OFFICIAL LANGUAGE, OFFICIAL NAMES? A CASE STUDY OF SASL PLACE NAMES

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ABSTRACT

The pending officialisation of South African Sign Language (SASL) as one of South Africa's twelve official language raises critical questions about its standardisation, application in official domains, and the recognition of SASL place names. Place-name planning, a subset of corpus planning, gains relevance as the Deaf communities uniquely assign signed names to places, often resulting in parallel toponymy that is overlooked in a formal context. This study examines the intersection of language officialisation and the recognition of signed place names and explores the impact of the diverse naming practices employed to create place-name signs. Using a selection of signed names and interviews from an ongoing documentation project, this paper explores the dynamics of language contact, cultural identity, and official recognition in the context of SASL toponymy.

Keywords: Cultural heritage, place-name planning, signed place names, signed toponymy, South African Sign Language (SASL)

1. INTRODUCTION

Sign languages, the rich cultural and linguistic systems of Deaf communities, are often marginalised, functioning as minority and sometimes indigenous languages. Defining minority status involves more than numbers; it's about the unequal resource and power distribution that leads to disadvantage. The Deaf community, with its distinct language and culture, fits this definition. While precise figures are elusive, a significant portion of Deaf individuals exist within hearing-dominated societies, often with limited recognition of their linguistic rights. This disparity underscores the unequal power dynamics, where the focus tends to be on "fixing" deafness rather than valuing sign language. (Healey, Stepnick & Eileen 2018; Turner 2009; Morgans 1999; Reagan 2010, 2020; De Meulder & Murray 2017:137; Krausneker 2003).

The reality that many Deaf children are born to hearing parents contributes to the misunderstanding of the Deaf community's unique position. Despite technological advancements (that prioritise spoken language), signed languages remain crucial for Deaf identity. This persistent marginalisation highlights the need for greater awareness and support of sign languages, recognising them as vital linguistic and cultural heritages. The lack of support, and the focus on trying to "fix" deafness, creates a system of unequal power and resource distribution. However, linguistic legislation frequently neglects sign languages, typically addressing them under the legislation related to disability groups. This neglect reflects a general lack of understanding of sign languages as crucial cultural-identity markers for Deaf communities.

Legislative recognition of sign languages varies significantly, with only a few nations granting them official status. For instance, Kenya has enshrined sign language use in parliament within its constitution, while New Zealand and the Netherlands have recognised their national sign languages through Language Acts. South Africa is distinguished by its constitutional recognition of SASL as an official language in 2023[1], underscoring its cultural and linguistic equivalence with other minority languages in the country. This landmark recognition compels critical considerations in language planning, especially for non-standardised languages like SASL.

According to McLelland (2021), standardised languages achieve their status through linguistic processes of norm development and social acceptance, influenced by ideological factors, focusing on formal contexts, and serving as a reference point for "correctness".

1 The Constitution Eighteenth Amendment Act, 2023 stipulates that the act "... comes into operation on a date fixed by the President by proclamation in the Gazette ..." (see RSA 2023).

Conversely, official languages gain status through legal or political recognition, serving governmental and administrative functions. While a language can be both standardised and official, standardisation emphasises linguistic form and norms, whereas official status concerns a language's socio-political role.

Even though SASL is granted official status, the language itself is not standardised and, as with other sign languages, is known for having localised dialects and variations. This paper therefore explores the dynamics of language officialisation and place-name standardisation through the lens of SASL, highlighting the implications for corpus development and cultural preservation. Specifically, it investigates the factors influencing sign-creation practices for place names, including changes of official place names, the etymology of spoken equivalents, and preferred sign-creating traditions.

2. STANDARDISING SIGNED LANGUAGES: A PLACE-NAME PERSPECTIVE

Language planning initiatives are essential to ensuring its appropriate use in the various domains that corresponds with a language's official status (Schemer 2003). This involves various dimensions, such as status planning (defining social roles of a language), corpus planning (enhancing linguistic forms), acquisition planning (integration into education), and prestige planning (improving social perception) (Kaplan & Baldauf 2003). Small and Cripps (2009) add language-attitude planning, a strategic intervention within language planning that aims to influence and modify people's perceptions and attitudes towards a specific language.

Sign language standardisation, a key aspect of corpus planning, faces unique challenges. Corpus planning often focuses on producing lexicons or dictionaries to record and formalise linguistic features, as seen in the case of Dutch Sign Language (Nederlandse Gebarentaal – NGT) (Schemer 2003). However, Adam (2015) emphasises that while standardisation can promote a language, it may also lead to the exclusion of some or all variations. Historically, standardisation efforts have often prioritised creating resources like dictionaries that present a single sign for each concept, neglecting the natural variation in sign languages.

