A Sociolinguistic Survey Report of the Dominican Republic Deaf Community

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Abstract

This survey investigated the sociolinguistic situation of the Dominican deaf community, researching factors such as ethnolinguistic identity, language use, language vitality, and language attitudes. After two months of Internet and library research, three researchers collected data in seven different Dominican Republic cities over a period of 3 weeks. This paper reports data collected during fieldwork through sociolinguistic questionnaires and participant observation. Results indicate that deaf Dominicans recognize themselves as a distinct ethnolinguistic community. Deaf Dominican attitudes toward American Sign Language (ASL) are mixed, but there is evidence that they are moving toward distinguishing Dominican Sign Language (LSD) from ASL. Given opportunity, they would like to see the development of LSD, increased Spanish literacy, more support from the government and hearing parents, better educational and employment opportunities, and increased access to interpreter services.

Contents

1 Dominican Republic demographics

The Dominican Republic (D.R.) is the second largest country in the Caribbean; is located on the island of Hispaniola, which it shares with Haiti, to the west (see figure 1).

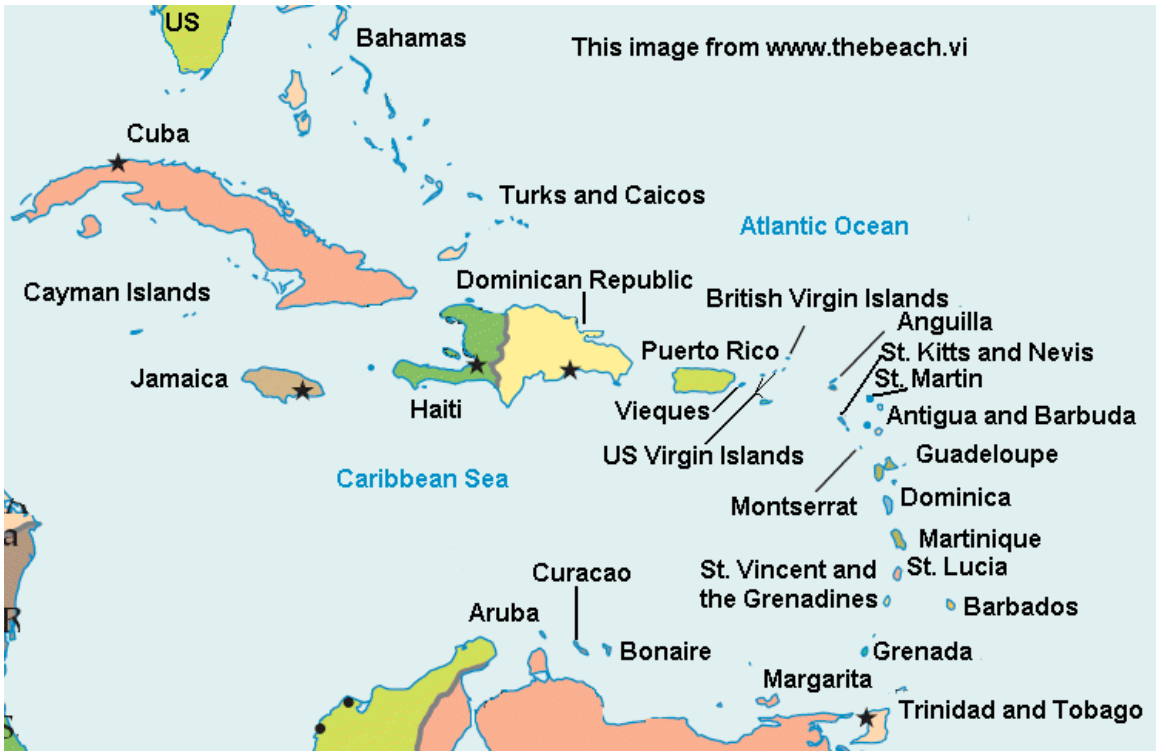

Figure 1. Caribbean map (thebeach.vi).

The total area of the Dominican Republic is about 30 thousand square miles. It is divided into thirty-one provinces and one district. Of the estimated 9.5 million people in the Dominican Republic, 1.9 million live in the capital, Santo Domingo. Santiago, located in the center of the country, is the second largest city with a population of 507,000. For this survey, we also visited La Romana, Puerto Plata, La Vega, Bonao, and Moca. The seven cities in which we collected language data are shown on the map in figure 2. We did not survey the western part of the Dominican Republic because reports indicated that in that area of the country there were smaller and more isolated deaf[1] populations, with little access to education or a conventionalized sign language. Their signing is widely believed to be home signs, invented for enabling basic communication with family.

[1] The term “deaf” is used instead of “Deaf” to refer to people with a hearing loss who may or may not culturally identify themselves with a distinct deaf identity and the use of sign language

Figure 2. Dominican Republic map (www.cia.gov).

The Dominican Republic is a developing country with limited resources. As a result, there is a lack of access to good health care, which leads to a high-disability rate. Disabled persons in the Dominican Republic are often isolated from society and face lack of education, high unemployment rates, and exploitation. Lopez (2005) indicates that some people believe that "moral violations or supernatural causes are responsible for an individual's disability and can result in feelings of guilt or shame for the family and lead to ostracizing the individual with disabilities" (p. 10). Even for families who want to help their disabled child, sufficient resources may not be available or affordable.

International Child Care (2008) states that "six out of every one hundred Dominicans have some form of physical or mental disability, many of them children." Lack of medical care during pregnancies results in some Dominican mothers contracting German measles, increasing the risk of their children being affected by blindness, deafness, or heart disease. *Dominican Today* (2006) reports that, every year, approximately 1,150 children are affected in this way. Most of the deaf Dominicans[2] we met during survey became deaf through sickness or a physical accident. People associated with the deaf community said that there is very little generational deafness in the Dominican Republic.

