"Construction in Eritrean Sign Language: an Anthropological Linguistic Perspective" Conference paper from TISLR-9, Florianopolis, Brazil; Poster Session

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1. Introduction:

Last year, Eritreans began to develop a new lexicon for the official sign language of Eritrea. The previous lexicon showed influences from Swedish, Finnish, and Sudanese Sign Languages. In the history of Deaf Education in Eritrea, the missionary from Swedish established the school for the Deaf in Keren, 1955. As a result, Swedish and Finnish Sign Language (SwSL & FSL) were introduced to the sign language of Eritreans. There is no record of indigenous signs prior to the arrival of missionaries. The current local lexicon development project will attempt to erase this historical linkage to Scandinavian sign languages and those of the neighboring countries, such as Sudan. The Eritrean National Association of the Deaf (Eri-NAD) is presently in the process of creating a dictionary of Eritrean Sign Language (EriSL). This paper covers information on imported sign variation, the lexicon of the missionalized EriSL, and will concentrate on the current standardization project and how it affects community identity in Eritrea. This is an ongoing research project.

2. Fieldwork and Research Design

Eritrea is the youngest country in Africa, gaining its independence in 1991, from Ethiopia. The three different main sites of research are: Asmara, the capital city of Eritrea; Keren, the large community of Deaf who graduated from the residential school for the Deaf; and Mendefera, a growing community of the Deaf Eritreans. Each site rents an office space where a branch of Eri-NAD is established.

For the research of this community, I gathered data in the course of a two-month feasibility study. Selected people involved with the dictionary-developments gave interviews. Immersed

experience was gained from participation observation in their Sign Language Reseachers' (SLR) meetings. Video footage recording of several meetings show how the collaborators deliberate to create new signs. On videotapes, several elicited signs signified the problematic confusion with limited expression of a lexicon with the same sign.

The investigation is based on the people who made major contributions in the development of EriSL Dictionary, such as the *collaborators*, who are seven selected local researchers in SLR. They are volunteers; and sometimes they travel at their own expense. The group consists mostly of Deaf people, including an interpreter and a local linguist.

There are two societal identities of Deaf people: City-people and villagers. A status hierarchy is already built in within those categories. For research purposes, it is more convenient to reach a city-person, rather than a villager who lives remotely. There are an estimated 15,000 Deaf Eritreans and approximately 2,000 members of Eri-NAD, of which 300 are employed in Asmara. The social status predetermines the validity of their contribution to this linguistic development project. Most educated Deaf Eritreans are fluent in the language of Tigrinya, the major spoken and written language of Eritrea. They will put more effort to participate in the EriSL development.

The study is formatted by the Lucas and Valli (1992) systematic research design on signed language-contact study with two or more sign languages. Their design has five foci as research points. The first, third and fourth focus will be used here. The first one is the linguistic factors that are the result of language contact. Given the historical influence, the contact affects the growing variation in the EriSL. That leads to the third focus that will cover sociolinguistic factors. The social status and identity of each individual affects how the SL is distributed throughout the country. The fourth focus is characteristics and attitudes toward language interference. The standardization is a project displays the attitudes and aspiration the Deaf organization, and the desire of the group to spread their language ideology. Inevitably, the construction of a language depends on the distribution of authority in the community, which, in turn, affects the progress of EriSL language development.

3. Questions:

1. What kind of variation is found there? 2. Who uses the distinct variations? 3. How is variation distributed throughout in Eritrea? 4. When and what kind of situation does the variation arise? 5. What do variations mean in local contexts? The final question will be left to ponder and investigate further in my upcoming paper.

3.1. Outcomes of language contact

Variation of SL:

The outcome of the missionalized sign language of Eri-SL has multiple influences from SwSL, FSL, and Sudanese SL (generally based on American Sign Language). There are additional immigrated sign languages, but these three are major influences. The given elicited signs show, in Fig. 1 and 2, resemblance to the signs found in SwSL and FSL.

Figure 1. WHAT / *ENTAY*

Figure 2. WHO / *MEN*

The sign in Fig. 1 reads as WHAT / *ENTAYI*[1] in EriSL. It moves clockwise whereas FSL motions counterclockwise. This sign also signifies WHERE / *ABEY*, which matches the Swedish sign for "where". Fig. 2 indicates the sign WHO / *MEN*, derived from both FSL and SwSL.

Figure 3. SICK / *HAMIMU*

Figure 4. DIRTY / *RESAH*

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[1] Translated in Tigrinya in an italicized form

The signs may be found in other sign languages other than those mentioned already and known to be influential contact languages. For examples, both Fig. 3 and Fig. 4 were imported from FSL and SwSL but they are also found in Irish Sign Language (LeMaster). Fig. 4 identifies as DIRTY / RESAH, connecting both palms while RH moves clockwise.

