Article Title: 1. Ferreira-Brito L 'Similarities and differences in two Brazilian sign languages'

Article Author: YHM

Volume: Issue: 42
Month/Year: 1984
Pages: 45-56

Journal Title: Sign language studies

Imprint: Washington, D.C. [etc.] Gallaudet Univer

ILL Number: 75121695

Fax: 150.209.85.91

Ariel: 150.209.85.91

Shipping Address:
HAMILTON COLLEGE
YHM - SYRACUSE HUB - CLINTON LAND DELIVERY

Maxcost: 50IFM
SIMILARITIES & DIFFERENCES IN
TWO BRAZILIAN SIGN LANGUAGES

Lucinda Ferreira Brito

Abstract. The sign language used by Urubu-Kaapor Indians in the Amazonian jungle and the sign language used by deaf people in Sao Paulo, Brazil's largest city are contrasted sociolinguistically and in a few details of structure.

SL in the jungle & in the city. The Urubu-Kaapor live in the Brazilian state of Maranhão, near the Gurupi River. The language spoken by the Urubu-Kaapor belongs to the Tupi-Guarani language family. This tribe has a considerable overproportion of people born deaf. In 1965 Kakumasu (1968) found seven deaf people in an estimated 500. Visiting the tribe in January and February 1982, I would estimate the population now as fewer than 500, including five deaf people, three children and two adults. A sign language has developed in the tribe and is used in villages where there is or there was at least one deaf person. The villages are far apart but the sign language is the same in the different villages. I call this sign language Urubu-Kaapor Sign Language (UKSL), using the name the people call themselves (Kaapor) and the name other Brazilians call them (Urubu). UKSL, used for many generations in this region of the Amazonian jungle, is completely native to Brazil.

The other Brazilian sign language is used in Sao
Paulo, a highly industrialized city of more than eight million people and the capital of the state of Sao Paulo, in the south of Brazil. My research among deaf people there since 1979 has provided some evidence for concluding that this sign language (SPSL) is the same as that used by deaf people in other states of Brazil, Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, Santa Catarina, at least. It is still impossible to state whether it is the same in all 23 states of Brazil where Portuguese is the spoken language. It is clear, nevertheless, that there are at least two different sign languages in use in Brazil.

Patterns of UKSL & SPSL use. In Sao Paulo, sign language is used almost exclusively by deaf people among themselves. It may be known and used, but rarely, by hearing members of a families including a deaf person. A consequence of this is a separation between deaf and hearing people. Even if deaf people try to integrate with the hearing community by using spoken language, the deaf community remains virtually unknown to the hearing population -- completely unknown to almost all. Deaf people in Sao Paulo have generally received an oralist education at school and are, potentially, bilingual. The use of Portuguese and SPSL by the deaf is determined by the setting: in clubs and associations of deaf people (i.e. in the Deaf world), the language used is sign language; in other places, in the hearing world, the language the deaf person uses or tries to use is Portuguese.

In contrast, the Urubu-Kaapor deaf people are monolingual and most of the Urubu-Kaapor hearing people are bilingual; i.e. they master both spoken Kaapor for their intercommunication and UKSL for their
communication with the deaf people in their villages. As there are no schools, deaf people do not have special education and consequently are not forced to learn the spoken language. It is more common to see hearing people using sign language than deaf people trying to learn spoken Kaapor.

As Kaapor is not written, UKSL is uninfluenced by the vocabulary of the spoken language and can therefore provide useful data to determine what is specific to the visual-gestural modality of language (Bellugi 1980) and what may be universal in the domain of semantics.

I will compare here only some of the more evident characteristics of the two languages, leaving a deeper analysis of both for a further study.

Among the Urubu-Kaapor deafness seems to be seen as something that need not have tragic consequences. If some people cannot hear, this does not isolate them socially, nor does it prevent them from learning a language, even in the case where there is only one deaf person in a village, because all the hearing people communicate with them by using sign language. In Sarapozinho, the village where I concentrated my research, there was only one deaf child, a ten year old boy, and all hearing people in the village spontaneously used sign language to communicate with him.

