

# 1 Ethics of Researching Signed Languages: The Case of Kenyan Sign Language

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This chapter addresses the importance of ethics in signed language research, especially with regard to how local communities should be involved in their own research. I discuss this by telling a personal tale of my own research partnership during my stint as a Peace Corps volunteer in Kenya. Even though my main assignment was to work as a teacher at a school for Deaf children, I worked with the local Deaf community in documenting their signed language for a CD-ROM dictionary. For this project, I worked closely with the Kenyan Sign Language Research Project (KSLRP) at the University of Nairobi.

In this chapter I describe this partnership and relate it to the sign language communities' terms of reference principles (SLCTR) developed by Harris, Holmes, and Mertens (2009). They suggest that Deaf signed language users should be involved in each stage of a research project and not just act as consultants. Such involvement entails that the community understand all of the aspects of the process and have a hand in the construction of knowledge about their own language, community, and culture.

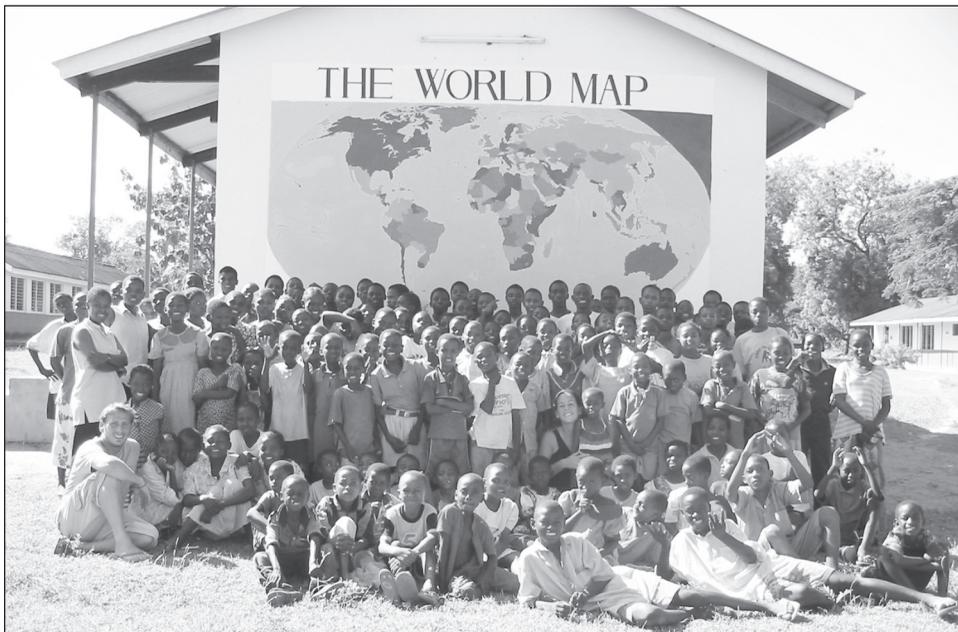
It is well established that signed language research is vital to the better understanding of the complexities of the Deaf community. Such understanding contributes to the empowerment of the Deaf community, the positive evolution of Deaf education, and the overall equality (socially, politically, and economically) of Deaf persons. It is also vital to determine how to establish a mutually beneficial and respectful research partnership between the researcher and the researched. This is the lesson I started to learn in Kenya years ago but have only now really begun to understand.

## INTRODUCTION

At the African Lessons on Language and Citizenship conference hosted at Gallaudet University in April of 2012, I stood before a crowd of people and told them about my work with the Deaf<sup>1</sup> community in Kenya as a Peace Corps volunteer.<sup>2</sup> I shared the lessons I had learned about language and what it means for citizenship. I stressed the importance of doing signed language research in full partnership with the local communities. In these pages I tell the story again by exploring a research partnership I experienced in the early 2000s. In doing so, I use the SLCTR to facilitate my discussion since these principles constitute the only ethics model that addresses research with signed language communities.

First, I briefly describe who I am and how I came to be writing this chapter. I am Deaf. I love languages and have always been fascinated by them. I used to seek out books with vocabulary exercises and do them for fun. I created my own dictionaries in composition books and diaries with locks on them. When I went to college for my undergraduate studies, I took some linguistics classes and was hooked. It was then that I started looking more closely at signed languages, particularly the one I knew: American Sign Language.

After graduation, I went to East Africa to live for two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Kenya.<sup>3</sup> My site was in Kilifi on the coast, which is about one hour north of Mombasa, a major port city. I lived and taught at a school for Deaf children in Kilifi called Kibarani School for the Deaf, which had about 150 deaf children (figure 1).



**FIGURE 1.** Children of Kibarani School for the Deaf with Peace Corps volunteers Jesse Guberman (bottom left) and Julie Hochgesang (near-center).

During my time in Kenya, I learned Kenyan Sign Language (KSL) and was quite fluent by the time I left.<sup>4</sup> During my service, I worked with the Kenyan Deaf community through the Kenyan Sign Language Research Project at the University of Nairobi to create a CD-ROM dictionary for KSL. When I finished my Peace Corps service, I returned to the United States and went to Gallaudet University for graduate studies in linguistics. Now I am a faculty member in the Gallaudet Department of Linguistics, and one of my specializations is documentary linguistics, which encompasses transcription, fieldwork linguistics, and corpus linguistics.

#### IMPORTANCE OF DOING SIGNED LANGUAGE RESEARCH

Not until the 1970s were signed languages recognized as languages in their own right. Prior to that, it was believed that speech was the only legitimate mode of communication. Today we know better. After about 60 years of research, we now know that signed languages, with their use of the hands as well as nonmanual behavior, encode meaning in highly conventionalized and structured ways. In other words, signed languages are complex and effective grammatical systems just like spoken languages. Different fields for the study of signed languages include phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax, discourse, sociolinguistics, and children's acquisition of language. These subdisciplines are usually made possible by collecting and analyzing small data samples and/or grammaticality judgments (asking signers about the acceptability of certain grammatical constructions). This recognition of signed languages as true languages and the subsequent linguistic understanding of their structures has greatly contributed to the empowerment of the Deaf community, the positive evolution of Deaf education, and the overall equality of Deaf people (e.g., Johnston, 2004).

