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# *Researching the Languages and Cultures of Deaf Communities in the Caribbean<sup>1</sup>*



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## **Introduction: Deaf communities, languages and cultures**

The idea that groups of deaf people share much more than a lack of hearing, that they can constitute linguistic and cultural communities, is by now well-established. Academic interest in Deaf communities and their languages has developed rapidly since W. Stokoe's early work on American Sign Language (ASL) in the 1960's, spawning new fields such as Sign Language Linguistics and Deaf Studies. At the heart of these fields has been the realisation that an audiological view of deafness fails to capture the richness and complexity of the cultures that have emerged when groups of deaf people come together. A Deaf community is not simply a group of people who cannot hear, and not everyone with some level of hearing loss is a member of a Deaf community. Rather, it is important to distinguish between the large number of people who experience some level of hearing loss, most often associated with exposure to noise and with age, and the small subset whose native or primary language is a signed language. Deaf communities are bound together by shared experiences, such as attendance at a deaf school, and are typically composed primarily of people born with severe or profound hearing loss. Above all, they share a common signed language. In contrast, people who

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<sup>1</sup> I owe any insights into the Deaf community of Trinidad and Tobago to the generosity and patience of many Deaf friends who have shared their knowledge and experiences with me over the past four years or so. The list of their names is too long to include here. Without their help, I could not have written this paper, although they bear no responsibility for any misunderstandings contained within it, which I no doubt introduced myself.

experience gradual hearing loss in later life, rarely learn to sign, and remain outside of, and often oblivious to, any Deaf community which may exist within the same geographical area. Following James Woodward, it has become standard practice to represent this distinction typographically, by using 'deaf' (with a lowercase 'd') to refer to audiological hearing loss broadly, but 'Deaf' (with an uppercase 'D') to refer to members of a sign language community.<sup>2</sup>

The linguistic and cultural view of deafness is still not always understood or accepted outside of Deaf communities and certain academic fields. Misconceptions about Deaf people and their languages are sufficiently widespread and persistent that writers on sign language linguistics still feel obliged to debunk such myths as the idea that there is only one sign language in the world or that sign languages are in some sense not complete languages.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, popular awareness of Deaf culture is growing. In 1988, Deaf students and staff protested the appointment of a hearing president of Gallaudet University, the first higher education institution in the world for Deaf and hard-of-hearing students. The 'Deaf President Now' protests drew international news coverage, and are widely regarded as a watershed moment for the public visibility of the American Deaf community.<sup>4</sup> Over the last few decades, ASL has gone from not being taught, to being the fourth most commonly taken 'foreign' language in American colleges, and many other signed languages around the world are being taught to more hearing people than ever before.

This growing popular awareness has been reflected in changes in public policy. National sign languages have been officially recognized in the constitutions of several countries (Schermer 894-95), and new legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act in the US and the Equality Act in the UK make specific reference to the linguistic rights of Deaf people. Internationally, the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) has provided a widely adopted framework which makes specific references to the responsibilities of signatories with respect to deaf populations, their languages and cultures.

Though still under-represented in public life, more Deaf people are reaching positions of public prominence. In the last twenty years there have been Deaf Members of Parliament such as Alex Ndeezi in Uganda, and Wilma Newhoudt-Druchen in South Africa. Deaf linguist Carol Padden was awarded a prestigious MacArthur Fellowship in 2010, and research into signed languages has attracted considerable attention over the last few decades, offering many new insights into the nature of the human capacity for language (Pfau, Steinbach and Woll 1-2).

Much is still not known. We do not yet have a clear idea of how many signed languages there are in the world, since in many parts of the world no research has been done. Mathur and Napoli's (6) statement that "[t]oo little has been published about sign languages and the deeper social situation of deaf communities outside of the United States and Europe", is echoed in much of the recent literature in sign language linguistics. Within the Caribbean, very little attention has been paid to Deaf communities, their languages and cultures. Overviews of the language situations of the

<sup>2</sup> Choosing between the two options is not always straightforward, especially since notions of deafness in the Caribbean may differ from those that exist elsewhere. Nonetheless, I have followed the convention in this paper, because the distinction between cultural/linguistic and audiological deafness is very important to the discussion.

<sup>3</sup> As Davis points out, this has been going on for so long that "even mentioning the ubiquity of this practice has become a cliché" (188).

<sup>4</sup> See Christiansen and Barnartt for extensive discussion of the impact of the 'Deaf President Now' protests.

Caribbean have generally left out sign languages completely. Neither Douglas Taylor's 1977 book, *Languages of the West Indies*, nor Peter Roberts' 2007 book, *The West Indians and Their Language*, for example, make reference to signed languages.<sup>5</sup>

In the last few years things have begun to change. Keren Cumberbatch's PhD dissertation on the sign language of the Deaf in Kingston, Jamaica was the first book-length study of a national sign language of a CARICOM (Caribbean Community and Common Market) nation. Elizabeth Parks, Holly Williams, and Jason Parks have provided sociolinguistic sketches of many Deaf communities across the Caribbean, while Jo-Anne Ferreira's overview of Caribbean languages and linguistics mentions several sign languages of the region (Ferreira 131). New languages are being 'discovered' on a regular basis. In 2006, Beppie van den Bogaerde observed a previously undocumented sign language in Suriname, and *Ethnologue*, the most comprehensive record of the known languages of the world, added Trinidad and Tobago Sign Language (TTSL) for the first time in 2013 (Lewis, Simons and Fennig).

