LUCKY CHILE in the Land of Enchantment: Mapping Perception of Signed Language Varieties in New Mexico

David Player

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LUCKY CHILE IN THE LAND OF ENCHANTMENT: MAPPING PERCEPTION OF SIGNED LANGUAGE VARIETIES IN NEW MEXICO

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

There are no known published studies documenting the linguistic variation of American Sign Language in New Mexico. We applied the Perceptual Dialectology approach to gain insights into how ASL variation is perceived by the Deaf and Hard of Hearing population in New Mexico. Participants reported 60 signs associated with a historical variety of ASL used at NMSD, and many more signs that are linked to regional and cultural relevance in New Mexico. Four participants provided highly descriptive maps that identify themes related to the sources of variation. Comparisons to studies of Black ASL are discussed to identify parallels in the factors that impact the signing of minority communities. The Perceptual Dialectology approach is an effective method to examine the attitudes and beliefs of signers toward local and outside varieties of ASL, and to generate hypotheses for corpus studies of the multicultural and multilingual Deaf population of New Mexico.

Keywords: Language Variation; Perceptual Dialectology; Signed Language; New Mexico
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CHAPTER 1:
Introduction

In my first semester of graduate school, I was assigned to teach American Sign Language IV. I learned the sign LUCKY from students who grew up in New Mexico using a different sign LUCKY than the standard LUCKY sign used outside of New Mexico (NM).

![Figure 1: New Mexico School for Deaf: LUCKY (recorded)](image1)

The New Mexicans told me the standard LUCKY sign means CHILE here, as in red or green.

![Figure 2: New Mexico School for Deaf: CHILE (recorded)](image2)

Eventually, I met more Deaf and Hard of Hearing New Mexicans who confirmed the New Mexico signs LUCKY and CHILE that I learned from the hearing interpreting students. That’s the beginning of the journey that led me to focus my thesis on an analysis of the regional signed language variation in New Mexico.
The thesis opens with a comparative and contrastive analysis of the sociohistorical emergence of Black ASL and New Mexican ASL, including a review of prior work on the role of segregated residential deaf schools in shaping Black ASL. I investigate the role of gestural communication in Black culture and its lasting impact on Black ASL. The participants discussed gestural communication in Latino culture and its enduring influence on New Mexico sign language variation. Comparably, New Mexico sign language variation showed a similar impact of Latino culture on its language as the impact of Black Culture relates to Black English on Black ASL.

Also, I examined several themes, such as regional differences, the generational change of the Philadelphia ASL variety, the role of segregation in developing two (white/black) Philadelphia ASL varieties, and the overt and covert prestige of Philadelphia ASL varieties in the Philadelphia ASL Project. Subsequently, this thesis outlines the establishment of the New Mexico School for the Deaf (NMSD) and policies regarding education within the broader context of colonialism in New Mexico. NMSD is a residential school that serves as a point of contact for Deaf students who come from minoritized communities, specifically Mexican and Indigenous communities. The geographic isolation of reservations promotes the retention of unique varieties of signing in New Mexico, just as segregation of Black Deaf students did during the Jim Crow era.

American Sign language scholars have not applied a perceptual dialectology approach to the attitudes and beliefs about sign language varieties in the US. The goal of the current study is to interview the Deaf population of New Mexico on their perceptions of usage patterns of ASL within the state. Given the prior analysis of spoken language variation in New Mexico (Koops & Wilson, 2016), we may find a similar sensitivity to
geographic variation such as North/South differences, or sensitivity to social variation such as urban/rural differences.

The New Mexico School for the Deaf in Santa Fe, New Mexico is arguably the center of the Deaf community in New Mexico and may provide an anchor to comparisons of ASL usage in other regions of the state. However, NMSD also attracts more deaf residents from outside of New Mexico than any other institution in the state. Hence, New Mexicans may perceive the ASL of Santa Fe as being less representative of New Mexico’s own variety of ASL.

This study is being guided by our main research question: How do Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and hearing New Mexicans construe signed language variation in New Mexico and in the US in spatial terms? Due to time constraints, New Mexico maps are the focus of this study. However, a sample of US maps offers a glimpse of New Mexicans’ perception of ASL varieties that exist outside of New Mexico. The participants discussed how sign language variation in New Mexico is different from other states. We hypothesized that more than one variety of American Sign Language would be identified. To explore this hypothesis, we asked signers to look at a map of New Mexico and identify areas where people sign differently. We then asked them to explain why they selected these areas, and asked for examples of what was different about the signing in these areas. The findings are reported in Chapters 4 and 5. This thesis is the first study of its kind to both document and compare minority varieties of ASL from two different minoritized communities.
CHAPTER 2:  
The Simultaneous Emergence of ASL and Deaf Education in North America

Signed languages, like all languages, are dynamic and constantly changing (Bybee, 2015, p. 1). Factors that lead to language variation include regional, educational, gender, race, and cultural influences on communities where signed languages are in use. For signed languages, residential schools for the Deaf have played a particularly important role in shaping language. “At such a school, the young Deaf learn ASL in the particular variety characteristic of each local region. The school is also a source of local innovation, for each school generation comes up with some new signs or modifications of old ones” (Croneberg 1965, p. 315 as cited in Lucas & Bayley, 2011, p. 495). Further, segregated Deaf schools have created the context for variation found in signed languages along gender and racial lines. For instance, the two major schools for the Deaf in Ireland are based in Dublin, less than a mile from each other. Like many other religious-run schools in Ireland, the schools for the Deaf are segregated according to gender (Leeson, 2005, p. 257), resulting in unique signs used by Irish women and men.

Fenlon & Wilkinson (2015) described the relationship between signed languages and residential schools using signed language in each state across the nation. Residential deaf schools serve as hubs for Deaf communities, and thus also play an important role in signed language variation. Signed languages in macro-communities are described as large stable signing communities that emerged from the European tradition, beginning in the late eighteenth century, of bringing deaf children together in residential schools (Fenlon & Wilkinson, 2015, p. 7).
For example, American Sign Language (ASL) and Mexican Sign Language (LSM) emerged in Deaf communities starting with the establishment of Deaf education in the Americas. However, indigenous Deaf communities existed before European conquests, and they developed their own signed languages that varied across different tribes. These signing varieties were likely used by both deaf and hearing people. After their lands were uprooted by colonizers, the Deaf members of these communities were often excluded from residential Deaf schools. It is unknown how much ASL and LSM were influenced by contact with indigenous signed languages of North America. The current research on signed language varieties in ASL is based on cultural and social factors of the larger hearing communities.

Research also shows that in contexts of language shift, communities will maintain specific indigenous vocabulary (e.g., words for food and drink, clothes, plants and trees, crafts, and religious terms) as imported sign languages often do not have signs for them (Schmaling, 2003 as cited in Fenlon & Wilkinson, 2015, p. 14).

History of Signed Languages and Deaf Education

In the early 19th century, there was no formal education for Deaf children in North America despite the prevalence of deafness from the beginning of colonization. Jonathan Lambert was a deaf settler who migrated to Chilmark, Massachusetts from Kent, England in the early 16th century (Romm, 2015). Possibly, he voyaged across the Atlantic Ocean in the Mayflower ship with other pilgrims.

It is believed that he brought his regional sign language from his native country and used it to communicate with other colonists in his adopted home community on
Martha’s Vineyard. Martha’s Vineyard Sign language (MVSL) evolved over the years and generally, Martha’s Vineyard is known for its high incidence of hereditary deafness and for the widespread use of MVSL by both deaf and hearing islanders to facilitate communication (Groce, 1980, p. 3).

While the Deaf community in Martha’s Vineyard flourished, formal instruction of Deaf education in America began to take form. The rapid extinction of Martha’s Vineyard Sign Language (MVSL) may have been precipitated by the founding of the American School for the Deaf (ASD) at Hartford, CT in 1817, where multiple islanders went to school before returning to the island, presumably with the signs they learned at ASD. Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, a pastor, and educator became interested in analyzing and incorporating the teaching method of educating Deaf children after a life-changing encounter with Alice Cogswell, the Deaf daughter of his neighbor.

Thomas Gallaudet traveled to Europe to discover the larger debate of what is the best teaching method for Deaf children, oral or sign language. Eventually, he met and recruited Laurent Clerc, a Deaf French instructor at The Royal Institution of Deaf-Mutes in Paris. Laurent Clerc taught Gallaudet LSF (French Sign Language) during their voyage back to America and assisted Gallaudet in founding the American School for the Deaf (Sayers, 2018, p. ix).

