

The 30th West African Languages Congress (WALC2017)
organized by the West African Linguistic Society (WALS/SLAO)
August 1, 2017, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

[Plenary 1]
The role of sign language and research
for the integration and development
of West Africa:
Cases in English-speaking and French-
speaking Africa

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KAMEI Nobutaka (Japan) 

- ▶ Cultural anthropologist / linguistic anthropologist
- ▶ Doing fieldwork in West and Central Africa since 1996
- ▶ Doctoral thesis: hunter-gatherer children in the tropical rain forest of Cameroon
- ▶ Research topics: minorities in African societies (hunter-gatherers; children without school education; people with disabilities; Deaf communities...)
- ▶ Certified Japanese Sign Language interpreter
- ▶ Husband of the Deaf partner

Purpose of the presentation

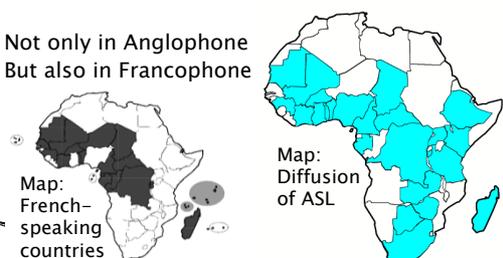
- ▶ This presentation shows the general situations of sign languages in West Africa and the role of sign language research based on my long-term fieldwork in nine countries (in Senegal, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon and Gabon) since 1997.

- ▶ In the first part, I show the outline of the distribution and the history of sign languages in West Africa.
- ▶ In the second part, I show the on-going research activities on sign language and Deaf communities with focusing on the examples of collaborative research in French-speaking areas.

- ▶ In the third part, I mention the importance of the research on the local sign language with the Deaf community.
- ▶ As a conclusion, I present the role of sign language research for the integration and the development of Deaf communities in West Africa and future research issues.

Backgrounds

- ▶ In Africa, it is said that American Sign Language (ASL) is widely diffused.
- ▶ Not only in Anglophone
- ▶ But also in Francophone



Map: French-speaking countries

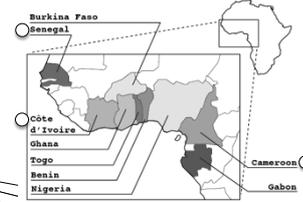
Map: Diffusion of ASL

Questions

- ▶ [In part 1] What were the historical backgrounds of the diffusion of ASL in West Africa? What kind of sign languages are used today in these areas?
- ▶ [In part 2] What research activities are conducted today especially in French-speaking West Africa?
- ▶ [In part 3] How can we develop sign language researches in West Africa?

Methods

- ▶ 1997–2017
- ▶ Fieldwork in nine countries in Africa
- ▶ Participant observation and interviews in Deaf communities with using their local sign languages



What were the historical backgrounds of the diffusion of ASL in West Africa?
Legacies of Andrew J. Foster and his Deaf colleagues

Results: History

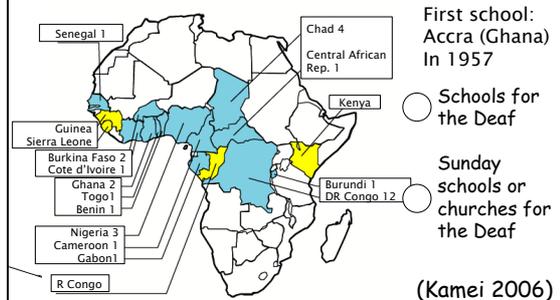
- ▶ During the era of colonial rule by France, Britain and Belgium, there existed no school education for the deaf in West and Central Africa.
- ▶ It was 1957, the year of the independence of Ghana, when Andrew J. Foster, an American Deaf pastor/educator, founded the first school for the deaf in these areas in Accra. He also continued his activities in Nigeria from 1960.
- ▶ This missionary activity introduced American Sign Language (ASL) for the first time in Africa.

