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Libras: An official language? A discursive analysis of the 'status' of Brazilian Sign Language in Brazilian states /

Libras: ¿Lengua oficial? Un análisis discursivo del estatus de la Lengua de Señas Brasileña en los estados brasileños

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the political status of Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) in 21 Brazilian states and the Federal District with laws recognizing Libras, investigating how the designations and functions attributed to the language have shifted in legislation between 1991 and 2026. The study is based on the area of Language Policy and the socio-anthropological perspective of deafness. Methodologically, a documentary research was carried out, with qualitative analysis of the terms and meanings present in the laws of subnational entities. The results reveal a historical shift in the legal framework: from an initial clinical and welfare-oriented view, which treated Libras as "gestures" or "means of communication", to an understanding of the language as a linguistic system of a visual-motor nature and its own grammar. However, the analysis points out that, despite the robust legal framework, the effective guarantee of linguistic rights and the protagonism of the Deaf community(ies) still face significant barriers in social practice. It is concluded that the recognition of Libras (Brazilian Sign Language) was a crucial step, but full Deaf citizenship depends on overcoming remaining ideologies that limit the linguistic autonomy of these individuals.
KEYWORDS: Libras; Language Policy; State Legislation; Deaf Community(ies); Bilingualism.

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa o status político da Língua Brasileira de Sinais (Libras) em 21 estados brasileiros e no Distrito Federal com leis de reconhecimento da Libras, investigando como as designações e funções atribuídas à língua se deslocaram nas legislações entre 1991 e 2026. O estudo fundamenta-se na área da Política Linguística e na perspectiva socioantropológica da surdez. Metodologicamente, realizou-se uma pesquisa documental, com análise qualitativa dos termos e sentidos presentes nas leis dos entes subnacionais. Os resultados revelam um deslocamento histórico nos marcos legais: de uma visão inicial clínica e assistencialista, que tratava a Libras como "linguagem gestual" ou "meio de comunicação", para uma compreensão da língua como sistema linguístico de natureza visual-motora e gramática própria. Contudo, a análise aponta que, apesar do arcabouço legal, a garantia efetiva dos direitos

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linguísticos e o protagonismo da(s) comunidade(s) Surda(s) ainda enfrentam barreiras significativas na prática social. Conclui-se que o reconhecimento da Libras foi um passo crucial, mas a plena cidadania Surda depende da superação de ideologias remanescentes que limitam a autonomia linguística desses sujeitos.
PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Libras; Política Linguística; Legislação Estadual; Comunidade(s) Surda(s); Bilinguismo.

1 Initial considerations

There is a constant misconception in saying that Libras is one of the official languages of Brazil since the approval, in 2002, of Law No. 10,436, which deals with the Brazilian Sign Language at the federal level. But what would be an official language?

As is widely known, a country can have one or more official languages[1], but for this to occur it is necessary to have a legal instrument that declares it or even a tacit agreement in its society. If there is an instrument, as with Portuguese in Brazil, we say that a language is the official de *jure* language. On the other hand, if there is no legal instrument, but a certain society recognizes a language as official, as was the case with English in the United States[2], we say that this language is *a de facto* official language.

In the case of Libras, in Brazil, there is not, at least yet[3], an instrument that makes it official. The Federal Constitution, in its article 13, expressly states that only "the Portuguese language is the official language of the Federative Republic of Brazil". Libras does not seem to us to be a *de facto* official language either, since it is not yet fully disseminated throughout the country, being far from the treatment given by the State and society to the Portuguese language.

Considering, then, what is expressed in Law No. 10,436/2002, we can say that, in Brazil, Libras has the *status* of "legal means of communication and expression". But is this the only function given to Libras in Brazil? Our objective with this work is to survey how Libras is designated in state laws and, subsequently, to analyze what these laws understand a sign language to be, of whom or for whom this language is and its political *status* in each Brazilian states. However, in

[1] Some examples of officially monolingual countries are France and Japan. Examples of bilingual are Belgium and Canada and of officially multilingual are South Africa and India.
[2] Since the independence of the United States in 1776, federal legislation has not defined English as the official language of the country. This scenario changed on March 1st, 2025, with the publication of a presidential decree during the administration of President Donald Trump.
[3] Currently, in the National Congress, there are some bills or constitutional amendments that aim to expand the *status* of Libras in Brazil. Among them are Bill No. 5,961/2019, which proposes the mandatory teaching of Libras to listeners in schools and Constitutional Amendment Project No. 12/2021 that makes Libras, the official language of Brazil, alongside the Portuguese language.

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order to start this work, it is necessary to have some information about Language Policy, the area in which our research is inserted.

2 Some notes on Language Policy

Language Policy as a field of study emerged in the 1950s and 1960s in the context of the decolonization of Africa, Asia and Oceania with the concern of what would be the official language of the newly independent countries. However, as Ricento (2000 apud Hornberger, 2006, p. 26-27) shows, in the following decades other themes gained importance in the area and attracted new researchers such as linguistic minorities, linguistic rights, immigration and education.

Historically, a framework stands out in the field and is perhaps the most used in research involving the area of Language Policy. And this framework is also important for the approach we will make to the state laws on Libras in Brazil. It is about the identification and categorization of language policies[4] as *status*, corpus, acquisition and structuring language planning. The first two categories were initially thought of by Kloss (1968; 1969) in the 1960s. For this author, language policies could be divided into those of status, aimed at intervening in the function that language plays in society, and those of corpus, aimed at intervening in the language itself, that is, in its writing, grammar or lexicon. The third category, the language acquisition planning, was developed by Cooper (1997 [1989]), years later, in a way of highlighting among the language status planning those aimed at teaching with the objective of increasing the number of users of a given language. The fourth, language structuring planning, was thought of by us on another occasion (Barbosa da Silva, 2024), when we analyzed language policies for Indigenous peoples in Brazil. This category would include the creation of state bodies or private entities with the competence or objective of managing the language policies of a State or a society.

