The developments of SASL, dialects, and its timeline

South African Sign Language (SASL) serves multiple roles for the Deaf communities in South Africa. It is the language that the Deaf people use for interaction and passing on cultural knowledge through generations (Aarons & Akach, 2002; Baker-Shenk & Cokely, 1981; Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996; Lawson, 2002; Lombard, 2006). SASL unites Deaf communities. This language conveys meanings of the intended messages through an essential combination of hand shapes, the orientation of hands, the location of hands, the movement of hands, and non-manual features (i.e., facial expressions, movements of shoulders, and head movements) (National Institution for the Deaf [NID], n.d.). In response to Aaron (1998)'s statement regarding the organic evolvements and developments of signed languages among Deaf communities, in-depth information of SASL developments, its dialects, and its status in South Africa are elaborated below:

Developments of SASL

SASL has been developed over time by multiple groups of Deaf people under influences of multiple formal institutions. The developments from SASL links back to the roles of churches at the schools for Deaf learners, the effects of the Apartheid system, and influences from outside South Africa (Aaron, 1998; Wehrmeyer, 2011).

Churches of different denominations brought different methods of teaching Deaf learners to South Africa, and that later entailed the development of SASL. Narrated chronologically, in 1863, a Dominican nun taught children with hearing loss with the signs rooted from Irish Sign Language (ISL). Soon after, a racially mixed school for Deaf learners was founded in Cape Town (Aarons & Akach 2002; Leeson & Saeed 2012; Penn, 1992). In 1881, the Protestant Dutch Reformed Church (NGK) set up a school for White children with hearing loss in Worcester; they used local natural signs for teaching and taught Afrikaans as a spoken language to the children (Lombard, 2006). By the mention of "local natural signs," it indicates that at least a dialect in SASL existed. In 1888, German Dominican nuns established a German-oralist-method school in King

Williamstown for White children with hearing loss (Aarons & Akach 2002). *Oralism* is a system that strictly optimizes the use of lip-reading, spoken language skills, and hearing aids (Baker-Shenk & Cokely, 1981). As such, natural signs—SASL—were ignored in this education method.

In 1948, the Apartheid policy on racial and ethnic classifications began to affect the residential settlements of all people in South Africa; people of certain races were forced to relocate and reside in restricted areas. The policy also had a tremendous effect on Deaf learners and their registrations in the schools assigned by race. As a result of the relocations, most of the Deaf learners were lodged some hundred kilometers away from their families. The policy also obliged changes in the teaching methods at the schools for the learners with hearing loss. More resources were budgeted to White schools compared to schools for other races.

In the early stages of Apartheid, the oralist method with English or Afrikaans was assigned for teaching at the schools for the White learners with hearing loss, since the government at the time considered the ability to speak prestigious. No signing was allowed at the schools for the White deaf learners. As opposed to the abundant resources and the oralist method, limited funds were distributed, and signed language was not prohibited in schools for the deaf learners of other races (Aaron, 1998).

Until the 1980s, the South African government enforced the implementation of mother tongues as the official medium of instruction in all schools. There was no problem at the schools for White deaf learners, as they had been already assigned to teach in either English or Afrikaans. However, there was confusion among schools for other races of the deaf learners. Since the learners were sent away from their families (who used any of the 11 languages), it was unclear to the schools for which of the languages should be implemented in their curricula. After a period of time, the government decided to implement English and Afrikaans as the medium of instruction in schools for Black students with hearing loss. The Paget-Gorman signing system, a system invented in Britain allowing simultaneous speaking and signing of the invented signs, was instructed to be the method for teaching. The signs were invented by hearing teachers; they are not the natural signs that Deaf people use and lack grammar (Aaron, 1998). The method was

evolved further in practice amongst the teachers of the deaf learners, and they derived three new teaching methods: 1) total communication, 2) sign-supported speech systems, and 3) signed English. The total communication method is a combination of linguistic communication (i.e., gesture, pantomime, drawings, and fingerspelling), invented signs, and a spoken language. With some slight differences, sign-supported speech systems employ a combination of speech and natural signs in the spoken word order. Signed English uses the combination of pidgin of spoken language and the invented signs. However, without involving SASL, these methods did not benefit learners with hearing loss (Aaron, 1998).

While the decisions on the implementation of the teaching methods and the medium of instruction were made by hearing people who were unaware of Deafness, the development of SASL simultaneously took place at playgrounds and hostels at the schools. Deaf people usually learned SASL from their peers. Penn (1992) hypothesized that the differences in SASL were originated from these consequences affected by the racial and ethnic classifications during the Apartheid.

International also influenced the developments of SASL. Back In the 1920s, South Africa was influenced by multiple countries to implement oralist method in the education for the Deaf learners (van Herreweghe & Vermeerbergen, 2010). The effects of oralism in South Africa lasted even after the abolishment of its Apartheid. In 1977, a meeting held during the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) symposium stimulated multiple countries to regain signed languages as the medium of instruction at the schools for Deaf learners. Led by these changes in other countries, signed language and its dialects used in South Africa were once again recognized and documented during a meeting held by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in 1983.

