

Revitalizing Deaf Culture Through Sign Language: Preserving Linguistic Diversity

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ABSTRACT: Sign languages are vital to Deaf culture and identity. They are complex visual languages that play a vital role in Deaf culture. In Cameroon, many Deaf languages face threats to their survival. Cameroon Sign Language (CSL) is a valuable and unique part of Deaf culture and identity. Yet, CSL faces significant barriers including; inadequate training of sign language teachers, limited documentation, and poor access to sign language education. These challenges threaten the long-term survival and revitalization of the language. This study is grounded in the framework of Cultural capital Theory developed by Pierre Bourdieu (2004). This theory explores how cultural knowledge, skills, and preferences can be leveraged as resources for social mobility and empowerment. 30 participants made up the population of study. A Mixed-method research design was employed. 5 sign language classes and 5 community events were observed. 20 Questionnaires were distributed to students. Interviews were conducted with 5 sign language teachers, and 5 policy makers. Findings indicate that: 1. Four major challenges were identified that hindered the preservation and revitalization of CSL: Limited access to sign language education and technology, sociolinguistic challenges, lack of documentation and cultural factors. 2. Four strategies are highlighted to effectively preserve and revitalize CSL. The study recommends the development of a training program to certify CSL teachers and ensure the quality of education as well as record and document stories, legends and cultural practices to create a linguistic and cultural archive that will preserve and revitalize the language.

KEYWORDS: Cameroon sign language, culture, revitalization, preservation, documentation.

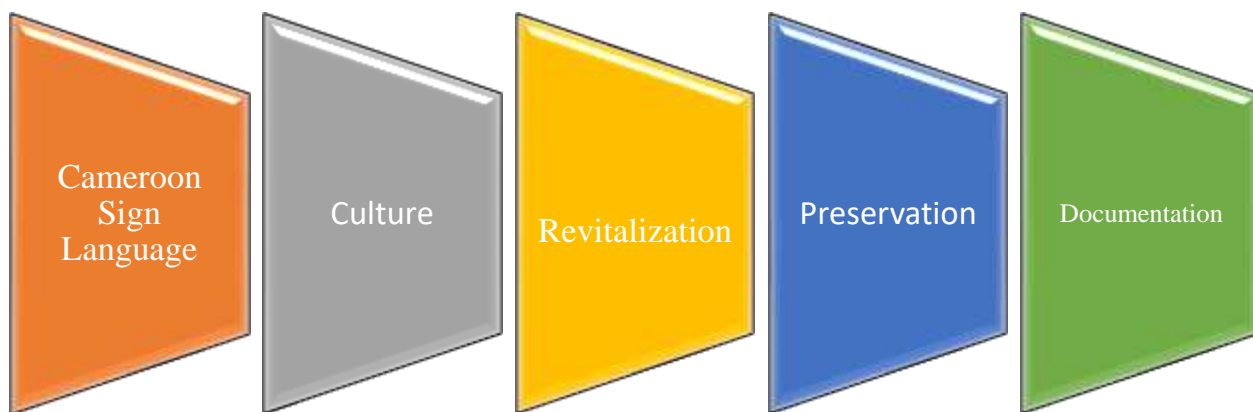


Fig 1: Keywords

1. INTRODUCTION

One major challenge of CSL preservation is the complex sign language situation in Cameroon. This language has been influenced by both American and French sign languages, making it difficult to establish a unified sign language. Deaf children in Cameroon face barriers in education, with very few schools tailored to their needs. There are efforts being made to promote and protect the rights of individuals with hearing impairments, including the recognition of sign language. The Cameroon Human Rights Commission (CHRC) has emphasized the importance of sign languages for the full realization of the rights of Deaf people.

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While there is still much work to be done, there are positive steps being taken to preserve and promote sign languages in Cameroon. CSL contains unique knowledge, histories, and perspectives that are valuable to humanity. Preserving a community's language can empower them to maintain their cultural traditions, customs, and values. Language revitalization requires dedication, community involvement, and strategic planning. Preserving minority languages promotes social cohesion and contributes to a more equitable and inclusive society.

Cameroon Sign Language stands out as a vital means of communication for the Deaf community among these languages. Sign language preservation and revitalization are crucial for the empowerment of Deaf identity and cultural preservation. Preserving CSL is essential for promoting and protecting the rights of Deaf Cameroonians.

Language preservation and revitalization is a complex and multifaceted process that requires collaboration among linguists, educators, community leaders and policymakers. Successful revitalization efforts lead to the preservation of cultural heritage and identity, enriching both the speakers and the wider community.