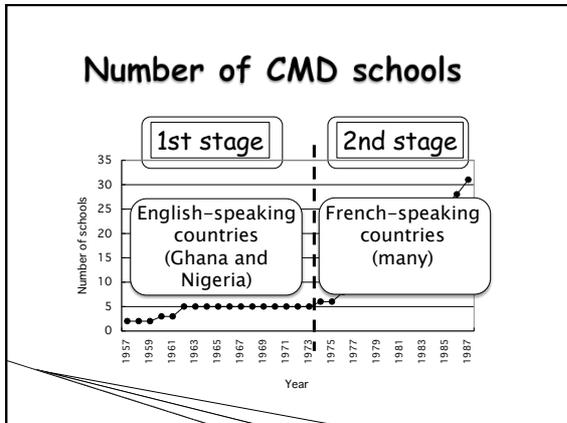
Founder of the Christian Mission for the Deaf



Dr. Andrew J. Foster (1925-1987)
A Deaf African-American
"Father of Deaf Education in Africa"

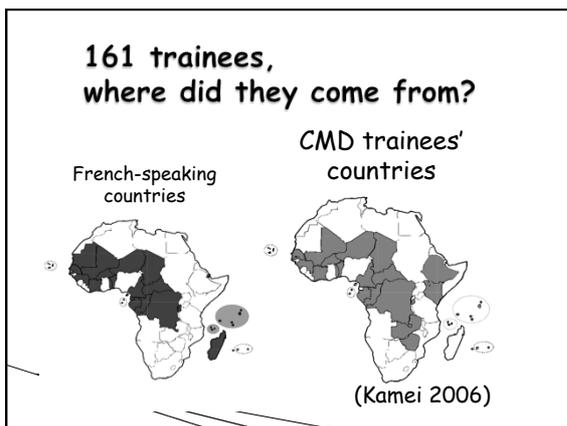
31 deaf schools in 13 countries





Results: History

- ▶ In 1973, his mission founded the Christian Center for the Deaf in Ibadan, Nigeria for the purpose of the training for the teachers in French-speaking countries.
- ▶ The series of teacher-training courses in Ibadan (1976-1987) invited at least 161 trainees from at least 19 countries in Africa.



Deaf instructors

- ▶ Every year, the teachers from the Republic of Benin came to Ibadan to work as the sign language instructors for the training courses.
- ▶ Victor Vodounou
- ▶ Marius Titus
- ▶ Serge Tamomo
- ▶ Ahoé Abou
- ▶ All were Deaf instructors from Benin.

Results: History

- ▶ After the training, these trainees returned to their homeland to become teachers for deaf children and became the core persons who created their transnational sign language.
- ▶ The schools and churches for the deaf founded and managed by them in urban areas became the nodes of the signing communities.

Deaf schools and Deaf communities in 13 countries: A fieldwork report

Photos and field data: by KAMEI Nobutaka
School data: Christian Mission for the Deaf
(<http://www.cmdeaf.org/> Accessed on July 28, 2017)

(1) Ghana (visited in 2006)

- ▶ 1957 Accra (photo) (moved to Mampong-Akwapim in 1959)
- ▶ 1957 Accra (Adult school)

School in Osu,
Accra
The birthplace of
Deaf education
in West Africa
1957

Ghana

- ▶ The school was taken by the government
- ▶ The activities of churches and associations
- ▶ Developed Ghanaian Sign Language

Deaf church
in Osu, Accra
2006

(2) Nigeria (visited in 2006)

- ▶ 1960 Ibadan (photo)
- ▶ 1962 Enugu-Nsukka
- ▶ 1962 Kaduna
- ▶ 1973 Center in Ibadan

School in Ibadan, 1960s

Nigeria

- ▶ Nigerian Civil War (Biafran War 1967-1970) damaged the schools for the Deaf
 - ▶ The schools were taken by the government
 - ▶ The activities of Deaf Christians in Ibadan
 - ▶ Developed Nigerian Sign Language
- Center in Ibadan, 2006 Church in Lagos, 2006

