INVESTIGATING ASPECTUAL AND TEMPORAL ISSUES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN THE PORTUGUESE LANGUAGE AND LIBRAS

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to research linguistic fields related to the semantic domain; namely, aspects of meaning belonging to the sentence level. For the analysis, we started from Saeed's perspective in the reference work *Semantics* (1997). We point out elucidative descriptions about the elements *situation type*, *tense* and *aspect*. The conclusions reinforce the fact that sign languages are natural and legitimate, to the detriment of any interpretation that points to them as rudimentary or inferior to oral languages. We emphasize that the research prevents a stigmatized point of view about Libras and corroborates it as an effective communication instrument for deaf Brazilians to exercise their citizenship.

Keywords: Libras. Legitimacy. Semantics. *Aspect*. *Tense*.

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INTRODUCTION

Especially since the studies of William Stokoe, in the United States in the 1960s, the hitherto considered sign *languages* received attention and began to achieve the status of *language* when this researcher identified and classified the minimum units that constitute the sign language focus of his study, namely, the American Sign Language (ASL), as well as the different linguistic aspects that compose it. From these considerations, it was possible to report the structural analyses found by Stokoe for other sign languages in the world, including the Brazilian Sign Language, Libras. Following a similar line of research, in Brazil, names such as Sérgio de Almeida, Lucinda Ferreira Brito, Ronice Muller, Lodenir Karnopp and other scholars have been busy describing linguistic aspects of Libras since the 1980s.

Therefore, as a natural and legitimate language, sign languages must be organized and based on all the different levels pointed out by Linguistics; namely, the phonetic-phonological level, which refers to the minimum units of formation of words/signs in a language and how they combine in the formation of significant units; the morphological level, responsible for the structure and formation of words/signs of the language from morphemes, considering their functions and how they combine when forming words; the syntactic level, which is for the identification and classification of the way languages are organized and the defining rules of such organization; the semantic level, which is concerned with signification; and the pragmatic level, referring to the analysis of the use of language in real communication contexts.

Although linguistic studies separate each of these levels, this division occurs in the analytical sphere in order to facilitate the understanding and the object of research of each of them in an isolated way and, therefore, more emphasized in one aspect or another. However, in the language in use, all linguistic levels interact with each other and complement each other, so that they highlight the complexity of any language, whether oral or sign.

This article intends, based on the work of John Saeed, to highlight semantic concepts that, associated with the analysis of Libras, will allow us to corroborate it as a legitimate language that is submitted, among all the linguistic levels mentioned, also to the semantic level, detailed here by *situation type*, *tense* and *aspect.*

John Saeed points out important semantic aspects of oral language in his work *Semantics*, published in 1997. From the concepts defined therein, it is also possible to broaden its perspective by exploring and describing properties of spatial-visual languages, such as Libras. Considering this work, we intend to investigate semantic approaches of sign

languages - in our case, Libras - in order to detect similarities and/or differences between spatial-visual languages and oral-auditory languages, the latter being the object of mention by Saeed. We will focus on the perspectives of time marking and discursive situations discussed in chapter five of the reference in question, seeking to corroborate the linguistic foundation of Libras, disseminating its authenticity in this context. This is relevant, as it shows that this minority linguistic system should not be subjugated to the majority linguistic system of the country, especially with regard to the schooling practice of deaf people.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of the research detailed here is descriptive in the sense that it will bring associative evidence of the semantic domain in the discourse of Libras, especially about *situation type*, *tense* and *aspect* that demonstrate, in the field of Semantics, elements that justify it as a language when it comes under such a linguistic level. By describing this phenomenon in a comparative way with Portuguese, we can reinforce the fact that Libras and Portuguese are languages with their own independent structures.

Also, we can associate the research with the bibliographic methodology, as we will use as a reference work of analysis the text *Semantics*, by John Saeed (1997). The author's statements, even if in observation of the oral English language, serve as a basis for establishing the investigation carried out here for a sign language.