One increasingly common discipline today is corpus linguistics, which entails the collecting of a large body of data and the use of these data to describe a particular language and allow for structural analyses to further our understanding of signed languages and ultimately language in general. Examples of corpus projects are the Australian Signed Language (Auslan) "Endangered Languages Documentation Project" (2004–2007); the Signed Language of the Netherlands "Corpus NGT" (2006–2008); the British Signed Language Corpus Project (2008 and ongoing at the time of writing); and the German Signed Language (DGS) Corpus Project (2009–2023) (Konrad, 2012). These projects provide "valid and verifiable description" of these languages based on the actual use of language through discourse (Johnston, 2004, p. 373). Corpus projects are not widespread (particularly outside of Europe) and are fairly recent in the research of signed languages.

Signed language research has also consisted of fieldwork description, which entails a trained linguist making contact with a language community and identifying a number of speakers to serve as consultants. Once a consultant relationship has been formed, the linguist asks systematic questions about the language (e.g., What is your word for X? How do you say this and that? Is it okay to say this sentence this way?). For instance, in Nigeria, Schmalig (2000),

through systematic inquiry and work with consultants, identified and listed the phonological, morphological, and lexical structures that appear to be accurate for Hausa Sign Language.

As is true for many countries, several paper (and sometimes digital) dictionaries have also been produced by local community centers in several African nations (Schmaling, 2012). Lexicography (i.e., dictionary making) is indeed a complex and rich endeavor and is meant to be used to document a language for different reasons, including serving as a resource and as a record of the language at that point in time and/or to standardize the language throughout the region (ibid.). When done without the aid of a trained lexicographer (as is usually the case with local community centers), these “dictionaries” are just a partial description of some words in the lexicon (most likely, a word list of what is thought to be the most common words in a language) with little, if any, mention of the grammar of the language or how to use the words themselves.

These small-scale research projects, corpus projects, fieldwork projects, and dictionaries are examples of signed language research, a significant discipline that has produced valuable and far-reaching work. But, of course, much remains to be done: Many signed languages are underdescribed, and it is likely that more have not yet been described at all. The lack of description and/or documentation means that no linguistic analyses can be undertaken. Since it is clear that Deaf people benefit from research on their signed languages (e.g., Johnston, 2004), it then follows that more research projects (e.g., fieldwork linguistic description or corpus projects) need to occur around the world. However, how to proceed is not always so obvious. Nor is it evident who should undertake the responsibility for this research, what questions should be asked, which community members should be involved, and what the implications of such research would be. In this chapter I explore my own answers to these questions by reflecting on my experience in working with one particular signed language community.

#### THE DEAF COMMUNITY IN KENYA AND KENYAN SIGN LANGUAGE

Approximately 35–40 million people live in Kenya, a country comprising about 40 tribes on the eastern coast of Africa. *Ethnologue* reports that Kenyans use 68 languages (<http://www.ethnologue.com/country/KE>), including Kiswahili, English, and Kenyan Sign Language (KSL), which are the nationally recognized languages.

Different sources vary in their estimates of the deaf population in Kenya. Akach (1991a), a KSL linguist, estimates 220,000. More recently, Wilson and Kakiri (2010) estimate the number at about 600,000. “Exact figures are impossible to obtain because we do not keep accurate statistics in the country” (ibid., p. 279). Poor transportation, lack of telecommunication systems (although today this is changing dramatically), and perhaps a tendency of families to sequester deaf people in their homes pose considerable barriers to obtaining adequate accurate figures (Guberman, 2005, 2006).

It is asserted in the literature that, among the majority population in Kenya, negative ideas about deaf people persist. Okombo (1992b) describes “traditional attitudes that define the deaf in extremely negative terms” (p. 13). Similarly, Akach (1993) says parents “view having a deaf child as a bad omen. Sometimes this necessitated some parents hiding their children” (p. 3). Kakiri, a Deaf Kenyan, reports that, “(e)ven in peaceful times, however, deaf people in Kenya don’t fare well. We are often asked some very bizarre questions with crude gestures . . . The mainstream of Nairobi dismisses us as lunatics when they see us signing just because they do not realize that sign language is bona fide language” (Wilson & Kakiri, 2010, p. 279.). Teachers of deaf students are often ill equipped to teach them and, more often than not, do not know signed language, have not been trained in special education for Deaf children, and do not understand general issues pertinent to Deaf education.

Based on my personal experience, a deaf person in Kenya is generally thought to be unintelligent, to have no language, and to be unable to contribute to the society at large. In fact, access to language can be extremely limited for deaf children born to a hearing family. Unless certain adaptations are made to their environment, these children will often not be able to acquire the mainstream spoken language<sup>5</sup> at a level necessary for customary interaction in the local context. The hearing family will not know KSL. With no language, these children enter school late—anywhere from the age of 7 to 19. Academic learning is, of course, adversely affected by such delayed acquisition of language. The deaf children can acquire KSL if they attend a residential school, but even then their levels of proficiency in KSL vary widely. Moreover, not all deaf children go to residential schools. Some are sent to “units,” which are small classrooms attached to a larger hearing school. Compared to the residential schools, these units often have fewer older children who know KSL. Finally, some children are kept at home and never go to school.

