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DEFINITENESS IN BRAZILIAN SIGN LANGUAGE: A STUDY ON WEAK AND STRONG DEFINITES

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RESUMO: Este artigo apresenta um estudo sobre o sistema de referência das expressões nominais definidas em Libras (Língua Brasileira de Sinais). Especificamente, investigamos se Libras apresenta diferenças morfossintáticas que marquem a distinção semântica entre definidos fortes (unicamente identificáveis) e definidos fracos (não unicamente identificáveis). As expressões nominais definidas são tradicionalmente vistas como referenciais e unicamente identificáveis (Abbot, 2010; Russel, 1905; Strawson, 1950). Recentemente Carlson e Sussman (2005) apontaram uma nova distinção entre os usos dos definidos do inglês, que seriam classificados como definidos fortes e fracos. Em diversas línguas orais, como português e inglês, não existem diferenças morfossintáticas entre definidos fortes e fracos. Libras, assim como outras línguas de sinais, utiliza uma marcação espacial para referência definida, por isso é possível levantar a hipótese de que Libras marque formalmente as outras categorias de referência. A partir de um experimento de produção, em que sujeitos surdos proficientes em Libras deveriam recontar os vídeos a que assistiam, percebemos uma distinção formal entre o fraco e o forte. Enquanto a expressão nominal definida forte é introduzida e retomada à direita ou à esquerda do falante, espaços que denominamos como determinados, a fraca é introduzida à frente do falante, que nomeamos como espaço neutro, e não há retomada. Dessa forma, cremos que ajudamos a evidenciar e elucidar a distinção entre fortes e fracos. Além disso, esperamos demonstrar que Libras é uma língua promissora para as pesquisas linguísticas, que pode ajudar a elucidar o funcionamento de outras categorias linguísticas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Libras; Definitude; Referência.

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INTRODUCTION

In this article we aim to distinguish between strong and weak definites in Libras (Brazilian Sign Language). We present the results of a production experiment conducted with 7 deaf subjects proficient in Libras.

According to the philosophical tradition and to the formal semantic proposals about spoken languages like Portuguese and English, the definite article would be a feature that shows that the nominal phrase has a unique reference (Strawson, 1950; Russel, 1905). However, Carlson and Sussman (2005) propose a distinction between strong and weak definites based on the fact that weak definites do have a reference but not a uniquely identifiable one.

Since there is lack of descriptions of the determiner system in Libras and since this language has a spatial referential process, such as others sign languages, we are interested to know whether strong and weak referents in Libras are differently marked. We ran a production experiment searching for morphosyntactic features that indicate definiteness in nominal phrases.

This article starts (Section 1) by reviewing the aforementioned semantic phenomena from the classical and the more contemporary literature. Next, (Section 2) we present a description of reference in Libras. After that we describe our experiment (Section 3) and the results (Section 4). We conclude with the final discussion (Section 5) about the importance of our data to the studies on the process of reference in Libras and on the distinction between weak and strong definites.

1. THE DEFINITE PHRASE

As Abbott (2004) claims, the prototypes of definiteness and indefiniteness in English are the definite article *the*, the indefinite article *a/an* and singular noun phrases determined by them. As Abbott (2004) claims, we have prototypes of definiteness and indefiniteness from singular noun phrases in English. When the NPs are determined by the definite article *the*, this article is a prototype of definiteness. When the indefinite article *a/an* are used this is a indefiniteness mark.

Definiteness is marked in diverse ways, the most well-known of them, through definite and indefinite articles and their accompanying noun phrases, such as English definite

the and indefinite *a/an* and the correspondent Portuguese articles *a/o* and *um/uma* alongside their respective plural forms.

The conditions that warrant the correct employment of definite articles in language has a long tradition of studies (c.f. Abbott, 2004, *inter alia*) and has stirred heated debates in the semantic tradition. One of the first full-fledged theories of definiteness was proposed by Bertrand Russel in its classic work “On Denoting” (1905).

