

**AMERICAN AND PUERTO RICAN SIGN LANGUAGES AND ISSUES REGARDING  
THE NEED FOR INTERPRETERS FOR THE DEAF COMMUNITY IN PUERTO RICO**

**A research essay submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of:**

**Master of Arts  
In English Linguistics**

By Grace L. Figueroa Olmo  
August 2, 2023

**Department of English  
College of Humanities  
University of Puerto  
Rico**

Approved by:

---

Dr. Yolanda Rivera  
Reader

---

Dr. Robert Duprey  
Reader

---

Dr. Ann Albuyeh  
Research Essay Director

## **Abstract**

The origin of language has been debated by many scholars. Among those who believe the use of gestures was critical is Gordon Hewes, an anthropologist at the University of Colorado. Hewes (1973, p. 8) states: “The beginnings of a language system could have been elaborated from the fundamental finger-pointing gestures.” In the “Earliest Known History of Deaf People,” Gordon (2012, p. 5) asserts that “signs were probably the first language and that signs helped humans to start voice languages.” Sign languages appear to have been around for thousands of years, yet there is little historical evidence of them. This research paper looks at the use of American and Puerto Rican Sign Languages in Puerto Rico and explores several issues regarding the need for interpreters for the Deaf community in Puerto Rico. The Deaf community in Puerto Rico is a minority community that has been struggling for many years to be heard and respected. They have not been successful in gaining recognition for the Deaf community. This has negatively impacted the education, physical and emotional health, and identity of the members of the Deaf community in Puerto Rico. Unfortunately, as Gómez (2014) states when a person identifies as Deaf in a majority community, they tend to be subjects of discrimination, prejudice, and/or ignorance, and which he labels a “silence in crisis” (p. 83).

The research will also explore the historical background of American Sign Language and Puerto Rican Sign Language, as well as some issues which both regions have had with interpreters of sign language. Most interpreters take part in the Deaf Community and are vital for the communication of a Deaf person with the hearing community or vice versa. The practice of interpreting in Puerto Rico, however, has no legislation. The United States has an organization that certifies the practices of being an interpreter, the National Interpreter Certification (NIC), yet

in Puerto Rico there is none. Among the issues investigated in this research will be that of becoming an American Sign Language interpreter in Puerto Rico. This is the process an interpreter goes through in Puerto Rico to be certified in the United States and registered as a professional interpreter to be able to earn a better livelihood.

The following are the research questions which will be examined in this paper: 1) Will Puerto Rican Sign Language continue to be used? 2) Is it still a learned sign language within the Puerto Rican Deaf Community or has it been forgotten? 3) Has there been progress in increasing the availability of sign language interpreters in Puerto Rico? 4) Is the number of sign language interpreters increasing in Puerto Rico? 5) To what extent can interpreters in Puerto Rico code switch either between American Sign Language and Puerto Rican Sign Language or where necessary between English and Spanish? 6) What are the issues with having an interpreter that does not have all the tools to interpret in Puerto Rico, yet is still hired? 7) Will interpreters in Puerto Rico have their own licensure process like in the United States? The methodology of the research will use case studies and personal experience to address these questions.

### **Introduction: Historical Background**

The history of sign language in the West indicates that during the period from 400-1400 A.D., early Christians who had Deaf children and enough wealth, began to hire private teachers who knew sign language for their Deaf children, but these children were mostly taught how to read lips and communicate orally since signing was viewed as a negative feature. Deaf Christians that were less fortunate taught themselves sign languages or none at all. (Nomeland & Nomeland, 2012). In later centuries, there is evidence that Christian clergy were involved in using sign language. For example, in the sixteenth century, Christian monks used sign language

for religious outcomes and maintained it within their practices. Thus, religion appears to have helped expand the usage of sign language.

During the year 1816, the arrival of Laurent Clerc in Hartford, Connecticut contributed to the establishment of the first Deaf school in America. Clerc introduced Paris Sign Language while teaching Deaf children. When Clerc taught at Gallaudet University, founded in 1817, students communicated in other varieties of sign language after class. Those signs were from New York, Philadelphia, and Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, and this mix came to be known as "the natural language of signs" that later became what we now know as American Sign Language (Nomeland & Nomeland, 2012, p. 28). Thus, because of Clerc's teaching, American Sign Language has been influenced by French Sign Language. After some years, "it was reported that [Clerc] grieved over the fact that LSF [langue des signes française] was being modified and that other signs that he did not teach were assimilated into ASL." (Nomeland & Nomeland, 2012, p. 38).

Unfortunately, there has currently been minimal research done on the local sign language, Puerto Rican Sign Language. Most instructors are members of the Deaf community, some are Deaf, some are hearing early signers because their parents and/or siblings were Deaf, and others are late learners of the language (Quinto, 2011, pp. 137-138).

Sign languages are not the only modality of non-spoken language, we also have what is called tactile language. This modality of language is often used by people who are Deafblind, people who cannot hear or see, but are able to communicate with each other by the sense of touch. The Deafblind may spell American Sign Language, or any variation of it, but they will touch the whole hand to comprehend what they are communicating, and this technique is called "hand over hand," but the majority that use it have been able to learn visual sign language before

losing their vision. The hand over hand language is also very recent because for many years the Deafblind people were often forced to live in isolation until the 1970s, when forms of communication between Deafblind people emerged. There are an estimated 15 million Deafblind globally, but there is very little public data. A famous Deafblind person is Helen Keller, a 20<sup>th</sup> century American novelist, disability advocate, and political activist who learned how to tactile fingerspell to communicate after losing her vision and hearing abilities at a young age (Fable Tech Labs, 2023).

### **Disparity within the Deaf Community**

American Sign Language is taught in many countries, but that does not mean it is used by many people or that it is treated as a socially prestigious language since the main users are considered disabled by the hearing community. As a matter of fact, it was not until the 1990's that the US Congress passed the American Disabilities Act to recognize disabled communities, including the Deaf Community.