The establishment of the school created a meeting place for multi-generational deaf families who sent their children to ASD from across New England. Over time, ASL developed into a full-fledged signed language and was mainly used as the language of instruction throughout residential Deaf schools as more Deaf schools were established across the US. Residential Deaf schools eventually became regional hubs for the Deaf
communities in their respective states. In McKay-Cody (2019) dissertation and she noted that,

ASL is a creolized sign language. Although rarely acknowledged, it is likely that some of the tribal signs from eastern tribes in the New England area, especially, became incorporated into ASL, but credit to the centuries-old Indigenous Deaf for their contributions to creating the country’s signed language are long overdue. (p. 2)

Melanie McKay-Cody, Professor at the University of Arizona, researched North American Indian Sign Language commonly known as “Hand Talk”, the Plains Indian Sign Language (PISL) and Southwest Indian Sign Language (SWISL). She designed a signed language typology diagram of North American Indian Sign Language (see Figure 3). She groups all Indigenous signed languages used in North America under the term “North American Sign Language”.

This language family is made up of regional signed languages, each of which is a grouping of multiple tribal signed languages. Southeast Indian Sign Language is marked as “non-existent” because there is no current signer from Cherokee, Creek, Seminole, Chickasaw, Choctaw, or any of the other associated tribes, even though they used tribal signed languages in the past (McKay, 2019, p. 29). The Southwest Indian Sign Language (SWISL) involves Navajo, Hopi, Pueblo, and Apache tribes. These Navajo, Pueblo, and Apache tribes are currently residing in New Mexico.
Santa Fe is among the oldest colonial cities in the United States. The area was originally inhabited by indigenous people, who were forcibly removed by Spanish colonialists who arrived in the early 16th century. Don Pedro de Peralta founded Santa Fe as a Spanish colony in 1610 and designated it as the capital of New Mexico. Today, New Mexico is a highly diverse state. The largest ethnic group consists of Hispanics and Latinos who make up 49% of the population. This is followed by 36% non-Hispanic whites, 11% Indigenous, 3% African Americans and Asian Americans. 34% of the
population speaks Spanish and/or Diné, the language of the Navajo tribe (New Mexico Economic Development, 2022, May).

Santa Fe, New Mexico has a distinct Deaf history in New Mexico. Lars Larson, Deaf educator, founded New Mexico School for the Deaf (NMSD) in 1885 and served as its first Deaf superintendent in 1887. Lars Larson was an 1872 graduate of Wisconsin School for the Deaf (WSD) and he was also a Gallaudet College alumnus of 1882.

Three years after graduation, Larson’s lofty dream led him to New Mexico where no teacher of the Deaf had gone before. On 25 August 1885, the following advertisement appeared in The Santa Fe New Mexican newspaper: “Notice is hereby given to the public that there is a school for the education of the deaf of this territory to be located in Santa Fe, NM. (Meyer, 1989, p. 2)

Larson was the superintendent of the NMSD for a little over two decades before Benjamin M. Read, NMSD Board of Trustee, led the termination of Lars Larson’s in 1906 over their contentious views about which method of instruction was best and the ethnic background of the students to be admitted at the NMSD. In A Century of Progress: History of the NMSD, Meyer (1989) did not indicate the ethnicity or race of the student body in NMSD in the 19th century because the information on the demographics of the NMSD students was ambiguous. The Milan Conference of 1880 happened during Larson’s tenure and his language policies were revealed in his reports.

The Second International Congress on education of the deaf, commonly known as “The Milan Conference of 1880” based on where it took place in Milan, Italy addressed the oralism vs manualism debate about which is the best instruction method to be used
for Deaf students (Kinsey et al., 1880). The educators agreed that oralism was superior to manualism and passed a resolution banning the use of signed languages in Deaf schools. Larson reported that his language and educational policies relied on the manual method that involved signed language and heavily emphasized a rigorous academic curriculum for the students (Meyer, 1989, p. 17).

In the correspondence between Larson and Read, there were contentious arguments over the ethnicity and race of the students related to the federal funding of NMSD. Larson felt Navajo Deaf children had as much right to an education as others and fought the Territory over it. He said, “They are capable of learning, as well as the whites” (Meyer, 1989, p. 23).

Eventually, the contentious relationship between Larson and Read was deadlocked, and Read led the termination of Larson as the superintendent of NMSD. Read made his intention clear that he wanted a hearing superintendent (Meyer, 1989, p. 27). Wesley O. Connor, Jr. was hired as a superintendent in 1906, and he was the longest-tenured superintendent of NMSD until his retirement in 1944 (Meyer, 1989, p. 41). Connor Jr.’s language and educational policies were different from Larson’s. Connor Jr. proclaimed his support of oralism and emphasized manual training. He proclaimed, “We do not teach signs, neither do we teach by signs” (as cited in Meyer, 1989, p. 43). However, despite Connor’s denial, signs were undoubtedly used at the school. Seemingly, the practice of oralism was not strictly enforced at NMSD. Dorothy Moseley, long-time NMSD teacher, admitted that she used signed language even though she was an oralist supporter (Meyer, 1989, p. 90).
Connor Jr.’s educational policies prioritized manual training over a rigorous academic track. This had a long-standing impact on NMSD students’ academic readiness, for example, in case a student wanted to pursue post-secondary education. Meyer (1989) noted that during Connor Jr.’s first nine years of tenure, only one student officially graduated from NMSD, in 1915. Across his entire 38 years of leadership, only 35 students officially graduated from NMSD (Meyer, 1989, p. 47). It is not clear what is the motivation behind Connor Jr.’s decision to change NMSD’s educational policies, but it did not lead to higher graduation rates.

NMSD is one of the oldest deaf schools and is the only land-grant school for the Deaf in the United States. It became a central hub for Deaf communities in New Mexico long before New Mexico achieved statehood on January 6, 1912. Jack Gannon (2012) noted Larson's lasting contribution to Deaf and Hard of Hearing communities in his *Deaf Heritage* book that discusses Deaf history and education in America.

Another important factor in the standardization of American Sign Language is Gallaudet University in Washington, DC which serves as a national hub of Deaf education, language, and culture. Gallaudet University is a federally chartered university for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing students located in Washington, DC. President Lincoln signed a charter bill into law for Gallaudet University to be founded in 1864.

Originally, it was named “Columbia Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind.” It was renamed “Gallaudet College” in honor of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, a Deaf Education Pioneer, in 1894. Gallaudet College was renamed again to Gallaudet University when its status changed to a full-fledged university in 1986 (Cordano, 2018). Many students with regional varieties of ASL from their respective
states attended Gallaudet University. William Stokoe, Dorothy Casterline, and Carl Croneberg led ground-breaking research on the linguistic principles of American Sign Language, and they provided evidence that ASL is an actual language (Lucas & Bayley, 2011, p. 494.). ASL gradually gained the status of a prestige variety thanks to their historic ground-breaking research. Croneberg (1965) has explicitly stated that “the body of signs used at Gallaudet, then, must contain the main base of what we call standard ASL (McCaskill et al., 2020, p. 67).

However, Croneberg did not clearly explain what variety of ASL became the standard at Gallaudet University. Interestingly, Stokoe discussed the prestige of Signed English and ASL in formal settings. He perceived that Signed English was more appropriate for academic and professional settings whereas ASL was more appropriate for non-academic settings in general (Stokoe, 1969, p. 4). Perceptions of ASL and Signed English at Gallaudet University have continuously evolved. Eventually, ASL became the more prestigious variety whereas Signed English became a less prestigious variety.

History of Deaf Education in Mexico

Indigenous communities of Mesoamerica existed long before Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés conquered the Aztec empire in Mesoamerica and then colonized Mexico which lasted over 300 years. Mexico gained its independence from Spain in 1821. The formal education of Deaf children in Mexico has similar origins as the formal education of Deaf children in the United States. President Benito Juárez, the 26th president of Mexico, and Eduardo Huet, French Deaf Educator, played a significant role in establishing the education for Mexican Deaf children in the 19th century (Oviedo, 2007; Ramsey, 2011, p. 67).
There were pre-existing indigenous signed languages in Mexico just as there were indigenous signed languages in the United States, such as Meemul Tziiij, Yucatec Maya Sign Language (LSMY), Albarradas Sign Language, and many others. Indigenous signed languages are not taught in schools, used by wealthy tourists, or broadcast on television to translate newscasts, in contrast to what is the case with the signed languages used by the respective mestizo or ladino populations of Mexico and Guatemala: Lenguaje de Señas de México (LSM), Lenguaje de Señas de Guatemala (Lensegua), and even ASL on occasion (Fox Tree, 2009, p. 332).

