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SIMILARITIES & DIFFERENCES IN
TWO BRAZILIAN SIGN LANGUAGES

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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   The Urubu-Kaapor live in the Bra-
& in the city.   zilian state of Maranhao, 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 lan-
                               guage 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:

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

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

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