Classifying verb types in Portuguese Sign Language

Mariana Martins[1]
Associação Portuguesa de Surdos

Ângelo Costa
Associação de Profissionais de Lecionação de Língua Gestual – AFOMOS

Joana Cottim
Associação de Profissionais de Lecionação de Língua Gestual – AFOMOS

Isabel Morais
CED Jacob Rodrigues Pereira, Casa Pia de Lisboa

ABSTRACT

Portuguese Sign Language (LGP) deaf teachers meet regularly at the Portuguese Deaf Association to develop a scientific and pedagogical basis for LGP teaching, especially as a first language to deaf students in bilingual schools. LGP grammar is one of the four study axes of the curricular program and is also one of the less defined. In order to overcome this fact, describing LGP Grammar has become a major concern for LGP deaf teachers.

When doing so, this group of native LGP speakers, linguistically aware of their language characteristics, realized that verb types in LGP were not properly classified for the purpose of teaching it.

After analysing different LGP syntactic structures according to argument selection of verbal typology defined in other sign languages (SL), as well as in spoken Portuguese (LP), it was clear that neither system could fully match the variability of LGP verbs. Therefore, we propose a blended classification of LGP verbs, where arguments within LP verbal system fit in general SL verb types.

This new classification questions a few concepts, such as the one for indirect or oblique object, and shows the need for a different terminology in relation to argument structure in LGP.

Keywords: Sign language syntax, verb types, argument structure, classifier verbs.

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[1] Contact email: mariana.martini@surduniverso.pt

1. Teaching Portuguese Sign Language grammar to deaf students

Portuguese Sign Language (Língua Gestual Portuguesa – LGP) has been formally taught as a curricular subject to deaf students since 2008, when reference schools for the bilingual education for the deaf were created.

The LGP curricular program is divided into four nuclear subjects: interaction, language (grammar), literacy (literature) and community and culture. Each of these encompasses certain competences that have to be learned throughout the school years. The problem is that there are no educational materials to support LGP teaching, nor are curricular contents described in a sufficiently detailed manner.

Nevertheless, LGP teachers have been doing their best to teach sign language using different signing "texts" and deaf cultural subjects. Though interaction might be a more pragmatic area to work upon, grammar needs more substantial reference material. Thus, the study of language has been the most problematic area to develop with students.

To overcome this major challenge, LGP teachers propose to focus primarily on the linguistic description of LGP's core: its verbal structure.

2. Classifying verbs in other sign languages

Verbs have been described in different sign languages using terminology that is not yet uniform. While the classification of "plain" verbs is generally accepted, verbs that vary according to the participants involved have been denominated differently as "indicating" verbs (Liddell, 2003) or "agreement" verbs (Sutton-Spence & Woll, 1998). However, the more problematic classification is for verbs varying on object and/or location, which have been named "depicting" verbs (Liddell, 2003), "classifier" verbs or verbs of "motion and location" (Suppalla, 1990), and "spatial" verbs (Sutton-Spence & Woll, 1998).

Within this last class of verbs, there can be variation in motion/location, in handling manner and in its visual-geometric properties (Schembri, 2003).

3. Organizing verbs in Portuguese Sign Language

The thirty deaf LGP teachers from all over the country who usually work together at the Portuguese Deaf Association have been describing LGP grammar since the curricular program was published, in 2008. This group of native signers has the metalinguistic ability to reflect on the language and linguistic intuitions to distinguish the grammatical acceptability of different productions in LGP. This has enabled a corpus of a sufficient number of linguistic patterns to elicit suitable results for the purpose of teaching the language.

In order to propose a uniform classification of verbal structure in LGP to facilitate its teaching, there was an effort to broaden the analysis to the syntactic level, focusing on the relation between the verb and its arguments.

3.1. Plain verbs

It was then possible to agree that, regardless of the number of arguments required by the verb, some verbs do not undergo any major modification. These are the so called "plain" verbs, like those in examples a), b) and c).

a) <u>MÃE FILHO DOIS-JUNTOS</u> <u>PARQUE</u> **IR**
   Subject   **Loc.**
   (Mother and child go to the park.)

b) <u>NETA</u>   <u>AVÓ DELA</u>   **GOSTAR**
   Subject   **Direct Object**
   (The granddaughter likes the grandmother.)

c) <u>RAPAZ</u> <u>ELE VELHO</u>   **RESPEITAR**
   Subj. D. O.
   (The boy respects the old man.)

The plain verb category includes linking verbs, such as "BE", "SEEM"; modal verbs, such as "CAN", "HAVE-TO"; intransitive verbs, such as "DISAPPEAR", "COUGH"; and transitive verbs with indirect object of location, such as "LIVE", "STAY" and "GO".