In this seminar work, Russel (1905) proposes that the phrase determined by a definite article denotes one definite object, therefore being characterized by what he calls *uniqueness*. The author says that the noun phrase *the x* (*x* being any nominal expression) quantification requires the existence of one and only one entity in the world that is the reference for the expression *x*. One of Russel’s examples is the noun phrase (1), that denotes “a certain man”. This is different from the undetermined phrase like (2), that denotes “not many men, but an ambiguous man” Russel (1905: 479).

(1) The present King of England.

(2) A man.

Later, Strawson (1950: 320) claims that a definite noun phrase (henceforth NP) is used to “mention or refer to some individual person or single object or particular event or place or process”. He called the use of this definite expression of “uniquely referring use”.

Despite the differences in analyses of those two classical philosophers², both maintain the idea that the definite phrases denote a unique referent in the relevant universe. Notwithstanding the heated debated the followed these analyses, the uniqueness view of definite article still holds today as one of main models of its functioning (c.f. Roberts, 2003). This view was complemented by the important work of Heim (1982) that defines and advances the concept of familiarity as one of the main aspects of definite NPs semantics.

According to Heim (1982) the definite article marks familiar referents in discourse. In other words, the definite NP would be an indication of anaphoric expression or reference that is shared by speaker and hearer.

Carlson and Sussman (2005) suggest a further refinement distinguishing between what the authors called strong and weak definites; the former would behave in a way akin to

² While Russel was a proponent of a strict truth condition description notion of definiteness, Strawson defends a more pragmatic view that incorporates NPs use conditions. We cannot develop this interesting discussion for the sake of space, but we refer the interested reader to the original papers.

indefinites than to proper definites. Weak definites have a referent, but not a uniquely identifiable one. The authors exemplify with the sentences in (3) and (4) below³:

- (3) a. Mary went to *the store*.
- b. I'll read *the newspaper* when I get home.
- c. Open *the window*, will you please?
- d. Fred listened to the Red Sox on *the radio*.

- (4) a. Mary went to *the desk*.
- b. I'll read *the book* when I get home.
- c. Open *the cage*, will you please?
- d. Fred listened to the Red Sox over *the headphones*.

They call attention for the differences in reference among (3) and (4) pointing that while in (4) the definite NPs (in italic) denote a singular, specific referent whereas in (3) this reference is “weaker”, they do not require a uniquely identifiable entity to fulfill the reference felicitously.

According to Carlson and Sussman, weak definites occur in specific contexts that reflect in their distribution and in the possibility of referents introduced by weak definites to be referred back by anaphoric expressions. These contexts constitute a set of tests that make it possible to evaluate if a particular definite lacks the uniqueness requirement and, therefore can be characterized as weak (c.f. Schwarz, 2009 for a good summary). The first distributional restriction relates to the fact that weak definites are governed by specific lexical items, compare the examples (5a) and (5b) below:

- (5) a. Mary went to *the restroom*.
- b. Mary went to *the auditorium*.

(5b) refers to a specific place whereas in (5a) *the restroom* does not need a uniquely identifiable referent to be understood. Moreover, even the specific lexical items that can receive a weak interpretation do not allow for this interpretation if the item receives any kind of modification, as illustrated by the contrast in (6):

³ The examples were extracted from Carlson and Sussman (2005: 27).

- (6) a. Mary went to *the restroom*.
b. Mary went to *the professors' restroom*.

In strong readings, lexical items have particular identities while in weak reading this identity is non-specific:

- (7) a. Mary went to *the restroom* vs. *the auditorium*.
b. I need to see *the dentist* vs. *the teacher*.

Another class of test, as mentioned above, relates to the differences in the possibility of the NP to function as the antecedent of an anaphoric expression. Only strong definites allow this anaphoric co-reference. The test that brings this characteristic to light is with the elliptic co-reference in (8) as well as the possibility of disjunctive reference in (9a) compared to (9b), shown below:

- (8) a. Mary went to *the restroom*, and John did too. (Different restrooms, acceptable).
b. Mary went to *the auditorium*, and John did too. (Must be the same auditorium.)
- (9) a. Mary went to *the restroom*, and John went to *the restroom*. (Different restrooms, acceptable).
b. Mary went to *the auditorium*, and John went to *the auditorium*. (Must be the same auditorium.)