In 2005, LSM became a prestigious variety due to the official recognition by the Mexican government of LSM as a full-fledged language. Mexican Deaf are exposed to LSM in various places: in religious settings, community gatherings, at school, or from Deaf acquaintances who interacted with others in the language (Quinto-Pozos, 2008, p. 168). By contrast, the Mexican government has not formally recognized any existing indigenous signed languages. Without the Mexican government’s formal recognition of these indigenous signed languages, these indigenous signed languages remain understudied and the society’s broad awareness of existing indigenous signed languages beside LSM in Mexico continues to be limited.

The Importance of Cultural Identity and Gesture Communication

To foreshadow the findings of this study, several participants noted that Deaf New Mexicans used unique repertoires of gestural communication to communicate with their hearing families who are Mexican and in their interactions with other Deaf New
Mexicans. Cultural differences in nonverbal communication are subtle and rarely (if ever) studied (Archer, 1997, p. 82).

Gestural communication is another social factor that should be considered as a marker of an individual’s New Mexican identity and language communication for people who do not know sign language. Ray Birdwhistell, American Anthropologist, first coined kinesics in his work *Introduction to Kinesics* in 1952. Birdwhistell recognized that nonverbal communication tends not to be researched thoroughly. He created an intricate annotation system to record body motion and facial displays, then detailed his research on facial expressions, body language, and gestures in his work (Birdwhistell, 1952, p. 2).

Similarly, Black scholars have investigated the role of nonverbal communication patterns in Black culture. Kenneth R. Johnson (1975) devised several hypotheses about the relationship between the Black dialect of English and nonverbal communication patterns. His first hypothesis was that “Black dialect has a different base of development from other varieties of American English (even though it is similar to other varieties of American English), and it shares many common features that can be extended to nonverbal communication patterns” (Johnson, 1975, p. 297).

Archer (1997) noted that the importance of being fluent in any language also requires an understanding of the nonverbal communication used by native members of that culture. In various news outlets such as Mexico News Daily and CGTN America, Leigh Thelmadatter published an article about a Mexican man who volunteered to show his hand gestures for foreign travelers to Mexico. CGTN America posted a “Beginner’s guide to: Mexican Hand Gestures with Blanca” on YouTube.
Similarly, in “Sorry Hard Understand Strong Accent!”, Hou & Moges (2023) describe some of the consequences for Deaf scholars of color who have to rely on white interpreters who are unfamiliar with their racial and ethnic heritage. They include an anecdote from a Deaf Latinx scholar who struggled repeatedly with a white interpreter whose interpretation from ASL into English obscured his Latinx identity. One day when the regular interpreter was not available, he was assigned a Latina ASL interpreter who understood the cultural aspect of co-speech gesture. He had an eye-opening experience when the interpreter included the cultural behavior of Latino gestures, which permitted her to accurately project his identity to the class (Hou & Moges, 2023, p. 162).

In the current study, several participants demonstrated their gestural communication, and I documented it in a category labeled “Hearing Spanish gesture” in the analysis of cultural and language influences on New Mexico sign language variation.

Prior studies of language variation in ASL

The Perception of Signing Exact English and ASL’s Lexical Borrowing from English

Lexical borrowing is well-documented in spoken languages. Signed languages too have evidence of borrowing. After William Stokoe’s linguistic research proved ASL is a language in the 1960s, various signing systems were invented, such as Signing Exact English 1 (SEE1) and Signing Exact English 2 (SEE2). These signing systems are not languages, but instead are systems closely tied to English that were created by Deaf and hearing educators to help Deaf students improve their mastery of English (Rendel et al., 2018, p. 19). Many ASL users have an unfavorable attitude toward initialized signs and
borrowing from English due to the minority’s social perspective about borrowing from a majority language (Cagle, 2010, p. 50).

However, some Deaf users did embrace several of the English-based signs, such as BUS, VAN, TOY and CALENDAR (Cagle, 2010, p. 60). Beyond these examples, there is ample evidence of ASL borrowing from English.

There are several ways that ASL has borrowed from English: through initialization, fingerspelling, and lexicalized fingerspelling. ASL and English have co-existed for close to 200 years. One cannot deny that ASL has borrowed terminology from the English language. Examining the ASL lexicon closely reveals that numerous ASL signs are initialized using handshapes corresponding to the first letter of English words, such as F in FAMILY, G in GROUP, I in IDEA, M in MATHEMATICS, and more (Cagle, 2010, p. 62).

Several participants noted that many non-New Mexicans perceived some of these New Mexico signs are influenced by SEE although many of them attended New Mexico School for the Deaf. I added SEE to an educational language policies category in the Table 2 to understand the possible influence and of SEE on New Mexico signed language variety.

**Historical Background of Jim Crow Education and Black ASL**

Three social factors that enabled the emergence of Black ASL are reflected in how racial politics were intertwined with education and language policy when the United States first legally instituted the system of enslavement for African Americans. White Deaf residential schools, including Gallaudet University, were established before the U.S. Congress enacted Reconstruction amendments to abolish slavery and extend citizenship
recognition for African Americans with voting rights for African American men after the Civil War.

Within this historical context, most ASL signs have been based on a white, Deaf signers’ lens (McKay-Cody, 2019, p. 19). The establishment of Black Deaf schools occurred after the Civil War when African Americans were fully freed, however, relegated as second-class citizens until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The language contact between Black and white Americans was often kept to a minimum with the strict enforcement of Jim Crow laws that required both races to be physically separated.

During the Reconstruction period of 1865 to 1877, 18 Black Deaf schools or departments opened for Black Deaf students including the North Carolina School for the Colored Deaf and Blind in 1869 (McCaskill et. al, 2020, p.20-22). Jim Crow segregation deliberately shaped the language policies and instruction method for white and Black Deaf students.

However, the educators at the Milan Conference of 1880 did not discuss if Deaf students of minority backgrounds would receive the same instructional methods. This historical event occurred during the Jim Crow era where race took precedence in shaping the language policy that was implemented in schools for white and black deaf students.

Spoken language was perceived to be a language whereas signed language was not. The educators implicitly associated spoken language to white people because white people were seen as “the human race,” whereas non-white people were not. Baynard
(1996, p. 46, as cited by Lucas et al., 2022) noted that educators made a coordinated effort to impose oral education for white deaf students throughout the country.

“While other schools throughout the south joined northern schools in pushing deaf people to rise, as they saw it, to full humanity by abjuring sign language, this was apparently not considered as significant a need for deaf people of African descent.” Lucas et al. noted the results of these instruction methods are starkly different based on students’ racial backgrounds. They found that 70 percent of white students received oral instruction, compared to only 10 percent of Black students (Lucas et al., 2022, p. 187).

Jim Crow policies not only affected the language policies of these segregated Deaf schools, but Jim Crow policies also affected their educational literacy policies. Burch & Joyner (2007) noted that superintendents such as Gustavus Lineberry of North Carolina School for the Deaf, and Wesley O. Connor Sr. of Georgia School for the Deaf schools, as other superintendents of Black Deaf schools, are white males. They enacted unequal educational policies for Black Deaf students that limited their literacy development and language acquisition, unlike their white counterparts in the accordance of Jim Crow South (p.22).

In Black ASL Project, the older participants discussed the quality of their education, and they said their quality of education was an inferior compared to white deaf students’ the quality of education during the Jim Crow era. The consequences of these unequal policies were uncovered by several investigators. The Babbidge Report (1965) was commissioned by Congress to examine the issues in residential schools for the Deaf across the United States. Stuart & Gilchrist (1991) examined the results in the Babbidge report and found that in 1963, eight states maintained segregated schools for Black Deaf
students, and the report found that these schools were consistently underfunded and understaffed.

The school officials at the Black residential schools for the Deaf were unable to recruit many qualified teachers. For instance, Knorr & Whatley (2015) examined the Georgia School for the Deaf's *School Helper Newsletter* to discover the history of the Black Deaf Department. The *School Helper Newsletter* listed various levels of education for Black and white students. "In the White school, students in the advanced department, typically a high school-like setting, illustrated complex work.

The Colored Department reported that students work at the elementary or intermediate level. No advanced studies were noted for the Colored Department” (Knorr & Whatley, 2015, p. 69). Due to the restrictive education policies imposed on Black Deaf students, it is more likely that Black Deaf students resorted to gestural communication for concepts they never learned at school and shared their home-signs to communicate with each other driving the development of their regional sign varieties.

