

Brazilian Sign Language Onomastics¹

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1 Introduction

Naming something is making it exist. All things in the world – concrete or abstract, animate or inanimate, real or fictitious – are given a name that makes them part of a linguistic community, i.e., “a group of human beings who use the same language or the same dialect at a given moment to communicate with each other”² (Dubois *et al.*, 1973, p. 133). It is through the act of name-giving that the lexicon of a language is formed and renewed. Languages are formed by a lexicon and by a grammar (Polguère, 2018) as two interdependent parts: lexical items combine through specific rules to form the textual materiality that is necessary for linguistic interactions; similarly, the formation of lexical items is based on grammatical “rules” that are specific to each language.

This is a notion of language as a system of conventional signs used by a given human group, be that language auditory-oral (Portuguese, French, Italian, English, etc.) or visual-spatial (Brazilian Sign Language, Portuguese Sign Language, American Sign Language, etc.). In interactional events, we can use other communication tools such as hand gestures, face expressions or other body movements: waving goodbye, smiling, greeting with a handshake, winking, etc. These tools can be combined or not with verbal language.

¹ From the original book chapter *Onomástica em Libras*, published in *Perspectivas para o Ensino de Línguas* 6. Retrieved from: <http://www2.ufac.br/editora/livros/PerspectivasEnsino.pdf>. Translation authorized by the original publishing house.

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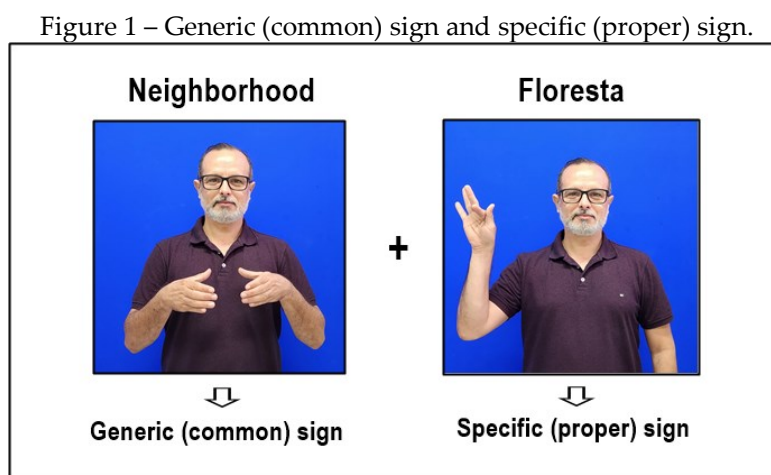
² Original in Portuguese: “um grupo de seres humanos que usam a mesma língua ou o mesmo dialeto, num dado momento, e que podem comunicar-se entre si.”

This article addresses the lexicon of Brazilian Sign Language (Libras), which is used in the Brazilian deaf community. It uses the body – hands, arms, head, face, chest, etc. – for linguistic constitution at all levels (phonetic-phonological, morphological, morphosyntactic, syntactic, semantic, textual, lexical) with a view to enabling linguistic interaction.

2 The lexicon in Libras

The linguistic signs in Libras can be either lexical or grammatical. Lexical signs can be used alone in a complete communication, as they have external (social, psychological, biological, etc.) meaning. Grammatical signs are used together with lexical signs, adding information to the latter (gender, number, verbal tense, etc.) or operating language-internal relationships (prepositions, conjunctions, etc.)³.

A lexical unit in Libras in general can be considered as an association between the form of the linguistic element (the sign) and its content (the idea). In the lexical universe of Libras, some units generically name a class of items – these are the common (generic) signs – while some units particularly (individually, specifically) name the items of a class – these are the proper (specific) signs. Figure 1 provides an example.



Source: the author.

³ These notions of grammatical sign and lexical sign draw on Lamb (1974), who discusses the relationships between words and meanings. The author addresses the English language, but the same relationships can be applied to Brazilian Sign Language.

Figure 1 shows the phrase BAIRRO FLORESTA in Libras, which refers to a neighborhood (BAIRRO) named Floresta. The sign BAIRRO generally names the residential and/or commercial urban geographic space made up of different streets, avenues and boulevards (i.e., the neighborhood). It is, therefore, a generic, common sign. Meanwhile, the sign FLORESTA names a specific neighborhood located in the City of Rio Branco, capital of the State of Acre. It is, therefore, a specific, proper sign, which individualizes the space.

In Linguistics, the field that studies proper names, whether in oral languages or in sign languages, is called Onomastics. The next section discusses this field.

3 Onomastics

Dubois *et al.* (1973, p. 441) refer to Onomastics as a “branch of Lexicology that studies the origin of proper names”⁴. Câmara Jr. (1986, p. 182) contends that Onomastics (or “Onomatology”, in his words) deals with the set of anthroponyms and toponyms of a language. Anthroponyms are “proper nouns that are applied to the individuals of a given society to distinguish them from each other”⁵ (Câmara Jr., 1996, p. 53), while toponyms are the “proper names of places or geographical features”⁶ (Câmara Jr., 1996, p. 232).