The tests with ellipses and anaphora (8 and 9), demonstrate the non-uniqueness property of weak definites. Since the strong reading demands the same referents for the two kind of anaphoric situations. On the weak reading, on contrast, there is no necessary co-reference, and the expressions (the restroom in our example) can felicitously refer to different entities.

In this present work, we aimed to investigate the introduction and co-reference of the definite phrases to shed light on these different referential possibilities in Libras. We designed pairs of experimental sentences, similar to example (9). We hypothesized that the weak and strong would be marked through different spatial configurations. Before to detail our

production experiment, we will discuss the construction of reference in Libras in the next section.

2. REFERENCE IN LIBRAS

There are very few work and investigations about reference in Libras. In one of the pioneering works on the theme, Bernardino (1999), describes the anaphoric reference of personal pronouns. According to the author, if the referents are physically present, the signer just points to their location. If the referents are absent, the signer points to an arbitrary location in space. So, the anaphoric reference requires pointing, looking or body shifting to the previously established location (Figure 1).

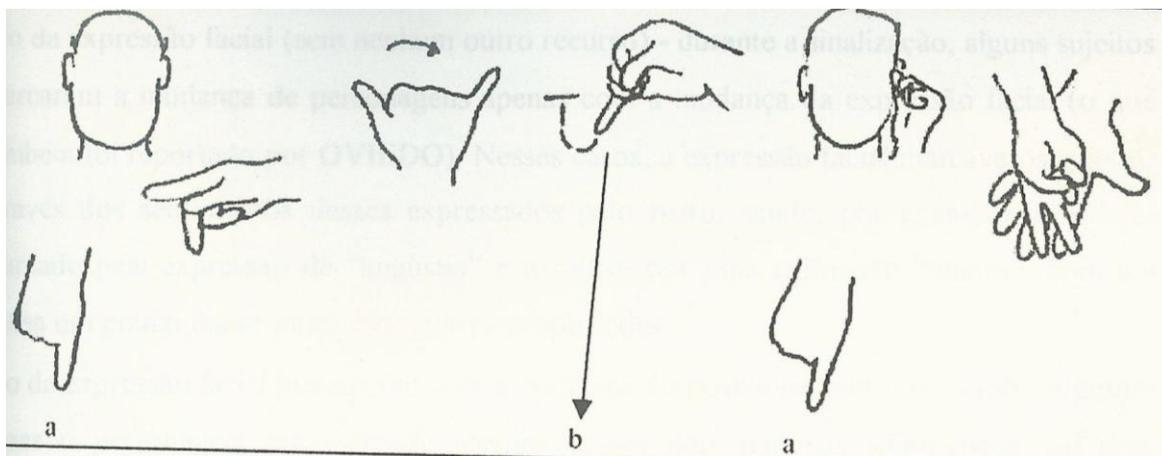


Figure 1 Bernardino, 1999: 145.

IX_a PAULO_a TELL_b IX_b JOÃO_b WIFE_a IX_a FALL
Paulo told João that his [João's] wife fell.

Figure 1 above illustrates this last process. In a., the signer introduced, using dactylology, the proper name “Paulo” and subsequently points to a place in the space (glossed as IX). This point becomes the place where “Paulo” is localized during the current discourse. When “João” is introduced (b) another place must be assigned to him, so the signer points to a different place. Whenever they are mentioning one of these referents again the signer points back to the place previously established.

Ferreira-Brito (1995:116) also claims that the index sign is used to establish reference and co-reference (both anaphoric and cataphoric) in Libras. She asserts that the co-referential process is not that simple; because besides personal, demonstrative and possessive pronouns –

also available in spoken languages –, comparatives, shifting, classifiers constructions and even eye gaze are used⁴.

