

Basics of the South Sudanese Deaf Community and the Sign Language

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TO DATE, there has not been any research conducted on the South Sudanese Deaf community and South Sudanese Sign Language (SSSL). This article presents an introductory note about both with information gained from personal observations of the authors and from online resources. It provides an insight for furthering extensive research on the newest nation's sign language and the Deaf community.

The South Sudanese Deaf Community

South Sudan is an East Central African nation (see figure 1) that seceded from North Sudan in 2011. According to the *World Population Review*, the population size of South Sudan is about 11.19 million. South Sudan is a newly established nation, and Christianity is the largest religion. There are about sixty-two ethnic groups. The official language of South Sudan is English.

As per the database on www.peoplegroups.org, the Deaf South Sudanese population totals about 215,000, with the majority living in the rural area. Juba is the capital city, where there are a relatively greater number of Deaf people than in other cities.

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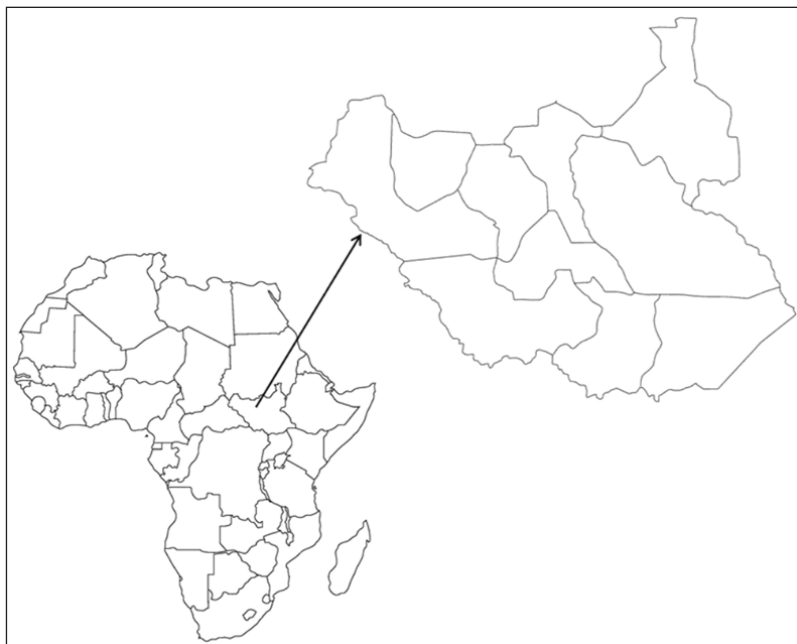


FIGURE 1. Map of South Sudan.

Data about the Deaf community in South Sudan is mostly available within the “disability” category. According to the Coalition of Organization of Persons with Disabilities (2016), there are two Deaf associations in South Sudan: the Equatoria States Association of the Deaf and Dumb (ESADD) and the South Sudan National Association of the Deaf. The report mentions that the highest level of education attained by its members is a secondary school education. Few Deaf people are university graduates with the opportunity they gained from abroad, such as in Kenya, Uganda, and North Sudan, before independence. Those who got access to education secured professional jobs at government offices and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). However, most of the Deaf people in the capital are engaged in physical labor, trade, and other private businesses, such as car washing and hair braiding.

Currently, the majority of South Sudanese Sign Language (SSSL) signers reside in the capital Juba, though their exact numbers are not known. One of the social gathering places is at the lone Deaf church

in the capital. The other meeting places for the Deaf community are in cafés along the shore of the White Nile.

SSSL Signers

Like most African sign languages, SSSL is an emerging sign language that is named after the formation of South Sudan in 2011. This probably labels it as the world's youngest sign language. Before 2011, it was called Sudanese Sign Language. The SSSL signers in Juba have frequent language contact with Kenyan and Ugandan signers. For cross-cultural communication, they also use American Sign Language (ASL). ASL fingerspelling is used to teach and learn SSSL. This is reflected in the production of the national SSSL dictionary, published in 2016. Names of the months and days of the week show variations. Signers have said that some signs are from Kenya, some are from Uganda, and some others are from North Sudan. In fact, there are also indigenous signs observed in daily communications. More detailed analysis needs to be done to identify other areas of variations.

As can be seen in the figures, the names of months and days of the week are entirely different in the two dictionaries. Examples are in figures 2 and 3, compared with their corresponding figures 4 and 5. Similarly, figures 6 and 7 are entirely different from their corresponding

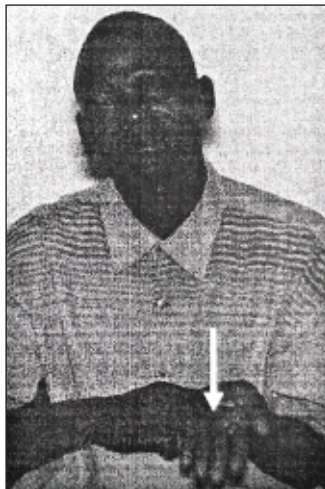


FIGURE 2. MONDAY (ESAD, 2010).



FIGURE 3. TUESDAY (ESAD, 2010).



FIGURE 4. MONDAY (Light for the World, 2016).



FIGURE 5. TUESDAY (Light for the World, 2016).

