

# “HOME GESTURE IS NOT PART OF DEAF CULTURE”: THE CURTAILMENT OF THE USE OF HOMESIGN LANGUAGES IN BI/MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION<sup>1</sup>

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## “Gesto caseiro não faz parte da cultura surda”: *O Cerceamento das Línguas de Sinais Caseiras na Educação Bi/Multilíngue de Surdos*

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**ABSTRACT:** The linguistic status of *Libras* (Brazilian Sign Language) has already been recognized and, from a socio-anthropological view of Deafness, some studies have distanced the Deaf from the pathological conceptions based on hearing impairment and inserted them in discussions about education in contexts of minorities. However, there is still great resistance to viewing the Deaf as bilingual, especially when they do not have the expected proficiency in the prevailing language of the country or in a conventional sign language. This resistance is enhanced if they communicate through homesign languages. The aim of this article, based on a qualitative research of ethnographic nature, inserted in the field of Applied Linguistics, is to discuss the curtailment of the use of homesign languages in bi/multilingual education of the Deaf in the representations that are part of the discourse of the Deaf individuals' relatives, the hearing professionals and the Deaf and hearing trainees attending a special support program for public school Deaf students. The analysis of the participants' representations indicates that there is a misrepresentation of family communication, homesign languages being described as a restricted linguistic system, harmful to the learning of already established languages (in this case, Portuguese and Libras) and a threat to the inclusion of the Deaf in their different communities or in the different groups they take part in. We believe that these representations are based on a static concept of language that disregard the linguistic and cultural diversity of Deafness, ignore the difficulty in communication between the hearing family members and their Deaf children, as well as reinforce the marginalization of the Deaf within the school and within the communities/groups they belong to.

**KEYWORDS:** Homesign languages. Brazilian Sign Language. Bilingual deaf education. Multilingualism.

**RESUMO:** Recentemente a língua brasileira de sinais (Libras) obteve o reconhecimento do seu estatuto linguístico e, a partir de uma visão sócio-anropológica da surdez, alguns estudos têm distanciado o surdo das concepções patologizadas baseadas na deficiência auditiva e inserido o mesmo em discussões sobre educação bilíngue em contextos de minorias. Contudo, há ainda grande resistência em admitir o surdo como bilíngue, principalmente quando ele não apresenta o domínio esperado na língua majoritária do país ou em uma língua de sinais convencional, ou seja, se a comunicação ocorrer por meio de línguas de sinais caseiras. Assim, o objetivo da presente pesquisa qualitativa de cunho etnográfico, inserida no campo da Linguística Aplicada, foi discutir o cerceamento do uso das línguas de sinais caseiras na educação bi/multilíngue de surdos, a partir das representações de familiares de surdos e seus profissionais e estagiários surdos e ouvintes que frequentam um programa de apoio escolar. A análise das representações dos participantes demonstrou o processo de descaracterização linguística dessa comunicação familiar, sendo as línguas de sinais caseiras descritas como um sistema linguístico restrito, prejudicial ao aprendizado das línguas já estabelecidas (português e Libras) e uma ameaça para a inclusão da pessoa surda em sua comunidade. Acreditamos que essas representações estão calcadas em um conceito estático de língua e precisam ser revistas, pois desconsideram a diversidade linguística e cultural da surdez e dificultam ainda mais a comunicação entre familiares ouvintes e seus filhos surdos, além de reforçar a marginalização do surdo dentro da escola e da sua própria comunidade.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Línguas de sinais caseiras. Língua Brasileira de Sinais. Educação de surdos. Multilinguismo.

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<sup>1</sup> This article revisits and expands the discussion on homesign languages, using a cutout of the data sources generated in the ethnographic research work carried out by Kumada (2012).

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[L]anguages are constructed [...] [and the] linguistic criteria are not sufficient to establish the existence of a language (the old language/dialect boundary debates), in order to identify the important social and semiotic processes that lead to their construction. (MAKONI; PENNYCOOK, 2007, p. 1)

## 1 Introduction

Almost two decades ago, *Libras* (Brazilian Sign Language) was officially recognized as the Deaf people's linguistic system by the Law 10,436 (BRASIL, 2002). Based on this legal determination the right to a bilingual education has been ensured, respecting the linguistic singularities of Deaf students, and having *Libras* as a first language (L1) and Portuguese as a second language (L2) for communication and instruction.

Despite of the importance of this recognition for the social movements led by the Deaf in Brazil and of the greater visibility that *Libras* has achieved after its legitimation, there is still resistance to viewing the Deaf as bilingual individuals. In fact, statements such as "my son is studying in a bilingual school" or "it is important to be bilingual" are only part of the collective imaginary of the country's society when bilingualism means the association of Portuguese with prestige languages such as English, French, German, Spanish... In the trail of this logic, people hardly ever associate bilingualism with minority languages<sup>1</sup>, such as *Libras* or one of the (circa<sup>2</sup>) 180 indigenous languages that inhabit the Brazilian scene.

Actually, minority bilingualism is naturalized as invisible in the country. In our view, this invisibility, in the case of Deaf people, can only be explained if we look at this sociolinguistically and culturally complex context (CAVALCANTI, 1999) and consider at least three situations: 1)

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1 Similarly, as suggested by Maher (2007), it is worth recalling the innumerable situations in which we have been inquired about our linguistic competence in the production or comprehension of oral or written English, Spanish, French or German in comparison to the non-existent episodes in which we were asked about our knowledge of *Guarani*, *Xavante*, or *Libras*.

<sup>2</sup> According to Oliveira (2003), there are about 210 languages in Brazil, including 180 indigenous languages and approximately 30 immigration languages. However, these numbers vary. Maher (2013, p. 117, our translation) indicates that more than 222 languages are spoken in Brazil: "[...] at least 180 indigenous languages, about 40 (...) immigration languages; and two (...) sign languages - Brazilian Sign Language - and Brazilian *Ka'apor* Sign Language". Altenhofen (2013) says that according to the 2008 survey by the Instituto de Investigação e Desenvolvimento em Política Linguística - IPOL (Institute for Research and Development in Linguistic Policy), there are 219 indigenous languages, in addition to 51 immigration languages. For Altenhofen (2013), this variation occurs because there is no reliable systematic survey as yet. In alignment with Makoni and Pennycook (2012, p. 442), we regard this variation as related to the "(...) critique of the notion of separable languages (...) as "[t]here is good reason to question common assumptions about the existence of separate, nameable and numerable languages".

The Deaf will not to be acknowledged as bilingual if bilingualism is strictly associated with languages of prestige; 2) The Deaf is will not be understood as bilingual if *Libras* is not socially seen (or accepted) as a language and; 3) The Deaf person is will not be recognized as bilingual when his/her competence is considered insufficient in the languages involved (in the case of the Brazil, *Libras* and Brazilian<sup>3</sup> Portuguese). In other words, instead of bilingual, he/she is seen as having no language or as being in a condition of having acquired 'half language(s)' .