Kyle and Woll (1985) state that dignity has been denied to Deaf people in the rush for success within the speaking community or educational achievement. They maintain that this value must be integrated and involved in society, but there has been no success. Two aspects have been undervalued, the need for access to information and Deaf people's right to choose. (Kyle & Woll, 1985, p. 1). This has made it difficult for sign language users to reach out to, and/or receive adequate attention from different educational, healthcare, legal, economical, and political institutions. Kyle and Woll argue that sign language and the signing community have an endless struggle to be recognized as a worthy and deserving of respect.

In an article titled "Los invisibles deben ser escuchados: la construcción de la representación política de la comunidad sorda mexicana", Rose M. Gómez (2014), asserts that,

throughout history, the people that are denominated as Deaf are usually the object of discrimination produced by prejudice or the ignorance of the community that shares the same environment. This has caused Deaf people to experience situations of rejection, exclusion, and disparagement that not only affect Deaf persons and their families, but also educational, social, and economic development within their communities resulting in Deaf people being marginalized. Gómez stresses that the possibilities for Deaf people to integrate into an active social life are, therefore, reduced and viewed as problematic. The fact that they are labeled incapable also complicates their ability to be involved in political processes or be recognized as a social group by the government. (Gómez, 2014, p. 84).

An investigation carried out in 2021 by Alina Engelman, Mariana Guzzardo, Marley Muñiz, Laura Arenas, and Aracely Gómez (2022) titled “Assessing the Emergency Response Role of Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) Serving People with Disabilities and Older Adults in Puerto Rico Post-Hurricane María and during the COVID-19 Pandemic” stresses that political, social, and economic problems have affected Puerto Rico for decades, which can result in an inadequate response to its inhabitants’ needs. Puerto Rico suffers from not being represented in Congress, a debt crisis, exploitation of natural resources, the legacy of the island’s use as a military testing ground, privatization of infrastructure, vulnerability to climate change, and widespread poverty (Engelman et al, 2022, p.1). The extent to which Puerto Rico’s government is lacking in many areas greatly affects issues of accessibility for people with disabilities, in this case, the Deaf Community. Engelman et al emphasize that, this does not mean that members of the Deaf Community are incapable. The authors stress that they have personally met with Deaf people and know that they need interpreters and possibly support. But Engelman et al., (2022) suggest that often Deaf people are helped to a level that creates in them self-doubt,

the idea that they are dependent on others and cannot defend themselves, which is incorrect. Engelman et al., (2022) emphasize that the Deaf are not incompetent, they have their own culture, community, and customs. The idea of the treatment of “someone in need” can be one of the major factors resulting in their language staying a minority language.

The exaggerated idea that disabled people need help with everything is regarded as a form of discrimination. The website Disability IN defines such discrimination as “the practices, beliefs and attitudes, intentional or non-intentional, that assign inferior worth to people who have developmental, emotional, learning, neurodiverse, physical or psychiatric disabilities and are based on a medical (to be fixed) vs. social (a dimension of human difference) model for disability. It is a form of repression” which denies the Deaf person’s ability to express themselves (Disability IN, 2023). When an external person integrates within the Deaf Community, it can often be problematic. Outsiders may share situations in which they have met Deaf people and learned of the struggle they went through as a Deaf person in the hearing community, but when outsiders take over the situation this falls into ableism.

Another related category of prejudice is audism, “the discrimination or prejudice against individuals who are Deaf or hard of hearing” (Disability IN, 2023). This is a very common situation where a hearing person may see that they are about to interact with a Deaf person, but they decide not to, simply because they assume that the Deaf person will not understand, thereby equating Deafness with the inability to understand. Another common situation is when a hearing person raises their voice assuming that by speaking louder to a Deaf person, they will be able to hear. In this situation, the recommendation is that the hearing person should speak calmly, not raise their voice, and allow the Deaf person to do lip reading or communicate in writing (Disability IN, 2023).

## **Sign Languages as Minority Languages**

American Sign Language, Puerto Rican Sign Language, and any other signed language used in Puerto Rico are minority languages. For a language to be considered a minority language, it must be spoken by 50% or fewer people in a region, state, or country. A minority language can be defined as having a numerically smaller speaker population and also a lack of official status (Grenoble & Roth, 2017). Jefwa Mweri's research titled "Diversity in education: Kenyan sign language as a medium of instruction in schools for the Deaf in Kenya" indicates that "all sign languages are minority languages in the countries they are used in" (2014, p. 2). There are an estimated 70 million Deaf people and 15 million Deafblind people worldwide. An estimated 1.1 million people use American Sign Language as their only method of communication, and it is the 7<sup>th</sup> most used sign language around the world.

## **Organizations for Deaf Communities**

Gómez mentions several organizations that have been formed in different nations to help Deaf Communities within their country or region. A large organization is the European Union of the Deaf (EUD) that involves France, England, Spain, Germany, and others which makes them a supranational organization whose vision is for all the Deaf people in Europe to have equality in both public and private aspects of life. In the United States, we have the National Association for the Deaf (NAD), which is a civil rights organization of, by and for Deaf and hard of hearing individuals who believe in the right of the American Deaf Community to congregate on issues and have representation at the national level. Their mission is to "preserve, protect, and promote the civil, human, and linguistic rights of Deaf, DeafBlind, DeafDisabled, Hard of Hearing, and Late-Deafened people in the United States of America" and their vision is "that the language, culture, and heritage of Deaf, DeafBlind, DeafDisabled, and Hard of Hearing, and Late-



Deafened Americans will be acknowledged and respected in the pursuit of life, liberty, and equality” (NAD, 2023). Internationally, the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) works in partnership with the United Nations and its agencies, and their vision is for human rights for Deaf people including recognition of sign language in all aspects of life.

### **Historical Background of Sign Languages in Puerto Rico**

Even if American Sign Language is a minority language in the United States, in Puerto Rico, with respect to sign languages, it is in a dominant position. The situation in Puerto Rico regarding American Sign Language is one in which the language is associated with both identity and territory. This dates to the 1900’s when American Sign Language took over the formal education of Puerto Rican Deaf students in 1913 in Aguadilla in the Colegio San Gabriel school, which in 1956 moved to San Juan. It was taught by nuns who only knew American Sign Language and English. When the nuns moved to San Juan, they were replaced by Spanish-speaking nuns who were also trained to use American Sign Language. As a result, it is now common for a Deaf person in Puerto Rico to know and use American Sign Language (Torres, 2009, pp.88-89).