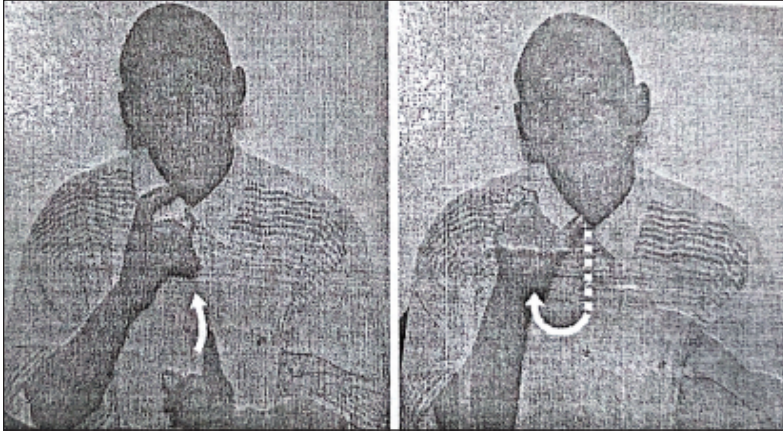


FIGURE 6. JANUARY (ESAD, 2010).

figures 8 and 9. Signers use them interchangeably, where the choice of the signs might be dependent on the sociopolitical and linguistic factors that exist in the entire nation. Sociopolitically, South Sudan is a diverse community that has frequent local and foreign movements. As a recently founded nation, several contact phenomena are observed with the local and neighboring communities. Linguistically, most community members have literacy skills in English, followed by proficiency in their local languages such as Nuer, Dinka, Shilluk, Acholi, Murle, and Juba Arabic.



FIGURE 7. FEBRUARY (ESAD, 2010).



FIGURE 8. JANUARY (Light for the World, 2016).

Currently, SSSL is mostly visible in religious places, conferences, and occasionally in the media through sign language interpretation. There has not been any record of the use of sign language interpretation at schools.

Deaf Education in South Sudan

According to Global Partnership for Education, in 2016, there were about 8,000 primary and 120 secondary school buildings, which are mostly located in the major towns of South Sudan.

As per Educate the Child, the official age for entry into primary school is six years. Only 6 percent of school-age children complete



FIGURE 9. FEBRUARY (Light for the World, 2016).

primary school. There are no records of Deaf schools in South Sudan. However, there is the Rajaf School for the Deaf and Blind. There are about five sign language interpreters in the whole of South Sudan, who gained their sign-language skills through immersion in the Deaf community. None has any training in interpretation.

Sign Language Resources

Prior to becoming an independent state, ESAD compiled a list of South Sudanese signs in 2010. This dictionary has 220 signs. The signs are thematically grouped in eight categories. The dictionary uses photo images with directional arrows to present the signs.

In the history of South Sudan, the first sign-language dictionary (see figure 10), initiated by Light for the World,¹ has a lexicon of 200 signs divided into four themes: Cities and Place Names, Family, Food and Drink, and Education. Additionally, it includes numbers, letters, and arithmetic signs. All the signs are photographed.

The third dictionary, which is currently underway, is planned to be completed by December 2020. It has more than five hundred signs,

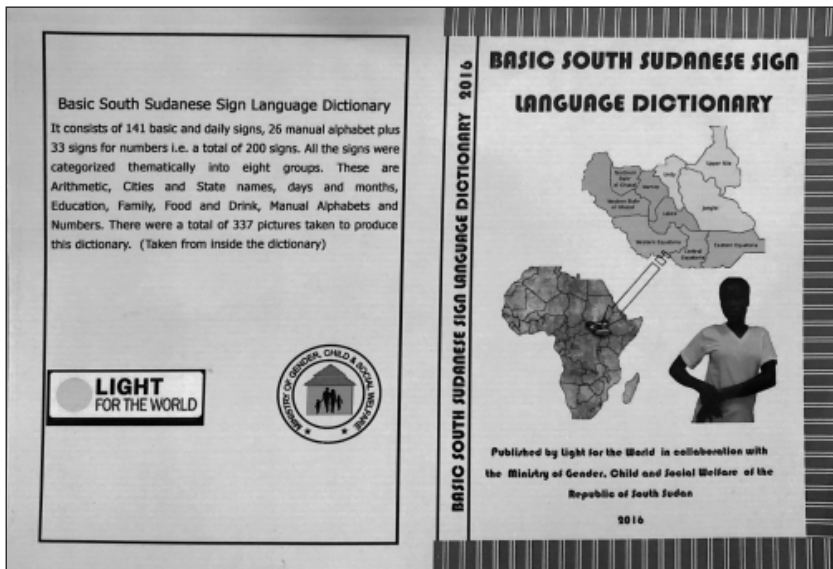


FIGURE 10. SSSL Dictionary (Light for the World, 2016).

grouped in twenty-one thematic categories. This dictionary was also initiated by Light for the World International.

All three sign language dictionaries are for general use, and no other resources are available in the country.

Note

1. An international NGO headquartered in Austria, Vienna.

References

- Equatoria State Association of the Deaf and Dumb (ESAD). 2010. *Sudanese Sign Language Dictionary*. Juba, South Sudan: Author.
- Light for the World. 2016. *Basic South Sudanese Sign Language Dictionary*. Juba, South Sudan: Author.

Online Resources

- <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/south-sudan-population/>
<https://www.peoplegroup.org>
<https://educateachild.org/our-partners-projects/country/south-sudan>