

## **SOUTH AFRICAN SIGN LANGUAGE: CHANGING POLICIES AND PRACTICE**

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### **1 Introduction**

In April 1994, South Africa held its first democratic elections, and as a result of the election of the new government, the policy of apartheid which had governed each and every aspect of the lives of all South Africans, was officially abolished. Needless to say, the simple abolition of apartheid did little to affect the many years of profound damage, and the heritage of apartheid will be with us for many years to come. The consequences of the policy of apartheid can nowhere more clearly be seen than in the structure of education provision in South Africa. Deaf people in South Africa have been affected by the policies of apartheid, and its educational and linguistic consequences, in a profound and thoroughgoing way.

In this paper, we discuss the historical context of signed language use in South Africa, by presenting the historical background against which the development of signed language has taken place. We provide a brief overview of the history of Deafness in South Africa, and then present the current situation with regard to education and language as it pertains in schools for the Deaf. Thereafter we consider the language used in the different Deaf communities, particularly in the Western Cape Province (one of the nine provinces in South Africa, and the province in which the first schools for the Deaf were established). We consider the issue of variation in the signed language used, and discuss the Dictionary of South African Signs and its claims that there are many different signed languages used in South Africa. We look at the situation of interpreting in relation to claims of variation. Thereafter we present the constitutional position of South African Sign Language and assess the implications of multilingual language policies for the use and status of South African Sign Language.

Crucially, in this paper, we want to show that despite the fact that the law has changed dramatically, and that the country has put in place a policy of multilingualism and linguistic

human rights, oppressive practices with regard to Deaf people, particularly children in schools, have barely changed at all.

This paper was originally presented in September 1996, by Debra Aarons and Louise Reynolds (at that time a language therapist working for the Deaf Community of Cape Town) and several important developments have occurred subsequently in South Africa. Where possible, I have provided updated information when revising the paper for publication. The paper focuses on the Western Cape Province. The conference paper was written as an initial step in the investigation of the issue of variation in the signed language used in South Africa. Subsequent to the presentation of the paper, a research project to investigate the linguistic structure of the signed language used in two provinces (the Western Cape Province and Gauteng) has been initiated by Aarons and Morgan<sup>1</sup>. A more detailed discussion of the signed language used throughout South Africa may be found in Aarons and Akach 1998, and forthcoming.

## **2 The historical context**

### **2.1 Background of education provision**

Under the apartheid regime in South Africa, separate departments of education for each racial group were set up, each with its own directorate, staff, budget, syllabi, curriculum, and standards. From 1910 to 1994, there were four provinces in South Africa<sup>2</sup>. Each of the four provinces had a separate department of education for white scholars. Further, there was one national department of education for black<sup>3</sup> scholars, another national department of education for so-called colored, or mixed race, scholars, and yet another for scholars of Indian origin. Additionally, a national department of special education for whites was established, as well as a separate department of special education for each of the other three "race" groups. These departments were by no means equally funded or supported: the funding was based entirely on the relative color ranking in the country. It was further determined as a matter of national policy what was necessary for each of the population groups to get by way of education and training, thereby ensuring differential knowledge and skills bases. Decisions relating to language policy were also made by the national

government for each of the communities in question. The provision of education services was directly related to the pigmentation of the various groups.

Since 1994, there has been a radical re-envisioning of education structures. There is now one national ministry of education, and, in principle, equality of educational opportunity for all. The practice still lags behind: other than some desegregation of white schools in mostly urban areas, for the majority of the population, schools remain very much the same, owing to massive undertraining of teachers and an as yet unequal distribution of resources. Thus, whereas the law has now changed, the situation on the ground remains largely untouched.

A new constitution, arguably one of the most democratic and fair in the world today, was drawn up and accepted in 1996 (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996). Current educational practices, as they relate to Deaf people, are undoubtedly unconstitutional. In order for them to be changed, however, they will have to be opposed in the Constitutional Court, and challenged. This will be lengthy and costly, and will involve major commitment and involvement by the parties most oppressed by this system. As South Africa is a country in which much must still be challenged, and many new institutions are yet to be developed, the lot of Deaf people is not currently perceived as a high national priority. Many of the issues and conflicts surrounding language and education in South Africa, can be seen very clearly, at their extremes, by an examination of the situation of Deaf people in South Africa today, as has been suggested previously by Foreman, Penn and Reagan (1994).

Deaf people in South Africa are a subset of the wider community, and, as would be expected, the divisions within the Deaf community itself reflect very accurately the divisions in the wider society (Penn, Reagan and Ogilvy 1994). Thus, as a consequence of apartheid, there are social strata within the Deaf community that are based on color and racial privilege. Deaf schools have always been segregated, first on the basis of color. In apartheid South Africa (and to a large measure, still today), there were separate schools for the white Deaf, the colored (mixed race) Deaf, the Indian Deaf, and the black Deaf. Additionally, the schools for white and colored Deaf children always have been further divided into schools for the Afrikaans-“speaking” Deaf, and

schools for the English-”speaking” Deaf. The rationale for this is that the pupils are considered to be either English or Afrikaans “speaking”. This is a consequence of the practice of oralist teaching strategies, and more recently of the perception that a signed language is a manual form of a particular spoken language. Furthermore, under Apartheid education legislation, it was also stipulated that the medium of instruction in the colored schools would be either English or Afrikaans; in the Indian schools, English; and in the black schools, (where there were pupils from approximately nine different spoken language backgrounds) the medium of instruction from the early 1980's was to be (officially) English.

Post-apartheid, the South African Schools Act of 1996 stipulates that in schools for the Deaf in South Africa, South African Sign Language should be the medium of instruction. However, as of 1999, this is not the practice in a single school for the Deaf in South Africa. The reasons for this are manifold, as will become evident below, but crucially, there are at most four teachers of the Deaf throughout South Africa who could conform to the stipulations of this Act.

Since the policy of apartheid has officially been abolished, it is interesting to note that (apart from a small number of black and colored pupils in erstwhile white schools for the Deaf) almost no change has come about in the demographics of schools for the Deaf. Astonishingly, thus, despite the fact that officially there is no longer segregation on the basis of color, and despite the well-established fact that the signed language of a community is not related to the spoken language of the wider community, Deaf schools in South Africa are still segregated on the basis of color and on the basis of the (former) official spoken languages designated by the apartheid education policy, English and Afrikaans. The previously white schools are well-resourced, with a small pupil-teacher ratio, and some specialized facilities. The schools previously set aside for colored pupils are less well-equipped with a much larger pupil-teacher ratio, and fewer facilities. The schools previously intended for black Deaf pupils have very few resources, a high pupil-teacher ratio, and almost no specialized facilities. Needless to say, then, Deaf people in South Africa are just as oppressed as Deaf people anywhere else in the world, but for some Deaf people, the oppression is multiple, perhaps even exponential.