In addition to sign languages used in the Caribbean with origins outside (ASL, British Sign Language, the Sign Language of the Netherlands, French Sign Language), *Ethnologue* currently lists seven sign languages indigenous to the region: TTSL, Providencia Sign Language (also known as Providence Island Sign Language), Puerto Rican Sign Language, Cuban Sign Language, Dominican Sign Language, Jamaican Sign Language and Jamaican Country Sign (also known as Konchri Sain). Some of the languages on the list might be sufficiently similar to ASL to be considered varieties of that language. *Ethnologue* states, for example, that the lexical similarity between Dominican Sign Language and ASL is 85-90%.<sup>6</sup> There are certainly others not on this list, such as the signed languages found in Guyana and Suriname. Much more work remains to be done before we will be able to provide a comprehensive list of sign languages used across the region.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, although research is beginning to be done on sign languages in the region, there has been almost no research into aspects of the cultures of Caribbean Deaf communities beyond their languages.

These gaps are of much more than simply academic significance. In this paper, I will argue that the lack of research into Caribbean Deaf communities also has serious consequences for policy development. Much of the discussion is based on my own research with the Deaf community in Trinidad and Tobago. It aims to show some ways in which the current lack of understanding of the linguistic and cultural identities of Deaf Trinbagonians leads to systematic inequalities, and discusses some ways in which research might help to address the many social, economic and health problems which many face as a result of the lack of effective public policies. Section 2 discusses some immediate areas of concern, in relation to the UNCRPD. Section 3 considers the uncertain futures faced by Deaf communities in the Caribbean and beyond. Section 4 discusses the importance of conducting research in an ethical and empowering manner, and section 5 concludes the paper.

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<sup>5</sup> This is not surprising: sign languages were almost completely ignored by linguists until the 1960's and it has taken some time for the field to readjust to the discovery that the very notion of 'language' needed to be understood more broadly than it had been, to include both signed and spoken languages.

<sup>6</sup> In comparison, Swadesh tests suggest around 50% lexical similarity between ASL and TTSL, well below Parkhurst and Parkhurst's thresholds for considering two sign languages to be distinct. For more on classifying sign languages using the methods of Historical Linguistics, see Woodward's "Some Observations on Research Methodology in Lexicostatistical Studies of Sign Languages."

<sup>7</sup> Parks and Williams provide a fairly up-to-date list of sign languages of the region.

### The UNCRPD, Deaf Identities and Signed Languages

At the time of writing, most countries in the Caribbean had either signed or signed and ratified the UNCRPD. The UNCRPD makes a number of specific references to the responsibilities of state signatories with respect to Deaf communities, their languages and cultures. It is clear that not nearly enough has yet been done to address these responsibilities. Article 30, for example, contains the following clause: "Persons with disabilities shall be entitled, on an equal basis with others, to recognition and support of their specific cultural and linguistic identity, including sign languages and deaf culture." (Article 30, Section 4) Governments can only implement effective policies to recognise and support sign languages and Deaf cultures if there is a reasonable understanding of the culture of the Deaf communities and of the sign languages they use.

A persistent problem in many countries has been the ways in which Deaf communities are identified by public bodies. This can be seen in Trinidad and Tobago, where the largest organisation responsible for providing services to deaf and hard of hearing Trinbagonians is called the Trinidad and Tobago Association for the Hearing Impaired (TTAHI). The TTAHI changed its name in 2000 from the Trinidad and Tobago Association in Aid of the Deaf. In doing so, it (unwittingly) alienated many Deaf Trinbagonians who do not like to be called 'hearing impaired'. 'Hearing impaired' is not a term that most Deaf Trinbagonians use to describe or identify themselves. Instead, the English word they prefer is 'Deaf', which is viewed positively, as a marker of a shared cultural background and community membership.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, the term 'hearing impaired' fails to distinguish between Deaf community members and people who have lost their hearing, but do not sign. Conflating the two groups under the term 'hearing impaired' not only shows an insensitivity to the cultural values of the Deaf community, but denies altogether the existence of a Deaf linguistic and cultural minority group. This, in turn, has contributed to a strong sense among the Deaf community that the TTAHI is not acting in their interests, only enhanced by the fact that the board of the Association has, until very recently, been made up largely of hearing non-signers, with no Deaf representatives.