Pursuing post-secondary education was not an option for many Black Deaf students. Gallaudet University had a Jim Crow policy of not admitting Black Deaf students. Gallaudet President Percival Hall maintained this policy throughout his tenure from 1910 to 1945 (Burch, 2002, p. 37). After the landmark Brown vs Board of Education Supreme Court decision of 1954, coupled with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 laws officially toppled Jim Crow segregation laws; all Deaf schools were integrated at various times, up until the last school for Black Deaf students in Louisiana was closed in 1978.
Integration of Deaf schools had an unintended effect on Black ASL because the long-standing racial dynamics associated with the past Jim Crow era influenced how Black Deaf students were being treated by their white counterparts. With no national recognition of the status of their signing varieties, they were expected to adapt, and were even ridiculed for using different signs than their white classmates.

In *Black and Deaf in America: Are We that Different*, Hairston & Smith (1983) noted that Black Deaf students learned either to assimilate or to code-switch which is common for minority students in predominantly majority schools. Black children began to sign “white,” or as some others would say, “the Gallaudet way.” Most adopted this way of signing to better themselves and to succeed in their new schools and so as not to appear different. However, among themselves, they retained their signed dialect and signed Black (Hairston & Smith 1983, p. 56), which is known as code-switching.

In *Through Deaf Eyes* (2007), Dr. Carolyn McCaskill, a Black Deaf professor describes her experience learning Black ASL during segregation, then transferring to a white Deaf school when Alabama schools were integrated. She explained that she didn’t understand her white teachers and peers because the segregated communities had developed different varieties of ASL. She stated that she felt that she had to put her Black Alabama regional sign variety aside and learn their white variety of ASL. She would only use her own regional variety when she was back home with family or friends.

In the *Black ASL Project* film, participants noted that they learned how to code-switch as Dr. McCaskill did after the integration of Black Deaf schools. Two themes in the *Black ASL Project* film, are that “white Deaf education is better” and “(white) American Sign Language is better and more advanced” as a result of the Jim Crow era’s
inequality and discriminatory educational policies. The consequences of these policies shaped society's perception of Black ASL as seen as inferior and left under-researched compared to so-called “standard” ASL (McCaskill et. al, 2020, p.71-73).

**Philadelphia Signs Project**

Black ASL is not the only variety of ASL that differs from standard ASL and that has been documented by linguists. In 2018, The Philadelphia Signs Project team, Dr. Fisher at the University of Penn collaborated with Dr. Tamminga, and Dr. Hochgesang to launch an extensive project of sign language documentation and preservations of the variety of ASL used in Philadelphia.

They addressed the implications of sociolinguistic theory for language variation and change in Philadelphia English and Philadelphia ASL, as well as to contribute to corpus management. Their sociolinguistic interview strategies were modeled after Labov’s 1984 sociolinguistic methodology and applied to ASL.

Thanks to Labov’s methodology, The Philadelphia Signs Project team tailored their sociolinguistic interview questions to address the Philadelphia Deaf communities’ lived experiences, so that interviewees were ready to engage with the team. The age of interviewees appeared to be the determining factor in variation in the Philly ASL. They created a repository for the Elderly Deaf Philadelphians and their repository can be found on the University of Pennsylvania website.

The variety of ASL in Philadelphia is known to be unique because of their extensive lexical variations of over 250 signs that were documented. Their historical
relationship with Abigail Dillingham and Laurent Clerc bought their Connecticut variety of ASL to the Philadelphia School for the Deaf when they worked there in 1821. Fisher et al. noted the relationship between the Connecticut variety of ASL and Old French Sign Language (LSF) because Laurent Clerc brought his first signed language, LSF, to the American School for the Deaf (ASD) in Hartford, CT.

Anecdotally, there appear to be relics of Old LSF in the Philadelphia dialect used by older Deaf Philadelphians (Fisher et al., 2018, p. 436). The older Philadelphians also use the larger signing space than younger counterparts. The local interpreters provide the special training for interpreters who are not aware of a vast list of Philadelphia signs.

The Philadelphia Deaf community, with its historic exclusivity and its members’ tendency to stay local to the region provides the ideal conditions for such dialect differentiation (Fisher et al., 2018, p. 452). The researchers also mentioned Gallaudet ASL as a standard variety. The term “Gallaudet ASL” may be imprecise, but it is still used to signify a type of standard and stands as a clear marker of those who have left the Philadelphia community and been exposed to other ASL varieties (Fisher et al., 2018, p. 451).

The Pennsylvania School for the Deaf (PSD) had a history of Black Deaf students who attended there. PSD may not officially have been segregated as most southern schools for the Deaf. They had integrated classroom, but outside of the classroom, school officials enforced de facto segregation.

The older Black participants in the Philadelphia Signs Project also discussed how they were treated and how the de facto segregation influenced their signing variety that
was different from their white counterparts during those days. One Black Deaf Philadelphian recalls that when she attended PSD in the 1940s and 50s as one of four Black children in the school, she and the other Black children were not permitted to share bathrooms with white students, attend the same parties, and were expected to sleep in the highest bunk—four beds high—all indicators of the second-class status that Black people were given by the after-school staff (Fisher et al., 2018, p. 453).

Similarly, Southern Black Deaf people’s lived experiences of Jim Crow segregation impacted their varieties that are different from their white counterparts. Generally, the Philadelphia Sign Project team noted that the older participants were more likely to retain their signing variety and were highly resistant to assimilation to the standard ASL, presumably Gallaudet ASL.

The historical overview of the Black ASL and Philadelphia Sign Projects research showed several recurring themes. First, the older generation of signers are more likely to retain their local varieties and associate them with the region. However, the intergenerational transmission of older individuals’ signing varieties to their descendants is more likely to occur than between generations of signers who do not have familial relations. Second, the studies show that residential schools for the deaf such as ASD and PSD are foundational to the development of signed languages, and the school varieties become the most prestigious forms of ASL in their regions.

However, solidarity also influences the maintenance of varieties of ASL that have been marginalized. The fact that the LUCKY sign persists in New Mexico even though it is different from the standard LUCKY sign indicates that these forces may also be at
work in language choice in New Mexico. The Gallaudet ASL variety is considered as a standard and prestigious form of ASL because of its association to the university.

In this study, we anticipate discovering regional differences that have been retained by native New Mexicans, and as such, provide evidence that more than one variety of ASL exists in New Mexico. Lastly, the study will document New Mexicans’ perception of their local varieties and how New Mexican signers interact with people who do not use New Mexico varieties.
CHAPTER 3: 
Methodology

Perceptual Dialectology

Linguists have been carrying out Perceptual Dialectology research in California, Kentucky, Washington, and many other states to better understand the cultural geography of spoken languages in the United States and to examine the awareness of sociolinguistic variation and ideologies about the language of speech communities. Perceptual Dialectology is a branch of Folk Linguistics, and its overall purpose is to analyze non-linguists' beliefs and attitudes towards language. Perceptual Dialectology is a multi-faceted approach using map tasks and/or questionnaires to study non-linguists' perception of language variation. Dennis Preston pioneered the map task (Preston, 1986).

In his Five Visions of America research, he compiled hand-drawn maps from five areas (Hawaii, southeastern Michigan, southern Indiana, western New York, and New York City) and converted them into generalized maps of local perceptions of dialect areas of the United States (Preston, 1986, p.2; see Figure 4). He compared it to traditional maps of cultural and regional zones, calculating attitudinal factors, and determining the existence and scope of speech communities.
Bills and Vigil (2008, as cited in Wilson & Koops, 2015) in a publication titled *The Spanish Language of New Mexico and Southern Colorado: A Linguistics Atlas* find that Spanish-speaking New Mexicans overall perceive two main groups of Spanish speakers in the state: speakers in the north, who claim a colonial connection to the land and the language of Spain, and speakers in the south, who identify themselves as being more closely connected to Mexico (Wilson & Koops, 2015, p. 168).

Wilson & Koops (2015) adapted the map task to study perceptions of spoken language variation in New Mexico and were able to replicate Bills & Vigil’s findings (see Finding 5). To this day, no one has applied Perceptual Dialectology methods to investigate variation in signed languages.

