What is South African Sign Language? What is the South African Deaf community?

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What is South African Sign Language?

The question "What is South African Sign Language" may look simple but answering it is far from obvious. It is a well-known fact that less than five to ten percent of deaf children are born to Deaf parents and as such are exposed to a signed language at home. The majority of deaf children are born to hearing parents who are not likely to know a signed language. These children start acquiring their signed language only when beginning (pre)school, mostly as a playground variant through contact with (slightly older) peers since signed languages are still not widely used as medium of instruction in deaf education. The atypical acquisition process is but one of the factors likely to influence any signed language. Another such factor is the spoken language(s) used by the surrounding hearing community. Most signers do not (yet) know a written form of their signed language and use an oral language for reading and writing. The signed language and the spoken language(s) will most often have a very different status.

Both deaf education and spoken language use are complicated issues in South Africa. There are eleven official spoken languages and even more unofficial ones. Deaf education ranges from no education to certain groups of black deaf children, over education using sign supported speech to other groups of black, coloured and Indian deaf children, to oral education to white deaf children. All of this has played a part in shaping South African Sign Language (SASL). It is therefore not hard to understand that determining the nature of SASL is also far from simple.

Deaf education in South Africa

Because of the atypical acquisition process – deaf children generally acquire a signed language as their first language (not necessarily their "mother" tongue) at a deaf school, and not at home – schools for the deaf, especially if they are residential schools, play an important role in the development of regional variation in signed languages. As already stated, in many cases the language of instruction in the deaf class room until recently was – and often still is – not a signed language but a spoken language (possibly in its written form) and/or a "signed spoken language"

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i.e. a (simplified form of the) spoken language combined with signs.[2] The language of instruction may of course have an influence on the signed language use of the deaf pupils. All this is true for many countries around the world, but in South Africa, because of apartheid, deaf education is a very complicated issue.

The apartheid regime officially started in 1948, but it had roots in the first stages of the colonisation of the southern areas of Africa that are now called South Africa. The apartheid ideology recognised four racial groups: the whites, the blacks, the Asians or Indians, and the coloureds (people of mixed racial heritage). The regime intended to keep these four groups – and even the ethnicities within these four groups – totally separate. This "apartness" was realised in various domains, e.g. geographically through the homeland policy. As for education, during apartheid there were separate departments of education for each racial group, each with its own directorate, budget, curriculum, and standards (Aarons and Reynolds 2003: 194).

The South African education system did account for segregated schooling not only on the basis of colour, but also on the basis of children's ethno-linguistic background. This entails that there were e.g. Afrikaans and English schools for whites and coloureds and Sotho, Zulu, Tswana, Xhosa etc. schools for blacks. The latter schools were all set up in the respective homelands of every ethno-linguistic community or "Bantustans". The apartheid's principles of "Bantu education" and "mother tongue principle" foresaw that all children should begin their schooling experience through the medium of their own mother tongue.

The first deaf school, the Grimley Institute, was founded in Cape Town in 1863 by Irish Dominican nuns. The history of this first school shows an evolution that illustrates important tendencies in South African deaf education in the twentieth century. Many authors claim that, in the beginning, the Grimley Institute offered education to all racial groups. The more detailed historical account of Bantu education in Mocke (1971) presents, however, a more subtle picture. First, although there were both white and coloured pupils in the school, the European and non-European children were kept apart. Second, the Grimley Institute did indeed host the first black deaf pupil ever, but this was only in 1927, in other words 64 years after the foundation of the school. In any case, black deaf pupils were only a small minority in the few schools that were open to "all racial groups". The medium of instruction was the Irish Sign Language which the nuns had brought with them from Ireland. In the 1920s the school segregated the deaf children on the basis of whether they were to use signs or speech (oralism) and all but the most "backward" children were taught using speech. According to Mocke (1971), the signing classes were for *Nie-Blanke* (non-white) children only. In the 1960s, the school moved to Hout Bay, became an all white school and changed its

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[2] This is also known as "sign supported speech" or "simultaneous communication."

educational policy to strict oralism, i.e. the use of an oral language only. Signing was completely forbidden all over the school premises.