The exact deaf or signing deaf population in the Dominican Republic is difficult to determine. According to Dr. Soper's (2008) deaf population estimate, which takes into consideration a country's gross domestic product and how that could influence the health environments of each country and related populations of deaf people who may use a sign language, the Dominican Republic had approximately 18,000 signing deaf people in 2000.The Ethnologue lists the Dominican deaf population at 474,490 (Gordon 2005). Dominican deaf people indicated during this survey that Santo Domingo has the largest deaf population in the Dominican Republic, followed by Santiago. Other cities reported to have large deaf populations are Moca, Puerto Plata, and La Vega, but precise estimates of deaf populations in each city were not given.

[2] Following the writings of Gerner de Garcia (1990), this paper refers to deaf individuals in the Dominican Republic as Dominican deaf, not to be confused with deaf individuals from Dominica.

2 Research questions

For this survey, we used a rapid appraisal (RA) method of sociolinguistic survey, which investigates and gathers information to provide an overall perspective of the language community situation in a relatively short amount of time. We assessed social factors that influence language use and could ultimately influence language-development projects, in addition to exploring the question of language classification. This particular RA survey gathered sociolinguistic information about the Dominican deaf community using participant observation and sociolinguistic questionnaires (SLQ). Wordlists and recorded text testing was also conducted during fieldwork, but results from these survey tools will be reported in subsequent papers. Detailed description of the SLQ research instrument is found in appendix A. Our two main research questions (RQ) were:

RQ1: *What is the sociolinguistic situation of the deaf community in the Dominican Republic?*
To determine the sociolinguistic profile of the deaf community in the Dominican Republic, participant observation and SLQs were used to investigate ethnolinguistic identity, language standardization and vitality, and language attitudes toward local sign varieties and Spanish.

RQ2: *What is the language attitude of the deaf community in the Dominican Republic towards American Sign Language (ASL)?*
Participant observations and SLQs were used to determine language attitudes toward ASL.

3 Sociolinguistic factors relevant to the Dominican deaf community

In this section, we address RQ1 by exploring factors that have significant ties to the use of sign language in the Dominican deaf community. Gerner de Garcia (1990) lists five major influences on LSD: native teachers who obtain their teacher training for the deaf in the USA, tourists visiting the Dominican Republic who know ASL, missionaries and non-profit organizations that come to assist the Dominican deaf community, young deaf Dominicans who go to the USA for their education, and the use of sign language books and other materials. We discuss these and others factors in the following sections: education, social groups, religion, social access, and language use.

Throughout this paper, LSD (Lengua de Señas Dominicanas) is used to refer to the sign language used in the Dominican Republic. Gerner de Garcia (1990) previously referred to it as Dominican Republic Sign Language (DRSL). We gathered thirteen SLQs (see table 1 for participant metadata) and participant observation from deaf and hearing people who have significant ties to the use of sign language in the Dominican Republic.

Table 1. SLQ participant metadata

Participant	Hearing status	Gender	Age	Deaf family members	Location
1	Deaf	Female	16	No	La Romana
2	Deaf	Female	44	No	Santiago
3	Deaf	Male	27	Yes	Santiago
4	Deaf	Male	34	No	Santo Domingo
5	Deaf	Male	37	No	Santo Domingo
6	Deaf	Male	38	No	Bonao
7	Deaf	Male	42	Yes	Moca
8	Deaf	Male	48	Yes	Santo Domingo
9	Hard of hearing	Male	28	No	La Vega

Table 1. SLQ participant metadata (continued)

10	Hard of hearing	Male	43	Yes	Santiago
11	Hard of hearing	Female	35	Yes	Santo Domingo
12	Hearing	Female	53	Yes	Santo Domingo
13	Hearing	Female	Unknown	No	Puerto Plata

3.1 Education

There is a high dropout rate in the public schools in the Dominican Republic. Although there is a law that a student cannot fail during the first three years of school, some deaf children leave early due to frustration in the learning environment. Transportation is cost-prohibitive for some students to travel to school, especially in provinces where deaf schools are farther away. When students do travel these long distances, they may arrive late with few hours left for learning. In addition, rainy season and family issues may prohibit school attendance. The *Dominican Today* (2005) states that, in general, 50 percent of all students will finish four years of schooling, 22 percent will finish eight years, and only 10 percent will finish secondary education. Educational communication policies in deaf schools (e.g. signing, lip-reading, reading and writing Spanish, etc.) affects the language use of the Dominican deaf community. A few deaf children have been mainstreamed (without interpreters) into public schools (Gerner de Garcia 1990) but there is no post-secondary education available for deaf students in the Dominican Republic. If deaf students want to pursue advanced education, they must find their own funding.

3.1.1 National deaf schools

Before the first deaf school was founded, parents who had financial resources might have sent their children, especially boys, to Puerto Rico or the USA to receive their education. This changed in 1967 when the National Rehabilitation Center established the first and largest national school for deaf people in Santo Domingo, La Escuela Nacional de Sordomudos (Meline 1996). Initially, it used an oral education philosophy (speaking and lip-reading Spanish) with involvement of Uruguayan educators, though students are reported to have used sign language outside of class.