At this time, there was also a Puerto Rican Sign Language, which the nuns in San Juan forbade the students to use on campus. It is important to note that in the twenty-first century, educators are more open minded, and Puerto Rican Sign Language can be used in schools for the Deaf. We do not know the exact origins of Puerto Rican Sign Language, which is why many consider it an American Sign Language dialect (Quiñones, 2021, p. 1).

Nonetheless, in Puerto Rico the official sign language to use is still American Sign Language and not Puerto Rican Sign Language. This is because the government does not recognize Puerto Rican Sign Language as a language, making it less appealing for those who

learn sign language on the island. This complicates another situation, which is where Puerto Rican Sign Language could be taught. As will be discussed further below, there are no regulations for the teaching of American Sign Language in Puerto Rico. Because Puerto Rican Sign Language is not taught in schools, it must be learned within the Deaf Community. There are interpreters who have experience with this sign language, and connections with the Deaf community. Those proficient in Puerto Rican Sign Language know about the local signs taught within the rural regions of Puerto Rico, these might be other languages, as in Orocovis. Puerto Rican Sign Language can also be learned in the metropolitan area, which is where the American Sign Language is more abundant, but it is more commonly found in areas like Orocovis, Morovis, Mayaguez, etc. which are far from San Juan (Benedicto, Martínez, & Rivera, 2021) and these rural areas also have their own sign language like in Orocovis, as stated before. This does not mean that those users do not know American Sign Language; there are those who are capable of using both sign languages and code switching between the two. In other words, like other bilinguals, they can language shift while communicating to another user who only knows one of the varieties. Impressive as this is, most signers are also capable of reading lips, which helps their understanding when they communicate with each other or a hearing person.

Puerto Rico also has many additional sign languages within communities, an important example being Orocovis Sign Language, considered a village language. Those who use Orocovis Sign Language are descendants of older users and have learned it through their family or community (Benedicto, Martínez, & Rivera, 2021, p. 4). Thus, communicating with this or any other signing community in Puerto Rico can require several interpreters, including those who know the community sign language, Puerto Rican Sign Language and/or American Sign

Language. Therefore, successful communication with such communities relies on a potentially complex system of interpreting among the different sign languages.

The Covid-19 pandemic heavily affected the Deaf Community in Puerto Rico (and the United States) because it required the usage of masks, causing a negative impact on how Deaf people could communicate with the Deaf Community and hearing people. Interpreters were required to only use face shields, but many refused to use the shields without the mask because they did not feel safe when the pandemic began. Luckily, a clear mask was created, although not approved by health regulations. Clear masks were made by several companies, such as those advertised by the company ClearMask on its webpage during the pandemic. The site states that “76 percent of Deaf people missed vital information when masks were worn during conversations” reinforcing the idea that many Deaf people felt disconnected from society at this time (Gutierrez et al., 2022).

### **Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

One relevant theoretical perspective relates to the survival of sign languages, such as Puerto Rican Sign Language, discussed below within the context of minority languages. As Mweri points out “all sign languages are minority languages in the country they are used in” (2014, p. 2). John Myhill (1999) contrasts two language ideologies in his article “Identity, Territoriality and Minority Language Survival.” One associates language with individual identity and the other associates language with a specific territory. According to Myhill, these two considerations can help to identify the fate of a minority language. When language is associated with identity, the native language is inherited by generations of users, and the users are emotionally attached to the language because of its roots. When language is associated with

territory, a language is commonly used within the regional territory in public circumstances and/or intergroup communication when other languages cannot be used.

Those two ideological concepts can be easily contradicted, which is why many get confused and do not know how to help a minority language or whether they are helping or unconsciously sabotaging the language. It is a conflicting matter because both ideologies affect the minority language and dominant language in the area. American Sign Language is a minority language in the United States, and it is in many areas, the language-identity of the community. Territorial considerations are relevant to what can be seen as a competition between the use of Puerto Rican Sign Language and American Sign Language in Puerto Rico.

In addition to these considerations is the theoretical belief that local organizations are best equipped to help members of Deaf Communities in regions such as Puerto Rico. Engelman et al (2022) have proposed that conditions in Puerto Rico place community-based organizations (CBO's) at the forefront of critical responsibilities for the disabled (as well as older adults). While the specific findings of the Engelman et al study will be further discussed below, the research discussion which follows will be examined in light of this proposal.

The methodology of this MA research paper involves examining case studies reported in articles and accounts of personal experiences to address the seven research questions within the above framework. Given a larger time frame, such as that of a PhD dissertation, CIPSHI approval for survey questions among members of the Deaf Community in Puerto Rico would be possible and, obviously, preferable. This study, thus, is a first step toward contributing toward research intended to help Deaf Puerto Ricans and their families realize their potential to fully participate in their communities and the country at large.

### **Issues in Puerto Rico regarding Qualifying Interpreters**

Interpreting in Puerto Rico started off as a voluntary service involving family members, close friends, or anyone who was willing to perform this service for a Deaf person, and because of this, it was mostly done by the hearing children of Deaf adults (CODAs). According to Trujillo (2021), although there is a law 36-1996 which obliges governmental agencies to provide and have interpreters for people with hearing impairments, on most occasions, Deaf people do not currently receive these services. They either know someone who can be their interpreter and/or translator or go to an organization that has interpreters and request services. Furthermore, since Puerto Rican Sign Language is not recognized as a language by the government, unlike American Sign Language, it is not considered important to teach it to interpreters.

Since Puerto Rico is part of the United States, we follow federal guidelines; however, we have a problematic situation when looking for an interpreter. The interpreters from Puerto Rico are not certified by Puerto Rico because they must be registered by the United States, meaning the interpreters must go to the United States, pass the exam, and then come back to qualify as an interpreter. Not only that, but the interpreter must also gain experience before applying, have educational preparation, specifically a bachelor's degree, have extra certifications, and years in the field to qualify for the licensure. According to the website of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc. for the National Interpreter Certification (NIC), the process is as follows: "the NIC certification process begins with a multiple-choice NIC Knowledge Exam. Candidates are eligible for the NIC Knowledge Exam if they are at least 18 years old. Candidates who have passed the knowledge exam within 5 years and meet RID's educational requirement may then take the NIC Interview and Performance Exam." When the interpreters that come from Puerto

Rico who have all the qualifications decide to apply for the examination, they must make economical adjustments because they will not only be taking several exams, but they also have to travel to the United States and stay for some time to pass all the test requirements.

