

Patterns of sign language use in Ghana and future objectives

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To a large extent, the history of the sign language used by the educated of Africa in general and Ghana in particular, dates back to the establishment of the first school for the deaf in Ghana by an Afro-American, the late Dr. Andrew J. Foster, who was deaf himself. To facilitate formal education for the deaf in Africa he introduced the American Sign Language, more particularly Signed English. The situation pertained and most of the educated deaf of the present generation benefited from it.

Nevertheless, I have to stress the fact that before the arrival of Dr. Andrew Foster to Ghana there were deaf adults in the Ghanaian society who could communicate perfectly among themselves and their families by using signs. In addition, in a village with a high number of deaf people, named Adamorobe, and in a big deaf family in Nanabin, there developed a local sign language that many hearing people in these villages also do understand and use to communicate with deaf people.

It therefore is evident that a conflict arose between the indigenous forms of sign language, which were natural and native for the unschooled illiterate deaf; and the conventional one learnt in the schools, which was imported and foreign. Confusion arose about the different signs for the same concepts such as man, woman, boy, girl etc. Furthermore, there are many Ghanaian indigenous concepts which are not known in the American culture and therefore do not have sign equivalents in the ASL. The result is that the adult deaf people who over the years continued to use the American Sign Language introduced by Dr. Foster, enriched these with some indigenous signs for local items such as food and traditional events.

At the 50th anniversary of the Deaf Education in Ghana, the Special Education Division joined with the Ghana National Association of the Deaf to celebrate this occasion. There the need for the use of a common standardized sign language in Ghana was discussed. The liberal use of sign language as the medium of instruction alongside other methods, strengthened the need for a common sign language. Each school for the deaf in Ghana had begun to introduce any signing method and signs found in the numerous foreign sign language books imported into the country. In addition, deaf young people in high schools and deaf adults in bigger cities have developed their own local initialized signs. Furthermore, with the introduction of Community Based Rehabilitation Programmes in the country it became relevant that persons with disabilities are reached and assisted within their own communities and among their own families. This poses a great challenge for standardising the sign language to ensure uniformity for sign language in Ghana that can be learnt by both the deaf and the hearing people for mutual communication.

The above situation has caused delay in the proper training of interpreters in Ghanaian Sign Language and also in the pursuing of higher education for the deaf in Ghana. Therefore, the Deaf Empowerment Foundation was established in August 2007 with the help of the International Centre for Sign Language and Deaf Studies of the University of Central Lancashire (England). The objective is training in Ghanaian Sign Language for both deaf and hearing people.