Trask (2007, p. 212) also defines Onomastics as the “study of proper names”. He presents the following definition for proper names:

A linguistic form which serves to pick out a unique person, place or thing. Grammatically speaking, a name is a **noun phrase**, but one with the highly distinctive function of pointing at some individual entity: *Abraham Lincoln, Paris, the Golden Gate Bridge*. (Traditionally these have rather confusingly been called *proper nouns*.)

⁴ Original in Portuguese: “ramo da lexicologia que estuda a origem dos nomes próprios”.

⁵ Original in Portuguese: “substantivos próprios que numa dada sociedade se aplicam aos indivíduos componentes, para distingui-los uns dos outros”.

⁶ Original in Portuguese: “nomes próprios de lugares ou acidentes geográficos”.

Probably every person in every society receives a *personal name* (or *given name*), typically shortly after birth, though in some societies an adult name is conferred later in life. [...]

Place names, or *toponyms*, are conferred everywhere upon every kind of significant location: settlements, rivers, lakes, seas, valleys, forests, fields, mountains and hills, roads and streets, bridges, city gates, houses, places of worship, office buildings, sports stadiums . . . the list is endless. Names are also conferred upon ships, trains, planes, railway lines, festivals, holy days, books, newspapers ..., upon virtually everything that human beings consider important. (Trask, 2007, p. 180, emphases as in the original).

The author highlights the referential, individualizing function of the proper name, which can be conferred upon not only individuals and places, but also means of transport (e.g., a ship can be individualized by being given a name), festive events (e.g., a festival, a rodeo, etc. can be given a name), works of art (e.g., a book, a painting, a sculpture, a choreography, etc., can be given a name), animals (e.g., a pet or a zoo animal can be given a name), commercial establishments (a clothing store, a shopping mall, a beauty salon, an automobile repair shop, etc. can be given a name) and everything that one wants to particularize from a more generic set of elements (as exemplified in Figure 1). The same applies to sign languages: giving a sign individualizes a person, a place, a football team, a literary work, a pet, etc.

Supalla (1992) explains that giving a name to a person is inherent to all cultures around the world, and having a name is essential for socialization in a community. He also considers that proper names have complex systems of formation and use and suggests that “in each culture throughout the world, there may be a distinguishing system for forming and using proposed names” (Supalla, 1992, p. 13).

Biderman (1998) describes the magical power of words, especially proper names: in several primitive societies⁷ (e.g., Chiloé Island, in Chile; British Columbia, in Canada; the Malay archipelago; New Guinea; South Africa), people fear revealing their

⁷ Biderman (1998) drew her examples upon the work *La rama dorada* by Frazer (1956). This work contains other examples of the magical and sacred power ascribed to the proper name.

names to sorcerers, who could allegedly use them to do evil to the name-bearer (Biderman, 1998). In the ancient Egyptians for one, people had two names, the actual name, which was kept secret, and a public name (Biderman, 1998).

Biderman adds that

in the Yoruba culture, naming a newborn is a ritual, a festivity celebrated in the community by relatives, friends, neighbors, acquaintances. The name-giving ceremony is a symbolic initiation of the baby into society and life. Through this ceremony, the newborn is introduced into the value system of the Yoruba society. The name given to the newborns clearly evinces that they are seen as a reflection of the social order, as the events, values, and beliefs of one's family or community provide the rules for creating the baby's name. As a matter of fact, the name for the Yoruba is identified with the essence of the individual (Biderman, 1998, p. 113-114)⁸.

In the deaf community, the name-sign is a mark of identity and a socialization mechanism (Supalla, 1992). Initially, name-signs were used only among the deaf; however, as hearing individuals learned sign language and joined the deaf community, they were also given a name-sign. Supalla (1992) identified two basic types of name-signs in American Sign Language: *descriptive name-signs* (they contain the handshape corresponding to the individual's name letters in oral language) and *arbitrary name-signs* (they are based on physical characteristics of the individual).

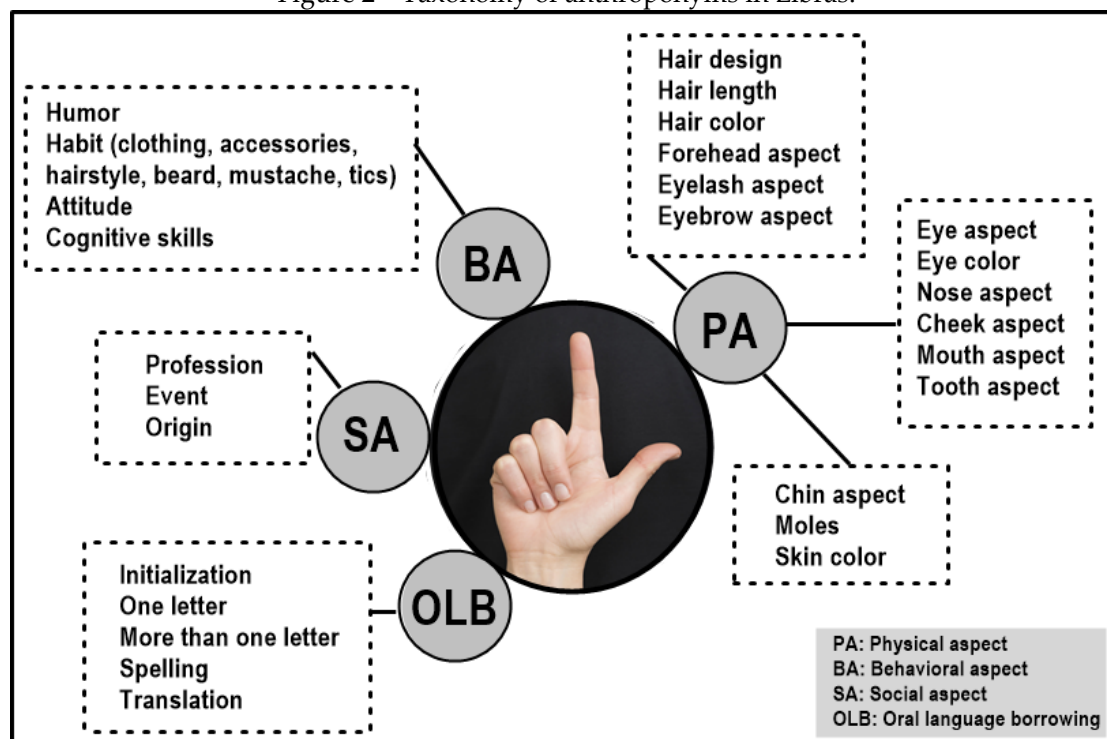
Supalla (1992), Wild (2017), Barros (2018), Sousa *et al.* (2020) and Menezes (2021) showed the influence of extralinguistic factors on the conceptual formation of the name-signs given to individuals in sign languages. The same has also been shown for