In this article, we focus on the impact arising from the third situation, after briefly discussing the other two for a better understanding of the recurrence of representations that insist on situating the Deaf individual in a language vacuum or in a language limbo.

According to Cavalcanti (1999, p. 387, our translation), bilingualism in Brazil is "[...] stereotypically related to the languages of prestige in what has been named by some researchers as elite bilingualism". Elite bilingualism is seen as chosen bilingualism: individuals who voluntarily choose to learn another language (or who do it by choice of their parents), naturally, with no debate raised about an abandonment of their L1. On the contrary, it is expected that these individuals fully develop their proficiency in both language systems. Thus, when, for example, an individual is encouraged to join a bilingual college or to travel to another country, the student knows that he/she can/will be able to use his L1 when he/she returns or whenever meets his peers. In this case there is a lower level of internal or external pressure involved (MAHER, 2007). The representations regarding this model of bilingualism are positive and are linked to the linguistic enrichment of the individual (SKUTNABB-KANGAS, 1981). Cavalcanti (1999, p. 387, our translation) further adds that elite bilingualism is associated "[...] with languages of prestige both internationally and nationally". The author emphasizes that only standard languages are included in this perspective/view of bilingualism. The same goes for monolingualism in the country: only standard Portuguese is acknowledged as a language of instruction, any popular variety of Portuguese is seen as non-prestige or non-language.

When part of linguistic minorities, students suffer social pressure, often within their own families, to become bilingual, usually because their L1 has restricted rights and the mastery of L2 represents the only chance of educational and economic success (SKUTNABB-KANGAS,

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<sup>3</sup> Hereon whenever Portuguese is mentioned, the reference is to Brazilian Portuguese.

1981; CAVALCANTI, 1999). As this type of bilingualism involves a minority language with no social prestige<sup>4</sup>, there is usually less investment in research in the field, in the production of pedagogic materials for language teaching.

And, if there is learning failure, the risks and consequences for the individual are more serious when compared to the group allocated as elite bilingualism. As Skutnabb-Kangas (1981, p. 79) had already pointed out in the early 1980s:

If the child becomes almost monolingual or very dominant in her own language, then most future educational opportunities will be closed to her. She will not be able to compete in the labour market with other young people from the majority. Her chances of sharing in the life of the larger community and influencing it will be severely limited. It will also be impossible for her to try to improve the situation of her own group, together with others, to demand linguistic and other rights for her group [...]-

In Brazil, when the languages at stake are of a non-prestigious character, such as *Libras* and indigenous languages, "[...] bilingualism is almost always seen as a 'problem' to be eradicated" (MAHER, 2007, p. 69, our translation), facing obstacles ranging from the lack of professionals to the shortage of teaching materials available in the minority language. In fact, this lack contributes to the invisibilization process of the minority language, and of its speakers as bilingual, as it happens to *Libras* and to the Deaf.

Moreover, the Deaf will hardly be understood as bilingual if *Libras* is not accepted or acknowledged as a language. Actually, in Brazil, *Libras* is referred to in daily discourse and in the traditional media as "*linguagem*<sup>5</sup> *de sinais*", which means a way to communicate through gestures, not a language.

In this sense, the unfamiliarity with *Libras* as a language backs up representations similar to those aired by a teacher, in a study developed by Silva and Kumada (2013, p. 106, our translation). This teacher, acting as a research participant, questioned why "[...] each country is creating its [own] written language for the hearing impaired, such as, for example, *Libras*".

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<sup>4</sup> Altenhofen (2013, p. 94, our translation) points out that there is a range of expressions used to "[...] designate languages that exist at the margin (or in the shadow) of a dominant language [...]", among them it is possible to list 'peripheral language', 'marginal language', 'threatened language', 'community language' and 'dialect'.

<sup>5</sup> "The word '*linguagem*' [language], in Portuguese, is more embracing than the word '*língua*' [language], not only because it is used to refer to languages in general, but also because it is applied to communication systems, whether natural or artificial, human or not." (QUADROS; KARNOPP, 2004, p. 24).

Behind this question is the denial of *Libras* as an autonomous linguistic system with cultural characteristics such as those granted to oral languages. Besides this unfamiliarity with *Libras*, it is worth of mention that, there is a myth of a universal sign language and this myth is also constantly focused on by authors in the area of Deaf Studies who seek to deconstruct this image of unity and homogeneity (Cf. QUADROS, 1997; FELIPE, 1997; QUADROS; KARNOPP, 2004; SILVA; FAVORITO, 2009; KUMADA, 2016). However, even nowadays, the myth of a one-only sign language for all countries is recurrent in Brazil.

As long as sign language is constantly placed under suspicion that it is not a language such as oral languages are, the Deaf will not be understood as bilingual and will be constantly referred to by the pathological bias of hearing impairment or as "Deaf-mutes", an expression still used in daily discourse and also in the discourse of the media in the country. It is important to problematize the choice and use of the word 'mute' as it marks the individual who cannot speak. The word carries a veiled assumption conceiving that *Libras* is not a language and as such Deaf people are seen as not able to speak any language or even to communicate.

As a matter of fact, this representation is ingrained in Brazilian society despite the work done by many scholars and professionals in the field of Deaf Studies, as well as of the work done by Deaf and hearing people in Deaf communities<sup>6</sup> and groups, trying to foster *Libras* and bilingual education for the Deaf, deconstructing some of these myths and spreading knowledge about the subject. For these professionals and Deaf and hearing people, of course, there is no question about the linguistic status of *Libras* or about the recognition of minority bilingualism.

However, it should be pointed out that even within Deaf communities or among some professionals working in this area, the Deaf individual may still be disqualified as bilingual.

As Gesser (2006) points out, in the trail of the struggle for the strengthening of *Libras*, there is a suppression of other languages in the context of Deafness, such as, for example, homesign languages, which have been overlooked or disregarded in Deaf Studies research. As

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<sup>6</sup> The concept of Deaf communities is used within a socio-anthropological view of Deafness, understanding the groupings performed by Deaf individuals in associations, events, conferences and other spaces for the maintenance and production of Deaf culture (texts, poetry, literature, theater plays, etc.). It is important to point out that we acknowledge the existence of multiple Deaf communities in Brazil and in the world, and these communities are plural: not to be essentialized and homogenized. (KUMADA; CAVALCANTI, 2014).

such, and, according to Silva (2008), many Deaf people have also been viewed as 'having no language' at all.

In agreement with previous studies (KUMADA, 2012; KUMADA; CAVALCANTI, 2014), we use the expression "homesign language" to name the communicative system established between hearing family members and their Deaf children. It is known that in 90% of the cases, the Deaf child is born within a hearing family that is generally unaware of the existence of *Libras* (REILY, 2004). As oral communication cannot be established with the child, a private way of communication is created in the family between the hearing relatives and the Deaf child. This type of communication is usually based on a mishmash of gestures, pointing out signs, mime, orality and other resources (SILVA, 2008).