Quadros (1999) compares the role of this index in Libras and in ASL:

Another important role of pointing in sign languages, such as ASL and LSB, is that of determiner. Bahan, Kegl, MacLaughlin and Neidle (henceforth BKMN) (1995) present evidence for a D(eterminer) P(hrase) in ASL. They conclude that pre-nominal pointing occurs in the head determiner position of DP and functions as a definite determiner. Also, BKMN show that this determiner can be associated with eyegaze to the specific location that is related to the referent. This is observed in LSB as well with the same distribution. (...)Note that the presence of pre-nominal pointing is obligatorily a determiner, but the absence does not require an indefinite reading. (Quadros, 1995:41)

Given these considerations, we can surely assume that Libras uses the space to make reference. Therefore it is a promising ground to explore the distinction between weak and strong definite; especially since this difference in spoken languages, like English and Portuguese, is very subtle due to the lack of morphosyntactic distinctions in their determination systems.

As mentioned, our hypothesis was that, in Libras, the nominal expression forms have different formal marks in space for strong and weak definites. Defining these differences would help to elucidate this semantic phenomenon.

3. THE PRODUCTION EXPERIMENT

We prepared a production experiment to observe if there are morphosyntactical differences between strong and weak definites in Libras. In this experiment, the subjects have to retell pairs of sentences that they watched on video. The recorded sentences presented were carefully controlled for and we will detail its preparation process in next sub-section.

3.1 MATERIALS

We defined 12 target words based on Carlson and Sussman (2005) and Carlson *et al* (2006). The choice of the target words was determined by the fact that they could receive

⁴ Shifting is a process to establish reference by shifting the enunciator's body to the location of the referent (Bernardino, 1999:151). Classifiers are morphophonological complex forms that denote spatial relations and motion events and/or characterize shapes and dimensions of objects (Sandler and Lillo-Martin, 2006:76). The eye gaze is a non-manual expression of object agreement (Neidle *et al*, 2000:64).

strong or weak readings depending on the context they are used. Another important point was that all of them should have a sign in Libras that is already registered in dictionaries.

Each target word was embedded in strong and weak contexts (each context with a pair of sentences). These contexts were initially created in Portuguese. We did it in pairs of sentences because we wanted to verify the first and the second introductions of the target word. One example of our contexts with its respective pairs of sentences is shown in the Table 1:

Target word	Weak Definite	Strong Definite
Televisão (<i>Television</i>)	João viu <u>na televisão</u> a enchente no Rio. Clara também viu <u>na televisão</u> a enchente do Rio. <i>(João saw the flood in Rio on the TV. Clara also saw the flood in Rio on the TV)</i>	João comprou <u>a televisão</u> na loja. Maria ficou feliz com <u>a televisão</u> . <i>(João bought the TV in the store. Maria was happy with the TV)</i>

Table 1 Sample of sentences in Portuguese

As Carlson and Sussman (2005) observed, in the weak condition, there is no co-referentiality: the first and second target word occurrences will not have only one identifiable reference. In the strong condition, on the other hand, the first introduction will denote a uniquely identifiable entity, and, consequently, the second occurrence will co-refer to the first one.

To verify if these contexts are really acceptable in both conditions (strong and weak definiteness) we created a completion task. This task consists in asking subjects to write down continuation to fragment of sentences or texts (Cunha Lima, 2008). 30 undergraduate students were tested; all of them are native speakers of Portuguese.

They received 12 pairs of sentences, and were instructed to complete the second sentence (just initiated) of each pair (a sample is shown in Table 2). Alongside with the 12 experimental targets (6 weak and 6 strong), each subject completed another set of 24 filler sentences used to guarantee that the subjects were not aware of our experimental purposes. The target words were distributed in two lists, so that each subject saw each target word in just one condition, and the target words was presented an even number of times.