In relation to this typology, we can say that the state laws on Libras can be considered examples of status planning because they expand the social importance of this language within the states that approved them. This same category includes policies that declare a certain language official or ensure its social function, enabling its use in areas such as education and

[4] We differentiate the scientific field of Language Policy (in capital letters) from its object of study (in lowercase).

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telecommunications. This is the case of Libras, already used in the bilingual education of the Deaf, in institutional communication and in official public broadcasts.

Continuing with regard to status planning, in Brazil, as we have already said, according to the 1988 Federal Constitution it has only one official language: Portuguese. But since 2002, some municipalities and states have declared other languages as co-official in their jurisdictions, in a way to expand the social function of these languages in relation to the Portuguese language, which remains official. The first municipality to do so was São Gabriel da Cachoeira (Amazonas state), in 2002, when it declared three indigenous oral languages official: Tukano, Nheengatu and Baniwa[5]. The first state to carry out this procedure was Amazonas, which declared 16 Indigenous oral languages as co-official. Subsequently, other municipalities and states followed with the declaration of immigrant oral languages, other Indigenous oral and sign languages. Examples of these groups are the Terena Sign Language, declared co-official alongside the Terena Oral Language, and the Kinikinau Oral Language in the municipality of Miranda (Mato Grosso do Sul state) through Law No. 1,538/2023 and the Pataxó Sign Language, declared co-official alongside the Patxôhã Language in the municipality of Santa Cruz Cabrália (Bahia state) through Law No. 776/2025. Let's see, at this point, the state laws on Libras.

3 State laws on Libras and our methodology

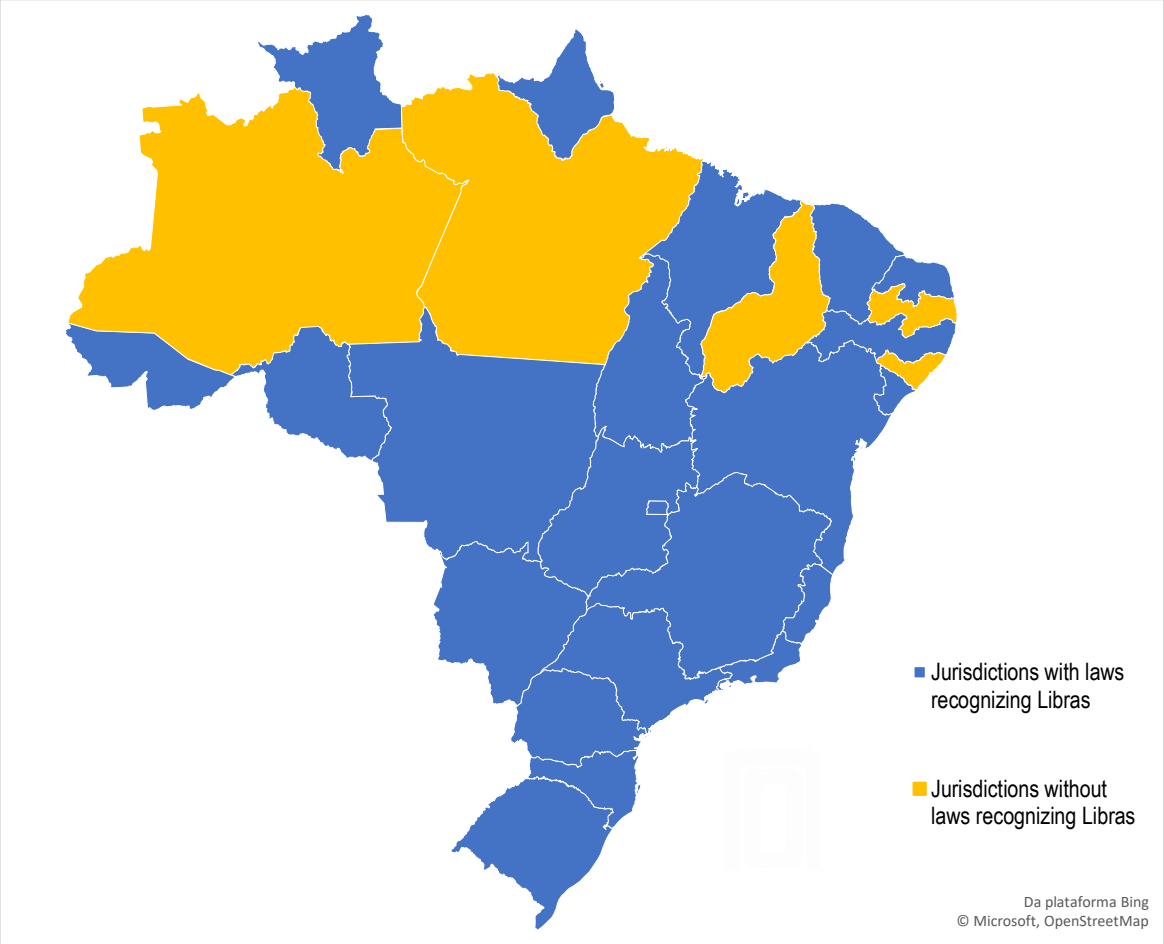
Conducting a thorough search on the portals of the legislative bodies of the subnational units in Brazil, we identified dozens of legal instruments that provide for the recognition of Libras, that deal with accessibility and that determine the teaching and/or the provision of services in Libras. Among so many provisions, we chose to focus on those of recognition of Libras, as they are laws that dialogue with the Libras National Law (Law No. 10,436/2002), even though they were approved before and after it. Below, we present Map 1 with 21 states and the Federal District with Libras recognition laws.

