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Al-Sayyid: A Sociolinguistic Sketch

Shifra Kisch

The village of Al Sayyid is located in the northern Negev, the southern arid region of present-day Israel. Its Bedouin inhabitants are all related through kinship and named after their common ancestor who settled here in the mid-19th century. Al-Sayyid is home to a shared signing community where deaf and hearing signers use Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language (ABSL), an indigenous sign language that has emerged over the past 90 years.

Following the practice of cousin marriages, Al-Sayyid's grandchildren intermarried: four of these unions bore deaf offspring. The first deaf siblings were born between 1924 and 1940. The Al-Sayyid are now estimated¹ to number 4,500 men, women and children, of whom nearly 130 are deaf. These deaf individuals are distributed throughout Al-Sayyid's major lineages representing five apical ancestors, each a son of Al-Sayyid the founder.

To this day kin-endogamy (between and within these lineages) accounts for over 60% of marriages (Kisch, this volume). Genetic research,² conducted among the Al-Sayyid in the early 1990s, identified autosomal, recessive non-syndromic deafness, associated with intermarriage. Demographic and genealogical data I have been recording since 1995 show a stable incidence of congenital deafness of 2.5–3%.³ The recessiveness of the genetic mutation, the fact that the majority (80%)⁴ of deaf individuals were born to hearing parents, and the fact that deaf adults were until recently always married to hearing partners, further contribute to the blending of deaf and hearing.

Not only did kin-endogamy induce high incidences of deafness, it also accounts for a dense social network in which both hearing and deaf people are embedded. Many members of the community have at least one deaf individual among their household, in-laws, peers, or neighbours. Consequently, all deaf and many hearing Al-Sayyid infants are exposed to signing from birth, within the family environment, with additional (deaf or hearing) adult models in the community.

Sited on one of the highways connecting the northern Negev and the Dead Sea, the village of Al-Sayyid lies less than 20 kilometers from the Negev's district capital of Beersheba. In fact, this highway divides the original village into two parts and beside the road are situated several garages, grocery stores, and one of the village's four mosques. In the village there

are several smaller grocery stores. The larger part of the village, south-west of the highway,⁵ is spread at the foot of a moderate hill, on top of which the village's first school and clinic are located. The village now has three elementary schools and two (HMO) clinics. Until 2005, Al-Sayyid was one of the many Bedouin villages officially unrecognized by Israeli authorities due to the state's refusal to recognise or negotiate land claims. Despite the current process towards recognition,⁶ most parts of the village still lack basic infrastructure, including paved roads, running water, connection to the national electricity network, sewage and waste disposal.

Most homes are modest cement-brick constructions of two to four rooms with flat tin or concrete roofs. There are also several new two story red tiled houses belonging to the few more affluent residents.⁷ Generally, village homes are arranged in compounds of several households of extended families. The village is made up of several dense clusters of multiple compounds, as well as slightly more dispersed compounds. The geographical distribution of the residential clusters partially corresponds to the five main lineages. Many dirt roads crisscross the village leading to its residential clusters, neighboring villages and the adjacent highway. Most households have a television⁸ and, increasingly, more men and women have mobile phones, but only a few have an internet connection. In most (multiple-household) compounds there is at least one car owner.

Formerly semi-nomads, the Negev Bedouin are the native Arab inhabitants of the Negev. The Negev Bedouin have a very high proportion of young people; more than half of the population is under the age of 14.⁹ Fertility rates are high and kin-endogamy and polygyny are common. The Negev Bedouin constitute one of Israel's most marginalized minority groups. Bedouin (men) are mostly enrolled in the lower strata of the labour market. With a population of over 210,000, the Negev Bedouin make up roughly a fourth of the otherwise predominantly Jewish-Israeli Negev inhabitants.

Most deaf and hearing Al-Sayyid signers are embedded in several diverse language communities. Hearing signers communicate in both sign language and the local spoken Arabic dialect. Literacy in Hebrew and/or Arabic is increasingly common. Additionally, most men and increasing numbers of women regularly communicate in Hebrew for work, administrative or medical matters. The majority of deaf signers are, or have been, members of student signing communities at school and boarding school outside the village, where communication between students was mostly based on Israeli Sign Language (ISL). Since people regularly move between languages, code switching and mixing are common. Deaf signers may code switch or blend ISL and ABSL, while many hearing signers often switch between speech and

sign, use signed Arabic, or voice over their own or other people's signing in mixed-group interactions.