I use the Western Cape Province as an example. The Dominican Grimley School for the Deaf (at Hout Bay, in metropolitan Cape Town) for the white English (of origin) Deaf is rigidly oral. This school started out as a Catholic church school, and is now state-subsidized. First to twelfth grade schooling is provided. Parents of children are asked to commit themselves to a non-signing environment. The school is extremely well-resourced, with specialized facilities, and support staff. Eighty kilometres away, in Worcester, is De la Bat School for the Deaf, established for white Afrikaans (of origin) Deaf which also goes from first to twelfth grade. The language policy at this school in recent years has become more open to the teachers' ability and preference, and there is a measure of sign supported Afrikaans used at this school, depending on individual teachers. This school is extremely well-resourced, with a great deal of private, as well as state funding, and the support of an Institute concerned originally with the welfare of the Afrikaans Deaf of the Dutch Reformed Church. There is now a tiny fraction of colored pupils at the school.

Of the two schools for the colored Deaf, one (Dominican Grimley at Wittebome in Cape Town), is also affiliated to the Catholic church, although state subsidized, and offers only nine years of schooling (the last few technical, and not academic). A few teachers attempt to provide instruction in signed language, but the school policy is still overwhelmingly oral. The other school for the colored Afrikaans Deaf, Nuwe Hoop, is also attached to the Dutch Reformed church in Worcester. Nuwe Hoop runs along similar lines to the Wittebome school for colored Deaf, although it officially offers twelve years of schooling. Said to be the largest school for the Deaf in Africa, at this school there is very little signing. Although the richest school for the Deaf in the country (De la Bat) is within walking distance, and is affiliated to the same church, as yet the schools have not come together or shared resources, staff, materials, or facilities.

The school for black Deaf children in Cape Town offers only grades one to seven. This school too is under the auspices of the Dutch Reformed Church, and is situated in an urban township, just outside of Cape Town, surrounded by squatter camps, and informal housing. The stated language policy is total or simultaneous communication. A (limited, and quite possibly unnatural) collection of signs (many of them culled from a British interpreter modelling some basic Gestuno) has been prescribed for use in the previously officially black schools (Nieder-

Heitmann 1980) and these are the only signs that are acceptable to the school authorities. We have been unable to get any official answer to the question of what happens to black or colored students in these schools who want to pursue their academic education further after seventh or ninth grade. (In fact, anecdotally, we know that black and colored children who have continued academically have had to move to other provinces, in apartheid times, either Natal or the Transvaal, where there are some large schools for the black Deaf, often with combined programs for blind and mentally handicapped pupils). Some technical training is provided for those black deaf students who remain in the schools in the Western Cape, but the almost explicit assumption has always been that they are unable to pursue further academic education, nor that they have any need to.

Thus, as a consequence of the apartheid provision of education, Deaf South Africans have been given a differential education. Since education for Deaf children was not compulsory under the previous regime, many Deaf children never attended school at all. This is particularly true for black children from poor and uneducated families.

## **2.2 A brief history of South Africa**

In order to give readers some sense of the background to the history of the Deaf, we present here a very brief and sketchy history of South Africa from colonization till the present day. In 1652, Dutch settlers arrived at the Cape of Good Hope in order to set up a refreshment station for ships in pursuit of a sea route to the East. In 1795, the first British settlers arrived. Various settlements were established in the Cape and in the interior of what was later to become South Africa. The British and Dutch settlers soon quarrelled over who was to rule the land. The indigenous people were taken to work for the settlers, and border wars with indigenous people were fought over territory. Missionaries were sent from various churches to convert the indigenous people.

Up until 1910, what is now South Africa was under the rule of the British or the Dutch, depending on the various European wars that were being fought, and the treaties that were made which affected the ownership of the colonies by the various powers. The second Anglo-Boer War

ended in 1901, after which the British ruled until 1910, when the Union of South Africa was declared to be a member of the British Commonwealth. South Africa was essentially self-governing, although still a member of the Commonwealth. In 1948, the Nationalist government came to power, formally entrenching the policy of apartheid, or separate development. Essentially this policy meant that there was separate and unequal provision for people on the basis of color. By 1955, only white people in South Africa could vote, and although less than 20% of the population, whites owned 87% of the land. There were two official languages, English and Afrikaans (the language based primarily on Dutch and some indigenous and slave languages that had developed in South Africa). White South Africans spoke either English or Afrikaans as their first language, and black (African) South Africans spoke one or several Bantu languages, amongst them, isiZulu, seSotho, seTswana, isiNdebele, sePedi, siSwati, isiXhosa, Xitsonga, and TshiVenda. Additionally, some black South Africans spoke Khoi-san languages. Colored (mixed race) South Africans used English or Afrikaans, or a mixture of both. A significant sector of the community spoke Indian languages such as Hindu, Gujirati, Tamil and Telugu.

In 1961, South Africa became a republic, and the policies of apartheid were more deeply entrenched. During this time, legislation such as the Group Areas Act was passed. This legislation enforced separation of the races at all levels of society, including in living areas, schools, and hospitals. People of different racial classifications could not marry or cohabit. Black people were sent to live in special reserves, or "homelands" according to the so-called ethnic or tribal classifications they had been given. These homelands were designed to provide a cheap labour force for white South Africa, and to take the responsibility of provision for black people out of the hands of the central government. There was major suppression of all political opposition to this policy. A student uprising occurred in 1976, starting in Soweto, one of the black townships, against gutter education for black people. This started a new wave of political resistance and consequent repression. From the beginning of Nationalist Party rule until the early 1990's most of the opposing voices were silenced, through torture, banning and imprisonment. In 1994, after hundreds of years of oppression and minority rule, South Africa had its first democratic election.

### **2.3 History of the Deaf in South Africa**

Little is known about the history of the Deaf in South Africa prior to colonization (Heap, to appear). After colonization, and the beginning of publicly provided education, the state authorities took little or no responsibility for establishing schools for the Deaf, and this was left almost entirely to the different churches. During the course of the twentieth century, once schools had been established and were functioning, they were eligible for some state aid. It was not until the new Constitution of the Republic of South Africa in 1996 that education was declared compulsory for Deaf children. It should be noted that before 1994 the majority of Deaf children in South Africa had never been to school, i.e., there were more Deaf people that had never been to school than there were Deaf people that had attended a school at any time.