In 1976, three Dominicans traveled to Rome and learned about the Total Communication (TC) philosophy (which encourages the use of any mode of communication based on the needs of the individual). These Dominicans decided to test TC at La Escuela Nacional de Sordomudos in Santo Domingo. According to the current school director, TC was fully accepted in 1978 as the educational philosophy of the school. However, Gerner de Garcia (1990) states that the implementation of the TC philosophy was unsuccessful as a result of a teachers strike in 1985. According to the director at La Escuela Nacional de Sordomudos, students now begin with oral training and switch to a sign language focus if they are not succeeding orally. Consequently, La Escuela Nacional de Sordomudos tends to put the non-signing teachers with the younger students and signing teachers with the older students.

La Escuela Nacional de Sordomudos is free for students, with the exception of a small transportation fee based on economic status. La Escuela Nacional de Sordomudos also has ten satellite schools throughout the country and hopes in the future to have a deaf school in each of the thirty-one provinces. Apart from funding, the satellite schools have no direct coordination with La Escuela Nacional de Sordomudos in Santo Domingo and most of the smaller and poorer satellite schools have few resources for their students. It is important to note that, although a school may have the word “National” in the title, it is not necessarily fully funded or managed by the government. In fact, there are no completely government-run deaf schools in the Dominican Republic.

National deaf schools across the country follow the regular Dominican school schedule, offering 4 hours of school in the morning and/or afternoon, and many teachers work both morning and afternoon shifts because of the lack of available teachers. The national deaf schools are often staffed with teachers who have had no training in deaf education because training is not available, nor are they fluent in sign language. Most teachers who know some sign language learned it from their students or fellow teachers. The majority of the teachers are not involved in the deaf community outside of school. Deaf adults are not allowed to be teachers but they can work as assistants. Gerner de Garcia (1990) stated that La Universidad de Pedro Henriquez is a private university that offers a training program for teachers of the deaf. This program was established in the 1970s with the assistance from a South American deaf educator. In the 1980s, this program was struggling to maintain enrollment and, at the time of our survey, seems to be closed. Many deaf people we talked with indicated that they were unsatisfied with current deaf education, in part because teachers are not sure how to teach deaf students and tend to focus more on keeping the students busy through rote learning, rather than ensuring that their students are comprehending the material.

Of the students who attend the national deaf schools, most do not know sign language when they first arrive, unless they have deaf family members or have interacted with deaf adults. Some students arrive with home signs, some of which may be considered vulgar by the teachers who prefer not to use those signs (e.g. MOTHER – indicating a female's breast). In general, deaf students seem to be learning sign language from deaf teaching assistants and other deaf adults in the community. These students then teach other classmates who are more isolated from the adult deaf community. Although many of the national deaf schools say that they use TC (perhaps following the philosophy of the main school in Santo Domingo), many lean more toward the oral method of education. Observation during visits to various national schools found that the majority of teachers used their voices, did not sign much with their students, and requested that their students, even when embarrassed to do so, also use their voices.

3.1.2 Oral deaf schools

The Instituto de Ayuda al Sordo Santa Rosa is another large deaf school in Santo Domingo. In 2004, eight teachers from the Instituto de Ayuda al Sordo Santa Rosa and the Instituto Alternativo in San Pedro spent three weeks of oral education training in the USA. They were supported by a non-profit organization which assists professionals in providing educational programs for auditory development for deaf children (Surís 2004). Students at Santa Rosa are considered hard-of-hearing because the students must have at least 60 decibels of hearing to attend. Even though it is an oral school, many students still use sign language outside of the classroom. Santa Rosa has at least one satellite school in Boca Chica, an area near Santo Domingo.

Escuela de Sordos Sara Esther Moran, located in Moca, is also an oral school. However, there does not seem to be a strict adherence to a policy of no signing in the classroom even though officially they are to be oral-only environments. One of the founders of this oral school told us that he hopes that ASL materials will be used in the classrooms and that all the teachers will start using sign language.

3.1.3 Other deaf schools

In 1984, an American missionary who had been working with the Puerto Rican deaf community visited the Dominican Republic and saw an opportunity to work in the Dominican deaf community. As a result, a deaf school was established in Bonao. This was the start of many more deaf schools to be founded by various religious organizations, most of which are connected with organizations in the USA. Although these schools average fewer students than the national schools, their teachers are usually better trained and the schools have access to more resources. The religious schools are mainly funded by individuals and religious organizations in the USA and are free or have a minimal fee for students.

In Santo Domingo, Centro Cristiano Educativo Para Sordos teaches signing and Spanish literacy simultaneously. They teach the first year using sign language and add Spanish during the second year. This school typically does not accept students older than 14 who are not already fluent in sign language because they believe that, after this age, language learning abilities have drastically decreased without sufficient language input. Centro Cristiano Educativo Para Sordos receives children who are not doing well at La Escuela Nacional de Sordomudos. The Centro Cristiano school used to be a residential school with students staying all year round, four nights at school and three nights at home.

Table 2 lists the known educational centers (organized by location) for deaf people currently available in the Dominican Republic.

