Learning/teaching philosophy in sign language as a cultural issue

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Abstract

This paper is about the process of learning/teaching philosophy in a class of deaf students. It starts with a presentation of Portuguese Sign Language that, as with other sign languages, is recognized as a language on equal terms with vocal languages. However, in spite of the recognition of that identity, sign languages have specificity related to the quadrimodal way of their production, and iconicity is an exclusive quality. Next, it will be argued that according to linguistic relativism - even in its weak version - language is a mould of thought. The idea of Philosophy is then discussed as an area of knowledge in which the author and the language of its production are always present.

Finally, it is argued that learning/teaching Philosophy in Sign Language in a class of deaf students is linked to deaf culture and it is not merely a way of overcoming difficulties with the spoken language.

Key words: Bilingual education**,** Deaf culture, Learning-teaching Philosophy, Portuguese Sign Language.

According to Portuguese law (Decreto-Lei 3/2008 de 7 de Janeiro de 2008 e Law 21 de 12 de Maio de 2008), in the "escolas de referência para a educação bilingue de alunos surdos" (EREBAS) (reference schools for bilingual education of deaf students) deaf students have to attend classes in Portuguese Sign Language. If the teacher is not a fluent signer, there must be an interpreter to make the translation from one language to another.

Portuguese Sign Language (LGP), as with all other sign languages has some specifics: it is produced in a quadrimodal channel (three dimensions of space plus time) and is iconic in essence. We start by examining these attributes of sign languages.

Afterwards, we discuss the relationship between language and thought, arguing that language shapes thought (moulding theory in its weak version (Chandler, 1994).

Assuming that language moulds thought, and that philosophy is also shaped by language, one can argue that learning/teaching philosophy in sign language is not a way towards overcoming students difficulties (educational special needs) but a cultural issue; this procedure is linked to the assumptions about deaf culture and that it includes bilingualism/biculturalism.

In the paper, we assume the existence of a DEAF-WORLD, in which members feel deafness as a mark of their identity and a symbol of pride rather than an obvious disability or a physical problem that impairs their ability to communicate with family, friends, and the rest of the hearing world. Contrary to audism[1], which is not concerned with the cultural heritage of deaf people, including their language, it is argued that the language is an unavoidable feature in dialogue with deaf people.

Sign languages as true languages - Portuguese sign language

According to Thomas A. Sebeok, only the members of the species *Homo sapiens* can communicate by both nonverbal and verbal means (Sebeok, 2001). According to the author, "by verbal means" is equivalent to "by means of speech" or 'by means of a sign language'. However, in linguistic research, the acceptance of sign languages as true languages only occurred in the 1970s, on the basis on the work of William Stokoe (1960), "Sign language structure: an outline of the visual communication system of the American deaf". Before that, linguistic research considered that human language was only possible in the auditory-oral modality. In fact, according to Roman Jakobson, no other sign system (sign language or scientific language) has elements that are simultaneously signifiers and are meaningless, like the phoneme; only phoneme language is a true language (Jakobson, 1976). Accordingly, sign language was considered mere pantomime and so vocal language was the only learning/teaching language.

The qualities of sign languages – a quadrimodal way of production, iconicity

Presently, research in the field accepts that there are at least two language modalities in which human language can be produced: the auditory-vocal modality of spoken languages and the visual-gestural modality of sign languages (Meier, 2002). Furthermore, Christian Cuxac argues that human language cannot be reduced to its vocal-auditory modality because it cannot "show by saying" and so has less possibilities than the visual-gestural modality (Cuxac, 2001).

Previously, research in this field focused on the linguistic status of sign languages and on the similarity in formal structures of sign languages and spoken languages; however, we can find another perspective that, although assuming that sign language is a true language, argues that sign languages must be studied by iconicity, which is a feature specific to sign languages (Cuxac, 2003).

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[1]   Tom Humphries created the word "audism" in 1975 to mean an attitude that hearing and speaking people are superior.