[5] Subsequently, in November 14th 2017, the Yanomami was also co-officialized in São Gabriel da Cachoeira by Law No. 084.

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Map 1: Federative units and the laws of Libras recognition



Source: Prepared by the author based on state laws.

In Map 1, we notice that only the Alagoas, Amazonas, Pará, Paraíba and Piauí states so far do not have legislation that addresses the recognition of Libras[6]. We consider Libras recognition laws to be those norms with the main declaratory objective of recognizing a social function to Libras. Thus, a distinction is noted in the locutionary act[7]. While the recognition laws have a declarative

[6] Some of these states have accessibility and bilingual education laws for the Deaf that reproduce the meaning of Libras from the recognition laws that we will show below. These states and laws are: Alagoas (Law No. 8,303/2020); Amazonas (Law No. 7,792/2025); Pará (Law No. 11,185/2025); Paraíba (Law No. 12,528/2022) and Piauí (Law No. 7,444/2021). However, these norms would not fall into the category of recognition laws, as this would not be their main objective. The definition of Libras in these rules occurs precisely to legally specify what Libras would be. The discursive functioning, therefore, is different.

[7] We used it as a way to differentiate a recognition law from the others, through Austin's theory of speech acts (1990 [1955]). According to this theory, "to say is to speak" and it is not only to describe the world, but to perform actions. Austin (1990 [1955]), thus identifies three speech acts: locutionary act, the physical act of emitting sounds and words with meaning; illocutionary act, the intention or strength of the speaker when saying something (promising, commanding, warning) and; perlocutionary act, the effect produced on the listener (to convince, frighten, cheer).

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effect, that is, to change reality, the others have an assertive effect, that is, to affirm something. Next, in Chart 1, we list the states with Libras recognition laws in order of approval of that law[8], as well as with the discursive sequence that deals with the designation given to Libras in the state, translated by us.

Chart 1: Discursive sequences about Libras in Brazilian states and Federal District laws

State	Law	Discursive sequence
1st Minas Gerais (MG)	Law No. 10,379, January 10th, 1991.	It officially recognizes, in the Minas Gerais state, as a means of objective communication and current use, the sign language codified in the Brazilian Sign Language – LIBRAS. (...) Art. 1. The Minas Gerais state officially recognizes the sign language codified in the Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS - and other resources of expression associated with it, as a means of objective communication and current use.
2nd Goiás (GO)	Law No. 12,081, August 30th, 1993.	Art. 1. The Goiás state officially recognizes the sign language codified in the Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS and other resources of expression associated with it, as a means of objective communication and current use.
3rd Espírito Santo (ES)	Law No. 5,198, March 25th, 1996.	Art. 1. The Espírito Santo state officially recognizes the sign language codified in the Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS - and other resources of expression associated with it, as a means of objective communication and current use
4th Mato Grosso do Sul (MS)	Law No. 1,693, September 12th, 1996.	Art. 1. The Mato Grosso do Sul state officially recognizes the sign language codified in the Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS, as a means of objective communication in current use.
5th Paraná (PR)	Law No. 12,095, March 11th, 1998, with the first article repealed by Law No. 18,419, January 7th, 2015, which establishes the Statute of Persons with Disabilities of the Paraná State.	In 1998: Art. 1. The Paraná state officially recognizes sign language codified in the Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS - and other resources of expression associated with it, as a means of objective communication and current use. Sole Paragraph. Brazilian Sign Language is understood as the means of communication of a visual-motor nature, with its own grammatical structure, originating from communities of Deaf people. And the form of expression of the Deaf and their natural language. In 2015: Art. 192. The Paraná state officially recognizes LIBRAS and other resources of expression associated with it, as means of objective communication and current use. Paragraph 1. Brazilian Sign Language - Libras - is understood as the form of communication and expression, in which the linguistic system of a visual motor nature, with its own grammatical structure, constitutes a linguistic system for the transmission of ideas and facts, originating from communities of Deaf people in Brazil.
6th Rio de Janeiro (RJ)	Law No. 3195, March 15th, 1999.	Provides for the recognition of LIBRAS (Brazilian Sign Language), in the Rio de Janeiro state, for people with hearing impairment and deals with other provisions. (...)

[8] For this research, we did not consider, therefore, when the bill was presented, nor the path of changes that the bill may have undergone during the process in each legislative body.