If we conclude that the world of the deaf person in Urubu-Kaapor is different from that of the hearing people, we still cannot deny the great area of intersection these two worlds have. And this is because a deaf Urubu-Kaapor is not considered a handicapped person but only a different person who requires a different modality of language to communicate. Consequently, deaf people among the Urubu-Kaapor do not
feel bad because of their deafness. They do not show that they feel shame or embarrassment in using sign language, and they participate in all kinds of activities. For example, in a meeting during which some of the village people were singing for me, the deaf boy of Sarapozinho village decided to sing too. So, despite his deep deafness, he took the instrument (Maraca) they were using to follow their songs and began to dance, to play, and to sing in a voice with rhythm perceived visually by watching the movements of the instrument and the feet of the others — but in a voice without melody. The others did not laugh at him, and the deaf child did not feel any embarrassment in singing in the middle of the group.

Besides the acceptance of UKSL by the Urubu-Kaapor community, another circumstance pointing to a lack of prejudice against deafness is their use of the word macu, 'deaf,' without restrictions in their spoken tongue. This is the only word for this concept in their language, and by the way, it is also the name of the deaf boy in their speech.

In Sao Paulo, on the other hand, there are two or more words for deaf. Surdo, 'deaf,' is a word avoided by educated hearing people when they want to refer to a deaf person. In the place of surdo one frequently finds the euphemism deficiente auditivo. Use of this kind of euphemism, actually a sign of prejudice by denial against deafness, is more common among educators.

When deaf people of Sao Paulo are in a "deaf" place (e.g. Deaf clubs), they communicate freely in sign language. But when there is even one hearing person in the club, they prefer to adopt the oral approach. Curiously, deaf women particularly feel embarrassed to
use signing in front of hearing people. It could be said they use sign language because it is more comfortable for them, yet they think it is not beautiful.

Generally, hearing people in Sao Paulo think that deaf people should learn Portuguese to communicate with them, and the idea of learning sign language -- as the hearing Urubu-Kaapor do -- is inconceivable to them.

At school in Sao Paulo deaf children lean that it is not good to use signs. There is a feeling among deaf people that to be a successful person the obstacle of perceiving and producing the spoken language's sounds should be overcome. Similar problems in the social relationships between hearing and deaf people were described by Lunde in his 1956 paper "The Sociology of the Deaf" (in Stokoe 1960 [1978]). Certainly Lunde was referring to deaf people in Western cultures like Brazil's; there the deaf are always between two worlds, the hearing world where they receive their education in Portuguese, the only accepted language, and the deaf world where they have their social activities and where they freely and spontaneously sign.

Fieldwork and comparisons. I collected data among the Urubu-Kaapor in January and February 1982 for about one month, and among the deaf in Sao Paulo for about three years, since 1979. Among the former the fieldwork was very intensive; however, in both places I tried to follow the same procedure: first to get to know a considerable number of signs, second to understand some sentences, and third to try to follow short conversations.

Among the Urubu-Kaapor, in order to know signs, I began by asking my informants (the ten year old deaf
child, hearing people of Sarapozinho, and later a deaf adult of another village and his ten or eleven year old son) signs for some things or actions that we could point to. If we could not understand each other or if the sign I wanted to know referred to an abstraction, I asked in Portuguese and he translated into sign or into spoken Kaapor. The informant signed what I wanted to know. Most of the time my interpreter was my informant too, since he was a very good signer.

In Sao Paulo most informants frequented a deaf club and a square where they exhibited their artwork. The method I used to learn their signs was the same as that I used with the Urubu-Kaapor. In both places I tried to avoid obtaining data by translation from Portuguese to sign language. Even so, many times I was obliged to resort to such translations. Generally I followed other strategies; e.g. showing the informants a series of pictures that I wanted them to interpret or describe in sign language. Some signs, sentences, and conversations (in both sign languages) were filmed (Super 8mm). Many of the data were collected in favorable contextual situations where spontaneous conversations in sign language happened naturally.