Table 2. Deaf education centers

School Name	Location
Escuela Nacional de Sordomudos	Santo Domingo
Instituto de Ayuda al Sordo Santa Rosa	Santo Domingo
Centro Cristiano Educativo Para Sordos	Santo Domingo
Two self-contained classrooms at Mi Esperanza	Santo Domingo
Escuela de Sordos Vida y Esperanza	Santo Domingo
La Escuela de Sordomudos	Barahona
Colegio Bautista Escuela de Sordos – Robert Bell	Bonao
Hogar de Niño	La Romana
Escuela Bautista Para Sordos	La Vega
Escuela de Sordos Sara Esther Moran	Moca
Montessori Deaf Preschool	Puerto Plata
Escuela Nacional de Sordomudos de Santiago	Santiago
Centro Alternativo Experimental del Sordo (CAES)	San Pedro de Macorís
Escuela Nacional de Sordos	San Francisco de Macorís
Assemblies of God Deaf Schools	Bani, Higuey, La Romana, Azua, Dajabon, La Alta Gracia, Santo Domingo de Santa Risa, Neyba, Sabana de la Mar, Hato Mayor
National Deaf Schools	Puerto Plata, Villa Consuelo, La Vega, Higuey, Bani, Jarabacoa, San Cristóbal, San Juan de Lamaguana, Esperanza

3.2 Organized social groups

Deaf Dominicans freely associate with other deaf people they meet, regardless of which Dominican city they call home. Most small cities do not offer many activities for their local deaf residents, so deaf people from these places will travel to the larger cities to socialize at the deaf club or deaf association. There are also many informal gatherings which take place in local parks, street corners and homes, and deaf people report that sign language use may vary based on each social network.

As the Dominican deaf community has developed, so have organizations serving the community. The oldest association, La Asociación Pro-Educación de los Sordomudos, Inc. was created in the 1960s by a group of parents of deaf children. This association set up a club for young deaf people who attended La Escuela Nacional de Sordomudos in Santo Domingo. Later in 1982, those young people, now grown, started the Deaf Club. According to Cultura Sorda (2006), it is common to see deaf clubs form 15 to 25

years after the first deaf school is established. In 1986, Gallaudet University (Washington D.C., USA) sent a group of people to Santo Domingo to assist and encourage the leaders of the Deaf Club (Gerner de Garcia 1990). The Deaf Club's goal is to strengthen the deaf community with access to improved education and higher employment rates. Everyone at the club was supportive of research of LSD because they want help establishing it as an official sign language distinct from ASL. Deaf Club meetings take place on Sundays at two o'clock behind La Escuela Nacional de Sordomudos in Santo Domingo.

The Deaf Club hopes to help start small associations in every province. These would act as branches of the main association in the capital. The local disability association has invited the deaf community to be a part of their work with the government, to gain more rights and support for disabled Dominicans. However, deaf people are not proactively joining this effort, due in part to language barriers and lack of motivation. Reportedly, the disability association is moving forward without them.

Another major deaf organization is the Asociación Nacional de Sordos (ANSORDO), also located in Santo Domingo, and established around the year 2000. It is using the Deaf Club's building in Santo Domingo to host their meetings. ANSORDO's main activity is presenting on various topics that they believe will build up the deaf community. They believe that it is important to study indigenous signs and hope that linguistic professionals will become familiar with its richness and identify important grammatical aspects. There are at least twenty-five members who attend ANSORDO meetings, usually held on Saturdays at two o'clock, and announced through a text message to deaf member's cell phones.

There are also other non-profit organizations that are involved with the deaf community. The Starkey Hearing Foundation has provided hearing aids to hundreds of deaf adults and children in the Dominican Republic in 2007 and 2008. The Partners for a Greater Voice helps parents and professionals expand their understanding and vision of what is possible for deaf children, and build skills in auditory development and oralism. They also publish *El Oído* which is given free to teachers, parents, and professionals in the Dominican Republic (2008). In 1993, the Instituto Tecnológico de Santo Domingo (INTEC) started offering a degree in speech-language pathology. This course included a class on "language for the deaf."

3.3 Religious groups

Religion plays a major role in the deaf community and their sign language use. According to Gerner de Garcia" (1990, p. 265), "After the deaf club the church seems to be the next most important organization for the deaf people in the Dominican Republic." Baptists, Assemblies of God, and Jehovah's Witnesses are the main religious groups serving the Dominican deaf community. There is one Catholic Church in Santo Domingo which had, and may still have, an interpreted mass. It is not uncommon for deaf people to attend one church service for awhile and then switch to another, often depending on the social networks present at each church service. See table 3 for a list of known deaf religious services in the locations we surveyed.

Table 3. Deaf religious services

City	Religious Services
Bonao	Baptist
La Romana	Assemblies of God, Jehovah's Witnesses
La Vega	Baptist, Jehovah's Witnesses
Moca	Baptist
Puerto Plata	Baptist, Jehovah's Witnesses
Santiago	Assemblies of God, Baptist, Jehovah's Witnesses
Santo Domingo	Assemblies of God, Baptist, Catholic, Jehovah's Witnesses

These groups offer various free-of-charge activities to the deaf community, such as education, Bible studies, and deaf-led or interpreted camps that include deaf people from all over the country and even internationally. Churches have offered a few sign language courses to the local communities in different cities. In some towns, the ASL sign for CHURCH refers to evangelical churches, whereas the same sign with an 'I' initialization for the Spanish word for church, "Iglesia," refers to the Catholic Church.

3.4 Social access

This section discusses social access issues related to deaf Dominicans such as employment, interpreter availability, and communication access. Each of these factors affects the language deaf people may choose or be forced to use in any given situation.

3.4.1 Employment

In order to find better-paid employment, a person must have a certificate showing completion of a certain level of education but many deaf Dominicans do not have this education certificate. In addition, many deaf people must work close to home or close to public transportation options because, even though deaf people are now allowed to get a driver's license, it is difficult to do so and not encouraged by the government.

Most deaf Dominicans work as custodians, guards, teacher's assistants in deaf schools, hairdressers, painters, tailors, carpenters, hotel workers, or taxi drivers. They primarily work in the Zona Franca (factory zone) but rarely do multiple deaf people work together. Many deaf Dominicans wish the government would be more supportive of the deaf community by setting laws for deaf people to have the right to work and receive equal wages as hearing people. Some deaf Dominicans view the government as being more supportive of blind and other disabled people and forgetting about the deaf community.