Adults age 18 or older who self-identified as (1) Deaf or Hard of Hearing, or (2) a Child of Deaf Adults (CODA), or (3) a Hearing interpreter, and who had grown up in New Mexico or currently lived in the state of New Mexico were recruited for participation in the study. Seventeen participants (12 females and five males) expressed
their interest in being interviewed and completed a demographic survey and a bilingual ASL-English assessment form. Eleven participants were Deaf, three participants were Hard of Hearing, and three participants were hearing. Fourteen participants were New Mexico residents, and four participants grew up in New Mexico but were not New Mexico residents at the time of the study. Seven participants identified as Latino/a/x, five participants as non-Hispanics white, three participants as mixed race, one as Native American/Alaska Native, one as Black American.

Seventeen participants reported knowing American Sign Language (ASL), 14 participants knew English, three participants knew other signed languages, two participants knew Spanish and Mexican Sign Language and one participant knew Keres language. The educational background of the participants is that five participants attended a residential Deaf school, seven participants attended both mainstreamed public schools and residential Deaf schools, two participants attended mainstreamed public schools, and three attended public schools refer to hearing participants.

Design and Materials

Recruitment and Screening Procedures

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling and electronic flyers. Electronic flyers were posted on social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. The flyer included an email address where participants contacted the investigator to schedule an appointment if they wanted to participate. We created two different recruitment flyers. The first flyer was designed by a graduate student in Linguistics, and the second one was designed by a local hearing New Mexican artist (see Figures 6 and 7).
Figure 6: First Advertisement Flyer

Figure 7: Second Advertisement Flyer
The experimental protocol was carried out on Zoom due to the global pandemic. After reading the consent form and agreeing to participate, participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire, and a self-assessment language survey online. They were also scheduled for an appointment to complete the Draw-a-map task (see Figure 6) through a Zoom session or in-person interview. Participants had the option to schedule an in-person or online meeting. When participants first entered the meeting, they were asked if they were willing to have the interview or Zoom session recorded. If yes, the in-person interview or Zoom session was recorded. If no, only the outline of the New Mexico map or Zoom Whiteboard was saved. For participants who preferred not to be recorded, the experimenter imitated any signs that they demonstrated, and recorded himself on his smartphone or tablet.

Draw-a-map Task and Interview Questions

For the Draw-a-map task, participants were provided via Zoom with an outline of the state of New Mexico (see Figure 8) and drew on the Zoom Whiteboard using the annotation tool in response to the following questions:

1. Mark where Deaf and Hard of Hearing people sign differently.
2. Label the area and sign an example if possible. Explain what is unique about this signing variety in terms of specific signs, phrases, differences in movement, rhythm, face, stance, style, or structure of any kind.
3. Where do you think Deaf and Hard of Hearing people sign the best? Why?
4. Where do you think Deaf and Hard of Hearing people sign the worst? Why?
5. Where does the signing make you feel we are the same?
6. Where does the signing make you feel more different?
7. For New Mexico sign language documentation purposes only, do you know any particular sign or signed phrase that is only used in New Mexico? If yes, can you demonstrate the sign or signs?

Figure 8: Blank New Mexico Map for Draw-A-Task Activity

The purpose of using the United States map is to examine the New Mexicans’ perception of their New Mexico variety outside of New Mexico. All Deaf and Hard of Hearing participants have a post-secondary education background. They attended colleges or moved to different states for employment opportunities. Most participants discussed their realization when their New Mexican variety are different from the standard ASL through their interaction with non-New Mexicans and enhanced their understands of varieties outside of New Mexico.

Their responses are related to interview questions number three through six and this discussion helps us to understand local vs standard varieties of ASL through New Mexicans’ perspectives. However, due to time constraints and the length of the
interviews. Only five participants completed a US map in addition to the New Mexico map (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: Blank United States Map for Draw-A-Task Activity

Data Transcription and Analysis

I translated and transcribed the interviews of both New Mexico and US maps in Excel. I identified the themes addressed in each response. After all responses were listed, I selected the most common themes. Then I reviewed all interview responses again to judge their fit to the categorized themes in the Excel spreadsheet. The most common themes from interview data were code-switching, cultural awareness, language ideologies and attitudes, and regional demographics.

For the map data analysis, I only analyzed the New Mexico maps and eliminated the US maps from the analysis due to the higher number of New Mexico (n=14) than US (n=5) maps. I created a regional grid by dividing the state into nine equal sectors (3 rows x 3 column) and tabulated all city label responses separately. Then I compared both regional and city analyses to identify the density of regional and city markers appearing
on the participants’ maps. For the US map, I collected only one United States maps for displaying the language ideologies and varieties of signed languages outside of New Mexico (see Figure 17). The New Mexico maps are the focus of the map analyses.
CHAPTER 4:
Results from the Draw-A-Map Tasks and Language Elicitations

Chapter 4 presents findings based on an analysis of the maps that participants completed of the state of New Mexico. Specific signs that were identified as unique to New Mexico are first presented. Subsequently, generalizations based on a summary analysis of all maps is presented, followed by an in-depth analysis of four specific maps. Maps of New Mexico were completed by all the participants who grew up in New Mexico (n = 14).

Signs Used Only in New Mexico

Sixteen of the 17 participants identified signs that are unique to New Mexico. These are presented in a series of Tables organized by the sources and/or factors identified by participants that explain why New Mexicans use these unique signs.

Table 1 is a small-scale language documentation table of New Mexican signs labeled “New Mexico School for the Deaf: Original Signs” and this label means these signs were developed by native Deaf and hard-of-hearing New Mexican residents who attended the New Mexico School for the Deaf before out-of-state residents relocated to Santa Fe, New Mexico to work at the New Mexico School for the Deaf (NMSD).

It is likely that these signs were used outside the school as well, but participants emphasized that these signs were used at the school (see Figure 10). According to participants, out-of-state residents maintained their non-local sign language varieties that inadvertently shaped the current varieties used in New Mexico. Hence, some of these signs have been lost and are no longer in use. Other signs have persisted despite the influence of out-of-state residents for different reasons.
I created five categories to reflect how local sign variants are related to standard ASL: Natural Variation, Lexical Competition, Regional and Cultural Importance, Language Contact, and Abbreviation. The natural variation category refers to signs shaped by contextual factors unrelated to outside language contact. For example, the sign OFFICE in New Mexico was the name sign for the person who worked in a receptionist’s office. Going to see this person also implied going to an office, and so the name sign was semantically extended to the new context (see Figure 11).

The lexical competition category refers to New Mexico signs that are phonologically similar to a standard ASL sign with a different meaning. Only one example of this was reported by participants. New Mexico’s sign CHILE and the standard ASL sign LUCKY are nearly identical.

New Mexican Deaf and Hard of Hearing people created a solution by coining a new sign LUCKY that is phonologically dissimilar to distinguish the sign from CHILE.
Regional and Cultural Importance refers to the signs that are well-aligned to the culture and landscape of New Mexico, such as city names and local foods. There are not signs for these meanings in standard ASL.

Language Contact refers to signs that were borrowed from languages other than American Sign Language, and that reflect the language variation that exists in New Mexico. Abbreviations refer to the cities and New Mexico state that are characteristic of the signing of Deaf and Hard of Hearing New Mexicans. Note that some of these abbreviations have different meanings in other regions. For example, SF means San Francisco in other dialects of ASL, but in New Mexico, SF means Santa Fe. Attempts by outsiders to introduce a new abbreviation for Santa Fe to New Mexico have failed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NEW MEXICO SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF: ORIGINAL SIGNS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NATURAL VARIATION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUTOMATIC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIRTHDAY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COOKIE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAVORITE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEET</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I DONT LIKE YOU - GENDER (GIRL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITALY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OFFICE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOUNTAIN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAJAMAS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POISON</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOCK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOON</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIRE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