Dialects in SASL

Aaron (1998) proposed that there is only one signed language with variations in South Africa; they are similar in grammar, although they are semantically different (Morgan & Aaron, 1998; NID, n.d.). In contrast, some Deaf people perceive that there are multiple signed languages in the country. In response to these different views on SASL, Selzer (2010) explained that racial bias

among Deaf people affected the individual's understanding of the signed messages. The issues surrounding dialects in SASL have persisted (Kellett Bidoli, 2001), which some researchers note as a *red herring* that could distract Deaf people from understanding the intended messages. On the other hand, Deaf people of different dialects were able to fine-tune their understanding of each other.

The timeline of SASL development and its current status

At present, multiple stakeholders are trying to standardize SASL since the standardization will empower Deaf communities in receiving equal public services in the long run (Selzer, 2010). After 20 years of perseverance among Deaf organizations and relevant stakeholders, the Parliament of South Africa's Constitutional Review Committee is recommending the National Assembly recognize SASL as the twelfth official language of South Africa. Once there is an official approval, it will lead to the provision of accessible information and services amongst the governmental departments for Deaf people (Essop, 2017). During the write-up of this thesis, SASL has officially become the medium of instruction at schools for the Deaf learners (TIMEsLIVE, 2018). Figure 1 summarizes a timeline of the developments of SASL.
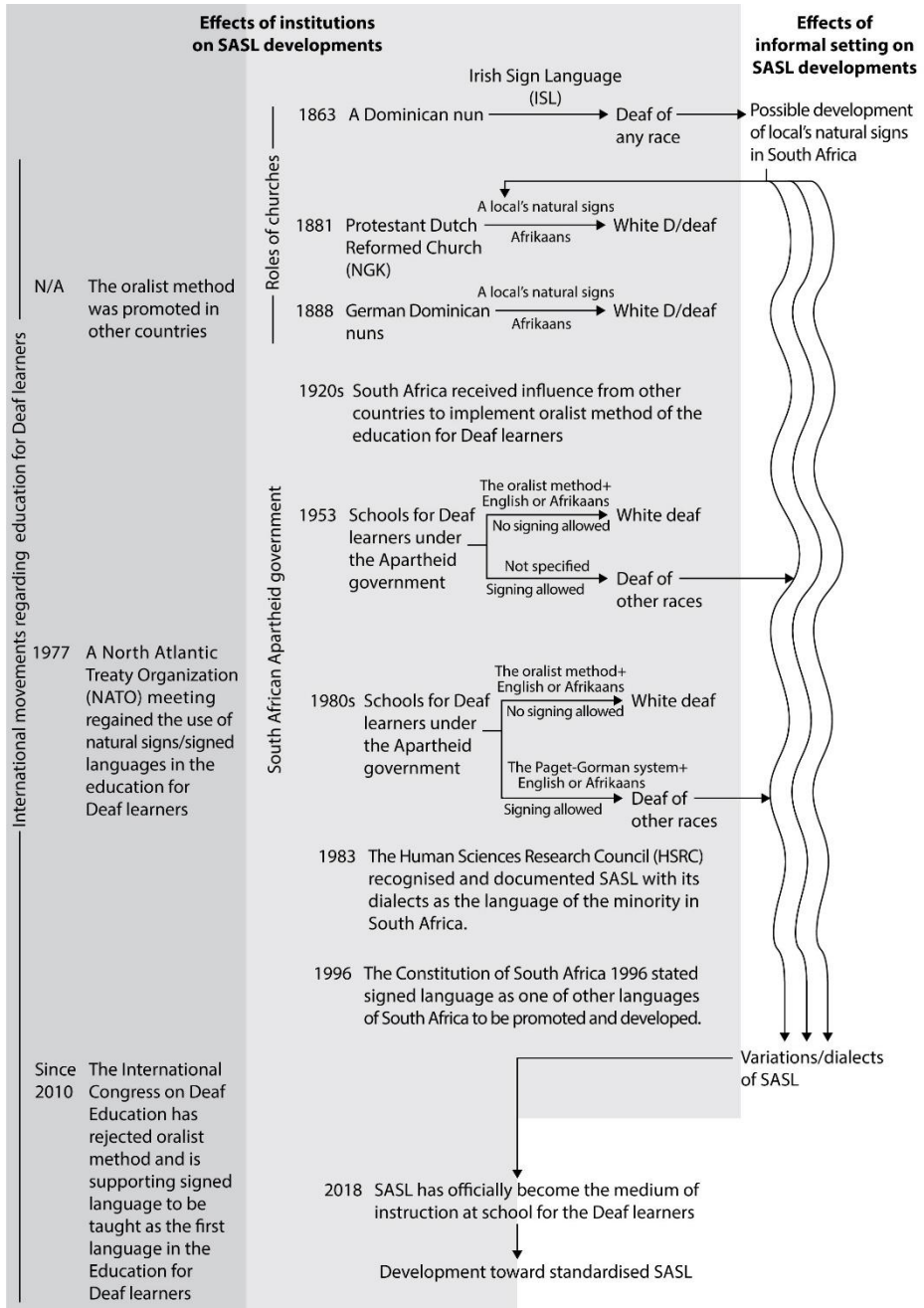
Figure 1 Timeline of developments of SASL

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