Actually, maybe because of the hybrid character of a communication that mixes gestures and orality, there is resistance even by the Deaf and their relatives, as well as by professionals and researchers in the field, to admit that this communication can be understood as a language (KUMADA, 2012). Similarly, there seems to be some caution regarding the choice of terms on the part of researchers in this field of study in relation to the denominations adopted. The caution, however, is materialized either as an understatement or as an overstatement with the use of words or expressions that may sound derogatory, i.e., not a language or perhaps a lesser language i.e.: "esoteric symbolism" (TERVOORT, 1961; BEHARES, 1997), "language embryo" or "umbilical language", (LIMA, 2004), "gestures" (PEREIRA, 1989), "mime" (LIMA, 2004), "emerging signs" or "pidgin" (VILHALVA, 2009). For the time being homesigns (MORFORD, 1996; KUMADA, 2012; ADRIANO, 2010) and spontaneous sign systems (GOLDIN-MEADOW; MYLANDER, 1998) seem to us not to be so much semantically loaded.

There are, however, authors such as Gesser (2006), Silva (2008) and Adriano (2010) who, envisaging the language potential of this type of communication, embrace the denomination "homesign language". As explained above, we have chosen to adopt the expression "homesign languages" (plural form), because we understand that we are not in face of only one sign language, but several (KUMADA 2012; KUMADA; CAVALCANTI, 2014), and because we

acknowledge not only the linguistic but also the semiotic<sup>7</sup> nature (CAVALCANTI; SILVA, 2016) of this phenomenon be it a conventional or a non-conventional sign language.

In Kumada and Cavalcanti (2014) we sought to answer the research question: What are the representations of Deaf children's family members, and of Deaf and hearing professionals and trainees participating in a bilingual support program for public school Deaf students regarding homesign languages? In this text, we briefly focus on the assertion that homesign languages are not considered as languages, encompassing three subassertions: 1) homesign languages are seen as mimes, dramatizations and invented signs used by people who do not know *Libras*; 2) homesign languages are seen as limited, but are also seen as functional; 3) classifiers can be seen as homesign languages if used by people considered non-proficient in *Libras* (KUMADA; CAVALCANTI, 2014, p. 45, our translation).

The aforementioned research question, originally formulated in the research developed by Kumada (2012), also has a second answer materialized in another assertion not explored in Kumada and Cavalcanti (2014). The assertion, which is the focus of this article, is based on the representation that the use of homesign languages makes the learning of *Libras* difficult and can lead the Deaf to the exclusion of the group(s) they belong to.

In view of the above, our aim is *to discuss the curtailment of the use of homesign languages in bi/multilingual education in the representations of Deaf relatives attending a bilingual support program for public school Deaf students and of Deaf and hearing professionals and trainees at work in the program.*

In addition to this introductory section and to the final considerations that stitch our reflections together, this article is organized in three parts, namely: 1) presentation of our locus of enunciation and of the theoretical concepts from the areas of Applied Linguistics and Cultural Studies ; 2) a look at the literature on homesign languages; 3) analysis of data excerpts and discussion of the participants' representations concerning the curtailment of the use of homesign languages.

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<sup>7</sup> For Martin-Jones; Andrews and Martin (2017, p. 190), communicative resources of the semiotic type "include gestures, facial expressions, eye-gaze direction, and other non-verbal modes of meaning-making. They also include the artefacts, images, photographs, diagrams and textual resources that are produced and used on communication on paper and screen."

## 2 Theoretical assumptions for the analysis of representations in minority and invisible contexts of bi/multilingualism

Our gaze is aligned with the movement of detachment from the pathological conception of Deafness as disability and from the Deaf as a hearing-impaired person that could only have an education based on oralism<sup>8</sup>. In our perspective, the Deaf are/should be conceived from a socio-anthropological perspective, a perspective that has difference as being central, be it related to linguistic, cultural or identity aspects (SKLIAR, 2016). In this perspective, respecting and valuing sign languages, we align with Deaf Studies and with a sub-area of Applied Linguistics dedicated to bi/multilingual education in minority and invisible contexts. (CAVALCANTI, 1999, 2011; MAHER, 2007).

According to Skutnabb-Kangas (1981), the concept of bilingualism was originally associated with groups called linguistic minorities because they were socially and politically oppressed, but not always necessarily representing a numerical minority

As indicated earlier, minority bilingualism is not encouraged by society. As such, according to Hamel (1989) and Maher (2007), the educational model implicitly or explicitly chosen for minority bilingualism contexts is the assimilationist model of submersion. For Martin-Jones and Romaine (1986, p. 27) the submersion program became known as "sink or swim", as children who speak a minority language are allocated in classrooms with 'native'<sup>9</sup> speakers of the majority language which is the medium of instruction. In some cases, the minority language is accepted in the beginning years, especially during literacy, until it is subsequently excluded from the school curriculum. Maher (2007, p. 71, our translation) explains that, in sociolinguistic terms, the practice of this model leads to subtractive bilingualism, whose main objective is "[...] to withdraw the mother tongue from the speaker's repertoire [...]".

The assimilationist model of submersion is practiced by numerous Brazilian schools for Deaf people, under the misleading label of 'inclusive' education. In this educational model, Deaf students attend classes in groups composed mostly by hearers who are Brazilian Portuguese

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<sup>8</sup> Oralism, roughly speaking, consists of an educational approach that advocates the learning of oral language by the Deaf in an immersion context, thus prohibiting the use of sign language.

<sup>9</sup> The word is in single inverted commas to acknowledge the debate in critical revisions in the area of language studies. 'Native' speakers are idealized as part of a big narrative socially constructed.



speakers. Many a time, there is only one Deaf student at school and there are no *Libras* interlocutors, as well as there are no translators, interpreters or teachers of *Libras*. Moreover, it is common for the other teachers at school and for the Deaf student's hearing peers to be unaware of *Libras* as a linguistic and semiotic system.

It should be emphasized that the context of Deafness differs from that of other minorities in Brazil, since, as mentioned before, the great majority of Deaf people's relatives are hearers and do not know *Libras*. The teaching of this language is thus left to the school responsibility. However, in the Brazilian monolingual environment (at home or at school), hardly will a child learn and practice *Libras*. As a result, since he/she neither acquires the expected (basic) skills in *Libras* nor in Brazilian Portuguese, it is common to hear that "[...] the Deaf arrives at school having no language" (LIMA, 2004, p. 187, our translation and addition).

In fact, despite the critique made by Silva (2008) and Gesser (2006) to the representations of 'semilingualism' that insist on stigmatizing the Deaf person who does not meet the expectations of having learned a conventional oral or sign language, the concept is endorsed both in research studies and in the discourse of professionals at schools.