35
Table 1: New Mexico School for the Deaf: Original Signs

Table 2 presents participants’ perception of existing cultural and language influence on current New Mexico sign language variation. The table findings illustrate the lexical borrowings from Hand Talk to New Mexican sign language variation, the signs Deaf immigrants from Mexico retain their native sign language which is Mexican Sign Language (LSM), different forms of gestures, and signing forms related to the language policies implemented in New Mexico.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEXICAL BORROWINGS FROM HAND TALK</th>
<th>SIGNED LANGUAGE FROM MEXICO</th>
<th>CULTURAL INFLUENCE: HEARING SPANISH GESTURE</th>
<th>HOME SIGNS GESTURE VARIATION</th>
<th>EDUCATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 VARIATIONS: CHILE</td>
<td>LSM: MEXICAN SIGN LANGUAGE</td>
<td>EATING GESTURE</td>
<td>EATING</td>
<td>SEE - SIGNED EXACT ENGLISH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 VARIATIONS: DRUM</td>
<td>M AND N LETTER</td>
<td>HAND TO ELBOW GESTURE: TO INSULT: SELFISH/STINGY</td>
<td>FOODS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 VARIATIONS: MEDICINES</td>
<td>N WITH ACCENT</td>
<td>MALE TESTICLE GESTURE: HUEVON: LAZY PERSON</td>
<td>HOME</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 VARIATIONS OF NAVAJO</td>
<td>TAMALESE</td>
<td>WAGGLING FINGER GESTURE: NO</td>
<td>HUNGRY</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 VARIATIONS OF SOPAPILLA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>TRASH</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 VARIATIONS OF WEAVE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEAN</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CORN</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAGLE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Cultural and Language Influences on New Mexico Variation

Map Analyses

Regional analysis

To determine how frequently different regions in the state of New Mexico were identified on the Map Task, I divided each map into nine equal sections using a grid overlayed on the map. The grid is divided into three sections horizontally and vertically, with each section representing different regions in New Mexico. The three rows of the grid are as follows: North, Central, South. The three columns of the grid are: West, Central, East. I then identified how many of the participants included each of the nine regions in their responses to question 1 (see Table 3). Participants were asked to mark where Deaf and Hard of Hearing people sign differently.

The Central region was included on all 14 maps of New Mexico that were collected. The South Central and Northwest regions were included very frequently, on ten maps. The Southeast region was included on seven maps (half). The North Central and Southwest regions were included on six of the 14 maps. Fewer than one third of participants included the West Central (4/14) or the East Central (3/14) regions. The likelihood of including each region on the map task reflects a continuum of awareness of the uniqueness of signing varieties in New Mexico (see Figure 12).

The Central region was most consistently identified as an important region for understanding ASL variation in New Mexico. This may be due to multiple reasons. Most
significantly, this region includes the New Mexico School for the Deaf in Santa Fe, the location of the highest density of ASL signers in New Mexico, and the location of the most populous city in New Mexico, Albuquerque.

The maps did not necessarily indicate that signing within the Central region consisted of a single variety, the standard variety, or one or more non-standard varieties. However, this region was important to all participants, whether they viewed the variety of signing in this region as prestigious or not. By contrast, the East Central region was almost never included on maps. Participants mentioned that this is an area of New Mexico with very few Deaf residents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Northwest Region: 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Region: 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwest Region: 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North region: 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central region: 14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East region: 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South region: 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast region: 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3: The Total of Region Identification Responses*

![Perception on the Linguistic Diversity Continuum](image)

*Figure 12: Perception on the Linguistics Diversity Continuum*
City analysis

The participants were asked to label the areas they identified with unique sign language varieties on the New Mexico map. The results are highly consistent with the regional analysis. 12 out of 17 respondents identified Santa Fe, 8 out of 17 respondents identified Albuquerque, 6 out of 17 respondents identified Las Cruces, and 4 respondents identified Farmington. Santa Fe, Albuquerque, Las Cruces, and Farmington had the most respondents compared to the rest of the cities in New Mexico, and are located in the regions that were most often included in the regional analysis.

Note however, that some participants included these regions without naming a specific city in that region. Santa Fe, Albuquerque, Las Cruces, and Farmington are the urban centers because of the regional and social dimensions associated with these cities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Northwest region</th>
<th>North region</th>
<th>Northeast region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Farmington: 4</td>
<td>Espanola: 1</td>
<td>Raton: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Taos: 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West region</td>
<td>Central region</td>
<td>East region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gallup: 2</td>
<td>Central region</td>
<td>Clovis: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Albuquerque: 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Santa Fe: 12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast Region:</td>
<td>South region</td>
<td>Southeast region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silver City: 1</td>
<td>South region</td>
<td>Ruidoso: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Las Cruces: 6</td>
<td>Roswell: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hatch: 1</td>
<td>Hobbs: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chaparral: 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anthony: 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 4: The Total of City Identification Responses*
Four maps included more descriptive language about varieties of signing used in New Mexico than the remaining maps. These four maps were selected for a case study to identify the specific characteristics associated with the regions and cities identified in the previous analyses. By including descriptive language, these participants provide greater insight into the reasons that New Mexico signers perceive these areas as the most important to understanding linguistic diversity in New Mexico.

**Map 1: The Egocentric Map**

The first map includes language that situates the participant in the Central region of Albuquerque and Santa Fe, a region labeled as “Normal” (see Figure 13). The participant labeled the West and Northwest region as “Slow ASL”. This participant perceived a different intonation and rhythmic pattern of the signers and who reside in these West and Northwest regions. By contrast, the participant pointed out that in the East and Northeast parts of the state signers utilize a wider space of signing which they labeled as “Big ASL”. These regions were specifically marked based on prosodic features of ASL that appeared to be distinguished from the perceived “normal” in terms of utilizing ASL features in communication. The participant labeled the South region as “LSM” because the South region is adjacent to the border with Mexico, indicating a perception that signers who reside in the South region are more likely to know LSM. The participant also perceived that LSM is part of the linguistic landscape diversity in New Mexico.
Map 2: The Language Attitudes Map

The second case study comes from a participant who described their experience as a student at NMSD. This participant described areas on the map in terms of the attitude expressed by NMSD teachers about students who came from those areas (see Figure 14). The participant also reported the race factor in how white NMSD officials perceived the varieties associated with these regions. The participant recalled that white school officials perceived NMSD as having the best signing model, whereas Western and Southern regions of New Mexico did not provide good signing models for NMSD students. This map reveals that Deaf and Hard of Hearing signers in New Mexico not only develop an understanding of language variation from direct observation of different varieties but also from exposure to the language ideologies of people in positions of power and authority.
The third case comes from one participant’s keen observation of generational change, not regional variation, in New Mexico (see Figure 15). The participant wrote, “the variation in New Mexico ASL seems to be more generational than regional. The majority of current sign models at NMSD are not native to New Mexico, so our unique signs (with the exception of “Chile”) are fading away.” The participant noticed that older New Mexico natives incorporated many New Mexico-specific signs from their years at the New Mexico School for the Deaf prior to the influx of Deaf people from different states who now make up the staff of the school.
The participant also noted that immigration of Deaf people from other states is influencing the current variation of New Mexico’s CHILE sign which reflects the cultural importance of chile to New Mexicans for reasons related to both economy and identity. Hatch, New Mexico is the capital for growing and exporting chile, a variety of peppers that is used for New Mexico's daily cuisine and recognized as New Mexico's state vegetable. The CHILE sign is a compound sign of both TASTE-HOT signs. As this example illustrates, many signs except CHILE that are unique to New Mexico are vulnerable to change as the population in New Mexico undergoes changes.

Similarly, Black ASL has experienced generational changes related to the transition from segregation to integration. The passage of Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954 required all public schools to become integrated. Despite being called “integration”, the burden of moving to new schools was primarily placed upon black
students, who were then immersed in varieties of ASL signing that were unfamiliar to them. By contrast, white students rarely had to adjust their signing variety following this legal decision because they rarely were transferred to new schools.

In *Black and Deaf in America*, Hairston and Smith (1983) noted that generational variation influenced Black ASL. “As a result, in the newly integrated schools or during cultural events, the sign “cornbread” was rarely used, if at all. Today, one rarely sees it, except when occasionally signed by older deaf persons at Black deaf clubs” (Hairston & Smith, 1983, p. 56).

Generational change is another important factor to be considered for why variations across the age spectrum would appear differently. The case of generational variation in Black ASL provides a comparable context for understanding how New Mexico sign has diverged from earlier generations.

The intergenerational transmission of signed language between the older and younger generations of signers who attend residential Deaf schools is less likely because of the lack of language contact between these signers. The intergenerational transmission of signed language between an older relative to their descendants often occurs due to their familial relationships.

For instance, Nakia Smith posted her highly viral video of Mr. Jake Smith Jr, her grandfather who demonstrated his older Black Texan signs from his times in attending segregated Texas School for the Deaf. She posted several videos of Black Texan signs she learned from her grandparents.

The participants are the younger Black signers who appeared in the *Black ASL Project* and they did not experience legalized segregation as their older counterparts.
These participants discussed the lexical borrowing of African American English terms such as, “What’s up”, “My Bad”, “Boujie”, “Chill”, etc., into their signed language. Also, they discussed the importance of Black Culture gestural communications as part of their language to show their identity of being Black.