There is an opportunity for higher education for only a select few deaf Dominicans through Cooperative Association of States for Scholarships (CASS), which is affiliated with the Center for Intercultural Education and Development. CASS does not require that students already have a high school diploma, however, some stay in the USA to earn advanced degrees. They offer scholarships to disabled people (most of whom are deaf) or to hearing people who desire to become sign-language interpreters. Students are recruited from deaf-directed advocacy groups from across Central America and the Caribbean and most students who have received CASS scholarships in the Dominican Republic attended Mount Aloysius College in Georgetown, Pennsylvania. A 2005 CASS report stated that about 95 percent of deaf CASS alumni are employed in their home countries (p. 1). At least eighteen Dominican deaf students have completed the program and now work in the Dominican Republic. Two hearing Dominicans, Miriam Encarnación and María Valerio, received CASS scholarships and returned to the Dominican Republic to work as sign language interpreters for a local TV station, Congress, and the Dominican court system (CASS 2005).

3.4.2 Communication

In 2002, 63 percent of disabled people had no access to technology such as computers, telephones, and the Internet. Only 1.5 percent had Internet access, 3 percent owned a computer, and 32 percent had phones (Paula 2006). However, at the time of our survey in 2008, it was very common for deaf adults to have cell phones for text messaging. Most of the deaf community goes to Internet cafes to use Oovoo and Camfrog for Internet chat opportunities with deaf friends from all over the country and world.

According to participants, the majority of sign-language interpreters are not very skilled in signing. One group of hearing people, who have functioned as interpreters in various contexts throughout the country, is currently working toward the establishment of an interpreters association. Currently, school teachers

(who may not be very skilled in LSD) may be called to interpret if the government or police need an interpreter. However, interpreters are not usually summoned in these situations, despite the difficulty law enforcers may have in communication. As a result, deaf people may not know what is happening or have the opportunity to effectively defend themselves. Hearing people are often viewed by deaf people as not very helpful to the deaf community, even if they know sign language. Deaf people perceive most hearing people as being patronizing, too busy to actively learn from deaf experiences, and lacking motivation to learn sign language from native deaf users of the language.

3.5 Language use

This section covers the history of sign language in the Dominican Republic, our findings on intelligibility of ASL, language acquisition and attitudes, and sign-language dictionaries.

3.5.1 History of sign language in the Dominican Republic

There does not appear to be a significant deaf population over the age of 60 in the Dominican Republic, nor a sign language evidenced in that generation. Deaf informants indicated that the dictator Trujillo (in office from 1930-1961) was responsible for killing a whole generation of deaf people when pursuing ethnic cleansing and social purification in the country through large-scale massacres. It is possible that an older sign language died with the majority of that generation.

Another possibility is that a developed sign language was not in existence in the Dominican Republic until after the founding of the first deaf school in 1967. Soon after the first school was established, missionaries from the United States started setting up deaf ministries and schools in the Dominican Republic. Deaf children were only educated together for seven or eight years before ASL was introduced by missionaries in the 1970's and the deaf community may not have had enough time to fully develop an indigenous sign language (Gerner de Garcia 1994).

Another rendition of LSD history that deaf people reported was that there was no sign language in the country until the 1970s when the president of the Dominican Republic bought ASL books and distributed them across the country. The deaf Dominicans started using some of the signs from those books but it was not until the 1980's when more Americans came that ASL rapidly spread. In a few cities, people talked about a Dominican deaf man who studied in New York and introduced ASL (or possibly Signed Exact English) to the Dominican Republic. People looked up to him and started using his signs instead of continuing with their indigenous LSD.

3.5.2 Language acquisition

The majority of deaf Dominicans learn sign language either from friends or at school. Most sign language classes that are offered target hearing adults. When asked about signing skills, eight out of ten deaf questionnaire participants said that most signing deaf people have average signing skills, and most hearing signers have average or below average signing skills (see figure 3).

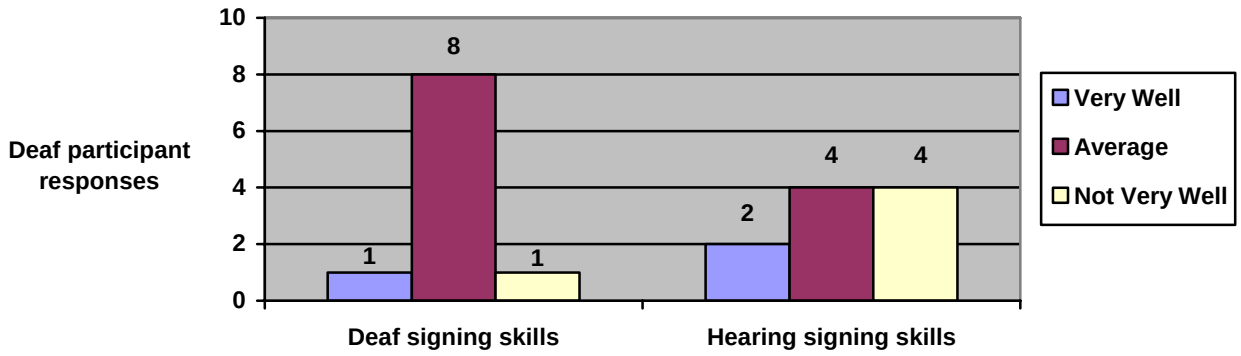

Figure 3. Perceived signing skills of hearing and deaf individuals

Deaf Dominicans may change their signing when interacting with hearing people, adding more expression or voice to help hearing people understand. About two-thirds of our ten participants said that deaf Dominicans sign differently with other deaf Dominicans than they do with hearing people (see figure 4).