(3) Côte d'Ivoire (continuous research since 2008)

- ▶ 1974 Abidjan
- ▶ Foster negotiated with the President Félix Houphouët-Boigny and founded the first school in French-speaking Africa.
- ▶ The school was taken by the government

Deaf boys
playing soccer
in Abidjan
2017

(4) Togo (visited in 2011)

- ▶ 1976 Lomé
- ▶ Hearing pastor founded several deaf schools

A classroom in 1979 in Lomé, Togo

(Photo by CMD)

(5) Chad (not researched yet)

- ▶ 1976 Mondou
- ▶ 1986 N'Djamena
- ▶ 1987 Sarh
- ▶ 1996 Center in N'djamena
- ▶ Continued the connection with CMD, the Foster family also after the Death of Andrew.
 - ▶ Partly influenced by LSF (French SL) ?

Deaf pastor from Chad
presenting in Kyoto, Japan
2015

(6) Senegal (continuous research since 2013)

- ▶ 1977 Dakar
- ▶ Most of the students were/are Muslims.
- ▶ The school is continued by Christians.

Deaf pupils in Dakar, 2016

(7) Benin (visited in 2004)

- ▶ 1977 Cotonou
- ▶ Many Deaf instructors of CMD
- ▶ Published sign language books

Books published in Benin,
2002

Serge and Nana Tamomo

(8) Cameroon (continuous research since 1997)

- ▶ 1977 Kumba
- ▶ Some schools introduced LSF (French SL)

Deaf pupils in Kumba, 2002

Kumba school, 1977

(9) Central African Republic (not researched yet)

- ▶ 1977 Bangui

Members of National Association of the Deaf
in CAR, met in Yaoundé, Cameroon, 2002

(10) Democratic Republic of the Congo (not researched yet)

- ▶ 1979 Kinshasa
- ▶ 1982 Bunia–Nyankunde
- ▶ 1983 Lubumbashi
- ▶ 1983 Kalemie
- ▶ 1984 Bukavu
- ▶ 1985 Likasi
- ▶ 1985 Goma
- ▶ 1985 Kolwezi
- ▶ 1985 Kamina
- ▶ 1985 Mbuji–Mayi
- ▶ 1986 Matadi
- ▶ 1987 Kisangani
- ▶ 1987 Gemena
- ▶ 2002 Uvira

Deaf school in DRC, 1985

(11) Burkina Faso (visited in 2014)

- ▶ 1980 Ouagadougou
 - ▶ 1983 Bobo Dioulasso
 - ▶ A school managed by the hearing (Ouaga) and a school managed by the Deaf (Bobo)
- Ouagadougou, 1981 Bobo Dioulasso, 1984

(12) Burundi (not researched yet)

- ▶ 1981 Bujumbura
- ▶ “ASL signs with spoken French” observed by Dr. Harlan Lane, an American researcher
- ▶ Lane, Harlan, Robert J. Hoffmeister & Benjamin Bahan. 1996. *A Journey into the Deaf-World*. San Diego: Dawn Sign Press.

(13) Gabon (visited in 2003)

- ▶ 1982 Libreville
 - ▶ The school was nationalized
 - ▶ The government introduced LSF (French SL)
- Deaf church in Libreville, 2013

What kind of sign languages are used today in these areas?

English-speaking countries
and French-speaking countries

Results: Language

- ▶ Sign languages in West Africa have been considered as the various dialects of ASL in the world.
- ▶ For example, in the page for “ASL” in *Ethnologue* reported that ASL was also used in various African countries.
- ▶ ASL (*Ethnologue*)
Also used in Ghana, Nigeria, Chad, Burkina Faso, Gabon, RD Congo, Central Africa, Côte d’Ivoire, Mauritania, Kenya, Madagascar, Benin, Togo, Zimbabwe

English-speaking countries

- ▶ In Ghana and Nigeria, the Deaf communities have developed their own sign languages based on ASL, spoken/written English and local signs created by the Deaf.
- ▶ Today, they have their own language names:
 - Ghanaian Sign Language
 - Nigerian Sign Language
- ▶ In the west part of Cameroon (Anglophone): the sign language is similar, not named yet

French-speaking countries

- ▶ In French-speaking countries, the Deaf communities have developed their own sign languages based on ASL, spoken/written French and local signs created by the Deaf.
- ▶ However, they do not have their own language name.

