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# Linguistic Policies, Linguistic Planning, and Brazilian Sign Language in Brazil

THIS ARTICLE EXPLAINS the consolidation of Brazilian Sign Language in Brazil through a linguistic plan that arose from the Brazilian Sign Language Federal Law 10.436 of April 2002 and the subsequent Federal Decree 5695 of December 2005. Two concrete facts that emerged from this existing language plan are discussed: the implementation of bilingual education in regular state schools in the state of Santa Catarina and the creation of the e-learning undergraduate Brazilian Sign Language Program (known as Letras-Libras). It discusses a study on the impact of Brazilian language policies on the lives of deaf people enrolled at regular schools in the state of Santa Catarina, where Brazilian Portuguese is normally the teaching language. In this context, sign language is used as the instructional language for deaf students. By referring to information and opinions from the teachers themselves, I look at the various paths to a process that relies on the professional education of teachers who work in a bilingual

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context and which depends on the recognition of the bilingual status of Deaf students. I also discuss the Letras-Libras undergraduate program, which offers two degree options: bachelor's and *licenciado* (the latter is associated with the master's and PhD programs). This national program has had both a symbolic and a real impact on the effectiveness of language policies favorable to Brazilian Sign Language. I describe the symbolic, linguistic, and social consequences unleashed in Brazil by these undergraduate programs as part of ongoing language planning in the country.

### The Brazilian Linguistic Context

Brazil is still considered a monolingual nation inasmuch as Portuguese is its official language. However, there are many groups of speakers of other languages, which means that the country can actually be considered a multilingual nation:

In Brazil, about 210 languages are spoken by approximately one million Brazilian citizens who do not consider Portuguese to be their mother tongue but who consider themselves no less Brazilian for this reason. Around 190 languages are autochthonous, or, in other words, indigenous languages from various linguistic families such as the Apurinã, the Xoklêng, the Iatê, and about 20 languages are allochthonous, languages from immigration, which are part of our national profile, along with the indigenous languages and the official language of over two hundred years, such as German, Italian, and Japanese. (Oliveira 2005; my translation)

All of these languages are Brazilian and need to be recognized by language policies that favor their preservation as languages used by Brazilian citizens (Oliveira 2005). However, the policies that encourage the use and the maintenance of the country's different languages are not robust. In fact, linguistic approaches in Brazil today are similar to those of several European nations that favor one language over others (Grosjean 1982):

One of the greatest myths, in authoritarian terms, that governs the mind of some sectors of the Brazilian elite, is the one that we live in a homogeneous society, with just a few ethnic groups (blacks, whites, Indians, and mestizos) and with the predominance of just one language—the Portuguese language. Even worse, this same myth,

perpetuated since nursery school, still supports the idea that our official language, the Portuguese language, is an idiom with unique characteristics of the nation despite the fact that there are dozens of different Portuguese dialects throughout the nation. . . . The legal recognition of the Brazilian multilingual character is indispensable to the exercise of citizenship by nonspeakers of the original language of our Lusitan colonization. (Miranda 2005; my translation)

Both Oliveira (2005) and Miranda (2005) stress that the Brazilian language policy needs to recognize the existence of various Brazilian languages. In this context, language policy tends to “subtract” rather than “add” (cf. Cummins 2003); that is, it perpetuates the mistaken idea that one language hinders the development of another (“subtract”). Thus, historically, there has been little investment in policies that favor the development of other languages besides Portuguese. This situation has been slowly changing in the last few years, although it involves a process of change that will affect both the near and the distant future.

Some proposals for “additive” language policies have been implemented in the outer reaches of Brazil at indigenous schools and for deaf education. For example, the 1988 constitution of Brazil, which recognized the nation’s native peoples, resulted in a number of consequences for our indigenous languages. Since then, the language rights of the Indians have begun to be considered in several areas of society, including education. Many indigenous schools have been established with the indigenous language as the language of instruction and Portuguese as the students’ second language.

There have also been specific actions for the allochthonous languages in towns where the question of language is a “patrimonial heritage”<sup>1</sup> and it is beneficial for the state to adopt language policies that affect education. In relation to deaf education, the following sections discuss the implemented language policies, which characterize a bilingual context.

