

Abstract for the 18<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Linguists (CIL18)  
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## **A Descriptive Study of Creole ASL in French-Speaking West Africa**

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### **Abstract**

Although linguistic research on sign languages of the Deaf has been conducted worldwide, very little research has been done in Africa, particularly in French-speaking countries. In most countries of West and Central French-speaking Africa (Chad, Burkina Faso, Gabon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic, Côte d’Ivoire, Mauritania, Madagascar, Benin, and Togo), Deaf people are reported to use American Sign Language (ASL) (*Ethnologue* 2006). Scattered descriptions, however, suggest the existence of a unique sign language similar to ASL, such as “language des signes du sourds Africain francophone,” “ASL in French word order,” and “Francophone Sign Language” (Tamomo 1994; Lane et al. 1996; Stephen F. Austin State University 2003).

Through my fieldwork with the local Deaf communities in Cameroon (1997-1998; 2002; 2005; 2007; 2008), Gabon (2003) and Benin (2004), where the majority of hearing people speak French, I observed a common sign language with the following characteristics: (1) a vocabulary similar to ASL, (2) the mouthing of spoken French, (3) finger-spelling of ASL, (4) modifications of finger-spelling (adapting it to written French), (5) loan words from written French, (6) modification of signs (adapting them to written French), (7) formation of idioms borrowed from French, and (8) indigenous signs. I consider this sign language to be a contact language created between ASL and spoken/written French.

From an historical context, educational activities have existed for deaf children in 11 French-speaking African countries sponsored by the Christian Mission for the Deaf (CMD), which has been managed by Deaf Americans and Af-

ricans. The combination of French literacy education and the use of ASL in the classrooms has led to the birth of a new sign language that exists neither in the United States nor in France, but only in Africa.

Considering its unique linguistic characteristics, its original history, and its wide use in French-speaking Africa, I propose naming this language “Langue des Signes d’Afrique Francophone (LSAF).” This paper will show not only a new distribution of African sign languages but also the capabilities of Deaf Africans who have constructed another unique language community.

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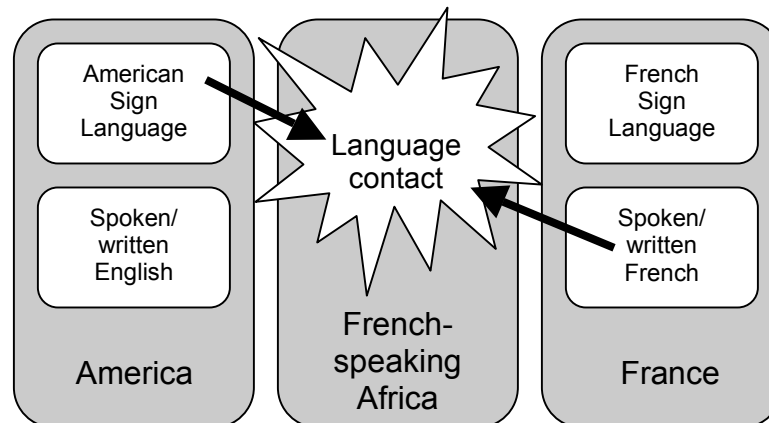
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### DVD

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Contact language between American Sign Language  
and spoken/written French created in Africa