

Guinea-Bissau: the birth of a sign language

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Abstract

In Guinea-Bissau, there were many deaf people without access to language, education and even to legal registration. Since 2003, deaf people started to attend the school for the blind, having quickly surpassed in number those of blind students.

In 2005, the teachers for the blind recognized that they could not teach the deaf and asked for help at the Portuguese Association of the Deaf (APS), which has little capacity to give support, so offered some materials in LGP.

That same year, nominated by APS, travelled to Bissau a deaf teacher, Marta Morgado, and a linguist, Mariana Martins, to assess the situation of the deaf.

It was observed that teachers communicated with the deaf using signs based on a LGP dictionary, *Gestuário*, which, being visually static, were executed with little or no movement. Moreover, deaf children and young people communicated with each other, although still at a basic level, using a coded visual system. It was noted that they had sign names and that native signs were not influenced by LGP.

After selecting a small group of deaf people based on their fluency to communicate in signs and on their facial expressions, they were

gathered to register some basic signs to a first dictionary of their Guinean Sign Language (LGG). The aim was to establish that language in an initial stage, since there was still a lot of variation in sign productions.

The participants discussed concepts and the form of its linguistic representation, having been notorious the economy on final sign forms and the ability of signers to segment signs for its registration in photography. As a result of this study, 220 signs were documented.

In 2006, due to the exponential increase of deaf students, the National School for the Deaf was created. It organized simultaneous classes, bringing deaf groups closer together in order to develop greater contact between them.

Later that year, the deaf teacher and linguist returned once again as volunteers. They now joined a larger group of deaf people, with the aim of increase the cataloguing of LGG.

Through stimulation with images, they managed to double the collection, to about 500 signs, this time on video, and adapted the dictionary to an educational purpose, being quite visible the evolution of that language in just one year of use by approximately one hundred and fifty deaf.

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