For instance, in Lima's (2004, p. 257) point of view, a Deaf person can only be considered bilingual when he/she can express himself/herself in *Libras* and Brazilian Portuguese. The author, however, points out that 16% of the Deaf participants in her research use "natural gestures" as a means of communication with their hearing parents. We infer that these gestures are thus not part of a conventional sign language, and as such they may then be part of a non-language.

Similarly, Nader (2011, p. 102) acknowledges the potential of communication between the Deaf and their hearing relatives, but considers that homesign language is a "pseudo-language" that cannot be legitimated as a language, since in its conception it has limitations for the cognitive development of a Deaf child.

According to Martin-Jones and Romaine (1986, p. 26) the term 'semilingualism' was coined to denote the 'incomplete' linguistic ability of bilingual individuals in Finnish and Swedish of Tornedal. The same term reemerged in the 1980s to refer to children with an immigrant background. What worries the authors is the way in which the term is used to label as 'semilingual' children or adults with abilities inferior to those of 'native' speakers, and in

some cases they even attribute to these children/adults negative effects derived from their linguistic condition, such as consequences related to their cognitive and academic aspects.

In agreement with Martin-Jones and Romaine (1986), when discussing 'semilingualism', the argument is not to legitimize the practice of this term, but to bring to the fore the misrepresentations embedded in its conception. The concept is used to nourish "[...] the belief that there is such a thing as an ideal, fully competent monolingual or bilingual speaker who masters a complete version of a language." (MARTIN-JONES; ROMAINE, 1986, p. 32). Although the authors' discussion does not focus on Deaf people, it is possible to borrow their contribution to explain the negative load present in the term "semilingual" and, here in this article, by extension, in the expression "without a language".

In the core of this reflection, for Skutnabb-Kangas (1981, p. 35), the error lies in trying to measure the bilingual person as the result of the addition of two monolingual individuals considered "complete". According to Maher (2007) and Skutnabb-Kangas (1981), this quantitative conception of bilingualism entails several problems, as it addresses a static and rigid understanding of human language skills and the very concept of language as a ready object, rather than contemplating it as permanently under construction. After all, this is an unfruitful search, because if we cannot measure what would be the totality of language, how can we demand a 'complete' bilingualism from an individual?

In this perspective, in alignment with Maher (2007) and leaving behind idealizations of the concepts of language and bilingualism in which each language is imprisoned in a distinct "container", we reiterate the permeability of the languages that inhabit the universe of a bilingual individual. According to Cox and Assis-Peterson (2007, p. 42, our translation), it is timely to shed light on "[...] a concept that grasps the life of a language in its flux state, which allows us to think of it as liquid and not as solid". From this perspective, for the same authors, we must look at languages "[...] as rivers that flow and indistinctly merge with other rivers".

In a similar way, César and Cavalcanti (2007) invite us to imagine language as a metaphor, a kaleidoscope metaphor, discursively situated and capable of producing the most diverse (re)arrangements, adjusted according to the situation and to the interlocutor. Languages may be then described in constant movement and cannot be analyzed outside an interactional context. Additionally, Cavalcanti and Maher (2018), remind us that languages do

not precede human interaction, in fact, they are created by virtue of social interaction. For this reason, their fluidity and dynamicity have to be taken into account.

Having situated this study in the field of Applied Linguistics, understood as "critical" (PENNYCOOK, 2001) or "undisciplined" (MOITA LOPES, 2006), we now turn to the area of Cultural Studies in relation to the hybrid nature of every cultural phenomenon, including language (BHABHA, 1994; TAGATA, 2007).

The understanding of the concept of language in the light of hybridity is in line with the discussion on homesign languages, conceived as a range of linguistic and semiotic resources (CAVALCANTI; SILVA, 2016) which include made-up signs, signs from *Libras*, mimes, gestures, pointing out signs, writing, orality, dramatizations, use of objects, among others (KUMADA, 2012). Thus, while this mixed configuration has been pointed out by some as an argument to disqualify this type of communication as a language, our theoretical framework pushes into another direction, i.e. as an argument to qualify homesigns as languages.

According to Souza (2010, p. 301, our translation), it is necessary to clarify that the discussion about hybridity does not mean a compliment to the mixture, in reality, it is a criticism of purism, since the hybrid is not "[...] merely a translation mix of two originals - a supposed third element that would resolve the tension between two cultures, [...] it is an agonistic process in a constant state of inconclusive negotiation, without truce, without assimilation nor incorporation". In fact, in Bhabha's theory (1994), the concept of Third Space (or in-between) is proposed to identify the space of hybridity and ambivalence, without any coherence with the claims of pure originality. In fact, according to Souza (2004), any attempt to return to an "authentic" origin consists of an unfruitful search.

The concept of Third Space in Bhabha (1994), also contributes to think about the discourse that the Deaf individual who uses homesign language cannot be read as bilingual, since this communication does not correspond to *Libras* or Portuguese. The argument here is that if we take the in-between space as legitimate, homesign languages and their speakers are no longer viewed under the lens of 'semilingualism'.

The area of Cultural Studies also informed our view of the concept of representations, as situated in a hybrid space influenced by numerous discourses. These discourses, understood as meaningful practices, are part of "a process that posits meaning as a systemic production

situated within certain systems and institutions of ideological, historical, aesthetic, political representation" (SOUZA, 2004, p. 117, our translation).

According to Silva (2001), the process of representation involves a number of participants chosen to speak for the Other or about the Other based on a presentation and description of that individual. The author emphasizes that representations have the effect of being true and exerting power relations, allowing the construction of stereotypes which are strengthened through the repeatability of the speech.

Thus, the analysis of representations is here seen as appropriate to reflect on these stereotypes that, according to Bhabha (1994), operate as a perverse reaction to difference, subalternizing the Other based on established naturalized hierarchies, related to race, culture or gender. In the author's words,

[t]he stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (which the negation through the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the *representation* of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations. (BHABHA, 1994, p. 75)

In agreement with the same author, we understand that the processes of representation and, therefore, the construction of stereotypes are mechanisms of exclusion of the Other, of that Other that diverges from what is normalized in society and is viewed as a 'threat' to normalization. Hence, our interest in discussing how representations of Deaf relatives and Deaf and hearing professionals and trainees in a bilingual support program for public school Deaf students may be restrictive towards the use of homesign languages.

Before moving to the data analysis, we make a review of the literature on homesign languages.

### 3 What has to be said about homesign languages

In search of an overview of the research work developed in the area, we have consulted two Brazilian online repositories<sup>10</sup>, namely the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO/FAPESP<sup>11</sup>) and the *Biblioteca Digital Brasileira de Teses e Dissertações* (Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations) (BDTD/FGV<sup>12</sup>). The search was developed without the determination of a temporal cutout, aiming to reach the greatest amount of scientific productions available over the years.

