrews (1990:197) state that "[d]eafness is a psychological variable which influences the behaviour of deaf persons such that their life experience differs in some consistent ways from that of those who are not deaf". In Adamorobe, deafness has been accepted as part of the community's heritage. One deaf person reported that, in the past, several researchers visited the community because of them. In Adamorobe community, the hearing people have learnt to share their lives with deaf people and this includes a section of hearing signers who also have a positive outlook for deaf people in Adamorobe. AdaSL is regarded as signed Akan by some section of hearing signers in Adamorobe and they believe that using AdaSL is tantamount to signing Akan (Edward, 2015a & 2015b; Kusters 2012).

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2 The author has engaged in sign language research projects in both Ghana and Nigeria and as a proficient signer of GSL, she was able to communicate with the students of the deaf schools she visited in Nigeria.Many of the sign languages used in African countries stem from the missionary work of Andrew Foster (Nyst 2010).In addition, over the years, linguistic research on African sign languages has been pioneered mostly by missionaries that sought to evangelise to the local people through their native languages.

2.   SIGN LANGUAGE DOCUMENTATION

My current research promotes language documentation to save AdaSL from possible endangerment. This documentation will ultimately prevent AdaSL from suffering the fate of Martha's Vineyard Sign Language (Groce, 1985). My MA and PhD projects have involved fieldwork trips to Adamorobe, and working closely with community members. Factors that contribute to languages becoming endangered in societies include assimilation to another language, lack of speakers, lack of documentation, and unfavourable laws that cause stigmatisation of the users of the language. The problem in Adamorobe can be traced to the death of most adult members of the deaf community, the marriage law, inactive use of AdaSL outside Adamorobe, the gradual assimilation to GSL by younger signers and the lack of documentation (Edward 2015a, 2015b & forthcoming; Kusters 2012, Nyst, 2007). Documentation of the language is crucial in light of these factors, and will help preserve use of and interest in the language, as well as providing a record of linguistic and cultural heritage. Further linguistic description, for example, will make it possible to compare AdaSL to other village sign languages in Africa and around the world to determine the typology of village sign languages.

The need for collaborative work between the linguist and the deaf community is important for the success of a documentation project. In this current project in Adamorobe, documentation is a joint effort between the researcher and the deaf signers. Documentation of AdaSL is an urgent remedy to save the endangered language from possible extinction. The documentation is embedded in social interventions that give an open door to the deaf community (within Adamorobe) which was before shut from the outside world. Stigmatisation of deaf Adamorobeans is largely attributed to the marriage law and the need to have "*no more deaf*" (Kusters, 2012). Working to establish a cordial relationship with the deaf community and encouraging deaf individuals to support people within academia to help document sign languages is an important step to emancipate deaf people from the ideology of rejection and ultimately protect the language and the culture.

3.   DEAF EDUCATION

Educating deaf children is one of the challenges in Africa and most deaf children within rural communities tend to suffer from lack of education more than their counterparts in the urban societies

(Edward, forthcoming). In my interactions with deaf communities, it was evident that most parents with deaf children consider them as the unfortunate *gifts of God*. These parents tend to show favouritism towards their hearing children as compared to deaf children. The unfortunate deaf children born in some villages3 do not even get the opportunity to be educated and they grow up having to develop gestural resources in order to communicate with friends and family. They tend to learn few signs from the national sign languages when they encounter other educated deaf people. Few deaf who could not have an early start in school manage to start school just before they become teenagers (at the time that their hearing counterparts are about to start Senior High School). However, the fortunate ones who begin school with hearing children of their age manage to climb the academic ladder with swiftly and smoothly and compete at the same level with little or no challenge at all. Some of these deaf people collaborate with other hearing people to champion the cause of deaf people. Recent interviews show that most of the young deaf are educated to the Junior High School level and others to the vocational level. It is however a disheartening situation that mostly deaf girls find it difficult to complete their education because of lack of opportunities or teenage pregnancy.

4.   DEAF EMPOWERMENT

Currently, the adult deaf population in Adamorobe are mostly involved in farming and a few others are self-employed or have part-time jobs in a nearby stone quarry. There is also the younger deaf population who are either unemployed or are still receiving their education. A discussion with two girls revealed that they are not so much interested in higher education. They just want to find jobs after school, marry and make a good life for themselves. One means to empower the deaf in Adamorobe is through *intervention by advocacy*. The teenage deaf members of the community are encouraged to take their education seriously and those who have dropped out of school as a result of pregnancy are encouraged to return to school if they can4.