Furthermore, the lack of a written form and the visual-gestural nature of sign languages complicate standardisation processes that often focus on written language (Johnston 2003). Other factors include the influence of dominant spoken languages, generational gaps in transmission, high variation across signing communities, and limited use

in education. Misconceptions about standardisation, such as the need to eliminate variation, are also prevalent in Deaf communities (WFD 2014).

Despite these challenges, place-name planning offers a valuable avenue for contributing to sign language standardisation. As a form of corpus planning, it involves developing and adding lexical items to the language. Additionally, signed place names, integral to cultural identity, demand a balanced approach between corpus development and the preservation of unique community practices.

While language standardisation focuses on developing a uniform variety, place-name standardisation, facilitated by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN), involves standardising geographical names within a territory. Yet, this group also fosters the protection of minority place names and encourages the documentation of alternative and indigenous toponymies through the promotion of collaborative fieldwork with native language users. This process emphasises the worth of the people and the value of their place names as cultural heritage (UNGEGN 2006).

3. SIGNED PLACE NAMES: LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

Place names are integral to any language and hold cultural and historical significance (Spocter 2018). Signed place names have a similar importance within Deaf communities, serving as identity markers and reflecting unique naming practices. These signs are not merely translations of spoken names but are uniquely created and adopted by Deaf communities, often borrowing from indigenous sign languages to facilitate communication (Revilla 2009). They contribute to identity development and group solidarity (Humphries 2008). Additionally, they constitute a distinct lexical category within sign languages (Paales 2010). As a result, a parallel toponymy is created that exists alongside spoken place names.

Signed place names are developed using various traditions, or methods and strategies to create a sign. These may be practised inconsistently in Deaf communities because of, for example, generational associations and educational differences, adding to the high level of variation in sign languages. The diversity of sign-creation practices enriches the language, where standardisation leads to the selection of only one practice or variant. This poses the risk of potentially eroding linguistic diversity (Adam 2015). Therefore, systematic documentation remains critical for preserving these cultural artifacts while recognising their functional and symbolic significance in Deaf communities.

Du Plessis (2020) agrees that signed place names should be recognised as a unique and dynamic parallel toponymy that coexists with spoken or written names. Including signed place names in a dual system where both spoken and signed variations are officially recognised could contribute to their broader acceptance and use. However, the South African Geographical Names Council still focuses solely on spoken languages in the current standardisation programme (De Lange & Du Plessis 2021).

Despite attempts since the production of the first SASL dictionary, *Talking to the Deaf/ Praat met die Dowes* (Nieder-Heitmann 1980), SASL remains unstandardised, resulting in high variation and localised conventionalisation of signed place names (Loth, Kotzé, & De Lange 2021). Acknowledging that the lack of a written form presents challenges to the recognition of signed place names, De Lange and Du Plessis (2021) argue that UNGEGN's recommendations on minority and unwritten languages can be applied to signed place names. This approach would be crucial for using signed place names in various domains, raising the question of how to achieve official recognition while representing community autonomy.

Continuous documentation of signed place names is an essential step in the codification and standardisation of signed place names. Systematic collection and proper documentation of SASL place names is crucial to keeping track of the developments of the language on a grassroots level and adding to the efforts of appropriate agencies. In this way, planning for SASL place names can contribute to the corpus development of the language itself.

To understand how signed place names are allocated by the Deaf community, it is crucial to grasp how signs are produced and how meaning is conveyed in sign languages. Despite linguistic differences, sign language shares common features due to the use of space, simultaneity, iconicity, and similar sociolinguistic contexts (Johnston *et al*. 2016). Signs are produced using five parameters, namely handshape, palm orientation, location, movement, and non-manual markers. Each parameter is essential, as incorrect usage can change the meaning (Akach & Lubbe 2003). For example, the signs for GREEN, GRASS, and FIRE (Figures 1, 2 and 3) are all produced with both hands in the 5-hand handshape, palms faced towards the signer, in the middle of the signing space. In all three signs, the fingers are moving. Below is the sign for GREEN (without additional movement) (Figure 1):

Figure 1: *GREEN (Source: Author replication)*

However, moving the hands away from the body to the front, changes the meaning to GRASS (Figure 2). Moving the hands up and down in opposite directions changes the sign to FIRE (Figure 3):

Figure 2: *GRASS (Source: Author replication)*

Figure 3: *FIRE (Source: Author replication)*

Non-manual markers, such as facial expressions, convey nuances similar to voice volume and tone in spoken language (Lombaard 2020). In the above example, non-manual markers can be included to indicate how green the trees are, how bushy the grass is, or how severely the fire is burning. Understanding a sign language word or sentence requires consideration of all parameters, as signed languages use blends of gestures and lexical signs (Johnston *et al*. 2016).

