POINTING OUT SOME CONTRIBUTIONS OF EMERGING SIGN LANGUAGES TO THE LANGUAGE EMERGENCE DEBATE

Emerging sign languages (ESL) are newly evolved manual communication systems of deaf communities in which one has the unique opportunity to observe its structural development from its first steps (MEIR et al, 2010), a phenomenon that is not observed in modern spoken languages. These systems generally emerge in places with a high incidence of hereditary deafness and a considerable geographical/cultural isolation, where a system is created and transmitted through some generations without the influence/input of another stable language. As such, these systems have called the attention of many scholars because of its "forbidden experiment" status (SHATTUCK, 1980) in which they would represent the closest scenario of a linguistic system being developed in isolation and without a linguistic model, as the hearing non-signers' gestures cannot be taken to be language-like systems.

Using data from an ESL found in the state of Piauí, northeast of Brazil, called CENA (ALMEIDA-SILVA & NEVINS, 2020), I aim to raise some linguistic issues and try to contribute to the debate of 'to which extent language emergence can benefit from ESLs data'? I will not assume any gradual or abrupt perspective on language creation, but rather focus on linguistic phenomena that are found in the cases of ESLs, more specifically in CENA.

First, I want to show examples of how some grammatical phenomena are developed in ESLs, namely compounds and directionality (a.k.a, verb agreement). These two phenomena may contribute to the question that has been pointed by Armstrong and Wilcox (2003) that innateness could not be confirmed by ESLs data, because these deaf communities are not found in complete isolation, but they pose the question of whether the capacity for language creation would come from the brain which in genetically endowed to create certain types of grammatical structures or if it could be attributed to the human brain plasticity that tends to solve similar problems in similar ways?

Secondly, I want to compare the size, location and the time of existence of these well described ESLs in order to question which of these communities' settings better reflect the most isolated and least externally-influenced scenarios.

Thirdly, the language CENA seems to have developed its first symbolic items skipping a pantomimic phase, which was predicted by Arbib's expanding spiral hypothesis (2012), but that is reformulated by the analysis of Sandler (2013), who claims that ESLs starts the process with words first.

Ultimately, some core properties of human language that are absent in animal communication like compositionality are also observed in the early examples of CENA, in which the gradation of intensification is found separately marked on the body while in the hands is produced the lexical sign for MORNING, meaning compositionally 'very early' (fig.1).

Of course, these contributions are to be carefully assumed from the point of view of a modern human brain creating language that must differ from the very remote and ancient pre *homo sapiens* conditions.

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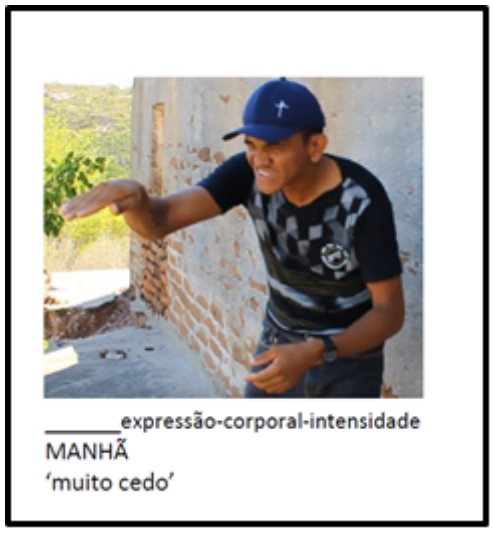

Fig.1 – Early compositional structure in CENA (ALMEIDA-SILVA & NEVINS, 2020)