

How can the situational uniqueness cases in Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) help on the distinction between strong definites and demonstratives? A crosslinguistic analysis.

Based on the distinction between strong and weak definites proposed by Schwarz (2009;2013) further formalized by Jenks (2018), I investigated how this distinction would be found encoded in Libras (ALMEIDA-SILVA, 2019). My findings are summarized and illustrated in the tables 1 and 2 below.

Structures	Definite types	
	Weak definite Contexts	Strong definite contexts ²
Bare nouns	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Not allowed</i>
Prenominal IX _{sg.} /pl. (definite Article)	<i>Monolingual signers: No Bilingual signers: Yes/No</i>	<i>Yes</i>
Role-shift	<i>Not allowed</i>	<i>Yes</i>

Table 1 – Weak x Strong definiteness marking in libras

Libras DPs (Almeida-Silva, 2019)



	BARE NOUN	BARE NOUN + DEICTIC NMM	DEFINITE ARTICLE	DEM
SEG	DOG	DOG	POINTING	POINTING
NMM	-----	Eye_gaze +Head_Mov	-----	Eye_gaze +Head_Mov

Table 2 – The phonological composition of definite items in libras

Regarding to the strong x weak definiteness marking shown above, Libras would pattern with Mandarin in that both languages have items which are only used for anaphorically contexts, namely, a definite article, the Pre-nominal IX, in the former, and a demonstrative item in the latter. However, in the cases of situational uniqueness, as in (1) below, in order to get the referential reading “the unique dog in the context”, in the absence of a prior mention, Mandarin can employ the strong definite item (demonstrative) but it must to be accompanied by a pointing gesture, as the strong definite items should only be licensed under a prior mention, which is not the case.

(1) *There is a dog visible and someone utters:*

A: Gou yao guo malu.

dog want cross road

‘The dog wants to cross the road.’

Mandarin (CHENG AND SYBESMA, 1999, p.510)

Interestingly, in Libras, in which the definite items generally involve pointing actions/signs, the situational uniqueness reading of the referent “the unique dog in the context” is only achieved if one adds on the top of the Pre-nominal IX sign, a suprasegmental information, a non-manual marker (NMM - glossed in the table 2) as an extra demonstrative resource, i.e.: eye-gaze, head and trunk movements, but not by the use of the strong definite article alone.

Our methodology encompassed the creation of a visual stimuli that was presented to the speakers of BP and Libras in order to facilitate the production of the grammaticality judgments for every situation. The visual stimuli consisted of an image of two men talking about a nearby dog, the conditions presented in the 12 figures were: (1. A-bare DP; B-DP headed by an article; C-DP headed by a DEM), (2. A- Referent

visible for both interlocutors, B- Referent visible for one the interlocutors) and (3. A- Pointing with the index finger, B- Without pointing with the index finger). This analysis can shed light on the question that has been posed by Dayal (2021) and Šimík (2021) on whether definite articles and demonstrative items could be subsumed as the exponents of the L^x operator, as proposed by Jenks (2018). The results indicate an overall preference summarized in the table below:

	LIBRAS	MANDARIN	PORTUGUESE
SITUATIONAL UNIQUENESS	*Bare noun	Bare noun	*/#Bare noun
	Bare noun +deictic NMM	*Demonstrative	Definite Article
	*Definite article (DEM in Mandarin)	Demonstrative+deictic pointing	Demonstrative
	Demonstrative (DEM+deictic pointing in Mandarin)		

Table 3 – Definite items employed in situational uniqueness crosslinguistically

Conclusions

Both Libras and Mandarin require additional ostensive gestural support for the pertinent linguistic form; Libras patterns with the behavior of bare nouns in article languages and with DEM in articleless languages, regarding situational uniqueness; Regardless of pointing, visibility affects referents identifiability, hence supporting Šimík’s view on definiteness of an accidental uniqueness; Despite the deictic information being more directly mapped into signed lexical items, the Libras definite article differs from the demonstrative in that the latter presupposes non-uniqueness, which is a feature of real demonstratives; The semantic differences between Mandarin and Portuguese Demonstratives remains a question for future research.

References

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Contact

Anderson Almeida da Silva
 Adjunct Professor in Sign Language Linguistics
 Universidade Federal do Delta do Parnaíba
 Av. São Sebastião, 2819.
 Nossa Sra. de Fátima, Parnaíba – PI.
 64202-020
 Brasil
andersonalmeida@ufpi.edu.br