Many interpreters in Puerto Rico decide not to complete the licensure process, not only because it is a complicated and hectic process, but also because it is given in English, and many are not bilingual. Even when the interpreters are bilingual, there have been complaints that they do not pass the performance exam on the first try, but on the second or third attempt, making it even more intimidating for those who aspire to be interpreters, according to The Center for the Assessment of Sign Language Interpretation, which publishes exam statistics of the pass and fail rates. For example, in 2011 only 50% of the candidates managed a passing rate for the first part of the exam. The second part, which is the Performance Exam, had a 25% to 30% passing rate (CASLI, 2011). (In those analyses they did not determine if the candidates were heritage users of ASL, ASL as a second language, etc.) For the year 2020 only 39% of the candidates passed both exams, and 61% failed (CASLI, 2020).

However, to be an interpreter in Puerto Rico candidates mostly need certifications or courses that prove that they know American Sign Language, they are a child of a Deaf adult (CODA), or have done interpreting for a Deaf relative before. This implies that there may be different forms to regulate these services. However, there is an organization of interpreters, “Registro de Intérpretes para Sordos de Puerto Rico” (RISPRI). This organization lists interpreters in Puerto Rico for members of the Deaf community who want to hire an adequate interpreter, but it is not regulated by any governmental standards of Puerto Rico. It is a private non-profit organization that wants “to advocate for best practices in interpreting, professional development for practitioners, and for the highest standards in the provision of interpreting

services for the diverse users of languages that are either signed or spoken in Puerto Rico” (RISPRI, 2023). The RSPRI also provides education to the community to learn about the importance of hiring an interpreter that has a formal educational background and experience with the Deaf Community in Puerto Rico.

Thus, it is common in Puerto Rico to hire an interpreter with just a few certificates and some experience to interpret in meetings, activities, and news broadcasts, and within the health field, educational system, professional services, etc. This does not mean that these interpreters are inadequate, it is to clarify that Puerto Rico needs an appropriate form to prepare these professionals to have success while learning the language or they might know the language already, as in the case of CODAs.

### **Recent Research on the Deaf Communities in Puerto Rico**

This section examines recent research in Puerto Rico concerning the external and internal issues that negatively affect its inhabitants, specifically people with disabilities and/or impairments. Engelman et al (2022), referred to above, presents an analysis which deepens our understanding of how inaccessible Puerto Rico can be before, during, and after a disaster for older adults and people with disabilities. Their research revealed how political, social, and economic problems limit the response capacity of governmental authorities, which only worsens for the most at-risk population. Engelman et al also found that governmental efforts are not effective when reaching populations with functional and access needs, and that non-governmental organizations, on the other hand, were often present and prepared to provide support and assist with recovery before the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) arrived. The lack of investment in infrastructure and privatization of health and social services has led to a capitalist disaster in Puerto Rico causing a negative impact on the livelihood of people with disabilities, mental

illness, and the elderly (p.2). After Hurricane María, many passed away not because of the impact of the hurricane, but because of their inability to receive medical assistance, food, electricity, treatment, and/or access to clean water. A lack of communication and transportation was a major barrier affecting every inhabitant across the island, but especially people with disabilities because, as Engelman et al argue, many people with disabilities had no idea a hurricane was coming and that they had to prepare equipment and supplies for perhaps a month.

Another factor that impacts Puerto Rico is its dependence on foreign production since 85% of the food supply is imported. When Covid-19 arrived, there was a crisis in global food production, which made it difficult for the inhabitants to access food. The situation in Puerto Rico was exacerbated by the restrictions imposed by the Merchant Marine Act of 1920, the Jones Act, which limits commercial trade with foreign lands. Another factor was the tax on food even though it was lowered from 11.5% to 7% in certain cases, such as fast foods. Engelman et al point out that due to all of these crises and disasters, an increase in migration occurred resulting in an older population on the island, which increases the rates of poverty and unemployment, and results in lower levels of education (p.3).

Engelman et al found that in 2016, half of the elderly population reported at least one disability and in older adults of lower socioeconomic status the risk of disabilities was higher. Unfortunately, limited access to services leaves a burden of uncertainty for the future of people with disabilities (p.4), which will have a negative impact on the health system of Puerto Rico. The deaths after Hurricane María could have been prevented if the condition of the infrastructure were restored beforehand. A crucial recommendation is that a better response plan to emergencies is needed and must include people with disabilities.

### **3. Case Study Data**



In this section we will be discussing the research questions in depth using case studies citing various news articles and personal experiences related to the Deaf Community. The first research questions to be considered concern the viability of Puerto Rican Sign Language:

**Research Questions 1 & 2: Will Puerto Rican Sign Language continue to be used? Is it still a learned sign language within the Puerto Rican Deaf community or has it been forgotten?**

Andrés Torres (2009), a Puerto Rican CODA (Child of Deaf Adult), portrays his parents' experiences as Deaf children in his article "Puerto Rican and Deaf: A View from the Borderland." Torres' father, one of the very few Deaf children privileged enough, was enrolled at Colegio San Gabriel, and was surprised to discover how many more other Deaf children there were (p.88). He was taught to correct his basic Puerto Rican Sign Language signs and adapt them to American Sign Language. Since many of his siblings were Deaf, they also had the opportunity to enroll at the Deaf school so that within his household, everyone had to know the "proper" sign language, which was American Sign Language. The situation was so demanding that his sisters would teach the younger kids American Sign Language, even if they were not Deaf (p. 93). That practice continued even for the grandchildren. This is a common situation where a heritage language (for them, Puerto Rican Sign Language) is threatened because the users must know the new language to be able to communicate in social areas, for example, school, and at home. In the case of his family, they saw a bright opportunity to teach the new language in their household since it was the dominant language.

