

Introduction

The study of language use and attitudes with respect to Ethiopian Sign Language (EthSL) has several advantages: not only will it assist in the development and recognition of the language itself by reinforcing EthSL as a real language, it will also potentially impact the lives of the Deaf community in Ethiopia by enhancing educational and employment opportunities. This has been true of other sign language communities around the world such as the American Deaf community (Lucas, 2004).

There are more than 80 languages in Ethiopia. Some are major languages with over a million users, serving as a medium of instruction, and having the status of being official and/or prestigious languages. By contrast, others are minor languages, confined to restricted domains, and are less prestigious. Ethiopian Sign Language (EthSL) is one of the minor languages, yet it has about a million users (WHO statistics).¹

Little work exists on EthSL that could serve as a starting point for a sociolinguistic study of the language. Not much is known about the language's sociolinguistic profile. Except for sign language dictionaries, there is no reference material available on the language. However, curiosity has been growing nowadays among educational and social domains as to what the sociolinguistic nature of EthSL and the Deaf community may look like. For example, although it is not possible to find any written information about the history of EthSL before the introduction of Ethiopian Deaf Education, many Deaf people in Ethiopia believe that American Sign Language (ASL) has had a strong influence on EthSL.²

1. This is an unconfirmed estimate. According to the 2013 World Health Organization report, 15 percent of every country's population consists of People with Disabilities (PWD). Out of this, 1/10th of them are assumed to be Deaf people (www.who.org). There is no other source that gives any exact figure.

2. The term *Deaf* (with upper case D) in this study refers to sociological deafness; the term *deaf* (with lower case d) refers to audiological deafness. The term *Hearing* refers to those (deaf) people who identify with oral language communities and their values; the term *hearing* means the ability to hear (Woodward, 1982; Lucas, 2004).

This is because ASL was brought to Ethiopia together with Deaf education and evidence of the continued contact between EthSL and ASL is apparent in the structure of EthSL today.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

As EthSL is an under-described and under-documented language of Ethiopia, the general objective of this study is to describe the sociolinguistic situation of EthSL by:

1. providing a current sociolinguistic profile of EthSL and the Deaf community;
2. illustrating the use of EthSL in various domains such as in the home, education, religious place, media, market, medical institution, courtroom, and informal social gatherings; and
3. investigating the factors responsible for attitudes toward the use of EthSL.

This research hypothesizes that the use of EthSL in various language domains will be a reflection of the community's attitudes toward its own language. In other words, the more domains in which the language is used, the more positive the community's attitudes toward the language. The objective of this research is not only to determine the current situation and to find out the factors responsible for various attitudes toward EthSL but also to set a benchmark for future language documentations on EthSL.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROJECT

To date, there is very little research about the sign languages of Africa. Some grammatical sketches, which also include some information about the sociolinguistic profile, include Schmalig (2000), Nyst (2007), and Akach (2010). As a consequence, sociolinguistic studies of sign languages have been neglected in Africa.

A sociolinguistic description of EthSL is important for both academic and social reasons. Academically, it will foster the teaching and learning of the language. For example, it will empower the staff capacity of the EthSL and Deaf Culture Program at Addis Ababa University (AAU) and

will be of help expanding the BA program to MA level and ultimately to PhD once the required expertise is available. In such a case, the number of Deaf students going into the tertiary level would increase. Socially, it would contribute to the promotion of EthSL a better communication means for the Ethiopian Deaf community and its associated members. In other words, the research will increase understanding and general respect about the current situation of EthSL and will be an important resource for the ongoing development of EthSL. Lastly, the information gained from this research will be a valuable resource for those concerned with policy issues in connection with sign language and Deaf education in Ethiopia.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to address the basic research questions, this study follows both quantitative and qualitative research approaches. Data was collected via interviews, questionnaires, and participant observation. All methods were administered by myself (the principal investigator) with the support of Deaf Research Assistants (DRAs).

Before conducting the fieldwork, information regarding the Ethiopian Deaf community and EthSL was gathered from individuals and organizations. As the national census underestimates the number of Deaf population in Ethiopia, the research data is dependent on the statistical data available from regional Deaf associations and Deaf schools. Although a large number of Deaf communities exist in Ethiopia, this study focused on communities in eleven regions: Addis Ababa, Hosaena, Adama (Nazareth), Hawassa, Arba Minch, Harar, Dessie, Mekele, Bahir Dar, Nekemt, and Gambella. These regions represent the locations of national Deaf associations, Deaf schools, and Deaf centers. When selecting participants from each region for inclusion in this study, care was taken to consider a range of factors known to account for sociolinguistic variation in Deaf children—such as age at onset of deafness, degree of hearing loss, medical history, linguistic background, age, gender, IQ, and socio-economic status (Baker and Woll, 2005). This study also involved prestratification of the population before selecting the sample size. The socially stratified sample population includes Deaf students, their teachers, school administrators, parents of Deaf children, children of Deaf parents/adults (CODA), Deaf community leaders, Deaf associations and organizations, and individuals

working with Deaf people. These participants were grouped into three types: Deaf participants, parents, and teachers.

Participant observation, sociolinguistic questionnaires (SLQ), as well as a sample sociolinguistic questionnaire found in Leigh (2010), and questionnaires from previous sign language corpus projects (mainly BSL and Auslan corpus projects) were used to gather information about Deaf communities, sign language use, and language attitudes.³ The questionnaires and interview guides were modified for the purpose of this research. In order to gather more personal information about the attitudes and ethnolinguistic identity of the Deaf community toward their language, both structured and open-ended interviews were conducted. To supplement the use of questionnaires, it was also necessary to observe participants at home and in schools.

3. Bickford (1988) and Showalter (1990) provided a basis to gather information about sociolinguistic data.