Target Word	Weak Definite	Strong Definite
Supermercado (<i>Supermarket</i>)	<p>Julia procura sempre as ofertas do supermercado antes de comprar. Já Alexandre _____.</p> <p><i>Julia always looks for the sales before going to the supermarket But Alexandre _____.</i></p>	<p>A prefeitura interditou o supermercado ano passado. Os clientes _____.</p> <p><i>The city council closed the supermarket last year. The costumers _____.</i></p>

Table 2 Completion task's example

The continuation generated were classified as weak definite, strong definite and others. When the subjects produced a co-referential continuation (either by using NPs or ellipsis) the continuation was categorized as strong. If the continuation did not permit a co-referential interpretation, the continuation was classified as weak. If the answers did not fit in the context or changed the topic, they were classified as others. An example of the typical continuations of answer is shown in Table 3:

Target Word	Weak Definite	Strong Definite
Supermercado (<i>Supermarket</i>)	<p>Júlia procura sempre as ofertas do supermercado antes de comprar. Já Alexandre <u>compra no primeiro supermercado que vai.</u></p> <p><i>Julia always looks for the sales before going to the supermarket But Alexandre <u>shops at the any supermarket.</u></i></p>	<p>A vigilância sanitária interditou o supermercado ano passado. Os clientes <u>ficaram satisfeitos. O supermercado fedia.</u></p> <p><i>The city council closed the supermarket last year. The costumers <u>were happy. The supermarket smelled bad.</u></i></p>

Table 3 Sample continuations for the completion experiment

The result of this task (Table 4) confirmed our hypothesis that definites introduced as strong have more co-reference in the next sentence than the weak ones, those last have more introduction of new referents.

Context	New referent	Co-reference	Others	Total
Strong	8,9%(20)	75,2%(170)	15,9%(36)	100%(226)
Weak	60,9%(112)	12,5%(23)	26,6%(49)	100%(184)

Table 4 Results of completion task by type of occurrences

We analyzed the results statistically, using the Chi-square test. Those results showed that in context that we deemed strong continuations were significantly more probable to elicit expressions that are anaphoric with the first sentence's target word [χ^2 (180) df = 2, p-value < 0.00001]. The weak context also showed a significant pattern favoring absence of anaphora and the introduction of new reference [χ^2 (68), df = 2, p-value > 0.0001].

Once we have confirmed that our context and target words do generate the intended reading, we started to prepare our stimuli in Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) to the experiment. One Portuguese and Libras male bilingual hearer and two deaf signers, who are proficient in Libras, (one male and one female) generated the Libras' adapted versions.

Only the hearer had access to the sentences in Portuguese. He signaled to the deaf and asked them to say how they feel the sentence, if it was good or not, and he asked about their comprehension. Then he asked them to signal the sentence keeping the target word. We did this for the 12 pairs in two conditions (strong and weak).

We videotaped the two deaf signers producing the final version of the sentences. Each one of them performed one of the sentences in each target pair. Besides the 12 experimental targets, 24 pairs of sentences (comprising 48 videos) were recorded to function as fillers. Similarly to what we did in the completion task, each participant was exposed to only one condition of the target word, and the conditions were uniformly counterbalanced. One example (in English) of the sentence pair distribution can be seen in Table 5:

	Woman	Man
Weak Definite	I always close the window with fear of a robbery.	I like to leave the window open when I travel.
Strong Definite	I broke the window.	I paid someone to fix the window.

Table 5 Example of one sentence recorded translated to English. The target word is window

3.2 SUBJECTS

Seven Libras proficient signers (all of them deaf), aged between 21 and 42 years old, 4 male, volunteered for this experiment. They acquired Libras between 03 to 17 years old. The participants were invited following suggestions by UFMG's Libras study group whom asserted the proficiency of those subjects.

It is not easy to find native signers of Libras. According to Costello *et al.* (2008: 77) the notion of the native speaker of a spoken language in a monolingual context is fairly straightforward. Sign languages diverge from this pattern as they are minority languages and they are in very close contact with the majority spoken languages. Moreover, only 5% of deaf children have deaf parents (Bernardino, 2000). So it is difficult to define the native signer.