1.1 Statement of the problem

The decline of sign languages not only threatens linguistic diversity but also erodes the cultural heritage of Deaf communities worldwide. The absence of effective promotion and preservation strategies hinders Deaf individuals' social inclusion, empowerment, and equal access to opportunities. This study aims to punctuate effective strategies for revitalization, with focus on promoting linguistic diversity, cultural identity, and community empowerment.

1.2 Objectives of the study

The study seeks to:

1. Explore the current state of sign language use and preservation in Deaf communities.
2. Identify factors contributing to sign language endangerment and decline.
3. Develop ways to support, promote, and preserve sign languages in Cameroon.

1.3 The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the current challenges facing sign language promotion and preservation in Cameroon?
2. What factors contribute to sign language endangerment in Cameroon?
3. What can be done to support, promote, and preserve sign languages in Cameroon?

These research questions guided our investigation and provided a framework for the study.

1.4 Significance of the study

This study is significant for several reasons:

1. This study raises awareness on Deaf culture and the importance of sign language, promoting greater understanding and inclusivity in society.
2. Involving Deaf community members in this study fosters community engagement and participation in sign language revitalization efforts. It provides a platform for Deaf individuals and communities to share their experiences, promote a deeper understanding of their needs and concerns.
3. This study contributes to the preservation and promotion of sign languages, highlighting their importance in Deaf culture and identity.
4. Findings of the study will inform policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders with evidence-based recommendations for supporting Deaf communities.

1.4.1 Sign language variations

According to Enow (2025), Sign languages vary across different countries and regions just like spoken languages. Some variations in Cameroon are:

- American Sign Language (ASL): This sign language is used in the United States, parts of Canada and Cameroon.
- British Sign Language (BSL): It is used in the United Kingdom.
- French Sign Language (LSF): Used in France and parts of Canada.
- German Sign Language (DGS): Used in Germany.
- Australian Sign Language (Auslan): This language is used in Australia.

1.4.2 Cameroonian Sign Language (CSL)

Cameroon, a country in Central Africa, has a rich linguistic diversity, including several sign language variations. Here are some examples:

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1.4.2.1 The following are the various Cameroonian sign languages:

National Sign Language: CSL is the national sign language of Cameroon, used by the Deaf community across the country. Cameroon Sign language has regional variations, with differences in vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. Examples of regional sign languages found in Cameroon are:

1.4.2.2 Regional Sign Languages

Douala Sign Language: It is used in the coastal region of Douala with its own distinct vocabulary and grammar.

Yaoundé Sign Language: This language is used in the capital city of Yaounde. It has its own unique characteristics.

Bamenda Sign Language: It is used in the Northwest Region. This language has its own features.

Maroua Sign Language: MSL is used in Maroua, a city in the Far North Region of Cameroon. It emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, as Deaf students came together to attend school in Maroua. These students developed this language that blended elements from various regional sign languages. MSL has its own grammar, unique vocabulary that includes signs of everyday objects, actions, and concepts. MSL exhibit iconicity, where signs resemble the objects or actions they represent.

1.4.2.3 Indigenous Sign Languages

Baka Sign Language: Used by the Baka people, an indigenous group in the East Region. This sign language is unique to their community.

Mbororo Sign Language: It is commonly used by the Mbororo people, a nomadic indigenous group. This sign language is distinct from other sign languages in Cameroon.

Cameroon sign languages face significant challenges. These variations are not documented, which makes them difficult to standardize and teach. Efforts are needed to preserve and promote their use among younger generations. These sign languages can be a powerful tool for empowering the Deaf community, promoting their identities, language and culture.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature review on sign language preservation and revitalization encompasses various aspects including conceptual, theoretical and empirical framework within which the present study was carried out. Concepts that are related to the research topic are examined. This study is placed under the framework of Community-Based Language Revitalization Theory developed by Leanne Hinton and Ken Hale (2001). The empirical frame reviewed previous practical research studies on sign language.

2.1 Conceptual framework

Concepts employed in this study include: Sign language preservation and revitalization, Endangered languages, Language shift, Language death, Heritage languages.

