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TITLE: Ethics of researching signed languages: The case of Kenyan Sign Language (KSL)

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ABSTRACT:

This chapter will be about the importance of being aware of ethics in signed language research, especially focusing on how local communities should be involved in their own research. I will discuss the need of being aware through telling a personal tale of my own research partnership - one I experienced years ago as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Kenya, Africa. Even though my main assignment as a Peace Corps Volunteer was to work as a teacher at a Deaf school, I worked with the local Deaf community in documenting their signed language for a CD-ROM dictionary. For this project, I worked closely with the Kenyan Sign Language Research Project (KSLRP) at the University of Nairobi.

In my chapter, I will describe this partnership and relate it to the Sign Language Communities' Terms of Reference Principles (SLCTR) developed by Harris, Holmes and Mertens (2009). The six principles of the SLCTR, which I will discuss at length, suggest that Deaf signed language users should be involved in each stage of the research project and not just act as consultants. It is important that the community be involved, to understand the aspects of

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the entire process, to have a hand in the construction of knowledge about their own language, community, and culture.

It is well-established that signed language research is vital to the better understanding of the complexities of the Deaf community. That is, the better understanding of a community's language contributes to the empowerment of the Deaf community, the positive evolution of Deaf education, and the overall equality (socially, politically and economically) of a Deaf person. What is also vital to this process of understanding the signed language of a community is how to establish a mutually beneficial and respectful research partnership between the researcher and the researched. This is the lesson I started to learn in Kenya years ago but only now have really started to better understand.

KEYWORDS: signed language, linguistics, signed language research, ethics, fieldwork, dictionary, terms of reference, Deaf Community, Kenya, Kenyan Sign Language, KSL, Peace Corps, international development

<1>Introduction

In April of 2012, I stood before a crowd of people and told them about the work I did with the Deaf¹ community in Kenya as a Peace Corps Volunteer². For the conference “African

¹ In the American Deaf community, it is standard practice to capitalize the ‘d’ as in ‘Deaf’ to refer to the cultural sense of the word, to refer to a community that considers itself a cultural entity complete with a language and set of norms. The uncapitalized ‘Deaf’ is a more neutral designation and refers instead to a person with some degree of hearing loss. I follow this practice throughout this paper but ask the reader to remember that such cultural identification may be different in the Kenyan community.

² Please note that this chapter does not officially represent the opinions of the United States Peace Corps or the Government of the United States or any host country. All information here, unless otherwise cited, has been written by a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer and only represents her opinions.

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Lessons on Language and Citizenship” hosted at Gallaudet in April of 2012, I shared the lesson I learned about language and what it means for citizenship. I stressed the importance of doing signed language research in full partnership with the local communities. In these pages, I will tell the story again by exploring a research partnership I experienced in the early 2000s. I do so through the lens of the Sign Language Communities’ Terms of Reference Principles (SLCTR) developed by Harris, Holmes and Mertens (2009) because it is through these principles that we can discuss the lesson that I have learned. This is the only ethics model to address research with signed language communities; given this, and its particular components, it is the model that best allows me to discuss the ethical questions of concern in this chapter and what I have learned in the process.

First, I need to briefly describe who I am and how I have come to be here today. I am Deaf. I love languages and have always been fascinated by them. I used to seek out exercise vocabulary books and do them for fun. I created my own dictionaries in composition books and diaries with locks on them. When I went to college for my undergraduate studies, I took some linguistics classes and was hooked. It was then that I started looking more closely at signed languages, particularly the one I knew - American Sign Language.

After I graduated, I went to East Africa to live for two years as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Kenya³. My site was in Kilifi on the coast, which is about one hour north of Mombasa, a major port city. I lived and taught at the Deaf school in Kilifi called Kibarani School for the Deaf, which had about 150 deaf children.

³ The Peace Corps, an American volunteer service organization, has been in Kenya since 1965. Volunteers have been serving as education, health, and business volunteers. Since 1992, Peace Corps has been sending volunteers to work in the Deaf Education program in Kenya. These volunteers learn Kenyan Sign Language (KSL) and work in the primary schools with Deaf children or, more recently, with health care professionals in raising HIV/AIDS awareness.



Figure 1. Children of Kibarani School for the Deaf with Peace Corps Volunteers Jesse Guberman (bottom left) and Julie Hochgesang (near-center)

During my time in Kenya, I learned Kenyan Sign Language (KSL) and was quite fluent by the time I left⁴. During my service, I worked with the Deaf Kenyan community through the Kenyan Sign Language Research Project (KSLRP) at the University of Nairobi creating a CD-ROM dictionary for KSL. When I finished my Peace Corps service, I returned to the United States and went to Gallaudet University for graduate studies in linguistics. Now I am a faculty member in the Linguistics department and one of my specializations is documentary linguistics (transcription, fieldwork linguistics, and corpus linguistics).

<1> Importance of Doing Signed Language Research

Not until the 1970s were signed languages recognized as languages in their own right.

Prior to that, it was believed that speech was the only vehicle, the only mode for communication.

⁴ I would like to make some limitations clear. I was not formally trained in anthropology or linguistics before attending the Peace Corps and living in Kenya for two years. My experiences are influenced from my own biases from being white, being female, being American, being Deaf in America, and being a fluent user of English and ASL. For example, I may have identified elements in KSL that are actually remnants from my own lifelong experience with ASL. Any errors in observations here are mine alone.