We might anticipate similar processes to impact signing in New Mexico as New Mexicans search for ways to distinguish themselves and their unique identity. Without knowledge of the older signs used in New Mexico, they may borrow parts of speech and gesture from hearing New Mexicans with whom they identify in terms of their cultural identities. This earlier comparative case of generation changes representation of how Black ASL variations divergence would possible better explanation of how New Mexico Sign Variations divergence based on the participant’s observation.

Map 4: The Southwest Indian Sign Language Map

Map 4 was drawn by an individual who identifies as Latino/a/x. The map shows Navajo and Apache tribes residing in the Northwest and West regions while Pueblo tribes reside in the Central region (see Figure 16). The participant demonstrates a high level of awareness of language diversity in New Mexico. The participant listed lexical signs that derive from Southwest Indian Sign Language specifically from the Navajo tribe brought to NMSD because of their cultural importance. The participant also noted in the South regions, their regional signs for CHILE, TORTILLA, BEANS, PECANS, INDIANS, AND MEXICO are different than in standard ASL.
Interestingly, the participant observed that Spanglish, a contact language variety that combines Spanish and English, along with Spanish exist in Northeast and South regions. On the New Mexico-Mexico border, the participant mentioned LSM, Gesture, and Spanish. The participant wrote two Spanish language varieties in the South and New Mexico border area that would be perceived as different as well. Recall the previous discussion of how co-speech gesture is culturally relevant to the Latino culture (see Chapter 2). The participant’s keen observation shows that the New Mexico population exhibits a highly diverse linguistic ecology in terms of both language modality, language contact, and multiple types of bilingualism.
CHAPTER 5: Themes from Interview Data

Chapter 5 provides a thematic summary derived from interviews with 17 participants. The re-occurring themes are regional demographics, generational change, language ideologies, and Gallaudet Sign variety. These themes are closely associated with the findings reported from the analysis of the maps.

Regional Demographics Theme

Sixteen participants discussed the regional diversity in their responses to the interview questions, except one who only recently moved to New Mexico. Due to the global pandemic, this particular participant didn’t have any opportunity to interact with native New Mexicans.

The first theme, regional demographics, that participants discussed involved their observations of language diversity associated with the regions in New Mexico. I selected two responses matched closely with the fourth case study from the map task: The Southwest Indian Sign Language Map. These interview responses emphasized the highly diverse population and multilingual practices throughout New Mexico. One participant described their mental map of linguistic variation in New Mexico in this way:

“I think we need to have three big main regions: the Northwest or AZ – NM border: Reservations’ sign languages (Navajo, Zuni, Pueblos); the Northern region: Born and Raised Multigenerational Settler families, attending mainstreaming schools or isolated, remote mountain areas, influenced by Spanish colonization history; and the Southern region: Access to Mexico, LSM, Mexican
culture more than New Mexico culture. These three regions have different influences on New Mexico sign variation.”

Another participant noted the highly diverse language contact in Las Cruces due to its proximity to Mexico:

“In Las Cruces, that area has very interesting signing. Why? Many of these signs are from Mexico. Many people migrated to Las Cruces from Mexico. There are many Mexican signers who interact with English and ASL signers. I can see the combination of these sign languages. That’s unique and different about Las Cruces.”

**Generational Change Variation Theme**

The regional demographics question led to a lot of discussion relating to generation changes in New Mexico signing variation. Nine participants discussed the loss of unique of natural variation in New Mexico’s, and that older New Mexicans are more likely to retain their signs than younger counterparts. In two responses, the participants discussed their observation of how signs changed from their times as NMSD students to the present. Their responses are closely matched with the third case study from the Map Task: The Generational Map.

One participant happened to be a native New Mexican interpreter and who was fortunate enough to interpret for diverse New Mexico Deaf and Hard of Hearing communities. The participant noticed different signed varieties across the generational groups of signers scattered throughout New Mexico which is similar to the generational timeline groups of Black signers:
“The older people who are now in the age group of 90, 80, 70, and 60 years old all sign a certain way. The 50- and 40-year-olds are signing in a distinctive way. Ages 30, 20, and below are signing differently too – more like standard signing with other regions in America. Younger signers use more “Standard ASL” than older generations of signers.”

Another participant who resided in New Mexico for a long period of time also noticed the different signing varieties among older generations of signers. This participant noted that there is a strong desire to preserve the older variety of signing in New Mexico in any form, either through documentation or by passing it down from older to younger signers:

“I’ve been learning their New Mexico signs because I’m involved with Deaf communities here. I’ve met with older Deaf people, and I noticed their signs are amazing. I’ve been hanging out with some people who are eager to be recorded to preserve their New Mexico sign. I know one who is from a multigenerational Deaf family in New Mexico. He’s from Santa Fe; his family passed down their signing to their descendants. He tends to use most of his family’s New Mexico variety of signing.”

Language Ideologies Theme

Participants also shared their observations about language ideologies as they relate to regional variation. Thirteen participants used various terms, such as “best”, “code-switching”, “looked down”, “intelligent”, and “wrong” to discuss the language ideologies related to varieties in New Mexico. This language ideologies theme is closely
associated with the Language Attitudes Map. One participant noted that standard norms for ASL depend on their proximity to academic spaces. Further away from the New Mexico School for the Deaf, signed language varieties are considered to be less prestigious:

“People do use different sets of rules when it comes to sign language in Albuquerque, Santa Fe. Santa Fe has the reputation of having many intelligent, educated Deaf people who are fluent signers. People in SF use more conceptual signing, more topics, and can discuss many things in ASL. That makes them look like they’re fluent signers, but they only talk about different things. Think about Southeastern New Mexico, they definitely use the true form of ASL. They follow the rules of ASL with facial expressions, mouth morphemes. But they don’t express their topics, ideas often. Less usage of these compared to the academic world. They [academic signers] will use more topics than in the nonacademic world.”

Another interview response related to language ideologies came from a participant who noted that their Deaf family migrated from Mexico to Santa Fe, and their first native languages were Mexican Sign Language (LSM) and Spanish. The educational program models informed by this orientation tend to be monolingual in structure, with the rationale that linguistic minorities are best served by as much exposure to the dominant language as possible in the interest of “inclusiveness” (Ruiz, 1984, p. 20). García-Fernández recalled that when she worked at two different residential school for the Deaf. She noted that immigrant Deaf Mexicans informed her about similar hostile sentiments shared by the Deaf teachers toward their native languages.
Two of them confided to me that both Deaf teachers and students told them ASL is superior to LSM (García-Fernández, 2021, p.2). Similar to other immigrants, they were discouraged from using languages from their home countries but encouraged to converse in the dominant language of their new country:

“I remember when my family and I moved to Santa Fe. We didn’t know ASL and English. On the first day of school, they immediately told us that we can’t use Spanish. They told us that we must learn English and my family complied with their requirements. It was a long time ago. My parents did not know how to have a discussion with them because of language barriers. They thought the NMSD officials were right, and my parents were wrong. That’s when I pushed my languages aside.”

This perspective parallels that of Dr. McCaskill who also recalled that she had to push her language aside after the integration of Alabama Deaf schools.

Gallaudet Sign Variety Themes

The Gallaudet Sign variety theme is the only theme that is not associated with any of the descriptive language maps but is strongly associated with the language ideologies theme that appeared in many of the interviews. The Gallaudet Sign variety theme is mentioned in *Black and Deaf in America* when the authors, Hairston & Smith, observed that Black signers code-switch to the Gallaudet Sign variety in order to be accepted by white signers after the integration of Deaf schools.

The Philadelphia Signs Project researchers discussed that signers in the Philadelphia community perceive Gallaudet Sign variety as a standard variety. The older
participants discussed difference between the Philadelphia Sign variety and standard American Sign Language that led to the discussion of assimilation in their interviews.

I noticed there are patterns of prescriptivist views relating to the Gallaudet Sign variety based on New Mexican signers’ experience during their interactions with non-New Mexican signers who attended Gallaudet University. “When I took off for Gallaudet University, discrimination continued to multiply. New Mexican cultural signs for certain items such as chiles, sopapillas, or pinto beans were criticized or mocked by White Deaf students, faculty, and staff” (Garcia-Fernández, 2014; 2021, p. 2).