The material prepared in advance for my fieldwork gave better results in Sao Paulo than among the Urubu-Kaapor. There it did not stimulate informants enough to give me the desired data. The Urubu-Kaapor were not acquainted with much of what was presented in my materials: pictures representing scenes of life and sequences of pictures from the best known stories of Brazilian children. The Urubu-Kaapor were often astonished by the new things and did not readily express themselves in language. This happened often with
pictures that I showed them in order to contextualize a situation for eliciting linguistic data. They were so astonished by what they were seeing that they did not talk to me about it. This demonstrates the need to create contextual situations based on the informants' own culture. Therefore, to have relevant linguistic data, I tried to create linguistic situations that were culturally relevant.

If one looks at conversations in the two sign languages, one will notice that UKSL presents a greater number of one-hand signs than does SPSL. Further, SPSL signers use fingerspelling but UKSL signers do not. The Urubu-Kaapor language is not written and of course has no manual alphabet, so that they cannot borrow words from spoken Kaapor by spelling them in a manual alphabet, as do the deaf people in Sao Paulo. When there is writing corresponding to the spoken language even deaf people who do not know how to read or write can use fingerspelling and signs beginning with the initial letter of the word in the written language. Thus, signs FAMILIA 'family,' DEUS 'God,' and CEU 'sky' are made with hand configurations representing the first letters of the Portuguese words for the concepts. This fact brings the signed and spoken languages' vocabulary closer in Sao Paulo. This does not happen with signed and spoken languages in Urubu-Kaapor.

Differences. Signing space in UKSL is much more free than it is in SPSL. In SPSL there are more constraints on the location of signs and the signing space is smaller. In UKSL there are many signs that are signed below the waist. In SPSL this is much less frequent because signing space is bounded below (as in
ASL) by the signers's waist; e.g. the sign for 'eat' in SPSL has as its place of articulation the space in front of the signers's mouth. In UKSL, if the agent of the sign for 'eat' is an animal (e.g. a pig), the sign is performed below the waist, even in some cases near the ground.

With signing space thus constrained, the signs of SPSL seem to be more conventional. Conversely this translates as a greater degree of iconicity in the signs of the Urubu-Kaapor; e.g. the sign for 'man' in UKSL is made below the waist, as it represents the penis.

It is common to say that the more iconic a sign is, the less conventional or arbitrary it must be [perhaps by extrapolation from a doctrine of Saussure]. Generally signs have a tendency to become less iconic because of the necessity for their being more easily produced and perceived. Consequently they become more conventional; however, data I have collected on color terms and terms for time and space in UKSL seem to show that iconicity plays an important role in the organization of highly abstract linguistic systems. Iconicity is not always a cause of less arbitrariness and conventionality of signs; it can be responsible for very conventional semantic systems; e.g. a color system in SPSL that is based in the iconic opposition closeness/openness obtained with the use of certain hand configurations and movements of the signs (Ferreira Brito, in preparation).

SPSL and UKSL do organize intensification and quantification of concepts similarly. In both languages the sign carrying intensification or quantification always comes after the noun intensified or quantified; e.g. in UKSL: BIRD FOUR, FISH A-LOT, FLOWER SEVERAL, NIGHT TWO; and in SPSL: HAPPY VERY, CAR SEVERAL, TREE
MANY, HOUR FOUR. Sometimes the intensification or quantification comes inside the sign and it is the movement parameter that symbolizes it; e.g. HAPPY VERY (SPSL) can also be expressed by the single sign HAPPY with a stronger movement. The greater intensity of the movement corresponds to the idea 'very' that does not appear as an overt sign.