The history of sign language in South Africa is, of course, deeply intertwined with the history of apartheid schooling and its complicated language policies. For this reason, I present some of the details of the history of schools for the Deaf in South Africa, with particular reference to the role of different churches, and apartheid racial and ethnic classifications. Additionally I highlight the different communication practices that were prescribed or emerged in the different schools for the Deaf.

To help the reader through a mass of details, I provide a guiding generalization: schools for the white Deaf insisted on oralism, whereas schools for the other races allowed some measure of manualism (in most cases, not a natural signed language, but a mixture of speech and some signs). In general, speaking was perceived by the authorities as the prestigious form of language, hence the insistence on oralism in schools for the white Deaf, whereas, based on pigmentation, manualism was permitted increasingly in schools for the Deaf of other racial groups.

In this paper, I will focus on the Western Cape Province, since it is the area I know best, and doing so also allows us to focus on some crucial issues. In 1863, the Irish Dominican Order established a school for the Deaf, St. Mary's, in Cape Town. From early this century, St. Mary's catered for

all race groups, using signed language as a medium of instruction. The written language that was taught was English.

By 1904, two other schools for the Deaf had been established in South Africa. These schools served only white Deaf children. Some 80 kilometres from Cape Town, the Worcester School for the Deaf and Blind was established in 1881, by the Dutch Reformed Church, for the children of the Dutch settlers. The 1904 census report states that combined oral and manual methods were used in the school. The folklore is that Jan de la Bat, a Dutch Reformed Church missionary, taught his Deaf brother by means of signs, and that this heralded the beginning of the signed language used in Worcester, which is claimed by this community to be indigenous. Only "European"<sup>4</sup> children were permitted to attend this school.

In 1884, German Dominican nuns established a school at Kingwilliamstown in the Eastern Cape. This too was a school for the "European" Deaf and followed a policy of strict oralism, presumably because of the overwhelming influence of oralism in Germany. The German Dominican School later moved to Johannesburg, where it became St. Vincent's School for the Deaf, which took in only white Deaf children.

In 1933, the Dutch Reformed Church set up another school, for the "colored" Deaf, known as *Nuwe Hoop*. The language policy was the same as that at the Worcester school for the white Deaf: spoken Afrikaans, and some manualism.

The Grimley Institute for the Deaf in Cape Town remained racially integrated, and in the 1920's segregated the children on the basis of whether they were to use manualism or oralism. This occurred after one of the sisters visited the German Dominican School in Kingwilliamstown, and instituted a policy that all but the most "backward" children would be taught using the oral method. In 1937, the Irish Dominicans opened a separate school for the "non-European" Deaf in Cape Town at Wittebome. Both "colored" and African Deaf children were admitted to the school. However by 1953, once the Nationalist government refined the policy of apartheid even

further, the Dominican Grimley School at Wittebome was declared a school for colored Deaf only<sup>5</sup>.

In the 1960's, the white Dominican Grimley School for the Deaf moved to Hout Bay and adopted a policy of strict oralism which it has continued to this day. Pupils are expected to maintain strict separation from any signers, and absolutely no signing is permitted on school premises.

In 1962, owing apparently to the fact that there were still African pupils trying to attend the Wittebome school for the colored Deaf, a separate school for African Deaf children was set up in Hammanskraal (then in the Transvaal Province, some 1600 km away from Wittebome), also by Irish Dominican nuns, from the Wittebome School. Note that there was no school for the African Deaf in the Western Cape and no attempt to set one up until 1986. This was in accord with the Nationalist Government's policy of influx control (in terms of which no African children actually officially belonged in the Western Cape). Only after influx control had been officially scrapped in 1986, did the Dutch Reformed Church set up a school for the African Deaf, Noluthando School, in Khayelitsha (an area set aside for black people), on the outskirts of Cape Town.

The first school for black Deaf children, Khutlwanoong, was opened in 1941, near Roodepoort in the Transvaal province. Started originally by the Johannesburg Deaf and Dumb Society, it was taken over by Dutch Reformed Church trustees in 1954. At this school, a system of signs, invented in Britain, known as the Paget-Gorman system, was introduced, and teachers and pupils were to speak and simultaneously use the Paget-Gorman signs. This was a policy that was to spread to other schools for black Deaf pupils. The Paget-Gorman system was not a language but a set of invented signs, based on unnatural handshape permutations, lacking a grammar at any level.

As a result of the homelands policy,<sup>6</sup> a number of additional schools for the African Deaf were established in the rest of the country, divided according to the spoken language of each ethnic group, and in line with the Bantustan separate development policy<sup>7</sup>.

It is known that in the schools for the African Deaf, there was little access to hearing aids and speech therapists. Although there was an official oralist policy, sign language thrived among the pupils in these schools. Most of the schools for the African Deaf were vastly under-resourced, under-funded, and understaffed (Penn, Reagan and Ogilvy 1991). In these schools children were not forbidden to sign, and a very small number of the teachers picked up some sign language from the children. Less school time was wasted teaching children to speak, and although these Deaf children received an atrocious general education, an unexpected benefit of the neglect was the development of strong centers of natural signed language use.

Educational levels and opportunities varied markedly in the different Deaf schools, depending on the color of the students, and the attitudes of the churches involved (Reynolds 1995). The State never took a strong position on Deaf issues and essentially allowed religious and educational groups to make policy decisions of their own accord (as long as these did not conflict with the overarching apartheid legislation). The majority of the funding for the schools for the Deaf came from church groups, and these schools were partly subsidized by the State. It is probably worth noting that the Deaf could not have been regarded as even potentially threatening to any aspect of the apartheid state, since most institutions in South African life were entirely controlled and monitored by the state, to ensure that they could never pose a challenge. As I have already mentioned, schooling for Deaf children (of any race classification) was not made compulsory until after the 1994 elections.

Deaf communities evolved largely out of school contacts, and, because the schools were racially divided, as were all communities in South Africa, the adult communities tended almost exclusively to be racially divided too. As a result of sharing the same school for the first half of the century, there is still some colored-white interaction among the older Dominican-educated Deaf in the Western Cape.

In 1929, a national council was set up to address the needs of the "poor white" Deaf community. This council was called The South African National Council for the Deaf (SANCD)<sup>8</sup>. Until very recently, this was an organization staffed entirely by hearing social and welfare workers. Apart

from its obviously paternalistic and non-inclusive nature, it also did not cater to the needs of all population groups, focusing largely on the white Deaf community. The SANCD took no stand as far as language policy was concerned. Few, if any, of the workers on the SANCD could sign. The SANCD did not, as a matter of course, consult the Deaf community on any policy issues.