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Today we know better. After 60-some years of research, we now know that signed languages, with their use of the hands and nonmanual behavior, encode meaning in highly conventionalized and structured ways. In other words, signed languages are complex and effective grammatical systems just like all spoken languages. Different fields for studying signed languages include phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax, discourse, sociolinguistics, and child acquisition. These sub-disciplines are usually made possible by collecting and analyzing small data samples and/or grammaticality judgments (asking signers about the acceptability of certain grammatical constructions). This recognition of signed languages as true languages and subsequent linguistic understanding of their structures has greatly contributed to the empowerment of the Deaf community, the positive evolution of Deaf education, and the overall equality of Deaf people (e.g., [Johnston, 2004](#)).

One increasingly common discipline today is corpus linguistics, which entails the collecting of a large body of data and using it to describe the language and allow for structural analyses to further our understanding of signed languages, and ultimately language in general. Konrad (2012) reports some examples of corpus projects: the Australian Signed Language (Auslan) “Endangered Languages Documentation Project” (2004-2007); The Signed Language of the Netherlands “Corpus NGT” (2006-2008); The British Signed Language Corpus Project (2008 and ongoing at the time of writing); The German Signed Language (DGS) Corpus Project (2009-2023). These projects provide “valid and verifiable description” of these languages based on the actual use of language, through discourse (Johnston, 2004, p. 373). Corpus projects are not widespread (particularly outside of Europe) and are fairly recent in the research of signed languages.

Signed language research has also consisted of fieldwork description. This entails a trained linguist making contact with a language community and identifying a number of speakers to serve as consultants. Once a consultant relationship has been formed, the linguist asks systematic questions about the language (*What is your word for X? How do you say this and that? Is it okay to say this sentence this way?*). For instance, in Nigeria, Schmaling, through systematic inquiry and by working with consultants, identified and listed the phonological, morphological and lexical structures that appear to be true for Hausa Sign Language ([Schmaling, 2000](#)).

As is true for many countries, several paper (and sometimes digital) dictionaries have been produced by the local community centers in several countries in Africa ([Schmaling, 2012](#)). Lexicography (dictionary-making) is indeed a complex and rich endeavor and is meant to be used to document a language for different reasons including serving as a resource, a record of the language at that point in time, and/or standardization of the language throughout the region (e.g., [Schmaling, 2012](#)). When done without the aid of a trained lexicographer (as is usually the case with local community centers), these “dictionaries” are just a partial description of some words in the lexicon (most likely, a word list of what is thought to be the most common words in a language) with little, if any, mention of the grammar of the language or how to use the words themselves.

These small-scale research projects, corpus projects, fieldwork projects and dictionaries are some examples of signed language research, a significant discipline that has produced valuable and far-reaching work. But of course, much remains to be done as many signed languages are under-described and probably more are not-yet-described. The lack of description

and/or documentation means that no linguistic analyses can be undertaken. Since it is clear that Deaf people benefit from research about their signed languages (e.g., [Johnston, 2004](#)), it is then clear that more research projects (e.g., a fieldwork linguistic description project or corpus project) need to occur around the world. However, how to proceed is not always so clear. Precisely what is not clear is who should undertake the responsibility for signed language research, what questions should be asked, who in the community should be involved, and what the implications of such research would be. I start to explore these questions here in this chapter. Or, rather, I start to explore my own answers to these questions in this chapter when reflecting on working with one particular signed language community.

<1> The Deaf Community in Kenya and Kenyan Sign Language

Approximately 35-40 million people live in Kenya, a country on the eastern coast of Africa, which is comprised of about 40 tribes. Ethnologue reports there are 68 languages (<http://www.ethnologue.com/country/KE>, last accessed July, 2013), including Kiswahili, English and Kenyan Sign Language (KSL) which are the nationally recognized languages.

Different sources vary in their estimates of the deaf population in Kenya. Akach (1991a), a KSL linguist, estimates 220,000. More recently, Wilson and Kakiri (2010) estimate there are about 600,000 deaf people. “Exact figures are impossible to obtain because we do not keep accurate statistics in the country” (279, Wilson & Kakiri, 2010). Poor transportation, lack of tele-communication systems (although dramatically changing today), and perhaps a tendency of families to sequester deaf people in their homes will be considerable barriers to obtaining adequate population figures (Guberman (Hochgesang), 2005; 2006).

It is asserted in the literature that the majority population in Kenya usually holds negative ideas about the deaf. Okombo (1992b) describes “traditional attitudes that define the deaf in extremely negative terms” (p. 13). Similarly, Akach (1993) says parents “view having a deaf child as a bad omen. Sometimes this necessitated some parents hiding their children” (p. 3). Kakiri, a Deaf Kenyan, shares that, “(e)ven in peaceful times, however, deaf people in Kenya don’t fare well. We are often asked some very bizarre questions with crude gestures... The mainstream of Nairobi dismisses us as lunatics when they see us signing just because they do not realize that sign language is bona fide language” (279, Wilson & Kakiri, 2010). Teachers of the deaf are often ill-equipped to teach deaf children and, more often than not, do not know signed language, have not been trained in special education for the Deaf, and do not understand general issues pertinent to Deaf education.