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		Art. 1. To recognize the Brazilian Sign Language LIBRAS, as a means of objective communication and current use by the Deaf community, throughout the territory of the Rio de Janeiro state.
7th Pernambuco (PE)	Law No. 11,686, October 18th, 1999, as amended by Law No. 16,980, July 21th, 2020.	In 1999: Officially recognizes in the Pernambuco state, as a means of objective communication and current use, the Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS, and provides for the implementation of this as an official language in the Public School Network for the Deaf. (...) Art. 1. The Pernambuco state officially recognizes the sign language codified in the Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS, and other resources of expression associated with it, as a means of objective communication and current use. Sole Paragraph. Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS is understood as the means of communication of a visual-motor nature, with its own grammatical structure, originating from communities of Deaf people. It is the Deaf person's form of expression and their natural language. In 2020: Sole paragraph. Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS is understood as the means of communication of a visual-motor nature, with its own grammatical structure, originating from communities of Deaf people, constituting the form of expression of the Deaf person and their natural language.
8th Rio Grande do Sul (RS)	Law No. 11,405, December 31th, 1999.	Provides for the officialization of LIBRAS – Brazilian Sign Language and deals with other provisions. (...) Art. 1. LIBRAS - Brazilian Sign Language and the other resources of expression associated with it are hereby recognized within the scope of the Rio Grande do Sul state, as means of objective communication and current use. Sole Paragraph. Brazilian Sign Language is understood to be the means of communication of a visual and gestural nature, with its own grammatical structure, originating from a community of Deaf people in Brazil, being the form of expression of the hearing impaired and their natural language.
9th Ceará (CE)	Law No. 13,100, January 12th, 2001.	Officially recognizes in the Ceará state as a means of objective communication and current use the Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS, and provides for the implementation of LIBRAS as an official language in the public school system for the Deaf. (...) Art. 1. The Ceará state officially recognizes the sign language encoded in the Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS, and other resources of expression associated with it as a means of objective communication and current use. Sole Paragraph. Brazilian Sign Language is understood as the means of communication of a visual motor nature, with its own grammatical structure, originating from communities of Deaf people. It is the Deaf person's form of expression and their natural language.
10th Santa Catarina (SC)	Law No. 11,869, September 6th, 2001, amended by Law No. 15,925, December 6th, 2012, by Law No. 17,292, of	In 2001: Officially recognizes, in the Santa Catarina state, the sign language encoded in the Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS - and other resources of expression associated with it, as a means of objective communication and current use. In 2012: Officially recognizes, in the Santa Catarina state, as a means of communication and expression, the Brazilian Sign Language (LIBRAS) and other resources of expression associated with it." (...)

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	October 19th, 2017 and by Law No. 19,031, July 26th, 2024.	In 2001: Art. 1. Sign language codified in the Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS - and other resources of expression associated with it are officially recognized in the Santa Catarina state of as a means of objective communication and current use. Sole Paragraph. Brazilian Sign Language is understood as the means of communication of a motor nature and visual space, with its own grammatical structure, originating from communities of Deaf people, being the form of expression of the Deaf and their natural language. In 2017: Art. 1. Sign language encoded in the Brazilian Sign Language (LIBRAS) and other resources of expression associated with it are officially recognized in the Santa Catarina state as a means of objective communication and current use. Sole Paragraph. LIBRAS is defined as the means of communication of a motor nature and visual space, with its own grammatical structure, originating from communities of Deaf people, being the form of expression of the Deaf and their natural language. In 2024: Sole paragraph. Libras is defined as the form of communication and expression, in which the linguistic system of a visual-motor nature, with its own grammatical structure, constitutes a linguistic system for the transmission of ideas and facts, originating from communities of Deaf people in Brazil.
11th São Paulo (SP)	Law No. 10,958, November 27th, 2001, consolidated by Law No. 12,907, April 15th, 2008.	In 2001: Makes the Brazilian Sign Language (LIBRAS) official and makes other provisions. (...) Art. 1. The Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS - and the other resources of expression associated with it are officially recognized as a means of objective communication and current use of the Deaf Community. Sole Paragraph. Resources of expression associated mean gestural and visual communication with its own grammatical structure, whose uniqueness may be incorporated into the cultural heritage of the Nation. In 2008: Art. 77. The Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS and the other resources of expression associated with it are officially recognized as a means of objective communication and current use by the Deaf community. Sole Paragraph. Expression resources associated with LIBRAS are understood as gestural and visual communication with its own grammatical structure, whose uniqueness can be incorporated into the cultural heritage of the Nation.
12th Roraima (RR)	Law No. 353, November 21th, 2002.	Provides for the Libras (Brazilian Sign Language) recognition, in the Roraima state, for people with hearing impairment and deals with other provisions. (...) Art. 1. To recognize the Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS, as a means of objective communication and current use by the Deaf community, throughout the territory of the Roraima state.
13th Mato Grosso (MT)	Law No. 7831, December 13th, 2002.	Provides for the official recognition, in the Mato Grosso state, of the Brazilian Sign Language - Libras, as a means of objective communication and current use. (...) Art. 1. The Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS is officially recognized by the Mato Grosso state as a means of communication and expression.