Around the same time as changes in government were beginning in South Africa (the early 1990's), there were also changes that were forced in Deaf organizations, largely through external pressure. The SANCD approached the World Federation for the Deaf and was advised that it was not to be considered for membership as the organization was dominated by hearing people and its constitution was not acceptable. As a result, changes were made: the professionals in the organization consist now of both Deaf and hearing people, and various changes were made to the constitution of the Deaf organization. The name of the organization was changed to DEAFSA, The Deaf Federation of South Africa.

By 1994, it had been clear for some time that the many different Deaf communities in South Africa, particularly those which were not white, were not served by the national organization. Various grassroots organizations of Deaf people surfaced, previously entirely unfunded, or supported minimally as non-governmental organizations, and affiliated themselves to DEAFSA. These organizations are localized racially as well as geographically. DEAFSA's national office is still essentially white, and DEAFSA is still perceived by many black and colored Deaf people as a primarily white organization.

Communication between the different Deaf communities had been very poor over the apartheid years. It is only since 1994 that there have been television programmes (*Sign Hear*, and then later, *Signature*) for Deaf people that use sign language as well as captioning and voice. Very few Deaf people have access to TTY's, or the use of fax machines and e-mail. In fact, it is probably true to say that the majority of South Africa's Deaf does not have access to electricity, and that literacy among Deaf people is inordinately low. DEAFSA statistics from 1994 are that 70% of Deaf South Africans are functionally illiterate and 65% are unemployed. It is probably reasonable to assume that the majority of the illiterate and unemployed Deaf is black or colored.

Deaf communities have tended to form out of school ties. Even those Deaf people who did not attend school tend to cluster where there are organizations of other Deaf people. South Africa is a large country and travel is expensive. As a result, there has been little opportunity for the majority of people in poor Deaf communities to make contact with other Deaf communities. Few Deaf people have had the advantage of secondary education, and a handful of these have gone abroad to study further, where they have remained, enjoying the obvious benefits to educated Deaf people that are provided in the USA and Europe, rather than enduring the difficulties of life as a Deaf person in South Africa.

The prevailing attitude of the general hearing community in South Africa towards Deafness is one of ignorance. Some awareness of minority rights is taking place in South Africa in the current climate of democracy. Essentially, however, Deaf people are not seen as a minority group, or as members of another cultural or linguistic community. This is to a large extent because their language is neither recognized, nor acknowledged.

The Deaf ARE recognized by medical practitioners and educationalists as having specialized needs. The reasons for this recognition are obvious, as are the consequences. Hearing people make decisions for Deaf people: Deafness is regarded as a medical problem. The people regarded as most qualified to make decisions about the lives of Deaf people are medical practitioners and special educators, all of whom make their livelihood through the medicalization of Deafness. Even the bulk of the research that has been done on communication and the Deaf focuses on Deaf-hearing interchange, rather than on the language of Deaf people themselves (see, for example, Penn *et al* 1991). The medical profession in South Africa (including ENT's, audiologists, speech and language therapists) favor oralism and take a purely medical view of Deafness. A language therapy model (remediating impaired spoken language) is typically adopted in the language planning that is done for Deaf children, and even though sign language is sometimes considered, the acquisition of a sign language is not regarded as normal language acquisition.

Since the general public has had little exposure to the issues of Deafness and the use of signed language, the media focus tends to be on miracle cures such as cochlear implants, and on the best ways in which Deaf children can be taught to speak. As yet, lobbying by Deaf people has not made much impact in changing the general public's perception of Deafness as a medical problem, properly to be dealt with by experts in audiological and acoustic matters.

### **3 The current situation in education and language use**

The position in schools for the Deaf from 1994 to 1996 was that schools were able to choose their own language policy. To date (at the time of writing, 1999), most Deaf schools have retained their apartheid character, and maintain precisely the same managements as before 1994. Up until 1996, very little had changed in regard to race or language policy. Deaf schools had never been fully funded by government, and, now, as a result of recent legislation, schools that are privately funded may make their own decisions about the medium of instruction in the schools, based on the will of the parents and the governing body. In hearing schools, this might mean that these decisions are made by the community. In the case of Deaf schools, what constitutes the community is less clear. Decisions as to medium of instruction must be in line with every child's constitutional rights, and the position in Deaf schools may well conflict with the constitution.

However, since the South African Schools of Act of 1996, the law concerning medium of instruction in schools for the Deaf is much clearer. The Act stipulates that South African Sign Language (SASL) is to be the medium of instruction in schools for the Deaf<sup>9</sup>. Regrettably, this has not changed the practice in the majority of schools for the Deaf. There are only three qualified Deaf teachers in the entire country. Most of the teachers in schools for the Deaf do not sign at all, nor do they believe that they should have to do so. The majority of parents would like to see their children learning to speak. The adult Deaf community has, in the main, not spoken out in a unified way in favour of SASL medium of instruction. Under the auspices of DEAFSA, curricula for SASL as a subject, in line with the new requirements for outcomes-based education, have been developed. As yet, there is no official way of getting these curricula into the schools,

nor of getting the teachers to use them. There is a certain amount of pressure from local Deaf organizations for the schools to appoint Deaf adults as assistants to the hearing teachers so that pupils will have access to the content of classes, and so that the teachers may begin to learn how to sign. There are also proposals for starting sign language classes for all teachers in schools for the Deaf. However, these proposals are finding no backing from school authorities, education departments, or teachers themselves. Thus, the Act notwithstanding, very little is changing in schools for the Deaf.

In several parts of the country, a very small number of teachers in schools for the Deaf has tried to adopt a language policy that is in line with the wishes of the adult Deaf community, that is, to use signed language as a medium of instruction. In the Western Cape, where we have conducted most of our observations, there is still enormous confusion among educators of the Deaf. Some still maintain a rigidly oralist policy. Others confuse signed language with sign supported speech, simultaneous communication, and manually coded spoken language. Very rarely, if ever, are Deaf people consulted. Language policy is determined entirely by hearing people who consider themselves in the best position to do so. As a matter of fact, there are hardly any educators of the Deaf in South Africa who are in any position to determine whether or not the signed language used by the community is a natural language or not, nor are any decisions about medium of instruction based on established research about access to language in education. The decisions are made by hearing educators purely on the basis of belief about the superiority of spoken over signed languages. These decisions also display ignorance of research that shows the possibility of the acquisition of literacy in a second language, (for example, English) once the first language (a signed language) is in place (such as Johnson, Liddell and Erting 1989; Strong 1988).

#### **4 Language used in the adult Deaf community**

##### **4.1 Apartheid and variation**

Deaf South African adults who consider themselves to be members of a Deaf community sign among themselves, and consider the fact that they sign to be the distinctive feature of their

Deafness and membership in a Deaf community. As has been discussed earlier, there are a number of historically distinct Deaf communities in South Africa. Their distinctness is, in general, school-related. The separation of the schools is due to apartheid policies and spoken language apartheid as well as geographical distance.