Based on my personal experience, a deaf person in Kenya is generally thought to be unintelligent, language-less, and may not be able to contribute to general society. In fact, access to language can be extremely limited for a deaf child born to a hearing family. Unless there are certain adaptations to the child’s environment, she will often not be able to acquire the mainstream vocal language⁵ at a level necessary for customary interaction in the local context. The hearing family will not know KSL. With no language, the child enters school late – anywhere from the age of seven to nineteen. Academic learning is, of course, adversely affected by the child’s late acquisition of language. The deaf child can acquire KSL if they attend a residential school, but even then levels of proficiency in KSL varies widely. Moreover, not all deaf children go to residential schools. Some are sent to “units,” which are small classrooms

⁵ In Kenya, usually the language of the tribe or Kiswahili and English.

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attached to a larger hearing school. In these units, there are often fewer older children who know KSL as in the residential schools. Finally, there are some children who are kept at home and never go to school.

It stands to reason that learning, for deaf Kenyan children, is limited in the classroom where the teachers do not sign (which appears to be a frequent situation based on shared anecdotes of Deaf Kenyans and Peace Corps Volunteers working in Deaf Education in Kenya). Their literacy skills – in either English or Kiswahili – appear to seldom progress past the word level or basic sentences. Many can learn how to write their own names and recognize words in isolation, but their literacy rarely is sophisticated enough to perform successfully, for example, on secondary school examinations. Okombo (1992a) claimed that no deaf person had ever been enrolled in a Kenyan university. More recently, however, there have been anecdotal reports of late-deafened adults (those who acquired spoken language normally) who have attended university. Wilson and Kakiri (2011) report that there are “only eight deaf people with university degrees and thirty deaf people who have been trained as teachers” (p. 279). Closed captioning on television, interpreters, and TTYs are not widespread (if even available at all) in Kenya (Akaranga & Akach, 1991).

A lack of effective education and poor literacy often translate to poor living conditions. Deaf Kenyans are at higher risk for unemployment, poverty, and disease. Unemployed deaf people live at home with their families and are essentially isolated because there is little communication within the family or village. If a deaf person attends school and returns home because of unemployment, they “forget” KSL because there is little use for it. Deaf people are

not encouraged to marry other deaf people. Hearing children of deaf parents are even taken away to “learn speech” by hearing members of the family (Akach, 1994).

Slowly, the poor quality of life is changing with the help of different organizations. The Kenyan Sign Language Research Project (KSLRP) at the University of Nairobi, founded in 1991, plays an advocacy role by providing information on KSL and Deaf people in Kenya. The Kenyan National Association of the Deaf (KNAD) and other regional associations like the Nairobi Association of the Deaf focus on bettering the lives of deaf people and provide Deaf awareness training as well as career guidance and family life education. In the larger cities and towns, conditions are better, especially where there are schools for the Deaf.

KSL is the natural language of Deaf people in Kenya. Some KSL signs are briefly demonstrated in Figure 2.

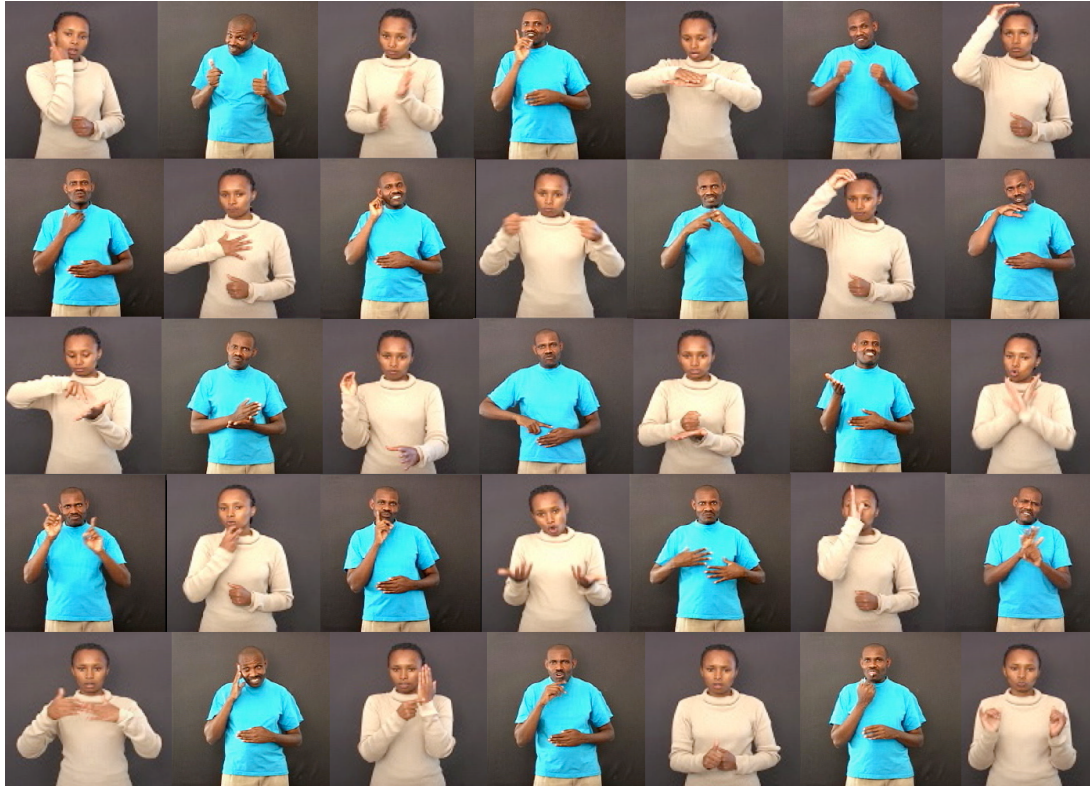
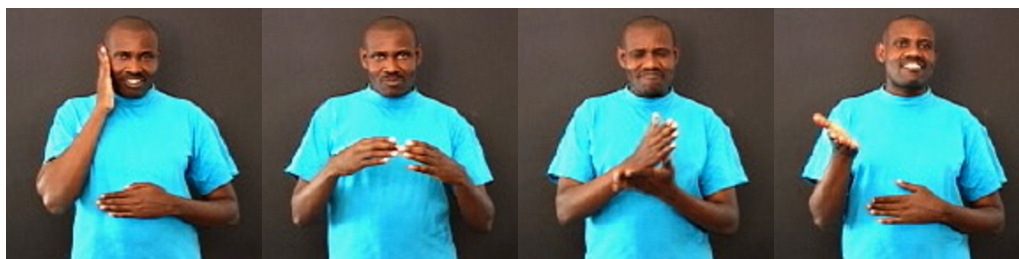