Sign languages exhibit variations influenced by sociolinguistic factors like region, age, gender, and family background (Kusters & Lucas 2022; Matthews *et al*. 2009; Morgans 1999). These variations evolve naturally over time and through transmission between generations. Deaf naming practices, including the use of name signs, offer valuable insights into sign languages, cultural traditions, historical events, and language change within the community (Day & Sutton-Spence 2010). Researchers like Lombaard (2020), Paales (2010), and Day & Sutton-Spence (2010) have classified place-name signs predominantly according to five categories, namely phonetic, initialised/arbitrary, descriptive/metonymic/metaphoric, initialised metonymic/metaphoric, and loans/translations.

Phonetic names are based on the sounds of spoken names through mouthing, in other words, imitating the movement of the mouth when referring to a place, which contains making a sound in pronouncing the name (Paales 2010). According to Lombaard, phonetic names are rarely used in SASL due to their association with the oralist period in Deaf education (Lombaard 2020). Before 1994, education was focused on teaching children to read lips and to speak, and they were punished when they used sign language. Initialised/arbitrary signs are the most common in SASL. These signs have no inherent connection to the place and often use a handshape representing a letter from the written name (Day & Sutton-Spence 2010). Examples include South Africa's signed names for the provinces, for example, Northern Cape is signed as n-c and the Eastern Cape is signed as E-C.

Descriptive/metonymic/metaphoric signs refer to physical or notable qualities of a place. This category includes associative signs, which also link the name-giver(s) connection to the place. Initialised metonymic/metaphoric signs combine descriptive and initialised elements, which originally constituted a descriptive sign and changed over time through the addition of a letter from the alphabet. For example, Kimberley was originally signed with a U-handform moving down and inwards to represent the Big Hole. However, this has changed over time, with the U-handform replaced by the first letter of the spoken name (K) (Lombaard 2020). Akach and Lubbe (2003), conducting research on personal name signs, suggest that educational practices contribute to initialisation, since only the

SASL alphabet is taught in school. Loans/translation signs have a direct connection to the written name. This category is favoured for its efficiency and is also common in personal name signs (Lombaard 2020). For example, using the sign for RHINO (Y-handform located on the nose) for the personal name sign for the name "Ryno".

The original intent of this study was to determine whether the South African name changes have resulted in changes in signed place names, since Lombaard (2020) identifies variation not only in signed place names but also in name changes. She argues that changes in place-name signs can reflect evolving traditions and associations within the Deaf community. However, due to the limited dataset, the focus shifted from analysing the impact of official place-name changes to examining the naming practices used to create signed place names.

4. METHODOLOGY

The data collected for this study was a pilot study for developing a larger project to document SASL place names. Ethical clearance was obtained from the General and Human Research Ethical Committee (UFS-HSD2023/1614/4). The data collection took place in Bloemfontein in May 2022. An invitation in SASL was created to explain the purpose and procedure of the study. Random convenience sampling was employed to find participants. The Deaf fieldworker circulated this video amongst her local Deaf acquaintances. Interviews with those that indicated interest were set up. The fieldworker first explained the consent form in SASL and ensured that all facets were understood before the participant signed it. In total, eleven Deaf individuals, all with varying backgrounds in terms of educational attainment, employment, and socio-economic status, participated. The structed interviews were guided by a questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to collect three types of information:

1) Background information, such as age, gender, race, and the language that was spoken in their homes, are factors that influence variation in sign language use.
2) Questions such as "Where did you grow up?", "Where did you go to school?", and "Where do you live?" attempted to elicit the use of place names.
3) To ensure the creation of a comparable, systematic dataset, the final section of the questionnaire included a list of pre-selected place names. These names were selected by the research team as generally well-known places in South Africa – the nine provinces, thirteen main towns, four places where there are schools for the Deaf, and five other prominent places (31 in total). The interviewer fingerspelled the name of the place in question. For example, the interviewer would ask, "do you know a sign for this place", and then fingerspell "Bloemfontein"'.