As already stated, the history of deaf education in South Africa is extremely complex, as the introduction of apartheid split the education not only on the basis of colour of the skin, but – especially in the case of black deaf children – also on "mother tongue" (i.e. the main spoken language of the family) and on the mode of communication/language of instruction. As a general guideline researchers provide the following ground rule: schools for white deaf pupils insisted on oralism, as speech was perceived as the prestigious form of language i.e. English and Afrikaans, whereas schools for the other races allowed some degree of signing (cf. Aarons and Akach 2002:131). For example, in the VN Naik School, a school set up in 1983 in Natal for Indian deaf pupils, "Signing Exact English" was introduced. The signs used with this form of simultaneous communication all came from American Sign Language (ASL). In the first school for black deaf children – called Kutlwanong and opened in 1941 –a system of signing invented in Britain, known as the Paget-Gorman system, was introduced in the 1950s, and teachers and pupils were to speak and simultaneously use the Paget-Gorman signs (cf. http://www.pgss.org/). These signs do not correspond to natural signs of any Deaf community. This was a policy that was to spread to other schools for black deaf pupils (Aarons and Akach 2002:133). In reality, in most schools for black deaf children, the teachers used an ad hoc system of sign supported speech, in other words a combination of a spoken language and signs. As for the spoken language, it is unclear whether they used English, Afrikaans, or a Bantu language. As for the signs, these were borrowed from the local Deaf signed language and/or artificial signs invented by educators of the deaf and/or imported from abroad. However, on the playground, the pupils in these residential schools for the deaf, largely left to their own, developed their own signed language. In the schools for black deaf pupils there was little access to hearing aids and language therapists and most of them were vastly under-resourced, under-funded and under-staffed. In these schools children were not forbidden to sign as was the case in the white schools. But even in the (white) oral schools, deaf children did sign. As in many parts of the world it is observed that despite the official language policies, pupils signed with one another in all the residential schools for the deaf in South Africa, and out of the classroom signed language(s) flourished (Aarons and Akach 2002:134).

If pupils of all these schools had stayed within the geographical location of the school, it could be expected that in and around each of these schools a different signed language would have developed that would have been passed on from generation to generation and as such had become a conventionalised signed language. That would imply that there are many different signed languages in South Africa, (nearly) as many as there are schools. However, that does not seem to be the case, as will be explained below.

The relation to spoken languages

Another factor influencing any signed language is the spoken language(s) used by the surrounding hearing community. Signers often come into contact with the spoken language(s) of the surrounding hearing world on a daily basis. Moreover, hardly any signers know a written form of their signed language and they use an oral language for reading and writing. This means that for most signers their signed language is their preferred language for face-to-face communication, although they will probably have to use a spoken language for communication with hearing people, and that an oral language is being used for reading and writing. Often these languages have a very different status: whereas spoken languages have a high status, many (Deaf and hearing) people still do not think of signed languages as real (fully-fledged) languages (Vermeerbergen 2006).

Signers' knowledge and use of (the written form of) a spoken language may leave its mark on their signed language use. For example, in Flanders, the northern part of Belgium, the influence from spoken Dutch can be seen in the lexicon and possibly also the grammar of VGT (Vlaamse Gebarentaal or Flemish Sign Language) (cf. Van Herreweghe and Vermeerbergen 2004, Vermeerbergen 2006). One example from the lexicon is the parallelism between Dutch compounds and VGT compounds; often Dutch compounds such as *schoonbroer* (meaning *brother-in-law* but in fact a compound consisting of *beautiful* and *brother*) are also compounds in VGT consisting of the same component parts (SCHOON^BROER). Another illustration of lexical influence of Dutch on VGT can be seen in the case of "(perceived) gaps": for example when there is no (single) sign to translate a certain Dutch word or when two different Dutch words are translated by the same sign, Flemish signers have been witnessed to "invent" (or import) a sign to fill the "gap". It should be noted here that the influence from a spoken language on a signed language may be the result of "direct import" from the oral language (i.e. the language in its spoken/written form), or may be related to the knowledge and use of a signed spoken language (i.e. the "signed version" of the spoken language).

In South Africa, there are eleven official spoken languages (and even more unofficial ones). Many of these seem at one point to have been "transferred" into a form of simultaneous communication, i.e. a combination of the spoken language (grammar) and signs. However, there are no studies on the influence of these spoken language structures on signed language structure in South Africa or on the influence of the use of signed spoken languages, as used in some schools. We may however assume that this influence has been present.