Figure 2. Two Deaf Kenyans producing signs in KSL (taken from the KSL CD-ROM dictionary)

Like any other natural signed language⁶, it has its own grammar and lexicon separate from the spoken language(s) in Kenya (Akach, 1991c). In Figure 3, I show an example of a sentence in KSL.



KSL glosses: DEAF COMMUNITY TRUE THERE
English translation: “There really is a Deaf community.”

Figure 3. An example of a KSL sentence by a Deaf KSL signer

Figure 3 is a brief example of how KSL is a language. Manual signs and non-manual signals (e.g., eye gaze, mouthing movements, eyebrow movement, head movement, etc.) are immediately visible in Figure 3. Also, we can perhaps assume that the KSL signer prefers the signs be ordered in this way. All of this suggests that meaningful units are assembled together in a structured, meaningful and conventionalized manner, consistent with what we would expect to find in any language.

The spontaneous development of KSL began quite recently (Guberman (Hochgesang), 2005; 2006). Before the inception of Deaf schools, most deaf people were apparently isolated in their villages. Many of these deaf people probably never met another deaf person. In the 1960s, this changed with the founding of schools for the Deaf. Deaf people began coming together in

⁶ A natural signed language refers to a system that has evolved naturally when a critical mass of Deaf people interact on a daily and prolonged basis. Natural signed languages do not include artificial signed systems (e.g., Signed Exact English) which are invented by educators or people working for the Deaf community in order to provide manual access to spoken languages.

large numbers and KSL began to develop. Gestures, home signs and perhaps foreign signed languages (brought by missionaries or British colonizers) most likely contributed to the initial development of KSL. In the late 1970s, the first graduates of these schools started entering the job market. This meant they gathered in the bigger cities, creating more opportunities for interaction and thus the Deaf people began to view themselves as a Deaf community within Kenya and value Deaf community activities (<http://www.knad.org/ksl.php>, last accessed November, 2013). Within this community, the preferred means of communication is KSL ([Okombo & Akach, 1997](#); [Wilson & Kakiri, 2011](#)). But, as a result of active discouragement of deaf-to-deaf marriage, Deaf families and native speakers⁷ of KSL are apparently very few.

In the 1980s, Deaf people from Sweden came to work with the Deaf community in Kenya. The Swedish Association of the Deaf sponsored the Swedish Deaf Project in Kenya, in which two Deaf volunteers (Uldis Ozolins and Briggita Ozolins) were sent to Kenya to provide financial support and leadership training (Akaranga & Akach, 1994). The Deaf community in Kenya was encouraged to establish their own association, KNAD. Under KNAD, KSLRP was established at the University of Nairobi, where linguists Okoth Okombo and Philemon Akach have conducted some research on KSL. Akach (1993) explains that most of their work has consisted of using foreign signed language linguistics models to describe the grammar of KSL. Lack of money limits their ability to travel Kenya and record actual data. From 1988 to 1994, there were four different seminars on African signed languages (Akaranga & Akach, 1994). In 1991, the first dictionary on KSL, with approximately 2000 signs, was printed by KSLRP (Akach, 1991b). In 2000, the dictionary was reprinted with no changes. In 2004, a new CD

⁷ A native speaker refers to a person who has been born to a certain language and grows up in an environment that uses that language daily.

dictionary with 1,100 KSL signs was made with the help of American Peace Corps Volunteers. Although the new dictionary contained fewer signs due to limited file space on the CD, such a format was preferred because updates could be done more easily and inexpensively. Moreover, videos of signs were considered more effective than frozen pictures on paper.

<1> Research Ethics When Working with Signed Language Communities

Ethics, in the most basic sense, signifies a set of governing principles for how one behaves toward another in the context of their society, complete with its language(s) and cultural norms. When we are talking about research ethics, we are talking about being explicitly aware that research affects those who are studied and being careful to prevent any negative effect of such research. To discuss research ethics is to be mindful of the negotiation of power, the consequences of any research action, and the need to protect/involve those who are studied. Linguists are often trained in research ethics and required (by their universities) to formally address the ethical issues at hand in any proposed research project.

