The De-Globalization of World Sign Language

English has long been acknowledged as the language of commerce, the language of education, and the language of the privileged, worldwide. This status comes out of a long history of colonization by the British Empire, which spilled over into American business, treaty, education, and expansion. One might even say the offspring republic has far exceeded the teachings of its parent country.

This American language trend has neatly duplicated itself in a parallel version of language colonialism, language elitism, and language pervasion. American Sign Language (ASL) has held a position of high regard and recognition, in addition to legal protection and popular appeal, not only in America, but around the world as well.

The groundbreaking American with Disabilities Act law set forth a complex machinery of language influence, due to the proliferation of ASL courses, ASL in popular media, the ASL-English interpreting field, Deaf Studies programs, as well as ASL linguistics research and programs. America also offers the Washington D.C. based Gallaudet University, long considered to be the Mecca of the American Deaf community, and a guiding star for the deaf communities of other countries to steer by in all matters of language, identity, and culture.

The large number of schools for the Deaf, missionary programs that serve Deaf members, Deaf and hearing scholars studying sociolinguistics, cultures, and
various other branches of anthropology, humanities, language, and again, Gallaudet’s reputation have all served to maintain a high profile for ASL in a global viewpoint.

ASL may have been derived as much from French Sign Language (LSF) and a variation of British Sign Language (BSL) vis-à-vis Martha’s Vineyard linguistic roots in Kentish signs as from Native American Indian sign languages (Groce, Daviss); however there is a growing indication of a reversal in Europe. ASL is now emerging as the lingua franca at global Deaf conferences, at foreign institutes of study with Deaf Studies curriculum, in certain regions and communities, even to the point of influencing and supplanting International Sign, also known as Gestuno, the former preferred medium of basic communication between different sign language communities. (Hay)

For the most part, this is entirely logical. ASL, after all, shares many grammatical features and syntactic constructions with the LSF language family, creating an effective contact language. Now, though, the use of the term “contact language” presents several complications, and also the main point of this paper. ASL, when it acts as a contact language, carries over the contact language facets embedded within by its long and convoluted development history and how it has been shaped, modified, redefined, and at times, corrupted by English.

English is a language of colonization, and it has often perpetuated the four tenets of colonialism: economic, welfare, linguistic, and cultural (Lane, Wrigley). Paddy Ladd notes that in the field of Deaf Studies, parallels between the Deaf world and colonialism are frequent and constant, and that special note must be
given to the latter two forms of colonialism. (Ladd) Linguistic and cultural colonialism. When a cultural order is imposed on a community, the language is often molded to the dominant culture’s mother tongue.

In America, the Deaf world has embraced ASL and made it a foundation of cultural identity, and yet acknowledges that a working command of English is needed to function within the larger mainstream frame society. Ryan Commerson identified that there is a bias associated with proficiency in English in the academic world, which carries the implication that ASL is a rung or two below in terms of prestige, articulation and communication. This indicates language superiority attitudes that have carried over into other sign language communities. (Commerson)

ASL linguistics came up with the term contact language to work with and around the problematic presence of Manually Coded English Systems (MCEs) developed to try and fit the round peg of ASL into a square hole of spoken/written English. (Quinto-Pozos) Contact language also applies to fingerspelling, which replaces any word or pre-empts any sign with an English morpheme.

English-based contact language within ASL or Pidgin Signed English (PSE) framework has led to two distinct results: 1. The ability to include English lexicon into ASL syntax, without corresponding signs. And 2. The corruption, or contamination of ASL linguistics as a constant, definable and uniformly taught and/or shared language. Ask a Deaf person what they sign, and the answer is commonly, “ASL”. Yet, observation usually bears out that that given person uses contact language to some degree within their ASL utterance, which dilutes the
linguistic integrity of ASL as we, these in the field of ASL sociolinguistics, study and understand the language.