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1. Patrimonial heritage for languages was created in Brazil to preserve minority languages or languages in risk of extinction. Language as a patrimonial heritage will be documented and preserved for their signers and/or speakers through specific financial resources provided by Culture Ministry.

## Brazilian Sign Language in Brazil

Brazilian Sign Language is the language of the Deaf community in Brazil. It comprises all of the linguistic components found in any other full-fledged language, and its particular grammar is used by a specific social group (Quadros and Karnopp 2004). In Brazil, deaf associations have always maintained an excellent network that enables contact among deaf people throughout the country, thus supporting the transmission of the language from generation to generation. Parties, games, competitions, and meeting places foster social and linguistic interaction that perpetuates Brazilian Sign Language. However, these linguistic practices are still not reflected in deaf education because they represent resistance to a system that has ignored sign language for many years (Skliar and Quadros 2005).

For many years, Brazilian deaf schools, special classes, regular schools with deaf students included, and their specialized support assistants did not permit the use of Brazilian Sign Language in the classroom. The educational process was based on speech therapy aimed at teaching in Portuguese. The repercussions of these educational policies for deaf students are still perceptible today. In discourse, educational policies, teachers, classrooms, and deaf students themselves, one can see the continuation of a long tradition based on the favoring of one social group over another (i.e., the preference for the Portuguese language has meant the neglect of Brazilian Sign Language—the “subtraction” policy).

Despite this, various actions suggest a process of transformation. In the 1980s and 1990s, a number of deaf schools started using Brazilian Sign Language, which began to revitalize the educational environment as a favorable setting for its development. In 2002 Federal Law 10.436, which recognizes Brazilian Sign Language as one of the languages used by the Brazilian Deaf community, was approved in Brazil.

In December 2005 this law was regulated by Decree 5626, which stipulated various actions that implement linguistic and educational policies to preserve and disseminate this language throughout the country. The decree aims to establish annual Brazilian Sign Language proficiency exams, as well as specific qualification courses, for the next ten years. This legislation promises to bring about the inclusion of Brazilian Sign Language classes in every undergraduate education

course and the creation of undergraduate training programs for bilingual teachers (qualified in Brazilian Sign Language and Brazilian Portuguese) to work in primary education (kindergarten and elementary school), postgraduate Brazilian Sign Language courses for teacher training, and translation and interpreting courses for Brazilian Sign Language.

Brazilian Sign Language is also known as Libras (from “*Língua Brasileira de Sinais*”). The Brazilian Sign Language Federal Law 10.436 of April 2002 (thus known as the “*Libras Law*”) is an important victory with regard to language policies that affect Brazilian Sign Language. This law recognizes Brazilian Sign Language as one of the national languages used by the Deaf community in Brazil. The Libras Law represents a benchmark because it is the result of the efforts of Brazil’s Deaf social movements, allied with academic publications on the linguistic status of Brazilian Sign Language (Quadros 2009).

According to Calvet (2007), linguistic policies are major decisions regarding relations between languages and society and are inseparable from language planning, which addresses the implementation or application of these decisions. Calvet states that linguistic planning does not occur without legal support. Therefore, it is necessary to highlight the fact that Brazilian Sign Language, through its decree, represents an important opportunity for the organization of new linguistic policies geared toward the Deaf communities. However, despite uncertain aspects of the legal text in terms of its proposal, we must not forget that Brazilian Sign Language now enjoys official linguistic status, which, consequently, strengthens its relationship with other languages.

Television channels have begun broadcasting programs with simultaneous interpreting, politicians are offering simultaneous sign language interpreting during their speeches, schools have started “permitting” the use of Brazilian Sign Language on the school grounds and in classrooms with sign language interpreters, and a number of universities have begun offering Brazilian Sign Language as an option for their language courses and also making sign language interpreters available to deaf students. Thus, Brazil is now experiencing a politically favorable climate for affirmative linguistic actions that reflect the new linguistic status of Brazilian Sign Language. As a result, Brazilian Sign Language is being recognized as a language not only by deaf people but also by society in general.

Parallel to this legal and social recognition accorded by the Libras Law, in 2009 the ministry of culture created a book on Brazilian languages, characterizing them as our linguistic heritage. The book points out the need to safeguard these languages as a valuable part of the Brazilian cultural community. It also discusses outlines a linguistic plan to document these languages. In the case of Libras, the process of documenting sign language acquisition has already begun.