⁸ Original in Portuguese: "Na sua cultura yoruba a nomeação de uma criança recém-nascida é um ritual, uma festividade celebrada em comunidade por parentes, amigos, vizinhos, conhecidos. A cerimônia de nomeação constitui uma iniciação simbólica do bebê na sociedade e na vida. Através dessa cerimônia, a criança é introduzida no sistema de valores da sociedade yoruba. O nome que é atribuído à criança evidencia claramente que ela é vista como um reflexo da ordem social, pois são os eventos, valores, e crenças da sua família ou comunidade que fornecem as regras para a criação do nome do bebê. Ora, o nome para o yoruba se identifica com a essência da pessoa."

the signs of places (Souza-Junior, 2012; Sousa, 2019; Jesus, 2019; Ferreira, 2019; Miranda, 2020; Carmo, 2021). The reasons is that “when the referent is an object in the physical reality, name-giving can reach a maximum degree of identity between the word and the thing it refers to, practically equating the name and its referent”⁹ (Biderman, 1998, p. 112).

Barros (2018) identified the types of personal name-signs in Libras by analyzing the signs of 113 informants from Goiânia: signs reflecting physical characteristics (hair shape, eye shape, skin color, moles, etc.), signs reflecting behavioral characteristics (mood, habit, cognitive abilities, etc.), signs reflecting social characteristics (profession, origin, etc.), signs influenced by the informants’ name in the oral language. The following figure shows the taxonomic categories proposed by Barros (2018), which has been used by several studies on name-signs in Brazil.

Figure 2 – Taxonomy of anthroponyms in Libras.



Source: Sousa *et al.* (2020, p. 117).

⁹ Original in Portuguese: “quando o referente é um objeto da realidade física a nomeação pode chegar a um grau máximo de identidade entre palavra e coisa referida, praticamente identificando o nome com seu referente.”

In a study on the toponyms in Libras assigned to municipalities in the State of Acre, Sousa (2019) observed that the sign creation was influenced by the geographic features (street slopes, ravines), fauna (fishes), flora (trees), professions (rubber tappers, açaí crushers), means of transport (boats), and the place name in the oral language (Portuguese).

Following Dick's (1990) theoretical-methodological guidelines and considering the specificities of visual-spatial languages, Sousa's (2019) study of toponyms accounted for their structure (both of the entire phrase and the specific element), semantic motivation, and iconicity. Sousa (2019) observes that the toponymic phrase in Libras is structurally made up of a generic sign and a specific sign¹⁰. The generic sign names the general geographical feature, such as the signs NEIGHBORHOOD, CITY, RIVER, SQUARE etc., while the specific sign is the toponym itself (which particularizes the generic sign). For instance, VILA ACRE is the specific sign in the toponymic phrase BAIRRO VILA ACRE (a neighborhood, "bairro", known as "Vila Acre").