The interviews were video-recorded, and the videos were downloaded into a secure space. During the first round of processing, the place-name signs were isolated and linguistically annotated in ELAN (linguistic annotation software). Since the dataset is too small for a comparative study between official and sign names, the signs are analysed to identify visible trends in Deaf naming practices. Additionally, signs are compared to the etymology of the correlating spoken name, as recorded in the *Dictionary of Southern African Place Names* (Raper, Möller & Du Plessis 2014). Information from the SAGNC database is included where available.

5. RESULTS

The study documents 197 unique signs out of a possible 341 signs, with some participants lacking knowledge of specific places. The analysis first compares place-name signs to official name changes, then examines the influence of spoken names on signed place names, and finally investigates the observed variation in sign usage. Interestingly, official place-name changes seem to have minimal impact on signed place names. For example, despite the official change from Port Elizabeth to Gqeberha in 2021 (about a year prior to data collection), participants consistently use the pre-existing sign correlated with the old name, P-E. (Figure 4).

Figure 4: *GQEBERHA (Source: Author replication)*

Similarly, the change from Pietersburg to Polokwane (Figure 5) in 2002 shows no clear influence on the sign used, although further research is needed to confirm this.

Figure 5: *POLOKWANE (Source: Author replication)*

One exception is the province Free State, formerly known as Orange Free State. This change was affected in 1995. While most participants use the initialised sign FS (Figure 6a), one participant uses OFS (Figure 6b), referring to the historical name.

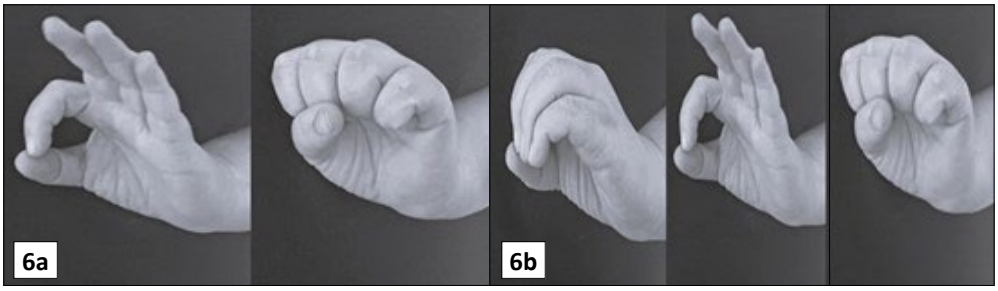

Figure 6a: *FREE STATE (Variation 1) (Source: Author replication)*
Figure 6b: *FREE STATE (Variation 2) (Source: Author replication)*

The etymology of spoken names also appears to have limited influence on signed place names. One clear etymological link is found in the case of "Mpumalanga". The placename sign SUNRISE (Figure 7) clearly correlates with the Zulu meaning of "Mpumalanga", which is "the place where the sun rises" (Raper, Möller, & Du Plessis 2014).

Figure 7: *Mpumalanga (Source: Author replication)*

A possible connection between the meaning of the official name and the sign name is also observed for Bloemfontein, where the sign for ROSE (Figure 8a), potentially refers to the "flower fountain", alluding to the city's association with roses. However, the most used sign for Bloemfontein, OB, (Figure 8b) is derived from historical vehicle number plates, where the letter "O" depicts the province's historical name (Orange Free State), and the letter "B" depicts the place name (Bloemfontein).

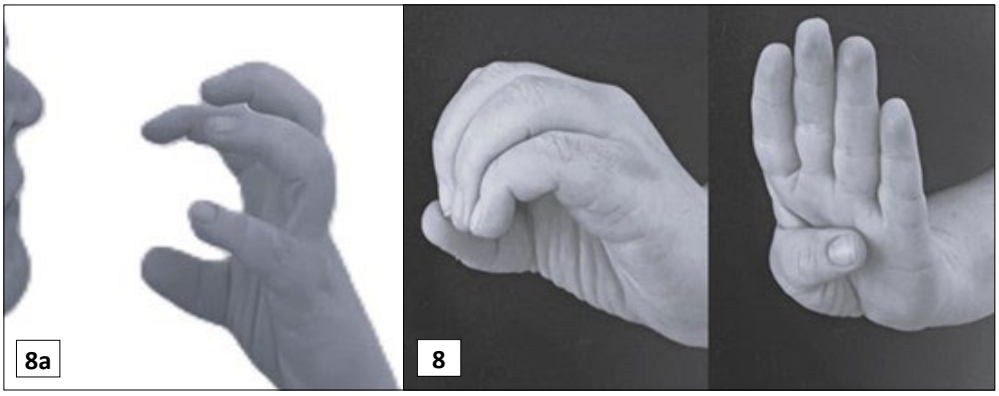

Figure 8a: *BLOEMFONTEIN (Variation 1) (Source: Author replication)*
Figure 8b: *BLOEMFONTEIN (Variation 2) (Source: Author replication)*

5.1 Naming traditions

Figure 9 below shows the naming traditions employed to create the place-name signs in the dataset.