There is a database of Libras that includes videos that show Deaf and hearing children spontaneously acquiring this language in monolingual and bilingual/bimodal contexts (Quadros 1997; Quadros et al. 2001) as part of a sign language acquisition corpus at the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina. This database has made it necessary to improve patterns of annotation (Quadros and Pizzio 2007; Chen Pichler et al. 2010). We have also begun identifying signs with the goal of standardizing the sign glosses in Portuguese. Each sign identification has a possible translation to Portuguese and English since the identification is not necessarily the same as the sign for other possible translations (Quadros forthcoming).

In this new context, in which Brazilian languages are becoming increasingly relevant, the plan is to document Libras through a Libras corpus (Leite, Quadros, and Stumpf forthcoming). This documentation will include all six regions of the country, starting with each state capital and totaling twenty-six capital cities. The project includes the training of local deaf researchers to collect data with production and interaction from ten pairs of deaf participants in each city, selected with the aim of representing different categories established by age and gender. The set of stimuli includes different textual genres and includes both spontaneous and elicited data. This project already has collaborators around the country.

### Brazilian Sign Language Linguistic Policy in Action: Bilingualism in Brazilian Deaf Education

*Language Representation in Deaf Education:  
Tension between Brazilian Portuguese and Brazilian Sign Language*

In Brazil, linguistic practices and policies based on the imposition of spoken language aimed at standard Portuguese language assimilation and once constituted the characteristic model of academic success.

Ignorance of the importance of sign language in clinical and therapeutic teaching for speech and language recovery is endemic in the philosophical and political values that have marked deaf education in Brazil until now. Deconstructing this process does not simply entail stipulating the vital role that language plays in schools for deaf students; rather, it means undergoing a much greater process of reflection, (de)structuring, professional training, creating new work spaces, and, particularly, inverting the logic of relations. Those who design these practices and policies must recognize what languages mean to the deaf students themselves. However, more is required than merely deciding which languages are to be part of the academic program. The languages need to coexist so that they can achieve real recognition and establishment of a permanent negotiation, that is, always we have to discuss and argue with people that do not understand deafness and the importance of sign language. Even more important, deaf people must be active participants in identifying the role of languages in deaf students' education. In this context, the tension between the Brazilian Portuguese language and the Brazilian Sign Language is clear.

The representation of Brazilian Sign Language as a nonlanguage during the years of its prohibition has finally given way to an increase in its value as a language for deaf people. Brazilian Sign Language users have begun to feel proud of their own language, which is leading to various actions to protect and disseminate it. Brazilian Deaf organizations have started offering sign language courses to the wider community. In addition, they have recommended linguistic policies for Brazilian society and for education with the aim of securing the recognition of their language and their linguistic rights (Brazilian National Federation of Education and Integration of the Deaf—FENEIS, 2006).

However, for many Brazilian deaf people, Brazilian Portuguese is beginning to represent a threat by begetting a spoken-language denial movement as a method of self-protection. If the logic is that of the “subtraction” policy, Brazilian Sign Language should take priority over Brazilian Portuguese. Thus, the recognition of Brazilian Sign Language will invert the previously established logic, and Brazilian Portuguese will start to be negated by deaf people in Brazil.

On the other hand, some deaf people who do not consider the spoken language as a threat have started using Brazilian Portuguese as



an empowering language. Assimilation policies on both sides are transformed into “additive” policies. Having more than one language no longer represents a problem with its different repercussions; rather, it represents greater power, more cognitive and social flexibility (Quadros 1997). That is, the other language is seen not as a disadvantage but as an advantage in many aspects (cognitive, social, cultural, political, and linguistic). Deaf scholars in Brazil have gradually established this kind of relationship with Brazilian Portuguese (Quadros 2005), hence settling the negotiation scenario. The languages are welcome, but they coexist in a constant process of negotiation regarding their respective social, political, and educational functions. The bilingual condition of deaf students, their teachers, and sign-language interpreters is slowly being recognized.