2.1.1 Definition of concepts

The following concepts are exploited in the study:

2.1.1.1 Sign language

According to Nyst (2007), sign language is a naturally evolved, visual-gestural language that employs a unique combination of manual and non-manual signals to convey meaning. It is a primary means of communication for Deaf and hard of hearing individuals. It has its own unique grammar and syntax which differ from those of spoken languages. Sign languages have their own unique structure including phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics. Sign language is a fundamental language right, essential for promoting equality and social justice. It plays a vital role in Deaf culture and identity. Sign language has key components: Handshapes, finger positions, facial expression, palm orientation and movements that convey meaning. Facial expressions, head movements, body language and eye gaze provide contextual information and modify the meaning of manual signs. Sign language uses three-dimensional space to convey meaning, including the location, orientation, and movement of signs.

2.1.1.2 Sign language preservation

According to Wikipedia, Sign language preservation involves documenting and teaching endangered languages, creating language repositories, and promoting language education in schools. Language preservation, including sign language preservation, is essential for maintaining cultural diversity and promoting intellectual heritage.

2.1.1.3 Sign language revitalization

Grenoble et al (2006) defines language revitalization as the process of reversing language decline and promoting the use of a language that is falling out of favour and is no longer widely spoken. Strategies for language revitalization include: Offering language classes in schools and communities, creating immersion programs where people can surround themselves with the language, develop language planning policies to support language revitalization, engage community to promote language use and revitalization and also use technology, such as language learning apps and online resources, to support language revitalization.

2.1.1.6 Language Documentation

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This is the process of collecting, analyzing, and preserving linguistic data, such as texts, recordings, and other materials, to create a comprehensive record of a language. This includes; Lexical documentation, grammatical description, text collection, and audio and video recordings. Documentation is essential for language preservation, revitalization, linguistic research and language education.

2.2 Theoretical framework

Bourdieu's (2004) community language theory lays emphasis on the importance of language in shaping community identity, culture, and social relationships. Key strategies of this theory rest on how language is embedded in social contexts and plays a crucial role in: community identity, cultural transmission, and social relationships.

Strengths

1. Cultural preservation

The theory prioritizes cultural preservation, recognizing the importance of sign language in maintaining cultural heritage.

2. Flexibility

Community-based language revitalization can be adapted to suit different community contexts and needs.

3. Sustainability

This theory empowers communities to take control of their language and culture, promoting self-determination and autonomy. Community-led initiatives are more likely to be sustainable in the long run, as they are rooted in community ownership and commitment.

4. Cultural preservation

The theory supports cultural preservation, recognizing the importance of sign language in maintaining cultural heritage.

Weaknesses

1. Communities require capacity building and training to develop the skills and knowledge needed to lead sign language revitalization efforts.

2. Evaluating the effectiveness of community-based language revitalization initiative can be complex due to the unique context and goals of each community.

3. Community-based initiatives may face challenges in accessing resources, such as funding, expertise, and infrastructure.

Applying this theory to sign language preservation and revitalization, we can empower Deaf individuals and communities to take control of their language and culture, promote cultural preservation, and support language immersion revitalization efforts.

2.3 Empirical Framework

Scholars have focused on documenting various sign languages, creating dictionaries, and analyzing grammatical structures to provide resources for education and preservation (Sutton-Spence & Woll, 2010). Canada has multiple sign languages, including ASL and Langue des signes du Quebec (LSQ). Efforts to revitalize these languages have been ongoing. Advocacy groups work to secure recognition and support for sign languages in education and public life. Initiatives to document and study Canadian Sign Language variants have provided resources for education and preservation. Local Deaf organizations host events that promote the use of sign language in everyday life.

Many studies explore the concepts of linguistic diversity and language preservation, discussing how minority languages, especially sign language, face threats from dominant languages (Crystal, 2000).

Many successful preservation efforts stem from grassroots movements led by Deaf communities, advocating for the recognition and use of their languages (Hindley, 1997). Studies emphasize the need for public awareness campaigns to educate the hearing population about the value of sign languages and the rights of Deaf individuals (Kusters et al., 2017).

Padden & Humphries, (2005) asserts that language preservation is vital for maintaining cultural heritage. Their research emphasizes the role of sign language in cultural identity for Deaf communities.

According to Baker (2011), Technological advancements, such as digital platforms and mobile applications, have been employed to document and teach sign languages effectively.

Literature highlights the importance of incorporating sign language into educational curricula for Deaf students, promoting bilingual education models that support both sign and spoken language (Lane et al., 2015). ASL is offered as a language option in many high schools and colleges, thereby increasing its visibility and acceptance. Community events such as Deaf Awareness Week, promote understanding of Deaf culture and ASL. Increased representation of ASL in films and television has helped in educating the public.