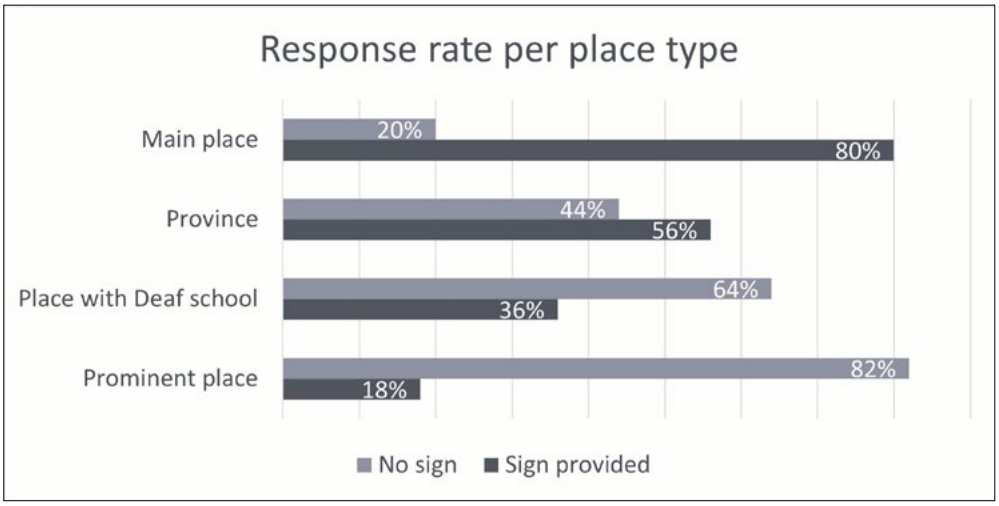

Figure 9: *Prevalence of naming traditions employed in the dataset*

Considering naming traditions, the analysis reveals that just over half of the collected signs are classified as initialised signs, confirming Lombaard's (2020) observation that this category is the most prevalent naming tradition in SASL. Examples include WESTERN CAPE (finger alphabet "W" and "C") (Figure 10), JOHANNESBURG (finger alphabet "J") (Figure 11), and THABA 'NCHU (finger alphabet "T" with additional movement) (Figure 12).

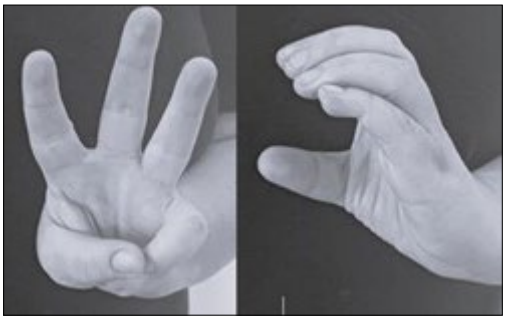

Figure 10: *WESTERN CAPE (Source: Author replication)*

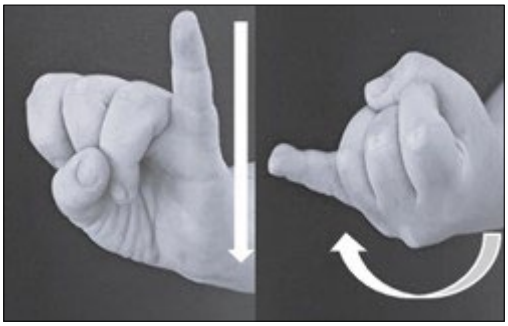

Figure 11: *JOHANNESBURG (Source: Author replication)*

Figure 12: *THABA 'NCHU (Repeat movement twice) (Source: Author replication)*

Approximately 20% of the signs combine initials with a descriptive element. For example, Kimberley's name sign is initialised with "K" where the movement downwards refer to the town's famous open-pit diamond mine (Figure 13).