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		Sole Paragraph. Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS is understood to be the form of communication and expression in which the linguistic system of a visual-motor nature, with its own grammatical structure, constitutes a linguistic system for the transmission of ideas and facts, originating from communities of Deaf people in Brazil.
14th Acre (AC)	Law No. 1487, January 24th, 2003.	Establishes the Brazilian Sign Language – Libras in the Acre state and deals with other provisions. (...) Art. 1. The Brazilian Sign Language - Libras and other resources of expression associated with it are hereby established in the Acre state, as a legal means of communication and expression. Sole Paragraph. Brazilian Sign Language - Libras is understood as the form of communication and expression in which the linguistic system of a visual-motor nature, with its own grammatical structure, constitutes the transmission of ideas and facts from communities of Deaf people.
15th Amapá (AP)	Law No. 834, May 27th, 2004.	Art. 1. The Brazilian Sign Language (LIBRAS), which is the natural language of the Deaf, is officially recognized by the Amapá state as a means of objective communication in current use.
16th Maranhão (MA)	Law No. 8708, November 16th, 2007.	Art. 1. The Maranhão state officially recognizes the sign language codified in the Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS, and other resources of expression associated with it, as a means of objective communication and current use.
17th Rio Grande do Norte (RN)	Law No. 9,249, July 15th, 2009.	Provides for the officialization, within the scope of this State, of the Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS and deals with other provisions. (...) Art. 1. The Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS, and other resources of expression associated with it, is recognized as a legal means of communication for the Deaf in the Rio Grande do Norte state. Paragraph 1. Brazilian Sign Language is understood as the form of communication and expression, the linguistic system of a visual-motor nature, with its own grammatical structure, constituting a way of transmitting ideas and facts and other resources of codified gestural expression, originating from the Deaf communities of Brazil.
18th Sergipe (SE)	Law No. 7,317, December 19th, 2011.	Provides for the use of the Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS, in the State of Sergipe, and provides related provisions. (...) Art. 1. The Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS, and other resources of expression associated with it, are recognized as a legal means of communication and expression. Sole Paragraph. The Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS is understood as the form of communication and expression in which the linguistic system of visual-motor nature, with its own grammatical structure, constitutes a linguistic system for the transmission of ideas and facts, originating from communities of Deaf people in Brazil. Art. 2. Institutionalized forms of support for the use and dissemination of the Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS must be guaranteed, as a means of objective communication and current use by the Deaf.
19th Tocantins (TO)	Law No. 3,367, April 24th, 2018.	Provides for the officialization of the Brazilian Sign Language – LIBRAS within the Tocantins state of and provides for other provisions. (...)

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		Art. 1. The Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS, and other resources of expression associated with it, is recognized as a legal means of communication for the Deaf in the Tocantins state. Paragraph 1. Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS is understood as the form of communication and expression, the linguistic system of a visual-motor nature, with its own grammatical structure, constituting a way of transmitting ideas, factors and other resources of codified gestural expression, originating from the Deaf communities of Brazil.
20th Rondônia (RO)	Law No. 5,579, July 25th, 2023.	Recognizes the Brazilian Sign Language LIBRAS officially within the Rondônia state. (...) Art. 1. The Brazilian Sign Language LIBRAS, and other resources of expression associated with it, are recognized in the Rondônia state as a language of instruction and a means of objective communication and of current use by Deaf communities. Sole Paragraph. The Brazilian Sign Language LIBRAS is understood as the form of communication and expression in which the linguistic system of a visual-spatial nature, with its own grammatical structure, constitutes a mode of transmission of ideas and facts, originating from communities of Deaf people in Brazil, according to Federal Law No. 10.436, of April 24, 2002.
21st Federal District (DF)	Law No. 7,823, December 17th, 2025.	Art. 1. The Brazilian Sign Language - Libras and other resources of expression associated with it are hereby recognized in the Federal District as a legal means of communication and expression, under the terms of Federal Law No. 10,436, April 24th, 2002, and its regulations.
22nd Bahia (BA)	Law No. 15,143, May 4th, 2026.	Art. 1. The Brazilian Sign Language - Libras and other resources of expression associated with it are recognized as a legal means of communication and expression in the Bahia state, as a language of instruction and a means of objective communication and current use by the Deaf community or people with hearing impairment. Sole Paragraph. Brazilian Sign Language - Libras is understood as the means of communication of a visual-motor nature, with its own grammatical structure, originating from Deaf communities, constituting the form of expression of the Deaf or hearing impaired person and their natural language.

Source: Prepared by the author based on state laws.

Immediately, we can see in the laws, marks of a very common practice in the legislative sphere, that of sharing ideas and bills by political agents from different legislative bodies. Therefore, we infer that many of these laws have similarities, but beyond the similarities, what interests us most here are the changes in meanings that have occurred over the years, from the approval of the first law in Minas Gerais, in 1991, to the last one in Bahia, in 2026.

A linguistic norm aims to modify a certain sociolinguistic situation, from A to B. This means that every linguistic norm, such as those in our *research corpus*, presupposes what a language is and aims to modify that language to achieve a given purpose. Cooper (1997 [1989]), on the other hand, when studying definitions of language policies, asks the following self-reflexive question:

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"who plans what, for whom and how", highlighting the importance of the subject in this policy. That said, the meanings of language and of the speaking subject and status become imperative in this process. And in order to analyze them, we will take the designation as the way in which subjects and objects are named and ideologically constructed in discourse (Pêcheux, 2009 [1975]; Orlandi, 2007 [1999]).

From these notions and from our first reading of the corpus, we understand that in these state laws there would be meanings of sign language, of speaking subject and of the social function of sign language that have been shifting over the almost 30 years of documents approved by the state and the Federal District legislatures. What we try to show is that there is an interdiscourse (Pêcheux, 2009 [1975]; Orlandi, 2007 [1999]) on what sign language is, the speaking subject and the social function of sign language that moves over time in the Brazilian enunciative space[9], although not in a progressive, or even uniform, movement.

Our analysis, therefore, is organized in three parts, according to the objective of this research, on how Libras and its speaking subjects are designated and on the status of this language based on these norms.

4 Analyzing meanings in laws

Let us begin our analysis by first observing the designations of sign language. In the first provision to address the subject, Law No. 10,379/1991, in its first article it is stated that “The Minas Gerais state officially recognizes the sign language codified in the Brazilian Sign Language - LIBRAS - and other resources of expression associated with it, as a means of objective communication and current use” (Minas Gerais, 1991). In this sequence, reproduced in laws of other states, three points draw our attention: a) the expression “sign language”; b) other resources associated with Libras and c) Libras as a means of objective communication and current use.

