

SIGN LANGUAGE NEWS AT ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY

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1- Regular BA program in Ethiopian Sign Language and Deaf Culture

It is believed that the Ethiopian Sign Language (ETHSL) has its origin in the American Sign Language (ASL) with some influence from the Nordic countries. According to a report on a pilot survey conducted by SIL Ethiopia (2005), a comparison was done between 249 signs that are published in American and Ethiopian books. Out of this number 25% of the signs from the ASL that was brought over have been modified to suit Ethiopian culture. This shows that the two languages are closely related languages than other sign languages. Besides, signers of the two countries are seen to communicate at a lesser communication breakdown.

The first missionaries that opened schools in Addis Ababa were from the US, and as most foreigners that open new schools do, they brought with them the language which was in use in their own country. There was another school in the then northern province of Eritrea in Karen, which was opened by Missionaries from the Nordic countries. The influence of the graduates of these schools was clearly seen in the development of the Ethiopian Sign Language.

Ethiopian deaf education is constrained by many factors. Among others is the lack of the development of the sign language. Lack of proficient (or nearly the total absence) sign language teachers is another constraint. There are only few deaf people employed at the deaf schools in Addis Ababa without any training in the teaching profession. Only hearing people were trained as teachers of the Deaf. These hearing teachers lack proficiency in Sign Language and tend to promote Oralism or their

spoken languages. Due to these facts, the Ethiopian Deaf students are denied strong role models in their education. The deaf students were, therefore, subjected to the wishes of their hearing teachers and professionals.

The other one is the problem of getting qualified sign language interpreters who are familiar with the ethics and conduct of behavior in Sign language interpreting.

Developing the ETHSL and providing education in ETHSL shall help develop linguistic self-confidence and security in the knowledge of deaf people's culture. It forms the basis for developing self-identity, respect for the culture of others, active social participation and lifelong learning. For deaf and severely hard-of-hearing students, communication using sign language is the key to active participation in linguistic interaction in large and small groups.

However, the Department has been solely devoted its activities to the teaching and researching of spoken languages. This was felt by a significant number of scholars in the Department and beyond as the Department was not doing justice to the Ethiopian Sign Language and its signers. In order to fill in this gap a project proposal was designed and subsequently submitted to the Ministry of Education as part of the DIF (Development Initiated Fund) project in order to establish the Ethiopian Sign Language Center. One of the objectives of the project was to launch a BA program in Ethiopian Sign Language and Deaf Culture Studies.

Some members of the Department traveled to some selected towns to conduct a need assessment research for the BA in Sign Language program. Some of the field sites are Hosaena, Awasa, Arba-Minch and

Jinka. The outcome of the fieldtrip was presented to a consultative workshop which was conducted on May 2008 at Ras Amba Hotel.

After designing the syllabus, the department has called up on a consultative workshop on the syllabus. Various stakeholders from the Ministry of Education, Hosaena School for the Deaf, Ethiopian National Association of the Deaf, Alpha School for the Deaf, Victory School for the Deaf, Mekanisa School for the Deaf and from others participated in the workshop and provided their comment on it. The workshop outcomes recommended the direction for the future progress.

Finally, by the year 2008/2009 Academic year, the Department of Linguistics, Addis Ababa University has launched Ethiopia's first BA in Ethiopian Sign Language and Deaf Culture program. In the current Academic year, 26 students are permitted to enroll. Out of this number, 20 of them are Deaf students and the rest 6 hearing. We have also hired three qualified instructors who are currently teaching the major courses. Besides, each class is supported by Sign language interpreters. There are three committed Sign language interpreters who are serving the students through tutoring.



Pic. 1 Some of the pictures taken during the sign language workshop at Ras Amba Hotel, AA (May 15, 2008)