Harris et al. (2009) discuss the ethics of research, particularly with un- or under-represented groups and specifically with signed language communities. On top of typical research ethics, Harris et al. propose a set of “culturally appropriate research guidelines” intended to accord respect and show sensitivity towards the studied group’s culture. The Sign Language Communities’ Terms of Reference (SLCTR) principles directly address the ethics of working with signed language communities. These principles would have provided useful guidance to the Peace Corps Volunteers and the people at KSLRP who directly worked on the CD-ROM, as well as to the Deaf Kenyan community at large.

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The SLCTR principles basically state that Deaf signed language users should be involved in each stage of the research project and not just as consultants. “It is critical that researchers attempt to determine the ways in which signed language community members feel and think about the world and give these the recognition they deserve” (Harris et al., 2009, p. 114). It is important to involve the signed language community so that they can understand the aspects of the entire process and to have a hand in the construction of knowledge about their own language, community, and culture.

First I will provide a brief background describing how the research partnership came to be. Then in the following subsections, I will identify each SLCTR principle, briefly describe them and then relate them to my research partnership in Kenya. These principles were not available to me or the research team I worked with in Kenya. Instead, this is a reflective and metaphorical application of the “journey in which the researcher develops increased understanding of differential access to power and privilege through self-reflection and interaction with members of the community” (Harris et al., 2009, p. 113). It is intended that this discussion may be beneficial to researchers thinking about doing work with any signed language community.

<2> Background of Research Partnership

The partnership between the Peace Corps Volunteers and KSLRP at the University of Nairobi (associated with KNAD) began in 2001. I was not one of the original Peace Corps Volunteers involved with the project. Rather I got involved during the second year (in 2002) to help finish the filming and to create the text for the dictionary itself (including some information about its grammar and the Deaf community and cultural norms). The original three volunteers

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involved with the project were one hearing woman who was involved with the Deaf Education program but had little training otherwise, one hearing woman who was skilled in filming and computer programming but did not know signed language (neither ASL or KSL), and one woman who was skilled in computer programming and graphic designed but did not know signed language (neither ASL or KSL). None of them had any formal training in Deaf education, linguistics or anthropology.

The original intent of the dictionary project was to collect words associated with common themes in Kenya (e.g., school, family, farming, and places). These words were written down in English and presented to two Deaf Kenyan signers who produced them for the camera. The target audience included Deaf students at Deaf schools and mainstreamed units, educators at these Deaf schools and mainstreamed units, and the families of Deaf people.

Given that the three volunteers had little technical knowledge in creating dictionaries or even much understanding about signed languages or the Deaf community. I, armed with my five classes of linguistics, three read books of Noam Chomsky, lifelong knowledge of ASL, and newfound knowledge of KSL, stepped in to help. I was eager to help because I loved studying signed languages and felt it was important to document signed languages, especially one as under-described as Kenyan Sign Language. Of course, I had little formal training myself.

When I started work on the project I felt we needed to directly partner with Deaf Kenyans themselves. My first instinct was to ask the Deaf community what they wanted. It is my understanding that the three volunteers were working with two Deaf Kenyans (who were hired as signed language trainers for new Peace Corps Volunteers). So there was some kind of relationship with the Deaf Kenyan community, although an unbalanced and precarious one. It

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appears that the two Deaf Kenyans were consulted to be signed language models for the videos in the CD-ROM and did not have active participation in the initial design of the project. Furthermore, it does not appear that the Deaf Kenyan community at large was originally consulted in the making of this dictionary.

As the SLCTR principles suggest, the signed language community itself should be the driving force behind the project. Furthermore, as observed by Wilson and Kakiri (2011) who talk about doing work in developing countries (using Kenya as an example), projects that get started in developing countries will most likely survive if the locals themselves are a major part of every step - planning, developing, use, maintenance, and so on. If projects are started and left for the locals to maintain, it is most likely that they will be abandoned.

When I became involved (along with additional Peace Corps volunteers who had varying experience with signed language communities), there was a more active attempt to involve the Deaf Kenyan community. This was accomplished by asking the Deaf people originally hired as consultants what they wanted and working more closely with KSLRP at the University of Nairobi which had a more established relationship with the Deaf Kenyan community through its formal relationship with KNAD.

<2> Principle One: Authority Lies with the Signed Language Community

The first principle of the SLCTR principles states that “the authority for the construction of meanings and knowledge within the signed language community rests with the community’s members” (p. 115). This basically means “ensuring that research accurately represents the people and their language” (p. 116). Accurate representation is accomplished by

“decenterizing” hearingness and “centerizing” the signed language community through making the research “by Deaf, for Deaf and, with Deaf” (p. 116).

This principle was haphazardly followed during the KSL CD-ROM dictionary project. While it is not clear if “by Deaf, for Deaf, and with Deaf” was adhered to in the beginning, it is clear that it became part of the project’s design as it developed. Eventually, two Deaf Kenyans (the ones you see in Figures 2 and 3) had a direct hand in deciding what knowledge should be imparted in the dictionary.

Originally, one of the three initial volunteers had developed the word list herself. This is not ideal since her knowledge of KSL and the Deaf Kenyan community was limited having only been in the country one year and had been primarily exposed to KSL at one Deaf school. We later asked the Deaf Kenyans which KSL words they wanted to include in the dictionary. They had some suggestions, including adding some lexical variants that they felt should be listed. For example, the Deaf Kenyans wanted to show that the concept of “new” could be expressed through two KSL signs shown in Figure 4.