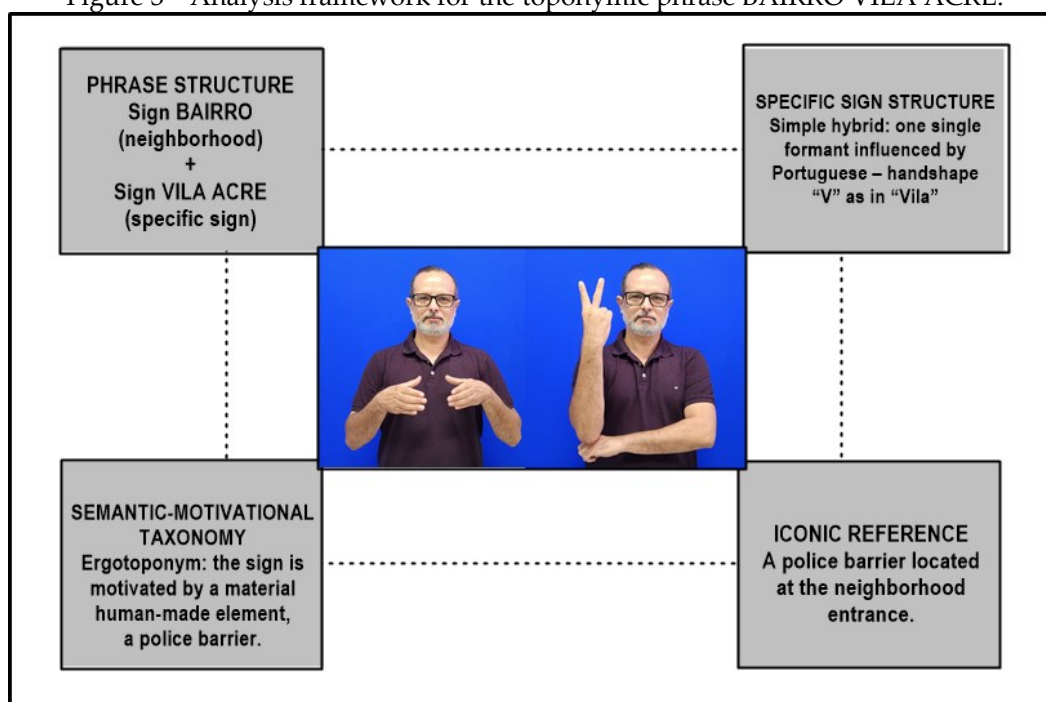
Sousa (2019) proposes a typification for the formation of the specific sign (the one which particularizes the geographic place by naming it). He lists four types according to origin of the toponym and the influence of the Portuguese language on its morphological constitution: 1) simple, when the sign has only one formant and it is in the native language (i.e., Libras); 2) simple hybrid, when the sign has more than one formant and is influenced by Portuguese in its configuration; 3) compound, when the sign has more than one formant and all of them are in the native language; and 4) hybrid compound, when the sign has more than one formant and at least one of them is influenced by Portuguese.

¹⁰ A similar analysis is proposed by Zinkin (1969) for North-American English and Dick (1990) for oral languages in Brazil.

Semantic motivation is based on extralinguistic elements that may have influenced the deaf name-giver in the act of conferring a given sign upon a given space (Sousa, 2019). These elements reflect the visual experience of the deaf and generally shine through (i.e., they are transparent) in the structure of the sign itself. Drawing on Dick's (1990) taxonomic proposal and its elaborations by Francisquini (1998), Carvalho (2010) and Souza-Junior (2012), Sousa (2019) highlights that due to the nature of sign language, a given toponym in Libras can have more than one taxonomic motivation, as two visual elements can influence the name conferred upon a place.

The motivational analysis leads to another relevant aspect of the toponyms in Libras: iconicity, i.e., the direct relationship between the form of a sign and its meaning. The visual nature of Libras, which takes place in space through moving body articulators (Perniss, 2007), favors the transparency of this relationship and the identification of the sign-creating motivation. Therefore, it is important to account for the iconic structure of the signs in any analysis of toponyms in sign languages (Sousa, 2019). Figure 3 shows the analysis framework proposed by Sousa (2019).

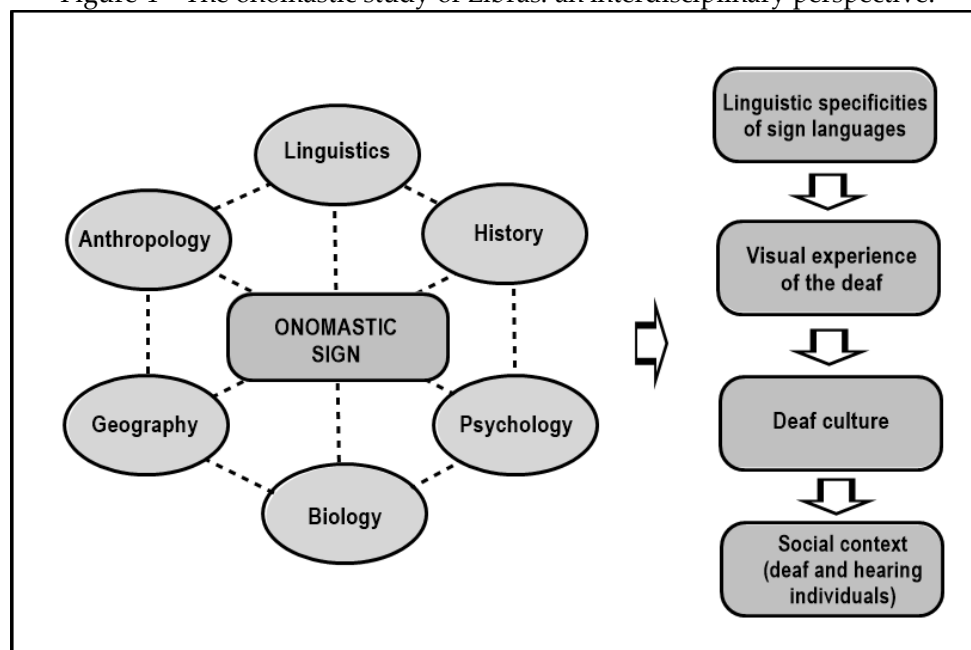
Figure 3 – Analysis framework for the toponymic phrase BAIRRO VILA ACRE.