French and ASL-like signs in the classrooms

Written French

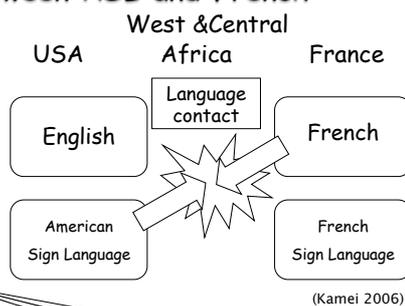


ASL-like signs

A classroom in 1979 in Lomé, Togo

(Photo by CMD)

Contact language between ASL and French



Results: Language

- ▶ After the process of the language contact between spoken/written French and ASL,
- ▶ African Deaf communities developed a new sign language with loan words of ASL and grammatical characters of French.

Results: Language

- ▶ Through a long-term fieldwork that started in 1997 and the discussions among the Deaf community,
- ▶ this sign language recently started to be considered as a newly constructed independent sign language that differs from ASL, because of these characteristics:
 - ▶ - Large influence of spoken/written French
 - ▶ - Vocabulary of African contexts

Results: Language

- ▶ The field data and the products of several dictionaries of this sign language edited by Deaf Africans support the recognition that the name of this sign language is now changing and the identity of the African Deaf community is also shifting.

Tamomo ed., 1996, in Benin

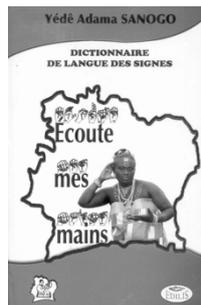
- ▶ A sign language dictionary published in Benin
- ▶ Edited by Serge Tamomo, a Deaf pastor from Benin, one of the successor of A. J. Foster,
- ▶ *Le langage des signes du sourd Africain francophone*
- ▶ (*Sign language of the French-speaking African Deaf*)
- ▶ ...not "ASL"

New language name

- ▶ *Langue des Signes d'Afrique Francophone (LSAF)* (Francophone African Sign Language) is a generic term for sign languages used in Deaf communities in French-speaking West and Central Africa with (1) loan signs from ASL and (2) an influence of spoken/written French (= Contact sign languages made of ASL and French in Africa).
- ▶ Some Deaf communities started to use this name.

Sanogo ed., 2012, in Côte d'Ivoire

- ▶ *Ecoute mes mains : dictionnaire de langue des signes*
- ▶ (*Listen to my hands: Sign language dictionary*)
- ▶ They call their language: *Langue des Signes d'Afrique Francophone-dialecte de Côte d'Ivoire*



What research activities
are conducted today
especially in French-speaking
West Africa?
Dictionaries and congresses

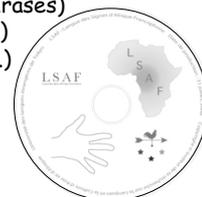
Editing dictionary in Cameroon 2007–2008

- ▶ As a research project of Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Japan (TUFS), the first dictionary project of LSAF started in 2007.
- ▶ Created the first DVD movie dictionary in 2008 with the collaborations of the Deaf community in Yaoundé.

DVD

Around 3,300 movie clips (7 hours 40 min.)

- ▶ Dictionary (2,600 words)
- ▶ Lessons (450 phrases)
- ▶ Conversation (110 ph.)
- ▶ Grammar (150 ph.)
- ▶ Natural dialogues (2 sessions)



Editing dictionary in Côte d'Ivoire 2008–today

- ▶ As a research project of the Grant-in-Aid by Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS Kakenhi), the second dictionary project of LSAF started in 2008.
- ▶ After the interruption by the military crisis in Côte d'Ivoire, it continues till today with the collaborations of the Deaf community in Abidjan.



