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RESEARCH REPORT

Taboo expressions in Brazilian sign language (Libras)

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ABSTRACT

Our main objective is to present some preliminary results and discussions on taboo terms in Libras (Língua Brasileira de Sinais). Given the lack of studies on the topic, our immediate scope is to survey the vocabulary and main uses of the expressions found. We will draw primarily on Gene, Fisher, and Napoli (2012), who provided a morphosyntactic description of taboo expressions in American Sign Language (ASL), and Loos, Cramer, and Napoli (2020), who discuss the iconicity of taboo terms in German Sign Language (Deutsche Gebärdensprache - DGS), and Sutton-Spence and Napoli (2024), who analyze expressiveness in sign languages in general. Based on a lexical survey of dictionaries and YouTube channels, we show that in Libras we have taboo terms in the same lexical fields found in spoken languages: religion, sex, body parts, and bodily fluids. We also show that the same linguistic aspects found by previous studies in other sign languages occur in Libras: a) more iconic signs tend to be more offensive; b) use of non-manual, or non-lexical, strategies to convey expressiveness.

RESUMO

Nosso objetivo principal é trazer alguns resultados e discussões preliminares sobre os tabuísmos em Libras (Língua Brasileira de Sinais). Dada a ausência de trabalhos sobre o tema, nosso escopo imediato é de levantamento do vocabulário e dos usos principais das expressões encontradas. Baseamo-nos principalmente em Gene, Fisher e Napoli (2012), que fizeram

uma descrição morfossintática das expressões tabuísticas na Língua Americana de Sinais (ASL), e Loos, Cramer e Napoli (2020), que discutem a iconicidade nos termos tabu na Língua Alemã de Sinais (Deutsche Gebärdensprache - DGS) e Sutton-Spence e Napoli (2024), que analisam a expressividade em línguas de sinais em geral. A partir do levantamento lexical em dicionários e canais do Youtube, mostramos que em Libras temos tabuísmos nos mesmos campos lexicais encontrados em línguas orais: religião, sexo, partes do corpo e fluidos corporais. Também mostramos que os mesmos aspectos linguísticos encontrados por estudos prévios em outras línguas de sinais se manifestam em Libras: a) sinais mais icônicos tendem a ser mais ofensivos; b) uso de estratégias não manuais, ou não lexicais, para veicular expressividade.

KEYWORDS

Libras. Expressivity. Tabooism. Semantics. Pragmatics.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Libras. Expressividade. Tabuísmo. Semântica. Pragmática.

RESUMO PARA NÃO ESPECIALISTAS

Nesse estudo realizamos um levantamento inicial das expressões tabu (vulgarismos, termos chulos, ofensas etc.) na Língua Brasileira de Sinais (Libras). Esse levantamento nos mostrou que nessa língua também encontramos expressões com alta carga ofensiva ligadas aos principais temas alvo de tabu nas línguas e sociedades: religião, partes do corpo, relações sexuais e fluidos corporais. Também olhamos para aspectos gramaticais desses sinais, pois estudos mostram que essas expressões podem exercer várias funções para além das mais básicas como predicados ou modificadores. Verificamos que a propriedade da iconicidade (a semelhança do sinal com o seu referente), uma propriedade fundamental das línguas de sinais, é um traço importante da ofensividade/agressividade do sinal, como já hipotetizado para outras línguas. Assim, sinais que se assemelham ao objeto sinalizado tendem a ser mais ofensivos do que sinais menos icônicos. Por fim, verificamos que a expressão da intensificação, que em línguas orais pode ser exercida por termos tabu (como 'pra caralho' no português brasileiro), na Libras é exercida por elementos não manuais, mas pela modulação do gesto ou pela expressão facial.

Introduction

There is a growing literature on taboo expressions and expressivity in sign languages (Mirus et al. 2012; Fisher et al. 2018; Loos et. al. 2020; Napoli; Sutton-Spence, 2025; among others), but about Libras (Língua Brasileira de Sinais) the topic was never discussed before. So, our main purpose on this paper is to expand a previous survey of taboo expressions in this language (Albuquerque; Souza, manuscrito). We took as a guide to our research previous work and surveys of taboo expressions in sign languages, particularly Mirus, Fisher e Napoli (2012), Loos, Cramer and Napoli (2020) and Sutton-Spence and Napoli (2025).

