Sign language: the place of deaf difference

Língua de sinais: o lugar da diferença surda

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Abstract: In this article, we review the literature of deaf and hearing researchers, seeking to demonstrate, based on them, that sign language constitutes the deaf difference in the cultural sphere. The deaf condition does not compose the diversity within a hegemonic culture, which is based on the majority language; rather, it constitutes a linguistic-cultural minority, which establishes in this same linguistic-cultural field its difference in the face of the majority language and culture. In this aspect, the deaf condition is distinguished from other disabilities, which are part of a diversity within a given culture, whether hegemonic or minority. This linguistic difference constitutes the deaf community – since every language is a community – within which a diversity of abilities and disabilities, of gender, race and social class, develops.
Keywords: Sign language. Deaf community. Deaf difference. Deaf diversity.

For Gladis Perlin

1 Sign language and the transformations of Linguistics in an anti-colonial sense (Saussure, Benveniste)

For the French linguist Émile Benveniste (1995, p. 31), "language is always realized within a language, within a defined and particular linguistic structure, inseparable from a defined and particular society". But what would language be, from this perspective? Modern Linguistics, starting from Saussure, and this is Benveniste's starting point, understands that language forms a system. This applies to any language, whatever culture it is used in, whatever historical state we take it from. "From base to top, from sounds to complex forms of expression, language is a systematic arrangement of parts. It is composed of formal elements articulated in variable combinations, according to certain structural principles" (Benveniste, 1995, p. 22).

More than a definition, this is a conception that breaks with empirical historical investigations into the origin and evolution of languages, a perspective that marked the so-called Historical Linguistics of the 19th century, particularly at a time of the resurgence of colonialism, and which prevailed until beginning of the 20th century. During this period, linguistics

> It essentially consisted of language genetics. He set out to try to study the evolution of linguistic forms. It proposed itself as a historical science and its object was, everywhere and always, a phase in the history of languages (Benveniste, 1995, p. 21).

The break with this evolutionary conception of languages eliminated any comparison between languages in the sense of superior and inferior languages, precisely because each of them is a system. Benveniste says:

> All types of languages acquire equal rights to represent language. At no point in the past, in any form of the present, is anything original achieved. Exploration of the oldest attested languages shows them to be as complete as, and no less complex than, the languages of today; the analysis of primitive languages reveals a highly differentiated and systematic organization in them. (Benveniste, 1995, p. 6).

This is so because "linguistic entities cannot be determined except within the system that organizes and dominates them, and one by reason of the other" (Benveniste, 1995, p. 23).

In his discussion of trends in contemporary Linguistics, Benveniste takes a position on the relationship between language and reality, and language and thought. These relationships concern, firstly, the nature of the linguistic sign, a subject on which Benveniste has Saussure as a reference. Now, for the Swiss linguist, the relationship between the signifier and the meaning that occurs in the sign is not necessary, which is why different sound signals (signifiers), in different languages, refer to the same signifier; in this way, the very relationship between the sign and the thing is also arbitrary. For Benveniste, "between the signifier and the signified the bond is not arbitrary; on the contrary, it is necessary. The concept (meaning) cow is necessarily identical in my consciousness to the phonic set (signifier) cow" (Benveniste, 1995, p. 55).

From this necessary relationship of the signifier (acoustic/visual image) with the signified (concept, idea), it follows that (or it is explained why) there is no content of thought before its linguistic form: "the content [of thought] receives form when is stated, and only so. It receives form from the language and in the language, which is the mold of all possible expression; he cannot dissociate himself from it and cannot transcend it" (Benveniste, 1995, p. 69). In this sense, language "gives its form to the content of thought" (Benveniste, 1995, p. 69), which, after all, would not exist without the assistance of this same form:

> The linguistic form is, therefore, not only the condition of transmissibility, but first the condition of realization of thought. We do not capture thought unless it is already adapted to the framework of the language. Other than that, there is nothing but obscure volition, an impulse that is discharged in gestures, mimicry. (Benveniste, 1995, p. 69.).

This entire discussion by Saussure and Benveniste is closely linked to the linguistic issue of sign languages. Within Deaf Studies, Ronice Quadros and Lodenir Karnopp (2004, p. 28) tend to maintain Saussure's position, when they state that "language is a standardized system of arbitrary signs/sounds, characterized by dependent structure, creativity, displacement, duality and cultural transmission". But, for this very reason, based on this definition, they state that "sign languages are a legitimate linguistic system" (Quadros & Karnopp, 2004, p. 30).

The basis of this thesis in the context of sign language is the discovery of the North American linguist Wiiliam Stokoe, who "realized and proved that sign language met all the linguistic criteria of a genuine language, in terms of lexicon, syntax and capacity to generate an infinite number of sentences" (ibid). Therefore, sign languages cannot be thought of as pantomimes, simple gestures descriptive of visible objects or actions, or even mimicry: "The pantomime wants to make you see the object, while the sign wants you to see the agreed symbol for this object." In the same sense, Quadros and Karnopp (2004, p. 30-31) state that

> Stokoe noted that signs were not images, but complex abstract symbols, with a complex inner structure. [...] he initially proved that each sign had at least three independent parts (in analogy with speech phonemes) location, handshape and movement and that each part had a limited number of combinations.