*The Construction of Bilingual Education Public Policy in Santa Catarina, Brazil*

For many years, the mainstream education of deaf students in Santa Catarina countenanced their submission to/oppression by the (hearing) educational system by establishing subordination to Portuguese throughout the students’ years of schooling, thereby decharacterizing the “Deaf being” completely.<sup>2</sup>

Data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE 2000) indicates that Santa Catarina has 178,000 deaf students. The Catarina Special Education Foundation (FCEE 2007) reported that only 1,680 of them are given classroom support at regular schools; less than 1 percent of the total number identified by IBGE is being served by the state. Faced with this reality, the FCEE, together with the Santa Catarina Department of Innovation and Education and the Santa Catarina Federal University (UFSC) have prepared a public-policy proposition for the bilingual education of deaf students with the goal of making schooling accessible to these students.

The document addresses Brazilian Sign Language issues and the importance of deaf groups in the regular-education context (i.e., deaf students with deaf classmates and deaf teachers). Brazilian Sign Language is used by Deaf social groups, which promote contact between deaf people (Quadros 2003; W. Miranda 2001; Perlin 2000; Wrigley 1996). At the same time, the document also deals with the principles of inclusive education, guaranteeing deaf students’ access to and per-

manence at school. The proposed policy presents a new perspective, as it legitimizes Brazilian Sign Language and suggests that Brazilian Portuguese be taught as a second language. From this point of view, it presents the possibility of truly recognizing that these two languages are part of the educational process for deaf individuals and also that each language has its own role to play in the educational scenario. In this manner Brazilian Sign Language will become the instructional language, and Brazilian Portuguese will be taught as a second language—meaning that the linguistic policy is “additive.”

From these administrative/technical actions, in 2004 the state began implementing classes taught in sign language in seven towns: Blumenau, Joinville, São Miguel do Oeste, Xanxerê, Criciúma, São José, and Florianópolis.<sup>3</sup> A survey was conducted at these locations to collect data on the languages used there. Questionnaires, which were distributed to the deaf education teachers and deaf students (including questions to their families) at the schools, contained questions that allowed the teachers, students, and relatives to present their views on the new process in which they were participating. Thirty-three teachers and 140 deaf students were interviewed, representing six Santa Catarina regional units. Their responses were analyzed with the aim of guiding the construction of the primary and secondary categories for analysis. The limitations of this methodology are allayed by the qualitative research that is implemented in a second phase.

The data show that the majority of schools started the process with elementary education (grades 1–4), with classes of deaf students and a bilingual teacher. In this context, instruction of the deaf students takes place in sign language, and both the bilingual teachers and the sign-language interpreters have Brazilian Sign Language as their second language. Also, the number of deaf teachers is considerably lower than that of bilingual teachers and sign-language interpreters. The deaf teachers, who are native speakers of Brazilian Sign Language, familiarize the deaf students with deaf references and with culturally contextualized sign language.

The students who were at state schools acquired sign language only when they enrolled there, which was before they were ten years old, but the school did not offer opportunities for contact with Brazilian Sign Language. Considering the sign language-acquisition

environment at school, the vast majority of the deaf students are in contact with people that know only a little sign language and use it only for minimal communication purposes with the deaf students. This environment of acquisition is unlikely to make use of the more complex linguistic aspects of sign language. This could have consequences for the students' linguistic and cognitive development. These linguistic conditions imply a level of fluency by those students, their relatives, and their speaker-teachers that is far lower than the expected level of effective linguistic and cognitive development at school.

On the questionnaire mentioned earlier, we will focus here in the teachers answers to questions such as these: What is the fluency level of your students in the Portuguese language? The answer options were as follows: excellent, very good, good, regular, insufficient, and none. The teachers classified the great majority of the students (70 percent) as having good or regular sign-language fluency. This fluency level, which has been experimentally tested by a comprehensive, expressive sign language evaluation, has confirmed the teachers' appraisals. Thus, possible sequels of late acquisition were identified, together with the system-imposed limitations, to which the students are exposed (i.e., the teacher's sign language production). In this sense, the "hearing" signs of the deaf students are highlighted and prompt the following question: *Who are your peers, that is, those who use your own language?* In the context of inclusion, deaf students do not include their own parents but do include their teachers—with the little sign language they know.

The questionnaire also asked about the students' parents' fluency. The responses show that the majority of parents (72 percent) have either no knowledge of sign language (41 percent) or insufficient knowledge (31 percent). Only 22 percent have a regular knowledge, and just 6 percent have good fluency in Brazilian Sign Language. None of the parents were considered to have excellent or very good fluency. Considering this context, it is clear that the great majority of the deaf students' interlocutors are probably not their parents.