The study of dysphemic or tabooistic language raises some interesting questions from the point of view of a lot of disciplines in linguistics and related fields[1]. Our main focus here will be the semantic and pragmatic properties of theses expressions. We presuppose a bidimensional semantics (Potts 2007; McReady 2010; Gutzmann 2013; 2019; among others and references therein). Our basic theoretical assumption is that linguistic expressions bring content that contributes to the truth-conditional dimension, use-conditional dimension (pure expressives, supplements, etc.) or both simultaneously (mixed expressives). However, we will not explicitly use the approach to analyze in detail any particular expression or construction of the language, since our main goal is to present the data we gathered online (mostly in Youtube channels and online dictionaries) and through informal conversations with native speakers from Curitiba (the capital of the Paraná state in Brazil) and metropolitan area.

We will assume that expressivity is a second layer of meaning that indicates the speaker's emotional state:

> They can tell us that she is angry or elated, frustrated or at ease, powerful or subordinated. Sometimes the emotion is directed at a specific individual, as with honorification. Sometimes it is directed at some specific feature of the current state of affairs. And sometimes it is just general, undirected emotion" (Potts, 2007, p. 173)

We begin our paper discussing some previous work on expressives and taboo expressions in section 1. We will see that their grammatical versatility in oral languages is impressive, their uses go way beyond the most common cases of predication (such as in slurs and name calling), imprecation and malediction (e.g. *go fuck yourself*), expressive modification (e.g. *fucking awesome*, *this damn car*) or vocatives (e.g. *you idiot*). The natural question is whether we can find similar patterns in sign languages. Previous work in American Sign Language (ASL) (Mirus; Fisher; Napoli, 2012) did not find taboo expressions in structures of modification or intensification (or in the context of syntactic embedding in general). In section 2 we will review some previous work on taboo language, and expressivity in sign languages. There are some interesting hypotheses that these works raise. Loos, Cramer

[1] See, for instance, the range of chapters collected in *The Oxford Handbook of Taboo Words and Language* (Allan, 2018).

and Napoli (2020), in their work about German Sign Language (DGS) propose that iconicity is an important factor that constitutes the expressive character of tabooistic expressions: the more iconic the expression more offensive it is. Finally, in section 3, we will present our data and discuss them in the light of the works previously presented. We will see that the same patterns found in ASL and in DGS are also found in Libras, especially regarding iconicity.

1. Taboo expressions: lexicon and grammar

A taboo is usually defined as "[...] a proscription of behaviour for a specifiable community of one or more persons at a specifiable time in specifiable contexts (Allan; Burridge, 2006, p. 11). Linguistic taboo is concerned with linguistic behavior. The usual taboo topics are death, illness, religion, sexual relations, body parts, bodily fluids and waste. The offensiveness does not come only from the referent or concept, but mainly from the community's reaction to the linguistic expression. We see that this is the case because languages usually develop dysphemic, orthophemic and euphemistic equivalents (e.g. *dick, cock/penis/male sexual organ*, in this order). It is also seen that these expressions can be used in some situations (mostly informal, among close friends etc.) and in some discursive genres (e.g. jokes, informal conversations, pop songs, adult tv shows etc.) (Allan, 2018; Allan; Burridge, 2009; a. o.). In sign languages, there are some linguistic behaviors that can also be source of taboo. For instance, it is very common to use physical features of individuals to create proper name signs (hair style, features of the face, height, weight etc.), in definite descriptions ("that skinny guy over there", "that girl with big boobs") or in people's names (the sign CHINESE[2] is iconic, "closed eyes" are used in many sign languages). However, in some sign languages this behavior is becoming to be seen as offensive by young people.