The identification of similarities between sign languages and spoken languages (structure, acquisition and processing) were important for the acceptance of sign languages as 'true' languages. However, in spite of those similarities, there are differences arising from the dissimilarity between articulators and also because sign languages have a specific feature – iconicity. By iconicity, according to Danielle Bouvet (Bouvet, 2011), we mean the creation of a perceptual reality both by the signer and the receiver. According to Richard P. Meier, there are "many non-effects of the modality in which language happen to be produced" (Meier, 2002). Like spoken languages, sign languages have a standard lexicon (conventional vocabulary) (Meier, 2002) Sign languages also have meaningless sublexical units (quiremas), and can expand their vocabulary through derivation processes (Meier, 2002). In spite of those "non-effects" – "Any rule of a signed language is also a possible rule of a spoken language, and vice-versa" (Meier, 2002) – the rules referring specifically to articulatory features (auditory or visual) are quite different and are linked to the different properties of the articulators (hands, arms/tongue, lips). As Myriam Vermeerbergen, Lorraine Leeson and Onno Alex Crasborn, (Vermeerbergen, Leeson, & Crasborn, 2007) say, "Sign languages signers can draw on a range of articulators when expressing linguistic messages, including the hands, torso, eye gaze, mouth and, as many studies have shown, other facial actions" . Additionally, deaf vision is completely different from hearing vision; deaf vision has linguistic functions (Cuxac, 1997) and R. P. Meier sustained that sign and spoken languages may also differ because of the different properties of the perceptual systems and the bigger potential of the visuo-gestural system for iconic or/and indexical representation. One of the properties of the visuo-gestural modality is the use of nonlinguistic gestures as a resource for the development of sign languages (Cuxac, 2001; Meier, 2002). According to C. Cuxac, sign languages have the possibility to construct discourse from two different domains of representation: spoken and figurative. The author assumes that these two domains of representation are possible in sign language because the visual-gestural channel offers a quadrimensional base and because deaf people have the cognitive skill to anamorphise the real so that, "the articulatory and perceptual characteristic of the visual-gestural modality give sign languages access to four dimensions of space and time" (Meier, 2002). Moreover, the visual-gestural modality has an enormous capacity for indexical motivation: by means of gestures we can point to the referents that we are discussing (Meier, 2002). We can apprehend simultaneously the linguistic object and the speech on the object: one hand represents the object and the other pointing to it can produce a comment about it, such as a semic or ethimological analysis, an explanation, including metalinguistical work. This is a unique situation in Pedagogy that can be used to clarify concepts, as we can stop the speech, take some elements then put them again in the stream of thought and speech. Sign languages can physically show abstract concepts such as, for instance, simultaneity, opposition, causality.

Meier maintained that in sign language, non-arbitrary signs can encode more important and varied notions than non-arbitrary gestures in spoken languages "Gesture can likewise signify size and order, but it can also point to the location of objects, sketch their shapes, and describe their movements" (Meier, 2002).

According to Yves Delaporte (Delaporte, 2002), the traditional conception of sign languages as unable to convey abstraction is meaningless. In fact, they are produced by the body and imitate real world forms and movements, but the most iconic sign can express abstraction through the transition from concrete to abstract meaning. The author underlines that many abstract concepts are represented from one of their concrete manifestations, which are mostly linked to the day-by-day life of deaf people within institutions for deaf education.

In fact, on one hand, sign languages - due to formal properties and the structure of the language - are able to express abstract concepts, but on the other hand, they are "concrete and evocative". In sign languages, iconic and abstract features exist side by side and they are complementary (Sacks, 2011).

In spite of differences between sign languages, they all have flexibility allowing them to create an entire vocabulary and all of the necessary grammatical structures. Sign languages perform the very same functions of the spoken languages: referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual, and poetic.

According to Antoine Tarabbo (Tarabbo, 2007) and C. Cuxac (Cuxac, 2001), sign languages enable the expression of any concept; furthermore, sign languages can say and show by saying and showing simultaneously.

The consequences of the use of space for the nature of linguistic structure in sign are due to a broader access (than the auditory) to iconicity of the visual representations (Meier, 2002).