It is the teachers who represent the sign-language model even though in general they have only a partial knowledge of sign language, as only 5 percent of those interviewed considered their sign fluency to be excellent. From good to regular constitutes 68 percent of the

teachers. Seventy-four percent of the teachers had attended the first sign-language course, and 58 percent had attended the third sign-language course. Since these same teachers appraised their students' linguistic performance, it is clear that a qualitative evaluation of all of the questionnaire data is needed. These data would need to be checked *in loco* because the similarity between the evaluation of Brazilian Sign Language fluency and Brazilian Portuguese fluency was surprising.

There is a significant difference between the numbers found at the "excellent" and "very good" levels. The "good" to "regular" results are very similar: In Brazilian Sign Language, they add up to 68 percent of the teachers, and in Brazilian Portuguese, they add up to 53 percent. Considering the fact that Brazilian Portuguese might be the teachers' native language and that Brazilian Sign Language might be their second language (in the acquisition phase), the data must be checked by a qualitative study. What might be influencing the teachers' perceptions is what it means to them to be "excellent," "very good," "good," and so on in Brazilian Portuguese. Since their relationship with the language (through their own education) has been governed by the Brazilian Portuguese teaching, which focuses on grammar only, this may explain why they consider their Portuguese proficiency not excellent, as we would expect, since they are both teachers and native speakers of Portuguese.

Brazilian Portuguese taught at school has been and still is based on a teaching process ruled by standard Portuguese, based on traditional grammar, which influences its becoming an inaccessible language. The historical backdrop justifies a critical self-evaluation related to the Portuguese language inasmuch as the way it is learned at school differs from the way that native speakers use it. Thus, even teachers consider Brazilian Portuguese to be "inaccessible." Interestingly, in terms of Brazilian Sign Language, this evaluation is not governed by the same criteria.

Another factor that can interfere with the teachers' self-evaluation is the erroneous perception of sign language as an "easier language," as it is gestural. This is a myth that has been debunked over the last few decades as a result of research on various sign languages, including Brazilian Sign Language (e.g., Stokoe, Casterline, and Croneberg 1976; Bellugi and Klima 1972; Quadros 1997). Based on teachers'

perceptions of the relationship between both languages, this research has questioned the bilingual status of those teachers or sign-language interpreters in professional terms. Unquestionably, these professionals should be experts in both languages. However, it seems that the “apparent” equivalent fluency in both languages is not real.

Therefore, we can conclude that an additive linguistic policy would probably be affected by this scenario since the deaf students’ teachers do not promise that the teaching language will be Brazilian Sign Language. In addition, the teachers’ perceptions of their own language, Brazilian Portuguese, show some possible errors in the implementation of the bilingual educational policy inasmuch as they interfere with the representations of the languages used in deaf education. If Portuguese is inaccessible to the teachers themselves, there is a great chance of its being considered inaccessible by their students, who, in addition to having to deal with a “difficult” language, are deaf. On the other hand, the fact that Brazilian Sign Language represents the exact opposite makes it impracticable as a teaching medium since it seems not to be possible to convey all of the subject contents through a language considered “easy.”

Considering this context, the FCEE, together with the secretary of education, has been prepared to intervene in education through professional training, which is also one of the technical/administrative actions prescribed by the deaf-education policies. However, the various types and orders of such instruction present problems. There are not enough bilingual teachers, deaf teachers, and qualified sign-language interpreters to meet the demand of the seven cities where the proposed policy has been implemented. Professional training is ongoing with short-term courses, which are, however, insufficient to speed up the process, which is by necessity an extensive one.

Languages are not learned in short-term courses but over years of study and contact with the second language, and for these teachers and interpreters, Brazilian Sign Language is a second language. The consequences of this process directly affect deaf students’ development at school because these professionals are the ones who provide linguistic input to the students. Thus, in equivalent terms, just as hearing students (who are Brazilian Portuguese users) sometimes find it

difficult to acquire knowledge in Portuguese, this “protolanguage” complicates deaf students’ access to academic knowledge.