Effective teacher training programs are essential for ensuring that educators can proficiently teach sign language and foster an inclusive classroom environment (Marschark & Hauser, 2012). In South Africa, workshops and training sessions for educators and interpreters have been established to improve proficiency in South African Sign Language (SASL).

Research highlights the role of policy advocacy in securing official recognition for sign languages, which has proven effective in countries like South Africa and New Zealand (Quinto-Pozos, 2011). New Zealand sign language was recognized as an official language

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in 2006. Since then, the language has experienced revitalization efforts that involve community engagement and government support. In relation to initiatives NZSL has been incorporated into the national curriculum, promoting its use in school for both Deaf and Hearing students. Promoting NZSL through media and public events have increased visibility and acceptance. Case studies from various countries illustrate successful revitalization programs, such as community-based initiatives that promote intergenerational transmission of sign languages (Hoffmeister, 2008).

Summarily, common themes such as education, community engagement, public awareness, and policy effectiveness are evident. These themes provide a comprehensive framework for highlighting efforts of sign language preservation and revitalization.

2.4 Research gap

While a growing body of research exist on sign language revitalization, there is need for more studies on steps to promote and preserve the language. Comparative studies could provide insights into the similarities and differences between sign languages and their preservation and revitalization contexts.

3. METHODOLOGY

Materials and methods used in collecting, managing, analyzing and interpreting data throughout the study are discussed. These include the research population, sample and sampling technique, instruments, design, procedure for data collection, and method of analyzing data.

3.1 POPULATION OF THE STUDY

The population of the study was made up of 30 participants. Participants were selected using purposive sampling methods.

Table 1: Population of study

No	Categories of participants	Number of participants
1	Sign language students	20
2	Sign language teachers	5
3	Policymakers	5
	TOTAL	30

Table 1 indicates that out of 30 participants, 20 were students, 5 teachers and 5 policymakers. The reason for this sample is because the researcher intended to work with particular students who will provide qualitative and reliable information on the topic under study and sample could be easily managed.

3.1.1 Demographic information on the sample

The sample of the study was made up of both male and female participants. Females formed the majority of the sample as seen on the table below.

Table 2: Population according to sex

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	11	37
Female	19	63
Total	30	100

Table 2 indicates that out of 30 participants who made up the sample 11(37%) were males and 19(63%) were females.

3.1.2 Report of questionnaires return and presentation

20 questionnaires were administered to participants. All were duly answered and returned to the researcher. Table 3 shows the report of the returns.

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Table 3: Report of questionnaires administered and returned

Questionnaires Participants	Number of questionnaires distributed	Number of questionnaires returned	Percentage returned %
Sign language students	20	20	100

Table 3 reveals that 20 questionnaires were distributed to students; all were answered and returned to the researcher giving a percentage return of 100%.

3.2 Sampling Technique

This study employed the purposive sampling technique. This technique helped the researcher in gathering data on diverse perspectives and experiences. The researcher focused on a smaller, targeted group of participants who are fluent in sign language, have experience teaching sign language, and are involved in sign language preservation efforts.

3.3 Research instruments

Observation, questionnaires and interviews were the main instruments used in this study. These research instruments were constructed taking into account the objectives and research questions from the study. Questionnaires were used to obtain quantitative data and contained items geared towards obtaining information on demographics, attitudes, and behaviours in relation to sign language preservation and revitalization efforts in Cameroon. Some of the questions were open ended while others close ended.

Systematic observations of interactions were carried out in sign language classrooms and in church. This enabled the researcher to naturally witness what was going on practically in these settings. Observations of practical classroom signing exercises were used to check students' acquisition and signing skills. Questionnaires were personally administered by the researcher through the direct delivery method.

Document analysis of texts, images, were also used in data collection. Video recordings and sign language software (Lingvano & SL Dictionary) were helpful with video clips that translated words. Documents were analysed such as: policy reports, educational materials and sign language resources to gather data on existing initiatives and efforts.

3.4 Method of data collection

In order to collect data for the study we employed a step-by-step guide to the collection procedure:

Pre-Data Collection

- A proper review of existing research on sign language preservation and revitalization was done to inform the data collection process.
- Research questions were refined and developed to guide the data collection process.
- The purposive sampling was chosen to select participants.
- Participants were recruited through various channels (e.g., School settings, churches, Deaf organization).