The results obtained from this survey show that, in addition to a previous research work (KUMADA, 2012), only one MA dissertation focuses on homesign languages (ADRIANO, 2010). There are also two other studies on indigenous sign languages, focusing on a debate on the possibility of indigenous sign languages to be conceived but only as homesigns (SOARES, 2018; BARRETOS, 2016).

In her MA thesis, Deaf researcher Adriano (2010) investigated the use of homesigns by three Deaf adults (age range 22 - 44) who lived in linguistic isolation. The participants were from municipalities in northeastern Brazil, two of them residing in the same city and having never had contact with users of *Libras*, having created and shared signs that allowed communication among themselves and their relatives. The third participant, Adriano's student, had knowledge of *Libras*. According to Adriano (2010), these individuals attended inclusive schools without the presence of interpreters and translators of *Libras*, with hearing teachers who were also unaware of *Libras*.

In her research, Adriano (2010, p. 40, our translation) endorses homesigns as a communicative system that has a linguistic function equivalent to the official languages, being able to "maintain the affective ties of the family". Like we do, the author adopts the terminology

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<sup>10</sup> These bases were chosen because they presented better performance in the result before filters and crossings of keywords. It should be noted that other databases were initially consulted and, even through the use of advanced search or the application of logical operators "OR" and "AND", publications with themes far from our purpose returned. This search was performed in May 2019, using the following keywords in English: homesigns; homesign; household; home AND sign AND deaf. The choice for the keywords in English was based on the fact that scientific works published in Brazil always include abstracts and keywords in English. In addition, we also use the Portuguese keyword "sinais caseiros" in our inquiry.

<sup>11</sup> *Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa de São Paulo* [The São Paulo Foundation for Research Support].

<sup>12</sup> *Fundação Getúlio Vargas* [Getúlio Vargas Foundation].

"homesign language" (in the singular form though) but relying on the Vygotskian theory to present homesigns as "linguistic signs".

In order to corroborate the linguistic status of homesign language, Adriano (2010) interviewed the three Deaf participants, requesting in some cases the mediation of a hearing relative as an interpreter, and analyzed the structure of the homesigns used. In a first analysis the author compared the phonological aspects of *Libras* to the homesign languages, highlighting the presence of the same linguistic parameters (location, hand configuration, movement, palm orientation and facial and body expressions), noting similarities in the use of hand configuration in both language systems. Next, she observed that the homesign languages also deal with the iconicity aspects of the signs, as well as the morphological characteristics of composition, time marking and numerals. In addition, Adriano (2010) identified the use of deixis, non-manual expressions (understood through facial and body expressions), and body mapping in the homesign languages in very similar conditions to the aspects of *Libras* and American Sign Language (ASL).

Even though treading a theoretical and methodological route that is different from our present research, the study developed by Adriano (2010) is relevant to this article because it contributes to strengthening the defense of homesign languages as a communicative system with linguistic and semiotic resources.

On the other hand, the studies of Soares (2018) and Barretos (2016) analyzed the communication forms developed by Deaf people from indigenous villages. However, in both cases the authors argue that the systems analyzed are not designed as homesigns. In our view, they are indigenous sign languages developed in the villages, i.e., in a multilingual scenario different from the one we are investigating since these sign languages potentially have the influence of indigenous languages and maybe of Brazilian Portuguese. In this sense, both studies are of interest because they provide information about other scenarios of multilingualism in the country, including other indigenous sign languages besides the *Ka'apor* Sign Language, usually referred to in the literature.

Similar to the methodological procedure carried out in the study by Adriano (2010), in the research developed by Soares (2018) about 40 *Terena* signs were analyzed in their grammatical aspects, with emphasis on phonology, morphology, lexicon, syntax and semantics.

Considering the results obtained, Soares (2018) elaborates that it is the communication between the *Terena* Deaf and that can be understood as an autonomous language, not equivalent to a system of homesigns, since in his vision such signs are not restricted to the family, being shared collectively among the *Terena* community.

Barretos' research (2016) analyzed the *Akwẽ-Xerente* Deaf communication and, through observation, interviews and communication with the participants, the author noticed that the *Akwẽ-Xerente* Deaf used spontaneous signs, touching and sound clues to attract attention, as well as tactile and visual perception of actions around them. Due to fact that the *Akwẽ-Xerente* signs are created by the Deaf families, without socialization or sharing with Deaf people from different villages or with other hearing people in the same community, the author does not reach a conclusive statement about the existence of an *Akwẽ-Xerente* Sign language. The author does not link the *Akwẽ-Xerente* signs to homesigns either:

Signs and gestures, as well as other symbolic constructions created and used primarily by the *Akwẽ* families, are communication resources mediated by the [indigenous] culture and are therefore conceived here not only as "homesigns" but as *Akwẽ* Signs of Cultural Communication. (BARRETOS, 2016, p. 74, our translation)

Thus, in the author's interpretation, these are not homesigns, but rather cultural signs, since these families cannot be understood or represented in a way that is dissociated from the culture of their people (BARRETOS, 2016).

In our opinion, it is not clear how Barretos (2016) understands that homesigns oppose to the idea of cultural signs, since in our understanding, in any family context (indigenous or otherwise), the interlocutors are sociohistorically and culturally located. Thus, since the communication created by the *Akwẽ-Xerente* is restricted to the family context, it may be seen as a homesign language.

Research on homesigns in an indigenous context was also the subject of an MA thesis developed by the Deaf researcher Vilhalva (2009), in Mato Grosso do Sul. The study was not found in the online literature survey carried out, but had been addressed previously (KUMADA, 2012). For Vilhalva (2009), the signs used by the research participants of the Guaraní ethnic group can be considered homesigns. In order to observe and record the emerging signs of

*Guarani* Deaf students, the researcher developed a linguistic mapping based on the existing vocabulary. Based on this mapping, the author states that, despite the preference for the denomination "emerging signs", these are also conceived as homesigns. However, in addressing this communication as "emerging sign language", the author attributes an evolutionary character to the emerging signs until they are effectively considered as sign language (VILHALVA, 2009).

Thus, few Brazilian studies are found in our review of the literature in which homesign languages were effectively addressed and recognized. In the studies here presented, only Kumada (2012) and Adriano (2010) analyzed this form of communication, the former with a focus on representation and the latter on grammatical description. The other researchers have addressed indigenous contexts in which indirectly the construction of homesigns are discussed. Our survey may not have been comprehensive and it is possible that there are other studies not located in our search, because of the cutout established by the choice of keywords or of repositories.

In addition, it should be noted that while our consultation has resulted in studies dating only over the past decade, research on the communication system established between Deaf people and their hearing relatives is as old as the research on ASL (KUMADA, 2012). The first study of the ASL grammar took place in the 1960's and was done by the linguist William Stokoe Junior (1960), The concept of 'esoteric symbolism' was coined by Tervoort (1961) to refer to the private communication system of Deaf children in professional and family contexts. The research was carried out in the Netherlands, Belgium and the United States and found that in internal situations Deaf children used a variety of resources such as oral language, dactylology, natural gestures, formal signs, mime, etc. For Tervoort, in spite of their limited character, these natural gestures had great linguistic potential, and could develop to become formal signs.