Eight participants explained that some signers who attended Gallaudet think that Gallaudet Signs should be the standard norms of ASL, not the New Mexico regional signing variety. Appropriateness connects to “prescriptive ideologies, which dictate there is one correct way of using languages and arbitrarily privilege particular linguistic practices while stigmatizing others” (Flores & Rosa, 2015, p.150). One participant recalled in her earlier days that a speaker shared similar views about Gallaudet and New Mexico varieties:

“A prominent Deaf educator from The Learning Center for the Deaf, was invited to give a speech about bilingual and bicultural education at NMSD. She was an outsider who was from a multigenerational Deaf family and a white woman. She criticized our signing, and she said our signing was wrong. She said we should be following Gallaudet Sign as the standard form of ASL. New Mexican people stood up to her and defended our variation, explaining that it is the right form. I was so thrilled.”
Another participant recalled when they attended Gallaudet university, the students criticized their New Mexican signs that appeared to be initialized. Recall from Chapter 2 that the Deaf community is highly resistant to SEE because of its relationship to English and the history of marginalization of ASL by promoters of SEE. The participant changed their signs for FRONT and FAT eventually, after realizing that their signs were unique to New Mexico variety:

“I used to sign initialized F for FRONT until I attended Gallaudet University and they laughed at me for signing FRONT. So, I changed my sign FRONT. When I signed FAT and they laughed at me. I realized that FAT sign is NM Variation.”

Another participant noticed that his childhood friends who grew up using the New Mexico variety of ASL changed their view of New Mexico signing after attending Gallaudet University.

“Two of my best friends who I grew up with since I was 3 years old. They went to Gallaudet, and I attended a hearing university. When we finally reunited, I noticed that they corrected my signing. They said these New Mexico signs are wrong and I need to change to a more proper form of ASL. We have to follow Gallaudet Sign as the standard way of Deaf culture signing while my New Mexico signing is more local. I did not accommodate by changing my variety for them. They criticized my signing sometimes.”

Interestingly, one participant who was also a Gallaudet alumnus, observed that the Gallaudet Sign variety represented a certain population of students from certain regions who faced fewer barriers to attending Gallaudet University. The participant explained
that the Gallaudet variety is not representative of the diversity of the Deaf community in the US:

“Gallaudet Sign variety represents the bigger Deaf community from bigger cities which tend to be from the East and West Coasts. Both East and West Coast signs overlap with each other.”

It is possible that students from densely populated Deaf schools on the coasts are more likely to attend Gallaudet University and are currently shaping the Gallaudet Sign variety. Alternatively, it is possible that graduates of Gallaudet are more likely to work in schools that are located in large urban centers along the East and West Coasts. Future research is needed to examine the direction of influence.
CHAPTER 6:
Conclusions/Limitations

New insights from Perceptual Dialectology studies of signing

The goal of this study was to examine Deaf New Mexicans’ perceptions of how people sign identify potential forms of regional and social variation in signing in New Mexico and in the US. The language maps and interview responses revealed a high level of sensitivity to the linguistic diversity of signed language in New Mexico, as well as an awareness of language ideologies along with the complexities involved with prestigious forms of signed language varieties such as their proximity with academic spaces.

Four themes of regional demographics, generation change, language ideologies, and Gallaudet Sign variety highlight the inequalities in race, power, and privilege between native Deaf New Mexicans who use a lesser-known variety of ASL and transplants who may come from places where the variety of ASL is perceived to have more prestige than other local varieties of ASL. These preliminary results show that Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and Hearing New Mexicans are highly aware of existing signed language variation and ideologies.

Some results of this study provide interesting parallels to the Wilson & Koops (2016) perceptual dialectology study of variation in spoken language varieties of New Mexico. The Egocentric and Southwest Indian Sign Language maps demonstrate sensitivity to the influence of Mexican Sign Language (LSM) and even Mexican Spanish at the southern border of New Mexico. The Southern Indian Sign Language map also revealed 6 lexical variants from southern New Mexico that contribute to New Mexico’s
signed language variation. However, it did not clearly reveal whether these six lexical variants come from Mexican Sign Language.

The Southwest Indian Sign Language map highlighted the cultural significance of gestural communication among New Mexicans who are from Mexico. These data all suggest that signing is perceived as distinct in the southern part of New Mexico, similar to Wilson & Koops’ discussion of Southern New Mexico’s variety of Spanish being associated with Mexico. This study also revealed a stronger influence of Indigenous varieties of signing on ASL than was found for spoken language.

While hearing people are aware of Navajo ways of speaking English, they do not report Navajo words that have been borrowed into English. This difference in the findings may reflect the significant role of language contact in the lexical borrowing of indigenous signed languages which is the normal process for any languages that are in contact. The fact indigenous Deaf students interacted with non-indigenous Deaf students regularly at the New Mexico School for the Deaf would provide the necessary conditions for lexical borrowing to occur.

This study overall reveals that not only signed language varieties exist, but the existence of multicultural and multilingual signed modalities in New Mexico that is extensive and is different from Wilson & Koop’s perceptual dialectology results for spoken languages in New Mexico. In this study, the map analyses and case studies of highly descriptive maps supported our hypothesis that more than one variety of ASL can be identified.

When Deaf people from any community stay together for a long time with little outside influence, there is the potential for a regionally distinctive variety to emerge
(Fisher et al., 2018, p. 452). Although the interview question was, “Where do people sign differently,” respondents started by establishing the center of the Deaf Community before identifying places that differ from this center. The map analysis results show that many participants recognized that the Central, Northwest, and South regions associated with the cities of Santa Fe, Albuquerque, Farmington, and Las Cruces have the most diverse signing varieties compared to other regions in New Mexico. Many participants are highly aware that New Mexico varieties are different from the standard ASL through their interactions with signers of other varieties.

In the Black ASL Project and the Philadelphia Signs Projects interviewees addressed the overt and covert prestige of signing varieties. Deaf signers, who are also aware of and express attitudes about signing varieties in the American Deaf community (Baer, Okrent, & Rose 1996), have a perception that a standard ASL exists. In reality, it is possible that there is more than one ASL standard in the American Deaf community based on social factors such as generational status, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and region (Hill, 2012, p. 23)

In this study, the participants discussed the Gallaudet Sign as the standard variety that showed its impacts on Deaf and Hard of hearing New Mexicans’ perceptions of the overt and covert prestige of New Mexico varieties of ASL. The reason why New Mexico varieties maintain a covert prestige status is due to multi-faceted factors, such as race, ethnicity, and the culture of minority communities in New Mexico, that shape the broader society’s perception of New Mexico’s positionality within the US.

A recommendation of this research extends from the focus on participants’ responses to the New Mexico state map, not the United States map. A more extensive
investigation of signed language varieties through the collection and analysis of United States maps would be the next direction to examine the perception of signed language varieties for future projects. To my knowledge, there are not any perceptual dialectology studies of signed language varieties in the United States. I will briefly touch on the responses to the United States Map to reveal the potential of this task to inform our understanding of signed language variation.

Five participants completed a US map in addition to a New Mexico map. One participant produced a highly descriptive map and their responses reveal the language ideologies that would possibly have a connection with the interview responses about the Gallaudet Sign variety. For example, the map is consistent with the interview response by the participant who noted that Gallaudet Sign variety consists of a combination of West and East Coast varieties (see Figure 17).

![Participant Response - Signed Languages Varieties in US](image.png)

**Figure 17: Participant Response - Signed Languages Varieties in US**

One participant responded to interview question 3, “Where do you think Deaf and Hard of Hearing sign the best? Why?”:
“I was told that Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals in the East and West coasts sign faster and better especially ones who went to residential schools for the Deaf or born to signing Deaf parents.”

A further limitation is that Perceptual Dialectology studies can’t capture the full range of variation that is captured in corpus studies. Signers tend to be more aware of lexical variation, for example, and future work should also document prosodic variation as was hinted by one map, as well as grammatical variation which was not mentioned by most participants. We should also consider the influential role of social media and video relay service (VRS) technology platforms that Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and Hearing New Mexicans use. They are more likely to be exposed to non-local varieties of American Sign Language through these influential platforms.

Finally, due to the generational changes in language variation reported by participants of this study, it is essential that a language documentation corpus should be undertaken with the goal of preservation of New Mexico’s original signing varieties as the Philadelphia Signs team did for their signed language documentation project. I hope this thesis will not be the last project to examine these signed language varieties and language ideologies from the perspective of minoritized communities using the tools of Perceptual Dialectology.
REFERENCES


https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A658998069/AONE?u=googlescholar&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=ee735c4c
## APPENDIX A: The List of New Mexico School for the Deaf: Original Signs

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