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# Sociolinguistic sketch: Sign Languages on Marajó Island (Brazil)

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## 1. About Marajó Island

Marajó Island (in the state of Pará in Northeast Brazil) is the world biggest river island (see Figure 1 and 2 below). Its capital city, Soure (24 488 inhabitants), is a rural area where people earn their living from fishing, agriculture or farming. For instance, the buffalo is a culturally valuable animal as it produces quality meat and milk. Marajó buffalo cheese is a well-known specialty in the North of Brazil. As for the demography, inhabitants are descendants of mixed ancestry of natives living in the Northeast of Brazil and white Europeans (known as *caboclos*<sup>1</sup>). Most of the population only work sporadically. Work is perceived as a way of satisfying family needs, but freedom is still seen as a significant value in this traditional way of life, and most people do not appreciate being bound to a professional obligation (Ayres 1992: 143; Serre 2002).

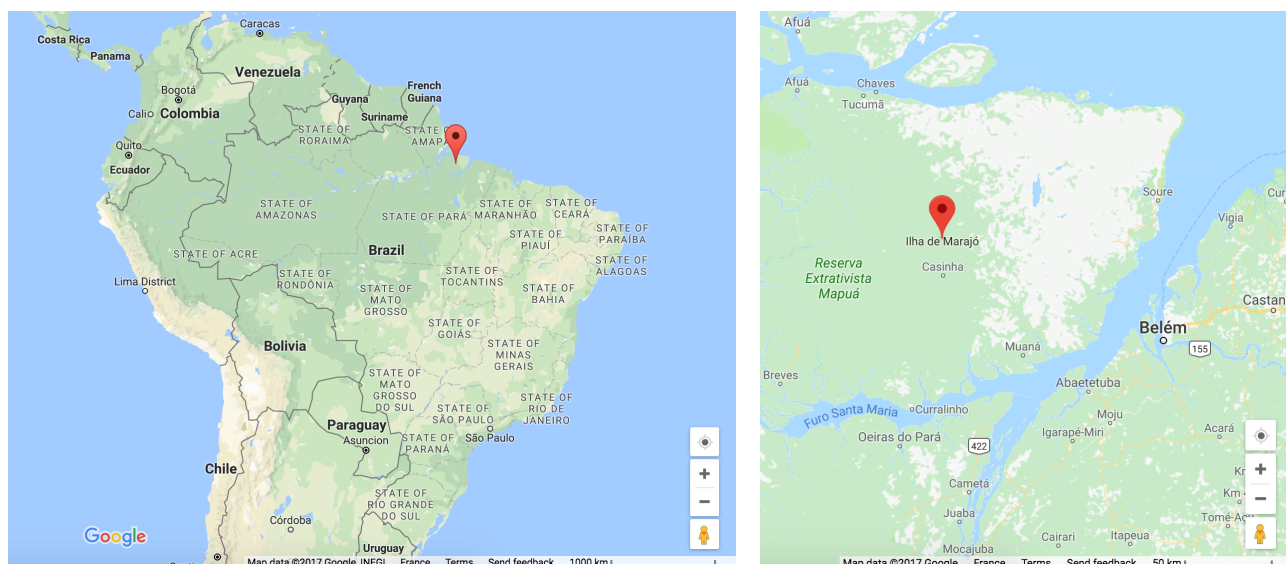


Figure 1 and 2: Map of the Marajó Island<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Moran (1974) or Parker (1981) for a basic background of this notion and Ayres (1992) or Tiphagne (2005) for more detail.

<sup>2</sup> Images from Google Map (<https://maps.google.com/>). Date of download: 18th November 2017.

## 2. History of the deaf community and local sign languages

Martinod (PhD in progress) led two fieldworks (August 2015 and March 2017). During this time, she collected data from the local sign languages (SLs) and conducted interviews with 10 deaf people and 10 hearing people (8 adults and 2 children of a deaf mother)<sup>3</sup>. The information below comes from observations made during the fieldworks, interviews and bibliographic research in the library of the Soure annex of the Federal University of the State of Pará (UFPA)<sup>4</sup> where students work is archived.

Since sign languages on Marajó are not recognized by the government, they have no official name. For convenience, we use the term *Marajó SLs* although our analysis focuses on some of the signers from Soure.

The deaf people on Marajó had, until the last decade, lived relatively isolated, among their hearing families, using homesign systems exclusively within the family circle. Since 2007 a deaf community is gradually emerging, and individual homesign systems come into contact with each other thanks to an initiative by the UFPA annex. The first study of the deaf people of this area and their SLs was conducted in 2006 by Thianny Brito of the UFPA<sup>5</sup>. Brito lists 50 deaf individuals in the area. A subsequent survey lists 30 individuals living in Soure<sup>6</sup>. Following Brito's work, social gatherings had been arranged for these deaf individuals by two local associations<sup>7</sup>, leading to the formation of a deaf community in Soure. The consolidation of this emergent community was aided by the creation of communal spaces hosting various activities (e.g. games, embroidery courses), thanks to a collaboration between the UFPA and the two mentioned associations.

