

# Algerian Jewish Sign Language: A sociolinguistic sketch

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Algerian Jewish Sign Language (AJSL) is a sign language that developed in a Jewish community in the Algerian city of Ghardaia. As the entire Jewish community in Algeria left the country by 1962, the language migrated with its users, and is in use today mainly in Israel and in France. AJSL, then, is a “village sign language” without a village. The sociolinguistic sketch of the language refers both to its development in its original locale, Ghardaia, and to its maintenance in present-day Israel.

## 1. AJSL in Algeria

Ghardaia is located in the northern Sahara Desert region of Algeria, in the M'zab area. It was founded in the 11<sup>th</sup> century by Berbers belonging to the Ibadiyya sect, a schismatic Muslim sect who is characterised by a puritanic interpretation of the Koran (Briggs & Guède 1964:9, Nagel 2004:27). According to M'zabite and Jewish oral traditions, Jews arrived at Ghardaia, the main town in the M'zab area, during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, and established a Jewish community there. The community lived in its own walled quarter (called *mella*) in the south-east part of the town. Though members of the Jewish community maintained commercial and economical relations with their Muslim neighbours, marriage was strictly within the community, which gave rise to a closed and rather isolated community. This social isolation that lasted for at least 500 years gave rise to a community with several distinct physical characteristics, among them elongated heads, slight tendency towards blond or red hair, and deafness. In 1954, the Jewish community numbered 1,091 members, and the entire population of Ghardaia was about 12,500 (Briggs & Guède 1964:9). At that time there were 25 deaf individuals in the community (2.5%). We do not have information about the distribution of deafness within the families in the community, but all the people we interviewed have deaf relatives, and therefore it can be deduced that deafness ran in specific families. However, according to Briggs and Guède's (1964:12) description, deaf people participated in social events and “had about as rich a

social life as anyone". From interviews we conducted with nine AJSL signers (see chapter XX in this volume) we learn that hearing people could sign very well, and the sign language that arose in the community served as the major means of communication between deaf and hearing members.

Based on the interviews we conducted, we further learn that deafness goes at least 5 generations back in the community. However, it is difficult to get more precise information about the interaction of the deaf people in Ghardaia with other deaf people, since all the people we interviewed had left Algeria about 50 years ago, and could not recall whether there was any contact with deaf people from outside the community. Furthermore, there are no sources of information about Algerian Sign Language,<sup>1</sup> and we have no information about deafness in the Muslim population of Ghardaia. Therefore it is difficult to establish whether the language developed *de novo* or was influenced by other signing systems. The Jewish community in Ghardaia had social contacts with at least two other Jewish communities in the area, the communities in Laghouat and Aflou. Deaf people in these communities also use AJSL.

Deaf children, boys and girls, in Ghardaia did not go to school, and therefore remained monolingual in AJSL. The hearing members of the community used their dialect of Arabic for everyday communication. The hearing boys, who went to school, studied Hebrew as well, in order to read the scriptures, and some of them also eventually acquired French for business discussions. Most of the hearing girls stayed at home, and therefore were not exposed to languages other than those used at home (spoken Arabic dialect, and AJSL if there were deaf people in the close surroundings).

The financial status of deaf people did not differ significantly from that of hearing people. Deaf men held ordinary jobs such as goldsmiths and porters in the market. Some were quite wealthy, while others were poor. Deaf people, men and women, were married to hearing spouses. Therefore, it seems that deaf people were integrated into the hearing community, AJSL serving as a main means of communication, used by both deaf and hearing. Nonetheless, deafness was considered as a punishment from God. According to the local superstition, deafness may be the result of having sexual intercourse during menstruation, which is considered a serious religious offence.

## **2. AJSL in Israel**

Between the years 1943 and 1962 the entire Jewish community left Ghardaia and immigrated, mainly to Israel and to France. The first wave of immi-

gration was between 1943–1950. Due to growing tension between Berbers, Muslims and Jews in the M'zab area and in Algeria in general, 500–600 Jews immigrated to Israel and France (Briggs & Guède, 1964). In 1950–1951 the tensions in Algeria diminished to some extent and the Jews stopped leaving Algeria. Some immigrants who were unsatisfied with life in Israel returned to the M'zab region at that time (from the archives of Beit HaTfutsot #73772).

In the 1950s, a second wave immigration began, motivated both by the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, and by the Algerian War of Independence with France. The Jews of the region were regarded as French allies, and as such they felt increasingly unsafe in their homes and began to leave, again. The last wave of immigration from Algeria to Israel was in 1962. No Jews remain in Algeria today.

There are no sources concerning deaf Algerian immigrants in Israel or in France other than the interviews we conducted. Therefore all the information about the lives of deaf Algerian immigrants in Israel is based on these interviews.

The emigration from Algeria changed the life of the community members in every aspect of life. First, the community itself disintegrated. Part of the community immigrated to France while the other part moved to Israel. Those who moved to Israel settled in different places in the country. Thus, members of the Ghardaia community no longer shared a physical location, and consequently the close-knit relationships between the community members collapsed. Secondly, they had to learn a new language, Hebrew, to adjust to the fact that the Jewish society in Israel was, by and large, secular, and they had to find housing and jobs.

The deaf members encountered other deaf people, who used a different sign language, Israeli Sign Language (ISL) and were part of a Deaf community with Deaf clubs and activities held by and for members of this community. Many of the members of the Deaf community were educated, an issue that was thorny and painful for the Algerian immigrants. AJSL users felt that they were singled out and stigmatised because of their origin and language, and consequently stopped using the language with other ISL signers.

Today almost all AJSL users are bilingual in ISL and AJSL. We do not have demographic data concerning the number of current AJSL signers in Israel, and their marriage patterns. However, from the interviews we conducted, we learnt that these signers use AJSL mainly with their nuclear family, both with hearing and deaf family members. They use ISL for interaction with members of the Israeli Deaf community, and since many deaf Algerians married deaf non-Algerians, they use ISL with their spouses and children too. Even in families where both spouses are of Algerian origin, the

deaf children use ISL, and barely understand AJSL. According to our investigation, there are hardly any people younger than 50 that can use the language fluently. AJSL is not used in schools, nor is it used in any official meetings of the Deaf community. No official resources (such as interpreting services) are available, and many people, including members of the Deaf community, are unaware of its existence. The first public mention of the language was in a conference on multi-culturalism and multi-lingualism in deaf communities in Israel, held by the University of Haifa (April 14, 2008). Currently there is a growing interest in the language among AJSL users, and some of them are eager to participate in projects aiming to document the language.

## Notes

1. Ethnologue (<http://www.ethnologue.com>, accessed in 2012) has just one line on Algerian Sign Language: “It has influenced the deaf community in Oujda in northern Morocco”. Other internet sources inform that Algerian Sign Language was recognised in 2002 as the main means for communication for the hearing impaired community (<http://www.conseilconstitutionnel-dz.org/languages-of-algeria.htm>, accessed in 2012), and that it developed from French Sign Language, as is evidenced by lexical similarity (over 50% of the signs). Yet they do not cite any sources for this statement, and they do not provide any description of the language (<http://www.sourds.net/2010/09/28/%C2%ABla-langue-des-signes-algerienne-est-une-revendication-des-sourds%C2%BB/>, accessed in 2012).

## References

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