According to Gesser (2009, p. 14), to these three elements identified by Stokoe, Robbin Battison and Edward Klima & Ursulla Bellugi added the discovery of a fourth element: the orientation of the palm. These are studies that reveal phonological and morphological levels in sign language, to which syntactic, semantic and pragmatic aspects can be added, as occur in all sound languages, as structures that they are.

2 Deaf identity, difference and diversity

From the struggles of people with physical disabilities in the United States and Europe in the 1970s, struggles led mainly by former soldiers who returned from the war against Vietnam with permanent disabilities, a different perspective of people with disabilities began to be developed, no longer from a medical-rehabilitative perspective, as it had been until then, but from a social perspective. Politically, we move from the register of philanthropy to that of civil rights. It is no coincidence that the struggles of people with physical disabilities in the USA come in the wake of the black civil rights

movement and the movement against the Vietnam War. In this last vision elaborated by people with physical disabilities, social life organized according to the majority and dominant patterns of housing, transportation, communication, etc. create obstacles for people with disabilities. Therefore, from now on, it is not about finding the defect to be overcome in people with disabilities, but in the social conditions in which they find themselves, which need to be adapted, making them accessible to everyone.

In the 1980s, it was the turn of the emergence and growth of the deaf social movement, not only in Brazil, but in several other countries around the world (Latin America, North America, Western Europe). Little by little, the Deaf Communities, their political leaders and their academic researchers began to distance themselves from the social model of disability and get closer to the concept of linguistic difference (or deaf difference, of an anthropological and cultural nature) that they themselves developed. . According to deaf English philosopher Paddy Ladd (2011, p. 16-17), deaf people

> are uncomfortable with their inclusion in the social model of disability because, even if it could be constructed in a way that could assimilate them, the criterion for including deaf communities within it is physical deafness: in other words , medical concept.

Therefore, as he says later, "communities that use sign language constitute, in fact, a third model, a linguistic-cultural model". As a linguistic difference, deaf people are not included in the disability (as a lack, "defect", disability), but in another language modality (visual gesture).

In Brazil, the fundamental moment of this understanding occurred, in the academic sphere, with the publication of the book *Surdez: Um olhar sobre as diferenças* (Deafness: A look at the diferences), in 1998. In the debate then inaugurated, a first important conceptual question is that of the relationship between identity, difference and diversity . The hegemonic discourse on disabilities is based on diversity. From this perspective, which is entirely appropriate to the social model of disability, the different segments of people with disabilities would be included in the same anthropological, linguistic-cultural register; and, with them, also the deaf (in the Portuguese-speaking society, or in the Portuguese-speaking school, for example, the deaf would only be the diverse one, the one who does not have the same command and use of Portuguese, which, however, is their language; it would be part of of Lusophone linguistic diversity). In the words of Carlos Skliar (2005, p. 13), "'diversity' creates a false consensus, an idea that normality hosts the diverse, however [, in fact,] it masks ethnocentric norms and serves to contain difference". And he clarifies what he understands about difference:

> I understand "difference" [...] not as a rhetorical space - deafness is a difference - but as a historical and social construction, the effect of social conflicts, anchored in practices of meaning and representations shared among deaf people. (Skliar, 2005, p. 13).

This conceptual understanding marks an epoch and marks a new moment in Deaf Studies in Brazil. For deaf researcher Gladis Perlin (2005), it is necessary to recognize the place of deaf people in hegemonic society based on differences (of language, culture, history, habits), therefore constituting their own identity. In this conception, diversity would not be external, as proposed by the hegemonic discourse (with the deaf being one of the diverse groups in a diverse society), but internal to the deaf identity. Two definitions are important in her argument. One, of deaf identity as "plural, multiple identities; that transform, that are not fixed, immobile, static or permanent, that can even be contradictory, that are not something ready" (Perlin, 2005, p. 52). In this sense, "[deaf] identity is something in question, under construction, a mobile construction that can often be transformed or in motion, and that pushes subjects into different positions" (Perlin, 2005, p. 52). It is, therefore, a non-essentialist conception of deaf identity, crossed by plurality (cultural, access and use of sign language, etc.), movement (displacements, repositionings), even contradictions (social class, for example).

Based on this conception of identity, the linguistic-cultural difference of the deaf in the face of the hegemonic Lusophone society establishes, within itself, a linguistic, cultural, behavioral, as well as economic, social and political diversity. This movement of withdrawing from Lusophone diversity by affirming difference in the face of it is what makes possible the recognition within the deaf themselves and their communities (associations, schools, churches, etc.) of a broad diversity. Thus, the historical, practical element in the constitution of diverse deaf identity is the confrontation with what the author, following international literature, calls "hearing power", a set of institutions (medicine, industry, churches, school and family) which aim to normalize the deaf subject in the sense of hearing culture (oralization, hearing aids, cochlear implants, etc.). This confrontation is the practice that constitutes both deaf identity as a difference in society and, within it, deaf diversity:

> deaf identities take on multifaceted forms in view of the fragmentations and are subject to the presence of the hearing power that imposes rules on them, even finding in the deaf stereotype an answer to the denial of the representation of the deaf identity to the deaf subject (Perlin, 2005, p. 54).