Issues of identity are complex, and we cannot assume that what is true of better-studied Deaf communities applies to deaf groups in the Caribbean.<sup>9</sup> Research is starting to reveal that there is more diversity in D/deaf communities and sign languages than had sometimes been presumed. For example, William Washabaugh, conducted substantial research on the deaf population of Providence Island. Because of a high incidence of genetically inherited deafness, the island has an unusually high proportion of deaf people. As a result, it is quite normal for hearing and deaf people to communicate using sign language. However, Washabaugh was surprised to find that there was no sense of shared membership of a Deaf community among the deaf people of Providence Island. He observes that "(t)he deaf, perhaps because of their small numbers and dispersed residences, are not interested in defining themselves as a deaf group complete with a deaf language. They want to become part of the hearing world" (145). This example demonstrates that it is important to keep an open mind about what kinds of D/deaf communities, cultures and languages might exist in different places around the world. As Leila Monaghan puts it: "[t]he nature of deaf or Deaf identity in a given

<sup>8</sup> Several community leaders prefer the use of the capital 'D' to recognise cultural deafness.

<sup>9</sup> As LeMaster and Monaghan observe: "How d/Deaf identity plays out in cultures outside of the United States, and even within microcultures within the United States, is only beginning to be investigated." (155)

community depends on the forms of community and language [. . .]. A deaf person in a small farming village [. . .] will have a very different concept of deafness than a graduate of Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C.” (20).

Languages and cultures are closely bound together and many of the policy issues affecting Deaf communities most directly concern their languages. The crucial role of sign languages to Deaf communities is repeatedly emphasised in the UNCRPD. Article 21 commits signatories to “[a]ccepting and facilitating the use of sign languages[... and r]ecognizing and promoting the use of sign languages.” (Article 21, Section e) Article 24 includes a commitment to “[f]acilitating the learning of sign language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the deaf community.” (Article 24, Section 3b) Reagan discusses at length the importance of language policy planning for sign languages, and argues that “[l]anguage policy for deaf people [...] does not yet reflect equality or social justice, and this colours language rights everywhere and for everyone.” (185)

Some progress has been made in recognising sign language in Trinidad and Tobago. The government recently supported the production of two editions of a dictionary of TTSL. The first edition was completed in 2007, with a second edition completed in 2010. This is a good example of the way in which research can help to address the needs of Deaf communities. Crucially, the research, especially for the second edition, was largely carried out by Deaf community members themselves.<sup>10</sup> Materials such as dictionaries are essential for facilitating and promoting sign languages. Because of the lack of any publicly available teaching or reference materials, hearing people interested in learning to sign in Trinidad and Tobago have usually ended up learning ASL or Signing Exact English, for which teaching materials are available. Even among hearing people involved in deaf education and sign language interpreting, knowledge of TTSL is generally low.<sup>11</sup> In the wider society, most Trinbagonians are still unaware of TTSL’s existence. A language is, of course, much more than a list of words, and much more work needs to be done in documenting and understanding the grammar. On the basis of this work, it will be possible to produce new teaching and learning materials, which in turn will facilitate the learning and promotion of the language.

The statements in the UNCRPD about the acceptance and recognition of sign languages raise other questions about language policy. Over the last three decades, Deaf activists have led campaigns in many countries for the official recognition of national sign languages.<sup>12</sup> These movements have much in common with campaigns for language rights in the Caribbean, which have generally focused on Creole languages. It is useful to highlight this connection because language policy and planning is an area in which many Caribbean researchers have been closely engaged for many years<sup>13</sup> and the lessons learnt from this work could assist in the development of better language policies relating to signed languages in the region.

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<sup>10</sup> Deaf project members have noted that the person responsible for video editing was not Deaf, nor a signer, and that, as a result, some of the clips cut in and out at inappropriate points. This supports the view that Deaf people themselves should be involved as much as possible in all aspects of research into their own languages and cultures.

<sup>11</sup> Parks and Parks report that the Deaf Trinbagonians they interacted with indicated that hearing people were not interested in learning TTSL (9). My own sense is that TTSL has, until recently, been a language used among Deaf people, and that Deaf people tend to switch to a more ASL- or English- influenced way of signing when interacting with hearing signers.

<sup>12</sup> For an overview, see Schermer.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Hubert Devonish’s influential book *Language and Liberation*.

In Jamaica, there has recently been much discussion about whether and how Jamaican Creole should be included in the Constitution (*Language and Liberation* 201). Celia Brown-Blake supports the inclusion of a clause in the Jamaican Constitution protecting people from “linguistic discrimination” alongside the existing protection against discrimination on the basis of “[r]ace, color, place of origin, political opinion and creed/religion” (39). She argues, however, that financial constraints and pragmatic concerns dictate that this need only extend to English and Jamaican Creole:

The administrative costs involved in the provision of services in languages other than English and Jamaican Creole are not likely to be justified given the number of speakers of such other languages, the consequential relatively negligible demand for services in such languages, and the extent of the state’s resources. (67)

Deaf Jamaicans constitute a small minority when compared to Jamaican Creole speakers, but is this sufficient grounds to exclude them from the linguistic rights available to all other Jamaicans? Clearly sign language linguists need to be engaged in these discussions.