Also, in the international scenario, it is possible to cite Goldin-Meadow and Mylander's (1998) study on spontaneous sign systems produced by four North American Deaf children and four Chinese Deaf children, all of them daughters of hearing mothers and without exposure to a conventional sign language system. In order to evaluate the relationship between the structure of these gestures and oral language and to compare these practices among themselves, the authors analyzed the participants' interaction, finding a great similarity



between gestures developed by Chinese Deaf children and their hearing mothers, when compared to American children and their hearing mothers. Among the Deaf American and Chinese children similar patterns were also observed.

Another pertinent study published outside Brazil was carried out by Morford (1996), with the objective to provide a description of research works involving homesign systems. The author clarifies that homesigns differ from spontaneous gestures, as the latter are determined and influenced by oral speech, while homesigns may display structures similar to conventional sign languages. In his survey, covering the period from 1961 to 1996, 15 authors who developed studies in about 11 countries were found. Based on these studies, Morford (1996) states that research works on homesigns are still insufficient to determine whether they can be considered a language. Nevertheless, from these surveys it is possible to draw two main pieces of information, the first one being based on the fact that iconic representation is relevant for motivation in the process of creating homesigns. Second, although homesigns are not seen as complex "[...] as conventional languages, the range of language-like devices that children can generate without input is nevertheless impressive. This structural complexity is maintained across the lifespan, if the homesigner is never introduced to a conventional signed language" (MORFORD, 1996, p. 175). For this reason, according to the same author, these studies indicate that home language can become the first language of the Deaf, affecting the learning of a conventional language.

In fact, the literature review by Morford (1996) corroborates the claim of resistance in conceiving homesigns as languages, although their functionality and linguistic complexity are admitted. Moreover, as pointed out by Morford (1996), there is a veiled warning from some studies of the threat that homesign languages may represent when the Deaf homesigner is late exposed to a conventional sign language, indicating risks to learning.

According to Maher (2007, p. 71, our translation), the suppression of a minority language is often based on the argument that "[...] it will complicate or even hinder the acquisition of the language of prestige." For this author this assertion is farfetched and underestimates the individual's ability to learn languages, disregarding linguistically high-density communities such as some African countries where speakers are able to interact in three or more languages. However, we would like to add, this type of argument is usually used

to inhibit the use of homesign languages, such as the representations that will be discussed below.

### **3 The curtailment of the use of homesign languages in bilingual education in a multilingual scenario**

This qualitative ethnographic study<sup>13</sup> was carried out in a program of school support for Deaf children, developed in a study center linked to a public university in southeastern Brazil. The research participants were 10 Deaf and hearing professionals and trainees, 12 hearing family members of Deaf children, and the researcher (Kate Kumada).

The choice for this field of research is in line with Erickson's (1984) assumptions, understanding that ethnography can be performed in the space where the researcher participates, seeking to problematize our naturalized look at certain phenomena, that is, in the run of the estrangement process of the familiar to, at a later stage, render familiar what has been estranged. Thus, the referred study center and its participants were elected because they constituted a return to the place where the researcher worked for two years as a trainee pedagogue as part of a postgraduate program.

The generation of data sources was developed in videorecorded focus group meetings and informal conversations that were later transcribed. These sessions were also annotated in the researcher's field diary. Three focal group meetings were held with professionals and trainees and nine meetings with the Deaf's family members. It should be noted that in these focus groups, no questions were asked to the participants, the triggers of the discussions were short texts/talks by people and professionals in the area taken from books and documentaries, shared with the group so they could discuss and issue their own judgment/opinions.

Based on the theoretical precepts of data analysis used in ethnographic research, we used the analytical induction method (ERICKSON, 1989). However, according to Erickson (1984, p. 51), it is not pure inductions, since "The ethnographer brings to the field a theoretical point

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<sup>13</sup> In agreement with the ethical principles of the research, this study was submitted and approved by the Research Ethics Committee/Universidade Estadual de Campinas. The informed consent of the individuals was contemplated, ensuring the privacy and identity confidentiality of the participants, by replacing their real names with fictitious names.




of view and a set of questions, explicit or implicit. The perspective and questions may change in the field, but the researcher has an idea base to start from."

Under the procedure of analytical induction, the researcher seeks patterns in his records, that is, analogous episodes that serve as confirmatory evidence for the construction of one or more assertions which are used to answer the research question(s).


As mentioned before, our research question was: What are the representations of Deaf relatives and the Deaf and hearing professionals and trainees in a bilingual support program for public school Deaf students regarding homesign languages? Two assertions and three subassertions were elaborated for this question, but, in this article, we will focus only on the second assertion: The use of homesign languages makes *Libras* learning difficult and can lead the Deaf to the exclusion of their community

In Excerpt 1 below, the Deaf professional Luisa, responsible for the teaching of *Libras* for Deaf children and their families, contextualizes her reasoning by declaring that the Deaf child's communication with his/her hearing relatives is established through homesigns and this can be an obstacle to their insertion in a Deaf community.

#### Excerpt 1

**Luisa** (Deaf professional): I was talking to Luan's grandmother... Do you remember Luan? So she has an experience like this: it's pure homesigns. She shows ((indicates a point in space))... Luan's father does not know how to talk to his son "Oh what do you want, do you want? Water?" ((With the index finger indicates a point in space)). So, the child does not have an interaction with the language, he ends up sticking to the homesigns. Now when he enters into a Deaf community, he will have difficulties in communication, will not understand. [...] So, then, we, professionals in the area of Deafness, have to break this [circle]. I have a [Deaf] student, I have experience. The student attends an *EJA [Educação de Jovens e Adultos - Youth and Adult Education]* class, and, at the age of 35, he still uses homesigns. So I'm always trying to break this, being careful not to hurt his feelings, because it's like this: "you're telling me that everything is wrong, this is { wrong<sup>14</sup>}, this is { wrong}?" No, otherwise he will be traumatized and will not want to join the Deaf community. So, gently, I say, "oh, this is the { sign}, that's not it!" In a special way, you know? So he is able to end up accepting, to join the Deaf community. You know? It is something like, normal in the family that do not have access to the language, who has no knowledge of sign language. That in reality is a language seen as the first language, so they keep getting into [and sticking to] the homesigns, unfortunately this is happening. And the worst thing is that when the child grows up with no contact with another child or with a Deaf teacher to have as a model for him/her, he will grow up with those signs, you know? And then it will be difficult for him/her to leave [the homesigns], to own a "real" sign

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<sup>14</sup> The icon  means that the section was performed in a signaled way, besides the use of orality.

language. (Extracted from the Focus Group with Professionals and Trainees, 11/19/2010, our translation)

Do notice how Luisa emphasizes the intrinsic harmful aspect of the use of the homesigns. For this professional, the act of "pointing out" (accompanied by orality) used by Luan's relatives (a 14-year-old Deaf teenager) is understood as "pure homesign" and, in turn, is not considered as a language, since the participant states that the teenager [Luan is a 14-year old Deaf] does not interact using a language yet, revealing an implicit semilingual representation for the Deaf individual mentioned. However, in addition to the negative connotation attributed to homesigns when she says that "unfortunately" this insertion has occurred using homesigns, Luisa sounds a warning note on the consequences that the Deaf can face if they persist in this linguistic situation when they enter a Deaf community, since they will not be understood.