3 Sign language, being deaf and the deaf community

Understanding the deaf subject as a linguistic-cultural difference (therefore, as a diverse linguistic-cultural identity) is to understand him as a community being. Language is, as Saussure, Vygotski and Benveniste say, a social mediation. People acquire language and become part of a symbolic world produced by language as they interact with others, as they relate socially to others. The activity of work and, with it, language are the mediations that constitute man's sociability, insists Vygotsky. And the main

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form of language is, for every man located in a given community, in a given culture, language. Therefore, Sign Languages are, throughout the world, those mediations in which and through which deaf people produce their common symbolic universe and give understanding and meaning to their daily lives.

When arguing that the deaf condition is situated within the linguistic-cultural difference, Paddy Ladd (2011, p. 17) explains that the

> The essence of this model has its roots in ideas about individualism and collectivism in Western societies. Deaf cultures are not cultures of individualism, but of collectivism, a trait they share with 70% of the world's population [...].

The collective life of the deaf, the deaf-deaf encounter, the individual discovery of Sign Language, the social interaction that then becomes possible, all these events show that the development of the deaf person is not possible except in a relationship with other deaf people. Being deaf is constituted only in the bond, primarily linguistic, with the deaf community. Therefore, community experiences are decisive for the deaf subject, from a linguistic, social, cultural, political point of view, invention and achievement of rights.

Deaf associations, sports federations and deaf schools are the most important forms of socialization for deaf people. The family, which, for hearing children, occupies this place of primary socialization in the early years, which continues later at school, in coexistence with other children who speak the same language, does not provide the same thing for the majority of deaf children, as 95% of them have hearing parents, who almost all of them do not speak sign languages. This scenario has been changing, but still very slowly, mainly because there is a renewed and strong medical-rehabilitative discourse on cochlear implants, oralization and removal of deaf children from other deaf children, a discourse that, reinforced by non-specific school inclusion policies , acts on the deaf child from the moment the newborn's acusis is detected. In the hegemonic medical discourse, the cochlear implant is the cure for deafness and sign language would prevent or hinder it, as the child would spontaneously tend towards it.

The medical-rehabilitation and non-specific educational inclusion discourses, which dissolve the linguistic difference of the deaf in the diversity of disability, present themselves as forms of exercising power over the deaf person, subalternizing them as a minority group, who are not responsible for decisions at their self-respect. This means that the discourses - medical, pedagogical, psychological, philosophical, religious - about the deaf person produce them as a disability, an expression of diversity, who is responsible, on the medical side, for correction, and on the pedagogical side, for their isolated individual socialization, without community, without common language, without common history, in Lusophone classes and schools.

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For Paddy Ladd (2011, p. 79), this external discursive construction of the deaf as a disability shows, in its most general practice, how "each discourse constructs canons of 'truth' upon which its participants decide what is 'admissible evidence' [whereas] the convergence of these discourses constitutes a discursive system that is extensive and controlling"; Therefore, he says, it is necessary to develop an "awareness about these relationships between power and knowledge", subjecting these colonizing discourses to a critical analysis. According to deaf researcher Patrícia Rezende (2012, p. 84), "discursive practice produces a strategic system in which the power to treat and rehabilitate the body implies the medicalization of the deaf subject. In this way, deaf bodies are produced in history and in the world, invented by discourse".

This speech, which is also discourse, offers us precisely this understanding of language as a battlefield, as a discursive practice that produces a strategic system of power, both inserting the object of its discussion, namely, the historical process of disempowerment of sign languages, as well as investing themselves (and their object) with power, when speaking, naming, arguing about this same historical process. It is this discursive practice of empowerment (empowerment, strengthening within a given correlation of strength) when justifying sign language, which, for the deaf, can confront a history of subalternization, in which they spoke for them, thought for them, decided for them.

The deaf person's discourse about himself is, therefore, not a neutral, distant, scientific discourse, but a discourse in a broad genealogical sense (in the Foucauldian and Nietzschean senses of the expression), and precisely by situating himself, as well as others, discourses that it combats, in a field of power relations that is language. For this reason, language is not just designation, but the power of designation, as part of a practical form of social relations and power. Hence the need, for the Deaf Community, for common spaces (schools, associations, sports entities) to strengthen the language and deaf discourses, to constitute a common memory and equally common production of historical knowledge about themselves and their relationship with the hegemonic society; in short, common spaces for the production of communities, as sources of collective and individual powers.

The motto *ubuntu* is also valid for deaf people: I am, because we are.