

Shared Signing among the Al-Sayyid and Qderat Bedouin

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The Al-Sayyid Bedouin are one of the many Arab-Bedouin groups inhabiting the southern region of present day Israel. Exceptionally high rates of hereditary deafness occur within several Negev Bedouin groups. Among the Al-Sayyid 130 of the estimated 4,500 inhabitants are deaf (2.5 -3%). These high incidences account for significant differences in the experience of deafness by both deaf and hearing. Most significantly, both deaf and hearing people are exposed to signed communication from a young age. In addition to the 130 deaf Al-Sayyid signers, roughly a third of the hearing Al-Sayyid are observed to sign regularly. Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language (ABSL) emerged over the past 80 years and provides the basis for a signing community shared by deaf and hearing signers. However, the lives of most deaf and hearing Al-Sayyid are embedded in several diverse language communities. The dynamic sociolinguistic landscape in which ABSL emerged and operates is often overlooked; consequently it has typically been portrayed as an isolated language emerging in a linguistic vacuum. This notion is most evidently challenged by the common signed bilingualism of the majority of the Al-Sayyid deaf signers, and the inherent cross-modal bilingualism of hearing signers.

Another factor that received little attention so far are the sociolinguistic contacts between the Al-Sayyid and neighbouring Bedouin groups with comparable rates of deafness and hearing signers. The first deaf descendants among the Qderat Bedouin groups and the Al-Sayyid are coevals, and their deaf descendants attended the same schools for over 30 years. The signing of the Al-Sayyid and Qderat is mutually intelligible. While signers commonly remark some lexical variations, they do not consider their signing to constitute separate languages. Based on ethnographic fieldwork spanning over the past decade and a half among the Negev Bedouin, and a preliminary lexical comparison, the relationship between the Al-Sayyid and Qderat and their signing practices will be considered.