Another action prescribed in Santa Catarina’s deaf education policy is the hiring of deaf teachers, sign-language interpreters, and bilingual teachers. This issue encompasses both political and economic questions. The state presents a preexisting structure for hiring teachers that does not meet the professional requirements for implementation of the new policy. For deaf teachers, the almost complete absence of this kind of qualified professional has been very clear. This also applies to sign-language interpreters, who are expected to work in mixed classrooms, that is, regular classrooms with both deaf and hearing children. This kind of setup is prescribed for all classes from the fifth grade of elementary school through high school. The great majority of teachers that have started working as teacher-interpreters feel embarrassed when they need to present themselves as such because they recognize their limitations in terms of sign language. Research undertaken between 2001 and 2002 among sign-language interpreters considered fluent in both languages (Brazilian Portuguese and Brazilian Sign Language) reveals the following results regarding the information translated from Brazilian Portuguese (the source language) to Brazilian Sign Language (the target language) by the classroom interpreter:

- (1) Omission of information given in the source language
- (2) Addition of information not present in the source language
- (3) Semantic and pragmatic distortions at minor or more serious levels in the source language contents
- (4) Inappropriate lexical choices (Quadros 2004, 70)

It was verified that the information was often completely distorted, particularly after the first hour of interpretation by sign-language interpreters who were considered highly qualified.

The reality of Santa Catarina is yet more serious: Besides having teacher-interpreters, the large majority of whom are not suitably qualified, these professionals must work throughout the entire school day without breaks. According to Lacerda (2002) and Quadros (2004), educational interpreters do not just interpret but also end up taking on the role of teacher.

This public policy also calls for supervision of the work, but such management has not yet been implemented in an effective way due to economic reasons. The FCEE team that is responsible for this oversight is composed of a very restricted group of professionals who are to address all questions and issues related to this policy, including those concerning research development. Even though the team has made a plan to monitor the process, it has not yet done so.

The deaf students' access to the school's educational material in sign language continued to be limited because time was quite short and the teacher or interpreter had so little knowledge of sign language that they were unsuitable linguistic models; as a result, the students' acquisition of knowledge was compromised. In addition, the Deaf instructor/teacher would also be responsible for preparing the teacher and the sign-language interpreter and for instructing family members. During the sign-language training courses, all of the teachers and sign-language interpreters had an opportunity to interact with the deaf instructors, but we are here referring to the systematic work that involves extensive time spent in the school environment itself. This work is planned for, but to date there have not been enough deaf instructors or teachers hired to act in these capacities.

Another listed action involves the partnerships established with both governmental and nongovernmental institutions. The FCEE has sought to establish partnerships with training institutions, especially the Santa Catarina Technological Education Federal Institute (IFSC/SC) through its São José city unit, which is developing a graduate-degree program for state teachers who have worked with the state policy on deaf education. The Santa Catarina Federal University (UFSC) is offering a sign language program to qualify sign-language teachers, translators, and interpreters. The Santa Catarina State University (UDESC) is contributing to this process through its undergraduate program in pedagogy for deaf education, which has so far graduated thirty-two Deaf and six bilingual teachers.

The analysis of the process, of these professional-training efforts, and of the proposal's impact on deaf students' education helps all those concerned to evaluate the proposed policy. They also make it possible to present alternative solutions and/or to forward potential predicaments to the responsible institutions. The teachers and the sign-

language interpreters do not know clearly how to solve impasses in the classroom that occur as a consequence of this novel experience. The bilingual context is new to everyone—for the school, students, parents, teachers, and sign-language interpreters.

The negotiation space should always be considered a primary element. Hence, constant dialogue with the deaf students themselves is fundamental. To complete this, work with the parents and the school units is important. The deaf education policy and pedagogical project has been implemented in a school community that still does not sufficiently understand deaf people. The school community, including the parents, who think they know little or nothing about Brazilian Sign Language, cannot be ignored.

The implementation of the planned actions, those suggested by the monitoring process and the deaf subjects' effective participation, are vital if the state of Santa Catarina's political and pedagogical project is to be able to offer a closer perspective on those people most involved with this public policy.

The additive linguistic policy will become a reality through the process resulting from these actions. From this experience, plus what has been done at federal level and in other states, one can identify multilingual language-policy initiatives that favor deaf bilingual education, in which Brazilian Sign Language and Brazilian Portuguese coexist, as they do in the lives of the deaf students, their teachers, and the sign-language interpreters—even if there are misunderstandings.