On Torres' mother's side, the children were not enrolled in the only Deaf school in Puerto Rico; in fact, they were not even enrolled in a regular school (pp.87 & 89). They were hidden away because they had to be protected and sheltered (p. 93). They were marked as "useless" within their hearing community and by their parents. This was a heavy judgment and

included the idea that a Deaf person was paying for the sins of an ancestor who had committed acts against God (p. 95). In addition, there was the belief that many Deaf people would see themselves as Jesus, who in order to clean the lineage mistakes of the hearing community, had to suffer (p. 95). Torres mentions that when his Deaf aunts became adults, they blamed their father for his “adventures” with many lovers during his youthful days. When they grew up and met other Deaf people, they were ashamed at how basic their sign language was, and it only made them even more angry (p. 89). Their sign language had been a means of survival, and was not adequate as a means of communication with the rest of the Deaf Community that they had just met and moved into (pp. 89 & 90).

According to Torres, his mother’s side of the family used the sign language that was taught among themselves, their family and friends, in Puerto Rico. His mother and siblings were among the few children that used Puerto Rican Sign Language during the emerging changes on the island because they lived far away from any other Deaf Community or Deaf school. When they moved to the United States, his mother’s family had the opportunity to learn American Sign Language because it was the most common language used within the new community (p. 93). Following Myhill (1999), this situation can be described as reflecting language-identity and language-territory ideologies.

Torres explains how in their family reunions many of his Deaf cousins and relatives would often exchange many signs and gestures, but his mother, the Puerto Rican Sign Language user, would often feel ashamed and not use it (p. 96). This can be one of the main reasons why Puerto Rican Sign Language can be in danger of disappearing. Unfortunately, as Torres illustrates, Puerto Rican Sign Language is seen by some as a lower-class language, so primitive that it is not worth the time or respect for a Deaf person to learn. The shame and reticence

Torres' mother felt regarding the use of Puerto Rican Sign Language may be prevalent among others in the Deaf Community. Her fear of getting corrected and/or not understood made her reluctant to use Puerto Rican Sign Language. Thus, American Sign Language would seem to be the language that can, and will, bring social power within the Puerto Rico Deaf Community, and not Puerto Rican Sign Language.

A more recent case involves a University of Puerto Rico PhD student of linguistics who, until 2023, has been encouraging the documentation of Puerto Rican Sign Language. The child of Deaf parents, Marina Martínez experienced how Puerto Rican Sign Language was viewed as a negative, inadequate, informal, casual sign language while growing up, making her question why that was, and motivating her quest to revive the language and encourage others to learn Puerto Rican Sign Language. Martínez hopes that her efforts to document Puerto Rican Sign Language will facilitate its being taught properly in the future and that this will prevent the loss of this language (Martínez, 2023, personal communication).

Another important factor related to issues surrounding the use of Puerto Rican Sign Language also referred to by Torres involves racial and ethnic identity. Being Deaf is often hard enough, but belonging to a racial and ethnic minority complicates it even more. In the United States, they have American Sign Language, mostly used by Caucasians, and they also have Black American Sign Language. Users of the latter make up a very excluded community that does not have many interpreters, and those interpreters, who use it, get judged heavily for where they are from or their roots. When Torres' family moved to the United States, he says that many studies examined how disability and racial, and ethnic identity shape the education families such as his received. This includes their access to services and programs which other Deaf people are privileged to have. As a result, Torres' family feared that when a Latino immigrant faces the

new school system, they are often presented with a lack of well-prepared professionals and educators to help them. As Torres notes, educators can be culturally insensitive and not know more than one language.

**Research Questions 3 & 4: Has there been progress in increasing the availability of sign language interpreters in Puerto Rico? Is the number of sign language interpreters increasing in Puerto Rico?**

Available evidence indicates that there have been many occasions where there are no interpreting services for the Deaf community in Puerto Rico with sometimes dire consequences. Rico (2021) reports the tragic case of Janet Viera, a young mother of two, who was Deaf and was threatened that her children were going to be removed by the state. She did not receive interpreting services for her court case, even when the authorities knew that she needed an interpreter, which caused her to lose custody of her children. Unfortunately, she decided to end her life. According to Rico, Viera's suicide alarmed the president of the "Comisión de Bienestar Social," Lisie Burgos Muñiz, regarding the process a Deaf or hard of hearing person must go through to receive interpreting services in Puerto Rico (Rico, 2021).

In her 2017 article "General Overview of the Puerto Rican Signed Language Interpreter," Katia Rivera emphasizes that there are no official, or accredited, organizations to teach American Sign Language in Puerto Rico, and the interpreters that have managed to find a decent education, cannot continue their professional development as interpreters as in other professions. In fact, as discussed above, there is only one organization that has recently given a licensure to interpreters, but only in the United States, which is called the Registry of Interpreters of the Deaf, Inc. and applicants must go through the National Interpreter Certification (NIC).

According to Rivera, in that organization there are only five certified American Sign Language interpreters that provide services in Puerto Rico, this is not enough, since many PRSL signers don't know ASL. This impacts the quality of the service many interpreters provide the Deaf Community in Puerto Rico. Rivera asserts that many interpreters lack education and are unable to keep up with new ways to interpret. In general, this means that currently for interpreters to provide a service in Puerto Rico they do not have to be licensed because as long as they claim that they know American Sign Language, they are "qualified enough" for the job, whereas in the United States the interpreter must be certified either by the Registry of Interpreters of the Deaf, Inc. or the National Association for the Deaf, as well as, comply with individual state requirements.

However, it should be noted that the greater regulations do not always guarantee adequate interpretation of sign language in the United States. The television network ABC reported a situation in 2017 in Tampa, Florida, in which an interpreter was hired during a police conference, and the interpreter did not know American Sign Language. Once Police Chief Brian Dugan was confronted with the question of who hired the interpreter, the Tampa Police Department spokesman, Steve Hegarty, admitted, "I simply did not ask enough questions." Unfortunately, Derlyn Roberts, who volunteered her interpreting services, ended up signing gibberish during the conference, and the Deaf Community did not understand the important news of an incident that had occurred (ABC News, 2017). Thus, not only do there need to be regulations, education, and licensing opportunities, but organizations hiring sign language interpreters need to follow the established guidelines.