In Trinidad and Tobago, linguist Ian Robertson prepared a Language and Language Education Policy for the Government in 2010. The Policy makes reference to the Deaf community and their language, and observes that “[a]t no time in the history of education in the country has there been sufficient information on deafness and Deaf Education for a policy position to be arrived at” (37). Despite this, over the course of seven decades of deaf education, many policy decisions have been made, and these decisions have had profound effects on the lives of individual Deaf people, and on the Deaf community at large.

Research has now begun to address this lack of information, and Ben Braithwaite, Kathy-Ann Drayton and Alicia Lamb provide an overview of the history of deaf education in Trinidad and Tobago since the opening of the first school for the deaf in Trinidad in 1943. It is clear that education policy has had a profound effect on language in the deaf community, and that despite several changes in educational philosophies efforts to date have been largely unsuccessful in providing deaf children with the same level of education as their hearing peers.

For much of the first three decades of deaf education in the country, sign language was banned in the classroom, as teachers focused on oralist methods, hoping to equip deaf pupils with lip-reading and speaking skills which would enable them to integrate into hearing society. Well-intentioned as this may have been, such policies were both unpopular with pupils, and unsuccessful in achieving these aims. The policy was also entirely unsuccessful at preventing children from signing. When classes were over, children would go back to the dormitories and sign to each other, creating their own original signing system as they did. It was out of this that TTSL was born. TTSL was one unintended consequence of the oralist policies of this time, but other results were both damaging and predictable. For example, Deaf adults who went to school at this time generally graduated with very few qualifications, low levels of literacy in English, and very limited prospects for work or further training. Veditz’s statement that “[e]nemies of the sign language [. . .] are enemies of the true welfare of the Deaf” (qtd. in translation in Padden and Humphries *Deaf in America* 35-36), certainly resonates strongly with the experiences of many Deaf Trinbagonians today.

The failed attempt to prevent deaf children from signing is rather reminiscent of language policies across the Caribbean which have attempted to keep Creole languages out of classrooms, and linguists in the Caribbean are particularly well-positioned to contribute towards better educational policies in deaf education. Indeed, this has already begun. In January 2011, the International Centre for Caribbean Language Research (ICCLR) organised an International Conference on Language Rights and Language Policy in the Creole-speaking Caribbean. Out of this came the Charter on Language Policy and Language Rights in the Creole-Speaking Caribbean. The Charter includes specific reference to policies regarding signed languages. Article 1, Section 3 makes clear that sign languages should be treated no differently from spoken languages: "This charter does not distinguish between the media a language may be communicated, namely, whether spoken, written or signed. This means that in addition to spoken languages this charter will address the language rights of the Deaf in relation to signed languages."

However, there is still much more work to be done to include sign languages. For example, the Addendum to the Charter entitled "Register of languages of the Creole-speaking Caribbean" does not mention any sign languages at all. Of course, including sign languages on such a register depends on more research into the linguistic situations of Deaf communities in the region.<sup>14</sup> In order to build an argument for official recognition of any language, it is often necessary to conduct research into the language situation and the ways in which users of the language are systematically disadvantaged.

Another important area which has received international attention is access to high quality health care services. Article 25 of the UNCRPD states that persons with disabilities have "the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health without discrimination on the basis of disability" (Article 25). Research has repeatedly shown inequalities between the levels of health in Deaf communities compared to wider populations. For example, Monaghan reports that in the United States, Deaf people are far more likely to be infected with HIV compared with the population at large (22). It seems that part of the problem is that health care professionals are often not aware of the linguistic needs of deaf patients. Judith Berry and Annette Stewart found that American health care professionals tended to rely on written English, unaware of the problems that this may cause for Deaf people, for whom English is a second language. David Reeves and Brian Kokoruwe found that more than half of the deaf patients they investigated preferred to communicate via a sign language interpreter, yet only 17% had one provided (100). Annie Steinberg et al. report that one doctor in a study in the United States gave the following response on a questionnaire: "The day that I have to hire an interpreter is the day I stop having deaf patients" (263).

Again, we are largely left to guess at the problems facing Deaf patients in the Caribbean. Initial research in Trinidad and Tobago shows that it is a major problem. Interviews with Deaf people have consistently indicated dissatisfaction with the levels of communication in medical settings, that some Deaf people avoid going to a doctor, even when they have health concerns, because of the frustration of communicating, and the difficulty in arranging for a sign language interpreter to be present. Preliminary results of a survey of health care professionals in the country indicate that many are also unsatisfied with the quality of care provided to Deaf patients. By investigating and

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<sup>14</sup> In addition, some of the wording might be adjusted to make it clearer that sign languages are included. For example, Article 15 states that "[n]ational legislatures must have as their official languages the territorial languages *spoken* [my emphasis] in the territory they represent". "Spoken" here might be changed to "used".

documenting the problems with the current situation, it should be possible to make a forceful case for changes in policy and practice. It is very difficult for appropriate policies to be developed in the absence of such research. Moreover, the practical measures that might be required to implement such changes, such as training new sign language interpreters or providing training to health care professionals, also require more research.