### Brazilian Sign Language and Its Corresponding Undergraduate Literature Program

The first undergraduate program for Brazilian Sign Language (called *Letras-Libras*; see <http://www.libras.ufsc.br>) was created in 2006 by the Santa Catarina Federal University (UFSC) as a result of Decree 5626 of December 2005 (Quadros, Cerny, and Pereira 2008; Quadros and Stumpf 2009). This degree program qualifies Brazilian Sign Language teachers, while the bachelor's degree program qualifies Brazilian Sign Language translators and interpreters.

This program, which is being offered through the e-learning system, includes fifteen units spread throughout the country in Amazonas, Pará, Pernambuco, Ceará, Bahia, the Distrito Federal, Goiás,



Mato Grosso do Sul, Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo (two units), Paraná, Rio Grande do Sul, and Santa Catarina. The four-year program has already qualified 371 Brazilian Sign Language teachers (about 90 percent of whom are deaf). Currently the program has 450 students who are studying to be teachers and 450 in the bachelor's-degree program.

All of the subject information was conveyed via Brazilian Sign Language. From the selection process, which had more than three thousand candidates, to the production of teaching materials, deaf people were present during and central to the entire decision-making process and the definition of teaching methods. These degree programs received financial support from the Brazilian Ministry of Education once they became part of the linguistic planning for Libras. For the nondistance learning modality, UFSC offers an annual class of twenty students for the sign-language degree program and twenty students for the bachelor's degree program, and it currently has twelve professors working in full-time positions, including six deaf professors with a PhD in education.

The sign language degree program teaches its students how to express knowledge in Brazilian Sign Language and privileges the ways in which deaf people learn. There is also a challenge as to how to translate this deaf method of teaching and learning in Brazilian Sign Language to the e-learning modality. To meet this double challenge, participation by deaf people is guaranteed for the program. In the corresponding literature degree, Federal Decree 5626 prescribes that the vacancies be preferentially occupied by deaf students, which establishes an affirmative policy to ensure that deaf people in Brazil are able to carry out their own language teaching. This is a way to plan deaf education from another perspective—in a deaf way:

To “think in another way” means the task of (trying) to think beyond what is a given and has already been formulated, not in the sense of extending its limits, but rather in the sense of not taking for granted the foundation on which it is based; and in this way leaving old conceptions behind. (Veiga-Neto and Lopes 2010, 150)

The bachelor's degree enables a Brazilian Sign Language interpreting policy for the effective integration of deaf people into society at large. In addition, at graduate level, the education of sign-language

translators and interpreters has become a component of translation studies, thereby achieving academic recognition. One consequence of this is that the UFSC has started offering a specific line of research in interpreting studies. Also, in the linguistics department, the UFSC has placed new emphasis on research in Libras.

The consolidation of a formal organization of interpreter training has triggered a cascade effect that extends to other public spheres. The proposed policy of deaf education needs to be implemented as a national objective so that deaf people in Brazil do not have to suffer the consequences of ignorance in authority figures such as judges, prosecutors, law officers, school supervisors, and so forth with regard to the legitimacy of sign language and professional channels for interpreting.

The field of translation is being eminently occupied by bilingual deaf people. This new profession is starting to be represented through the creation of the undergraduate program in Brazilian Sign Language (the Letras-Libras). Translators have been trained to translate texts from Brazilian Portuguese into Brazilian Sign Language. The majority of these translators are bilingual deaf professionals. These deaf “translator-actors” have developed specific methods to make more deaf translations while observing issues like faithfulness to the source-language originals—in this case, Brazilian Portuguese (Quadros and Souza 2008; Segalla 2010; Souza 2010). They are called translator-actors because they are performing when they film themselves translating a text from Brazilian Portuguese to Libras. These translators are essential for guaranteeing that the texts can be released in their Libras versions in a variety of educational venues, following a deaf translation norm (Stone 2009).

The presence of the deaf translator-actors makes it possible to offer the degree programs in Libras, meaning that Brazilian Sign Language is now one of the tools of the education process. Discourses in a particular language are both organized and determined by the instructional language. The discourse of sign language utilizes a visual dimension that spoken language does not capture.