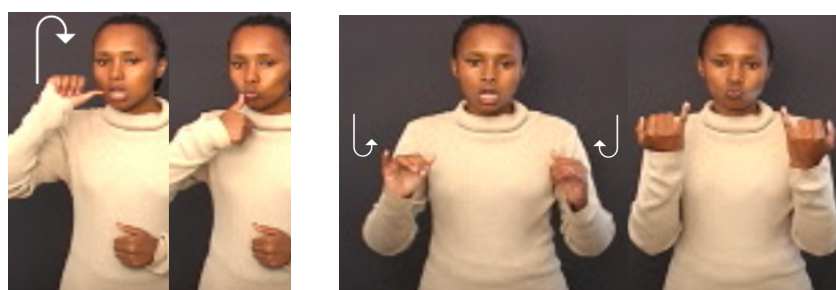


Figure 4. Two KSL signs for the concept of “new”

This is one instance of how the project became more “By Deaf”. Given that there are about 30-40 Deaf Schools in Kenya and several Deaf adult communities, it is highly likely that there are more variants than can be observed at a single school. The Deaf Kenyans knew this and were

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able to add more signs that they wanted to share, that is they were able to “construct knowledge” about their own language.

One other aspect that was not originally planned for the dictionary was later added - information about KSL grammar (e.g., modification, word order, sentence types) and the Deaf Kenyan community. This information, crucial for creating meanings and knowledge about the Kenyan Sign Language community, was obtained through discussion with the Deaf Kenyans. Such discussion was better facilitated since more members of the dictionary project could communicate directly with them through KSL. Ideally, perhaps the Deaf Kenyans should have produced this information themselves via signed videos on the dictionary rather than the Peace Corps volunteers extrapolating the information in written English.

In any case, “by Deaf, for Deaf, and with Deaf” started to become more ingrained in the daily activities of most, if not all, of the team members by the end of the project. When the volunteers finished their Peace Corps service and left the country, the CD-ROMs were left with KSLRP and KNAD for distribution and future development. That is, the authority to construct further meanings and knowledge completely belongs to the Deaf Kenyan Community now.

<2> Principle Two: Incorporation of Signed Language Community Values in Research Ethics

The second principle is: “Investigators should acknowledge that signed language community members have the right to have those things that they value to be fully considered in all interactions” (Harris et al., 2009, p. 116). For our project, the second principle holds that the values of the Kenyan Sign Language community should be considered in any interaction.

Possible interaction scenarios for our project included: communication between the research team and the community, the language(s) used in the dictionary, coordinating the distribution of

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the dictionary to schools and families, and providing supplemental workshops to Deaf educators and/or families of Deaf Kenyans. During any of those interactions, the values of the Deaf Kenyan community should be incorporated.

During our project, the incorporation of the community's values in any interaction was not outright ignored but it also was not a factor that we explicitly considered at the time. I will outline two examples where we could have better considered the values of the community during our interactions.

The work done by the Peace Corps volunteers and KSLRP resulted in a CD-ROM that consisted of KSL videos which were labeled by English and Kiswahili glosses. The description of the signs, the KSL grammar, and Deaf community was done entirely in written English and some Kiswahili. While the written form may be more accessible than the spoken form, it may not be much better given that illiteracy rates are most likely elevated among the Deaf community in Kenya. The Deaf community may have preferred that the knowledge be entirely presented in KSL but, then again, the target was not just Deaf children and adults but also hearing educators and family members of the Deaf. Given that hearing family members and educators have limited fluency in KSL, it may be better for them to access any information through the written form (be it English or Kiswahili) rather than the signed form.

The second example concerns the fact that in this new dictionary, the KSL signs were presented in videos rather than pictures on paper as in the first KSL dictionary. I, as a Deaf American woman trained in linguistics, would imagine that the KSL videos in the dictionary would be preferred over pictures in a paper dictionary. These pictures are frozen images of one point of a sign, basically misrepresenting the real-life three-dimensional productions that

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dynamically move from beginning to end. Video appears to be the better medium for representing signs. Yet, when I was a volunteer (from 2002-2004), computers were not very common in the Deaf schools and children did not have daily access. Internet cafes were widespread but it is not clear how often, and by whom, the computers were used. This leads to the very real concern about whether CD-ROM dictionaries are actually more useful to this targeted audience than paper dictionaries.

Here I provided two examples and discussed the modes that were used during the interactions. I described the situations and described the different possible modes that may have been preferred by the Deaf Kenyan community. Ultimately, however, understanding what the community values and what they want to happen during any interaction involving the dictionary needs to be asserted by the Deaf Kenyan community itself.

<2> Principle Three: Consideration of Worldview of Signed Language Community

The third SLCTR principle is: “Investigators should take into account the worldview of the signed language community in all negotiations or dealings that impact on the community’s members” (Harris et al., 2009, p.118). This principle concerns the power distributed among relationships. Historically, deaf people in Kenya have been marginalized as they have been almost everywhere. This principle aims to put all of the people involved in a mutual research project on equal footing. “Instead of having a hierarchical research team with a primary investigator at the top, assistants in the middle, and participants at the bottom, the research project should be a horizontal dialogue between research teams and participants” (p. 118). The principle goes even further by suggesting that the members of the team defer to the norms or preferences of the Deaf community.