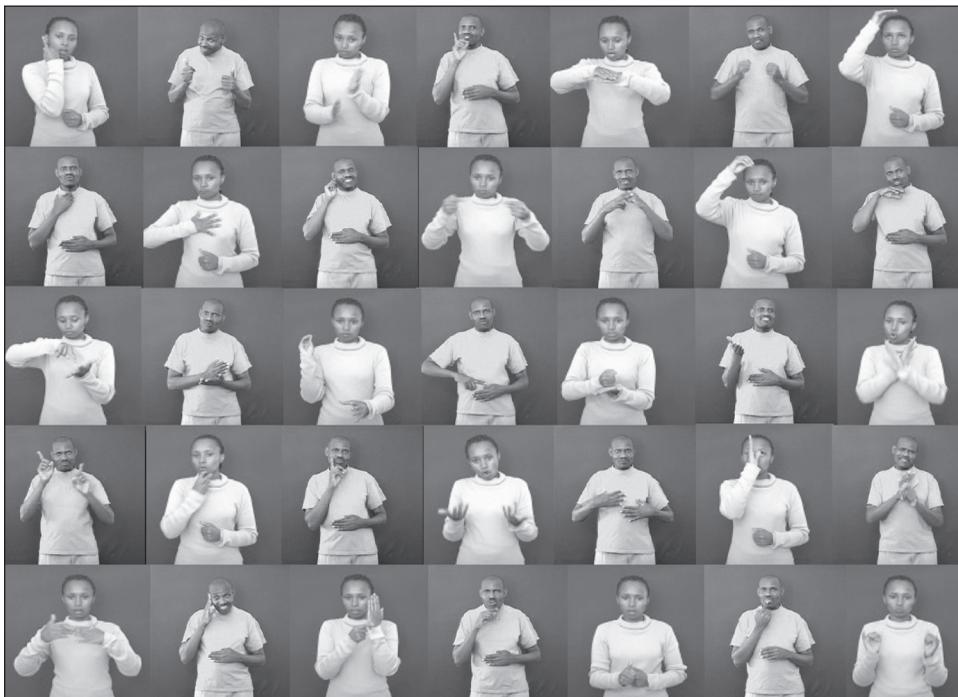
In classrooms where the teachers do not sign (which appears to be a frequent situation, according to Deaf Kenyans and Peace Corps volunteers working in Deaf education in Kenya), it stands to reason that learning, for deaf Kenyan children, is limited. Their literacy skills—in either English or Kiswahili—appear to seldom progress past the word level or basic sentences. Many can learn how to write their own names and recognize words in isolation, but their literacy rarely is sophisticated enough to perform successfully, for example, on secondary-school examinations. In fact, Okombo (1992a) claimed that no deaf person had ever been enrolled in a Kenyan university. More recently, however, anecdotal reports have surfaced of late-deafened adults (those who acquired spoken language normally) who have attended a university. Wilson and Kakiri (2010) report that there are “only eight deaf people with university degrees and thirty deaf people who have been trained as teachers” (p. 279). Closed captioning on television, interpreters, and TTYs are not widespread (if available at all) in Kenya (Akaranga & Akach, 1994). However, mobile phones have become widely available, and with them has come text messaging, which is widely used by deaf and hearing people alike. This is a promising

development that may encourage literacy among deaf Kenyans, while promoting communication among deaf and hearing people on an equal basis.

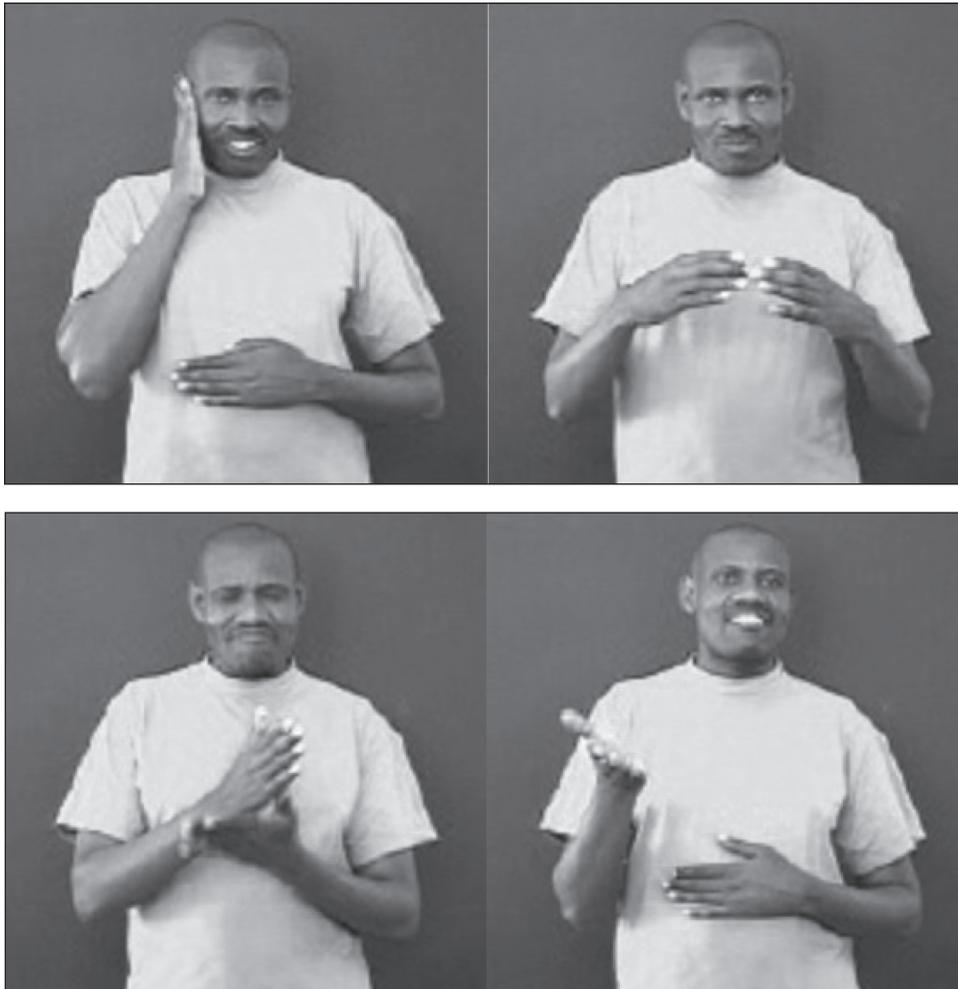
A lack of effective education, which results in low levels of literacy, often translates to inadequate living conditions. Deaf Kenyans are at higher risk for unemployment, poverty, and disease. Unemployed deaf people live at home with their families and are essentially isolated because there is little communication within the family or village. If deaf persons attend school and return home because of unemployment, they “forget” KSL because it is little used. Deaf people are not encouraged to marry other deaf people. Hearing children of deaf parents are even taken away to “learn speech” by hearing members of the family (Akach, 1994).

