

Cristina Gil: “Cultural implications of gender construction in Portuguese Sign Language and historical considerations on gender segregation in the Portuguese Deaf community”.

Affiliation

ESE-IPS/CECC

Abstract

Sign language linguistics has contributed to a better understanding of human languages. How gender manifests in signed languages requires further exploration and comparative linguistics approaches in several signed languages so we can learn about the intrinsic complexities in these issues. In signed languages, most of the lexicon is genderless which justifies that in Sign Language and Linguistic Universals by Sandler and Lillo-Martin there is only a footnote regarding the topic: “There is no gender-or case-marking morphology on nouns, except for possessive pronouns;” (2006:23). Considering this, Correia (2016) points out that there is much more to consider regarding gender in signed languages.

In Portuguese Sign Language (LGP), feminine and masculine contrast is present in signs such as WOMAN/MAN; MOTHER/FATHER; BOY/GIRL; BULL/COW; MALE-NURSE/FEMALE-NURSE to present a few examples. In other cases, gender manifests morphologically by the usage of the prefix WOMAN (mostly used) marked (in most cases) before the noun, as visible in GRANDMOTHER, GRANDDAUGHTER, AUNT, or LIONESS. The masculine versions retain the same noun without the mentioned prefix. In many contexts, considering contexts where gender is irrelevant, there is no morphological mark for masculine or feminine. This has been briefly described by Amaral, et al. (1994) for LGP and considered as non-marked signs. Therefore, many signs are genderless and neutral, and only when gender is relevant they can encapsulate the masculine meaning, and when the female is to be used, it can be with resource to the prefix or the correct (female) version of the sign. So, in the versions that work with a prefix, can these account for a generic masculine or are they neutral? This is yet to be researched. For example, the signs BALL or CHAIR correspond to words that in Portuguese are feminine, however, they are genderless in LGP, thus reaffirming that Portuguese Sign Language is not anchored in Portuguese, at least in terms of gender construction. The recent field of Portuguese sign language linguistics is starting to be explored and perhaps soon we can have more research concerning gender and other topics. Gender in signed languages can serve as windows to better understand if gender-inclusive language or gender-neutral language is required for a gender-inclusive society. Although Deaf communities have been described as more open to diversity, we can find

discriminatory phenomena among Deaf people. This leads us to question to what extent does the political effort for an evolution in language to morphologically visibly include diversity can actually be sociologically helpful or not.

Still regarding Sign Language Peoples, but now on an historical, social and cultural level, in the beginning of the twentieth century, an interesting historical turn happened in Deaf education in Portugal with socio-linguistic implications – gender segregation.

In 1947, 22 Deaf girls who were students in Casa Pia de Lisboa in Algés (Lisbon) were sent to Instituto de Surdos-Mudos Araújo Porto. These institutes were managed by the same religious congregation and they sent 29 boys to Colégio das Irmãs da Imaculada Conceição in Lisbon (Vaz de Carvalho 2019). This geographical drastic separation led to different experiences, different classes, but also resulted in the emergence of distinct signs in the different schools. At the time, some signs were exclusively used by women and other signs for the same meaning used by men. This is a similar phenomenon to what happened with racial segregation in the United States of America that made possible a different variant of American Sign Language which is designated now as Black American Sign Language. Agency, representativity and leadership is a pivotal aspect in Deaf communities that is heavily impacted by Deaf education (Gil 2010). Leadership has been predominantly male and only in recent years there has been a visible increasing representation of gender diversity and intersectionality in Portuguese Deaf leadership.

References

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