One clear need which emerges from the discussion so far is for more and better sign language interpreters. The responsibility to provide interpreters is explicitly mentioned in Article 9 of the UNCRPD. Signatories must "provide forms of live assistance and intermediaries, including guides, readers and professional sign language interpreters, to facilitate accessibility to buildings and other facilities open to the public" (Article 9, Section 2).

Over the past few decades, a critical shortage of skilled, trained, certified sign language interpreters has been the source of a recurring crisis for deaf children in the education system. There is no deaf special school at secondary level, and many deaf pupils are educated at one of a number of designated mainstream schools. In theory, these pupils are accompanied in mainstream classes by sign language interpreters. In practice, there are many problems. Frequently, one interpreter is expected to cover several deaf pupils at different levels, and in all subjects. Deaf pupils are frequently left without an interpreter at all, inevitably isolated and unable to follow.

It is clear that more interpreters need to be employed, but the problem runs deeper than simply insufficient financial support from the government. There is very little tradition of sign language interpreting as a profession in Trinidad and Tobago. Most interpretation has been carried out by friends or family members of Deaf people on a voluntary basis. Training has also generally been informal, with interpreters learning to sign by spending time with Deaf people, and learning to interpret by doing it. This has led to some problems, such as courts refusing to accept the testimony of Deaf people because their interpreter was unable to produce any formal certification. In one instance, reported in the *Trinidad and Tobago Newsday*, a Deaf defendant's plea in a murder trial was mistakenly entered as guilty, rather than innocent (Boodan). In that case, it appears that the problem had to do with the type of training the interpreter had received: she was using an English-based signing system and failed to make the crucial distinction between the senses of 'murder' and 'kill.' It was only as a result of an intervention by another interpreter who happened to be present that the mistake was noticed, the plea changed, and a replacement interpreter sought.

Interpreters themselves have been anxious for more training opportunities, and also for a proper system of assessment and certification. Attempts have been made to address this problem: training and certification exercises were run by experts from the University of Tennessee between 2010 and 2011, and an undergraduate Diploma in Caribbean Sign Language was offered for the first time in Trinidad and Tobago at The University of the West Indies in 2010. Proper training, assessment and certification depend on previous research into the language situation in which the interpreters will be operating. It is clear that the linguistic situation of the Deaf community in Trinidad and Tobago is complicated. As a result of changing educational philosophies (from strict oralism in the 1950s and '60s to Total Communication from the 1970s, and a move towards mainstreaming in the 1980s) and a variety of outside influences (including BSL in the 1940s and ASL since the 1970s), there are significant differences in the ways in which older and younger people sign. Moreover, there seem to be regional differences in signing, especially between signers in the North and South of Trinidad. As

has been observed in other countries (see for example Quinn), different deaf schools are also associated with linguistic differences.

Professional interpreters need to understand and deal with this kind of variation, and it must therefore form part of their training and assessment. In order for this to happen, much research must be carried out to understand the nature and dimensions of variation. As in any language community, native users of the language tend to already have a good (more or less implicit) understanding of these things, which is why it is crucial that they are involved in that research. It is also essential that Deaf people themselves are crucially involved in the teaching and assessment of interpreters.

The shortage of interpreters creates other problems. As Norine Berenz observes of the Brazilian situation, the success of activism and advocacy efforts from within Deaf communities depends to a considerable extent on the quality of sign language interpreters (179). Beyond that, skilled, certified, professional interpreters can play a key role in providing access to services and information, to justice and democracy and to many of the basic human rights which members of Deaf communities are too often denied.<sup>15</sup> These people must have training which is both linguistically and culturally specific. Interpreting involves sensitive negotiation not just of linguistic, but also cultural differences (Mindess). Achieving culturally and linguistically specific training and accreditation programmes for sign language interpreters in the Caribbean will take a long-term commitment to detailed research.

### **An Uncertain Future**

The human rights issues described above call for urgent action. In addition to these concerns, there is great uncertainty about the future of Deaf communities around the world. It is now quite well known that the world's cultural and linguistic diversity is in immediate danger of drastic reduction. The more conservative estimates suggest that 50 percent of the roughly 7,000 languages in the world may disappear by the end of this century (UNESCO). Only very recently have linguists begun to consider the extent to which signed languages also face endangerment. It appears that in a number of respects signed languages are especially vulnerable: signed languages, especially those used in village communities, tend to have very small numbers of users, and are not written (Nonaka). Moreover, Johnston has discussed various demographic, social, technological and educational factors which raise immediate questions about the futures of Deaf communities, and the futures of their languages and cultures. Many of these factors are pertinent to the Deaf community in Trinidad and Tobago and those across the Caribbean. Graham Turner has argued that the "collective threat to the viability of heritage sign languages matters in a different way than the endangerment of individual languages upon which much of the related literature focuses." (410-411)

In Trinidad and Tobago, the largest cause of congenital deafness historically has been Maternal Rubella Syndrome. Rubella outbreaks in the past, including particularly widespread epidemics in 1960/1 and 1983/4 have been shown to be correlated with large peaks in births of deaf babies.<sup>16</sup> As a result, there are currently many deaf adults aged around fifty and thirty. Since the 1990s Rubella

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<sup>15</sup> As Cokely points out, there are also problems associated with moving from a system in which most interpreters have some personal connection to the Deaf community, to one in which they may be outsiders who entered interpreting as a career choice.