A sign language uses manual communication and body language to convey meaning. This can involve simultaneously the combination of hand shapes, orientation and movement of the hands, arms or body, and facial expressions to express a speaker's thoughts.

Sign languages use space for grammar in a way that spoken languages do not, while exhibiting the same linguistic properties and using the language as spoken languages do. Sign languages are the core of local deaf cultures.

According to C. Cuxac, sign languages use signifiers taken from the spatial-gestural universe, as spoken languages take signifiers from the acoustic-temporal universe. Sign languages take a specific trait from an existing object to depict that object, i.e., to construct its gestural signifier, but the distinction between signifier/meaning is maintained. In fact, in the distinction between word representations, e. g. sign signifiers and things representations, the mental image of the object is the same as in spoken languages. The linguistic sign only changes modality: the signifier is no longer an acoustic image but a gestural image. Furthermore, sign languages are iconic and metaphorical. According to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (Lakoff, 1980) our conceptual system is metaphorical by nature. C Cuxac assumes that experiencing iconicization is a cognitive core from which two ways of communication are produced (two semiological intentions – "*visées*"). One is "saying without showing" – by means of lexical unities, as in spoken languages – and the other is "saying by showing" – by means of transfers, e.g. highly iconic structures anchored in perception and action (Cuxac, 2004). The transfers are cognitive processes which anamorphize perceptive-practical experiences in the signing space.

Usually, sign language users use a standard lexicon when there is shared knowledge between interlocutors, but in a narrative/explanatory or even argumentative

domain signers "say by showing" by means of visual structures. These structures are a visual mode of thinking about the world by putting in visual percepts; this mode is specific to sign languages. C. Cuxac (Cuxac, 2001) recognized three major highly iconic structures - transfers (transfer of shape and size, transfer of situation and transfer of person).

While Phyllis Wilcox (Wilcox, 2000) and Sarah Taub (Taub, 2001) consider the possibility of encoding abstraction by means of metaphor, Marie-Anne Sallandre (Sallandre, 2003), following Cuxac, considers other possibilities such as the creation of signs between standard signs and transfers.

Portuguese sign language (among others) has been legally recognized as the language of deaf Portuguese people (Portuguese Constitution, artigo 74°, h).

According to Maria Augusta Amaral, Amândio Coutinho e Maria Raquel Delgado Martins, (Amaral, Coutinho, & Martins, 1994) most deaf Portuguese people speak Portuguese Sign Language (Língua Gestual Portuguesa – LGP). Like all the other known sign languages, LGP is a true language, independent of the Portuguese language and of other sign languages, and has the same status as vocal languages. Also, according to the current authors, LGP has an endless possibility of making correct sentences with a limited number of components and rules. In other words, there is nothing that LGP cannot say.

Language and thought – linguistic relativism

"Dependence between language and thought has many unsolved problems and is controversial" (Shaumyan, 2006).

Language is a system of signs used by a community, and these signs must be understood by all members of that community in order to allow communication among them. Therefore, a member of a community "is not free to choose signs or their meanings". (Shaumyan, 2006). Furthermore, language is a social phenomenon, a phenomenon of culture, and a social institution – a system of rules imposed on individuals by the necessity to communicate, "Language is a sign system of culture, and culture is constitutive of mind" (Shaumyan, 2006).

Whorfianism (or the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) is a linguistic theory that states that the language of an individual shapes their thought process, i. e. the way he thinks about the world. In its *strong* version, language determines thought; in the *weak* version, language influences thought rather than determines it. According to Whorfianism, language is not "merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection" (Chandler, 1994), language is essential for people to adjust to reality, as "the »real world« is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group" (Chandler, 1994). So "people who speak different languages perceive and think about the world quite differently" (Chandler, 1994). Or, as Colette Dubuisson puts it: "(…) each culture has a particular vision of the world which is reflected in a language. (…) the particular visions of the world that we find in spoken languages have a common basis (partially due to the sequential organization of the language) and that the particular world visions that we find in sign languages have a different common basis (due to the

spatial organization of the language). These two different bases would be linked to a different perception of the world depending on that if they imply the hearing or not" (Dubuisson, 1993).