Research on the topic has shown that these expressions show different grammatical functions (Hoeksema, 2018; Napoli; Hoeksema, 2009; among others). From the point of view of pragmatics, they can be used in different kinds of speech acts, not necessarily in offensive or aggressive ones. Of course, maledictions, name calling, and insults are the typical cases we can think of when we talk about the pragmatic functions of taboo expressions. However, we see that these expressions can appear in different structures of modification or in cathartic uses, situations in which the target of the emotion expressed by the taboo word is not the addressee, but someone else (or something) in the context.

Just as an illustration, we see below some examples of the different syntactic, semantic and pragmatic functions that taboo expressions serve.

(1) John is a pain in the ass/an asshole. [predicate]

[2] We follow the usual practice to represent signs in CAPITAL LETTERS. In the hyperlink the reader can find a video of the sign.

(2) This damn car is not starting. [noun modifier]
(3) This coffee is so fucking good. [adjectival modifier]
(4) John, you asshole, come here right now! [vocative]
(5) Go fuck yourself!/Go to hell! [maledictio n]
(6) Fuck!/Damn it. [cathartic]
(7) This mayor is doing a shitty work all over the city. [descriptive]

From a semantic point of view, structures like (2) or (4) are interesting because they seem to require a bidimensional analysis. For instance, (2) has two layers of meaning, the truth-conditional (TC) and the use conditional (UC) one, as shown below in (8). This structure poses a problem for a compositional analysis of meaning, since the scope of the modifier is not only the noun it combines with, but the proposition. So, in (2) the target of the expressive content can be the car or the whole event, the malfunctioning of the car.[3]

(8) TC: This car is not starting.
UC: The speaker is angry at the car/The speaker is angry because the car is not starting.

Of course, we do not want to take oral languages as a reference of what a sign language can or cannot have. Our purpose is to keep in mind some questions that can be asked in the research of this phenomenon in natural languages in general:

i) What do grammatical functions do taboo expressions have in sign languages?

ii) The expressivity manifests itself in sign languages in all the grammatical levels as seen in spoken languages?

iii) Is there also lexical variation between dysphemisms and orthophemisms?

The studies reviewed in the next section will offer us some answers to these questions.

2. Taboo expressions and expressivity and sign languages

There is a recent and growing literature on the semantics and pragmatics of sign languages (Schlenker, 2022; Davidson, 2022) and on the topic of expressivity and taboo language is no different. Mirus, Fisher and Napoli (2012) described morphosyntactic aspects of ASL, Loos, Cramer and Napoli (2020) studied metaphorical and iconic processes of taboo signs in DGS and Sutton-Spence and Napoli (Sutton-Spence; Napoli, 2025; and references there in) discuss expressivity in sign languages in general. Our purpose in this section is to review these works.

Mirus, Fisher and Napoli (2012) show that taboo expressions are morphologically structured by various process, such as initialization, composition and blending. HELL, for instance, is a sign that

[3] See Basso (2020) for the discussion of this issue.

starts with the sign for letter H. The verb PISS-OFF is a combination of PEE and the lexicalization of the preposition OFF and the sign for MOTHERFUCKER combines the signs for MOTHER and the middle finger raised. And there are the so-called combinations, signs that combine strategies, like PISS-OFF in which OFF is a sign that uses initialization and is part of a compound.

Furthermore, there are signs that explore the connotation of a phonological feature. Usually, a sign that begins at the nose have a negative connotation. This is the case of the signs UGLY, BORING.



FIGURE 1 – *FUCK*.
Source: spreadthesign.com.

Regarding syntactic contexts in which the signs can appear, most of them occur isolated, as interjections, maledictions (e.g. FUCK, cf. Fig. 1 or the fingerspelling F-K), or name calling. They can occur also as referential noun phrases (e.g. like *that bitch*). However, taboo terms in structures of modification (as intensifiers, for instance) were not found. The authors point out some cases in ASL that seem to be borrowings or translations from English, like the ones we see below in (9-11). In (9) the sign HELL is between the verb and its direct object ME, and in (10) FUCK is after the wh-word for emphasis. These sentences were produced because the authors asked the consultants whether these structures were possible. They assume that, since the consultants were literate in English, it might be the result of language contact. In (10), for example, WHERE appears in sentence initial position (as in English), but in ASL wh-words appear in sentence final position. The only natural sentence they produced was (11), which is an order for the listener to stop doing whatever she is doing.