Furthermore, within the cultural framework of ASL use, many native signers adopt the practices of code-switching and contact language modulation. If a native signer meets someone who is learning ASL or not a fluent user, the native signer will often increase the amount of contact language; fingerspelling, MCEs, spoken English, and move away from an unadulterated ASL framework. (Quinto-Pozos)

This, however, is in America. When the influence of ASL on other sign languages around the world is examined, we must take into consideration that even the best intentions behind the dispersion of ASL may carry the contamination of a colonization mindset, and also that spoken/written American English will have some bearing upon the pervasion of ASL, especially in context where ASL is more than a contact language. This also creates a distorted perception of language capability and development, especially if the native population are not English speaking. (Deutscher)

There are minor influences, such as an increase in fingerspelling in the Turin region of Italy, a country in which the Deaf community maintain a collective disdain for fingerspelling, since there is a greater sign vocabulary compared to that of ASL, which does rely more upon contact language and loan signs. A significant percentage of the Turin Deaf population are alumni of Gallaudet University, according to Gallaudet University’s Fulbright Scholarship enrollment statistics, hence the exposure and integration of ASL contact language.
There are greater influences, such as in Nicaragua, in which the influx of linguists, service volunteers, missionaries and tourists from America, all versed in ASL and/or MCEs has caused cross-cultural contamination in Nicaraguan Sign Language (ISN). The more recent footage of the Deaf population’s signed discourse, the more interference is apparent.

This comes out of the perceived prestige associated with being American, which is an underlying attitude in Nicaragua and other similar developing countries. The language Deaf Americans use appears more attractive than the native language the Deaf Nicaraguans use, and so therefore, ASL is coveted. There is a noticeable increase in ASL signs interwoven with the native signs, especially within the last decade. The MCE feature of signing with initialized handshapes to indicate specific words from the English lexicon, such as signing WAY with a “W” handshape is applied more often in current forms of ISN, using initialized handshapes to indicate specific words from the Spanish lexicon. Accordingly, CAMINO would be signed with the “C” handshape, but with the other parameters matching that of the MCE sign for WAY. This interference is common in other Central American countries and Mexico as well. (Quintos-Pozos) There is also a greater bias towards MCEs over ASL, which will be examined in depth in the next section of this paper.

The greatest degree of influence, however, is apparent in the Ghana sign language framework. ASL and MCEs have not only gained a very firm foothold in Ghana, but also has brought with it a mirror of American Deaf cultural history, complete with its history of linguistic and cultural colonization, due to English preference.
The introduction of ASL to Ghana began with the Reverend Dr. Andrew Foster, the first Black graduate from Gallaudet University, visiting Africa in 1957, at which time the deaf citizens in many countries were regarded as lesser beings, incapable of being educated and therefore incapable of reason and effective communication (much as Deaf people in America were perceived in the 18th and early 19th centuries). Dr. Foster began the educational reform that would result in dozens of schools for the deaf in various countries, including Ghana, which was to become the main focus on his life’s work.

Dr. Foster’s work was performed in ASL, so it is important to bear in mind that the ASL of the 1950’s was a very different incarnation than the ASL now currently in use and taught in various curricula throughout American schools and programs. Oralism held a greater prevalence in schools for the Deaf and contact language was more prominent in ASL structure, including English pronouns and prepositions often not expressed as separate signs in contemporary ASL discourse. Dr. Foster himself promoted total communication as ideal for deaf students in Ghana and other African nations, stressing the importance of sign language for the deaf population, but also giving English the same bias possessed in American Deaf education at the time. (Foster)

Custodianship of ASL has been a topic of much contention in America, and a lot of discussion and scrutiny has been given to the accountability behind ASL preservation and integrity within the Deaf community. There is also the indisputable factor of linguistic colonialism prevalent in American Deaf education—the majority of school administrators, faculty and staff, legislative players, and
families that all have a bearing on a Deaf person’s education and subsequent place in society are often not fluent in ASL, and exhibit a bias for English. MCEs are widespread in all forms of Deaf education and have often caused issues with cultural identity, language acquisition and linguistic disregard. Also, in the realm of social media, the majority of so-called sign language lesson videos are posted by non-native signers, who are often less than fluent in ASL, but their presence on the internet is maintained by a large number of viewers who prefer the privileges of “lessons” conducted primarily in spoken English. Again, this is in America.