The poor quality of life for deaf people in Kenya is slowly changing with the help of different organizations. The Kenyan Sign Language Research Project at the University of Nairobi, founded in 1991, plays an advocacy role by providing information on KSL and Deaf people in Kenya. The Kenyan National Association of the Deaf (KNAD) and other regional associations (e.g., the Nairobi Association of the Deaf) focus on bettering the lives of deaf people and providing Deaf awareness training as well as career guidance and family life education. In the larger cities and towns, conditions are better, especially where there are schools for Deaf children.

Kenyan Sign Language is the natural language of Deaf people in Kenya. Some KSL signs are shown in figure 2.



**FIGURE 2. Two Deaf Kenyans producing signs in KSL (taken from the KSL CD-ROM dictionary).**



**FIGURE 3.** An example of a KSL sentence by a Deaf KSL signer.  
**KSL glosses:** DEAF COMMUNITY TRUE THERE  
**English translation:** "There really is a Deaf community."

Like any other natural signed language,<sup>6</sup> KSL has its own grammar and lexicon separate from the spoken languages in Kenya (Akach, 1991c). Figure 3 shows an example of a sentence in KSL.

Figure 3 is a brief example of how KSL is a language. Manual signs and non-manual signals (e.g., eye gaze, mouthing, eyebrow movement, head movement) are immediately visible. Also, we can perhaps assume that the KSL signer prefers to order the signs in this way. All of this suggests that meaningful units are assembled in a structured, meaningful, and conventionalized manner consistent with what we would find in any language.

The spontaneous development of KSL began quite recently (Guberman, 2005, 2006). Before the inception of Deaf schools, most deaf people were apparently

isolated in their villages. Many of them likely never met another deaf person. With the founding of schools for Deaf students in the 1960s, this changed. When Deaf people then started coming together in large numbers, KSL began to develop. Gestures, home signs, and perhaps foreign signed languages (brought by missionaries or British colonizers) most likely contributed to the initial development of KSL. In the late 1970s the first graduates of these schools started entering the job market, leading them to gather in the bigger cities and thereby creating more opportunities for interaction. Consequently, they began to view themselves as a Deaf community in Kenya and to value their activities.<sup>7</sup> Within this community, the preferred means of communication is KSL (Okombo & Akach, 1997; Wilson & Kakiri, 2010). However, as a result of active discouragement of deaf-to-deaf marriage, Deaf families and native speakers<sup>8</sup> of KSL are apparently very few.

In the 1980s Deaf people from Sweden came to work with the Deaf community in Kenya. The Swedish Association of the Deaf sponsored the Swedish Deaf Project in Kenya, in which two Deaf Swedish volunteers (Uldis Ozolins and Briggita Ozolins) were sent to Kenya to provide financial support and leadership training (Akaranga & Akach, 1994). The Deaf community in Kenya was encouraged to establish their own association, KNAD. Under KNAD, KSLRP was established at the University of Nairobi, where linguists Okoth Okombo and Philemon Akach have conducted research on KSL. Akach (1993) explains that most of their work has consisted of using foreign signed language linguistics models to describe the grammar of KSL. Lack of money limits their ability to travel throughout Kenya and record actual data. From 1988 to 1994 four different seminars on African signed languages were held (Akaranga & Akach, 1994). In 1991 the first KSL dictionary, with approximately 2,000 signs, was printed by KSLRP (Akach, 1991b). In 2000 the dictionary was reprinted with no changes. In 2004 a new CD dictionary with 1,100 KSL signs was made with the help of Peace Corps volunteers from the United States. Although the new dictionary contained fewer signs due to limited file space on the CD, such a format was preferred because updates could be done more easily and inexpensively. Moreover, videos of signs were considered more effective than frozen pictures on paper.

#### RESEARCH ETHICS WHEN WORKING WITH SIGNED LANGUAGE COMMUNITIES

Ethics, in the most basic sense, signifies a set of principles that govern how one behaves toward others in the context of their society, complete with its language(s) and cultural norms. With regard to research ethics, we are talking about being explicitly aware that such studies affect the subjects and taking steps to prevent any negative effect of these investigations. To discuss research ethics is to be mindful of the negotiation of power, the consequences of any research action, and the need to protect and involve the participants. Linguists are often trained in research ethics and required (by their universities) to formally address the ethical issues at hand in any proposed research project.

Harris et al. (2009) discuss the ethics of research, particularly with un- or underrepresented groups and specifically with signed language communities. They propose a set of “culturally appropriate research guidelines” intended to show researchers how to demonstrate respect for the studied group’s culture. The SLCTR principles directly address the ethics of working with signed language communities. Had they been available at the time, these principles would have provided useful guidance to the Peace Corps volunteers and the people at KSLRP who directly worked on the CD-ROM, as well as to the Deaf Kenyan community at large.

As mentioned earlier, the SLCTR principles basically state that Deaf signed language users should be involved in every stage of a research project and not simply considered consultants. “It is critical that researchers attempt to determine the ways in which signed language community members feel and think about the world and give these the recognition they deserve” (ibid., p. 114). It is important to involve the signed language community so that they can understand the entire process and have a hand in the construction of knowledge about their own language, community, and culture.

First I summarize how the research partnership came to be and then identify the SLCTR principles, briefly describe them, and relate them to the partnership. As already mentioned, these principles were not available to me or the research team I worked with in Kenya. Instead, this is a reflective and metaphorical application of the “journey in which the researcher develops increased understanding of differential access to power and privilege through self-reflection and interaction with members of the community” (ibid., p. 113). It is my hope that this discussion will be beneficial to researchers who are considering doing work with a signed language community.