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3 Not referring to Adamorobe.

4 Deaf education in Ghana is free although the schools complain of inadequate incentives from the Government. Generally, the students do not pay fees except other incentives needed for studies.

In Abuja and Imo states (Nigeria), the deaf-hearing advocacy programmes organised by SDELI[5] are encouraging and supporting talent and skill development among deaf children and young adults (Asonye et al., forthcoming). In Ghana, such social interventions are usually carried by churches and other NGOs. Working together with some colleagues and other donors, we have made donations (basically clothes and accessories) to deaf Adamorobeans[6]. This supports some of their basic needs and provide an avenue for us to interact and share ideas with them. In a similar language documentation task, a post-doctoral researcher from the University of New Mexico (USA), collaborated with several groups and individuals (including myself) to document the sign language used in Abuja and Imo (both in Nigeria)[7]. This project identified potential deaf talents which are currently being groomed and fostered to unearth their potential.

5.   INVOLVING EVERYONE

Documenting and working on AdaSL has been an interesting task; it has been involving but rewarding. I work with a team made up of a hearing signer of AdaSL, a user of GSL who knows AdaSL signs and a team of volunteers. The language data is recorded and managed by myself, Jay (AdaSL hearing Signer), FB (GSL signer, proficient in AdaSL) and the consultants (deaf Adamorobeans). The other team members provide social support to the people[8]. Deaf consultants provide the language data and the data is elicited through naturalistic means, designed interviews and elicitation with stimulus

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5 Save the Deaf and Endangered Language Initiativehas organised several outreachprojects in parts of Nigeria for deaf empowerment and sign language documentation.

6 This is a collaborative effort by some of my former students, friends and family to support the Deaf community in Adamorobe.

7 Asonye et al. (forthcoming). Deaf in Nigeria: A Preliminary Study on Isolated Deaf Communities.

8Several times we gather clothing and food items for distribution among the deaf Adamorobeans. This has proved a useful tool in providing some basic support to the Deaf community.

materials mostly captured with video camera. The AdaSL consultants, being aware of the endangered nature of their sign language, collaborate by creating opportunities for the researcher and other deaf members to meet and interact. Through these meetings and interactions, both researcher and consultants provide avenues for sharing ideas and contributing to the database of AdaSL and other sociolinguistic information are given.

Data that has been gathered so far ranged from individual signs, storytelling, narratives and video retelling. The project is ongoing and we hope that the database can be increased to include more signs.The database is currently used for educational purposes and will ultimately be compiled to create an online dictionary for AdaSL. This dictionary will be accessible worldwide for educational and non-educational purposes. Furthermore, comparative research work is currently being done by the author, comparing iconic structures in AdaSL and GSL to find out the typology of iconicity in rural and urban sign languages used in Ghana. Training and equipping the teachers of deaf schools (both deaf & hearing) to focus on literacy, and deaf child development is another step to gradually bridge the gap as these trainers will in turn transfer the knowledge to their students.

CONCLUSION

The sign language of Adamorobe is as important as any language used in Ghana. The fact that it remains a minority language makes documentation and linguistic analysis all the more important.The earlier the documentation is done, the better, to preserve the endangered language. To conclude, collaborations between researchers, deaf scholars, the community and deaf individuals are relevant to bridge the gap between the academia and the community in Adamorobe.

Language is intertwined in societies and linguists have the duty to preserve every language from possible endangerment. Tentatively, "the scientific examination of African sign languages is of major importance to the emancipation and participation of deaf Africans in society" (Nyst, 2013:77). The early history of deafness and the use of sign languages among African societies is scattered in stories that revealed that deaf societies have existed for several centuries (Miles 2004). However, research on African sign languages over the years, has not reached the level of gradually demystifying the assertion among non-linguists that sign language is gestures and pantomimes.

The relationship between language use and language development among deaf cultures display the intricacies of sign language documentation and description. Whereas linguists working on American and European sign languages can conduct *armchair* research works based on available data banks, data on African sign languages remain insufficient (if not unavailable for most under- or undescribed sign languages) and fieldwork becomes a necessary aspect of research work. The complexities of sign language demand a viable approach to data collection, description and storage. The best approach to data collection and storage (for future use) is through videoing, encoding and annotation and this multimodal approach requires a collaborative effort between language users and researchers to achieve a comprehensive result.

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