It is a logical and reasonable hypothesis to claim that as a result of apartheid and the historical distinctness of the communities, the language used by each of the communities would be different, as suggested by Penn 1992a; Penn 1992b; Penn and Reagan 1990; Penn, Reagan and Ogilvy 1991. However, this is a hypothesis that when tested is found to be false. It is, at the least, true to say that Deaf people from different communities in South Africa seem to understand one another reasonably well, much more so than Zulu and English speaking South Africans do. One could speculate about some of the reasons that Deaf people in South Africa do seem to draw on the same basic language.

One account that could be proffered is the standard one used to account for Deaf-Deaf communication: sign language is universal. We know that there are some signed language universals, but we also know that there are signed languages that are sufficiently different from one another for the claim to be made that they are distinct languages. Signed language is not universal, so this explanation cannot be invoked.

Another possibility could be the influence of the indigenous (precolonial) signed language on the present varieties. We know very little about indigenous signed language in South Africa, so this is not an easy claim to test. We do know that South Africa is a large country, and it is unlikely that Deaf people travelled extensively several hundred years ago. However, we can claim with some certainty that there were communities of Deaf people before the advent of schools for the Deaf, and there must have existed some indigenous signed language in South Africa. We can only speculate on the extent of this influence on the signed language used at present.

Education for the Deaf in South Africa was established by European missionaries and other church groups. It is well-accepted that Irish Sign Language profoundly influenced the development of the signed language used in South Africa. Irish nuns who established the first

schools for the Deaf brought with them some varieties of Irish Sign Language and this link between South African and Irish Sign Language is easily traced. The schools into which Irish Sign Language were introduced were established in different parts of the country, so this might explain the fact that communities which are geographically disparate have many commonalities in their language use. The folklore concerning the Afrikaans community is that the Afrikaans school for the Deaf in Worcester was established by a Dutch Reformed Church missionary, Jan de la Bat, who had a Deaf brother, and taught him by means of signs. The Worcester school for the Deaf was established under the auspices of the Dutch Reformed Church in 1881. Members of the signing community in Worcester believe that theirs is an indigenous sign language.

It is also known that some Deaf children had their color classification changed in order to go to Deaf schools in different parts of the country which their parents thought would provide them with a better education<sup>10</sup>. Thus, a black child from Soweto, if reclassified colored, might attend a school for the colored Deaf in Cape Town, where he would receive an education far superior to the one provided for black children in the Transvaal. Reclassification is a peculiarly South African notion, and not easy to conceive of, but it was possible, and always practiced, during the apartheid years. Deaf children who had been reclassified would return to their homes and original communities, and bring with them the signed language used in the school they had managed to attend.

More straightforwardly, there are the cases of children, for instance, from English speaking homes in another province, who are sent to the major white "English" Deaf school in Johannesburg, St. Vincent's, and then return to their community with the new variety, having taken their own variety to the school. There are also the cases of Deaf people from one area who move to live in another part of the country, becoming integrated into another Deaf infrastructure. These are common trends in the development of signed languages in most countries of the world.

Since the 1994 elections, there have been regular signed language programmes on television, although the number of minutes allowed to signed language per week is not very impressive. Throughout the 1994 election period, programmes related to the elections were interpreted,

although there is now much less interpreted coverage. There is now a regular bi-weekly half hour programme for Deaf adults, *Signature*, and although during the early days of the original signed language programme, *Sign Hear*, there was some attempt to keep the different regional varieties separate, the trend now is that signers simply sign in a way that is comfortable for them. There has been no protest from Deaf viewers. There is a half hour signed language programme on alternate weeks for younger viewers. Each evening (as of 1998) the six o'clock news is interpreted. We can assume that Deaf viewers are able to understand the different varieties that are used, and we may also assume that the language is converging. (For a discussion of convergence, see Thomason and Kaufmann 1988). This is a phenomenon that is happening generally in South Africa, particularly with different Englishes, as a result of increased integration, (see, for example, Lanham 1996) and a concerted move towards using a diversity of presenters on radio and television. DEAFSA (the national organization) is run almost entirely by a number of different committees, composed of Deaf people from all over the country. This provides a regular opportunity for Deaf people to meet and communicate, and the language contact is bound to have an effect that is also carried back into the grassroots communities that are represented.

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 *indaba* (a Zulu term meaning a "big meeting of great importance") have been held. Deaf people are beginning to train other Deaf people to teach sign language irrespective of whether or not they are from the same community. Anecdotaly, the most convincing piece of evidence is that Deaf South Africans seem perfectly able to communicate easily with one another, although it is revealing that many Deaf people believe that there are different sign language varieties in South Africa.

For the past few years, in the Western Cape, regular meetings of the Deaf Forum have been held. This is a huge departure from the past. The Deaf Forum is a coming together of Deaf people from white (English and Afrikaans), colored, and black Deaf communities, held by turn in different localities in the Western Cape, and hosted by different communities. In the past it was most

unusual for these communities to meet. Now they meet, and discuss matters of mutual interest to Deaf people. The proceedings are run entirely by Deaf people, and are open to everyone. There is often dissension expressed, and there are occasionally accusations of racism, but essentially, the forum meetings are a major development in the forging of a united Deaf community. Different grassroots communities are represented at the forum, and policy decisions are taken which affect, among other things, the public profile of the Deaf community. This has been a remarkable exercise in communication between the different Deaf communities, and has certainly shown Deaf people that they can communicate more easily with Deaf people of other colors and cultures than with people of their own original cultures. The language itself is not a barrier to communication, and people are learning, through exposure, to accommodate other people's varieties.

It is a fascinating feature of these meetings that the Deaf people from the different communities all manage to communicate with one another quite effectively, but that interpreting is required by the hearing people present. For example, if there is an Afrikaans Deaf person signing, then the hearing people demand that he must be voiced by an Afrikaans interpreter. However, when the interpreter signs for an Afrikaans speaking hearing person, the other (non-Afrikaans) Deaf people cannot understand the interpreter and, consequently, the interpreters who serve each community need to interpret the spoken Afrikaans into signed language for their community. This seems to be the case in these fora for any interpretation that is made from spoken language into signed language.

It is obvious that the problem does not lie with Deaf-Deaf communication, but with hearing-Deaf communication. We must assume that the interpreters are sticking very closely to signed Afrikaans or signed English or signed Xhosa, which is indeed the case. This explains why Deaf people who do not know the structure of Afrikaans will not understand the interpreter who is interpreting from spoken Afrikaans into signed Afrikaans. The interpreter is not interpreting into signed language, but putting Afrikaans on his hands and mouth. This is not a sign language variation problem. It is instead a fine example of how many hearing people involved with Deaf people believe that signed language is merely spoken language on the hands.