We agree with moderate Whorfianism, as the idea of linguistic relativism emphasizes that thinking can be influenced by language but not determined by it; it also considers that the type of language we use is influenced by the way we see the world. Furthermore, moderate linguistic relativism emphasizes the importance of the social context of language and not only purely the linguistic approach. In fact, according to Daniel Chandler, meaning is not in the text but arises from its interpretation, and interpretation is shaped by sociocultural contexts (Chandler, 1994).

We cannot directly observe thought; we can only directly observe text (a stream of signs in written or oral discourse). Thought is not an independent object that we can directly observe – thought is represented by language through text, but language only exists in connection with thought (Shaumyan, 2006). In the ancient Greek language, there was not a term for word: the Greek word *logos* meant word (written or spoken), as well as speech, rational explanation, reason, thought and idea.

In *Cratylus,* Plato discusses if the correctness of the names is determined by convention, if it depends on the use and custom (Hermogenes's thesis) or if things have a natural and proper name (Platão, 2001). According to Cratylus's thesis, names are correct because they are perfect images of the things; they are correct by nature because they are the product of an original creator who knew the nature of the thing in itself.

Thus, we ask, along with Sebastian Shaumyan, if linguistic signs stand for things outside of language and we also agree with his answer: "Paradoxically, the answer is no" (Shaumyan, 2006). It is true that in using language we mean things outside of language (a kind of *noumenon,* in Kantian terms), but those things are, in a sense, created by language. Linguistic meanings depend on the cultural organization of the world. In a conventionalized model of the world, language constitutes a dialectical unity with thought: they complement each other and they do not exist independently.

The traditional objectivist notion of sign considered that thought precedes language, with language coming at the end of the process to express thought (Shaumyan, 2006). We agree that language is not an autonomous phenomenon, or a mere means of expressing thought, but thinking and speaking are a double and complex process (Shaumyan, 2006).

T. A. Sebeok argues that when Peirce used the term 'interpretant' to refer to the meaning that one takes for a sign he was suggesting a kind of 'negotiation' whereby the sign-user evaluates or responds to what the sign means in different contexts, namely socially, contextually, and personally (Sebeok, 2001).

In conclusion, if "sign languages are *bona fide* languages, and that Deaf culture is therefore a *bona fide* culture, then one is confronted with the inescapable conclusion that there exists a »Deaf Way«, or ways, of thinking, of viewing the world; in short, Deaf epistemologies" (Padden, 2006).

Philosophy as knowledge and as activity – The case of the Portuguese high school

According to Immanuel Kant, philosophy is an endless task that is always incomplete. As knowledge is always being built, it can never be taught (Kant, 2009). To philosophize is an exercise in reasoning, analysing and criticising existing philosophical systems. To philosophize is an exercise of human reasoning performed with philosophical concepts, with these concepts created and recreated by the act of philosophizing. Philosophy is philosophizing and to philosophize is philosophy. On the other hand, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel argues that learning philosophy concepts is already philosophizing.

So, whether we agree with I. Kant or with G.W.F. Hegel, it is not possible to teach philosophy without teaching how to philosophize, "There is no split between philosophy and philosophizing" (Aspis, 2004). Philosophy and philosophizing cannot be isolated as they are part of the same thing. When we philosophize we produce philosophy and philosophy is the very content that generates philosophizing.

Philosophy is simultaneously thinking in action and the product of this acting; acting and production are discreet elements but interdependent; so, Renata Pereira Lima Aspis concludes, teaching philosophy is production of philosophy (Aspis, 2004).

Philosophy is a discipline in which students, apart from knowing philosophical concepts and theories, must learn how to question and connect different interpretations of reality. Students must know philosophical concepts and theories, and not to merely reproduce them. According to Ana Dorziat (Dorziat, 1999), the lack of a critical mind and the imposition of knowledge for its own sake, disregarding the process of its construction or its impact on society, are not strategies for education. Furthermore, in a philosophy class, one must take into account the previous references of students because their mind is not a "*tabula rasa*" on which we can place the contents of the philosophical tradition (Ferriol, 2006).

