Personal experience narratives in three West African sign languages: the influence of time-depth, community size and social interaction

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My position as a deaf researcher

It seemed natural to me as a deaf researcher to work with deaf people. I took for granted the feeling of mutual identification bringing us together, researcher and research 'objects'. It was only at the World Congress of African Linguistics in 2021 (held online during the global pandemic) that, after one of my presentations, I was taken aback by a simple, though crucial question. Lindsay Dunn, a Deaf Studies lecturer at Gallaudet University, asked me what my positionality was as a white deaf person working with African deaf communities, especially considering that these were very small communities. What seemed so evident to me before, had suddenly filled me with doubts. Was I a rightful researcher at all? To answer this, I need to go back to my past as it made me the person I am today.

I was born deaf, and at the age of two, I had my first contact with deaf children at school. Deaf education in the 1980s was not at its best. My parents wanted me to be with deaf people like me but they also wanted me to have a better education so I attended a hearing school as well, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon. Although Portuguese Sign Language (LGP) has existed since 1823, we were only deaf children at school creating our own way of communicating. Very few had deaf parents and brought LGP from home, but most of the time we were just mixing it all up. For us, it was signing non-stop even if we got to be called monkeys by teachers, who made us use speech to be 'intelligent'. At that time, teachers did not sign and there were no interpreters, so we could hardly follow the lessons. We felt inferior to the hearing because we were deaf, but we kept ourselves safe in our togetherness. Maybe because of this, I decided not to go to the university. I was tired of struggling to understand the teachers.

While my expectations within the hearing world shrank, the deaf community outside of school opened up. I joined the Portuguese Deaf Association at 16 and it became my second home. There I understood what deaf pride was and how much I needed those social gatherings to fully develop as a deaf person. At the same time, my horizons with the international deaf community spread out. At the age of 15, I had my first contact with International Sign (IS), in a deaf camp in France. After that, many other experiences followed, leading me to build a network with deaf people from all over the world. Besides IS, such exchanging experiences made me feel quite at ease with other sign languages, such as American Sign Language and Libras (Brazilian Sign Language).

While some hearing people made me feel inferior, others looked at me as if there was something special about me. Right from the beginning, since I was two, I remember people coming by the school to look us up. Yet, we never understood why, only that

it was related to our deafness. This went on until I finished secondary school without ever receiving the results of these works. In my last year of high school, the University of Lisbon started a research project on sign language, of which I ended up being part. This was 1994 and the project was coordinated by hearing people who did not sign, which did not please the deaf community. The project included a one-month training course at the University of Hamburg, Germany, where I realised that it was possible to proceed to a higher education as a deaf person. When the project ended, I left the academic world because it was not connected to the deaf community.

In 1997, I started working at the biggest deaf school in Portugal which was just beginning the bilingual educational model. At the same time, I gathered up the courage to get a university degree in education. This was a night course, since all students were supposed to be working in a day school. This university had never taken in a deaf student before, so, in the end, I was put to a test. Because I was teaching deaf children, the university board wanted to be sure that I was capable of teaching hearing children as well, which, of course, was never in my plans. It was so obvious to me, as a deaf teacher, that my rightful students were to be deaf like me. I did teach a class of hearing children anyway with the absolute sense of unfairness of it, knowing that so many hearing teachers were teaching deaf students without any preparation or even the willingness to do it.

After graduating, I went on to integrating the first master's course specifically in LGP and deaf education. In a class of about 30 people, there were only four deaf and two eventually dropped out. Shockingly, no interpreters had been included in the course's design. Therefore, after fighting for an interpreter without success, the university invited the Portuguese Deaf Association to give some of the classes. Of course, the deaf taught in LGP and, because there were no interpreters, half of the class did not show up. In the end, it was again challenging to find a qualified interpreter for my master's defence.

While teaching at the deaf school, my interest for deaf literature sparked. I was appalled by the lack of children´s stories with deaf characters. There were traditional stories translated to LGP, but deaf children could hardly feel identified with any of the characters. Therefore, I started creating deaf-directed stories myself. Stories that were about all of these children that I was teaching, all so different from each other and all so similar in their way of being in the world, as deaf. Many of the children came from former Portuguese colonies in Africa, without their families, without a sign language. Still, it was so easy to connect. As a teacher of the deaf at that same school for 21 years, and in collaboration with the Portuguese Deaf Association, I gave training courses to teachers of the deaf in West African countries, namely Cape Verde, São Tomé and Principe and Guinea Bissau. Moreover, with both the Deaf Association

and the Ministry of Education, I expanded curricula for Portuguese Sign Language as first language from nursery to high school and trained deaf teachers throughout the country on deaf education and deaf literature.

When I started as a PhD student at Leiden University, in 2018, my world opened anew. I moved from Portugal to the Netherlands, bringing a background of experiences to finally be part of a team composed of people fluent in sign language, both deaf and hearing. Although I had previously worked with west African deaf communities, I had never been to villages with deaf people. Thus, I prepared for fieldwork very carefully, so not to do to others what researchers had done to me while growing up. Fortunately, I had been preceded in the field by exemplary researchers, such as Victoria Nyst and Annelies Kusters. I did not stay in the village though, because I took my family with me – my youngest daughter was still breastfeeding – and there were no houses available. Hence, I stayed as close as possible to the villages.