Source: the author.

These aspects of proper names is indicative of the interdisciplinary nature of the onomastic study of sign languages. As Sousa and Dargel (2020) point out, Onomastics is a field of Linguistics that requires knowledge of other fields to account for the sign that particularize individuals or spaces. As an interdisciplinary field, it requires an interface of different bodies of knowledge, methods and subjects (Fazenda, 2014). Sign language onomastics should consider not only the relationship between different fields of knowledge, actors and procedures, but also the specificities of sign languages, the visual experience of the deaf, the deaf culture, and the social context in which deaf and hearing individuals live together and engage as citizens.¹¹ Figure 4 illustrates this.

Figure 4 – The onomastic study of Libras: an interdisciplinary perspective.



Source: the author.

As shown in Figure 4, any analysis of the onomastic sign (for people, places, commercial establishments, literary works, pets, etc.) should account for: 1) the specificities of sign language (from its language production modality to its structures

¹¹ The focus here is on the deaf who have Libras as their first language (L1) and use written Portuguese as their second language (L2) in a number of social instances. In other words, the focus is on bilingual and bicultural individuals.

and morphosyntax); 2) the visual experiences of the deaf (the name-giver), which underlie the motivational factors influencing the sign-creation act; 3) the deaf culture, which will shine through the name-sign through countless factors of perception, interpretation, reference, view of the world and of oneself in the world; and 4) the different social contexts in which the deaf engage with hearing individuals, their oral language and its influences on the social spaces and events.

Thus, the analysis of a given onomastic sign presupposes the relationships between the linguistic materiality and its historical and psychological aspects. These include the very nature of a sign language (structural and functional), how the deaf name-giver perceives the world and engages in it, the cultural aspects (pure or hybrid) of the deaf community, and the different social realities of hearing and deaf individuals.

4 Onomastics and its subfields

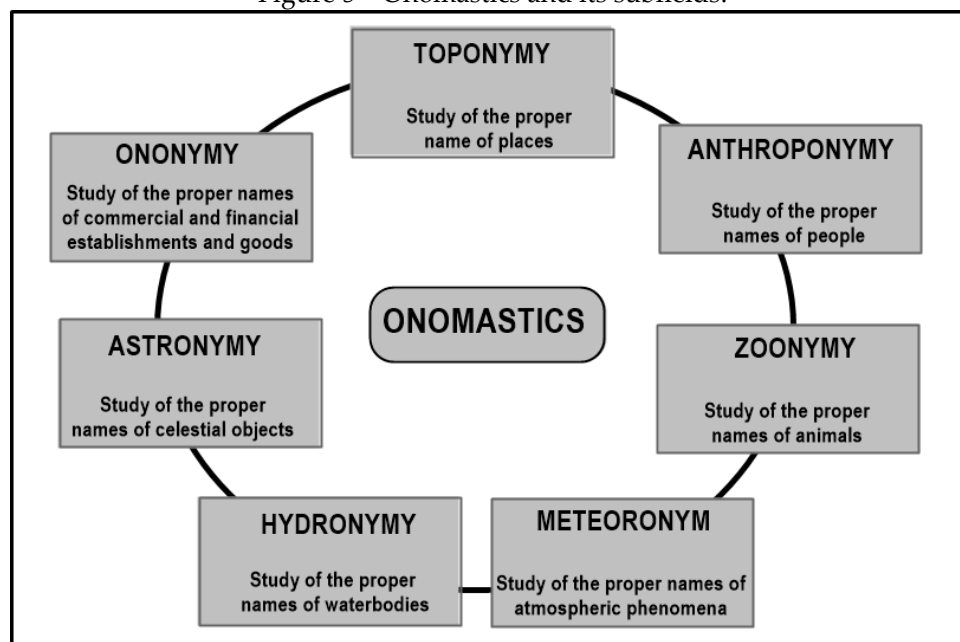
Although Onomastics has traditionally focused on Anthroponymy and Toponymy, the proper names of other entities are also objects of onomastic study. To the best of the author's knowledge, Leite de Vasconcelos (1928) was the first scholar to conceptualize the subfields within Onomastics:

[...] there are several species of "proper names". The philologists have agreed to refer to the branch of Glottology that address them (their origin, reason for use, form, evolution, etc.) as "Onomatology", which should be broken down into three secondary disciplines according to those species: 1) study of the name of places, or "Toponymy", which also includes waterbodies (rivers, lakes, etc.) and natural products, such as trees and rocks that frequently give names to places ("Toponymy" is, therefore, geographic Onomatology); 2) study of the name of people, or "Anthroponymy" [...]; 3) study of various other proper names, such as stars, winds, animals, supernatural beings,

ships, things: “Panteonym” (from the Greek *pantoïos*, which means “of all kinds”, “varied”) (Leite de Vasconcelos, 1928, p. 57)¹².