4. *Fidel* (Letter/Fingerspelling system)

The phonology in the fingerspellings of EriSL follows two criteria, which form the system for each *Halehame*, an order of constants in the *fidel*. The *fidel* is associated with Tigrinya phonemic in a consonant-vowel syllabic system that lists 291 characters. Stokoe, et al, laid out the three fundamentals of signs: hand configuration, place of articulation and movement (1976). The *fidel* maintain the same phonological rules for each letter according to its vowel or by itself. The two criteria are mainly focused, which the first is 30 handshapes that represents consonants. Second, the seven movements are distinctive for each sound (vowel). For example, the first consonant is H (Fig. 5) and follows its sounds in order: *Ha, Hu, Hee, Hah*, *Hie, H*, and *Hoe*. In the viewer's point-of-view, the movements will fingerspell each mark respectively: non-movement, moves to the right (speaker's left), move in a letter "J" or left, moves downward, circles it, shakes it, and twist the palm orientation from out to in—moves upward.

Figure 5. The handshape of the first consonant *"Ha"* on the *fidel*

Deaf Eritreans who graduate from institutions are acquainted with basic spoken English vocabulary and International fingerspelling system. They spell the phonetics in Tigrinya, and if another person does not understand, they will repeat the word as it is spelled in English but with Tigrinya phonetics. If that fails, they will use the International fingerspelling system.

Figure 6. THANK / *YEKENYELEY*   Figure 7. TEA / *SHAHI*

The variations are found in the fingerspelling systems (discussed in detail below), as seen in both Fig. 6 and 7 using the International fingerspelling "T" when applying the spoken English instead of Tigrinya. Nakamura (2006) disseminated the loanword in JSL fingerspelling and the initialized phoneme (first letter of the word) on the new lexicons from English, developed by the Deaf groups. This morphemic breakdown of both loanwords in Fig. 6 and 7 show its initialized phoneme differing from the native Tigrinya. The translation of THANK initializes with "YE-" whereas that handshape is formed distinctly from "T". The same finding is repeated in the Fig. 7, while TEA is not signed with the handshape for "SHA-" from EriSL. The variation of multilayered language systems take place in these lexicons: the English Spoken word and International Fingerspelling of "T" are embedded in these two lexicons.

4.1. Sociolinguistic factors

Distribution of SL:

The schools are the main source of language development for Deaf Eritrean children. Nevertheless, not every Deaf child gets the opportunity to enroll in the Deaf institutions, depending on the waiting list and the student population. The language does not pause after graduation at 6th grade level. Croneberg's "Linguistic Community" (1965: 310) discussed the cultural and social aspects in the Deaf community as the foundation of the social and linguistic network. The community of a Deaf person will continue to encounter the latest creation of signs. The second category, the villagers, having less socialization, will maintain their initial signs. However, that will not remain the case if they receive visitors from the city or they visit in the city and interact with Deaf citypeople. The

villagers will absorb the evolved signs from the city people. The speed of signing also differs between those two groups. Given the bustle of citylife, the tendency of signing speed is faster among the citypeople than the villagers. The social status tends to be perceived higher for those who speak well. In order to avoid confusion of signs, the good lip-readers will mouth their native language.

4.2. Characteristics and attitudes toward language interference

Authority:

A glimpse of Deaf community structure shows the division in three different floors, which lie under organization, institutions, and government. The Deaf people themselves run the organization provide the social service. The Evangelical Church, with funding from Swedish missions, moderates the Deaf institutions. Last, the governmental section, the Ministry of Education in Special Needs, evaluates the educational needs. This structure designed the pathway of language interference from the foreign missionary funding. It is prevalent that resources from Northern America and Europe assisted the establishment of schools for Deaf across Africa (Zeshan 2002, Schmaling 2001, Kiyaga and Moores 2003). The Deaf Education originally mobilizes the language and the core of the system that feeds the needs of Education is the floor of Church. The institutions are the starting points of language acquisition whereas the EriNAD is centralizing the space as the point to spread the new lexicons.

5. Language Ideology as the Result

EriSL has altered by several language interferences, which caused a rapid transition in its evolvement. The instability of lexicon poses a burden from absorbing interference, creating variations. This results in an obligation to create standardization when there is none available. Hitherto, their aim is to reinforce their language ideology; their approach pushes the community to participate and mobilize this new lexicon project.

The objective of the language standardization is not only to revive the indigenous signs but also to decrease any extreme variations. The language ideology is a method of Deaf empowerment within their country. In the end, EriSL is under construction of "demissionalization" where they can return to the point of origin before the foreign signs were introduced to Eritreans. In this progressive linguistic project, I anticipate similar phenomena from the controversial issue arose in The Netherlands as Schermer (2003) stated but inevitably, the new lexicon will evoke a mixture of reactions from the entire Deaf community in Eritrea.

In this discussion, so far, the contributions to the construction of this SL are found in the missionalized signs and its varied use of fingerspelling. The social network and linguistic project evolves through the distribution of language, authority, and language ideology. The follow-up to this research will concentrate on language planning and purism. This study will continue to document this ongoing linguistic phenomenon.

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