<sup>16</sup> See Karmody "Subclinical maternal rubella and congenital deafness" and Karmody "Asymptomatic Maternal Rubella and Congenital Deafness" for more discussion of the link between the 1960/61 rubella epidemic and congenital deafness.

has been eradicated from the country as a result of a concerted vaccination programme (Irons et al.). The much lower number of deaf babies being born now means that the Deaf community will almost certainly shrink dramatically in the next few decades.

As a direct consequence of the shrinking number of deaf children, schools for the deaf which not long ago were oversubscribed, now have very few pupils and face uncertain futures. This is particularly significant because residential schools for deaf children like the Cascade School for the Deaf (CSD) in Trinidad, often play crucial roles in Deaf communities. It was in the dormitories of CSD, in the 1950s and '60s, that deaf children first began to create a unique signed language of their own, TTSL.<sup>17</sup> As successive cohorts of children passed through the school, the emerging language developed and was transmitted from older to younger children. Schools like CSD tend to play an especially important role in the transmission of signed languages because deaf children overwhelmingly tend to have hearing parents, who are very rarely fluent signers (Schein and Delk). Deaf children therefore often learn to sign in the first instance not from their parents, but from other children at school. If residential schools close, it is not clear how or if Deaf language and culture will continue to be passed on the successive generations of deaf children.

A move towards mainstreaming of deaf children in Trinidad and Tobago has further reduced the influence of special deaf schools like CSD, and the amount of contact deaf children are likely to have with other signers. Sign language interpreters working in mainstream secondary schools report that the children for whom they are interpreting often have quite limited signing skills. This is not surprising, given that many of the children have had very little contact with fluent signers. Inevitably, a child who finds herself as perhaps the only deaf pupil in a mainstream school is far less likely to develop into a fluent signer with a strong sense of Deaf culture and membership of a Deaf community, than one who grows up around other Deaf people.

On top of this, in recent years, several deaf children have received cochlear implant operations in Trinidad and Tobago. These operations have usually been followed by exclusively speech-based 'rehabilitation.' The introduction of cochlear implants does not have to mean the disappearance of sign languages and Deaf culture. Indeed, research by S. Hassanzadeh has shown that exposure to a sign language prior to cochlear implantation is correlated with faster speech development afterwards. As Carol Padden and Tom Humphries put it:

Surely educational programmes can be developed that teach implanted children both speech and sign language. Surely the talents of doctors and scientists could be directed toward developing social programs that present speech and sign simultaneously to deaf children so that the benefits of bilingual acquisition in two modalities can be passed on to each new generation of deaf children. Instead the trend is a dangerously regressive one, threatening to return to the oralist project of the nineteenth century. (*Inside Deaf Culture* 170)

There is no doubt that as technologies such as cochlear implants become more common and more widely used, they are bound to have an effect on Deaf communities around the world, though it remains to be seen exactly how.

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<sup>17</sup> The emergence of TTSL in Trinidad appears to be very similar to the way in which Nicaraguan Sign Language emerged out of the first deaf school in Managua, as described by Kegl, Senghas and Coppola.

One other significant factor affecting the Deaf community in Trinidad and Tobago is the increased influence of American Sign Language (ASL). ASL was first introduced to CSD in the 1970s, when several teachers from the school went to study at Gallaudet University, and an American Deaf professor from Gallaudet, Frances Parsons, was invited to teach a sign language class at the school. Since that time, the influence of ASL has continued to grow: the deaf schools have used teaching materials from the US, several religious missionary groups have come into the country bringing ASL with them, several Deaf people have travelled to the US to study, and the advent of the internet has meant that many Deaf Trinbagonians now have access to the large amount ASL material online. The result of contact with ASL can be easily seen by comparing signers over 50 and those under 30. While the older signers typically use many signs which are not from ASL, younger signers are much more likely to sign in a way that is largely intelligible to a native ASL signer. Again, it is difficult to predict what effect this will have in the future. One possibility is that the general trend will continue, and in the future all signers in Trinidad and Tobago will use a (distinctively Trinbagonian) variety of ASL. This is not inevitable. There is a movement, led by the Deaf Empowerment Organisation of Trinidad and Tobago (DEOTT) to document and revive the older ways of signing. Already video recordings of older signers have collected around 1,000 non-ASL signs,<sup>18</sup> and these are being taught to both Deaf and hearing students in workshops run by DEOTT. Clearly, for at least some Deaf Trinbagonians, it is important to hold on to and revitalise this linguistic heritage. In my experience, most Deaf Trinbagonians view TTSL very positively, although I have occasionally heard negative attitudes expressed towards it by hearing people connected to the Deaf community who see ASL, as an international language, as more important to the future of Deaf Trinbagonians.<sup>19</sup>

