Signing Outside the Box: The Size of Signing Space in Black ASL

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The main goals of the project on the history and structure of Southern Black American Sign Language (henceforth, Southern Black ASL) are to create a filmed corpus of conversational Southern Black ASL and to provide a description of the phonological, morphological, syntactic, and discourse features that make Southern Black ASL recognizable as a distinct variety of ASL. The filmed corpus consists of videotaped conversations and interviews from 76 Deaf African-Americans in 2 age groups (over 55 and under 35) at 6 sites in southern U.S. states that had segregated schools or departments for Black deaf children. In this paper, we explore one phonological feature: the size of signing space in Black ASL. Lewis et al. (1995) and Aramburo (1989), in small scale studies, suggest that Black deaf signers use a bigger signing space (i.e. signs that exceed the rectangle that covers the area from the top of the head to the waist, from shoulder to shoulder, and a foot in front of the signer) and that Black signers incorporate more body movement into their signing. We selected 24 structured and 21 free narrative video samples from Black and White signers. Transparent grid lines were transposed onto the video samples of the signers, aligned with their rectangular signing spaces. We then coded the discrete signing spaces on the signers using a language archiving and annotation software tool called ELAN. Preliminary results of our analysis of signed narratives indicate that the Black signers consistently use a larger signing space and incorporate more body movement into their signing than do White signers. We explore morphological and discourse motivations, including constructed action, for the size of signing space and the incorporation of body movement.

References