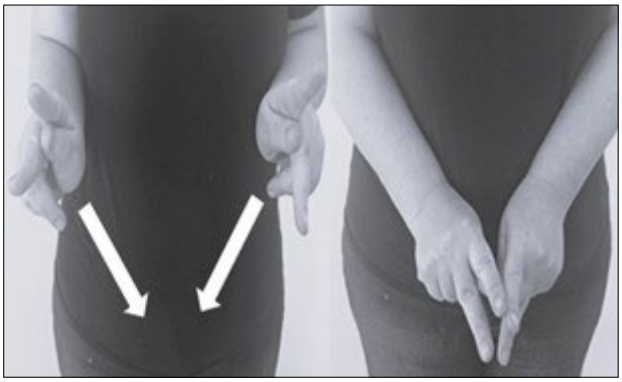

Figure 13: *KIMBERLEY (Source: Author replication)*

Around 10% of responses are arbitrary, such as TALKING/HEARING for Pietermaritzburg (Figure 14).

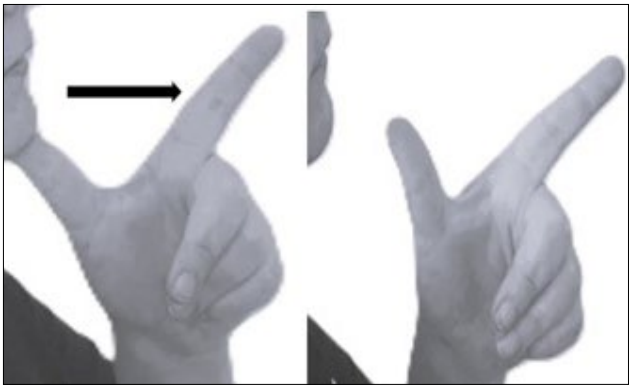

Figure 14: *PIETERMARITZBURG (Repeat movement twice) (Source: Author replication)*

Another 10% are descriptive, like NKANDLA (Figure 15), meaning "Zuma's home", the town where South Africa's former president Zuma stays. Polokwane's name sign is the same as rural (Image 5), only with bigger movements. Although Polokwane is an urban area and the capital of the Limpopo province, most of the surrounding area is rural in nature.

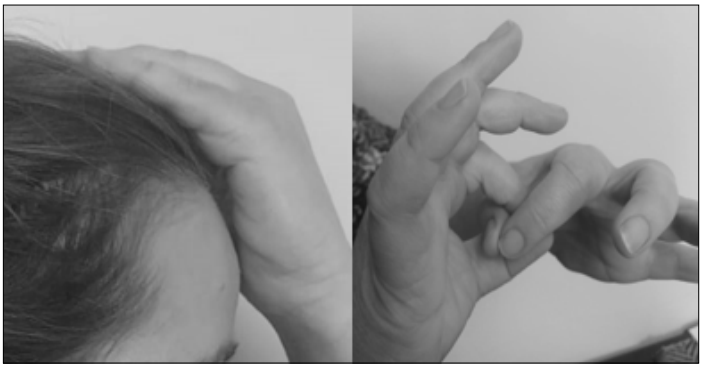

Figure 15: *NKANDLA (Source: Author replication)*

Loaning or translating accounts for 5% of the signs, as seen in the examples of BLOEMFONTEIN (Figure 8a) and MPUMALANGA (Figure 7). A small number of signs (3%) combine initialisation and loaning, such as EAST LONDON (Figure 16), where the "e" is fingerspelled, but the L refers to London in England. The research team could not translate the meaning of the sign and is therefore indicated as unsure in the table above. Additionally, no phonetic signs were identified in this study, which also confirms Lombaard's (2020) findings.

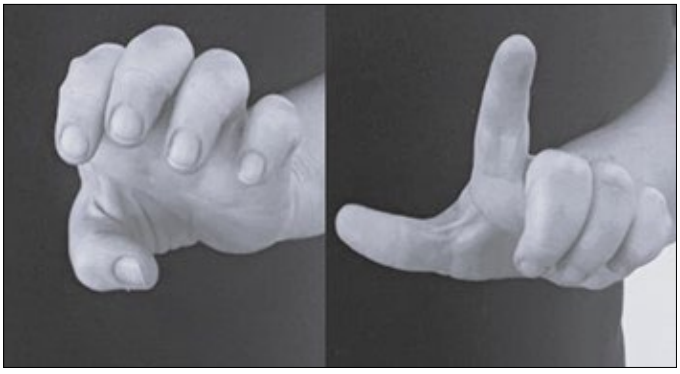

Figure 16: *EAST LONDON (Source: Author replication)*

Interestingly, while most place names are elicited through a singular naming tradition, BLOEMFONTEIN (Figure 8a and 8b), PRETORIA (Figure 17a and 17b), and CAPE TOWN (Figure 18a, 18b, and 18c) show greater variation in both the signs and the naming traditions employed. This suggests that prominent or frequently used place names may be more susceptible to variation within the Deaf community.