The result of all of this is a great deal of uncertainty about the future of the Deaf community in Trinidad and Tobago. Demographic factors, language contact, educational policies and new technologies create a situation in which change is inevitable, but the outcomes of change are very difficult to predict. We must take seriously the possibility that one outcome may be the loss of much of the older linguistic and cultural traditions of the community.

Much of what I have said about the Deaf community in Trinidad and Tobago almost certainly applies, *mutis mutandis*, to other Deaf communities in the Caribbean. Rubella outbreaks and vaccination programmes affected the whole region (Irons et al.). The spread of ASL around the world as a global language is raising similar questions in many Deaf communities, especially in smaller communities and those in developing countries, in the Caribbean and beyond (Monaghan). Indeed, ASL is not the only international sign language used in the Caribbean: Parks and Williams report that the Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT) is used in Suriname, Aruba and Curacao, and that French Sign Language (LSF) is used in French Guiana, Guadeloupe, and Martinique (3). British Sign Language (BSL) was used at one time in Trinidad, and may be used elsewhere. Language change and language death can happen very quickly, and indigenous Caribbean sign languages are already disappearing. As Cumberbatch reports, in Jamaica, one indigenous sign language, Konchri Sain, has already suffered a considerable reduction in the numbers of signers as a result of language contact ("Sociolinguistic sketch of Konchri Sain").

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<sup>18</sup> I use the phrase "non-ASL" because some of the signs used by older signers have clearly come from British Sign Language (BSL), presumably as a result of contact in the early years of deaf education in the country.

<sup>19</sup> The parallels with attitudes found in other language situations in the Caribbean where a Creole language co-exists with an internationally prestigious official language will be obvious to anyone with a passing familiarity with the literature on language in the Caribbean.

In his discussion of the future of the Australian Deaf community, Johnston concludes that immediate and concerted research efforts are not just a priority, but a responsibility: “[r]efusing to take seriously the task of recording a corpus of Auslan, the sign language of the Australian Deaf community for ongoing and future research would display a profound indifference toward our cultural heritage, and a lack of appreciation of the most basic principles of scientific research” (374). The situation in the Caribbean is, if anything, graver still. Research on Auslan has at least been going since the 1980s. In the Caribbean, there is a very real possibility that indigenous Deaf languages and cultures may disappear without ever having been documented. As Devonish observes, the Caribbean has already seen a large-scale elimination/slaughter of indigenous languages, many of which, like Nepuyo and Yao “left behind [. . .] just a language name and a word list” (“Language Heritage” 3). Indigenous Caribbean sign languages may disappear without leaving behind even that much.

### **Ethical questions and methodology**

I have argued that more research on the languages and cultures of Deaf communities in the Caribbean is essential to the development of better policies and that this research is urgent in view of both the many human rights issues and the great uncertainty over the futures of Deaf communities in the region. It is important now to consider how this research should be carried out, and especially the relationship between researchers and the subjects of their research.

In December 2012, the Sign Language Linguistics Society released an ‘Ethics Statement for Sign Language Research.’ The purpose of this statement was to supplement existing guidelines on ethical research with further advice related specifically to research on Deaf communities and their languages and cultures. The need for special ethical considerations in work on Deaf communities comes partly from the systematic inequalities that these communities have faced:

Sign language users and communities have been traditionally marginalized and researchers must always be aware that this might result in power inequalities with respect to sign language consultants. (1)

Not least because of the chronic failure of education systems to provide Deaf students with equal access to higher education, it is common for university-based research on Deaf communities to be conducted by hearing researchers who may not themselves be members of the communities they are studying. However good such researchers may feel their intentions are, situations in which there is perceived and/or actual exploitation are frequent enough for Susan Fischer to warn that “some deaf people use the term ‘linguist’ as a pejorative, based on the attitudes of linguists they’ve met” (“Sign Language Field Methods” fn41). Anthropologists, cultural theorists and others need only to look at the histories of their own fields to know that they are not immune to similar accusations.