The Deaf professional reports that she seeks to break the Deaf student's family communication based on homesigns, indicating that for her this model is not legitimate and threatens the linguistic health of the individual. She then calls on her colleagues to "break it", replacing the homesigns with *Libras* signs, promoting a careful break so as not to create a trauma or drive the student away from the Deaf community.

Likewise, in Excerpt 2, Luisa adds that, besides not being understood, the use of homesigns and lack of understanding of *Libras* by a Deaf student may lead him/her to be rejected by or excluded from the Deaf community.

**Excerpt 2:**

**Luisa** (Deaf professional): When a Deaf person enters the Deaf community, coping with the language there, the really pure language that is his/her official language, he/she will learn it correctly. But when he/she brings [*Libras*] into his/her house, into his/her family, there will be this difficulty, this barrier in communication. Because he is used to the home gestures. So, for the Deaf, the only way is for him/her to learn the language [...] He prefers to learn his/her language so the community can interact with him/her. He/she will attend a conference, a social gathering, a meeting in an association, a party ... the language there [in these places] is the sign language [*Libras*]. No one is going to make a home gesture there, you know? [...] So, you have to consider this, and the family has to make an effort to learn the sign language [*Libras*] as well, because it is their obligation. It is the family's role to make this effort[...] but the ideal is that the Deaf individual, even if he/she leaves the family, learns the sign language, home gestures, if appropriate, he will have some difficulties. And, in addition to this difficulty, there will be some rejection from other Deaf people: "he/she does not know *Libras*, he/she does not know how to communicate". But over time they will end up welcoming him/her. Then he/she will learn the sign language correctly [...]

**Valéria** (hearing trainee): Is there rejection among the Deaf themselves when one does not know the signs?



**Luisa** (Deaf professional): Oh, yes. Because in the Deaf community we see that the Deaf person who does not know signs, who does not know *Libras*, ends up being left behind or excluded. For example, in a group, where they are chatting, the ones who do not know [*Libras*] end up being excluded. (Extracted from the Focus Group with Professionals and Trainees, 12/03/2010, our translation).

In the Deaf professional's discourse, in Excerpts 1 and 2, it is noted that the learning of *Libras*, as it happens with Portuguese at school, becomes compulsory for the insertion in a Deaf community. In this line of thought, *Libras* is taken as a mediator of social practices within Deaf communities, from the interaction with other Deaf people to the participation in Deaf's conferences, events and associations.

However, in agreement with Lopes (2011), language cannot be conceived as the only identifying aspect, because, in fact, there are other elements that inscribe the individuals in a group. In the case of the Deaf, for example, the ways of communicating and experiencing the world through visual experiences are important identity markers. (LOPES, 2011).

It should be noted that we are not denying the restricted character of homesign languages, which have their functionality basically reserved for their family social circle. However, we are cautious about representations that lead to the belief of the damages caused by homesign languages, suggesting their abandonment or even a rupture with it. In our perspective, this type of action can further reinforce the distance between the hearing family and the Deaf child, as can be seen in the discourse of Deaf's relatives presented in Excerpts 3, 4 and 5:

**Excerpt 3:**

**Simone** (hearing mother): Gabriel [Deaf son], I'm back to Gabriel again, it's not even Gabriele [Deaf daughter]. Gabriel speaks much more *Libras*. Some things I don't understand, I can't follow "Oh { slowly}". And he gets angry, does like this to me "{ I do not want to talk anymore}"".

**Excerpt 4:**

**Aparecida** (hearing mother): Adriano [Deaf son] now he speaks [in *Libras*], but he speaks and speaks and I do not understand, right? Then I try and try again and end up giving up, because there's no way, right, to communicate.

**Excerpt 5:**

**Franciely** (hearing mother): So she [Deaf daughter] gets really good at it [*Libras*] and we don't, huh? First, we have more difficulty to learn.

**Marlisa** (hearing mother): Because we are hearers.

(Extracted from the Focus Group with Families, 11/18/2010 and 11/22/2010, our translation).

The analysis of the mothers' discourse illustrates how harmful it can be to encourage Deaf children to abandon homesigns and to require the family to "make an effort" to learn *Libras*. It is worth mentioning that in bilingual programs, such as the one in the context investigated, usually only one family member may accompany a Deaf child to provide assistance. This companion is the only person in the family to be given the opportunity to attend classes in *Libras*. But keeping in mind that there are members in the family and that not everyone is available to accompany the Deaf child, it's not possible to demand that the whole family learn *Libras*. It is also noted that even the family members participating in the bilingual program, that is, receiving lessons in *Libras*, when addressed in Excerpts 3, 4 and 5 showed some anguish in face of the difficulty in following their Deaf children's performance in *Libras*.

Nevertheless, in Excerpt 2, Luisa's discourse suggests that the family can be a barrier to the abandonment of the homesign languages, because after contact with a language considered by the research participant as "pure", the Deaf returns to the family context where, according to the Deaf professional: "he is used to the home gestures". *Libras* is qualified by Luisa as "pure" and "official", elevated to the level of a language itself. In contrast, it is possible to presuppose that home communication is seen as "mixed", "unofficial" and "below the language level". In fact, this notion of pure language disregards the concept of language as multifaceted (CÉSAR; CAVALCANTI, 2007), positioned in a hybrid linguistic-cultural space (BHABHA, 1994), making crucial the problematization of representations based on the ideal of language or of bilingualism.

Representations that seek to downgrade the linguistic aspect of homesign languages may be omitting the attempt to suppress this form of communication, as practiced in contexts of minority bilingualism. Thus, according to Excerpts 6, 7 and 8, it is possible to observe how the homesign languages are considered harmful to the learning of *Libras*, but can be used during the transition process:

**Excerpt 6:**

**Luisa** (Deaf professional): So if the family does not insert, [...] does not lead [the child] to learn the sign language [*Libras*], he/she [gets stuck] on these homesigns.