According to the Portuguese Philosophy Syllabus for High School, philosophy has a formative role: it must teach students to create concepts that help them to solve their problems, conduct civic awareness in youth by questioning attitudes and values, and emancipate them from natural determinism (Kant, 2009). The syllabus considers that the discipline of philosophy is essential for the enhancement of democratic life.

Learning/teaching philosophy in a class of deaf students – the translation problem

Before discussing the problem of translation, we want to explain why we say learning/teaching rather than learning and teaching. We do believe that teaching and learning are related terms. By teaching - learning process, we mean that the teacher's role and student's role are not opposite: the idea of learning-teaching highlights the participation of students for the construction of knowledge, and the role of teaching as a way of learning too.

According to Ottmar Teske, many schools that work with deaf students do not aim at education, but merely try to train students (Teske, 2001).

According to the Philosophy Syllabus, we argue that the philosophy classes can contribute to intellectual/social/cultural/personal development (development of reasoning, thinking and scientific curiosity, awareness of limits of our knowledge/ critical, responsible ethical-political thought/open aesthetics and cultural sensibility/life goals and identity). If philosophy is an exercise of reasoning, philosophy is to philosophize and *vice-versa*, and language moulds thought, our question is: in what language shall we do this with deaf students?

In fact, on the one hand, philosophical concepts have a history, a "*trace*" in foucaultian words, and that history is the history of philosophy itself. On the other hand, language is simultaneously a product and a producer of world visions. According to George Steiner (Steiner, 2002), each human language depicts a different map of the world and the death of a language is the death of a vision of a possible world. Therefore, the language in which we philosophize is always present in our philosophy. As Paul Ricoeur (Ricoeur, 1983) said, the linguistic structure of the Greek language predisposed the notion of 'being' to a philosophical calling.

As we have argued above, the language of deaf people is sign language. Portuguese law (Decreto-Lei 3/2008 and Law 21 de 2008) recognizes sign language as the language of the learning/teaching process. However, the Western philosophical tradition (since Socrates and Plato and even before, with presocratic philosophers, philosophy, is based on '*logos*'. Parmenides refers to *logos* as meaning thinking or reasoning, and it is only by means of its use that one can determine the truth, and according to Heraclitus the truth is contained in *logos*.

In Greek philosophy, only words can say there is a being, as rationality is identified with reality. This identification seems to exclude deaf people, whose language is a sign language, from philosophy.

However, Jacques Derrida (Derrida, 1967) considers phonocentrism as a kind of ethnocentrism, assuming that the primacy given to speech is a prejudice rather than a natural attribute. So, if the primacy given to speech and phonetic writing is not natural, sign language could be another legitimate way of language. Therefore, deaf students can make an autonomous use of their reason, not through words of the vocal-auditory language but through signs of the visual-gestural language.

However, in the framework of linguistic relativism, two languages are never considered to represent the same reality, as mentioned above. The worlds in which different communities live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached; as we said before, the deaf vision is quite different from the hearing vision, as it is built in the scope of another language. So, the translation between languages is problematic and sometimes impossible. According to D. Chandler, some authors suggest that even within a single language any reformulation of words has implications for meaning, since meaning is not in the text, but is generated by interpretation, and for Steiner (1975), any act of human communication can be seen as involving a kind of translation (Chandler, 1994).

J. Derrida considers that it is not possible to defend the possibility of translation, i.e., the translatability thesis is unsustainable, as language is not mere nomenclature. According to the author, some fundamental philosophical concepts lose meaning as they are translated. Translation is always a failed task; translation is always interpretation.

In a philosophical context, the task is almost impossible because of the specificity of philosophical concepts. As previously mentioned, philosophical concepts are embedded in the history of philosophy and in the language of its production, so they are unspeakable in a different language. If in spoken language it is difficult/impossible to translate philosophy from one language to another, what is even more difficult/impossible is the translation between languages of different modalities, as in the case of sign language to spoken language and *vice-versa*. Furthermore, there are philosophical terms that do not correspond in standard lexicons of sign language.