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<sup>3</sup> Full metadata is provided in our chapter (Martinod et al. 2020).

<sup>4</sup> *Universidade Federal do Pará*.

<sup>5</sup> Brito, T. (2006) "O ensino da língua portuguesa para surdos", Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso directed by Waldemar Cardoso, Universidade Federal do Pará.

<sup>6</sup> 2010, Brazilian Institute for Geography and Statistics (*Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística*).

<sup>7</sup> *Associação de Pais e Amigos e Deficientes de Soure (APADS)* and *Amis Marajó*.

Some of the deaf people (6 out of 10) went to school until the equivalent of the last year of middle school (about 13 years old). This year being completed with a special exam, none of them could pass it so they left school. They spent these schooling years in classes they could barely comprehend. Indeed, teachers were not trained to teach deaf children and did not use any SL<sup>8</sup>. Several deaf adults explained that at the time they went to school they stayed in the back of the classroom and simply wrote what was written on the board without understanding anything. In a study of the literacy skills of five Sourense deaf students during the Brazilian equivalent of Grammar school and Middle school (aged 7-12), Ramires (2012) has shown that none of the participants was able to master the alphabetic system. Another study (Almeida 2012) emphasized the urgent need for schools of the city to adapt to deaf students.

The associations organizing activities for the deaf stopped in 2012 due to lack of resources. To our knowledge, at least 4 deaf women who formed the strongest connections and could socialize freely, continued to meet regularly outside the association framework, thereby reinforcing the contacts between their individual SLs. The others seemed to return to the isolated conditions they lived in before 2007 living with their hearing family and communicating with them through their familiolect.

We observed that the frequent population movements and the tendency of hearing families to protect their deaf members keeps preventing the community from fully developing. This has also been confirmed by a teacher working in one of the associations for the deaf (APADS). Hearing families indeed often move on extended family visits to other areas of the island. This is a part of the Brazilian culture where family remains an important kernel in people's life, whatever their age or their social status. If a member of the family happens to be disabled, the family is expected to take care of him (Marques 2010).

The Marajó context does involve adult deaf signers who are not a part of a stable signing community. SLs produced in such sociolinguistic conditions are rarely studied, therefore requiring specific

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<sup>8</sup> A Brazilian Portuguese-LIBRAS interpreter began to work in Dom Alonso school (Soure) in 2017. At this time she is the only interpreter for three deaf students who attend different classes.

categorization. Given the conditions on Marajó, we now consider these SLs as *partially integrated adult homesigns*. This term comes, in part, from the distinction made by Nyst et al. (2012: 268) between child homesign and adult homesign in a rural context.

### **3. Influence of an institutional SL: LIBRAS**

Until recently, the national Brazilian Sign Language (LIBRAS) had little presence in the area of Marajó. The UFPA initiated weekly LIBRAS courses in 2016 for deaf and hearing people. These courses can also have a positive impact on literacy as they use a handbook where images of signs are presented next to their equivalent word in Brazilian Portuguese. We observed the case of a deaf woman who used this book to improve her Brazilian Portuguese skills.

LIBRAS also started to be used in one of Soure's schools (see footnote 8). This led some deaf adults to be willing to come back to school in order to increase their level of education. Unfortunately, we observed that some of them do not completely understand the SL the interpreter uses because their LIBRAS proficiency is low.

### **4. Attitudes towards the deaf and local SLs**

Martinod's observations and interviews with hearing and deaf individuals show that attitudes towards the local SLs are quite negative. Hearing people consider the institutional LIBRAS the only *real* SL. The simple fact that 9 of the 10 hearing people interviewed refused to use the local SLs in front of the researcher reveals how they consider this language. This is why they encourage the deaf to learn it when possible. The deaf assimilated this view and often have a poor self-esteem unless they learn LIBRAS. The LIBRAS courses initiated in 2016 are provided by a hearing interpreter whose assistant is deaf. Considering that most of the students are hearing people, usually teachers, this situation might discourage deaf people to attend the course and increase their sense of inferiority.

However, judging from our observations deaf people seem to progressively become a part of the current Marajoara life. They often briefly interact with hearing people, mostly for work purposes: some occasionally work as baby-sitters or housekeepers. In addition, the Dom Alonso school in Soure hired in 2012 a deaf dance teacher. This contributed to change people's perception on deafness. That being said, career opportunities for deaf people remain very limited because of their low level of education. This remains true even if we take into account the overall economic and cultural context of the island.

In 2015 and 2016 awareness-building activity for the preservation and promotion of Marajó SLs was initiated, following post-doctoral research conducted by the director of the Soure annex of the UFPA, Maria Luizete Carliez, in France at the University Paris 8. Workshops and courses were proposed to UFPA teachers and students by SL linguists, sociologists and philosophers. The aim of these activities was to encourage the use of local SLs and consider them in the education of the deaf. Nevertheless, the survey conducted in 2017 by Martinod allows us to think that the local SLs could continue to develop in the most remote areas of Soure while LIBRAS will increase its influence downtown.

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