Finally, Deaf people have very recently started training other Deaf people to teach signed language. As a result of this training, Deaf people are exposed to other varieties, without being required to change their own. This contact, too, is beginning to harmonize the different varieties.

#### 4.2 Variation and the SASL Dictionary

It is clear that in South Africa signed language has not been nurtured or encouraged in schools for the Deaf. Needless to say, however, many Deaf people use signed language among themselves. As we have shown above, the various Deaf communities have not mixed much over the years, and as a result, the signed languages used show some lexical variation, a variation perpetuated by apartheid divisions (Penn 1992a; Penn 1992b; Ogilvy-Foreman, Penn and Reagan 1994; Penn and Reagan 1990; Penn and Reagan 1994). This is one of the reasons many people, Deaf and hearing, refer to an Afrikaans sign language, or an English sign language, or a Xhosa sign language, because the communities have been kept separate for so long. The other reason, of course, is that many people still believe that there is a direct relationship between the spoken and signed language of a particular ethnic community.

In the mid 1980's the Human Sciences Research Council advertised for a researcher to work on the standardization of South African Sign Language. The *Dictionary of Southern African Signs* was the final outcome of the work commissioned by that research council. It was developed at much cost over seven years, and focused on lexical differences, attempting to correlate different lexical items with the spoken language communities from which the Deaf users came (see Penn 1992a; Penn and Reagan 1994). To this end, the project team documented signs from eleven different racial and geographical communities in South Africa. Researchers used English words and phrases to elicit the signs from representatives of each community. These signs were videorecorded, and presented in the *Dictionary* as the signs for the particular English word or phrase used by the different communities. Thus each page of the *Dictionary* listed an English item, and then showed 11 or so different signs that informants claimed were the ways in which this English word was used in their language.

It appears that the idea was to correlate a signing community with each major spoken language community. The false impression that this creates is that there is some relationship between the spoken and signed languages of an area.<sup>11</sup> Further, such divisions perpetuate rather than bridge apartheid divisions. The *Dictionary* was a creature of its time. It was commissioned under an apartheid government by a state funded council for scientific research. Its goal does not seem to have been to bring Deaf people together but rather, to collect their language varieties. It is difficult to see what purpose the *Dictionary* could have in standardizing the signed languages used in South Africa into a single signed language. It is more likely that the *Dictionary* could have been used to standardize each of the different varieties, assuming that each sign elicited was, in fact, the only sign used for that item in a particular community.

This is quite analogous to what happened to the indigenous spoken languages under apartheid. State language boards were set up, usually comprising non-native speakers of a language, for example, Xhosa, and then the standard Xhosa, to be taught in schools, was decided upon. Native speakers of Xhosa found that the language they actually used was often deemed to be faulty as a consequence of the decrees of the language board (see for instance, Nyamende 1994).

It should be also be noted that the *Dictionary* had a stated pedagogical aim (Penn 1992a; Penn and Reagan 1994). Thus, its purpose was not only to describe the different varieties used by the different communities, but to use them for teaching one or other signed language. The question of signed language syntax is not addressed in the *Dictionary* itself, and the pedagogical aim seems to be to teach some vocabulary, in the context of an English sentence. The dangers of this approach cannot be overstated.

Initially the *Dictionary* project was of great interest to those members of the Deaf community who knew about it. It was the first time that significant amounts of money had been used to research signed language in South Africa and it was an important advance that Deaf people were used as informants. However, there are many criticisms that can be made of the *Dictionary*: the elicitation procedures were somewhat restricted and flawed, as was the approach toward dictionary-making<sup>12</sup>.

The first serious misunderstanding upon which the *Dictionary of Southern African Signs* is based, then, is that the structure of a signed language is dependent on the structure of a related spoken language. The second misunderstanding is that there is a one-to-one relationship between a lexical item in one language and a lexical item in another, i.e., that there is a simple word-sign relationship. In any event, the base items for elicitation in the Dictionary were English sentences. It is not clear what the *Dictionary* makers see as the relationship among the different spoken languages in South Africa, the relationship of these to the signed varieties, nor the relationship of signed items in an utterance to one another.

A close examination of some of the signs listed in the Dictionary as translations into different varieties for the same English word, reveals that some of these signs differ only in some or other inflectional aspect, or perhaps a handshape alternation, and should not be considered as different signs, but as different inflections of the same sign. Thus, we use as an example the entry for the English word *look*.

The following is the entry for look. The entry is accompanied by photographs but the quality is not adequate for reproduction here.

**LOOK.**

**Grammatical category:** verb.

**Level:** preschool.

**Theme:** Sight-act.

**Translations:** Kyk (Afrikaans), Buka (Zulu), Sheba; tadima (Sotho).

**Synonyms:** See/watch.

**Example of usage:** Look at the beautiful bird with the red beak.

Kyk vir daardie pragtige voel (Afrikaans).

**Variation 1:** One-handed sign in which G-hand, palm left, hand up, moves outwards and downwards from eye level. Used by Northern Transvall Tswana and Zulu Natal.

**Variation 2:** One-handed sign in which B-hand, palm left, hand up, moves diagonally outwards and downwards from eye. Used by Transvaal Indian.

**Variation 3:** One-handed sign in which V-hand, palm left, hand up, moves outwards and downwards from eye. Used by Natal English and taught in the Department of Education and Training Schools (i.e., the black schools).

**Variation 4:** One-handed sign in which V-hand, palm down, hand away, moves outwards and downwards from bridge of nose. Used by Cape English.

**Variation 5:** One-handed sign in which V-hand, palm towards, hand up, moves outward and downward from eyes. Used by Soweto Sotho, Zulu Natal, Cape Afrikaans, Transvaal Afrikaans.

**GENERAL:** Transparent sign. All versions involve movement from eye level.

(Penn 1992, volume 1: 356)

Additionally, the *Dictionary* does not take into account that there is more than one possible sign for a given lexical item, so that although an informant might provide one sign, this does not mean that s/he does not know or use others on different occasions or in different contexts. The way that the *Dictionary* is presented leads to the false impression that there is only one sign that is suitable, even given a restricted context of use.

It is also the case that signed languages, just like other languages, have different registers, for formal and less formal occasions, that there are polite and less polite signs, that there is slang, fast signing, in-group signing, and all the other variations that other languages boast, depending on the context of their use. The elicitation and presentation of items for the *Dictionary* does not take these factors into account at all.