As the quote points out, in addition to studying the proper names of people (Anthroponymy) and places (Toponymy), Onomastics also accounts for the proper names of other entities. This includes celestial objects, such as Halley for a comet (*Astronymy*); atmospheric phenomena, such as Katrina for a hurricane (*Metereonymy*); animals, such Dolly for a sheep (*Zoonymy*); watercourses, such as Vêu da Noiva for a waterfall in the State of Mato Grosso (*Hydronymy*); commercial goods and establishments, such as Coca-Cola for a soft drink (*Ononymy*), etc. Figure 5 provides a visual representation of Onomastics and such subfields.

Figure 5 – Onomastics and its subfields.



Source: the author.

¹² Original in Portuguese: “Temos como se vê, muitas espécies de “nomes próprios”. A secção da Glotologia que trata d’eles (origem, razão de emprego, forma, evolução, etc.), convieram os filólogos em a designar por “Onomatologia”, que, de acordo com aquelas espécies, deverá decompor-se em três disciplinas secundárias: 1) Estudo de nomes locais, ou “Toponímia”, na qual se inclui igualmente o elemento líquido (rios, lagos, etc.), e outros produtos da natureza, como árvores, penedos que dão freqüentemente nomes a sítios (a “Toponímia” é, pois, Onomatologia geográfica). 2) Estudo dos nomes de pessoas, ou “Antroponímia” [...]. 3) Estudo de vários outros nomes próprios, isto é, de astros, ventos, animais, seres sobrenaturais, navios, cousas: “Panteonímia” (de pantóios, que quer dizer “de toda a espécie”, “variado”).”

Onomastic studies in Libras have focused on the Anthroponymy and Toponymy subfields. However, analyzing onomastic signs in other subfields is just as insightful and relevant, as shown in the next sections for *Ononymy* and *Zoonymy*.

4.1 Ononymy

Ononymy is the subfield of Onomastics that studies the proper names of industrial goods (Guérios, 1973). Its object of study is the ononym. Souza (2019) explains that:

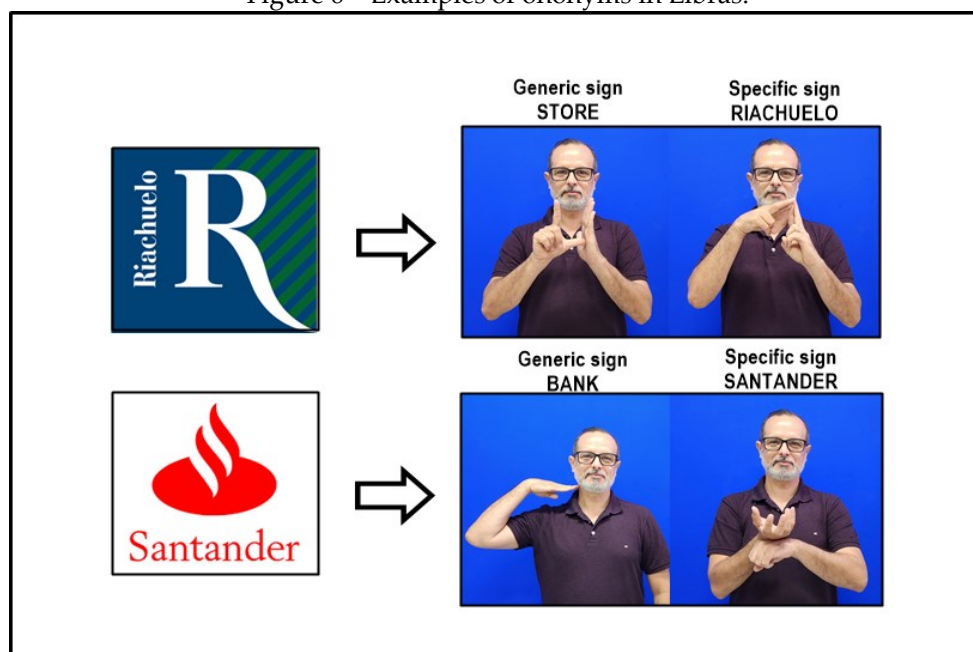
The definition of ononymy conveys a broad commercial perception of "industrial goods", including all commerce-related activities involving consumer goods, manufactured goods or industrialized goods available for purchase and sale. It also includes industries, i.e., industrial institutions and their services. This broad definition therefore covers the production and commercial networks of a given community (Souza, 2019, p. 27)¹³.

Further categories could include banking institutions (physical and virtual) and service providers, such telephone carriers.

Ononym creation has been an important driver of the lexical expansion of sign languages. It has served to name urban movements, technological developments, social and professional activities of deaf individuals as providers and consumers of goods and services, deaf individuals' engagement in social networks, accessible advertising campaigns, etc. Figure 6 provides two examples.

¹³ Original in Portuguese: "A definição de oniônimo aponta para uma ampla percepção comercial a respeito dos "artigos e produtos das indústrias", pois, sob essa ótica, por oniônimo entendemos todas as mercadorias, assim como todas as atividades relacionadas ao comércio, sejam elas bens de consumo, manufaturados ou industrializados à disposição na sociedade para compra e venda pelos consumidores. No que concerne às indústrias, entram, também nessa categoria, as instituições e os serviços por elas oferecidos. Essa ampla definição abrange, portanto, as redes produtiva e comercial de uma dada comunidade."

Figure 6 – Examples of ononyms in Libras.



Source: the author¹⁴.