A further case relevant to the question of whether more interpreters have become available in Puerto Rico involves my personal experience working in a hospital. As a healthcare

provider in Puerto Rico, we receive patients that are foreigners, or simply speak a different language than ours. It is very frustrating when we ask for translators or interpreters, and they are not provided. When I was still active in a prestigious hospital and it was the beginning of my shift, a coworker, who had over 40 patients in charge, had to report to me all the patients under her care. Obviously, it was impossible for her to attend to so many patients by herself. I received all of their records, but I began to prioritize them by how urgent their condition was. As the shift went along, a doctor notified me that he had discharged a patient, and because it was my responsibility to verify if the patient was in a good condition to leave the hospital, I went to the patient with his medical record in hand. I began to speak to the patient in Spanish to verify his name, birth date, record number, etc. but I noticed confusion in his expression (even when he was wearing a mask since this was during the covid-19 pandemic). I shifted my language from Spanish to English, assuming the patient's language would be English, or he would at least understand it, but his expression of confusion got worse. A few seconds into this uncomfortable moment, the patient began to use sign language. I was astonished and had no idea how to communicate with him. I began to use my hands, as if I knew any sign language, to try and communicate with him but it was unsuccessful. Then, after many attempts, his family member, who knew sign language, arrived, and gave her services as an interpreter.

This may sound upsetting, but I was not relieved that the family member arrived after her bathroom break, because who knows how many times the patient and a healthcare provider needed an interpreter to communicate and the family member either had to leave to eat, sleep, rest, etc. Instead I was angry and upset. I went to my supervisor to ask for an interpreter, and, at first, they told me they were not available, then that if the patient had a family member that does the function as an interpreter it is enough. I got even more frustrated by that response. The

patient was discharged, and the next shift came in, and the same coworker who handed me her patients at the beginning of the other shift, was the one receiving them again. She apologized to me because she knew how upset I was and that she had no idea we had a Deaf patient under our care. I did not blame my coworker for it, nor any other healthcare provider on that day, but I did blame the system. A patient who needs a translator or interpreter must be identified at the very beginning of his or her admission to any healthcare center. This event motivated me to study American Sign Language, and little by little involve myself with the Puerto Rico Deaf Community in order to better be able to communicate with Deaf people I encounter and understand their challenges.

From my own experience, those interpreters who have the desire to learn Puerto Rican Sign Language undergo a tedious journey. First, to find a Puerto Rican Sign Language certificate is impossible to nonexistent. The way that they can learn is to immerse themselves within the Puerto Rico Deaf Community, gain their trust, and be in the disposition to learn from the very beginning a sign language. Not many interpreters are willing to go voluntarily to an area for a prolonged period of time in order to learn the new sign language, and who could blame them? It can also be learned around private schools, but who are those providers? Are they part of the Puerto Rican Deaf Community and actually know what is commonly used among them or not? This raises the possibility that those who trust any institution offering sign language courses may not be learning to sign correctly.

**Research Questions 5 & 6: To what extent can interpreters in Puerto Rico code switch either between American Sign Language and Puerto Rican Sign Language or where necessary between English and Spanish? What are the issues with having an interpreter that does not have all the tools to interpret in Puerto Rico, yet is still hired?**

Engelman et al, discussed above, examined the situation for people with disabilities after Hurricane María. In this case, Puerto Rican interpreters were removed because they “did not qualify” and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) brought American Sign Language Interpreters, the message was not received correctly within the Deaf Community, and, as discussed above, many did not know that a hurricane was coming.

Relatedly, an interview in 2020 with a member of the Deaf Community impacted by the series of earthquakes occurring that year illustrates a similar problem. César Gabriel Jiménez Colón was interviewed by The Daily Moth, a news channel that keeps up with Deaf news, because of a viral video he posted on social media protesting the inefficiency of American Sign Language interpreters that were brought by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (Begnaud, 2020). During his interview, Jiménez criticizes the female interpreter that was brought for the earthquake briefing that Governor Wanda Vázquez gave:

But... she was not qualified for Puerto Ricans. She only knows English and doesn't know Spanish. I was puzzled on why she was interpreting while using an earpiece where someone else translated from Spanish to English. The information that was delivered was not clear -- there were a lot of repetitions. I tried to lipread and could tell that it was not the same as what the governor was saying. It means she didn't fully understand and was struggling.

Puerto Rico has plenty of interpreters here. We have Puerto Rican interpreters, absolutely. Why not request them? Is this a repeat of Hurricane Maria, but with the earthquake situation? For myself, I know ASL and have learned English, yes, but I am thinking of my



Deaf Community in Puerto Rico. They will not understand (parag. 4-5).

Many of the Deaf Community complained, according to Jiménez, that the interpreter did not sign important information correctly or use the language that Deaf people in Puerto Rico use. They identified that she was signing American Sign Language and English rather than American Sign Language and Spanish. It is not the first time that has happened, and this issue worries many from the Deaf Community, as attested by Jiménez's comments:

I am concerned -- what if two or three years in the future -- this happens again? I am not sure because most of the time, the government here, after listening to us, says, 'Yes, sure' but two or three years later, they forget all about it. It happens all the time. Please stop. You need to listen to the Deaf Community. It is time to stop this (parag. 8)

After the situation was brought to the attention of the federal government, officials claimed to be training interpreters to learn Spanish, and that they will be willing to work with local interpreters. Jiménez mentions how grateful he was that the Puerto Rican government hired an interpreter, but she was not qualified to interpret for Puerto Ricans. When the Puerto Rican government hired interpreters that knew American Sign Language, Puerto Rican Sign Language, and Spanish, FEMA found out and objected, and the interpreters were removed because they were not licensed by the United States. Jiménez also comments that Puerto Rico has plenty of interpreters, why not request them? When they hired interpreters that only knew American Sign Language and English, most of the Deaf Community in Puerto Rico were not able to understand or receive correct information about hurricane María, which as reported by Engelman et al, caused deaths among the Deaf Community who never knew a hurricane was going through Puerto Rico until their family were able to reach out to them. David Begnaud, an

American journalist, commented on January 12, 2020 on how FEMA subsequently decided to hire sign language interpreters that were Puerto Rican because of the interpretation incident with the qualifying interpreter they hired at first.