(9) GIRL SCARE HELL ME.
The girl scared the hell out of me.

(10) WHERE FUCK HE GO?
Where the fuck did he go?

(11) F-K FINISH!
That's fucking enough already.

The absence of modifiers is a characteristic of ASL. Intensification or emphasis are expressed by modulating the movement of the sign or by nonmanual markers, the usual strategy for intensification. Insults and rude behavior in ASL can be expressed by other means, such as: a) Sign modulation: slower or faster movement may indicate irritation; b) Face: narrowed lips, furrowed eyebrows, and torso position also convey expressivity; c) Imitation: awkwardly imitating signs (from deaf or hearing people) is also a behavior seen as pejorative and offensive.

Loos, Cramer and Napoli (2020) discuss the linguistic sources of taboo words in the DGS (Deutsche Gebärdensprache), focusing on metaphorical processes and iconicity. Their discussion of iconicity shows that it is a subjective and gradual property. They also show that metaphor and metonymy are important sources of lexical creation in sign languages. And one important hypothesis defended by the paper is that iconicity plays an important role in expressivity in taboo signs: the more iconic the sign, more offensive it is.

Consider, for instance, the signs SCHWUL1 and SCHWUL2 'gay' in figure 2. There is iconic motivation in the two signs, but the sign SCHWUL2 is more offensive, since it is iconic of the sexual act. And also it is an instance of metonymic creation, since the action is used to characterize this class of individuals.



FIGURE 2 – *SCHWUL1, SCHWUL2.*
Source: Loos, Cramer and Napoli (2020, p. 93).

Sutton-Spence and Napoli (2024) discuss the manifestation of expressivity in sign languages. In sign language studies there is a usual distinction between manual articulation, which express meaning through lexical means, and facial expression and torso movement, the means to convey grammatical notions (interrogatives, negation, connectives etc.) and subjective attitude (emotions: anger, surprise, disgust, joy etc.). This is an important difference between oral languages and sign languages. They discuss many phenomena, and here we will focus on some that are of particular interest to us.

One of them is what is called "Blurt interjections". They occur syntactically isolated, some are "swear words". "Some of them are in response to something just witnessed or uttered – such as *Huh*? after seeing or being told something hard to believe or *Ah!* after realizing something." (Sutton-

Spence; Napoli, 2024, p. 1134) Conventionalized signs can change in blurt interjections to convey intensity, like we see in Fig. 3 below.

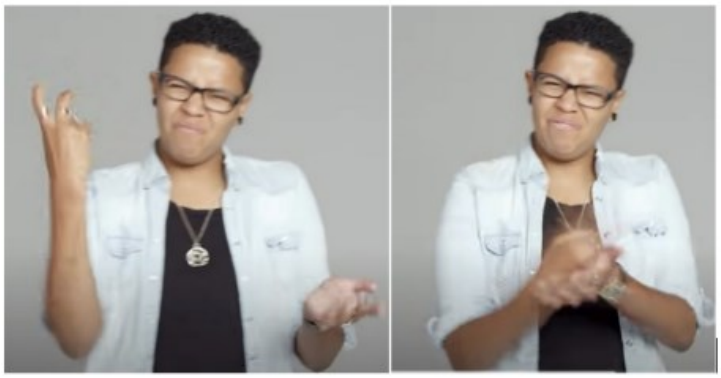


FIGURE 3 – *FUCK in ASL.*
Source: Sutton-Spence and Woll (1999 *apud* Sutton-Spence; Napoli, 2024, p. 1135).

Interjections can also be non-manual, one instance is the case of VIXE, in Libras. As can be seen in the video, the expression uses mainly facial features and is accompanied by the crossing of the arms.