The exemplified sentences, motivated by Saeed's work in working with the aspects taken up, were not extracted only from a decontextualized reading, that is, in which the sentence is presented in isolation to the students who translated/elaborated it for Libras. The constructions in Libras brought here were produced by deaf signers and readers of the Portuguese language and by bilingual listeners (Portuguese/Libras). The sentences were collected in two ways: they were asked to read the sentence contextualized in Portuguese and indicate how they would translate it into Libras and/or a dialogical communicative context was established in the classroom with a theme that induced specific constructions and allowed the appropriation of the comparative forms Portuguese/Libras. The most recurrent coincident forms were chosen to represent the comparisons established in this article.

We opted for a contextualized and dialogical idealization, especially because we consider that these perspectives are essential in the construction of the meaning of a spatial-visual language. Dialogic analysis, as Bakhtin postulates, focuses on the interaction between interlocutors, contexts and/or discourses. Thus, meaning can be constructed and reconstructed from these elements – expanding semantics. In the case of an analysis of

Libras, a language of a modality different from the oral-auditory languages, the understanding of the meaning depends on the context so that the spatial organization is in accordance with the communicative intention.

DISCUSSION

STARTING THE INVESTIGATION: *SITUATION TYPE, TENSE*

Saeed begins the fifth chapter of *Semantics* by mentioning particularities of meaning that pertain to the level of the sentence. One of them is the marking of time known as *tense*:

> Many languages have grammatical forms, such as verb endings, that allow the speaker to locate a situation in time relative to the 'now' of the act of speaking or writing. (SAEED, 1997, p.118. Our translation.)[2]

As we will see, the Brazilian Sign Language will not have the temporal marking of verbal actions by means of suffix organization, as is the case with the Portuguese Language. In Libras, other specific organizations will fulfill this function, such as the appropriation of movement and direction; spatial markings; non-manual expressions; and so on.

Saeed reminds us that the way marking happens in *Tense* varies from language to language. Thinking about oral-auditory and spatial-visual languages, in a comparative way, it is possible to perceive such variation. For example, Libras will not be based on a linguistic resource that defines the verb conjugation, including the aspect of time stamping, by means of morphological-suffix organizers. Thus, while in most oral languages the verb tense is revealed with the verb modified in the suffix scope by the conjugation required by the speaker, in Libras, the verb tense will be revealed through other constructions; since, in this case, "the inflection of verbs occurs through discursive, contextual and spatial mechanisms". (TEIXEIRA; LEITÃO, 2013, p.34)

For example, as for discursive mechanisms, the use of some lexia acting as a determinant of time, such as the adverb, ends up fulfilling the function of temporal marking. It may be associated with the contextual scope, when a sign of a specific nature gains generalization when it starts to act as a tool of verbal inflection. In spatial strategies, indicating different locations of the signaling space is also recurrent for the same purpose:

> 3.2 He **took** lessons. [Portuguese Language]
> 3.3 **Yesterday** he took classes. [Libras] → The sign coinciding with the adverb acts as responsible for the past tense time mark.

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[2] "Many languages have gramatical forms, such as verb endings, which allow a speaker to locate a situation in time relative to the 'now' of the act of speaking or writing." (SAEED, 1997, p.118)

In this case, for a sign in Libras that conveyed the same information in Portuguese, the organization of the constituent elements of the sentence was different from that established in Portuguese. Here, the use of the sign coinciding with the adverb "yesterday" was responsible for indicating the temporal mark. It is important to note, however, that, in this context, the sign that begins the sentence is understood exclusively as a temporal mark and not as an adverb of time. In this way, the sentence in Libras will not be translated [Yesterday he had classes], but it will be translated [He had classes].

A similar process occurs in some languages in which an element predominantly related to a certain class of words gains another function in a specific linguistic conjuncture. We cite, as an example, the sentences without a subject in French: for their formation, it is necessary to use a third-person pronoun that will not function as the subject of the sentence, but as an indicator of the sentence without a subject. See:

Il neige ici. [French Language]

The pronoun *il* [*he*] will not be resumed in the translation [*He snows here]. But it must necessarily be mentioned as an indicator of a sentence without a subject. Thus, the correct translation of such a sentence would be [Neva here].

In another example of spontaneous construction, we can see a second common way of indicating verbal inflection in Libras:

> 3.4 Moses **built** a boat. [Portuguese Language]
> 3.5 **In the past**, Moses built boat. [Libras] → The sign coinciding with the adverbial locution acts as responsible for the past tense time mark.