**Research Question 7: Will interpreters in Puerto Rico have their own licensure process like in the United States?**

This question is yet to be answered, since there is currently an organization, Registro de Intérpretes para Sordos de Puerto Rico (RISPRI) that is advocating for an official process to be required when becoming an interpreter, just as in the United States or any other profession in Puerto Rico, such as nurses in Puerto Rico who must be registered at Colegio de Profesionales de la Enfermería to be hired. RISPRI states that “En RISPRI nos esforzamos para promover las mejores prácticas para la interpretación, el desarrollo profesional de los practicantes, y los estándares más altos en la prestación de servicios de interpretación para las distintas personas que usan lenguajes de señas o lenguajes orales en Puerto Rico” (RISPRI, 2016). RISPRI hopes to, therefore, benefit many in the Deaf Community, provide better orientation and continued education for interpreters, authorize certifications to increase the number of certified professionals in the field, enact laws to regulate the practice, and improve the hiring of interpreters of American Sign Language or Puerto Rican Sign Language. Although this is a long process that will have to go through tedious approvals with the government and/or any other organization that authorizes the practice of the interpreting profession, there is optimism that Puerto Rico will be able to license sign language interpreters in the future.

**IV. Conclusion**

The following summarizes the findings with respect to the research questions presented above.

Questions 1 and 2: Will Puerto Rican Sign Language continue to be used? Is it still a learned sign language within the Puerto Rican Deaf Community or has it been forgotten? The research outlined above supports the idea that Puerto Rican Sign Language will continue to be used and confirms that it is still being learned within the Puerto Rican Deaf Community.

Questions 3 and 4: Has there been progress in increasing the availability of sign language interpreters in Puerto Rico? Is the number of sign language interpreters increasing in Puerto Rico? Even when the profession of interpreters is increasing, there are still issues when having interpreters available for Deaf or hard of hearing people that require services like legal, educational, or medical.

Questions 5 and 6: To what extent can interpreters in Puerto Rico code switch either between American Sign Language and Puerto Rican Sign Language or where necessary between English and Spanish? What are the issues with having an interpreter that does not have all the tools to interpret in Puerto Rico, yet is still hired?

The research demonstrates that the need to code switch between sign language varieties and/or English and Spanish presents many difficulties. Not all interpreters are bilingual, or bicultural. Moreover, the research suggests that when there is more than one sign language involved, which in Puerto Rico could be American Sign Language and Puerto Rican Sign Language, it is ideal to have two interpreters for each language. Also, in practice, having an interpreter code switch from American Sign Language to Puerto Rican Sign Language can cause issues and confusion with both languages. Ideally, it must be identified which languages the interpreter will be using before the interpreting services.

When an interpreter who does not have all the tools for the interpreting services is hired many may recognize themselves if the job is too much and decide not to do the service, however, those who do, will have issues like miss understandings or use incorrect signs.

Finally, question 7: Will interpreters in Puerto Rico have their own licensure process like in the United States? This is yet to be answered, but the organization *Registro de Intérpretes para Sordos de Puerto Rico* (RISPRI) is advocating for interpreters in Puerto Rico to have an official licensure process. This research needs further investigation.

A further important question which emerged out of this research is: Which are the qualities an interpreter must have to interpret Puerto Rican Sign Language in Puerto Rico? This research indicates that an interpreter must be able to adapt, be willing to learn every day through receiving feedback after a service, be willing to admit when they have made a mistake interpreting and correct it, understand their limit to intervene because they are interpreters of the moment, exhibit patience, and be willing to maintain a connection with the Deaf Community. In addition, education is important. Learning Puerto Rican Sign Language requires skill, time, correction, and being part of a Deaf Community, such education can be offered through a professor that has experience and a connection with the Deaf Community. To clarify, Puerto Rican Sign Language is not ‘signed Spanish’ as American Sign Language is not ‘signed English.’ However, while it is not mandatory, after this research I would recommend that an interpreter be bilingual. They should at least know Puerto Rican Sign Language and Spanish or if they are English speakers, American Sign Language and Puerto Rican Sign Language. As mentioned before, the research carried out here needs further investigation including more interaction with interpreters and with the Deaf Community of Puerto Rico.

After carrying out this research I would make the following recommendations: Because interpreters are essential to effective communication with the Deaf Community, it is important to have certified professionals. Puerto Rico needs its own regimen and laws to register these professionals and motivate them to earn continued educational certificates, take part in the Puerto Rico Deaf community, and have academic preparation in American Sign Language and Puerto Rican Sign Language. Puerto Rican Sign Language needs to be considered as an official language, it must be documented, and preserved. This is the language of many in the Puerto Rico Deaf Community and must be treated and respected like Spanish and English. The integration of Deaf professors in the organizations that will teach the sign language, either American Sign Language or Puerto Rico Sign Language, should be required. Aspiring interpreters, or new interpreters, must gain more experience and integrate within the Deaf community before being allowed to do interpretation for emergency news or the teaching of other interpreters.

Puerto Rico's government must act and consider new laws to assist people with disabilities and impairments around the island in all aspects; educational, political, health, economic, socioeconomic, etc. and include interpreters, not a family member, friend, or an employee that has a basic completion certificate of the sign language to assist the Deaf person. This community has to be treated equally and avoid ableism, this means that they can do as many things as a hearing person can, but we have assumed that they cannot, categorizing them as incapable. Our view must change, and we have to start asking them what we can do to finally allow them to integrate. In the words of René Pérez, a Puerto Rican rapper:

Desde que nacimos,

Nuestra mancha de plátano salió del mismo racimo

Somos hermanos del mismo horizonte

Todos nos criamos en la falda del monte”.