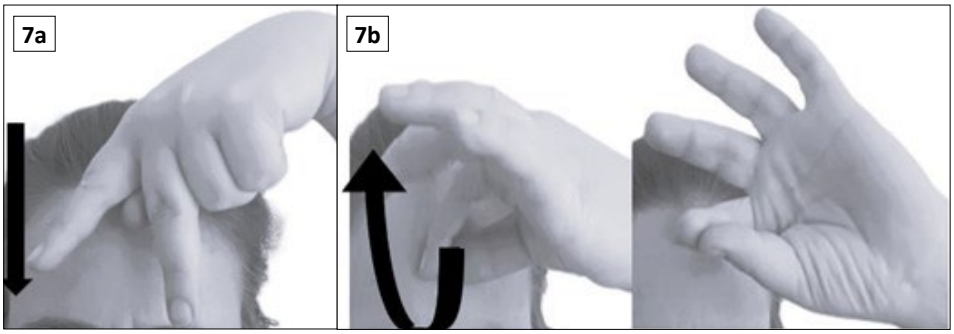

Figure 17a: *PRETORIA Variation 1 (Repeat) (Source: Author replication)*
Figure 17b: *PRETORIA Variation 2 (Source: Author replication)*

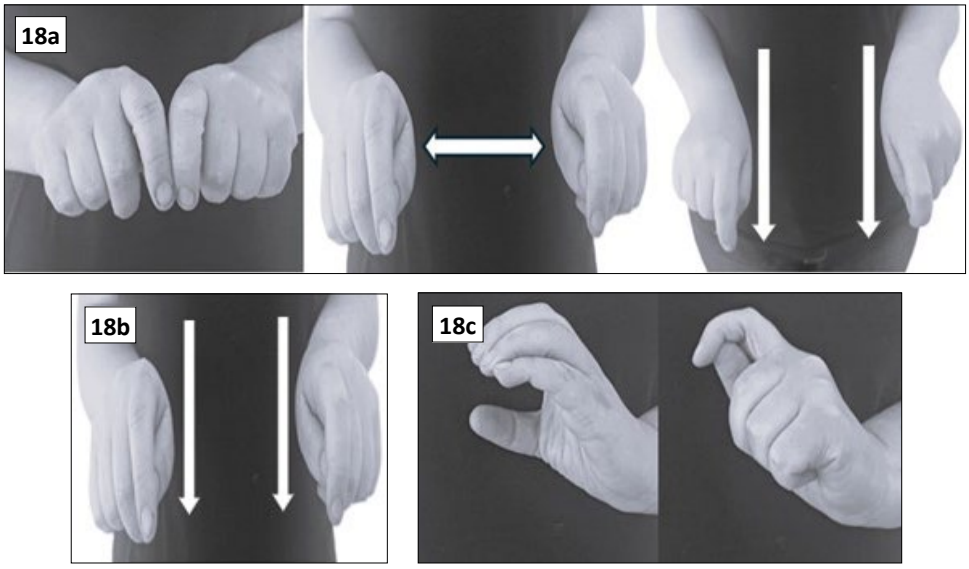

Figure 18a: *CAPE TOWN Variation 1 (Source: Author replication)*
Figure 18b: *CAPE TOWN Variation 2 (Repeat movement twice) (Source: Author replication)*
Figure 18c: *CAPE TOWN Variation 3 (Source: Author replication)*

5.2 Types of places

The pre-selected place names listed in the questionnaire are grouped according to the type of name, namely Main place, Province, Place with Deaf school [schools for the Deaf], and Prominent place. Figure 19 below reflects the response rate for each of these categories.