The enunciator makes use of an adverbial construction to convey the idea of the time of execution of the action. However, although this is a strategy recorded by Libras researchers when explaining the elaboration of inflection in this language, it is not the only one.

In addition to *tense*, Saeed (1997, p.117) continues to mention other dimensions in the task of classifying discursive situations. According to the author, the following are important dimensions*: situation type* and *aspect.*

The first described - *situation type* - concerns

> a label for the typology of situations codified in the semantics of language. For example, languages often allow speakers to describe a situation as *static* or *unchanging* in duration. (SAEED, 1997, p.117. Emphasis added. Our translation.)[3]

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[3] "Situation type [...] is a label for the typology of situations encoded in the semantics of a language. For example, languages commonly allow speakers to describe a situation as static or unchanging for its duration." (SAEED, 1997, p.117)

And as a natural language, Libras also has resources that reveal a choice between duration/state in a static and/or consequently dynamic way. It is important to note that these resources can be similar or different when contrasted with the resources of oral languages.

<u>Static</u>
3.6 Roberto loves pizza. [Portuguese Language]
3.7 Roberto loves pizza. [Libras]

The sentences exemplify a *static* or *immutable* condition with respect to not offering any information about the internal structure of the state described. The semantic-linguistic resources used to indicate the staticness of the sentence are singular for the two languages compared.

<u>Dynamic</u>
3.8 Roberto grew up fast. [Portuguese Language]
3.9 Roberto <grow up fast>. [Libras]

3.10 Mary is driving to St. Joseph. [Portuguese Language]
3.11 Now, Mary <direct> St. Joseph. [Libras]

The constructions show a dynamic condition with respect to the state or situation described by the speaker: he considers that Roberto's state of growth was continuous; as well as Maria's journey, which is happening through a dynamic process – it passes through several places until it reaches its final destination. It is interesting to note that in sentences 3.8 and 3.9, the choice of elements indicative of dynamism is similar when comparing the Portuguese Language and Libras: *grow fast.* However, as they are languages of different modalities, the way in which the marking of dynamism will be evidenced is different in each case.

The Portuguese language has its expression in linearity or sequentiality. The concept of linearity/sequentiality was developed by Saussure and attributed to linguistic signs. According to this conception, the acoustic signifiers of a language, that is, its phonological units, are organized linearly, that is, in sequence in a chain of time, generating the discursive construction in completeness. (PAULA, 2021) Thus, in the case of sentence 3.8, its formation happens linearly/sequentially and punctually: each acoustic signifier followed by another and another until the end of each word and, finally, of the sentence: R+O+B+E+R+T+O + C+R+E+S+C+E+U + R+Á+P+I+D+O. There is no possibility that the organization in Portuguese happens concomitantly. It is necessary to finish one element to start another, sequentially, until the construction is completed.

In Libras, however, we have an elaboration, as indicated in example 3.9, constituted in simultaneity.

> The main difference established between sign languages and oral languages was the presence of linear order (horizontal sequence in time) between the phonemes of oral languages and its absence in sign languages, whose phonemes are articulated simultaneously. (QUADROS; KARNOPP, 2004, p.49)

When enunciating any sign in Libras, the five main phonological parameters are organized as units. However, unlike what happens in oral languages, phonological units in sign languages can be produced at the same time, since the sign is articulated with all the parameters already arranged in the speaker's hands and body, that is, the parameters appear synchronously in the enunciation process. This is because sign languages are three-dimensional, thus accepting the appropriation of more than one linguistic element at the same time. (PAULA, 2021)

Therefore, it is possible for the organization to *grow + fast*, in Libras, to happen concomitantly. In this case, instead of the signaler organizing the prayer with three signs: Roberto + grow + fast; the signaler does so with two elements: Roberto + <grow fast>. He manifests in the realization of the verb *crescer* a more intense and accelerated movement than he would do when performing the verb in its common form (crescer), allowing the interlocutor to already perceive a rapid movement in the growth of the subject of whom he is speaking without needing the support of the adjective. The action is already visually indicated by the superimposed signage of the sum [name + characterizer].

In enunciations 3.10 and 3.11, the elements that show dynamic condition vary between oral language and Libras. In the Portuguese language, the use of the gerund provides procedural understanding. However, Libras, as already mentioned, will not reveal suffix resources marking verbal tense in this way, and a substitute for the situational role played by the gerund of the oral language is necessary. Therefore, the strategy that brings the semantic load of a dynamic state into continuity will be the use of an adverb (*now*), as well as a sign of the verb *to drive* associated with bodily and spatial movements indicative of an action with the constant and lasting characteristic.