3.3 PROCEDURES

The experiment was built DMDX⁵ software, in three different scripts. Each script had 12 pairs of experimental sentences and the 24 pairs of fillers. After watching a video with the informed consent translated to Libras, and signing a written version of it, the subjects were instructed in Libras and trained with three practice sentences before starting the experiment. At this point, they can solve any doubts and make questions about the experiments about the experiment. Afterwards, subjects are left alone to continue the experiment.

After each pair of sentences was presented, a picture of a camera appeared indicating to the subject to start retelling what he has just seen. He could take as long as he wanted to sign his understanding of the previous pair of sentences. Once he is ready to proceed, he pressed the space button and a new pair of sentences started randomly). The sequence is illustrated in figures 2, 3 and 4 below:

⁵ Free download: <http://www.u.arizona.edu/~kforster/dmdx/dmdx.htm>.



Figure 2 One video of the pair snapshot. The target word is newspaper.



Figure 3 The second video of the pair snapshot. The target word is newspaper.



Figure 4 The sign to start to retell what they saw. When it shows up, they looked at the camera e started the Libras.

4. RESULTS

The recorded video were annotated and analyzed with the aid of ELAN⁶, a software designed to study the video. A typical Elan screen is shown in Figure 5:

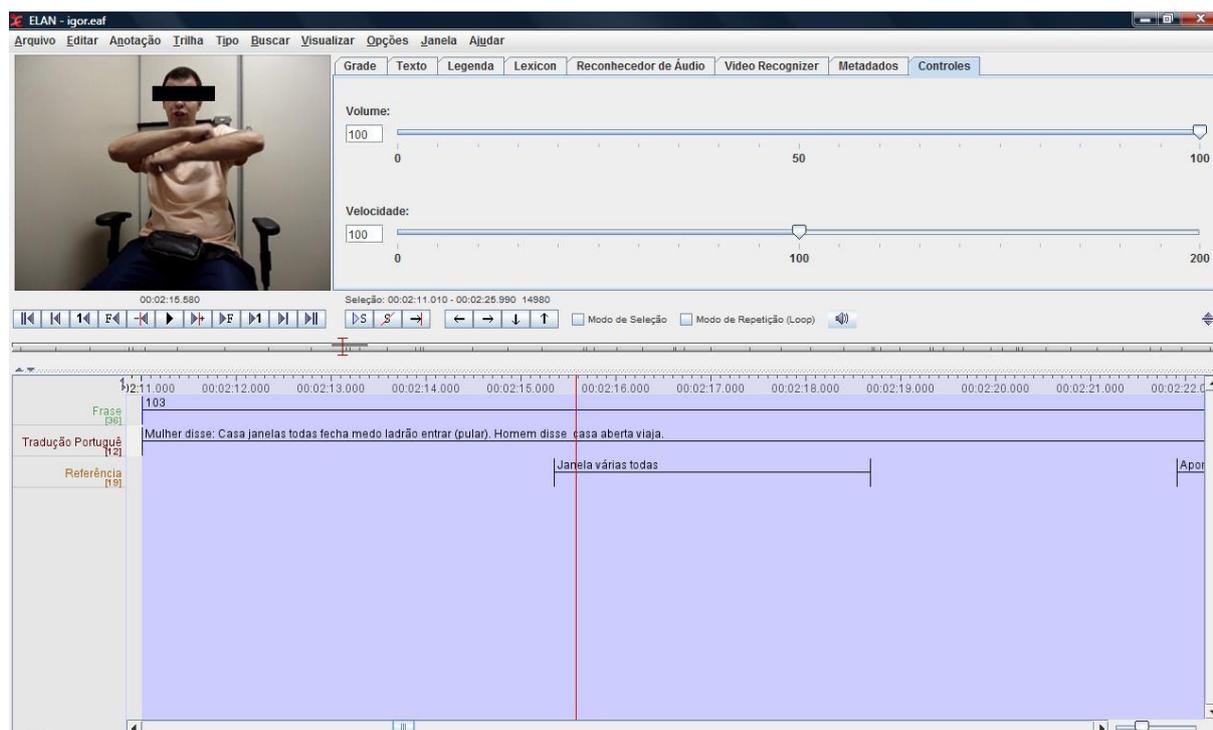


Figure 5 Elan snapshot.