Slurs are a class of expressions that iconically use stereotypical characteristics of some group of people. Sutton-Spence and Napoli (2024) exemplify with the signs JEW (nose), CHINESE (eyes), HOMOSSEXUAL (hand movements). These signs might be viewed as offensive by signers today[4], but for older signers they do not have negative meaning (examples from British Sign Language). There is another sign for JEW in BSL that uses the beard, as in ASL. "Social pressure from hearing signers (and non-signers) who consider these signs to be slurs have led to many of these older signs being replaced by less iconic signs to avoid the risk of inadvertent offence." (Sutton-Spence; Napoli, 2024, p. 1144).

Finally, in the discussion of intensification, they show that the manipulation of some sign parameter (number of fingers, movement of the arms etc.) in combination with facial expressions is the common strategy of intensification in sign languages. In fig. (4), we see that the doubling of fingers and facial expression convey exaggeration.

[4] These old offensive signs are not found in online dictionaries, such as spreadthesign.com.

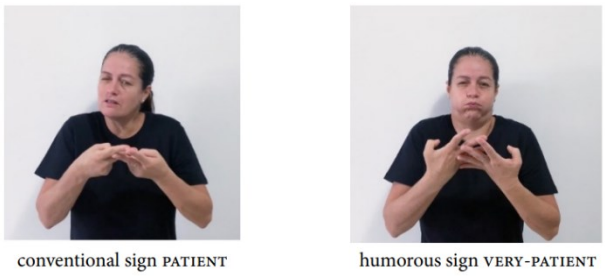


FIGURE 4 – *PATIENT in Libras.*
Source: Boldo and Sutton-Spence (2020 *apud* Sutton-Spence; Napoli, 2024, p. 1149).

What we have presented in this brief presentation is that there are various strategies of lexical formation of taboo words - not so different from lexical formation in general in sign languages and Libras in particular cf. Albuquerque and Souza (manuscript). Iconicity is a very important aspect of semantics in sign languages in general (Schlenker, 2022; Davidson, 2022; a. o.). In the case of taboo expressions, the hypothesis is that more iconic signs are more offensive (Loos, Cramer; Napoli, 2020). All the work reviewed shows that syntactic embedding is rare in sign languages, "dirty words" tend to occur isolated, specially as interjections or maledictions. We also have seen the importance of non-manual strategies: face (lips, eyes, eyebrows), torso, arms etc. And finally, regarding intensification, oral languages usually have lexical means to express intensity, but sign languages use modification of parameters (movement and manual articulation, mostly), to modify gradable properties.

The next section is dedicated to present our investigation of these aspects in Libras.

3. Taboo expressions in Libras

In this section, the data collected will be presented in dictionaries and Youtube channels. In a first survey (Albuquerque; Souza, manuscript), we have collected some examples from the deaf community of Curitiba and metropolitan region. Since the topic can create discomfort for many speakers, we decided to search for other sources, hence the search for expressions and constructions in the web. The Dicionário da Língua Brasileira de Sinais and Spread the Sign were used as another source[5]. We will look at some usual taboo topics and occasionally at other signs which refer to sensitive topics, such as slurs and offensive adjectives.

We started with the main topics of taboo, and the expressions collected can be seen in table 1.[6] Clicking in the hyperlink, the reader is sent to an online source.

[5] https://www.ines.gov.br/dicionario-de-libras/ and https://spreadthesign.com/pt.br/search/
We used mainly the Brazilian dictionary and occasionally Spread the Sign when the videos in the first were not working or the expressions were not found there.

[6] The morphology description of the data is in Albuquerque and Mendes (manuscrito).

Lexical field	Sign
Religion	INFERNO ‘hell’, DIABO ‘devil’
Sexual Behavior	SEXO(n) ‘sex’, TRANSAR(v) ‘to have sex’, VAI-TOMAR-NO-CU ‘go fuck yourself’, DANE-SE ‘damn you’, CORNO, FILHO-DA-PUTA ‘son of a bitch’, MASTURBAÇÃOF1 MASTURBAÇÃOF2 ‘feminine masturbation’; MASTURBAÇÃOM1 MASTURBAÇÃOM2 ‘masculine masturbation’
Body Parts	PENIS1, PENIS2, VAGINA1, VAGINA2, ÂNUS1, ÂNUS2, ÂNUS3, SEIOS ‘breasts’, PEITOS ‘boobs’, CUZÃO ‘asshole’.
Fluids and waste	BOSTA1 ‘shit’, BOSTA2 ‘shit’, CAGAR ‘to shit’, PORRA ‘semen’, URINA ‘urine’

TABLE 1 – *Taboo expressions in Libras.*
Source: the authors.