Ononyms in Libras can be analyzed like any other onomastic data in sign languages, i.e., as to their phrasal structure (generic sign and specific sign), morphological structure of the specific sign (simple, simple hybrid, compound, and hybrid compound), their semantic-motivational aspect (of the referent that influences the sign creation), and their iconic relationship. The examples in Figure 6 show a transparent iconic relationship between the form of the specific sign and its referent: in LOJA RIACHUELO, the sign movement resembles the contour of the letter “R” in the company’s logo; in BANCO SANTANDER, the specific sign is related to the flame icon in the bank's logo (meaning discovery, progress).

Graphic-advertising images (or visual signatures) generally consist of a drawing that accompanies the brand name (the logo) and a graphic symbol (Strunck, 2012). The image set is also made up of specific colors and typographic fonts (letters)

¹⁴ The Riachuelo store logo was retrieved from www.riachuelo.com.br, and the Santander bank logo was retrieved from www.santander.com. Both are public-domain images.

that constitute the “design” – the visual identity of the product, the company, the institution (Strunck, 2012). Currently, however,

[... at least in Brazilian Portuguese,] the word “logo” was popularly disseminated and used as a synonym for graphic brand, visual signature, logotype, graphic symbol and any other type of sign that serves as a brand in the representation of organizations, products and services, etc. (Silva; Souza, 2021, p. 12)¹⁵.

Neves (1971) and Prado (2014) studied the name-giving for commercial purposes and found a large number of linguistic borrowings in the ononyms. Borrowings from the oral language may also be found in the creation of ononyms signs in Libras, as the urban and virtual spaces (social networks, sales sites, etc.) have their names written in Portuguese (or in a foreign language, such as English and Spanish).

4.2 Zoonymy

Zoonymy is “the linguistic study of the origin of animal names” (Cardoso, 1977, p. 288). While Cardoso (1977) approaches the generic names of animals (lion, elephant, dog, wolf, etc.), zoonymy can be considered the onomastic study of proper names bestowed to animals, whether domestic or not.

Cardozo (2006), Broom and Fraser (2010) and Tavares (2011) showed how humans and animals (especially pets) have established an emotional closeness that is very similar to that in family relationships. Companionship, exchange of affection and various interactional processes bond humans and animals and compels humans to give names to animals in both oral and sign languages.

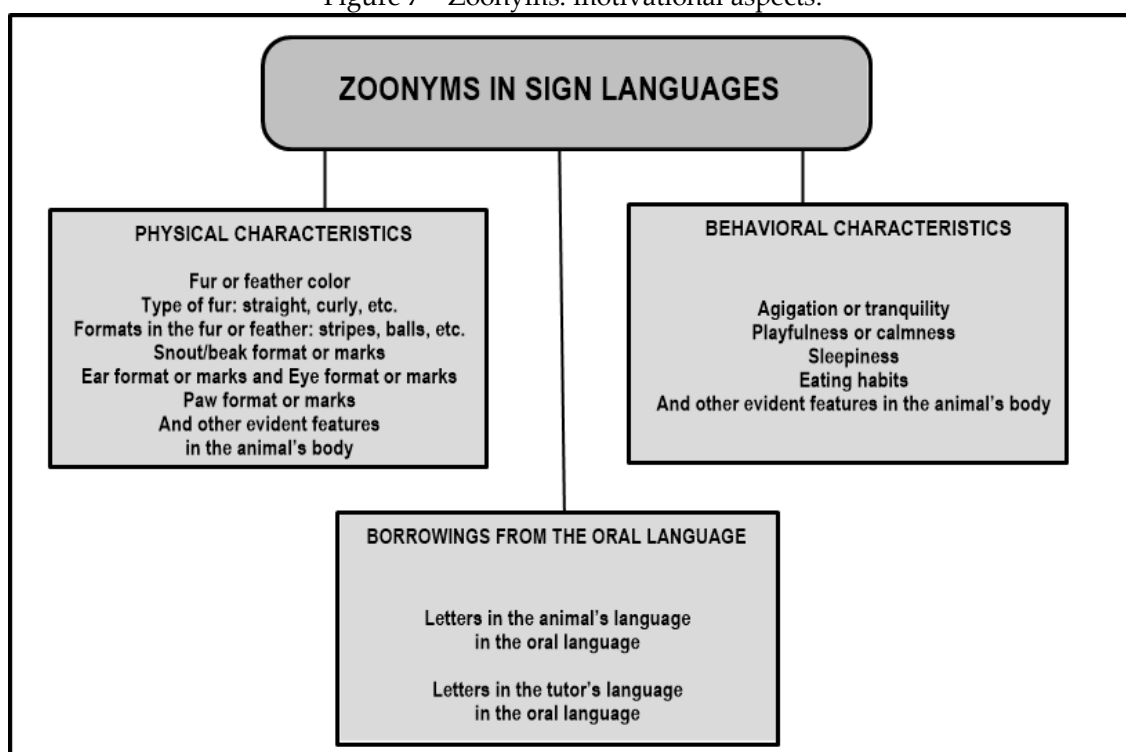
Some animals have reached a international status. For instance, Laika (a dog) was the first animal to travel to space in 1957; Dolly was the first mammal (a sheep) to

¹⁵ Original in Portuguese: “[...a] palavra “logo” foi popularmente difundida e usada como sinônimo de marca gráfica, assinatura visual, logotipo, símbolo gráfico e qualquer outro tipo de sinal que atua como marca na representação de organizações, produtos e serviços entre outras entidades.”

be cloned in 1996; Tião (a chimpanzee) received more than 400 thousand votes for Mayor of Rio de Janeiro in the 1988 elections in Brazil (the candidacy was not official, but the monkey came out as the third most voted “candidate”); Bandit (a bull) gained international recognition for knocking down all pedestrians who tried to ride him.