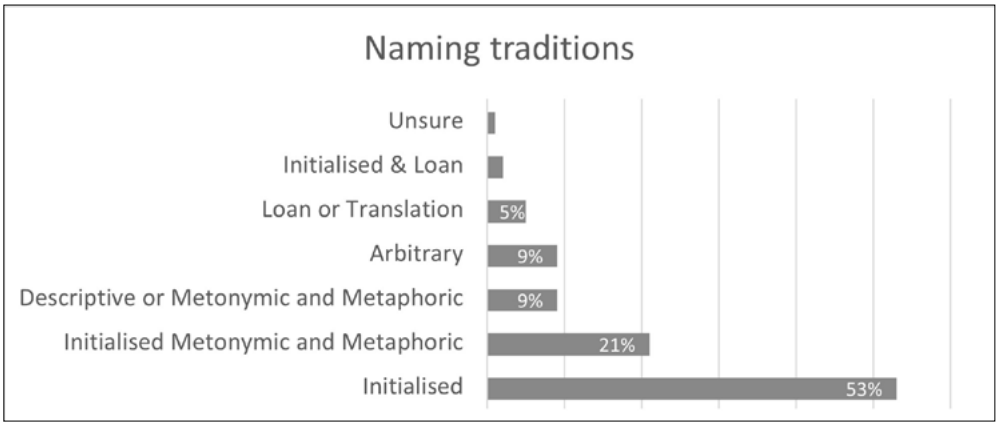

Figure 19: *Response rate per type of place*

Analysing responses per place type reveals that "main places" (major towns) has the highest response rate (80%), with "Bloemfontein" eliciting a sign from every participant. Interestingly, Bloemfontein is also the only place for which some participants provided multiple signs, suggesting potential variation in well-known locations. Provinces has a moderate response rate, with over half of the participants only signing PROVINCES instead of naming the different nine provinces. However, the categories "Places with Deaf schools" and "Prominent places" yield significantly fewer responses, with 64% and 82% of participants, respectively, not knowing signs for these locations. This discrepancy highlights a potential divergence between what is considered a "well-known" place by the general hearing population compared with specific Deaf communities.

6. DISCUSSION

Deaf communities allocate place name signs based on relevance and lived experience. This explains the low response rate for certain places in the study, as unfamiliarity likely played a role. Furthermore, challenges with literacy emerged during data collection, as some participants struggled with fingerspelling and written presentations of place names. This highlights the importance of considering educational disparities within Deaf communities when conducting research and standardising place names. Interestingly, the study revealed that the recent official name change from Port Elizabeth to Gqeberha had no impact on the local signed toponymy. This further emphasises the autonomy of signed place names and their grounding in the Deaf community experiences.

While the data indicates a preference for initialisation in SASL place naming, other traditions also hold value, for example descriptive name signs. This consistency across respondents suggests a degree of conventionalisation or collective agreement within the community. These findings underscore the need for localised, participatory research to inform standardisation efforts. Signed place names are deeply rooted in the lived experiences of Deaf communities, and standardisation processes must acknowledge this reality. While initialisations are prevalent, other naming traditions hold collective value, necessitating inclusive approaches that recognise and accommodate this diversity. The lack of influence from spoken name changes further reinforces the autonomy of signed toponymy, emphasising the need for dual recognition systems that acknowledge this parallel naming system.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This study illustrates the complexities of standardising SASL place names, where linguistic variation, cultural practices, and administrative needs intersect. To ensure inclusive standardisation, future efforts must prioritise community participation, respect regional traditions, and develop innovative approaches for unwritten languages. Further research should expand documentation across diverse Deaf communities, proving a comprehensive foundation for informed decision-making. Only through such an inclusive approach can SASL's rich linguistic heritage be effectively preserved and integrated in official frameworks. This research highlights the linguistic, cultural, and practical implication of SASL's officialisation of place-name recognition. By exploring the interplay of language planning, cultural identity, and administrative recognition, this study situates SASL place names within broader global discussions on minority language preservation.

From a names-planning perspective, this pilot study reveals several challenges. The tendency of Deaf communities to know only signed names for relevant places necessitates localised research and careful consideration of distribution methods, especially given the impact of educational disparities in literacy and access. Furthermore, the South African Geographical Names Council (SAGNC) must recognise that the signed place names are not merely translations of spoken names and that variations may exist even for places with the same spoken name. The data also indicates that changes in spoken names do not have an immediate impact on signed place names, suggesting a degree of autonomy within Deaf naming practices.

The variation in naming traditions observed in this study underscores the need for flexible standardisation approaches that accommodate this diversity. Given the lack of a standardised form of SASL and the community's resistance to it, the SAGNC must develop clear guidelines for recognising multiple or alternative names. This could involve closer collaboration with the Deaf community in selecting preferred name signs, considering local preferences and naming traditions. Furthermore, innovative methods are needed to address the standardisation of SASL place names due to the absence of a written system.

This pilot study, while limited in scope, provides valuable insights into the complexities of standardising SASL place names. More extensive research is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of signed place names and naming traditions in South Africa before official recognition processes are initiated.

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All images of signs in this paper are replicated by a hearing dominant left-hand signer.

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