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Creating a sign language out of everything and everywhere: an example from the deaf people of Bissau

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**Creating a sign language out of everything and everywhere:
An example from the deaf people of Bissau**

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**Creating a sign language out of everything and everywhere:
An example from the deaf people of Bissau**

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List of abbreviations

Sign Languages

ABSL	Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language
AdaSL	Adamorobe Sign Language
ASL	American Sign Language
Auslan	Australian Sign Language
BSL	British Sign Language
BISINDO	<i>Bahasa Isyarat Indonesia</i> (Indonesian Sign Language)
DGS	<i>Deutsche Gebärdensprache</i> (German Sign Language)
IPSL	Indo-Pakistani Sign Language
ISL	Israeli Sign Language
LSN	<i>Lengua de Señas Nicaragüense</i> (Nicaraguan Sign Language)
KSL	Kenyan Sign Language
LaSiBo	<i>Langue des Signes de Bouakako</i> (Bouakako Sign Language)
LaSiMa	<i>Langue des Signes du Mali</i> (Malian Sign Language)
LIS	<i>Lingua dei Segni Italiana</i> (Italian Sign Language)
LGG	<i>Língua Gestual Guineense</i> (Guinea-Bissau Sign Language)
LGP	<i>Língua Gestual Portuguesa</i> (Portuguese Sign Language)
Libras	<i>Língua Brasileira de Sinais</i> (Brazilian Sign Language)
LSE	<i>Lengua de Signos Española</i> (Spanish Sign Language)
LSF	<i>Langue des Signes Française</i> (French Sign Language)
NGT	<i>Nederlandse Gebarentaal</i> (Dutch Sign Language or Sign Language of the Netherlands)
NZSL	New Zealand Sign Language
ÖGS	<i>Österreichische Gebärdensprache</i> (Austrian Sign Language)
SL	Sign Language
UgSL	Ugandan Sign Language
YMSLs	Yucatec Maya Sign Languages

Other abbreviations

AGRICE *Associação Guineense de Reabilitação e Integração dos Cegos* (GB Association for the Rehabilitation and Integration of the Blind)

AS-GB *Associação de Surdos da Guiné-Bissau* (Deaf Association of Guinea-Bissau)

CJS *Centro de Jovens Surdos* (Deaf Youth Centre)

ENS *Escola Nacional de Surdos* (National School for the Deaf)

TISLR Theoretical Issues in Sign Language Research (Conference series)

WOCAL World Congress of African Linguistics (Conference series)

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Positionality

My research on the emerging sign language of Guinea-Bissau is grounded in three interrelated aspects of my identity: my longstanding engagement with deaf communities as a hearing person, my upbringing in Africa, and my professional dedication to linguistics as a discipline centred on people and their languages. These elements shape the lens through which I approach this work and inform the relationships, responsibilities, and ethical commitments I bring to it.

I have been immersed in the deaf world for over two decades, working primarily at the Portuguese Deaf Association, where I have been teaching written Portuguese to deaf adults and sign linguistics to deaf sign language teachers. My involvement with the community has extended beyond teaching, encompassing advocacy for language rights and deaf-led education. These experiences have allowed me to build a role of allyship and collaboration in which I seek to contribute in ways defined by community priorities. Although I am not deaf, my professional and personal life has been profoundly shaped by deaf colleagues, friends, and family, including my deaf wife and our children. All of it has continually reinforced my positionality as someone whose perspectives are intertwined with deaf worlds.

Growing up in Angola and then Mozambique has also marked my identity and research orientation. Despite my whiteness and middle-class background situating me within a privileged minority, my early years on the African continent cultivated a strong sense of belonging and responsibility. This has naturally drawn me toward collaborations with deaf communities in African contexts, including projects in Cape Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe, and, most significantly, Guinea-Bissau.

Guinea-Bissau presents an exceptional sociolinguistic context. In contrast to many countries, its deaf community has developed without external imposition from medical, oralist, or foreign sign language

ideologies. This has allowed a local sign language to emerge in ways that are rare in the global deaf experience. My professional engagements in Guinea-Bissau, conducted in partnership with deaf colleagues over the past twenty years, have been limited in duration but sustained in continuity. These collaborations have fostered a deep familiarity, mutual trust, and shared commitment that I now carry into this research.

Finally, my orientation to linguistics is anthropologically informed: I view languages not as abstract systems but as lived practices embedded in cultural and social life. My work is motivated by a conviction that research should be useful, relational, and accountable to the communities involved. This dissertation, while contributing to linguistic scholarship, is also intended as a recognition of the agency, creativity, and resilience of deaf people in Guinea-Bissau and as a contribution to their visibility and empowerment.

I also acknowledge the broader dimensions of my identity that shape how I engage with this work: I am a white, rainbow, hearing woman of Portuguese heritage. These positionalities bring both privileges and responsibilities, which I approach with reflexivity and humility. Above all, this research is situated, relational, and indebted to the deaf people with whom I have shared professional collaborations and personal ties throughout my adult life.