Turning our attention now to the syntactic and semantic contexts in which theses expressions occur, the main structure we see is predication, in which the taboo expression is used with the pragmatic function of name calling. In this case, we see also expressions highly aggressive, but not necessarily taboo words, such as BURR@, IDIOTA, MENTAL, BABACA – all of them are signs initiated at the head and are cognitive insults. In (12) we see some of the expressions of table 1 that can appear in the predicative structure.

(12) (ELE DIABO/CORNO/FILHO-DA-PUTA/CUZÃO/BOSTA.
He is a devil/”corno”/son of a bitch/asshole/piece of shit.

We can suppose that these expressions reveal an influence of Portuguese, since CORNO and FILHO DA PUTA are taboo expressions related to sex behavior that are culturally considered degrading. *Corno* (lit. ‘horn’) is a metaphor used to describe someone betrayed by his/her partner (boy/girlfriend, husband/wife), and *filho da puta* ‘son of a bitch’ is a very offensive word, like its English translation. In the same vein, BURRO ‘donkey’ can also be considered a borrowing from Portuguese, since it is a very common offensive adjective to insult people who are considered “dumb”. IDIOTA ‘idiot’ and BABACA seem to us native expressions. Both of them have the *locus* of the sign in the head, which indicates that what is being criticized is the mental attitude of the subject. *Babaca* in Portuguese is used as an offense to behavior, usually directed to someone who is rude or impolite. Of course, the use of the expression “borrowing” is kind of misleading, as pointed out by André Xavier (personal communication), since what is being borrowed by one language is not the total “linguistic sign” (in saussurean terms), that is, we can say that Libras takes from Portuguese the meaning or concept.

In line with current politically correctness trends in Brazil (and in the globe), some adjectives that describe physical features of persons are also beginning to be avoided. For instance, the adjective *gordo* 'fat'. GORD@/MAGR@ 'fat/thin', ALT@/BAIX@ 'tall/short', PEITUDA 'big breasted girl', must be used with caution, specially to describe a third person.

Gender expressions also may have a tabooistic flavor, but as usual with this class of expressions, its use can be an index of group membership and intimacy. PUTA 'bitch' is a very aggressive sign, and is used only for women. It is a sign made with a touch in the nose, a phonological feature that has negative connotations in sign languages (Fisher; Mirus; Napoli, 2012).



FIGURE 5 – *PUTA*.
Source: Dicionário de Libras (http://dicionario.ines.gov.br/).

Regarding the LGBTQIAPN+ community, Libras has the following expressions (cf. table 2). Here we see important expressive differences between the signs, especially regarding iconicity. Comparing the three signs that mean "gay", GAY1 is the fingerspelling of G-A-Y, so, the less offensive. GAY2 and GAY3 are both iconic. The latter two signs appear to maintain a more iconic relationship with their meaning. One of our consultants suggested that the sign produced next to the torso, using the E handshape, may be motivated by a stereotypical gesture associated with effeminate behavior, namely a more flamboyant hand-waving movement. In this sense, the sign can be understood as an iconic representation of that behavior. The third sign, articulated on the forehead, seems to be based on the same gesture but displaced to the head. This sign is generally perceived as the most offensive of the three, since within the Deaf community it is often used to mock or insult individuals perceived as exhibiting effeminate mannerisms. In this respect, its pragmatic force is closer to that of derogatory terms such as "fag" in English or viado in Brazilian Portuguese.

The signs for "lesbian" show a somewhat different pattern. LESBICA1 is an initialized sign derived from the manual letter corresponding to the initial of the word. LESBICA2 is more clearly iconic, as it appears to represent a stereotypical depiction of lesbian sexual activity through the friction of two vaginas, as illustrated in Figure 6. LESBICA3, in turn, still requires a more careful analysis. While it is commonly used to refer to lesbian women, it may also be employed as an offensive term in certain contexts, suggesting that its meaning and pragmatic force are not yet fully understood.