#### BACKGROUND OF RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP

The partnership between the Peace Corps volunteers and KSLRP at the University of Nairobi (associated with KNAD) began in 2001. I was not one of the original Peace Corps volunteers involved with the project. Rather, my involvement came during the second year (in 2002) to help finish the filming and to create the text for the dictionary (including information about its grammar, the Deaf community, and cultural norms). The original three project volunteers were a hearing woman who was involved with the Deaf education program but had little training otherwise, a hearing woman who was skilled in filming and computer programming but knew neither ASL nor KSL, and a woman who was skilled in computer programming and graphic design but also knew neither ASL nor KSL. None of the three had any formal training in Deaf education, linguistics, or anthropology.

The original intent of the dictionary project was to collect words associated with common themes in Kenya (e.g., school, family, farming, places). These words were written down in English and presented to two Deaf Kenyan signers, who produced them for the camera. The target audience included Deaf students at

Deaf schools and mainstreamed units, educators at these Deaf schools and mainstreamed units, and the families of Deaf people.

Given that the three volunteers had little technical knowledge of creating dictionaries or even much understanding of signed languages or the Deaf community, I, armed with my five classes of linguistics, three books by Noam Chomsky, a lifelong knowledge of ASL, and newfound knowledge of KSL, stepped in to help. I was eager to do so because I loved studying signed languages and felt it was important to document them, especially one as underdescribed as Kenyan Sign Language. Of course, I had little formal training myself.

When I started work on the project, I felt we needed to directly partner with Deaf Kenyans themselves. My first instinct was to ask the members of the Deaf community what they wanted. It is my understanding that the three volunteers were working with two Deaf Kenyans (who were hired as signed language trainers for new Peace Corps volunteers). Thus there was some kind of relationship with the Deaf Kenyan community, although an unbalanced and precarious one. It appears that the two Deaf Kenyans were consulted as signed language models for the videos on the CD-ROM and did not actively participate in the initial project design. Furthermore, it does not appear that the Deaf Kenyan community at large was originally consulted in the making of this dictionary.

As the SLCTR principles suggest, the signed language community itself should be the driving force behind any project. Furthermore, Wilson and Kakiri (2010), who are knowledgeable about working in developing countries (using Kenya as an example), state that projects that are undertaken in developing countries will most likely survive if the locals themselves are a major part of every step—planning, developing, use, maintenance, and so on. If projects are started by others and left for the locals to maintain, they will most likely be abandoned.

When I (along with additional Peace Corps volunteers who had varying experience with signed language communities) became involved, a more active attempt was made to involve the Deaf Kenyan community. This was accomplished by asking the Deaf people originally hired as consultants what they wanted and by working more closely with KSLRP at the University of Nairobi, which had a more established relationship with the Deaf Kenyan community through its formal relationship with KNAD.

#### PRINCIPLE ONE: AUTHORITY LIES WITH THE SIGNED LANGUAGE COMMUNITY

The first principle of the SLCTR principles states that “the authority for the construction of meanings and knowledge within the signed language community rests with the community’s members” (Harris, Holmes, & Mertens, p. 115). This basically means “ensuring that research accurately represents the people and their language” (ibid., p. 116). Accurate representation is accomplished by “decenterizing” hearingness and “centerizing” the signed language community by ensuring that the research is carried out “by Deaf, for Deaf and, with Deaf” (ibid.).

This principle was haphazardly followed during the KSL CD-ROM dictionary project. Although it is not clear whether “by Deaf, for Deaf, and with Deaf” was adhered to in the beginning, it is evident that it became part of the project’s design as it developed. Eventually, two Deaf Kenyans (the ones you see in figures 2 and 3) had a direct hand in deciding what information should be contained in the dictionary.

Originally, one of the three initial volunteers had developed the word list herself. This is not ideal since her knowledge of KSL and the Deaf Kenyan community was limited by the fact that she had been in the country for only one year and had been exposed to KSL primarily at only one school for Deaf children. We later asked the Deaf Kenyans which KSL words they wanted to include in the dictionary. They had some suggestions, including several lexical variants they felt were important. For example, they wanted to show that the concept of “new” could be expressed by two different KSL signs (figure 4).

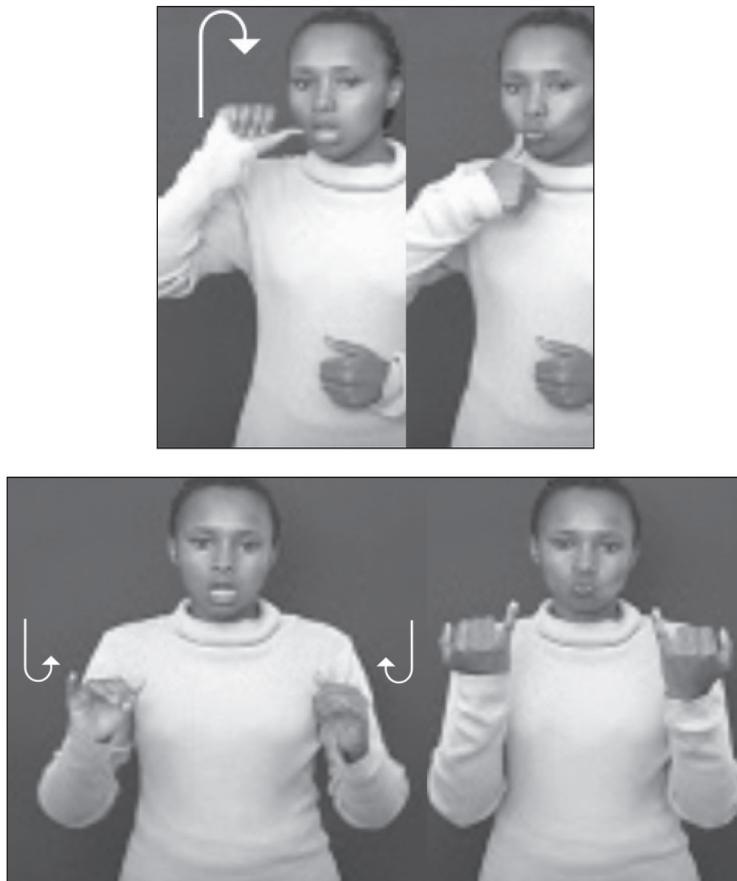


FIGURE 4. Two KSL signs for the concept of “new.”