In all three countries, I made sure I did not use any sign language other than their own. Since I had seen Língua Gestual Guineense (LGG) emerge, my communication with the deaf in Bissau, Guinea-Bissau, was never a barrier. In the village of Adamorobe, in Ghana, I communicated with Marco Nyarko, the deaf assistant, in IS although he only went with me to the village on the first and last days of fieldwork and on filming days. At the beginning of the fieldwork, the deaf youngsters also communicated with me in Ghanaian Sign Language (GSL), which was easy for me to follow because it is based on American Sign Language. Still, as soon as I could understand Adamorobe Sign Language (AdaSL), within no more than two weeks, they promptly stopped using GSL with me and switched to AdaSL. In contrast, since my very first day in Bouakako, Ivory Coast, I was able to understand Langue des Signes de Bouakako (LaSiBo) because many of the signs were similar to AdaSL and Língua Gestual Guineense (LGG). Hence, I always communicated directly with the deaf.

I suppose being deaf might have made the whole process easier for me. I was well accepted in the village of Adamorobe for being "DEAF SAME" as Annelies Kusters described in her book (2015). However, deaf – and hearing – people in Bouakako and on my first visit to Guinea-Bissau in 2005 were confused that I was also deaf. How could I be white and had not undergone 'curative treatment' for my deafness? What really stood out in me as an outsider was being white. They would get a plastic chair for me to sit on, while the others sat on wooden benches, or when I drank water from the bag, they would tell me to buy water bottles instead. In Adamorobe, after some time, they were very comfortable with me. They would ask me to touch my white hair because they had never seen one as white as mine.

Apart from being deaf and white, there were two other characteristics about who I am that played an important part during my fieldwork: being vegetarian and LGBTQ+.

The fact that I do not eat meat was worrisome for some deaf people. They would offer me food and I had to refuse it, which offended them. This led me to make up some poor excuse about getting sick if I would eat it. I also had to go around the truth about whom I was married to and had children with, especially in the two villages. They would ask about my 'husband' and I would say he was away. They would ask me for photos and I would show them pictures of my children, but mostly avoided developing the subject further. I believe that, in Guinea-Bissau, deaf people know that Mariana is my partner. Although we were never open about it, we never hid either when asked about it. This became clearer when they met our children.

During my stay, I paid attention to each deaf person whenever possible, helping them with their tasks and chatting. In Adamorobe and Bissau, I tried my best to remain neutral in conflicting situations, being there for both sides without getting involved in their problems. The trickiest situation to deal with is that as a foreigner from the global north, I am always perceived as someone with money, at least to their standards. Therefore, I had to be very careful when distributing goods, making sure that all deaf people benefitted from them. When I am asked for money, I try to assess the real need, like when someone is sick and needs medicine or a medical appointment. Those are very difficult situations to manage, especially from afar.

After the fieldwork, I kept myself available. I contact (and am contacted by) deaf people quite regularly, sometimes simply to say hello, except with the deaf from Bouakako because none of them has a mobile phone. I also exchange frequent messages with the local assistants in the three countries for various matters related to my work and other issues. I am currently planning to return to Adamorobe and to Bissau to show my final work to the deaf people. Although Bouakako is not in the near plans, I hope to get the opportunity to return there as well. I also plan to show my work at the Ghanaian National Association of the Deaf to stress the importance of preserving AdaSL. After the thesis, I really want to get the deaf community of Guinea-Bissau more involved in future research on LGG, such as organizing training about filming techniques, computer skills, ELAN annotation, among others.

Finally, and replying to Lindsay Dunn, I position myself as a deaf researcher who keeps connected to the local deaf people, trying to include them in academic work whenever possible and supporting deaf education. Of the three communities involved in this thesis, Guinea-Bissau is the only one that has children and has still a lot of work to do to improve deaf education, especially in what concerns university access to deaf young adults.

List of abbreviations

Sign Languages

ABSL - Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language

AdaSL – Adamorobe Sign Language

ASL – Americaqn Sign Language

Auslan - Australian Sign Language

BISINDO - Bahasa Isyarat Indonesia (Indonesian Sign Language)

GSL - Ghanaian Sign Language

ISL - Israel Sign Language

ISN - Idioma de Señas de Nicaragua (Nicaraguan Sign Language)

KQSL - Kufr Qasem Sign Language

LaSiBo – Langue des Signes de Bouakako (Bouakako Sign Language)

LaSiMa - Langue des Signes du Mali (Mali Sign Language)

LGG – Língua Gestual Guineense (Guinean Sign Language)

LGP – Língua Gestual Portugesa (Portuguese Sign Language)

LGSTP – Língua Gestual São Tomense e Principe (Sign Language of São Tomé and Principe)

Libras - Língua de Sinais Brasileira (Brazilian Sign Language)

LSF - Langue des Signes Française

LSR – Romanian Sign Language

Others

L&W – Labov and Waletzky

S&S – Size and Shape