In Portuguese, unlike in English, there are two distinct words to designate two different senses of the word “language”. In Portuguese, “língua” refers to the verbal language used by

[9] We say Brazilian enunciative space, because from the social practice of sharing ideas and legislative projects, we understand that an enunciative space of its own has been created, in which meanings circulate, regardless of the federative unit.

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human. “Linguagem”, on the other hand, encompasses all forms of language – verbal or non-verbal – such as human languages as well as music, painting, and gestures. In these early state laws, we observe that sign language is designated in Portuguese as “linguagem gestural” rather than as “língua gestural” or “língua de sinais”. By referring to Libras as a “linguagem”, its linguistic character is denied, bringing it closer to other forms of language such as mime and gestures. We know that this does not occur, however, with other languages. For example, in Portuguese we do not usually refer to the majority oral language spoken in Brazil, as “linguagem portuguesa” or even linguagem brasileira”.

Moving on to the second point, if we consider the context of the time, in the 1980s and early 1990s, in Brazil, there was a strong influence of the philosophy of Total Communication. This philosophy, as stated by Skliar (1998, p. 53), emerges in opposition to Oralism[10], privileging “communication, any form of communication, above any other objective”. Sign languages still faced problems in recognizing their linguistic character. Precisely because of this, Libras is also presented in the 1991 Minas Gerais legislation as one more among many possible forms of communication for the Deaf, which could be associated with it.

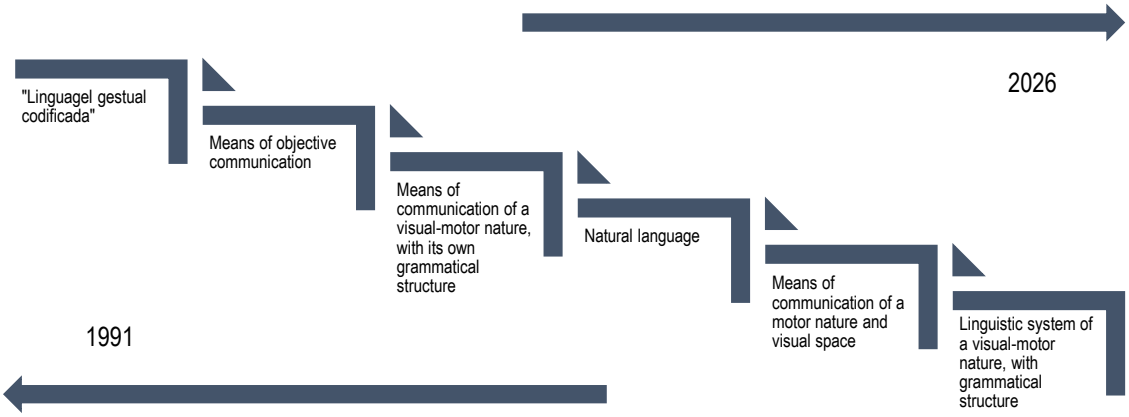
Regarding the third point, the use in Law No. 10,379/1991 of the expression “means of objective communication and current use”, it is interesting to think about the need to highlight only the communicative function of Libras. The communicative function is emphasized to the detriment of the cultural, identity, artistic and literary functions, thus denying part of the linguistic rights to the Deaf. Such a statement, of evidencing the practical and instrumental function of Libras in access to public services, ends up masking and reinforcing a prejudice that is still quite common, of Libras as a minor language, a means capable only of facilitating the communication of Deaf people.

Continuing our analysis, we observed the displacements around the meaning of this meaning for sign language, as can be seen in Figure 1, below.

[10] The Oralism philosophy defends the acquisition by the Deaf of an oral language in the spoken modality. According to Quadros (1997, p. 26), Oralism “is considered a social imposition of a linguistic majority (the speakers of oral languages) on a linguistic minority without expression before the listening community”.

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Figure 1: Libras designations in state and Federal District laws



Source: Prepared by the author.

From “linguagem gestual codificada” (MG, GO, ES, PR, PE, CE, SC, MA) to “means of objective communication” (MG, GO, ES, MS, PR, RJ, PE, CE, SC, SP, RR, MT, AP, MA, RN, SE, RO), one slips to “means of communication of a visual-motor nature, with its own grammatical structure” (PR, PE, RS, CE, SP, RR, MS, AC, RN, SE, TO, RO, BA), “natural language” (PR, PE, RS, CE, AP), “means of communication of a motor nature and visual space” (SC) and “linguistic system of a visual-motor nature, with grammatical structure” (MT, AC, RN, SE, TO).

In the state laws, we perceive a clash of meanings in which a transition between dominant meanings in different periods, related to philosophies on the education of the Deaf, from Total Communication to Bilingualism, is marked in the discourse of these norms. In Paraná, with Law No. 12,095/1998, we noticed, for the first time in a state provision, the Libras meaning as a “língua”, although the same norm still contains the Libras meaning as a “linguagem gestual”. This law states that Libras is the “means of communication of a visual-motor nature, with its own grammatical structure, coming from communities of Deaf people” and also “the form of expression of the Deaf and their natural language”.