For “trans” people we see a difference between TRANS1 and TRANS2, both mean “transvestite”, but the latter is the offensive one, since its more iconic – it has a touch in the Adam’s apple; TRANS3 means “transsexual”, following the current trend to differentiate between *transvestite*, *transsexual* and *transgender*. The sign TRANS2 can be combined with the nouns HOMEM and MULHER to create the compounds HOMEM-TRANS and MULHER-TRANS. However, it is always good to have in mind that political correctness discussions that are present in academia do not reach the population as a whole. So, a sign that can be regarded as offensive today to the LGBTQIAPN+ community may be used without negative connotations in some social circles or subcommunities.

Meaning	**Sign**
Gay	GAY1, GAY2, GAY3
Lesbian	LÉSBICA1-2-3
“Trans”	TRANS1-2, TRANS3,

TABLE 2 – - *Gender signs.*
Source: the authors.

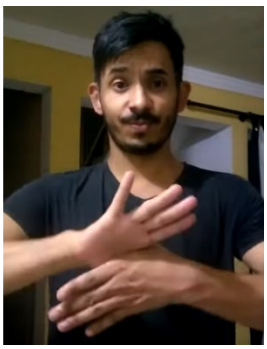


FIGURE 6 – *LESBICA3.*
Source: www.youtube.com/@dicionariolibras5552.

We tested informally the possibility of some structures of modification. We offered the consultants two structures, such as (13) and (14), to see if the pejorative sign could occur beside a name in (13), as an epithet, or beside a noun in (14), as an expressive adjective. At first, these structures were judged grammatical, but we still have doubts about its syntactic nature. (13) could also mean something like “João is shit. He is late”.

(13) JOÃO MERDA CHEGOU ATRASADO
The damn João is late
(14) CARRO BOSTA AQUELE
That car is shit or *that shitty car*

In Libras we have signs that express maledictions, VAI-TOMAR-NO-CU 'go fuck yourself' (fig. 7), DANE-SE 'damn/screw you' (fig. 8) and VAI-TOMAR-BANHO. The first expression is also a gesture commonly used by Brazilian Portuguese speakers with a similar meaning, but it is also a gesture that means "asshole". The second is also aggressive, but it expresses that the speaker does not care to whatever the hearer has said. The third is also a borrowing of Brazilian Portuguese, since *vai tomar banho* (lit. 'go take a shower') is an idiomatic expression without tabooistic connotation, but also it is a kind of malediction: can be used as a rude request to the hearer to stop doing whatever she is doing that is annoying the speaker; or it can be used to express that the speaker strongly disagrees with whatever the hearer has said[7]. Note that the two gestures have a movement towards the hearer. We see this feature as an indication that maledictions in Libras also use the imperative syntax to convey expressive meaning in this kind of speech act.



FIGURE 7 – *VAI TOMAR NO CU.*
Source: www.youtube.com/@angelagirardi.



FIGURE 8 – *DANE-SE.*
Source: www.youtube.com/@angelagirardi.

Some expressions can have cathartic uses, such as BOSTA 'shit' and PUTA MERDA (lit. 'bitch shit', but it means expressively something like 'holy shit').

[7] On maledictions on Brazilian Portuguese, see Souza (2025).

Finally, some expressions have descriptive uses. In this case, the taboo expression conveys a negative attitude towards the situation or the event described. SE-FODEU1' and SE-FODEU2 'someone is fucked' are common expressions with this use. SE-FODEU1 looks like a gesture also used by Brazilian Portuguese speakers. (15) means that the speaker got very angry or irritated about something.

(15) FIQUEI PUTO
I'm pissed.

Finally, Libras has non-manual means to convey expressivity. The movements of the hand and arm can be intensified to express irritation or intensification of properties. Facial expressions are also an important mode of conveying expressivity.

