Research Ethics and Systemic Functional Approaches to Indigenous Sign Languages

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Researching Indigenous sign languages raises distinctive ethical, methodological, and theoretical questions, specifically in multilingual and multicultural contexts where linguistic practices intersect with cultural identity, social vulnerability, and limited language documentation. This seminar presents an ongoing research project involving Terena Indigenous deaf communities in Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil and has two primary objectives: (1) to examine the challenges of conducting culturally responsive fieldwork; and (2) to explore the possibilities of applying Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to the analysis of visual-spatial meaning-making.

The first part addresses the ethical and methodological complexities of researching Indigenous deaf communities, whose members may experience heightened social and linguistic vulnerability. It discusses the negotiation of informed consent, institutional ethical requirements, community engagement, and the role of intercultural mediation in contexts where different linguistic and cultural practices coexist. Particular attention is given to the challenges of communication involving Terena Sign Language, Brazilian Sign Language (Libras), Portuguese, and the Terena language, as well as to the implications of linguistic asymmetries, cultural expectations, and communicative misunderstandings for the research process. The discussion considers how ethical procedures must extend beyond formal institutional approval to encompass ongoing negotiation, accessibility, cultural responsiveness, and respect for community participation and autonomy.

The second part explores the potential of SFL (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) as a framework for describing and interpreting meaning-making in sign languages. Part of the discussion is devoted to the functional approaches developed by Rudge (2018) and Almeida (2025), who applied SFL to British Sign Language and Brazilian Sign Language (Libras), respectively. Building on these contributions, the seminar considers how the ideational and interpersonal metafunctions can be applied to the analysis of visual-spatial linguistic resources. From an experiential perspective, attention is given to transitivity, participant representation, and the ways in which processes and experiences may be construed through manual and non-manual resources, spatial organisation and embodied interaction. From an interpersonal perspective, the discussion considers how social relationships, attitudes, and communicative positioning are negotiated through signing practices.

The intersection of these perspectives raises important questions about the applicability of linguistic models developed primarily for spoken and written languages to underdocumented visual-spatial linguistic systems. Therefore, the seminar considers the need for theoretically informed and context-sensitive analytical adaptations that recognise the particularities of Indigenous sign languages and their sociocultural contexts. In light of this, research ethics and linguistic analysis are understood as mutually constitutive dimensions of fieldwork, as ethical decisions affect how linguistic data are generated and interpreted, while analytical choices influence how Indigenous communicative practices are described and understood.

Bio

Ulisses Tadeu Vaz de Oliveira is a Professor of English Language, Philology, and Linguistics at the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul (UFMS), Brazil, and a permanent faculty member of the graduate programmes PPGLetras and PROFLETRAS. He holds an MA and a PhD in Applied Linguistics and Language Studies from the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP) and

completed a postdoctoral fellowship at the Institute for Medieval Studies, NOVA University Lisbon, Portugal.

His research focuses on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Critical Discourse Analysis, multimodality, pragmatics, intercultural communication, and digital discourse. His work explores the relationships between language, identity, ideology, and power across media, political, literary, and digital contexts, with special interest in persuasion and the multimodal construction of meaning.

He currently leads a FUNDECT-funded project investigating regional variation, cultural identity, and visual-spatial communication in Indigenous sign languages and Brazilian Sign Language (Libras). Combining SFL and Conversation Analysis, the project addresses meaning-making alongside the ethical, methodological, and intercultural challenges of linguistic fieldwork. His research also encompasses Portuguese Philology and medieval Galician-Portuguese literature.

Since 2020, he has served as Executive Editor of *DELTA*, a leading Brazilian linguistics journal. He is also a member and former Chair of the UFMS Research Ethics Committee.

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