Results indicate that the expression of definiteness in Libras is mostly special, where the sign is articulated. We observed the first and the second introduction of the target words, searching for morphosyntactical differences and if co-reference happened in the second one. It seems that weak and strong referents are related to different spatial positioning in the moment of introduction. This is further confirmed by the second occurrence of the target word. In weak condition it seems that there is no co-reference and a new sign is introduced regardless the previous mention. The same does not hold for the strong reference: in this case the second occurrence is made by pointing back to the initial place of introduction.

To test if this initial observation was on the right track, we categorized each of the subject productions according to the space used to introduce the referent and, when

⁶ Free download: <http://www.lat-mpi.eu/tools/elan/>.

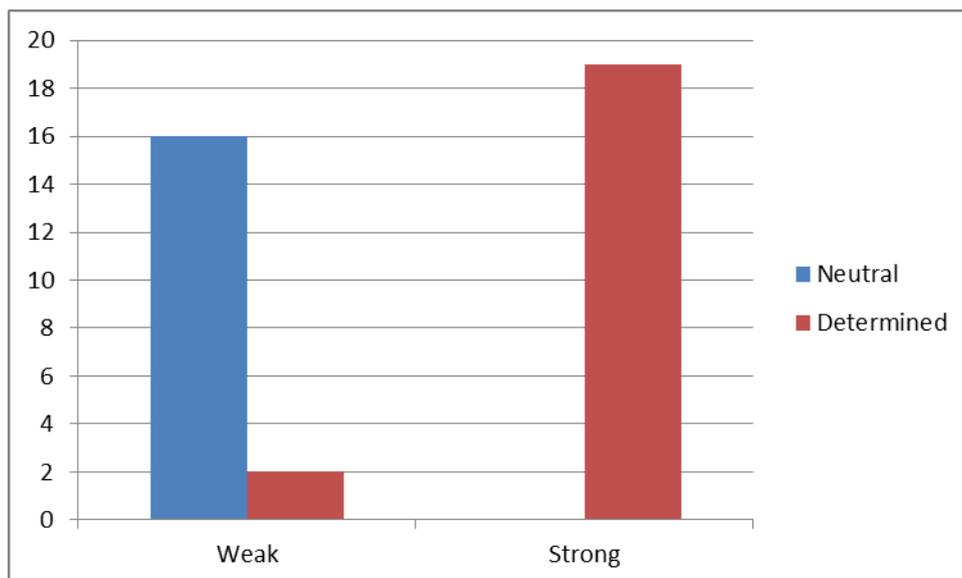
appropriate, to refer back to it. Spaces of were classified, thus, in two categories: neutral and determined.

In what we call determined space, signs are introduced either to the right or left side of the signers. In neutral spaces, on the other hand, items are introduced using the space right in the front of the signer. Figures (6) and (7) below, one of the authors illustrates the lexical item TELEVISION signed on both neutral and determined spaces.