A changed view on how many signed languages there are in South Africa

In the past eleven regional Deaf Groups were identified, each with their own sign "variant", to a certain extent linked to different spoken language communities (Penn 1992). It was common practice to talk about Sotho Sign Language, Zulu Sign Language, etc. and some – Deaf and hearing – people still do so today. It is indeed very well possible that as a result of apartheid education and social policies, different signed languages developed in South Africa (Aarons and Akach, 2002: 134) and in the past DeafSA (the South African National Deaf Association) itself assumed that there were eleven different signed languages. However, their stance changed in 1996 when they stopped using eleven or so interpreters at DeafSA meetings, but started employing only two interpreters who interpreted alternately. To every one's surprise there was hardly any misunderstanding. The two interpreters were hearing children of Deaf parents. One of them actually confronted the person who had instigated this, i.e. Akach (see below), and asked him how she could use the "ungrammatical way" of signing with the national director at the time. Akach's answer was clear: "Well, what you are referring to as ungrammatical, is SASL", to which the interpreter responded that she (and other hearing children of Deaf people) grew up believing that the way their parents signed was not grammatical and that she therefore signed the "spoken language version of signing" when asked to interpret at official meetings.

Official institutions today (including DeafSA) only talk about one signed language, i.e. South African Sign Language (or SASL). As already mentioned, eleven spoken official languages were acknowledged in the constitution of South Africa. SASL is not one of these, but it ís mentioned (as one of the other languages the Pan South African Language Board must promote and for which the Board should create conditions for the development and use) as "sign language", i.e. in the singular. Moreover, Chapter 2 of the South African Schools Act (Act nr. 84 of 1996) states that "A recognised Sign Language has the status of an official language for purposes of learning at a public school." Thus, although SASL is not an official language of the country, it does have the status of medium of instruction in schools (at least, that is how the 1996 Act can be interpreted) that are set up specifically to cater for the needs of deaf pupils.

How can this change from eleven signed languages to one signed language be explained? It seems to be the case that a number of the reasons to assume that there are many signed languages appear to be based on misunderstandings regarding the nature of signed languages as people often assumed that they were based on spoken languages (Aarons and Akach 1998, 2002), which is why it was believed that there were eleven signed languages. Moreover, a number of factors seem to indicate that there are at least fewer than eleven signed languages in South Africa. As a result of the apartheid system of schooling, deaf children often had to leave their home districts to go to school in another area. After graduation, they either returned home or moved to other parts of the country and since Deaf people socialise with other Deaf people, a convergence of some of the regional

variants is to be expected. At the same time,

> [m]ore recently, there has been signing on television in programmes for the Deaf, and interpreting of national news, and thus, Deaf people are exposed to the signing of different sectors of the Deaf community. There are frequent local and national Deaf events of a sporting, cultural and educational nature. Initiatives have been launched for the Deaf people within provinces to hold regular forums; in the last few years, national Deaf *indabas* (conferences) have been held. Deaf people are beginning to train other Deaf people to teach Sign Language irrespective of whether they are from the same community (Aarons & Akach 2002:135).

Furthermore, it is nearly impossible to decide on the matter by looking at linguistic evidence, since that is so scarce. There is lexical variation attested for in the dictionary, but no thorough studies on grammatical variation are available. So it is possible that we are dealing with one language with a certain degree of lexical (and grammatical?) variation.

On the other hand it is also quite plausible that there is more than one signed language in South Africa. Given the history of deaf education and the apartheid system, it is possible that there were not that many contacts across racial boundaries, so that it can be expected that different signed languages have developed based on "pigmentation". If for instance black Deaf South Africans and white Deaf South Africans went through completely separate schooling systems and never socialised with each other afterwards, it is quite likely that their signed languages also developed separately. And indeed, there is anecdotal evidence which seems to point at a possible difference between "white SASL" and "non-white SASL". A small-scale preliminary study on constituent order also seems to point at different structures used by the one white informant, but since there was only one white informant, these findings need to be confirmed by more research (Vermeerbergen, Van Herreweghe, Matabane and Akach, 2006).