As with the names of people, the names of animals are also motivated. They are usually influenced by the animal’s physical characteristics, behavioral characteristics, and borrowings from the oral language, as shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7 – Zoonyms: motivational aspects.

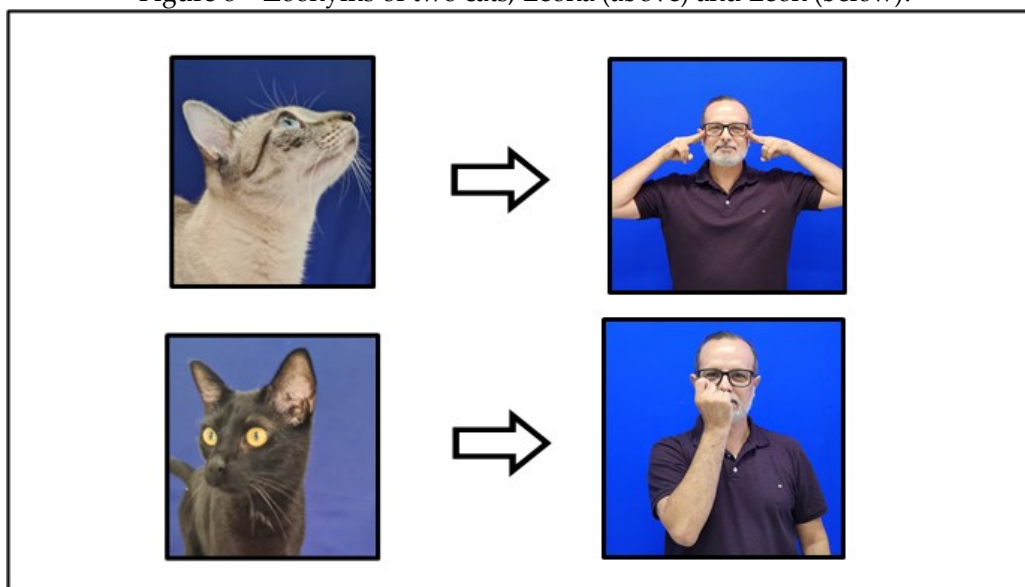


Source: the author.

The types of motivational factors vary across species. For example, the characteristics of fishes are related to their shape, the color of their scales, the shape of their fins, etc.

Figure 8 shows the signs of a female cat named Leona (top) and a male cat named Leon (bottom), respectively.

Figure 8 – Zoonyms of two cats, Leona (above) and Leon (below).



Source: the author.

In the top of Figure 8, the sign is produced with both hands in a “U” configuration turned downwards. Both palms of the hands touch the sides of both eyes from where they move downwards diagonally.

Morphologically, it is a simple sign, that is, it has a single formant in Libras. Motivationally, it refers to two stripes next to the cat’s eyes (a physical characteristic of the animal).

In the bottom of Figure 8, the sign is produced with the thumb and the index finger of one hand closed and their tips touching each other while the palm of the signing-hand is turned upwards. The signing hand placed towards the right eye moves towards the left eye. Then, they open at the middle extension of the fingers outwards, so that the index finger points upwards.

Morphologically, the sign is simple, as it has a single formant in Libras. Motivationally, it refers to the cat’s rectilinear pupil (a physical characteristic of the animal).

In sum, zoonyms can be analyzed as to both their formal aspect (phrasal and specific sign structure) and their semantic-motivational and iconic aspect.

5 Final remarks

Onomastics is the field of Linguistics devoted to studying proper names of people, places, animals, waterbodies, brands, commercial establishments, etc. In the dynamism of the modern world, people and animals are born everyday, companies and products are created every day, and human beings feel the need to give them a name that makes them particular, be it in an oral language or in a sign language.

Onomastic signs are necessary for social interactions and spatial references of and to people engaging in the world (working, studying, having fun, etc.). As a result, the lexicon of a language is continuously expanding, renewing itself, and acquiring new meanings and functions. Eventually, it becomes part of the culture and life of a community.

This article showed possibilities for studying the onomastic sign in Libras beyond the traditionally stronger approach to anthroponyms and toponyms. Ononymy and zoonymy are some aspects of onomastic studies in sign languages that could contribute to the lexicon description of visual-spatial languages and oral languages.

Although it is not the main focus of this article, the present descriptions can contribute to the teaching of the Libras lexicon as either a first language L1 for deaf individuals or a second language (L2) for hearing individuals. This teaching could be based on either the formal aspects or semantic aspects (motivational and iconic) of the Brazilian Sign Language.

Further studies are expected as the field is incipient when it comes to sign languages. As long as people – deaf or non-deaf – have the need to interact with each other, create things and give name, the lexical disciplines will have much to investigate. In considering this, this text ends as it started: “naming something is making it exist.”

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