In Ghana, this entire framework has developed very differently. The overall education system in Ghana has proven to be very ineffectual and corrupt, and this bears true for the schools of the deaf as well. An overwhelming majority of the administrators and faculty at these schools are not only poor signers, they often do not know more than a few signs. The faculty members often have sign language classes during school hours to improve their own vocabularies, at the expense of class time for the students.

In Ghana, the sign language used in schools is called Ghana Sign Language (GSL), and is considered by many local authority figures including school administration/faculty and spiritual leaders (e.g., Kingdom Hall elders who are fluent signers) to be its own language separate from ASL. However, an American sociolinguist studying ASL or a native American signer may observe right away that GSL is virtually identical to Signed English, a specific MCE that employs a great deal of initialized handshapes for English-based vocabulary. Unlike Mexico or Nicaragua,
however, English is the official language of education and commerce in Ghana, so 
GSL is a MCE, with the “E” standing for “English”, no substitutions.

The exception to this language system is the farming village of Adamorobe in 
South Ghana, with a high incidental percentage of deafness within the village 
population, currently at 2% of the entire populace. The deaf people in this village 
are largely illiterate, and only the current generation of deaf children, about ten in 
all have attended school. They have their own sign language, known as Adamorobe 
Sign Language (AdaSL), which incorporates virtually no contact language, since 
spoken/written Akan and Twi (the primary languages of the region) is inaccessible 
to the majority of the deaf residents. (Kusters) Curiously enough, the one notable 
exception to this is the use of arbitrary name signs using English handshapes for the 
first letter for their names, probably due to exterior influences by the numerous 
sociolinguists, missionaries, educators and Deaf people visiting the village.

As documented in great detail by Dr. Victoria Nyst and Dr. Annelies Kusters, 
AdaSL is a fully fledged sign language with many discourse features common to 
global sign languages; simultaneous constructions, inflecting and non-inflecting 
verbs, mouthing morphemes, grammatical facial expressions, the inclusion of local 
(Ghanaian and Adamorobe) hearing gestures, and so forth. (Nyst)

What is interesting about this is that AdaASL is nearly universally dismissed 
by the colonializing GSL community as an artificial, gestural communication system 
capable of expressing only the most minimal concepts. The designation 
“colonializing GSL community”, is in reference to the top tier of the hierarchy within 
the deaf community of Ghana; the hearing, non-native signers who enforce the MCE
structure of GSL in the schools, the churches, the training centers, and all other areas of business and society. The well-meaning non-native outsiders who believe that English is superior to sign language and that Deaf people need to eschew the “inferior” language in favor of that used by the dominant community. This echoes the history of ASL and Deaf education and cultural identity in America. (Van Cleve)

Ghana is not a mirror image, however, because it is a different culture. The status quo of the deaf community and language is at a very different level. A different set of sociopolitical values, and far less recognition and protection of deaf rights and genuine sign language usage as opposed to the more advanced status Deaf people and ASL hold in America. However, the patterns of colonization are quite apparent and as long as the hierarchy and imposed cultural order remain in place, the schools and other aspects of Ghana society, the stronger the contact language bias will grow, and the authentic language that is AdaASL will disappear from its already precarious position on the Alliance for Linguistic Diversity’s Endangered Languages Project list, under oversight by Eastern Michigan University.

ASL as a lingua franca, as a language of commerce is a strong ideal, but unless custodianship of ASL is examined and established, with very clearly defined parameters of standard ASL to be taught and used uniformly (In the manner English is standardized and taught uniformly with guidelines such as these set by the MLA), the spread of ASL into other sign language communities may need to be curtailed. The ideal of a singular, central sign language system to facilitate communication between different languages and cultures works far more effectively in theory, if the given central sign language is a complete and independent system free of excessive
contact language rooted in spoken and therefore non-visual language. Especially a contact language rooted in a long history of language bias, cultural privilege, and other trappings of language superiority attitudes that parallel colonialism.

Perhaps, then, ASL needs to evolve as a sign language further, before it may become a model for other sign language communities, and American educators, linguists, interpreters, scholars, and signers need to move forward with this in mind as we continue to interact on a global scale with other Deaf people.
Works Cited