In this respect it might be interesting to take into account that more recently we can see a changing attitude towards the degree of similarity across signed languages. Whereas the similarities across different signed languages were minimised in the past, this is no longer the case today (cf. Woll 2003, Johnston 1989, Vermeerbergen 2006). It is even claimed that there is a shared grammatical patterning across the different, unrelated signed languages studied so far. What seems to be important here, is the *type* of data studied, because signed languages appear to move on a continuum between two different manifestations, for which Vermeerbergen (2006) uses the notions "de l'eau plate" (still water) and "de l'eau pétillante" (sparkling water). The first form is more conventionalised and looks very much like what we know from the literature on spoken languages. The other form makes much more use of the possibilities offered by the gestural-visual modality: use of space, visual imagery, and simultaneity. The two manifestations seem to have their own organisation, rules and tendencies. Not all types of signed language usage display the same level of "de l'eau pétillante". A narrative style, for example, contains a lot of bubbles, but declarative

sentences produced in isolation hardly sparkle at all. This means that a researcher's choice of a specific type of data determines to a large extent which manifestation of the language is being studied and it seems there is less difference in "sparkling water" being used across signed language boundaries than there is in "still water". So, with respect to the signed language(s) used in South Africa, it is very well possible that those people who focus on "de l'eau plate" would end up talking about a good many different signed languages, whereas those people focusing on "de l'eau pétillante" would conclude that there is only one signed language.

Finally, an important remark here concerns the delineation of any language. How does one in general decide on the boundary between two languages? Where does one language end and another begin? It is a delicate matter and very often sociolinguistic factors and/or socio-political factors are more decisive than linguistic ones. Since the official policies today are geared towards one signed language, this may prove to be of overriding importance in the future.

Other possible influences 'shaping' SASL today

A recently imported foreign signed language

Although the teachers who started to teach at the VN Naik in 1983 were sent to the Western Cape for training, the principal went to America to learn Signing Exact English (SEE2; a form of simultaneous communication using lexical items from American Sign Language (ASL) and the morphosyntax (word order, signs for certain morphological markers, etc. of English). He came back with SEE2 books and videos and trained the teachers on how to use it in the classroom. Consequently, pupils from this school tend to use quite a number of ASL signs. The use of ASL vocabulary in SASL was enhanced by those Deaf South Africans who went to study in the USA (mainly at Gallaudet University) in the early and late 1980s. Those who came back used quite a lot of ASL vocabulary. One of them is Wilma Newhoudt-Druchen, the only Deaf MP and the current (2006) chairperson of DeafSA, who claimed[3] that when she signs in Parliament she has to use formal signing at a high level. At home, with her husband – who has also studied in the USA – she uses ASL "because SASL is quite different from place to place, it's a very confusing signed language, so at home, my husband and I use ASL or International Sign Language" but when she communicates with Deaf people at grassroots level she uses SASL. These people who have received education through ASL are in very powerful positions in terms of Deaf leadership and high level job placement (Parliament, universities etc.) and thus function as (linguistic) role models so that many of their signs are adopted by other South African Deaf people.

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[3] In the autumn of 2005 a number of Deaf people from various regions and backgrounds were interviewed by us in the framework of a larger ethnographic study into the South African Deaf Community/-ies (the results of which will be published in future publications). Wilma Newhoudt-Druchen was one of the interviewees.

Home sign systems and "micro deaf community signing"

In SASL a wide range of proficiency levels can be found, mostly determined by the age of first exposure to SASL. This is true for all Deaf communities but in the case of South Africa there are also "home signers" to be taken into account. "Home sign systems" are the gestural communication systems invented by deaf people and their hearing families who lack access to the spoken language of their hearing environment and are not brought into contact with the conventional signed language of their country's Deaf community (Goldin-Meadow 2003). In South Africa, an important number of black deaf people did not go to a deaf school (because of the apartheid rule when they were still a child). Although this does not automatically mean they did not have access to SASL (there may have been SASL-users living in their neighbourhood), the chances that they did not get to acquire SASL when they were young are high. Moreover, in South Africa education was not compulsory for black deaf children until 1996 (Aarons and Reynolds 2003).