International exchanges of sign language research

Workshops on sign language research
in WOCAL

World Congress of African Linguistics (WOCAL)



- ▶ World Congress of African Linguistics (WOCAL) is a congress held in every 3 years.
- ▶ In 2009, they started to include sign language workshop in the congress.
- ▶ Also they included the research on African sign languages in the objectives of the constitution of WOCAL.
- ▶ I participated all the sign language workshops held in 2009, 2012 and 2015.

The constitution of WOCAL

- ▶ 2. Aims and Objectives
- ▶ 2.3 To stimulate research and linguistic studies on African languages, both spoken and signed.
- ▶ 2.7 To create awareness in the academic circles as much as in the general public for the need to recognize the African languages, both spoken and signed, as indispensable resources for individual, social, cultural, political and economic development of their speakers.
- ▶ <http://www.wocal.rutgers.edu/>

WOCAL6, 2009, Cologne, Germany

- ▶ The first sign language workshop was held.
- ▶ 11 presentations (by 14 presenters) on sign languages in West and Central Africa, Mali, Ghana, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa, Mauritius and Africa in general.
- ▶ Also, an Ugandan Deaf Sign language researcher was invited as the plenary presenter.

WOCAL7, 2012, Buea, Cameroon

- ▶ The 2nd sign language workshop was held.
- ▶ 7 presentations (by 7 presenters) on sign languages in Nigeria, Cameroon, West and Central Africa, Uganda, East Africa and South Africa.
- ▶ Also, Sign language researchers (Deaf researchers from Uganda and Belgium) were invited as the plenary presenters.

WOCAL8, 2015, Kyoto, Japan

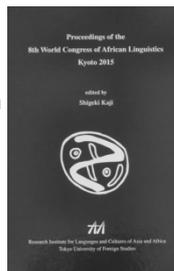
- ▶ The 3rd sign language workshop was held.
- ▶ 10 presentations (by 11 presenters) on sign languages in Chad, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kenya, Botswana and South Africa.
- ▶ Sign language researchers (Ivorian Deaf researcher and Kamei) were invited as the plenary presenters (on West and Central Africa, Côte d'Ivoire).

WOCAL9, 2018, Rabat, Morocco

- ▶ The 9th World Congress of African Linguistics (WOCAL9)
- ▶ August 23–26, 2018, Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Mohammed V University–Agdal Rabat, Rabat, Morocco)
- ▶ Theme "African Languages in a Global World," including "Proposed sub-theme: African Sign Languages"
- ▶ The 4th sign language workshop is expected to be held.
- ▶ <http://nimarrabat.nl/en/news/conference/>

Proceedings of the WOCAL8 (2017)

- ▶ Published in March 2017 in English.
- ▶ All the articles of the proceedings will be available on the web (under construction).
- ▶ The article of the plenary presentation by us (Yédé and Kamei) will be available on the web (Kamei's Laboratory).



Deaf presenters in WOCALS

- ▶ Sign language workshops
- ▶ 2009: 5 presenters out of 14 were Deaf
- ▶ 2012: 3 presenters out of 7 were Deaf
- ▶ 2015: 6 presenters out of 11 were Deaf
- ▶ Plenary presentations on sign language research
- ▶ 2009: 1 Deaf presenter (Uganda)
- ▶ 2012: 2 Deaf presenters (Uganda and Belgium)
- ▶ 2015: 1 Deaf + 1 hearing presenters (Côte d'Ivoire and Japan)

Sign language interpreters

- ▶ It is very important to provide sign language interpreting service for the congress in order to promote sign language research and accept Deaf presenters and participants.
- WOCAL6, 2009 WOCAL8, 2015

How can we develop sign language researches in West Africa?