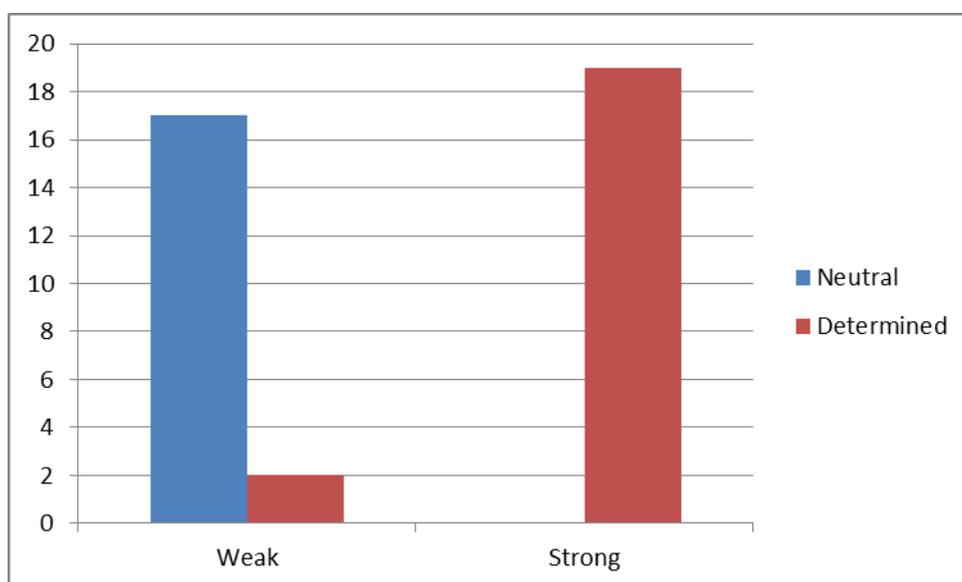
Figure 6 TELEVISION on neutral space. **Figure 7** TELEVISION on determined space.

We counted and categorized both the first and the second occurrences of the target word and compared the results statistically using the test Chi-square. Results show a clear pattern, strong definites are introduced using the determine space [$\chi^2(19)$, $df = 1$, $p\text{-value} < 0.0001$] as shown in graphic 1:



Graphic 1 Proportion of neutral and determined space in the first occurrence of the target word.

The second occurrence exhibits the same pattern, further confirming our hypothesis: the strong occurrences are linked to the determined space whereas the weak ones elicited a new introduction of the target sign in the neutral space [χ^2 (10.9), $df = 1$, $p\text{-value} < 0.0001$]. Graphic 2 displays the distribution of determined and neutral spaces for this last target words.



Graphic 2 Proportion of neutral and determined space in the second occurrence of the target word.

DISCUSSION

We found an overt distinction between weak and strong definites in Libras. This sign language has a clear spatial mechanism to distinguish this aspect of definiteness of NPs. To our knowledge, this is the first language which makes a morphosyntactic distinction to this semantic issue⁷. As we said, in oral languages as Portuguese and English, these questions about the reference theory couldn't be elucidated.

Our results show that Libras, as others sign languages, is an extremely promising research source to help us to comprehend questions about reference alongside of a huge variety of linguistic problems. Furthermore, it is very important to the authors to contribute with consistent linguistic and experimental descriptions of Libras as means to enrich the current literature on the subject, therefore helping to fill the existent gaps and to help the Libras signaling community to comprehend how their own language works.

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⁷ Schwarz (2009) has found another distinction for German related to the familiarity aspect of definiteness so, to be clear, ours is not the first morphosyntactic uncovered difference among definites, but is probably the first morphosyntactic distinction of this phenomenon.

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ABSTRACT: This article presents a study on definiteness in Libras (Brazilian Sign Language). More specifically, we aim to identify if there are, in Libras, morphosyntactic differences that mark the semantic distinction between strong definites (uniquely identifiable) and weak definites (more akin to indefinite expressions). The definite NPs are traditionally viewed as referential and uniquely identifiable (Abbot, 2010; Russel, 1905; Strawson, 1950). Recently Carlson and Sussman (2005) pointed a new distinction between the definites in English and proposed to classify them in strong and weak definites. Libras, like other sign languages, has a spatial marking that indicates the definite reference; thus, it is possible to hypothesize that Libras also formally marks the other categories of reference. Based on a production experiment, in which Libras proficient deaf subjects were asked to retell sentences presented to them on video, we noticed a formal distinction between weak and strong definites. While strong definite NPs are introduced and referred back to on the right or the left side of the signer, spaces that we call determined spaces; the weak ones are introduced right in front of the signer, what we call the neutral space, and there is no co-reference. Moreover, we hope to demonstrate that Libras is a promising ground for the linguistic studies, and that it can help to elucidate how other linguistic categories work.

KEYWORDS: Libras; Definiteness; Reference.

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