

The importance of Deaf involvement in African sign language research

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This presentation will describe how the current state of African sign language research can be improved, and in particular, how Deaf people's involvement can make a difference.

African sign language research began about 25 years ago, when east African sign language users forged links with Nordic sign language researchers. Since then, there have been several developments in terms of deaf awareness, empowerment and sign language training, but unfortunately precious little linguistic research. The main linguistic activities have been dictionary-related; several Ugandan Sign Language (USL) dictionaries have been published, as well as Tanzanian, Kenyan, South African and Zambian Sign Language dictionaries.

We have much to do if we are to create a fertile environment for sign language research in Africa. First, we must ensure that Deaf communities feel pride and ownership of their languages. Though some Deaf Africans have government-sanctioned language rights, most are not empowered and do not feel ownership of their languages; this needs to be addressed urgently. For those Deaf communities with no language rights at all, we need to communicate the importance of such rights. These endeavours will enable Deaf people to become involved in sign language research as informed stakeholders, thus making it more meaningful. Secondly, it is essential that our universities begin to employ deaf researchers as full staff members. Thirdly, there should be a strong triangular relationship between sign language training, research and local deaf communities and associations. Finally, we should carefully consider the implications of the current deference to foreign sign languages (notably ASL).

In Africa at the present time, we have a wonderful opportunity for a prolific exchange of expertise that has advantages for both Deaf communities and academic research. Deaf communities will benefit from the promotion of sign language and deaf rights, whilst academic researchers will be able to learn about a relatively unexplored group of natural human languages in the linguistically richest continent on Earth.