A case of the experiences in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire

Research training in Côte d'Ivoire since 2009

- ▶ 2008: started to promote the idea of the second dictionary project of LSAF in Cote d'Ivoire.
- ▶ 2010: We started the research training with Deaf counterparts in Abidjan.
- ▶ 2012: the first dictionary (book) was published.
- ▶ 2017: editing a DVD visual dictionary

Promotion of research

- ▶ In order to promote sign language research, it is necessary for the researcher
- ▶ 1) to learn and use sign language;
- ▶ 2) to organize a research team consisted of Deaf members;
- ▶ 3) to have research training for the Deaf;
- ▶ 4) and to work for the enlightenment of sign language and linguistic rights of the Deaf community.

Conclusion

For the integration and development
of Deaf communities in West Africa

Questions

- ▶ [In part 1] What were the historical backgrounds of the diffusion of ASL in West Africa? What kind of sign languages are used today in these areas?
- ▶ [In part 2] What research activities are conducted today especially in French-speaking West Africa?
- ▶ [In part 3] How can we develop sign language researches in West Africa?

Discussion: Answers

- ▶ [In part 1] What were the historical backgrounds of the diffusion of ASL in West Africa?
- ▶ There existed the international educational activities by an African-American Deaf pastor and his colleagues, the Deaf Africans. They did their work widely in West Africa and it resulted in the wide diffusion of ASL.

Discussion: Answers

- ▶ [In part 1] What kind of sign languages are used today in these areas?
- ▶ In English-speaking Africa, they developed Ghanaian/Nigerian Sign Language.
- ▶ In French-speaking Africa, a contact sign language derived from ASL and spoken/written French is widely used.
- ▶ Some Deaf people started to call it "LSAF (Langue des Signes d'Afrique Francophone)."

Discussion: Answers

- ▶ [In part 2] What research activities are conducted today especially in French-speaking West Africa?
- ▶ Some trials to edit dictionaries of LSAF have been started. However, not enough.
- ▶ International exchanges of researches on African sign languages have been started with accepting Deaf researchers.

Discussion: Answers

- ▶ [In part 3] How can we develop sign language researches in West Africa?
- ▶ It is important to conduct researches with organizing local Deaf research team.
- ▶ It is also important to conduct researches with respecting the linguistic rights of the Deaf community.

Practical propositions

- ▶ Fortunately, West Africa has good conditions for the international research collaborations.
- ▶ 1) Most of these countries share the same historical backgrounds;
- ▶ 2) similar basic vocabulary derived from ASL;
- ▶ 3) and similar sign languages developed by Deaf Africans.
- ▶ With using these historical legacies of the Deaf, we can start descriptive research on sign languages for the integration and development of Deaf communities in West Africa.

Practical propositions

- ▶ To promote sign language researches in every country in West Africa
- ▶ To encourage Deaf persons to be involved in the linguistic research in the universities
- ▶ To provide academic congresses and seminars with sign language interpreters to accept Deaf persons
- ▶ To provide opportunities of academic trainings for sign language interpreters
- ▶ WALC can be one of the important opportunities for Deaf communities and sign languages!

Kamei, Nobutaka. 2006.

- ▶ *History of Deaf people and sign languages in Africa: Fieldwork in the "kingdom" derived from Andrew J. Foster*
- ▶ Tokyo: Akashi Shoten
- ▶ An ethnography on Deaf communities
- ▶ Award for Excellent Work, Japan Society for International Development (2007)



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- ▶ JSPS Grant-in-Aid (C) "The theory of language and knowledge as resources through the descriptive research on Langue des Signes d'Afrique Francophone" (Chief: Kamei Nobutaka)
- ▶ Collaborators in African Deaf communities
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- ▶ Professor Firmin Ahoua, Professor Constantine Yuka and the board members of WALC/SLAO
- ▶ Staff of WALC 2017 (Ghana)
- ▶ Akiyama Nami, my wife (Deaf Japanese)
- ▶ All the participants of this plenary presentation