The verb "GO", in example a), may change slightly according to the Subject, having its starting point in a different location whether the subject is a first, a second or a third person.

Plain verbs can also be transitive with direct object, such as "BUY", "OBEY", "LIKE" and "RESPECT". In examples b) and c) both arguments of verbs "LIKE" and "RESPECT" are +human. Therefore, to avoid ambiguities, the Direct Object (D.O.) +human is emphisized with a pronoun located at one of the sides and verbs turn slightly to that location.

It is also important to notice that Objects are considered only in relation to the verb in LGP. That said, it is not possible to compare an Object in LGP to the corresponding Object in Portuguese, since verbs in Portuguese frequently require a preposition, which can alter the type of complement. This can be illustrated by the verb "gostar" ("to like"), in Portuguese, in example b), which requires the preposition "de" and is thus an oblique complement.

3.2. Agreement verbs

It was also widely agreed that verbs indicating their arguments through specific starting and ending locations might be more generally classified as agreement verbs. Even though they usually tend to refer to verbs of +animate arguments, as in examples d), e) and g), we will include in this group verbs that also indicate –animate arguments like the one in example f).

d) RAPARIGA **CONVIDAR** AMIGO DOIS-JUNTOS PIZZA / ELE **CONVIDAR** EU
     Subj.   **D. O.**   / **Subj.**   **D.O.**
  (The girl invites a friend for pizza. / He invites me.)

e) RAPARIGA **TELEFONAR-LHE** BOMBEIRO / ELA **TELEFONAR-ME**
     Subj.   **I.O.**   / **Subj.**   **I.O.**
  (The girl calls the fireman. / She calls me.)

f) RAPAZ JANELA SOL **VER-CIMA** / HOMEM ANDAR CAIR RAPAZ **VER-BAIXO**
     Subj.   **D.O.**   / **D.O.**   **Subj.**
  (The boy sees the sun from the window. / The boy sees a man falling down.)

g) RAPAZ **PEDIR** COLEGA LÁPIS FAVOR-DAR / LÁPIS ELE **PEDIR-ME**
     Subj.   **I.O.**   **D.O.**   / **D.O.**   **Subj.**   **I.O.**
  (The boy asks a colleague for a pencil. / He asks me for a pencil.)

This type of verbs includes transitive verbs with direct object, such as "LIE-TO", "LOOK-AFTER", "INVITE", in example d), "CALL", in example e) and "SEE", in example f). These verbs usually have their starting point at the Subject's location and the ending point at the D.O.'s. One exception, however, is the verb "INVITE", in example d), which has its starting point in the place of the D.O., possibly implying a passive construction, as in "I AM-INVITED BY-HIM".

Agreement verbs may also include bitransitive verbs with both direct and indirect objects, such as "TELL" and "ASK", in example g).

When +human subject and D.O. are the third person, the verb seems to assume a neutral form. It is as important to notice that, when the two arguments of an agreement verb are +human, its order is more likely to be S(ubject) V(erb) O(bject), in order to avoid any ambiguity, as in examples e), for the Subject and the D.O., and g), for the Subject and the Indirect Object (I.O.). In the case of the verb "ASK", in the two sentences of example g), where there are two objects, a D.O. and an I.O, it is noticeable that the order of the D.O. in the sentence varies because its –animate nature makes the sentence easier to be understood. In sentences with the verb "SEE", in example f), the verb comes in the end, as expected, but the order of the two arguments may also vary, since semantically the identification of the Subject is not problematic.

3.3. "Incorporator" verbs

If agreement verbs indicate their arguments in syntactic space, the next category of verbs incorporates them morphologically (Morgan & Woll, 2007). It was not consensus amongst LGP teachers that these should be named "classifier" verbs, since there are other classifier verbs that are syntactically plain (like "RUN") or belong to

the agreement category (like "CALL"). Also, not all of these verbs were of "motion" or "spatial". Therefore, in order to make this clearer for deaf students, we propose to classify them as "incorporator" verbs, since they alter lexically with the purpose of incorporating at least one of the arguments.

Within this classification, we considered verbs incorporating arguments that are located on the body, as in examples h) and i).

h) RAPARIGA <u>DENTE</u> **DENTE-DOER** / HOMEM <u>ESTÔMAGO</u> **ESTÔMAGO-DOER**
                         Subj. Subj.   /   **Subj.**   **Subj.**
    (The girl's tooth hurts. / The man's stomach hurts.)

i) <u>MULHER</u> **PESCOÇO-COÇAR** / <u>ELE</u>   **BRAÇO-COÇAR**
    Subj.   **D.O.**   / **Subj. D.O.**
    (The woman scratches her neck. / He scratches his arm.)