Saeed (1997, p.118) brings yet another example that deserves our attention, as it involves a rich linguistic process in Libras:

> 3.12 The pears are ripe. [Portuguese Language]
> 3.13 Ripe pears [Pounds]

The processes of formation of the sentences above are not different in the two languages analyzed. However, this does not happen in the locutions below:

> 3.14 The pears have ripened. [Portuguese Language]
> 3.15 Pears <ripening>cl [Pounds]

Unlike what we see in examples 3.12 and 3.13, sentences 3.14 and 3.15 have a dynamic characteristic. There, the structure of the verb in Portuguese organizes the concept of dynamism in the oral language, bringing the sense of a gradual process: from the beginning of maturation to its completion. However, Libras will not have such a verbal construction structure. In addition, it is very common to have, in sign languages, the so-called *semantic embedding*. For example, the sign for *madura* (adjective) is not different from the sign for *madurar* (verb); making it difficult to distinguish between sentences 3.13 and 3.15 when only the lexical-semantic units are used. So, the formation of the 3.15 structure in Libras happened through *classifiers*.

Classifier, among other functions, is a representation that aims to compose the discourse through details associated with signaling. In this way, it is possible for people, animals, objects, feelings, circumstances and discursive situations to be described beyond pure and simple explanation through signs. With the use of classifiers, the narrative gains a detailed description.

> Supalla (1986) states that classifiers are used in motion verbs (VM) [as in the example above, *mature*] and in location verbs (VL), and each of the basic parameters used in these verbs is a morpheme. In classifiers, hands and body are used as articulators to indicate the name of the referent or the agent of the action. The basic form of the verb includes: (1) a movement among a restricted series of possible movements, which refers to a type of predicate of existence, location, or movement; (2) a particular hand configuration (CM) or other body part, which would typically be the classifying morpheme of the MV or VL, and (3) a path or a tracing for this movement. (BERNARDINO, 2012, p. 253)

Thus, the strategy most used by the analyzed signers to indicate the construction of [THE PEARS RIPENED] was through classifiers related to the verb *to mature*. It is the classifiers that fulfill, here, the function of describing the dynamic and gradual process of maturation.

SIGN LANGUAGES: ON AGREEMENT AND ASPECT.

Another item worked on by Saeed in his reference work is the so-called *aspect*. Described as follows:

> *Aspect* is also a grammatical system relative to tense, but here the speaker can choose how to describe the internal temporal nature of a situation. If the situation is in the past, for example, the speaker may portray it as a completed closed event [...] or as an ongoing, perhaps unfinished, process.[4] (SAEED, 1997, p.118. Our translation.)

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[4] "Aspect is also a grammatical system relating to time, but here the speaker may choose how to describe the internal temporal nature of a situation. If the situation is in the past, for example, does the speaker portray it as a closed completed event [...] or as an ongoing process perhaps unfinished [...]." (SAEED, 1997, p.118)

We can understand the concepts through the following locutions:

> 4.1. David wrote a novel.
> 4.2. David was writing a novel.

These clauses show a difference in aspect, since, by means of a grammatical device, namely, the verbal endings, the speaker reveals the nature of the past event. But how to transpose this concept to sign languages, especially to Libras, if this language does not have the same resource of temporal marking through suffixes? It is necessary to link to the signage constituents that will allow us to understand such a distinction, as time-marking supports; use of movement and facial and body expressions when signaling the verb to highlight its aspect; use of classifiers; and so on.

The situation described may, at first, lead us to conclude that in Libras there is no verbal agreement, because there is no verbal inflection as in oral languages. Oliveira and Cunha (2009) state:

> In sign language, certain verbs agree with both the subject and the object, and with the latter it is mandatory, while with the former it will depend on the verb used. Thus, according to Sandler and Lillo-Martin (2006, p. 24), agreement is considered to be the process of modifying the structure of the verb according to certain formal aspects of the nominal subject or object, in sign language. (OLIVEIRA; CUNHA, 2009, p.6)

We can exemplify:

> 4.3. I answer him. [Portuguese Language]
> 4.4. USA <aREPLYb>. [Libras] → signal carried out in the direction of the receiver.
> 4.5. You answer me [English Language]
> 4.6. You <aREPLYb>. [Libras] → signal carried out in the direction of the emitter.