For example, when the project first started, the volunteers were basically in charge. As the project evolved, this changed and the Deaf Kenyans had greater involvement. I have provided a few examples of this greater involvement in the last two subsections.

In addition, everyone involved tried to see the project from “Deaf eyes”. One way we did that was by adding KSL phrases to the dictionary. During one of our discussions, we realized that showing signs by themselves may be helpful to new signers learning how to produce the signs themselves but not how to use them in everyday communication. Perhaps, the first instinct when providing examples would be to use common English or Kiswahili sentences and then to translate them to KSL. This, however, is not “seeing through Deaf eyes” because these may be phrases that are not used by the Deaf Kenyan community at all. While we were discussing this aspect, the Deaf Kenyans brainstormed phrases that they felt were common in the community and we included these in the dictionary.

In the beginning, the original designers of the Kenyan Sign Language dictionary project were hearing Americans with limited knowledge of the Deaf community or signed language. As the project progressed, however, the members entered a more “horizontal” relationship with the Deaf Kenyan community through working more with KSLRP and the Deaf Kenyan members and learning to see the project through “Deaf eyes”.

<2> Principle Four: Recognition of Diversity in the Community

The fourth principle holds that: “In the application of Sign Language Communities’ terms of reference, investigators should recognize the diverse experiences, understandings, and way of life (in signed language societies) that reflect their contemporary cultures” (Harris et al., 2009, p. 120). People who are deaf are not Deaf in the same way. For example, they may have

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different experiences with acquiring the language itself. Some may be fortunate enough to have access to the community's signed language from birth and others may not have had any access until their teenage years (if at all). Some will take pride in their own community signed language and consider it an element to be valued and celebrated. Some may see foreign signed languages as more developed and valuable tools for success in education and employment (as is unfortunately a common perception of ASL in many developing countries).

This principle, in which diversity should be acknowledged and respected, is certainly a challenging one to uphold when considering the Deaf community in Kenya. In a country where transportation is difficult (the roads are often rough or the fares are expensive), there is less interaction between members of the community (which has about 30-40 Deaf schools and an uncounted number of Deaf meeting places, including post offices and churches) and, I predict, more diversity. The very reason for this diversity also inhibits our ability to recognize and represent this aspect of the community. It was logistically difficult for our project members to travel across Kenya and ensure that we were reflecting a wide sample of the community.

Instead, the dictionary project relied on KSLRP and used two of the Deaf members as the video models. Whether they are representative of the community is certainly open to discussion. In fact, the project only thought to include one person as a signed model. As the project developed, other members suggested that more Deaf Kenyans should be included. As a result, one other Deaf Kenyan was brought on to help decide which words should be included and to produce the KSL phrases. It would have been ideal to include a more diverse group of Deaf Kenyan signers for the dictionary.

Furthermore, the authors of the SLCTR principles argue that this principle also concerns the “recognition of the community’s close-knit nature and implications for confidentiality or anonymity in research” (p. 120). The video models volunteered to film themselves for the project but there was little discussion about what this would mean for their standing in the community. Would other Deaf Kenyans support this or would they object? The consequences of their involvement in this project is unknown.

Recognition of diversity in the Kenyan Sign Language community received very little consideration during the dictionary project. There are some lexical variants listed in the dictionary as well as a discussion of language variation. But these are just two aspects that were briefly touched upon. If another dictionary or another edition of the same dictionary were to be produced in Kenya (or any other signed language community), I would recommend that funding be secured to travel across the country to obtain more data and to showcase the data in order to get feedback from the community itself.

<2> Principle Five: Evaluation and Validation of Research by Signed Language Community

The fifth principle states: “Investigators should ensure that the views and perceptions of the critical reference group (the signed language group) is reflected in any process of validating and evaluating the extent to which Sign Language Communities’ terms of reference have been taken into account” (Harris et al., 2009, p. 120). This principle basically says that Deaf signed language users should be involved in each stage of the research project and not just as consultants. And every stage, from planning, to data collection, to coding, to analysis, to writing, to dissemination, should be accessible and reflective (or an accurate representation of) of the Deaf community.

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This idea has been touched upon in each subsection leading up to this one. The material in the KSL CD-ROM dictionary should be fully accessible to the Deaf Kenyan community but perhaps it is not because of the written content (which may not be as accessible as we would like because of the high illiteracy rates among the Deaf Kenyan community).

The project should have been proposed, designed, conducted and disseminated by the Deaf Kenyan community. It is not clear who did the proposing. As the project developed, the signed language community became more involved.

Another way of evaluating and validating the research conducted during the dictionary project would have been accomplished by traveling through Kenya and meeting with a wide sample of the Deaf community. That is, the dictionary videos and written content should have been shown to a representative set of the Deaf Kenyan community in order to receive their feedback. As already discussed, this was not a feasible option at the time. There was extremely limited funding for the project and limited technical capacity among both volunteers and stakeholders within the Kenyan Deaf community. Even if it was easier to travel around the country, would the project members have properly incorporated the feedback they received? Everyone knew the project was being done on the cheap and in a sub-optimal way. But, at the time, it was perceived as an improvement over the status quo, which is a debatable proposition, but it was what all of the volunteers were conscious of during the project.