The presence of home signers also leads to the question as to whether there might be groups of Deaf people who live in the same location, township or village, forming a micro deaf community (cf. Fusellier-Souza 2006) and using a "micro community signed language", different from SASL as we know it today. What has been observed over the years and especially after DeafSA's provincial structures implementation is that there are deaf people being discovered living in isolation, i.e. without access to a signing community. The Deaf clubs take such persons in and guide them in their endeavours to learn to communicate in SASL. However, whether there is a group of Deaf people who never went to school and never acquired any form of SASL, but stayed (or stay) in a common area within proximity to each other (e.g. in a township) so that they developed their own micro community communication system, needs investigation.

The Akach Influence (*Akachism*?)

Philemon Akach, a Kenyan linguist, was employed by DeafSA in April 1996 as Director of Sign Language and Interpreters' Development. This was a powerful position and was meant to streamline the fragmented picture of signed language(s) in South Africa. At the time the priority was the standardisation of SASL. Being a linguist, Akach explained to people that standardisation was not that important and if it was to be carried out it would have to happen by extensive usage of visual media, in schools, using standardised teaching materials and centralised training of SASL instructors. He started training Deaf persons in teaching SASL and in the meantime developed a curriculum, since no formal training existed and universities were not willing to set up a new course like that. The trainees were selected and came from eight provinces. At the same time a training programme for interpreters was developed. Meanwhile Akach started to interpret on TV with the

interpreters at the time studying his signing. Knowing Kenyan Sign Language and other signed languages and having been an "International Sign Interpreter" for the World Federation of the Deaf congresses and other gatherings, he had to learn SASL and be fluent in it before embarking on being a role model for SASL interpreters. In such a powerful position Akach may have exerted a certain influence on the signing in South Africa either through foreign signs, including signs from Kenyan Sign Language, and/or the morpho-syntactic structure of Kenian Sign Language. This factor is difficult to gauge, but may well be of some significance.

Is there one South African Deaf community?

Deaf people do not have a general geographical area that they can call a "Deaf-land", comparable to for instance the isi-Zulu and is-Xhosa speakers who would respectively call Kwa-Zulu Natal and Eastern Cape their homes. They are therefore, at least to some extent, part of the hearing communities they were born into, i.e. Afrikaans, Zulu, English, Sotho, Xhosa, etc. (Akach and Lubbe 2000). This is in line with Kyle and Woll's (1985: 9-10) postulation that there is not a Deaf geographical nucleus in any given country or continent.

Nevertheless, even though there is no geographical nucleus, deaf schools can be considered as the "cradles" of the Deaf community/-ies. Residential schools for deaf pupils provide the physical conditions for signed languages to develop, and since language is used by people in a community sharing the same culture, they were, and still are, also the centres for the development of Deaf communities and Deaf culture. In the past they also had to hide their use of a signed language, the most important unifying factor of any Deaf community. Therefore,

> Deaf pupils start to understand that there are bonds that unite them to other Deaf people as a sort of extended family. Many Deaf people continue to live and socialise with other Deaf people, as adults. They regard other Deaf people as their primary community, with whom they share a common language, way of living and set of experiences, which bond them to one another. Thus, many Deaf people regard their primary culture and community as revolving around the use of their signed language and the experience of deafness. In most cases, Deaf people are not born into this culture: they choose it, usually as a result of negative communication experiences in their own families and with the hearing world, and the sense of familiarity and belonging they feel in interaction with other Deaf people. Typically, Deaf South Africans choose the company of other Deaf South Africans, and believe they are united on the basis of language and culture (Aarons and Akach 2002:130).

In this respect Deafness seems to override ethnic, religious or other backgrounds. After having finished school Deaf people go back to the hearing world either at home (since 90 to 95% of Deaf people have hearing parents) or at work, if they get a job at all, since they can very rarely find a working place with other Deaf people. Out of frustration due to communicative isolation, Deaf

people in any given centre, town or city, gather with the intention of socialising. These gatherings are then often formalised in a sports club, a church goer's fellowship, and more often than not leads to a national organisation that represents them and lobbies for the needs of the Deaf people. In South Africa DeafSA is such an organisation and its history dates back to 1929.