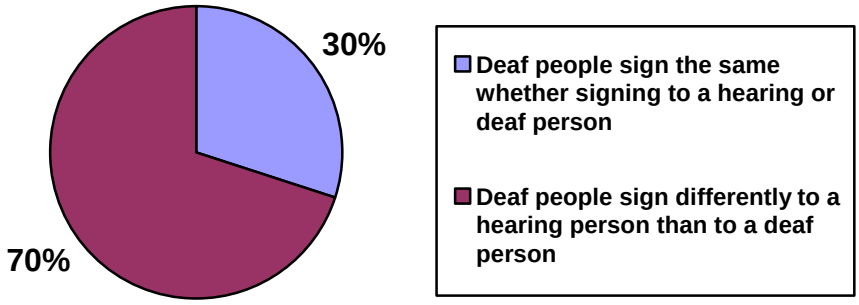

Figure 4. Signing differences of deaf people to hearing individuals vs. other deaf individuals.

Deaf Dominicans usually interact more with other deaf people than with the hearing community because they feel that they share more in common and communication is easier within the deaf community. Deaf Dominicans indicated that hearing people may make fun of deaf people who sign in public. Other deaf people choose to interact more with hearing people because they believe it will increase opportunities and allow them to interact with people of higher intelligence.

3.5.3 Language variation

According to the majority of our questionnaire participants, geographical region is the primary influencer of LSD variation (see figure 5).

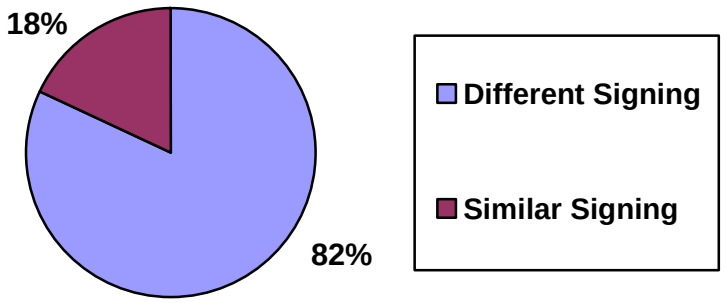

Figure 5. Perception of signing variation within the Dominican Republic.

Although most participants indicated that they would prefer sign language to be standardized in the Dominican Republic so that communication would be clearer, they also want to respect regional differences in order to retain distinct cultures. Santo Domingo and Santiago were mentioned as the main hubs where deaf people gather. There is notable sign similarity along the middle of the Dominican Republic because that is where the main schools and services are located and people are very mobile in that area. In the far eastern and western parts of the country, deaf people are more isolated and have a different way of signing (perhaps only using home signs and gestures).

According to our questionnaire participants, neither gender nor age influences sign variety, although women were decidedly absent from association meetings that the survey team attended. If women rarely leave their homes, they may have a smaller sign vocabulary. The speed of signing varies and may be related to educational levels. In schools, many younger students could barely fingerspell their names and could not converse very well, whereas older age groups conversed freely, although sign fluency varied.

Answers varied widely when deaf Dominicans were asked if signing in the Dominican Republic is the same as any other countries. A few people said LSD is different than the sign language used in Jamaica because Jamaicans use ASL. However, in general, LSD is said to be similar to the sign languages in the USA, Haiti, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico, but different than Cuba and Panama. According to people who have had contact with Haitian Sign Language, differences between Haitian and Dominican signs are mainly fingerspelling and initialization, due to the differing majority languages, French Creole instead of Spanish. Many deaf Dominicans want their sign language to be recognized as unique from any other country's sign language.

3.5.4 Intelligibility of ASL

Many deaf people stated that the name of their sign language was ASL. One deaf student clarified that they call it ASL, although it is not the same sign language used in the USA, which is American Sign Language. Various people believe that LSD is roughly 70% ASL and 30% Dominican, but that the similarity is not confined to a specific domain.

The few deaf Dominicans, who had attended school in the USA, noted that the signing was slightly different in the USA but not drastically so, making ASL easy to acquire. Some survey participants said that only the deaf people who exclusively use home signs and/or gestures (more common in rural areas) would not understand ASL.

ASL does appear to be used in the Dominican Republic in some domains and with varying levels of intelligibility. Private Christian deaf schools in the Dominican Republic use more ASL; one reason could be their connection to the USA. In these schools, ASL is the preferred form of communication, although they do mention keeping some of the local signs from the community. Anyone who has had interaction with a deaf religious ministry in the Dominican Republic has most likely learned some ASL.

3.5.5 Language attitudes

In the Dominican Republic, ASL has a higher status than indigenous Dominican signs, which are sometimes referred to as "wrong" signs. However, there is a deaf group which has tried to remove ASL and construct a new LSD. Some indigenous signs have been mixed with ASL, and it is difficult to know how much of the indigenous signing still exists. Indigenous signs may not be readily shared with outsiders due to the status symbol of ASL or the nationality and hearing status of the person trying to collect the indigenous signs (Gerner de Garcia 1990). ASL is considered a beneficial language to know for traveling and interpreting between deaf Americans and Dominicans.

Throughout the Dominican Republic, we saw the ASL sign DUMB being used by deaf Dominicans to describe other deaf people. In our observation, that particular sign seems to have a different connotation in the Dominican Republic than it does in the USA. In the USA, the sign DUMB is associated with something or someone silly, stupid, or generally lacking in intelligence, while in the Dominican Republic it seems to specifically refer to someone with very poor language skills. For example, deaf students called other students "dumb" when they could not fingerspell their own name (and it was not uncommon to find deaf people of all ages who could not fingerspell their names) and deaf adults used it to refer to other deaf people who only knew a few signs.