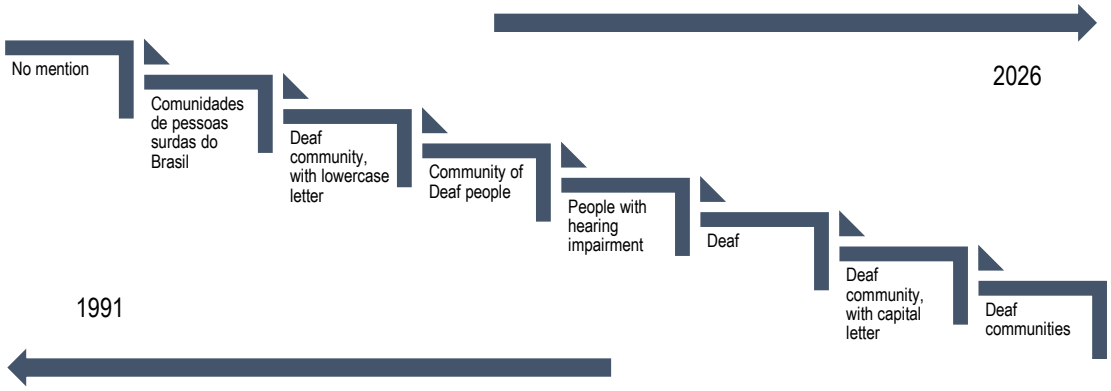
We note, however, that this Libras recognition as a language in these laws is always accompanied by the mention of its own grammar, as if there were a language that did not have grammar. Such redundancy, a mark of this period of transition from Total Communication to Bilingualism, tries to mask the prejudiced ideology of Libras as a minor language, as we have

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already said. As of the Ceará law, in 2001, the expression "linguagem gestual" is no longer observed in the provisions, except in the Maranhão law of 2007[11].

Let us now analyze the designation of speaking subject in the state norms of Libras recognition in Brazil. Examining the first provisions, from Minas Gerais Law No. 10,379/1991, to Mato Grosso do Sul Law No. 1,693/1996, we realize that there is no mention of the speaking subjects. This is modified from Law No. 12,095/1998, of Paraná, when it is stated that Libras comes "from communities of deaf people". From the Paraná law to the last law approved, that Bahia law, in 2026, we found mentions of Libras speaking subjects as "Deaf community" (RJ, SP, RR) with lowercase letter, "Deaf" (PE, CE, RN, SE, TO), "community of Deaf people" (RS), "people with hearing impairment" (RS), "people with hearing impairment" (RJ, RR), "communities of Deaf people in Brazil" (PR, MT, SE, RO), "deaf community or people with hearing impairment" (BA) as can be seen in Figure 2, below.

Figure 2: Designations of the Libras-speaking subject in state and Federal District laws



Source: Prepared by the author.

In the movement of meanings about the speaking subjects, we observed that there is no mention of the speaking subject in the first laws, for the prevalence of "Deaf communities", in the plural, in the last laws approved, going through many other forms of designations, such as "hearing impaired". In this process, we noticed ways of designating the speaking subject from different ideologies, of which two stand out in an oppositional way. On the one hand, there is a perspective that conceives the Deaf from the perspective of *deficit*, meaning them as a sick subject or a person

[11] The Mato Grosso Law No. 7,831/2002 is the only one to contain the expression "Linguagem Brasileira de Sinais".

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with disabilities who need rehabilitation. On the other hand, there is a vision that recognizes them as a fully constituted subject, belonging to a community with its own culture, identity and language. Dalcin (2009, p. 4-21) calls these two ideologies the “clinical paradigm” and the “socio-anthropological paradigm”, respectively.

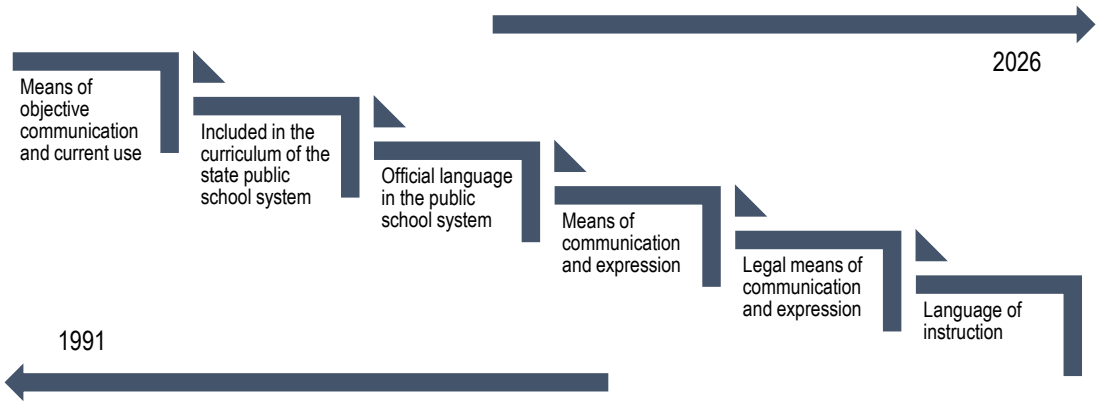
While the clinical (or pathological) paradigm focuses on the hearing absence and prioritizes normalization through oralization and auditory rehabilitation, the socio-anthropological paradigm shifts the axis from disability to linguistic and cultural difference. From this second perspective, deafness ceases to be a biological limitation and is understood as a singular existential and political experience, in which sign language acts as a central element of subjectivation and belonging.

Still regarding the designation in Portuguese of speaking subjects, we can see that there is a designation movement from the “deaf” individual, to the “deaf community” (in the singular and with a lowercase letter in Portuguese), to the “Deaf Community” (in the singular and with a capital letter), to “deaf communities” (in the plural with a lowercase letter). There are again marks of the two ideologies already mentioned, in which the use of the lowercase letter is closer to the clinical paradigm, and the use of capital letters and the expression “community”, to the socio-anthropological paradigm. However, even though in the most recent laws such as in Sergipe and Rondônia states, there is a mark of Deaf diversity, it is assumed that all these Deaf communities are Libras-speaking communities. Thus, the other sign languages spoken in the country are erased, such as the Indigenous sign languages, such as the Ka'apor Sign Language and the Terena Sign Language, and the local sign languages, such as Cena, in the interior of Piauí state.