The first organisation which claimed to speak on behalf of all the Deaf people in South Africa was the SANCD (South African National Council for the Deaf). It was founded on 4 April 1929 and was run on charity as this was long before the welfare services were professionalised. From the formation of the colony to the beginning of the 1930s, the church, state and landowners were the key role players in charitable organisations and schools. The focus of the services was the provision of food, clothing and scholastic training. It should be noted that the SANCD was initiated with the aim of dealing with the "poor white problem". Throughout its lifetime the focus of the SANCD seemed biased towards white Africans as opposed to coloured, black and Indian Deaf South Africans. However, SANCD, since its inception, never involved Deaf people in the planning, deliberations and execution of their activities at all. Deaf people were supposed to be on the receiving end of the services, hence the "South African Council *for* the Deaf". In 1995, SANCD contacted the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) to become a member. However, the WFD would not accept membership from an organisation with a majority of hearing people in the governing bodies so that SANCD was forced to change. SANCD was dissolved and out of its ashes DeafSA (Deaf Federation of South Africa) emerged. By then it had also been clear for some time that the national Deaf organisation did not cater for many, especially non-white, Deaf communities. Various grassroots organisations of Deaf people surfaced that previously had been entirely unfunded or only minimally supported as NGOs. Many of these clubs were not only geographically but also racially divided and did not intermingle. With the change of SANCD to DeafSA, these groups mostly affiliated themselves with DeafSA and gradually there have been more and more contacts between them. So here, we seem to be able to witness an evolution from different communities to one South African Deaf community.

However, can we say that in this one Deaf community apartheid has completely disappeared and that the Deaf community is racially mixed now? In 2003 Aarons and Reynolds (2003: 199) still maintained that this was not the case:

> Deaf communities evolved largely out of school contacts, and because the schools were racially divided, as were all communities in South Africa, the adult Deaf communities tended to be almost exclusively racially divided, too.

The deaf schools that were separated up till now still have to mix fully, although according to one ex-pupil of the VN Naik School for the deaf it is said to be crowded by black deaf learners, rather

than the Indians that the school was built for[4]. According to her the form of ASL-based Signing Exact English has diminished among the deaf learners of the school and is only seen to be used by the teachers of the school while the mixed Indian and black deaf learners use SASL. It should be noted that there are no white deaf learners joining this particular school. Likewise the schools originally for coloured pupils in the Western Cape (Nuwe Hoop and Wittebome) are now attracting black deaf learners and not white deaf learners. The white schools are still predominantly white with no or very few black learners being registered and the black schools have remained black with no or very few white students.

Nevertheless, we want to point out an interesting development in one of the schools for the deaf in the Free State which has recently admitted two deaf white children among the coloured and Indian deaf children as day pupils although the school normally is a boarding school. The two have an interesting history on how they got admitted. Until 2003 they, a brother and a sister, were going to the local (Bloemfontein) branch of the Carol du Toit Centre. Carol du Toit Centres propagate and take in deaf children as early as they can be identified to train them in speech-reading and encourage cochlear implants. A psychology student who was taking SASL as an extra subject at the University of the Free State was carrying out research at the school when she met the mother of the two children. This made the mother very curious as to what SASL was all about and she came to talk to the lecturer in charge. The result was that a special evening class was arranged for the parents taught with the assistance of SASL students and other students played with the children as the parents learned SASL. She, among the parents, raised money to employ a Deaf woman to work at the day care centre that the two children attended. The mother was then encouraged by the lecturer to visit and spend a day at the school for the deaf. She did and promptly volunteered as a house mother at the school and was then offered a position. This is very unique because firstly she accepted SASL, as opposed to other white parents, secondly she did not mind her two children being the only two white children amongst the approximately 260 black and coloured learners and thirdly she is the only parent who insists that the teachers use SASL as the medium of instruction. She sees her children as Deaf first (not as white first). She also decided to reside at the school so that she and her children could be emerged full time in the school community. Stories like hers could herald an incipient end of apartheid in deaf schools in South Africa and hence in the Deaf communities.

Conclusion

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[4] One of the interviewees in the above-mentioned ethnographic study (see footnote 3) was an ex-pupil of this school.

After having discussed the history and current situation of the Deaf community/-ies and their signed language(s), it has become clear that one question still remains to be answered: Is there enough contact between the different groups to allow for the alleged extensive variation in SASL to diminish or disappear? At this point, AD 2006, we would have to say that this is probably not yet the case. But mainly due to the socio-political choice of DeafSA to work from the assumption that there is only one South African Deaf Community and one South African Sign Language (e.g. by propagating the use of SASL on television, the use of SASL for cross-regional, cross-racial communication, etc.), the desired situation may well become reality in the near future.

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