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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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Summary

This thesis presents a unique account of the formation of a deaf community in the city of Bissau and the early emergence of its sign language, *Língua Gestual Guineense* (LGG). Documenting this emergence in real time since the early 2000s, the study traces how the community organised itself since the beginning and how signers expanded an emerging lexicon from local gestures.

The absence of a medically oriented approach to deafness enabled the growth of a free-signing deaf community in Guinea-Bissau. Schools and informal meeting places provided spaces for socialisation and awareness-raising, fostering collective pride that encouraged advocacy for LGG and greater social integration for deaf people.

To investigate whether and how LGG arose from a gestural base, this study elicited a repertoire of local gestures representing specific concepts. Methodologically, it is innovative in using small groups of hearing and deaf participants and in drawing on the metalinguistic expertise of deaf signers. The linguistic analysis compared the form and meaning of these gestures with early LGG signs documented in the three existing dictionaries (2005, 2006, and 2017). Results show that gestures entered the LGG lexicon largely unchanged, following three incorporation routes: direct integration of one gesture as one sign, integration of a few gesture variants as a few signs, and integration of many overlapping gestures entangled in form-meaning networks as many signs.

A large number of these signs-from-gestures became the starting capital for LGG's semantic, morphological, and grammatical expansion. Semantically, the development of kinship terms reveals how core family relations are grounded on gesture sources, often in combination, while relations beyond the nuclear family appear later, resorting, for instance, to initialisation. Such a diachronic sequence demonstrates the

early unfolding of an expected typological hierarchy. Similarly, colour terms expanded according to a typological sequence. In addition, the expansion of colour signs reflected sociolinguistic contexts where LGG has been developing, namely in male-dominated interaction spaces through football-based references. Morphologically, about half of the collected gestures expanded into families of signs via compounding and derivation. These processes, tracked in real time during the first two decades of sign language emergence, mirror patterns observed in other sign languages. While compounding proved to be the most productive strategy for lexical expansion—particularly in kinship and hypernyms—derivation was more frequent in signs rooted in meaningful body locations and handshapes. Grammatically, the case of the gesture-to-sign ‘hit’ in LGG is found to be similar to other signed and spoken languages, by extending from a main verb to comparative and emphatic functions.

Overall, this thesis demonstrates how deaf communities draw on surrounding gestures as cultural capital and how these gestural seeds of form and meaning drive lexical expansion, forging a new sign language out of everything and everywhere.