This is one instance of how the project became more “by Deaf.” Given that Kenya has 30 to 40 Deaf schools and several Deaf adult communities, it is highly likely that more variants exist than can be observed at a single school. The Deaf Kenyans were aware of this and thus wanted to share additional signs they knew; that is, they were able to “construct knowledge” about their own language.

Two other areas that were not originally intended for inclusion in the dictionary were later added: information about KSL grammar (e.g., modification, word order, sentence types) and the Deaf Kenyan community. This information, crucial for “creating meanings and knowledge” about the Kenyan Sign Language community (ibid., p. 115), was obtained through discussion with the Deaf Kenyans. Since more members of the dictionary project could communicate directly with them in KSL, this discussion was facilitated. Ideally, perhaps the Deaf Kenyans should have produced this information themselves via signed videos for the dictionary rather than having the Peace Corps volunteers extrapolate the information in written English.

In any case, by the end of the project, “by Deaf, for Deaf, and with Deaf” had become more ingrained in the daily activities of most, if not all, of the team members. When the volunteers finished their Peace Corps service and left the country, the CD-ROMs remained with KSLRP and KNAD for distribution and future development. That is, the authority to construct further meanings and knowledge now belongs completely to the Deaf Kenyan community.

#### PRINCIPLE TWO: INCORPORATION OF SIGNED LANGUAGE COMMUNITY VALUES IN RESEARCH ETHICS

The second principle is as follows: “Investigators should acknowledge that signed language community members have the right to have those things that they value to be fully considered in all interactions” (Harris et al., 2009, p. 116). For our project, the second principle holds that the values of the Kenyan Sign Language community should be considered in every interaction. Possible interaction scenarios for our project included communication between the research team and the community, the language(s) used in the dictionary, coordinating the distribution of the dictionary to schools and families, and providing supplemental workshops to Deaf educators and/or families of Deaf Kenyans. In all such interactions, the values of the Deaf Kenyan community should be incorporated.

During our project, however, the incorporation of the community’s values in interactions was not outright ignored, but it also was not a factor that we explicitly considered at the time. I would like to outline two examples where we could have better considered the values of the community at the time.

The work done by the Peace Corps volunteers and KSLRP resulted in a CD-ROM that consisted of KSL videos with English and Kiswahili glosses. The description of the signs, the KSL grammar, and the Deaf community was done entirely in written English and some Kiswahili. Even though written language may be more accessible than spoken language for Deaf Kenyans, it may not be much better,

given that illiteracy rates are most likely elevated in the Deaf community in Kenya. Members of the Deaf community may have preferred that the knowledge be presented entirely in KSL, but, then again, the target was not just Deaf children and adults but also hearing educators and family members of Deaf people. Given that these individuals have limited fluency in KSL, it may be better for them to access any information through the written rather than the signed form (be it English or Kiswahili).

The second example concerns the fact that in this new dictionary, the KSL signs were presented in videos rather than pictures on paper, as in the first KSL dictionary. I, as a Deaf American woman trained in linguistics, would imagine that the KSL videos in the dictionary would be preferable to pictures in a paper dictionary. These pictures are frozen images of one point of a sign, basically misrepresenting the dynamic real-life, three-dimensional productions that move from beginning to end. Video appears to be the better medium for representing signs. Yet, when I was a volunteer (from 2002 to 2004), computers were not very common in the Deaf schools, and children did not have daily access to them. Internet cafés were widespread, but it is not clear how often and by whom the computers were used. This leads to the very real concern about whether, for this targeted audience, CD-ROM dictionaries are actually more useful than paper dictionaries.

Here I have provided two examples and discussed the modes of communication that were used during the interactions. I have described the situations and the various possible modes the Deaf Kenyan community may have preferred. Ultimately, however, what the community members value and what they want to happen during any interaction involving the dictionary needs to be asserted by the Deaf Kenyan community itself.

#### PRINCIPLE THREE: CONSIDERATION OF THE WORLDVIEW OF THE SIGNED LANGUAGE COMMUNITY

The third SLCTR principle is as follows: "Investigators should take into account the worldview of the signed language community in all negotiations or dealings that impact on the community's members" (Harris et al., 2009, p. 118). This principle concerns the distribution of power in relationships. Historically, deaf people in Kenya have been marginalized (as they have been almost everywhere). This principle aims to put all of the people involved in a mutual research project on equal footing. "Instead of having a hierarchical research team with a primary investigator at the top, assistants in the middle, and participants at the bottom, the research project should be a horizontal dialogue between research teams and participants" (ibid.). The principle goes even further by suggesting that the members of the team defer to the norms or preferences of the Deaf community. For example, when the project first started, the volunteers were basically in charge. As the project evolved, this changed, and the Deaf Kenyans became more involved. I have provided a few examples of this increased participation in the last two subsections.

In addition, everyone tried to see the project from "Deaf eyes." One way we did that was by adding KSL phrases to the dictionary. During one of our discussions,

we realized that showing signs by themselves may be helpful to new signers learning how to produce the individual signs but not how to use them in everyday communication. Perhaps the first instinct when providing examples would be to use common English or Kiswahili sentences and then translate them into KSL. This, however, is not “seeing through Deaf eyes” because these may be phrases that the Deaf Kenyan community does not use. While we were discussing this aspect, the Deaf Kenyans brainstormed phrases that they felt were common in the community, and we included these in the dictionary.