In the constructions in Portuguese (4.3 and 4.5) we have grammatical evidence that defines the receiver and the emitter of the action represented by the *pronoun* + *verb*. In Libras, verbal agreement happens differently. Through hand movement, palm orientation (two of the five phonological parameters of Libras) and use of space, the verb is inflected (4.4 and 4.6).

VERBS IN LIBRAS: AGREEMENT IN EVIDENCE

Examples 4.4 and 4.6 demonstrate the presence of verbal agreement in Libras. This, however, does not mean that the agreement process is for all verbs in sign languages, since we have a classification of verbs in Libras defined exactly by whether they accept such a process or not. Quadros and Karnopp, (2004, p. 201) classify verbs in Libras into

two classes: without agreement and with agreement. Oliveira and Cunha (2009, p.7) remind us: "Felipe (2001) presents a similar classification, stating that the types of verbs are: verbs that do not have a mark of agreement and verbs that have a mark of agreement."

4.1.1 The aspect in evidence

According to Quadros, "verbs without agreement are not inflected into person and number, [...] however, in some cases, they can flex in terms of appearance." (OLIVEIRA; CUNHA, 2009, p.7) Among the verbs *without agreement* in Libras, we can mention: [THINK], [STUDY], [HAVE], [WANT], etc.

Verbs with agreement are inflected into person and number, as well as aspect. In these cases, for example, the initial point of execution of the signal may agree with the subject, while the final point of execution of the signal agrees with the object. The flexion will be revealed by the movement and orientation of the palm. Among the verbs *with agreement*, we have: [ANSWER], [LEND], [GIVE], [HELP], etc.

A question then arises: only verbs with agreement have aspect marking? No, because aspect marking, in Libras, does not depend on the ability to express verbal inflection, but rather occurs by changing the form of the movement and/or the rhythmic pattern of the sign. (OLIVEIRA; CUNHA, 2009)

> Aspect is understood as the point of view of the speaker or signaler in the face of the action, event or verbal state, differentiating them into perfective (completed processes) or imperfect (still in process). [...] Bernardino (2000, p.87) states that in sign language the punctual, continuous, durative and iterative aspects are observed, which occur from changes in the movement and/or configuration of the hand. In order to illustrate the aspects mentioned, the author cites the examples: "[SPEAK] (punctual) in 'he spoke' and [SPEAK] (continuous) in 'he speaks without stopping'; [LOOK] (punctual) in 'he looked' and [OLHAR] (durative) in 'everyone stared'; and [TRAVEL] (punctual), 'he traveled' and [TRAVEL] (habitual) in 'he travels always'." (OLIVEIRA; CUNHA, 2009, p.10)

The examples provided by Bernardino corroborate the assertion that not only verbs with agreement are subject to aspectual marking. The verb [SPEAK] is a verb without agreement, while the verb [LOOK] is a verb with agreement; Both were, however, represented by aspect markings. The examples also help us to understand another dimension of aspect: it has to do with the classification of a subtype of dynamic verbs.

SOME SEMANTIC DISTINCTIONS: THE DURATIONIVE, THE PUNCTUAL, THE TELIC AND THE ATELIC

Semantic aspects of languages go beyond the limits of a single, systematic or basic classification. Therefore, subcategorizations and new conceptualizations are common and

necessary. For example, from the classification of a verb as an evidence of a dynamic state, we have subtypes based on semantic distinctions, such as durative/punctual; telic/athelic. Just as these processes happen in oral languages, we can also perceive them in sign languages.

Durative *versus* Punctual

Saeed defines verbs with a *durative* characteristic as those that "describe a situation or process that extends over a period of time." (SAEED, 1997, p. 121. Our translation.) Whereas punctual verbs are described as those that "describe an event that seems so instantaneous that it hardly involves any time." (SAEED, 1997, p.121. Our translation.)[5] We perceive these characteristics in sentences such as:

> **[SPEAK]**
> 4.7 He has spoken. [punctual]
> 4.8 He talks non-stop. [durative]
>
> **[LOOK]**
> 4.9 He looked. [punctual]
> 4.10 Everyone stared. [durative]

Thelic *versus* Athelian

Verbs classified as *telic* are the "processes seen as having a natural, definite conclusion." (SAEED, 1997, p. 122. Our translation)[6] and *even* are the processes without a defined conclusion, that is, vague. Is the formation of thelic/atelic constructions in oral languages similar to the forms of these constructions in sign languages?