Neighboring Al-Sayyid are two villages inhabited by two groups of the Qderat Bedouin that exhibit comparable rates of deafness and hearing signers (Kisch 2007 and this volume). Here too, shared signing communities have emerged. The first Qderat deaf descendants are coevals of the first deaf Al-Sayyid siblings and their deaf descendants started attending the same schools around the same time.¹⁰ Despite the fact that they can easily demonstrate several obvious lexical variations, the signing of the Al-Sayyid and Qderat is mutually intelligible and they do not consider their signing to constitute separate languages. Moreover, comparable lexical variation exists within the Al-Sayyid community. Both hearing and deaf people often refer to it as 'our language'.

Many lexicalized signs bear evidence for the historical depth of ABSL. For instance, the sign for 'adult woman' or 'mother' is based on the iconic representation of a form of veiling no longer practised. Similarly, the sign for 'butter' derives from the iconic representation of the churning of milk, rarely seen nowadays, for in most households butter is no longer domestically produced (Kisch 2008). The compound place name COW-THERE (pointing to the actual north), referring to the region where some families took their cattle to graze in spring, is still used by some to sign 'Tel-Aviv' (or more generally to indicate the country's central urban agglomeration).

ABSL is used in diverse settings and communication contexts, from casual conversation to resolving disputes and storytelling, and from transactions in local garages or grocery stores to the simultaneous home translation of broadcasted news and other TV programmes. More formal medical, bureaucratic and legal interactions (in Hebrew or Arabic) are often interpreted into ABSL by accompanying relatives. State funded interpreting services (ISL/Hebrew) are also increasingly employed in such formal settings. Even within the village, ABSL is no longer used exclusively. Like schools outside the village, Al-Sayyid schools take a Total Communication approach to deaf education, based on ISL. Al-Sayyid deaf staff members (along with the non-Al-Sayyid teachers of the deaf) insist that the language of instruction should be exclusively ISL. However, hearing Al-Sayyid staff and peers (lacking command of ISL) regularly use ABSL to communicate with their relatives on school grounds.

Signing is not restricted to deaf signers; in fact hearing signers outnumber deaf signers. Roughly a third of the hearing population is observed to sign regularly. Whereas there are 130 deaf signers, there are more than 700 hearing signers, even when only the most immediate signing relatives are included.

This minimum estimate is based on a sample survey comprised of only those hearing signers, such as siblings (and half-siblings), partners and children of deaf individuals, that were regarded by other household members, including at least one deaf relative, as competent signers. Yet (unquantified) ethnographic data indicates there are many more hearing signers than this partial survey suggests, because there is a significant number of hearing signers who have no immediate deaf relatives.

However, the relative ease of communication between deaf and hearing, as well as the status of signed communication, does not solely depend on the number of fluent hearing signers. Indeed, hearing Al-Sayyid use the local sign language with varying degrees of proficiency. Some use local signs only to accompany spoken Arabic. But, even those least proficient often demonstrate awareness of the pragmatics of signed communication and can discuss practical matters fairly easily, preferring translation for more intensive interaction; skilled signers can readily be found to mediate, translate or tutor others in improving their signing skills. Largely due to this widespread awareness and experience of the viability of signed communication, deafness in Al-Sayyid does not make for social marginalization or isolation; deaf people are not categorically shunned or stigmatised. Rather than being considered a defect or disability, deafness is commonly perceived as a condition requiring the use of signed communication.

As manifested in both common attitudes and practices, this relatively inclusive social reality is grounded in daily experiences, that contest the disablement of deafness. There is no evidence that additional characteristics are perceived as inherently attached to deafness, nor are certain social roles or activities reserved for deaf people. The absence of local myths to account for deafness discloses the common perception of deafness as a form of human variation that does not require explaining or fixing. Thus, attempts to reduce the rates of deafness by means of genetic testing and counselling were not received without controversy; compliance to the program was low (Kisch 2004). Likewise, most (hearing) parents were initially reluctant to respond to the active promotion of cochlear implants (CIs). However, over the last five years, after parents were convinced it would increase their children's opportunities, as many as 14 Al-Sayyid children have been implanted.

The status of deaf people is gradually being eroded by the differential and restricted structure of their opportunities. The education available for hearing Negev Bedouin is rather dismal, but deaf education has fared worse. While hearing children have been able to attend school since the late 1960s, deaf Al-Sayyid children started attending a Hebrew school for the deaf in Beer-sheba only in the early 1980s. Later, some of the male deaf students could

also continue on to receive vocational training at a more distant boarding school. Only in the 1990s were the first classes for deaf students opened in Arabic schools, and in 2004, the first kindergarten (followed by elementary school classes) opened in Al-Sayyid. Out of the total of 134 deaf descendants among all generations of Al-Sayyid, only 14 have never had any form of schooling, and deaf people attend school for longer on average compared to their hearing peers. Nonetheless, literacy among most deaf students remains poor. The separate and mostly inferior schooling available for deaf students presents the most obvious structural disparity between deaf and hearing Al-Sayyid. This schooling has not been designed to prepare students for matriculation certificates, and so higher education has not been available to deaf students. Their options are limited to a few vocational training programmes.