In the beginning, the original designers of the Kenyan Sign Language dictionary project were hearing Americans with limited knowledge of both the Deaf community and signed language. As the project progressed, however, the members entered a more “horizontal” relationship with the Deaf Kenyan community by working more with KSLRP and the Deaf Kenyans and learning to see the project through “Deaf eyes.”

#### PRINCIPLE FOUR: RECOGNITION OF DIVERSITY IN THE COMMUNITY

The fourth principle is as follows: “In the application of Sign Language Communities’ terms of reference, investigators should recognize the diverse experiences, understandings, and way of life (in signed language societies) that reflect their contemporary cultures” (Harris et al., 2009, p. 120). People who are Deaf are not Deaf in the same way. For example, they may have had different experiences when acquiring language. Some may be fortunate enough to have had access to the community’s signed language from birth, whereas others may not have had any access until their teenage years (if at all). Some will take pride in their own community signed language and consider it an element to be valued and celebrated. Some may see foreign signed languages as more developed and valuable tools for success in education and employment (as is unfortunately a common perception of ASL in many developing countries).

This principle, in which diversity should be acknowledged and respected, is certainly a challenging one to uphold when considering the Deaf community in Kenya. In a country where transportation is difficult (the roads are often rough and the fares for accessing a “matatu”, a local form of transport on small buses or minivans, are expensive), there is less interaction between members of the community (which has 30 to 40 Deaf schools and an uncounted number of Deaf meeting places, including post offices and churches) and, I predict, more diversity. The very reason for this diversity also inhibits our ability to recognize and represent this aspect of the community. It was logistically difficult for our project members to travel across Kenya and ensure that we were reflecting a wide sample of the community.

Instead, the dictionary project relied on KSLRP and utilized two of the Deaf community members as the video models. Whether they were representative of the community is certainly open to discussion. In fact, the project originally intended to include only one person as a model. As the project developed, other members suggested that more Deaf Kenyans should be included. As a result, one other Deaf

Kenyan was brought on to help decide which words should be included and to produce the KSL phrases. It would have been ideal to include a more diverse group of Deaf Kenyan signers for the dictionary.

Furthermore, the authors of the SLCTR principles argue that this particular principle also concerns the “recognition of the community’s close-knit nature and implications for confidentiality or anonymity in research” (Harris et al., 2009, p. 120). The video models volunteered to be filmed for the project, but there was little discussion about how this might affect their standing in the community. Would other Deaf Kenyans support this or object to it? The consequences of their involvement in this project are unknown.

Recognition of diversity in the Kenyan Sign Language community received very little consideration during the dictionary project. The dictionary lists a number of lexical variants and includes a discussion of language variation, but these are just two aspects that were briefly touched upon. If another dictionary or another edition of the same dictionary were to be produced in Kenya (or any other signed language community), I would recommend that funding be secured to travel across the country to obtain more data and to showcase the data in order to permit the community itself to provide feedback.

#### PRINCIPLE FIVE: EVALUATION AND VALIDATION OF RESEARCH BY THE SIGNED LANGUAGE COMMUNITY

The fifth principle states that “Investigators should ensure that the views and perceptions of the critical reference group (the signed language group) is [*sic*] reflected in any process of validating and evaluating the extent to which sign language communities’ terms of reference have been taken into account” (Harris et al., 2009, p. 120). This principle basically says that Deaf signed language users should be involved in each stage of the research project and not just as consultants. And every stage, from planning to data collection, coding, analysis, writing, and dissemination, should be accessible to and accurately represent the Deaf community.

This idea has been touched on in each subsection leading up to this one. The material in the KSL CD-ROM dictionary should be fully accessible to the Deaf Kenyan community, but because of the written content (which may not be as accessible as we would like because of the high illiteracy rates in the Deaf Kenyan community), perhaps it is not.

The project should have been proposed, designed, conducted, and disseminated by the Deaf Kenyan community. It is not clear who did the proposing. However, as the project developed, the signed language community became more involved.

The research conducted during the dictionary project could also have been evaluated and validated by traveling throughout Kenya and meeting with a wide sample of the members of the Deaf community. That is, the dictionary videos and written content should have been shown to a representative set of the Deaf Kenyan community in order to acquire their feedback. As already discussed, this was not a feasible option at the time. There was extremely tight funding for the project

and limited technical capacity among both volunteers and stakeholders within the Kenyan Deaf community. Even if it had been easier to travel around the country, would the project members have properly incorporated the feedback they would have received? Everyone knew the project was being done on the cheap and in a suboptimal way. Nonetheless, at the time it was perceived as an improvement over the status quo, which is a debatable proposition, but all of the volunteers were conscious of this weakness throughout the project.

Again as stated earlier, the dictionary project did not have access to the SLCTR principles. If it had, this “evaluation and validation of research by the signed language community” principle might have received greater consideration, for it is certainly an important one. Ownership of any knowledge regarding Kenyan Sign Language or the Deaf community belongs to the users themselves. However, there is one tangible way in which the project is “owned” by the Deaf Kenyan community: KSLRP and KNAD are named as the coauthors of the dictionary.

#### PRINCIPLE SIX: DECISIONS ON RESEARCH PROCEDURES LIE WITH THE SIGNED LANGUAGE COMMUNITY

The final principle of the SLCTR principles states that “Investigators should negotiate within and among signed language groups to establish appropriate processes to consider and determine the criteria for deciding how to meet cultural imperatives, social needs, and priorities” (Harris et al., p. 123). The community decides what needs to be done, how to do it, and finally why it needs to be done. The idea for the project appeared to originate with one of the volunteers who worked in one of the Deaf schools. Were Deaf Kenyans or organizations consulted before the project was initiated? I am not sure. Luckily, she and the other volunteers did collaborate with KSLRP, which has a significant number of Deaf staff. That was a good start.

