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The Race to Study a Dying Sign Language Before It Disappears

By **Shira Rubin**



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AL-SAYYID, Negev Desert — In al-Sayyid, a Bedouin village in a remote corner of Israel's Negev desert, deafness is considered less a disability and more a fact of life. The rate of deafness in the community is 50 times the world average; out of 4,000 residents, some 150 are deaf, the result of a gene that first emerged in the villagers' ancestors a few generations ago. Deaf men work alongside their hearing relatives in construction jobs in nearby Israeli towns, and the deaf marry both deaf and hearing relatives — sometimes both, as the Bedouin tradition allows for polygamy and for the marriage between cousins.

Most important, both hearing and deaf members of the community speak al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language, a local language that developed in the village as its deaf population grew. ABSL, like other, similar "village sign languages," is not a counterpart to any other spoken or signed language: It does not share characteristics with the Bedouin Arabic dialect, Modern Standard Arabic, or Israeli Sign Language, all of which are also used in the village.

"One of the most exciting things about this language is that it arose out of nothing," says Wendy Sandler, the director of the Sign Language Research Lab at Haifa University, who has studied the al-Sayyid's sign language since 2000, along with fellow linguists Irit Meir, also from Haifa University; Carol Padden of University of California, San Diego; and Mark Aronoff of Stony Brook University. Village sign languages, Sandler says, are appealing to researchers for two reasons: One, they "match form to function more directly" than in spoken languages; and two, when they're still evolving, they offer a chance to "literally see [the language] unfold." Which means al-Sayyid has become a perfect laboratory for linguists looking to answer an age-old question: How does a language form in the first place? And can the evolution of a relatively new one, like ABSL, tell us anything about the traits all languages have in common?

Researchers can accurately date the origins of ABSL to 200 years ago, a time when nomadic Arab tribes roamed the dunes of the Negev desert and survived by herding goats. The head of one of those tribes was the sheikh of the al-Sayyid clan, an Egyptian peasant who migrated to the area after a family feud, married a number of local women, and adopted the Bedouin way of life. When his children, two of whom carried the recessive deafness gene, were rejected as "foreigners" by surrounding Bedouin tribes, they married among themselves. Four generations later, the first deaf children were born; as their deaf children had deaf children of their own, the language started to form.

By now, the al-Sayyid clan is nonetheless capable of using the language's vast sign vocabulary for anything. They fluently describe dreams and ambitions, gossip about upcoming weddings or births, and converse in great detail on national insurance or upcoming construction projects in the village. Complexity is achieved by the joining of simpler words. *Sweat* and *sun* combine to mean *summer*, *pray* and *house* to mean *mosque*. ABSL also incorporates frames of reference to locate both places and family members. When Kawkeb al-Sayyid, a 22-year-old deaf teaching assistant, speaks about her cousin Khlas, she points to the cousin's house instead of spelling out her name. When referring to significant locations, like Jerusalem, she uses a sign that looks like *prayer* combined with a reference to the direction of the city from her current location.

But ABSL's relative newness means that it hasn't yet fully developed some of the features that researchers once believed all languages to share. For most of its existence, ABSL has lacked many rules of grammar, which are just now beginning to take shape — and the slow pace has led researchers to question some conventional wisdom about the human capacity for language. The linguist Noam Chomsky, for instance, has argued that humans — unique among all animals — are born with a “universal grammar” already in place, and that an understanding of language is genetic and innate rather than learned. According to this view, all language is made up of “deep structures,” or underlying units of meaning, and “surface structures,” the specific combination of words chosen to represent that meaning; vocabularies may differ from one language to another, but they all have their roots in the same cognitive processes.

ABSL, though, with its relative lack of grammar and its creative blending of signs, challenges that idea. Meir, one of the researchers on the ABSL study, says that ABSL is a testament to humans' ability to process linguistic diversity. “We have a feeling that we date back to the Tower of Babel, but we're giving less credit than we should to our ability to sustain variation,” she says. “If we hear different accents, we're not so bothered by it. In small multi-lingual situations like al-Sayyid, they're less bothered by different means of communication.”