This kind of construction exists in both languages. The English expression "very good" could be translated in UKSL by one sign; the intensification is intrinsic. UKSL has one sign for 'good' and another completely different for 'very good.' Here the UKSL categorization is different from that of SPSL, in which 'good' is usually intensified by putting the sign VERY after it. This shows only that these two sign languages do not frame their objects in the same way (cf Fillmore 1982). In SPSL there is a concept 'good' (intensified or not) and an opposite concept 'bad;' i.e. two categories. In UKSL two delineated or graded categories of 'good' are expressed by two different signs; thus the language has three distinct elements. The following diagrams represent the differences:

SPSL: o---------------------------------------------o
BAD                                 GOOD
                                VERY         VERY

UKSL: o----------------------o----------------------o
BAD           GOOD           VERY GOOD
                VERY

However, the intensification of the concept by an alteration in the movement of the sign that names this concept can provide elements to compare the visual
contour (representing the intensification in sign language) with the intonational contour of the same expressions in spoken languages.

Besides the differences between languages (e.g. the framing of "goodness") and similarities between speech and gestural modalities (the intensification of a concept by giving the term that refers to it a stronger contour), it can be pointed out that there are differences in the use of person reference and personal pronouns in spoken and signed languages. In general, SPSL works almost in the same way that UKSL works. One difference is in the handshape used for first-person reference (SPSL has G-hand from unrotated forearm and sharply flexed wrist; UKSL has A-hand from pronated forearm and retroflexed wrist; both bring the hand to the chest).

Of UKSL, Kakumasu wrote:

The referent is pointed out. Thus first person singular I is indicated by pointing at oneself. Second persons singular you and third person singular he/she who is in sight is indicated by pointing to the referent. The plural forms are indicated by pointing to all the referents. In the absence of the third person, he is indicated by pointing to some distinctive feature of that person.

In SPSL, in contrast, the sign for the first person plural is a semicircle made with index hand moving from the ipsilateral shoulder to the contralateral shoulder. When third person singular or plural is not present, the sign may represent a distinctive feature of the person. Another possibility is to point to a place in the signing space where the person, when mentioned before, was placed by one of the signers. The location for first
person is the signer's upper chest, for second person is
the forward part of signing space nearest the addressee,
and for third person forward and right or left of
center, depending on where the referent has been placed
on first mention.

In both sign languages the use of a distinctive
feature to refer to a particular person functions as a
proper name. In SPSL this feature can be indicated with
a handshape forming the first manual alphabet letter of
the spoken language name. In UKSL, as there is no manual
alphabet, this does not occur; proper name is only a
distinctive feature of the person. Any personal physical
characteristic may be used: a mark on the face, the kind
of hair; if one is fat the sign FAT becomes the name.
The name can come from something unusual the person
uses: glasses, hat, etc. Once the feature chosen as the
proper name is accepted by the deaf community, it always
refers to this person and no other, even if it is a
feature of other persons too. Thus in both UKSL and
SPSL, proper names are not only referential; they are
descriptive too; literally e.g., 'the man who wears
glasses' or 'the woman who has curly hair.'

It is a property of proper names in these sign
languages to be as descriptive as definite descriptions.
Could this be a direct effect of the visual-gestural
modality? The answer to this question and careful study
of the subject should help us to understand better the
difficult problem of proper names in spoken languages;
are they only referential or can they be descriptive
too?

Contrasts between the two Brazilian sign languages
here described seem to be greatest in the
sociolinguistic sphere, especially notable in the
relation of the languages (spoken and signed) in contact: fingerspelling is used in SPSL but not in UKSL. In structure of the sign languages, there does seem to be more iconicity in the Urubu-Kaapor than in the Sao Paulo sign language.

 NOTE

The research reported here was supported in part by the Brazilian CNPq grant. The paper was first presented as a talk in the Salk Institute (San Diego). I am grateful to Fabiano G. B. Brito, Alzira Macedo, Luiz Antonio Marcuschi, Godelieve and Etienne Samain, Jurn J. Philipson, Maurizio Gnerre, Norine Berenz, Yau Shun-Chiu, Charlotte Emmerich, Berta Ribeiro, Maria Angela R.A. de Toledo, and Andrew Pawley for helping my research in various ways, and to the Urubu-Kaapor people and deaf people in Sao Paulo, informants par excellence.

REFERENCES

Bellugi, Ursula

Fillmore, Charles J.

Kakumasu, James

Stokoe, William C.