Post-Data Collection

- Data collected through interviews, and observations were transcribed.
- Data analysis was done using statistical software (SPSS) and qualitative analysis software (NVivo).
- To identify patterns and themes, qualitative data were coded accordingly.
- Findings were interpreted in light with research questions and objectives

Ethical considerations

- Participants were provided with informed consent forms to make sure they understood the purpose of the study.
- Their identities were kept confidential to ensure privacy
- Participants remained anonymous for their safety and security.

4. FINDINGS

The preservation and promotion of sign languages in Cameroon face four significant challenges.

RQ1. What are the current challenges facing sign language promotion and preservation in Cameroon?

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Table 4: Challenges facing sign language promotion and preservation

Findings	Challenges hindering sign language preservation and revitalization in Cameroon
1. Linguistic imperialism	The dominance of foreign sign languages and coded versions of spoken languages threatens the use, promotion, and preservation of indigenous Cameroonian sign languages.
2. Inadequate education and resources	Schools for the Deaf often lack qualified teachers trained in sign language and resources are insufficient to support effective learning.
3. Limited access to sign language	Deaf children and adults face significant barriers in accessing sign language, hindering their abilities to communicate effectively.
4. Insufficient promotion of indigenous sign languages	Indigenous sign languages are unique and culturally significant, but they face the risk of endangerment due to limited promotion and recognition.

Four major challenges were identified that hindered the promotion, preservation, and revitalization of CSL. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes advocacy for recognition, improved educational resources, community engagement, and increased research and documentation efforts. The Cameroon government and organizations are working to address these challenges, including the National Commission for the promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism whose aim is to promote bilingualism in the country.

RQ2. What factors contribute to sign language endangerment in Cameroon?

Table 5: Factors that contribute to sign language endangerment

Findings	Factors that contribute to sign language endangerment
1. Assimilation policies	Policies promoting assimilation into mainstream culture lead to suppression of sign languages.
2. Limited documentation	Sign languages are not well- documented, making it difficult to preserve and promote them in Cameroon.
3. Urbanization, migration, and globalization	Urbanization and migration has led to language contact and shift away from traditional sign languages. Globalization has as well spread dominant languages, thereby, threatening local sign languages.
4. Dominance of spoken languages	Spoken languages have dominated education, media, and government, thereby marginalizing sign languages.
5. Lack of recognition	Sign languages are often not recognize as official languages. This leads to limited support and resources.

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Findings of this study indicated that these five factors contribute to sign language endangerment, thereby highlighting the need for promotion and preservation in Cameroon.

RQ3. What steps can be taken to support, promote, and preserve sign languages in Cameroon?

Table 6: Steps to support, preserve, and promote sign languages

Findings	Steps to support, preserve and promote sign languages
1. Recognition and official status	The first step to promote and preserve sign languages in Cameroon is to include sign language in national frameworks and policies to promote its use and recognition officially.
2. Develop sign language laws and policies	Cameroon government need to establish clear guidelines for sign language use in education, administration and public services.
3. Train sign language interpreters	Cameroon need to provide training programs for sign language interpreters to support communication in various settings.
4. Include sign language in school curricular	To promote awareness and understanding, sign language should be taught in primary, secondary, high school, and university levels. Dictionaries, textbooks, and other materials to support sign language learning and use should be created.
5. Conduct research and documentation	More research is needed in order to promote and preserve this prestigious language. Systems that can convert sign language to speech or text and vice versa. Sign language news, segments and subtitles on television and other media platforms should be encouraged.

Cameroon can learn from several successful initiatives in other countries that have effectively addressed challenges in sign language promotion and preservation. These initiatives highlight the importance of comprehensive approaches that involve education, community engagement, public awareness, and collaboration among stakeholders. By learning from these successful strategies, countries facing similar challenges can improve their support for the Deaf community and enhance the recognition of sign language.

CONCLUSION

Conclusively, sign language plays a vital role in promoting the rights, identity, and inclusion of deaf and hearing individuals in Cameroon. Despite challenges, there are opportunities for growth and development. Promoting sign language education and training, creating awareness, conducting research and documentation, Cameroon can work towards promoting and preserving sign language. This can lead to a more inclusive society where Deaf and hearing individuals have equal opportunities to participate and contribute to development.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Recognizing the importance and value of Cameroon sign language, stakeholders can work towards creating a more equitable society for Deaf individuals in Cameroon. Policymakers should recognize Cameroon Sign Languages with equal status to spoken languages. Resources should be allocated, including funding and personnel, to support sign language preservation and revitalization efforts. Sign language should be integrated into school curricula from primary to university education.

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