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

Sousa da Silva Martins, M.

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Propositions

1. Unlike established deaf communities whose sign languages often emerged under the influence of oralist ideologies, the first generation of deaf signers in Bissau rose in the absence of hearing aids and speech-oriented norms, building a proud and organised community that has, within a free-signing environment, consciously shaped an autochthonous sign language, LGG.
2. Gesture incorporation into the emerging LGG follows three main pathways: from a direct integration of more conventionalised gestures to a variety of overlapping polysemous and synonymous forms that are taken advantage of to expand the signed lexicon.
3. Providing a first empirical account of the emergence of productive sign families, the diachronic study of LGG traces how gesture-based forms evolved over two decades through processes of compounding and derivation, revealing the mechanisms by which form–meaning networks take root in a new sign language.
4. The conventional gesture ‘hit’ extended in LGG from a concrete verb into comparative and emphatic markers, demonstrating that such grammatical functions can emerge very early in a new language.
5. The football-based origins of LGG signs for colours and country names show that emerging lexicons are socially situated, reflecting gendered and cultural contours of interactional environments.
6. The diachronic expansion of semantic fields – particularly of kinship and colour – in LGG is proof that signers not only forge language from gesture but also bring into focus the universal principles through which human languages take form.
7. Gesture elicitation using small groups of four participants and deaf people’s metalinguistic insights is methodologically innovative in gesture studies.
8. Regular gesture-based interactions between deaf and hearing people bridge communicative modalities, driving language emergence from the distributed interplay of gesture, interaction, and environment within the full ecology of human communication.
9. Witnessing one of the few natural environments where a language is emerging in real time offers a rare window onto the human capacity for language creation, where, given the opportunity, humans generate a linguistic system.
10. Even if a new sign language exhibits a largely autochthonous lexicon, its emergence hardly occurs in isolation, and the possibility that contact with other signed, spoken, or written languages supported the development of its underlying linguistic structure cannot be dismissed.

11. Since deaf communities evolve within social and global contexts, linguists must trust signers' agency and choices in shaping and preserving their own language rather than overprotecting them.
12. In Guinea-Bissau, culturally entrenched gender hierarchies, leading to widespread sexual and physical abuse, severely restrict girls' education, autonomy, and safety, perpetuating systemic violence and inequality against women.