Some have taken this idea even further. In a controversial 2009 [article](#) titled “The Myth of Language Universals,” linguists Nicholas Evans and Stephen Levinson claimed that linguistic diversity, more than the use of grammar or syntax, is the biggest thing separating human language from all other animal methods of communication — and that only once researchers understand that can they begin to learn more about the cognitive process that underpins language development. But the study of linguistic diversity, they argued, has been falsely informed by Eurocentric perspectives — most European languages are connected by underlying structures as Chomsky has described, they wrote, but the same can't be said of all 6,000 to 8,000 languages that exist in the world, many of which are far more structurally varied.

“The claims of Universal Grammar ... are either empirically false, unfalsifiable, or misleading in that they refer to tendencies rather than strict universals,” Evans and Levinson wrote. “Structural differences should instead be accepted for what they are, and integrated into a new approach to language and cognition that places diversity at center stage.”

Significantly, ABSL also contains some traits never before documented in sign languages, leading researchers to wonder if it might not have certain aspects in common with other spoken languages rather than signed ones. For example, many sign languages use classifiers, shaping the hand in a specific way to describe the spatial nature of an action or how that action relates to other things, like two cars passing one another. But ABSL is unique in applying classifiers to nouns, too — the ABSL sign for *egg*, for instance, consists of the sign for *chicken* together with a pantomimed oval object, a gesture that makes use of the shape of the hand.

Many “village sign languages” have emerged in isolated areas or islands. One of the earliest known examples arose in Martha's Vineyard, where, like in al-Sayyid, a high incidence of congenital deafness meant that sign language was widely shared by both deaf and hearing community members. It disappeared before ever being documented. Today, at least 24 village sign languages exist across the globe, including communities in Ghana, Indonesia, Thailand, and at least three different towns in Israel.

But as globalization corrodes the borders that once insulated these small communities, their languages are vanishing. The 19th edition of the *Ethnologue*, a catalogue of the world's living languages, counts 138 living sign languages, though its editors predict the real number to be higher. Within that category, all of the village sign languages are considered endangered to various degrees, usually a casualty of advancing deaf-education systems that teach and prioritize a standardized national sign language.

While it's difficult to mourn changes that give deaf children greater access to education and job prospects, the erosion of ABSL also threatens an identity, and a way of life, that has long been central to the al-Sayyid community. Salah al-Sayyid, a principal at a local school and the son of one of the village's first signers, notes a growing “dissonance” between ABSL-signing parents and their children. Village residents under 30, he says, have a greater command in Israeli Sign Language (ISL), knowledge they've picked up from school, television, and social networks that expand beyond the boundaries of the village.

“We believe that this is the beginning of the end for the language,” said Salah. One of Salah's deaf daughters was arranged to marry a Bedouin man from the center of Israel, with whom she communicates in Israeli Sign Language. It is a trend that Salah expects to grow as more young people go out to work in nearby Israeli towns, and, with the help of video messaging apps like Skype, find it easier to socialize with other deaf people from urban and rural communities.

Because Salah does not understand ISL, however, ABSL is still the dominant language in his household, where 2 of his 14 children are deaf. As the language persists, for now, within multigenerational households, al-Sayyid village continues as a large-scale case study, and one which researchers believe will continue even as it departs from its pristine state. While Israeli Sign Language has not yet influenced ABSL linguistic structures, Sandler's team expects ABSL to eventually become a creole influenced by ISL, which would likely impact its lexical structures.

Still, though he's convinced of its inevitability, Salah al-Sayyid is not overly sentimental about ABSL's gradual fade.

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"Language is a tool for communication, so it needs to be constantly undergoing revival and renewal," he says. "Just as you may like to look at a picture of your grandfather's car, you wouldn't want to drive that car, because it wouldn't hold up to the standards of today. We can't preserve everything."

But, he adds, when ABSL dies, so too will an opportunity to understand "everything that comes with it." He's referring, he says, to "the culture of our ancestors, their values of hospitality and of hard work," but the statement also applies to an issue both more mysterious and more universal.

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