Deaf Dominicans sign freely in public, although some will not for fear of being taken advantage of by hearing people. The majority of our questionnaire participants said that signing and speaking have equal value because they allow access into both deaf and hearing communities. Although Spanish is considered important, many have low Spanish literacy levels. The majority believe that it is necessary to know Spanish so one can understand fingerspelled words. Speaking is important in order to better maneuver in the hearing community and also for ease of talking to parents. On various occasions, we noticed deaf people using their voice with other deaf people to get their attention.

Nine out of ten questionnaire participants indicated that a person must be deaf to be selected as a leader of the deaf community. About half indicated that it was important for the person to sign and the other half said it did not matter. Only two said that a deaf leader must be able to speak and communicate well with the hearing community. In contrast, eight indicated that Spanish literacy is a high value while a good education was not nearly as important (see figure 6).

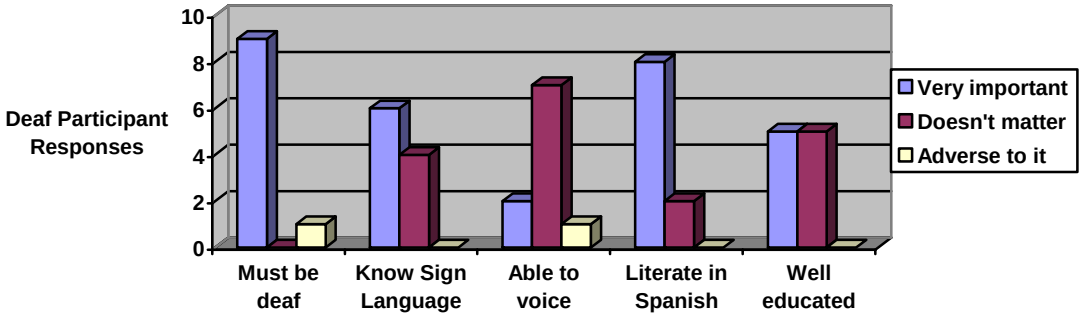

Figure 6. Desired characteristics of leaders in the deaf community.

3.5.6 Sign language dictionaries

There are a number of sign language dictionaries that are in use in the Dominican Republic, the vast majority of which are ASL dictionaries. "Before…1984, the Dominicans learned some signs through the book *Curso Basico*, the Spanish version of T.J. O'Rourke's *A Basic Course in Manual Communication*.

This book was brought from Puerto Rico and contributed to the lexical borrowings from ASL." (Gerner de Garcia, 1990, p. 270) The majority of deaf schools that we visited in the Dominican Republic had a copy of *The Basic Course in Manual Communication* in English. Some of the religious organizations are also known to have used Lottie Riekhof's *Joy of Signing*. Schools may choose to use ASL because they need a larger vocabulary than what is available in LSD.

A group of people, connected to the Deaf Association (ANSORDO) in Santo Domingo, have met to publish an LSD dictionary. The 89-page publication of Serie Lengua de Señas Dominicanas took place in June 2008, although many deaf people, even those involved in the making, had yet to see a published copy as of October 2008. It is arranged by topic and took over a year to complete. According to some people, this dictionary simply changes ASL signs to incorporate Spanish initialization (e.g. ASL sign for WATER now is signed with an "A" handshape since the Spanish word for "water" is "agua" and "agua" starts with "A"). Others believe that signs were borrowed from other Spanish-speaking countries and, reportedly, some signs that were not included in the dictionary, because they were "ASL," were not actually ASL signs.

This dictionary has caused a lot of mixed feelings among the deaf and hearing people who have been using an ASL variety of signing. There is a great desire for a sign-language dictionary that would be helpful for deaf people to learn Spanish and hearing people to learn LSD. Deaf people want to bring prestige to their language and are open to various methods of pursuing this end. There are plans to create a second dictionary with just a small group of deaf people leading its formation. Their plan is to include sign variations from throughout the Dominican Republic.

4 Conclusion

This survey addressed two research questions related to the following topics: the sociolinguistic situation of the Dominican deaf community and language attitudes toward ASL.

We found that the Dominican deaf community is most active and prominent near the center of the country and larger cities where mobility is high, due to better road and transportation systems. Deaf Dominicans frequently gather together in Santo Domingo and Santiago, the two largest cities, leading to significant language and social contact. Although educational communication philosophies and approaches differ among schools, most deaf people seem to embrace sign language regardless of their educational background. Individuals may choose to attend their preferred deaf club, association, or church, but these decisions do not seem to prevent the community as a whole from being fairly unified. Deaf Dominicans indicate that sign language variation in the Dominican Republic is mostly dependent on geographical region. Yet, with high degrees of mobility, deaf people do interact and understand each other well.

In general, the Dominican deaf community is becoming more unified in their pursuit for a better life for their community. However, they feel that, because of lack of Spanish literacy and difficulty communicating with the government, their movement toward these ends is stymied. Given opportunity, the Dominican deaf people report that they would like to see the development of LSD, increased Spanish literacy, more support from the government and hearing parents, better educational and employment opportunities, and increased access to interpreter services.