Again as stated earlier, the dictionary project did not have access to the SLCTR principles during the time of the project. If the project had been aware of the principles, this “evaluation and validation of research by signed language community” principle may have received better consideration for it certainly is an important one. Ownership of any knowledge

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regarding Kenyan Sign Language or the Deaf community lies with the users themselves.

However, there is one tangible way in which the project is “owned” by the Deaf Kenyan community: KSLRP and KNAD are named as the co-authors of the dictionary.

<2> Principle Six: Decisions on Research Procedures Lie With the Signed Language Community

The final principle of the SLCTR principles state that: “Investigators should negotiate within and among signed language groups to establish appropriate processes to consider and determine the criteria for deciding how to meet cultural imperatives, social needs, and priorities” (Harris et al., 2009, p. 123). The community decides what is needed to be done, how to do what needs to be done, and finally why it needs to be done. The idea of the project appeared to originate with one of the volunteers who worked in one of the Deaf schools. Were Deaf Kenyans or organizations consulted before the project was initiated? I am not sure. Luckily, she and the other volunteers did collaborate with KSLRP, which has a significant number of Deaf staff. That was a good start.

An example of a research procedure has to do with the filming set-up. For our project, there were several people in the room during the filming - the volunteer running the filming equipment, the Deaf Kenyans, and a couple other members, including myself. Usually the person doing the filming is the person in control since she is the one pointing the camera and capturing the information that will ultimately be presented in the final product. This person did not know KSL. This can create an unbalanced dynamic in communication and activity. For example, the Deaf Kenyans may have been uncomfortable and produced signs that they would have never produced if the room were full of Deaf Kenyans who used KSL on an everyday basis. This is a

well-known consequence of language contact (e.g., [Lucas & Valli, 1992](#)) - people change their variety of language to fit the situation or people they are addressing.

One other example of a research procedure in this project has to do with selecting the signs. As already mentioned, the target audience was mixed - Deaf children and adults, Deaf educators and families of Deaf Kenyans. This had considerable influence on which words were selected for the dictionary. Also, the research procedure was not clearly thought out. At first, one of the Peace Corps volunteers brainstormed what words should be included based on her one-year teaching experience at a single Deaf school. She then showed the words to the Deaf Kenyans in written English and asked them to produce it in front of the camera. If the Deaf Kenyans were not sure of the sign, the volunteer signed it herself. Later the Deaf Kenyans were asked to supplement to this list (not to completely start over since words from the original list were already filmed). This kind of procedure does not adhere to general good practices for fieldwork linguistics nor does it respect the sentiment outlined in the final SLCTR principle.

This final principle, in which the decisions on research procedures lie with the signed language community, received little explicit attention during the KSL CD-ROM dictionary project. Such procedures should be explicitly established early in the project based on discussion within the signed language community itself. Again, it is their knowledge that is being recorded and shared so it should be done in the way they prefer.

<1> Conclusion

In the last few subsections, I have described the six principles of the Sign Language Communities' Terms of Reference principles and reflected upon whether these were included during the activities of a particular research partnership that occurred in the early 2000s in

Kenya. As has been demonstrated, the SLCTR principles serve as a valuable guide to research ethics while doing research with signed language communities.

There are also other ethical principles that should be considered when working with signed language communities. In particular, one of the ethical principles of fieldwork says that the investigator should try as much as possible to not transform the setting with outside languages, values, and artifacts. This issue is relevant to signed language documentation projects where project members may have not given much thought to the role of the fieldworker and the effect they may have over the community they are working with, e.g., using groups of American Deaf people who model ASL as the high-status signed language (something I experienced in Kenya as a Peace Corps Volunteer).

During the conference where this topic was originally presented and in this book, we are discussing positive developments in working with Deaf communities in Africa. The SLCTR principles are certainly an excellent example of one positive development. And, as I have explained, there were some aspects we definitely incorporated, but the project would have greatly benefited from embracing these principles.

Before I finish my recounting of the lesson I have shared here, I would like to tell you a bit more about KSL in Kenya. The CD-ROM dictionary was published in 2004. At last, with the establishment of Kenya's constitution in 2010, the country now recognizes KSL as a language and considers it an official language of parliament (<http://www.parliament.go.ke/plone/national-assembly/the-standing-orders/standing-orders/part-xvi-rules-of-debate/75.-proceedings-to-be-in-kiswahili-english-or-kenyan-sign-language>, last accessed November, 2013).

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So it is clear that the work that has been done with KSL has helped get it recognized officially. Hopefully it will be not much longer before it positively influences other domains like communication access (e.g., signed language interpreting), Deaf education and other aspects that allow for equal citizenship. However, of course, more research on the language and community needs to be done.

When I first returned to the states from America, I had fully intended to do a complete description of Kenyan Sign Language as my dissertation.



Figure 5. Julie with deaf girl

It has been almost ten years since I have left Kenya. Along the way I realized (with the aid of my graduate school and research experience which includes explicit discussion of research ethics as outlined here) that I, as an American woman who uses another signed language (ASL), do not have the right to solely undertake that action. As a result, I felt that it was unethical for me to proceed with a complete description of Kenyan Sign Language as my dissertation. But like the SLCTR principles I just described, that does not mean I cannot do research on Kenyan Sign Language. It means that it is better to undertake such work when Deaf Kenyans invite me to do it

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with them. If they do, then I would be happy to serve as a consultant as they proceed with their own research on their own signed language.

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