These facts reveal that Libras shows the same features that other sign languages exhibit: borrowing from the oral language of the oral community, metaphors, iconicity (with the sign more iconic being more offensive), non-manual means to convey expressivity and offense.

4. Final Remarks

In this paper, we presented a first survey of taboo expressions in Libras. We have shown that we can find the same taboo topics as found in oral languages: religion, sex, body parts, fluids and waste. We also have seen that there are differences between signs, following a tendency demonstrated for other sign languages: the more iconic the sign, more offensive it is. Libras has a lot of borrowings from Brazilian Portuguese, but we see also that there are expressions that are native. Regarding the syntax and semantics of the expressions, we have shown that they are used mainly in predicative structures, to attribute a negative property to the subject with the pragmatic function of name calling. We still need to further investigate the possibility of occurrence of dysphemic expressions in modification structures such as *this damn car*, *the idiot* etc. Other pragmatic uses such as maledictions and as blurt interjections were also found. These facts reveal that Libras behaves much like other sign languages in using non manual means to convey expressivity.

There are some topics that we think deserve further exploration. Since the data were collected online, in dictionaries and Youtube channels, we were not able to control diachronic or intergenerational variation, an aspect in which political correctness discussions can influence the use of such signs, since young generations have more access to regular schools and universities. Another issue in this realm is dialectal variation. According to IBGE, there are around 10 million deafs in Brazil, but only 3% declare to use Libras. Even so, it is around 3 million users. For comparison, ASL is supposed to have around 2 million users. So, given the size of our country, we suspect that there is a lot of dialectal variation in the vocabulary, in particular the lexicon of taboo.

Finally, there is an issue of the influence of gestures in sign language semantics. Some authors have been assuming that sign language should not be compared to oral languages, but that the right analogy is between oral languages plus gestures, since sign languages have gestures too (cf. Shlenker; Lamberton; Lamberton, 2025; Sutton-Spence; Napoli, 2025). We see this in Libras clearly in signs like CUZÃO, VAI-TOMAR-NO-CU, SE-FODEU signs which use gestures also used by Brazilian Portuguese speakers. Since a lot of Libras users are bilingual (born hearing of deaf parents or raised by a deaf relative and acquired Libras at home and Brazilian Portuguese with another relatives and school), it is no surprise that this kind of influence is pervasive in this part of the lexicon of the language.

Additional information

Evaluation and author's answer

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EVALUATOR 1

O trabalho aborda um tema interessante que, como os próprios autores dizem, ainda não foi explorado na literatura sobre a libras. Daí sua originalidade e relevância, afinal está tratando de um assunto que normalmente fica à margem dos estudos linguísticos. Fiz alguns apontamentos com o único objetivo de contribuir com a melhoria do trabalho. Espero que os autores os considerem úteis. De maneira geral, peço que deixem os procedimentos metodológicos mais claros e sistematizem melhor os resultados obtidos.

EVALUATOR 2

O artigo traz discussões relevantes sobre expressões taboo em libras. O texto cumpre seu objetivo de apresentar resultados preliminares e discussões sobre termos taboo em Libras (Língua Brasileira de Sinais). Sugiro uma revisão criteriosa do texto para eliminar problemas de escrita acadêmica apontados no texto. O artigo faz ainda uma revisão do tema pontuando trabalhos com outras línguas de sinais. Todavia, o artigo não descreve exatamente como foi feita a metodologia. É mencionado que há consultores, mas não é indicado quantas pessoas e qual seu perfil. Também não há indicação da forma em que essas pessoas são consultadas. Uma metodologia explícita mesmo que haja poucos consultores é importante para iluminar uma área em ampla expansão. Apesar desses pontos que precisam ser ajustados, o artigo traz literatura atual e discussão relevante para área.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to this manuscript.

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Research Protocol and Pre-Registration

The authors confirmed that they evaluated the itineraries proposed by the Equator Network and considered that none of them proved relevant to the research in question. We also inform that the research developed was not pre-registered in an independent institutional repository.

Data Availability Statement

The research data is contained within the manuscript itself and are available publicly in the dictionaries and Youtube channels hyperlinked.

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