The way in which research is conceived and conducted can be inherently objectifying and disempowering for the Deaf communities and other groups and individuals being studied. Young and Hunt argue that “d/Deaf people have [. . .] been consistently treated as outsiders in research through their construction as the subjects of research – they are the sample, they provide the data. Research is done ‘on’ them, or ‘for’ them, but rarely ‘with’ them, or from and by ‘us’” (12). This has

direct consequences for the success of any research which hopes to have a positive impact on public policy, since:

[...] without insider status, d/Deaf people have less opportunity to set the agenda for what should be researched in the first place and how research should be carried out. There are few opportunities for d/Deaf people's experiences to be the interpretative framework through which to understand the data produced and their implications. Consequently the power of research, particularly in the sphere of social research, to influence policy and practice remains within the control of those who are not d/Deaf. (12)

In response to concerns about the ethics of conducting research on human individuals and communities, there have been efforts within Linguistics and related fields to achieve what Deborah Cameron et al. call "empowering research," characterised by the following statements:

- (i) Persons are not objects and should not be treated as objects
- (ii) Subjects have their own agendas and research should try to address them
- (iii) If knowledge is worth having, it is worth sharing. (24)

The potential of research to empower can be seen in early work on sign language in Trinidad and Tobago. The Deaf members of a government-funded research project which produced the first dictionaries of TTSL, went on to found DEOTT in 2010. DEOTT is the first advocacy group in the country whose board is comprised entirely of Deaf Trinbagonians. Their focus on research has remained, and members of DEOTT have been continuing to research and document TTSL as used by older members of their community.

This example also demonstrates that such research need not take place within a university. Still, universities are centres of expertise with resources which could be deployed to support impactful sign language research. It is unfortunately the case in Trinidad and Tobago that many Deaf people who would like to attend university lack the qualifications to be admitted.<sup>20</sup> Whilst being Deaf should not, in my view, be a prerequisite to conducting research on and with Deaf communities, I agree with the comment from Raychelle Harris, Heidi Holmes and Donna Mertens that, at a minimum, "[i]f a researcher is hearing, then a relationship needs to be developed in which the D/deaf and hearing members of a research team collaborate in a meaningful way" (127). This is likely to be very difficult if the hearing researcher is not reasonably fluent in a sign language used by Deaf colleagues, so signing ability is essential.

Meaningful collaboration may include the researcher becoming an advocate for the Deaf community, though, as Fischer notes, "only if the community wants it" (5). For a researcher who is new to a Deaf community, and who has limited connections to that community, choosing to speak out on their behalf might rightly be perceived as arrogant and patronizing. Other kinds of collaboration might include working as a sign language interpreter to support Deaf leaders who wish to advocate for their own community, or helping to organise training and educational opportunities for Deaf collaborators. Truly empowering research with and by Deaf communities should include removing the barriers that currently prevent Deaf people in the Caribbean from accessing higher education.

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<sup>20</sup> In particular, few Deaf Trinbagonians currently have the English CXC pass that is required for most further study.

Sharing information that comes out of research is also crucial, though not straightforward. Written academic English, the principal medium for disseminating the results of research, is not generally the most effective means of communicating the results of research to Deaf communities. It is essential to find solutions to this, since it is only when research is passed on to those communities that it can become transformative. Discussing the effect of the early academic research into ASL, Padden and Humphries make the following observation:

The recognition of sign language, not by linguists or scholars, but by Deaf people themselves, was a pivotal moment. While Deaf people have been aware that their sign language met their needs and provided them with an aesthetic pleasure that only languages can provide, the realization that sign languages were equal to yet uniquely interesting among human languages brought to Deaf people a sense of validation and pride. To possess a language that is not quite like other languages, yet equal to them, is a powerful realization for a group of people who have long felt their language disrespected and besieged by others' attempts to eliminate it'.  
(*Inside Deaf Culture* 157)

Finally, as Zeshan points out, there are special ethical concerns relating to research on so-called village sign languages. These are languages which have developed in relatively isolated places in which, as a result usually of genetically inherited deafness, there is an unusually high proportion of deaf people. The situations in such cases tend to be very different in important ways from those of national Deaf communities like the one in Trinidad and Tobago.<sup>21</sup> In village sign language situations, it is normal for both deaf and hearing members of the community to sign, and deafness and sign languages tend not to be stigmatized.<sup>22</sup> As Zeshan notes "it is not clear what a sign language linguist can or should be contributing to such a community" (273). For example, in 'deaf villages', where hearing and deaf people all sign, the need for interpreters is much less clear than in national Deaf communities. Nonetheless, there may be situations when deaf villagers find themselves outside the village and in need of an interpreter, such as the instance described by Lois Dungan where a monolingual Konchri Sain user found himself in court, and interpreting was done by a Deaf bilingual signer who interpreted from Konchri Sain into ASL, and a hearing interpreter who interpreted from ASL into spoken English (45).

## Conclusion

Deaf people in the Caribbean face systematic inequalities. Many of these inequalities have their roots in the lack of understanding of the special linguistic and cultural traditions of Caribbean Deaf communities. That lack of understanding comes from legislators, members of the public and academics. Research is not merely of great academic interest, it is an urgent social imperative, a prerequisite to the development of better policies and practices, and a route towards greater empowerment.

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<sup>21</sup> For more comparisons between different types of signed languages, see Meir et al..

<sup>22</sup> See for example the description of hearing and deaf signers in St Elizabeth, Jamaica in Dolman and Groce's description of signing on Martha's Vineyard.

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