The *Dictionary* is generally not used by Deaf people in South Africa. It appears to be intended mainly for the use of hearing people rather than Deaf people. The *Dictionary* also seems to play on Deaf people's sense of ethnic, rather than Deaf, identity. Penn and Reagan (1994) report that informants would insist that their sign was the correct one. However, it should be mentioned that as changes started to happen in South Africa and Deaf people began to mix across racial and geographical boundaries, many Deaf people noted that their signs were mutually intelligible. On completion of the *Dictionary*, some Deaf informants commented that they understood the entire range of signs, irrespective of which one they themselves would use or had used in the particular context of elicitation.

For a while, subsequent to the coming to power of the new government, a major concern, which we considered to be misdirected energy on the part of Deaf and hearing people involved in language planning, was the standardization of the signed language used in South Africa. The *Dictionary*, as a result, constituted an important focus of attention, and consequently it became important that Deaf people, linguists, and lexicographers understood its shortcomings. Understandably, since DEAFSA is fighting for language rights, it believes there should be one signed language that is declared the official language of the Deaf. However, the issue of standardization seems to be less of a priority now than in 1996, and there is more of an understanding that the Deaf are fighting for recognition of their right to use signed as opposed to spoken language.

It seems clear that Deaf people in South Africa understand one another, but that the problem arises when hearing people declare that they only understand Afrikaans or English sign language (meaning signed English or signed Afrikaans). The standardization issue is one that seems geared to accommodating hearing people who cannot really claim knowledge of signed language (so-called interpreters, many of whom have had no training whatsoever, and others including teachers of the Deaf and speech pathologists) at the expense of unity among the Deaf of South Africa. It is our observation, and that of other researchers such as Penn and Reagan (1994), that when there are gatherings of Deaf people from different communities, they all seem to communicate rather well with one another. We have seen that as soon as hearing people are

involved, a tower of Babel is erected, involving up to six interpreters, all of whom use different spoken languages and different sign systems.

In fact, not enough research has actually been conducted on the sign language/s used in South Africa to make the claim one way or another that there is one sign language. It is our intuition that there is some lexical variation in the choices of the signs that are used, but that SASL can be considered as one language, generally understood by the signing Deaf. However, we believe it would be hasty to make the claim without sufficient linguistic research. Several of the authors of the *Dictionary* themselves claim that there is a syntactic unity in the signed language used in South Africa (Foreman *et al* 1994, Penn and Reagan 1994). Unfortunately, their claim is based on research using only one sector of the signing community; and this research is, in any event, geared to showing that there are syntactic universals in signed languages based on the grammatical use of space (see for example Foreman *et al* 1994).

Much more linguistic research needs to be done, using a considerably wider sample of the Deaf population, a sentiment shared by the makers of the *Dictionary* (see Penn 1996). Further, this process of investigation essentially must involve Deaf people being trained to do linguistic research, research that feeds back into the Deaf community and is of some use to that community, in empowering Deaf people to be the experts on their language (Aarons 1994, 1996). Aarons and Morgan (1998) have been researching the structure of the signed language used in different communities in the Western Cape Province and Gauteng Province.

In any event, continued debate on what should be the standard, seems misplaced. It is far more important that Deaf and hearing people recognize that signed language is not merely a manual coding of spoken language. Much energy is still required to convince the general public, especially those such as the medical profession, speech pathologists, educators and legislators, who wield enormous power over the lives of Deaf people, that signed languages are natural languages and that Deaf people should have the right to use the language of their choice.

### 4.3 Interpreting

There is as yet no professional formal training of interpreters for the Deaf in South Africa. The University of the Free State has offered several short courses for potential interpreters, but these have merely identified likely candidates and begun to present the essentials of the language. As of 1999, both the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of the Free State have initiated interpreter training diploma courses. There are, in fact, very few skilled interpreters in the country, and none of them has been trained in the country. There has been no professionalization of the activity. Interpreters are very seldom paid, there is no code of professional ethics, nor any certifying or controlling body. There is also no legislation requiring interpretation to be provided for Deaf people. In the courtroom, interpreting services are provided on an *ad hoc* basis by hard of hearing people who have no training in interpreting at all, and who have often, themselves, not attained as much as a tenth grade educational level. In South Africa, any person can claim to be able to interpret for the Deaf, and Deaf people do not yet regard themselves as clients or consumers who are entitled to fully professional interpretation. This is because Deaf people in South Africa are not yet mobilized to the point where they demand full access to everything that is available to the rest of the society.

The constitutional rights of Deaf people are a crucial feature in the future development of sign language in South Africa, and the establishment of interpreter training programmes. Full access for Deaf people will necessitate highly trained, available interpreters. These, in turn, will have to be trained by Deaf and hearing people who are fluent in, and conscious of, the natural signed language used by a wide variety of Deaf people in the country. Additionally, interpreters must be trained by people highly skilled in interpreting theory and practice, irrespective of language or modality. The issue of variation should be acknowledged, but given that Deaf people in South Africa understand one another, it should be accorded no more attention than that given to different regional dialects on the BBC, for instance.

## 5 The South African Constitution and the Bill of Rights

Deaf consciousness in South Africa does exist, but is still very young. As a result of lobbying by Deaf activists, SASL was put on the agenda to be included in the constitution as one of the official languages of South Africa. The battle for official language status was lost, but, in fact, the protection and development of SASL has a particular mention in the constitution, and the constitution has been written in such a way that the rights of Deaf people are protected. Much of current practice will have to be challenged in the Constitutional Court and this will be time-consuming and costly, but the mechanisms are in place. Below are the relevant extracts from the Constitution of South Africa, as adopted on May 8, 1996.

### Languages

6. (1) The official languages of the Republic are sePedi, seSotho, seTswana, siSwati, TshiVenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu.

(2) Recognising the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people, the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages.

Without detracting from the provisions of subsection (2), all official languages must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably.

(5) The Pan South African Language Board must -

#### a. promote and create conditions for the development and use of

- i. all official languages;
- ii. the Khoi, Nama and San languages; and
- iii. sign language

b. promote and ensure respect for languages, including German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Portuguese, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, and others commonly used by communities in South Africa, and Arabic, Hebrew, Sanskrit and others used for religious purposes.

It should be noted that although sign language does not enjoy the status of an official language, the fact that it has a clause of its own may, in fact, give it a different, and in fact, special status. In reality, the eleven official languages are equal only officially. In practice, English is the language

of the parliament, although the majority of its members are not native speakers of English, Afrikaans still enjoys a widespread usage, particularly in officialdom. Historical inequality will last for a long time yet. People will have a right to education through the other official languages only if it is practicable to do so in the area in which they live. In general, this provision will serve the majority of South Africans' language needs, and the official languages will be given parity of esteem. The Pan-South African Language Board has a constitutional brief to create conditions for the development and use of sign language. Two years down the line, this has not yet happened. The clause that is important is, in fact, in the Bill of Rights.