What can be done to solve this problem? Create a new sign? Although language and thought are dialectically related, they also conflict with each other. This conflict results in a change of language; the new one temporarily becomes a better form of thought until the next conflict between language and thought (Shaumyan, 2006). Hence, the evolution of a language is a process that involves all members of a community and not only students and a teacher who may be a non-native signer. Therefore, the community of signing philosophers must create a new sign.

The use of dactylology seems useless, as the spelling of words in the signing space with hands does not encode the meaning of the related concept; dactylology is a way of showing words of spoken languages in a visual way, so it is equivalent to reading a text. In sign languages, dactylology is used to spell names rather than change ideas. In fact, if the student does not understand the concept, she/he will only memorize the signifier and the meaning has to be explained to him/her in order to make a connection between the two poles of the sign.

Our argument is that the work in the philosophy class with deaf students should be done by means of an explanation of the philosophical concept in sign language with the use of the standard lexicon and transfers (Cuxac, 1993, 1997, 2000, 2001, 2004) or by means of metaphors (Taub, 2001; Wilcox, 2000). The possibility of "to show", or of "saying, by showing", provides sign languages with specific possibilities to reflect about knowledge (Cuxac, 2001).

Conclusion

As LGP is the Portuguese sign language, and assuming that language encompasses a different perspective of the world, it seems fair to conclude that learning/teaching philosophy in a class of deaf students should be done in Portuguese sign language.

To speak any sign language, one needs to think with images. However, producing sentences with images, metaphorical sentences, is not only a matter of linguistic skills, it is also a matter of cultural belonging, as underlined by Y. Delaporte (Delaporte, 2002). This is why I argue that learning/teaching philosophy in a class of deaf students must include all of the particular characteristics of that cultural belonging.

Learning/teaching philosophy in LGP is a matter of interculturality and social equity. Intercultural factors, because the class might become a place of bilingualism and biculturalism, mean: that Portuguese Sign Language (sign language) and the Portuguese Language (spoken language) are in permanent interchanges; an equity factor, because deaf students and hearing students have the same opportunities to learn/produce philosophy from their culture's framework.

This procedure has consequences at different levels. First of all, the lesson must be *thought in* sign language (not thought in Portuguese language and, afterwards, *translated to* sign language)[2]. In fact, we have seen the impact of language on subjects who study philosophy; we have also underlined that the non-existence of standard philosophical lexicon in Portuguese sign language can be overtaken by iconicity (metaphor or/and transfers). This demands fluent signing philosophy teachers and/or deaf philosophy teachers. Since we are aiming at a bilingual school, bilingualism/biculturalism should occur in the philosophy class: analysis/production of philosophical texts in the Portuguese spoken language and in Portuguese sign language.

A new vision of deaf students will arise. Many deaf people do not feel comfortable with their inclusion in the disability social model, as it is anchored in the medical concept of physical deafness. Deaf people think that this epistemological and social model does not address the nature of their existence. Instead, they see themselves as having far more in common with language minorities (Ladd, 2003). Sign language users know that they cannot find a 'home' within the social majority until the day that society is able to use their language. In this process of learning/teaching philosophy, the traditional vision of deaf students as disabled and with Educational Special Needs must be progressively replaced by the cultural vision in which deaf students are seen as members of a linguistic-cultural community. Learning/teaching philosophy in sign language is a cultural demand of a community that feels that its existential situation is one of a cultural and linguistic minority, rather than a disabled group, even if the existence of that community is not associated with a land.

From the point of view assumed in this paper, deaf students are not seen as handicapped people with educational special needs and requiring re-education, and therefore the intervention of hearing experts; deaf students must be recognized as belonging to a linguistic and cultural minority that has the right to construct its present and future; this means education instead of training. Therefore, the use of Portuguese sign language is not a way of overcoming handicaps – any difficulty deaf students might have in Portuguese spoken language – but a cultural exigency.

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[2]   Authors's italic.

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