Let us observe, at this point, the social function that these norms declare to Libras. To follow these displacements, we present Figure 3. In state laws, Libras is recognized/considered “means of objective communication and current use” (MG, GO, ES, PR, RJ, PE, CE, SC, SP, RR, MT, MA, RO), as “included in the curriculum of the state public school system” (MG, GO), as “official language in the public school system” (PE, CE), as a “means of communication and expression” (SC, MT), as a “legal means of communication and expression” (AC, SE, DF, BA), and as a “language of instruction” (RO).

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Figure 3: Status of Libras in state and Federal District laws



Source: Prepared by the author.

As we have seen, the first state norms recognize Libras as a "means of objective communication and current use" (Minas Gerais, 1991). Such a statement seems a little strange to us if we compare it with other linguistic legislations, but it can be understood again by the political context of the struggle of the Deaf Communities at the time. At that time, the Brazilian Deaf population was organizing to demand that the Brazilian Sign Language be recognized by the State as the natural language of this segment of the population and, consequently, guarantee linguistic rights through Libras.

From this context emerged the various laws recognizing Libras as a language of communication and expression of the Brazilian Deaf Communities. These are laws, therefore, that carry the memory of a period in which sign language was not considered a form of communication, much less a language. The suffering that the Deaf went through over most of the years in the twentieth century, led to the existence of laws for the language recognition, unlike many other Brazilian peoples and groups. What we are trying to show is that there is no national or even state or municipal law in Brazil that recognizes an oral language as the language of a particular people or group. This is considered obvious. What we have, as we have seen, are laws that recognize these languages as co-official in certain jurisdictions.

In 1991, we noticed, therefore, is not Libras being declared the official language of the Minas Gerais state, but the official recognition that this is a language of communication for the

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Deaf. We have no doubts about the importance of these legislations in the process of raising society's awareness about sign languages and the rights of the Deaf, but what we show is that it is still very little in the sense of equalizing the rights between Deaf and hearing people.

Between 1991 and 2026, we have repeatedly found, in most state laws, the designation of Libras recognition "as a means of objective communication and current use of communities" or "language of communication and expression". Do we still need to affirm that Libras is a language and that it is capable of being used as a form of communication? For us, these statements end up reinforcing the prejudice by treating Deaf people differently in relation to hearing people.

Advancing in the analysis of the social function of Libras in these laws, it is worth noting that in some of them, such as the Minas Gerais, from this recognition they allow this language to be used in the service of the Deaf citizen and in education through an interpreter. Others, more recent, such as Rondônia, consider Libras as a language of instruction, in line with the philosophy of Bilingualism. However, when confronting these legal frameworks with the social reality of each state, we observe that the effective guarantee of linguistic rights to the Deaf community(ies) in Brazil still lacks concreteness in practice.

The relevance of these legislations in recognizing the trajectory of struggle of Deaf communities, as well as in the promotion of their human and linguistic rights, is undeniable. However, legal texts are not necessarily responsible for the effective transformation of social reality. If, on the one hand, these normative frameworks represented an indispensable advance in the scope of historical claims, on the other hand, new consolidation stages are necessary. In this sense, it is worth reflecting on new signifying ways the Brazilian Deaf communities, their sign languages and the social function of these languages themselves, going beyond the mere reproduction – albeit with small displacements – of meanings consolidated since the first state legislation, in 1991.

5 Final considerations

In this work, we analyze the political *status* of Brazilian Sign Language in 21 states and the Federal District, observing how the designations and functions attributed to the language have shifted over almost three decades. Regarding the rights of the Deaf community(ies), we note that

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there has been a significant advance through state legislation, which has moved from a limited view of Libras as a “linguagem gestural” or “means of objective communication” to the recognition of its own visual-motor and grammatical nature. However, this progress has occurred slowly and many norms still bear the marks of clinical and prejudiced ideologies, which sometimes reduce language to a welfare instrument, sometimes use redundant terms to validate a linguistic status that should be intrinsic.

Brazil needs to advance in legislation to guarantee, in fact, the linguistic rights of the Deaf population, going beyond formal recognition and investing in bilingual education and spaces of real social protagonism. It is imperative that future language policies recognize the cultural and linguistic plurality of this segment, avoiding the erasure of other local and Indigenous sign languages that coexist in the national territory. The transition to the bilingualism philosophy, marked in National Law No. 14,191/2021, which creates the bilingual education modality for the Deaf, and in more recent laws such as that of Rondônia, which establishes Libras as the “language of instruction”, points to a necessary path for the language to stop being just a “means of communication” and become the foundation of the intellectual and identity development of the Deaf subject.

At another time (Barbosa da Silva, 2025), we analyzed the official federal policies for the Deaf population in Brazil and realized that they are still precariously centered on access to public services. This analysis reinforces that the guarantee of linguistic rights to the Deaf community(ies) is still far from daily social practice. It is concluded that, although the legal framework has expanded and shifted meanings towards the socio-anthropological paradigm, the full officialization – de jure and de facto – and the implementation of language structuring planning continue to be fundamental challenges for the consolidation of an effective Deaf citizenship in Brazil.

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