During the adult lives of the first deaf descendants, farming and animal husbandry – the previously dominant sources of livelihood – became severely restricted and income increasingly depended on wage labour. Bedouin men generally inhabit the unskilled, lower strata of the Israeli labour market, with unemployment rates among the highest in the country. Among the Al-Sayyid, sources of income are diverse, including jobs as watchmen, mechanics, tractor or truck drivers, or seasonal agricultural or construction workers. Many commute daily or weekly to work all over the country. There are small business owners and over a dozen hearing young men who have studied abroad in medicine, dentistry, pharmacology and law. Though there is a growing number of both male and female teachers, Bedouin women are otherwise rarely involved in paid labour. Among young deaf Al-Sayyid women however, the rate of employment as trained and untrained educational staff at the local schools is slightly higher than that of their hearing counterparts. With poor literacy but relative ease of access to a limited number of vocational courses, most deaf men and women occupy the middle to lower range of occupations. The recent recession has left many hearing and most deaf men unemployed and dependent on welfare benefits with occasional informal day work.

Over 30 years of separate deaf education (and consequent differential work opportunities) have reduced the social space shared by deaf and hearing Al-Sayyid and transformed deaf people's social networks. This has contributed to the emergence of deaf sociality associated with the use of ISL, as well as a preference for deaf-deaf marriages. In 2004, the marriage of a deaf Al-Sayyid woman to her (non Al-Sayyid Bedouin) classmate constituted the first deaf-deaf marriage among the Al-Sayyid. Since then, half of the marriages of deaf Al-Sayyid women have been with deaf partners almost

exclusively from outside the community. Deaf-deaf marriages were initially received with some apprehension, as many deaf and hearing considered the familiar arrangement (the marriage of a deaf and hearing signer) advantageous. Besides, family members and deaf candidates often lacked the social networks to arrange deaf-deaf marriages. This illustrates that whereas the sociolinguistic space shared by deaf and hearing Al-Sayyid is generally accommodating for deaf people, established structures and practices may – as any social configuration elsewhere – both facilitate and restrict (deaf) people.¹¹

Since 2005, a team of four linguists¹² has published extensively on the linguistic structure of ABSL. From the late 1990s the Al-Sayyid have received occasional media attention from regional, national and international media. Publicity among the general public has also increased with two documentaries and the publication of a popular science book.¹³

Notes

1. Obtaining accurate and reliable demographic data is obstructed by the fact that unrecognised (or newly-recognised) settlements are only very partly included in data published by the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics (ICBS). Additionally, The Al-Sayyid now reside under different municipal jurisdictions, and some still reside outside the jurisdiction of any local or regional council.
2. Scott et al (1995, 1998). These publications are also often quoted to state that all deaf individuals are “descendants of two of the five adult sons of the founder” (Scott 1995:965). However, this conclusion was based on partial data collected at the initial phase of the genetic study. Also the use of the term tribe to refer to the Al-Sayyid, used by Scott et al. and in several other publication, is inaccurate.
3. Kisch 2000; 2004; 2008. Last updated survey conducted in the summer of 2011 listing 130 congenitally deaf individuals (Kisch, this volume). Higher rates noted for the Al-Sayyid case are mostly based on (over)estimations of the number of deaf individuals or outdated figures for the total population.
4. Based on my last survey of the total deaf population (rather than a sample) in summer 2011.
5. The smaller north-eastern part of the village is contiguous to one of the seven Bedouin state established townships, and has access to limited municipal utilities. It is no longer part of the Al-Sayyid village as defined in the state recognition plan.

6. It has been in the process for several years now, but a master plan for the village is still in preparation and negotiation. An approved master plan is required for the provision of many services and building permits. Connection to running water supply and the paving of several asphalt roads are underway.
7. With the prospect of full recognition and lowered risk of demolition, these houses were built by several businesses owners (such as a garage or construction company) and a few young dentists and lawyers.
8. Several Israeli and Jordanian channels offer limited but regular on-screen sign language interpreting, to ISL and LIU respectively.
9. The Negev Bedouin Statistical Data Book, No. 3. 2010; The Galilee Society 2010
10. For over 30 years deaf Qderat and Al-Sayyid students have had regular contact; together they made up a third of the deaf students at the relevant elementary schools (Kisch 2007; Kisch, this volume).
11. Kisch 2007; 2008
12. Sandler et al 2005 and other publications by these authors.
13. For review of this book see Kisch 2009

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