The Letras-Libras undergraduate program presents important symbolic repercussions for the consolidation of Brazilian Sign Language as a truly recognized language. The higher-education language programs

in Brazil are offered in language studies (i.e., Letras) in Brazilian universities. The federal institutions of higher learning are public and are characterized as producing professionals and researchers who turn out high-quality research. It is in this space that the Letras-Libras program operates. The academy and, consequently, Brazilian society now recognize Brazilian Sign Language as one of the country's national languages. The inclusion of Libras among the other languages of the Letras programs (e.g., English, French, Spanish, Portuguese) further legitimizes it. Brazilian Sign Language began being included in the curriculum of the teacher-training programs after 2005 and has become ever more visible and disseminated throughout the nation. The positive symbolic effect of Libras has unleashed a series of actions that have become part of the broadest linguistic planning in the country.

Libras has begun to be part of the Brazilian language heritage. Thus, the actions leading to the documentation of this language have received financial support and have ensured its maintenance. This development involves research output on Libras that is occurring in parallel with the higher-education training process through the Letras-Libras undergraduate program.

An example of this is the research at UFSC, which since 2003 has involved research training activities at the master's and doctoral degree levels, all linked to the graduate programs in education, linguistics, and translation studies, with research on deaf education, Brazilian Sign Language, and sign language translation and interpretation studies, respectively. From 2003 to 2011, UFSC awarded the following: twelve deaf master's degrees, four master's degrees in sign language interpreting, four bilingual teacher's degrees, five deaf PhDs, and four bilingual PhDs, with seven more doctoral and thirteen master's students still in training. The results of the completed and ongoing research have enabled various developments in the establishment of Libras linguistic policies. The link between teaching, research, and community ensures a solid linguistic policy regarding Libras and its relationship to other languages, especially with Brazilian Portuguese in Brazil.

## Conclusions

Brazilian institutions have achieved an indispensable legal instrument for the advancement of public policies related to the consolidation of Brazilian Sign Language. Although sign language was once confined to

the Deaf associations and to leisure and sports activities, which are also important to people, it is now acquiring a presence in official venues, such as universities and schools. The conveyance of this cultural relationship, which occurs at the Deaf associations and is crucial for deaf people's construction of their identity, also acquires formal legitimacy through the recognition of Brazilian Sign Language.

Libras is beginning to be considered as a language in academia, giving deaf students a national visibility. The "Libras Law" is gradually opening up social and cultural circles, and deaf people are now beginning to figure in different social environments. For example, the visibility of a lecture being interpreted into Libras is undeniable. Simultaneous interpreting signals a deaf presence, indicates that the right to information has been taken into consideration, and implies that a linguistic policy has been implemented. The materials translated into Brazilian Sign Language in various educational spaces also offer legitimacy to the right of access to it. The next step is to guarantee bilingual education for deaf people at Brazilian state schools. For that, the Brazilian federal government has suggested that we have, as a priority, the elaboration of an educational linguistic plan to direct the establishment of bilingual schools around the country. These examples of Brazilian Sign Language visibility illustrate the language policy that has thus far been established in Brazil.

A new chapter has opened in Brazil. From this educational process, deaf people have become more mature in discussions about deaf education policies and their language. In 2011, deaf people in Brazil created a strong network among themselves to fight for bilingual education in schools for deaf people, not in mainstreaming schools. Deaf people are demonstrating that deaf education can be improved in deaf bilingual schools as opposed to mainstreaming institutions. Thus, deaf leaders are proposing a deaf bilingual education plan that is independent of specific spaces, such as regular schools with hearing children, together with other possible pedagogical models that consider the uniqueness of deaf people and their languages.

## Notes

1. In most of Brazil, deaf children are placed in the regular education system in an environment where the Portuguese language is adopted as the teaching language, and is taught through a teaching methodology where it

is treated as the mother tongue. However, there are some regular schools that count on the presence of sign language interpreters, as there are some deaf schools that do or do not allow the use of Brazilian Sign Language as well. In this article, our focus will be on the regular schools that have a deaf education policy.

2. “Deaf being” is understood as the cultural identity of a deaf group that differentiates itself from other groups (Quadros 2003).

3. In 2005, nine more regions were included in the state of Santa Catarina. However, in this article I analyze the data that are relevant to the seven regions established in 2004.

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