Although some deaf people in the Dominican Republic indicate that they use ASL and others that they use LSD, a sign language distinct from ASL, deaf people in general identify strongly with each other as Dominicans. Some deaf people believe that, in order to embrace their Dominican deaf identity, they need to remove ASL influence from LSD. Others have very positive perceptions of ASL, giving it slightly higher prestige than their distinct indigenous signs. According to general community perception, there is some intelligibility of ASL in the Dominican deaf community. Many of the school administrators indicate that ASL is and will continue to be used in their schools, further solidifying ASL's use in future deaf generations.

However, many deaf association and club leaders indicate that they would use LSD materials if they were available. There has been a recent initiative for the creation of an LSD dictionary which shows that adult members of the deaf community are moving toward distinguishing their language from ASL. Deaf Dominicans seem to be moving toward desiring a bilingual sign situation, retaining ASL, while developing and standardizing their indigenous LSD. Whether or not ASL or LSD materials would better meet the linguistic and sociolinguistic needs of the Dominican deaf community seems to ultimately depend on whether the community's language attitudes lead them toward or away from supporting ASL or LSD as the primary language of their community.

Appendix A: Sociolinguistic questionnaire

This section describes the contents of the SLQ as well as the administration procedure for the SLQ used in the Dominican Republic. The following SLQ is an updated version of the SLQ used in a sign-language survey conducted in Peru in 2007 (Parks and Parks, in press).

A.1 SLQ instrument

English and Spanish questionnaire templates were created in Microsoft Word containing open fields for descriptive answers and fields for closed questions with answers such as "yes/no" or level of importance. table 4 lists the SLQ questions used in the Dominican Republic with both hearing and deaf people. The questions focused on gathering a wide variety of information about the social situation of the deaf communities and sign-language use and attitudes of the participants.

Questions 1 through 11 gathered basic demographics of the deaf community early in fieldwork that could be used with hearing or deaf people. Questions 12 through 19 collected metadata (personal background information) for any person who was providing language data. The final section (questions 20 through 40) probed language use and attitudes specifically among deaf individuals. The SLQ also included a brief description of the research project, opportunity for the participant to indicate consent to be involved in the project, and allowed the participant to indicate what level of access others could have in the future to the language data they provided.

Table 4. Sociolinguistic questionnaire

Deaf services and meeting places:

1. List associations and organizations serving deaf people in your area, indicating their role:
2. Do deaf people attend religious services? If no, explain why not. If yes, please answer the following: What services do they attend? Why do deaf people attend services? What language(s) does the service use? How many deaf people attend these services?
3. Do deaf people meet at any other places than you listed above? How often and with what activities?
4. Please list the deaf schools in your area. How many years of education do these schools offer students? Please identify the communication philosophy of each school (oral, bilingual, TC, etc.)
5. Are there interpreters available in your area? If so, please answer the following: How many? How are they trained? Where do they work? How many of these would you consider to be skilled interpreters?
6. Please list any published materials about the sign language in your area.
7. Do deaf people in your community interact with deaf people from other places in the D.R.? If so, please answer the following: Which other communities? Where and why do they meet?
8. Have deaf people here interacted with deaf people from other countries? If so, which countries?
9. What type of jobs do most deaf people have in the D.R.?
10. Do most deaf people in your area have a DVD player and/or computer in their house?
11. Please list the leaders, hearing or deaf, of your local deaf community.

Table 4. Sociolinguistic questionnaire (continued)

Participant information:

12. Roughly how old are you now?
13. Do you have any deaf family members? If so, who?
14. Where do you currently live?
15. How many years of education have you completed?
16. Please name the school(s) you have attended.
17. Where do you interact with deaf people?
18. At what age did you first start signing? Where and instructed by whom?
19. Do you sign, speak, or use both when communicating with other people?

Language use and attitudes:

20. Where do deaf people learn sign language in your community?
21. When choosing a president in your deaf association/organization, how important are the following? S/he must be deaf (not hearing)? S/he must sign well? S/he must be able to speak? S/he must be able to read and write well? S/he must be well educated?
22. How many deaf people sign in your community? How well do they sign?
23. How many hearing people use sign language in your community? How well do they sign?
24. Do deaf people sign the same with hearing people as they do with each other? If no, how do deaf people sign differently?
25. Do you interact more with deaf or hearing people? Why?
26. Do deaf parents sign with their hearing children?
27. Do hearing parents sign with their deaf children?
28. How do deaf people feel when signing in public?
29. Are hearing people supportive of the deaf community? Explain your answer.
30. Do all deaf people in the D.R. sign the same? If no, what factors lead to different signing?
31. Do you want everyone in the D.R. to sign the same? Explain your answer.
32. What is the name of the sign language in your area?
33. Is your sign language like the sign language of any other country? If yes, which one(s)?
34. Do you think that it is better for deaf people to use sign language or spoken language? Explain your answer.
35. How well do you read and write Spanish?
36. If language materials (e.g. Bible) were available in your local sign language, would you use them? If not, why not? If yes or sometimes, when and where?
37. What does your deaf community need most to succeed in life?
38. Country best for deaf people to live in (most services, education, support, etc.).
39. Country's sign language that is the easiest to understand.
40. Country with the most beautiful sign language.

Additional Notes:

A.2 SLQ procedure and limitations

After explaining the purpose of the questionnaire, obtaining volunteer consent, and identifying the participants' desired accessibility of the data, the questionnaire was administered. Participant responses were typed directly into the questionnaire forms on the researcher's laptop. Upon completion of the survey fieldwork, the questionnaire forms were imported into Microsoft Excel for easier analysis of participant responses.

Because the sampling method was based on whoever was willing and available to talk with us, we tended to work with participants who were more extroverted, educated, and the leaders of each community. It may not be a comprehensive representation of micro-cultures within each deaf community.

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