(3) The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, color, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language, and birth.

(4) No person may unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds in terms of subsection (3). National legislation must be enacted to prevent or prohibit unfair discrimination.

If Deaf people are not allowed to receive information in a medium to which they have access, then they will be regarded as being discriminated against on the basis of language, irrespective of whether this language is official or not. The point is that Deaf people do not have access to any spoken language, and it seems (in the absence of an alternative) that this must constitute unfair discrimination on the basis of both language and disability.

As far as education is concerned, the constitution makes provision only for education in official languages. However, it is clear that in the case of Deaf people, this is unfair discrimination in terms of clauses (3) and (4) above.

**Education:**

Everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable. In order to ensure the effective access to, and implementation of, this right, the state must consider all reasonable educational alternatives, including single medium institutions, taking into account -

- a. equity;
- b. practicability; and

- c. the need to redress the results of past racially discriminatory law and practice.

It is clear from the spirit of the clause above that if the majority of stakeholders in a school for the Deaf demanded sign language medium of instruction, this would be their constitutional right. What the constitution does not enforce, however, is that sign language SHOULD be the medium of instruction in schools for the Deaf. As discussed above, the South African Schools Act 1996 has made this law, but it has not been enforced. The Pan South African Language Board has, however, been made aware of the logical problem of providing instruction only through the medium of official languages for Deaf people, and the impracticability of so doing. Its brief is, among other things, to monitor unfair language practices, and it has declared itself willing to entertain alternative proposals for the elimination of discrimination on the basis of language. Thus, it seems that the door may be open, in the future, for an appeal to be made to the Constitutional Court to declare that the way in which Deaf children are educated in South Africa is unconstitutional.

Furthermore, should Deaf people be able to make the case that they are a linguistic and/or cultural community, they are entitled to protection through the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities. Should Deaf people feel that their human rights are being violated, they are also entitled to request the aid of this committee.

Thus, although the constitution does not provide explicitly for sign language medium of instruction in schools for the Deaf, it does provide, in principle, a means by which Deaf people can ensure that they have equal access. The South African Schools Act should be considered as law, and schools for the Deaf are thus in contravention of the law. However, in order for the provisions of the constitution to be explicitly articulated, Deaf people will have to mobilize themselves and challenge existing educational and language practices. As a result of the legacy of the past, there are a myriad ways in which Deaf people are oppressed on the basis of language. None of these will change unless they are challenged by Deaf people.

## **6 Implications of multilingual language policies for the use and status of sign language**

As has been outlined above, the education which Deaf people receive is inadequate and inferior, further aggravated by the deep racial inequalities still at work in South Africa, and the fact that the relevant ministries consider Deafness to be a disability equivalent in some ways to mental retardation. Information collected by DEAFSA indicates that there are only three Deaf teachers in South Africa, and that there is a maximum of fifteen Deaf university graduates in the country. The educational level in schools for the Deaf is inferior to that in schools for the hearing, and the students are deeply disadvantaged by inadequate access to the medium of instruction. As is common world-wide, many Deaf people do not acquire literacy at all, while some are just barely literate. It is also the case that, given the inadequate resources in large parts of the country, probably more Deaf black children are out of school than are in school. Many Deaf children find themselves in schools for the multiply handicapped, sharing classes with mentally retarded, physically handicapped, and blind pupils, all of whom have different educational and language needs. This is not going to change, despite the new constitution and the new educational dispensation, unless it is challenged by Deaf people, who unite on the basis of a common language, and who understand that they are entitled to all the rights that others in the country have.

For as long as Deaf people are not trained as teachers, Deaf children will be taught by hearing people, often themselves unable to sign well enough to function effectively. Until there are Deaf researchers and Deaf linguists, hearing people will make official decisions about signed language. Until interpreters are trained, and professionalized, Deaf people will not have their voices heard in the hearing world. As yet, resources and an infrastructure to train interpreters in South Africa have not been made available, and it is not yet perceived by the majority as an urgent priority to break the cycle of Deaf needs going unheard and unmet.

Thus, as must by now be obvious, the Deaf community in South Africa is largely untouched by the change of government and the development of a new constitution. However, the possibility of empowerment for Deaf people is now possible. The Deaf community has the rather formidable

task of organizing and mobilizing itself to determine the course of its future. For the first time, the law does not stand in its path. As a community united through linguistic oppression, it has now to transform the ignorance and accepted wisdom of the wider society of which it is a part.

#### Notes

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<sup>2</sup> These were the Transvaal, The Cape, The Orange Free State and Natal.

<sup>3</sup> The terminology related to color in South Africa is very complex, and was developed according to apartheid divisions. Some of the terminology has now been reclaimed. Thus, nowadays, some white South Africans might refer to themselves as "Africans", and mixed race South Africans may refer to themselves as "black". In order to make the apartheid distinctions clear, however, for the purpose of this paper, we refer to negroid South Africans as either "African" or as "black", and for the purposes of discussing Apartheid and its aftermath, we use Apartheid terminology. It is regrettable that it is necessary to do so.

<sup>4</sup> This was one more of the many racial classifications used during the apartheid years. "Europeans" referred to whites, "non-Europeans" referred to everyone else.

<sup>5</sup> We use apartheid terminology in order to show the distinctions that were maintained.

<sup>6</sup> This was the apartheid policy of separate development, in which the idea was to separate white South Africa from black South Africa, and then further divide black South Africans into a number of ethnic groups, each with its own "homeland". Black people were then considered "citizens" of their designated homeland, and not South Africans.

<sup>7</sup> The different homelands were also known as Bantustans.

<sup>8</sup> The italics are ours.

<sup>9</sup> However, the same Act makes provision for medium of instruction to be decided by the Governing Body, and the community. It does seem that schools for the Deaf are a special case, but this will eventually be decided by further legislation and possible litigation.

<sup>10</sup> Reclassification is a peculiarly South African apartheid concept. Every South African was classified according to the racial group to which the authorities thought they belonged. However, it was occasionally possible, through great trouble and difficulty, to get oneself reclassified.

Various random factors were taken into account, like the family name of the applicant, or the curl of her hair.

<sup>11</sup> Penn and Reagan (1994) themselves acknowledge that it would be incorrect or unwise to claim that there is such a relationship.

<sup>12</sup> The fact that the elicitation of different signs was based on English words leads us to make the first part of this claim; as to the second part of the claim, the organisation of the *Dictionary* on the basis of English words would make it almost impossible to look up a sign.

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