(Pérez, 2017)

## References

- ABC News. (2017, December 5). Fake sign language interpreter delivered gibberish in Florida. ABC 13, eyewitness news. URL: Fake sign language interpreter delivered gibberish in Florida - ABC13 Houston
- Begnaud, D. (2020, January 13). Puerto Rican deaf community complains about unqualified interpreter during earthquake briefings. *Daily Moth, Deaf News* (Jan. 13).
- Benedicto, E., Martínez, M. & Rivera, Y. (2021). A ‘new’ Village Sign Language: structural properties of LSOR in Puerto Rico? FEAST 4:111. <https://doi.org/10.31009/FEAST.i4.01> <http://www.raco.cat/index.php/>  
FEAST License: CC BY-NC 4.0
- Bilis, M. (2016). Throwback Thursday: When Martha’s Vineyard Had Its Own Sign Language. *Boston Magazine*.  
<https://www.bostonmagazine.com/news/2016/07/21/marthas-vineyard-sign-language/>
- Center for the Assessment of Sign Language Interpretation. *Exam Statistics*. URL: <https://www.casli.org/>
- Disability In. BRG ABLEISM/AUDISM FACT SHEET. Disability:IN, your business partner for disability inclusion.
- Engelman, A.; Guzzardo, M.T.; Antolin Muñoz, M.; Arenas, L.; Gomez, A. (2022). Assessing the Emergency Response Role of Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) Serving People with Disabilities and Older Adults in Puerto Rico Post-Hurricane María and during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health*, 19, 2156.  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph190421>
- Fable Tech Labs (2023). “What is Tactile Sign Language?” Make it Fable, Fable Tech Labs Inc.

URL: Tactile Sign Language | What is Tactile Sign Language? | Fable (makeitfable.com)

Gómez, R. (2014). Los invisibles deben ser escuchados: la construcción de la representación política de la comunidad sorda mexicana. *Revista Vectores De Investigación*, 9(9), 83–97.

Gutierrez, E., Lamarche, V., Rowley, K. et al. (2022). How do face masks impact communication amongst deaf/HoH people? *Cognitive Research Principle Applications* 7, 81. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41235-022-00431-4>

Hewes, G. W., Andrew, R. J., Carini, L., Choe, H., Gardner, R. A., Kortlandt, A., Krantz, G. S., McBride, G., Nottebohm, F., Pfeiffer, J., Rumbaugh, D. G., Steklis, H. D., Ralieg, M. J., Stopa, R., Suzuki, A., Washburn, S. L., & Wescott, R. W. (1973). Primate Communication and the Gestural Origin of Language [and Comments and Reply]. *Current Anthropology*, 14 (1/2), 5–24. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2741093>

Karlo, P. (2020). Sordos se sienten olvidados en medio de la emergencia: “Es una falta de respeto”. *Primera Hora, Noticias Puerto Rico*. URL: <https://www.primerahora.com/noticias/puerto-rico/notas/sordos-se-sienten-olvidados-en-medio-de-la-emergencia-es-una-falta-de-respeto/>

Kyle, J. & Woll, B (1985). *Sign Language, The Study of Deaf People and their Language*. Cambridge University press. Vol. 65, No.4, p. 1. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/414977>

May, S. (2003) Rearticulating the Case for Minority Language Rights, *Current Issues in Language. Planning*, 4:2, 95-125, DOI: 10.1080/14664200308668052

May, S. (2000). Uncommon Languages: The Challenges and Possibilities of Minority Language Rights. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 21:5, 366-385,



DOI: 10.1080/01434630008666411

- Mitchell, R., M., Young, T., Bachleda, B., & Karchmer, M. How Many People Use ASL in the United States? Why Estimates Need Updating. Gallaudet Research Institute, Gallaudet University. Retrieved: [https://www.gallaudet.edu/documents/Research-Support-and-International-Affairs/ASL\\_Users.pdf](https://www.gallaudet.edu/documents/Research-Support-and-International-Affairs/ASL_Users.pdf)
- Mweri, J. (2014). Diversity in education: Kenyan sign language as a medium of instruction in schools for the deaf in Kenya. *Multilingual Education* 2014 4:14.
- Myhill, J. (1999). Identity, Territoriality and Minority Language Survival. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01434639908666368>
- Nomeland, M., & Nomeland, R. (2012). *The Deaf Community in America; History in the Making*. McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.
- Pérez, R. (2017). Hijos del Cañaveral. Sony Music Entertainment US, Latin LLC.
- Quinto, D. (2011). *Teaching American Sign Language to Hearing Adult Learners*. Cambridge University Press. doi: 10.1017/S0267190511000195
- Quiñones, F. (2021). *Puerto Rican Sign Language: A Creole Language or an Endangered Dialect?*. Northeastern Illinois University, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. 28255799.
- Quiñones, F. (2021). Puerto Rican Sign Language: The Unpopular Opinion. NEIU Student Research and Creative Activities Symposium. 3. <https://neiudc.neiu.edu/srcas/2021/s39/3>
- Registro de Intérpretes para Sordos de Puerto Rico. *Bienvenidos*. RISPRI, 2016. URL: <https://www.rispri.org/>

Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc. National Interpreter Certification Process. RID, Inc.

2023

Rico, S. (2021). Cámara investiga caso de joven sorda que se suicidó. Noticel, online source:

<https://www.noticel.com/legislatura/ahora/top-stories/20210824/camara-investiga-caso-de-joven-sorda-que-se-suicidio/>

Rivera, K. (2017). *General overview of the Puerto Rican signed language interpreter* (Master's

thesis). Western Oregon University, Monmouth, Oregon. Retrieved

from <https://digitalcommons.wou.edu/theses/3>

Room, C. (2015). The Life and Death of Martha's Vineyard Sign Language. *The Atlantic*.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/09/marthas-vineyard-sign-language-asl/407191/>

Torres, A. (2009). Puerto Rican and Deaf: A View from the Borderland. *Centro Journal*,

XXI(2),85-107. ISSN: 1538-6279. URL:

<https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=37720842005>

Trujillo, R. (2021). Memorial Explicativo. Instituto de Estadísticas de Puerto Rico, Gobierno de

Puerto Rico. Comisión de Bienestar Social y Asuntos de la Vejez.