An example of a research procedure has to do with the filming setup. For our project, several people were stationed in the room during the filming: the volunteer running the filming equipment, the Deaf Kenyans, and a couple other project members, including me. The person doing the filming is usually the one in control since she is the one pointing the camera and capturing the information that will ultimately be presented in the final product. This person did not know KSL. This can create an unbalanced dynamic in communication and activity. For example, the Deaf Kenyans may have been uncomfortable and produced signs that they would have never produced if the room were full of Deaf Kenyans who used KSL on an everyday basis. This is a well-known consequence of language contact (e.g., Lucas and Valli, 1992): People change their variety of language to fit the situation or people they are addressing.

One other example of a research procedure in this project concerned the selection of signs. As already mentioned, the target audience was mixed (i.e., Deaf children and adults, Deaf educators, and families of Deaf Kenyans). This had considerable influence on which words were selected for the dictionary. Also, the research procedure was not clearly thought out. At first, one of the Peace Corps

volunteers brainstormed what words should be included based on her one year of teaching experience at a single Deaf school. She then showed the words to the Deaf Kenyans in written English and asked them to produce them in front of the camera. If the Deaf Kenyans were not sure of the sign, the volunteer signed it herself. Later the Deaf Kenyans were asked to supplement this list (not to completely start over since words from the original list were already filmed). This kind of procedure does not adhere to general good practices for fieldwork linguistics, nor does it respect the sentiment outlined in the final SLCTR principle.

This final principle, in which the decisions on research procedures are made by the signed language community, received little explicit attention during the KSL CD-ROM dictionary project. Such procedures should be explicitly established early in the project based on discussion within the signed language community itself. Again, it is that community's knowledge that is being recorded and shared, so it should be done in the way they prefer.

## CONCLUSION

I have described the six principles of the sign language communities' terms of reference and reflected on whether these were included during the activities of a particular research partnership that occurred in the early 2000s in Kenya. As I have demonstrated, the SLCTR principles serve as a valuable guide to research ethics while doing research with signed language communities.

There are also other ethical principles that should be considered when working with signed language communities. In particular, one of the ethical principles of fieldwork says that the investigator should try as much as possible to not transform the setting with outside languages, values, and artifacts. This issue is relevant to signed language documentation projects where project members may have not given much thought to the role of the fieldworkers and the effect they may have on the community they are working with, for example, using groups of American Deaf people who model ASL as the high-status signed language (something I experienced in Kenya as a Peace Corps volunteer).

During the conference where this topic was originally presented and in this book, we are discussing positive developments in working with Deaf communities in Africa. The SLCTR principles are certainly an excellent example of this. And, as I have explained, we definitely incorporated certain aspects of these principles, but the project would have greatly benefited from embracing them all.

Before I finish my recounting of the lesson I have shared here, I would like to tell you a bit more about KSL in Kenya. The CD-ROM dictionary was published in 2004. At last, with the establishment of Kenya's constitution in 2010, the country now recognizes KSL as a language and considers it an official language of parliament.<sup>9</sup>

So, it is clear that the work that has been done with KSL has helped get it officially recognized. Hopefully it will be not much longer before it positively influences other domains such as communication access (e.g., signed language



**FIGURE 5. Julie with deaf girl.**

interpreting), Deaf education, and additional areas that allow for equal citizenship. However, of course, more research on the language and community needs to be done.

When I first returned to the United States from Kenya, I had fully intended to do a complete description of Kenyan Sign Language as my dissertation.

It has been almost 10 years since I left Kenya. Along the way I realized (with the aid of my graduate school and research experience, which includes explicit discussion of research ethics as outlined here) that I, as an American woman who uses another signed language (ASL), do not have the right to undertake that action alone. As a result, I believed that it would be unethical for me to proceed with a complete description of Kenyan Sign Language as my dissertation. However, like the SLCTR principles I have described, that does not mean I cannot do research on Kenyan Sign Language. It means instead that it is better to undertake such work when Deaf Kenyans invite me to do it with them. If they do, then I would be happy to serve as a consultant as they proceed with their own research on their own signed language.

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## NOTES

1. In the American Deaf community, it is standard practice to capitalize “Deaf” to refer to the cultural sense of the word, that is, to refer to a community that considers itself a cultural entity complete with a language and a set of norms. The lowercase “deaf” is a more neutral designation and refers instead to a person with some degree of hearing loss. I follow this practice but ask the reader to remember that such cultural identification may be different in the Kenyan community.

2. This chapter does not officially represent the opinions of the U.S. Peace Corps, the government of the United States, or any host country. As a returned Peace Corps volunteer, I present the information here as representing my opinions alone.

3. The Peace Corps, a U.S. volunteer service organization, has been in Kenya since 1965. Volunteers have been serving as education, health, and business volunteers. Since 1992, the Peace Corps has been sending volunteers to work in the Deaf education program in Kenya. These volunteers learn Kenyan Sign Language (KSL) and work in the primary schools with Deaf children or, more recently, with healthcare professionals in raising HIV/AIDS awareness.

4. I would like to make some limitations clear. I was not formally trained in anthropology or linguistics before attending the Peace Corps and living in Kenya for two years. My experiences were influenced by my own biases as a white, female, Deaf American in the United States and a fluent user of English and ASL. For example, I may have identified elements of KSL that are actually remnants from my own lifelong experience with ASL. Any errors in observations here are mine alone.

5. In Kenya, this is usually the language of the tribe or Kiswahili and English.

6. “Natural signed language” refers to a system that has evolved naturally when a critical mass of Deaf people interacts on a daily and prolonged basis. Natural signed languages do not include artificial signed systems (e.g., Signed Exact English), which are invented by educators or people working for the Deaf community in order to provide manual access to spoken languages.

7. Retrieved April 26, 2014, from <http://www.knad.org/ksl.php>

8. “Native speaker” refers to a person who has acquired a certain language in early childhood and grown up in an environment that uses that language daily.

9. Retrieved April 26, 2014, from <http://www.parliament.go.ke/plone/statutory-documents/constitution-2010/chapter-eight-the-legislature/part-5-parliament2019s-general-procedures-and-rules/120.-official-languages-of-parliament>

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