The verb "to hurt", in example h), is semantically ambiguous when selecting a subject, since the person has or feels a certain pain that is located somewhere in the body. In Portuguese, the body part is, syntactically, a subject and the person is the I.O.: "O dente dói à menina.". In English, the person that feels "hurt" is hardly considered a D.O., but rather a determinative complement of the Subject. In LGP, the location in the body seems to act as a Subject, whereas it is the "tooth" or the "stomach", which is incorporated by the verb.

In example i), the verb "SCRATCH, also incorporates the location in the body, for both the "neck" and the "arm", that, in this case, functions without a doubt as the D.O..

This type of verbs may also change lexically in order to incorporate the form of at least one of its arguments. Such lexical incorporation (Zwitserlood, 2012) can be identified as an entity classifier, in the verb "FALL", in example j), or as a handling classifier, in all the other verbs: "CLOSE", "WASH", "EAT" and "PUT" at the given examples in k), l), m) and n).

j) <u>FOLHA</u> **FOLHAS-CAIR** / <u>PRATO PILHA</u> **PRATOS-CAIR**
    Subj. Subj.   / **Subj.**   **Subj.**
    (The leaves fall. / The pile of plates falls.)

k) <u>RAPAZ</u> **PORTA-FECHAR** / <u>ELE</u> **GAVETA-FECHAR**
    Subj. D.O.   / **S.**   **D.O.**
    (The boy closes the door. / He closes the drawer.)

l) <u>ELE</u> <u>ROUPA</u> **ROUPA-LAVAR** / <u>ELE</u> <u>CÃO</u> **CÃO-LAVAR**
    S. **D.O.**   **D.O.** / **S.** **D.O. D.O.**
    (He washes clothes. / He washes the dog.)

m) RAPARIGA MORANGO **MORANGO**-COMER / MULHER **HAMBURGER**-COMER
   Subj.   D.O.   D.O.   / Subj.   D.O.
   (The girl eats a strawberry. / The woman eats a hamburger.)
   COELHO **CENOURA**-COMER / LEÃO   **CARNE**-COMER
    Subj.   D.O.   / Subj.   D.O.
   (The rabbit eats a carrot. / The lion eats meat.)

n) RAPAZ LIVRO **PRATELEIRA**-**LIVRO**-PÔR
   Subj. O.D. Loc.   O.D.
   (The boy put the book on the shelf.)
   RAPARIGA JANELA VIDRO **JANELA**-**VIDRO**-PÔR
    Subj.   Loc. O.D. Loc.   O.D.
   (The girl put the glass on the window.)

This group of verbs includes intransitive verbs, incorporating the Subject, in the form of entity classifiers, such as "WALK" and "FALL", in example j), or by being produced on the body location itself, in verbs such as "HURT", in example h). There are also transitive verbs with direct object, that incorporate D.O. producing it in the same manner in the correspondent body location, such as "SCRATCH", in example i), or in the form of holding classifiers, such as "SMOKE", "CLOSE", in example k), "WASH", in example l), and "EAT", in example m). Most of these may incorporate the Subject as well, as is the case for animal Subjects, in example m). The incorporation of arguments can be even more complex in bitransitive verbs with both direct and indirect objects, such as "PUT", in example n), where the verb, as a holding classifier, incorporates the D.O. and the location.

3.4. "Mixed" verbs

Finally, there is a group of bitransitive verbs with direct and indirect objects that both indicate and incorporate their arguments, such as "THROW" and "GIVE", in example o).

o) RAPARIGA FLOR **FLOR**-**DAR** AVÓ
   Subj.   O.D. O.D.   O.I.
   (The girl gives a flower to the grandmother.)
   AVÓ MAÇÃ DOIS **MAÇÃS**-**DOIS**-**DAR** AVÓ
   Subj. O.D. O.D.   O.I.
   (The grandmother gives two apples to the granddaughter.)
   FILHO MEU FLOR **BOUQUET**-**DAR**-**ME**
   Subj.   O.D.   O.D.   O.I.
   (My son gives me a flower bouquet.)

For disambiguation purposes, it is reinforced in the sentences of example o) that, when there are two +human arguments that are indicated by the verb, the I.O. tends to come at the end. Furthermore, it is noticeable in mixed verbs that the incorporated D.O. is lexicalized before the verb in order to elucidate the verbal incorporation that follows.

4. Advantages of this proposal

This proposal to classify verbs in LGP, according to the type of its morphosyntactic patterns, was thought of in the context of LGP teaching as a first language to deaf students. For this reason, it aims mainly to clarify the different types of verbs in LGP, supporting the learning of their syntactic structures and, thus, of syntactic functions. Within such a frame it becomes easier for both LGP teachers and students to recognize verbs and identify them with their corresponding category.

However, it is required to further study the possibility in variation of argument order, according to verb groups and semantic nature of arguments.

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