**Valéria** (hearing trainee): But then when you learn the sign language [*Libras*] do you think it is taken all away?

**Luisa** (Deaf professional): Yeah, I think it does {  breaks}.

**Tatiane** (hearing trainee): I think so, comparing to Bruno [Deaf student]. I think [homesigns] should have been taken [away] from him when he was a kid. For example, in G. [name of another educational support program], if a child arrives [with a description such as:] "oh, my son does not say anything", it's usually because the mother gives him everything he points out to. So, the child does not see much need [to learn *Libras*] because his/her needs have been supplied only with the pointing out. It is the same thing when compared to *Libras* or even to the communication of hearing parents and Deaf children. If the child only uses home gestures, just points out, and that is enough for him/her at that moment, if not stimulated...

**Excerpt 7:**

**Vânia** (hearing trainee): But isn't it a bridge? A bridge. Isn't the gesture a bridge for him/her to begin learning from the Deaf themselves, the sign language?

**Excerpt 8:**

**Luisa** (Deaf professional): Exactly. Home gesture is not part of Deaf culture. [...]

Catarina (hearing trainee): The way you're talking, it looks like a very closed culture that does not want to have influence, you know?

(Extracted from the Focus **Group with Professionals and Trainees, 11/19/2010, our translation**).

In Excerpt 6, Tatiane, the speech therapist and trainee in the bilingual program, argues that, because homesign language satisfies its interlocutors, the Deaf may not want to make an effort to learn a sign language that is conventional and validated by Deaf communities and professionals of the area. This discomfort facing homesign languages is followed by the discourse of Luísa, pedagogue, and Valéria, speech therapist and trainee, who discuss the efficiency of *Libras* to "take it all away" and "break up" home communication. These discourses can be easily associated with an educational program of languages abandonment, especially in the models of subtractive bilingualism and systematic transition to a second language.

In explaining the sociolinguistic implications of a regulated education based on transitional programs that favor/ subtractive bilingualism, Hamel (1989) uses the bridge metaphor to characterize the student's mother tongue. Similarly, in Excerpt 7, the pedagogue and trainee Vânia, proposes that homesign languages can be tolerated if they serve as a "bridging" function for the learning of *Libras*. According to Hamel (1989, p. 55) the concept of "bridge" for the linguistic field suggests that "hay que transitarlas con la mayor celeridad posible

y destruirlas después, por lo menos como lenguas de instrucción, para evitar las fugas hacia atrás, es decir, las molestas 'interferencias' y 'recaídas' en una realidad lingüística indeseable."

In the track of this conception, homesign languages play a contradictory role, since the participants admit that their linguistic potential can satisfy their interlocutors to the point of not being motivated to learn *Libras*. Despite this, homesigning in family communication is not recognized as a language: there is, actually, an attempt to undermine its role/importance and to stress its harmful nature. Were the languages involved prestigious, arguments such as those involving, for example, linguistic accommodation or the need to break with the first language to succeed in the second language would not be employed, since, as already pointed out, in elite bilingualism the learning of an additional language is associated with "linguistic enrichment" (HAMEL, 1989; MAHER, 2007).

Thus, when saying that "home gesture is not part of Deaf culture" (Excerpt 8), the Deaf professional completes a series of deferred arguments to justify the curtailment of the use of homesign languages. In the core of this discussion, homesign languages become controversial because they are constituted by translanguaging practices, inhabiting a hybrid space of Portuguese spoken by hearing relatives and sign language conventionalized by the Brazilian Deaf communities. This configuration makes homesign languages contradictory and ambivalent, since they are conceived as linguistically restricted to the family context, harmful to the learning of a conventional language (either the oral language of the majority community or the official sign language of the country), while at the same time its potential as a first language for the Deaf that is admitted (MORFORD, 1996).

In this track, according to Kumada (2012), when homesign languages are devalued or negated because they are considered restricted and harmful, although they may be seen functional in the family context, it seems appropriate to follow Bhabha (1994, p. 51) and think of the Third Space as a space for "negotiation rather than denial". For this author, the term negotiation allows for the allusion to antagonistic and contradictory elements that can coexist in an articulated way. Thus, we conclude with Tagata (2007), when we envisage the possibility of articulating antagonistic elements through the use of "and" instead of the dichotomic "or", understanding that the concept of negotiation allows for the coexistence of similarity and difference, arbitrariness and hybridism by nature. From this perspective, we consider legitimate



that homesign languages can be conceived as restricted and "functional" without disregarding their linguistic character.

## 5 Final remarks

Many researchers in Applied Linguistics have sought, in recent years, to use a notion of language based on fluid and dynamic conceptions. For example, there are the analogies constructed by César and Cavalcanti (2007) when they propose to understand language under the metaphor of the kaleidoscope, capable of producing different images from multiple (re)arrangements. There is the invitation made, by Cox and Assis-Peterson (2007, p.42), for us to appreciate languages in a liquid form, such as mixing rivers. In the same direction, Maher (2007) proposed to understand to replace the conception of a bilingual individual's linguistic repertoire as a container by a cocoon representation. And there is also the proposition by Canagarajah (2018 based on DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 2007/1980) to analyze linguistic abilities, under the representation of a rhizome where roots and branches do not differ, allowing the ideal of linearity and accumulation to break down.

In our study, the data analysis indicates the need to spread the discussion about an expanded conception of language as a social construct in the context of sign languages, in the interaction between Deaf participants and hearers. This would imply the envisioning of translanguaging practices (CANAGARAJAH, 2013) that are present in family scenes as legitimate, thus destabilizing fixed and homogeneous notions of language that prevent the understanding of hybrid communication as authentic linguistic, semiotic and cultural phenomena.

In this way, we are ratifying our argument towards the recognition of homesign languages as a linguistic and semiotic system, although the literature in the area is still resistant to this understanding and few studies have been dedicated to shed light on this issue. On the part of the participants of this research, we perceive some difficulty in dealing with and accepting this type of family communication as a language. Indeed, there is a naturalized discourse that inhibits the use of sign languages, as well as proposes its abandonment. For the Deaf and hearing professionals and trainees involved in this study, a homesign language can make the learning of *Libras* difficult and as a consequence lead the Deaf to the exclusion of a community or group they belong to.

Ironically, the argument of the participants in this research concerning the ‘damages’ of acquiring a homesign language for having a later learning experience of a conventional sign language, as also observed in the study carried out by Morford (1996), lies exactly in the functionality and linguistic potential present in homesign languages. In other words, in view of the effectiveness of such a linguistic and semiotic system for communication, it is suggested that the Deaf individual would not feel the need to learn the national sign language.

In addition, we advocate that attempts to inhibit the use of homesign languages or to break away from this form of communication, under the justification of the circulation of one only sign language (*Libras*), has a detrimental impact to the social interaction between Deaf individuals and their families. According to the representations of the hearing family members in our study, there is a great difficulty for the hearers to learn *Libras* to the same extent as their Deaf children do. And without the possibility of transiting through homesign languages, we understand that there will be a linguistic and affective distance between these interlocutors. We, certainly, do not want to run the risk of enlarging the gap between the Deaf and their hearing family members.

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