> Telic:
> 4.11 Thaddeus built a raft. [Portuguese Language]
> 4.12 <In the past>a, Thaddeus <build>the raft. [Libras]
> Atelic:
> 4.13 Thaddeus looked at the sea. [Portuguese Language]
> 4.14 Mar Tadeu <stare non-stop>. [Libras]

In Portuguese, the determining elements for the classification of the sentence structure as telic or atelic are, in example 4.11, in the conjugation of the verb in the past perfect tense of the indicative and, in example 4.13, in the use of conjugation in the imperfect past tense of the indicative.

In Libras formations, the determining elements for the classification of the sentence structure as telic or atelic are, in example 4.12, in the use of direct temporal marking [in the

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[5] "Durative is applied to verbs which describe a situation or process which lasts for a period of time, while punctual describes an event that seems so instantaneous that it involves virtually no time." (SAEED, 1997, p.121)
[6] "Telic refers to those processes which are seen as having a natural completion." (SAEED, 1997, p. 122)

past tense] and also in the use of the signaling space in reference to the body. Some signalers performed the movement of the verb in the proximity of the shoulders, indicating the part behind the body of the signaler, giving a reinforcement to the evidence of a locution with the characteristic of a completed past. In example 4.14, what characterizes the locution as atelic is the placement of the element [without stopping] with the function of an imperfect past and also characteristic of a durative action.

Although, when comparing oral language and sign language, we conclude that it is not from the same process that we form telic or atelic structures, this does not mean that oral languages are more productive in this and other processes of marking time and/or aspect. We only have different types of structural formation, equally complex and productive. Both systems allow the user to report time-related situations and different inclinations in this field.

RESULTS

The analyses related to the semantic aspects indicated in this work account for the results expected at the beginning of the research. The expectation, before concluding the investigation, was that it would be possible to identify, in the organic discourse of deaf and hearing people proficient in Libras, semantic-pragmatic elements pointed out and recorded by Saeed in his work *Semantics* (1997) - even if primarily focused on the observation of an oral-auditory language, English.

From the mapping of the concepts mentioned by the researcher in the reference work and the examples considered by him, we established the scope of the research together with a group of deaf and hearing bilingual (Libras/Portuguese) students of the undergraduate course Letras-Libras. We offered the basic concepts brought by Saeed in expository classes and, through the video and written record of the dialogues held in the meetings to discuss the theme, we obtained appropriate material for the analysis of the elements investigated.

The results were conclusive in perceiving the semantic elements, mentioned by Saeed, appearing in the discourses in Libras and with the same function. Some are established in a similar way to oral languages, while others respect the structure of sign language, thus having an organization peculiar to it.

CONCLUSION

After comparatively considering temporal and aspectual elements in the oral language and sign language used in Brazil, namely, the Portuguese Language and Libras,

we conclude that, although they can resort to different processes to mark aspect and tense in their sentences, both, as natural languages that they are, reveal high productivity and complexity. We can say that aspectual reading occurs dynamically in Libras. It will be revealed through the inflectional organization of the linguistic system added to the interpretation of the syntactic-semantic composition of the utterances, in interaction with pragmatic principles (FINAU, 2014).

> This organization of the aspectuality of sentences interferes with the temporal reference, since it can be denoted by factors such as the lexical value of verbs and by the composition between syntax, semantics and pragmatics, especially for temporal restriction. (FINAU, 2004, p. 224)

There is no doubt that considerations such as these reaffirm the identity of Libras as a legitimate and complex language, capable of allowing the expression of any concept, feeling or discourse. Endowed with linguistic processes, elements and criteria specific to subjects whose main perception of the world is through the visual prism, sign languages are not inferior to oral languages; nor are they rustic, simple-minded or primary. Undoubtedly, understanding linguistic-semantic aspects such as those discussed in this article corroborates this statement.

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