

THE CONTRIBUTION OF EMBLEMATIC GESTURES TO THE EMERGING SIGN LANGUAGE OF GUINEA-BISSAU



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The use of emblems

Emblematic (quotable or symbolic) gestures may be strongly culture-specific. Their stable forms and meanings are easily recognised, independently of speech in common social interactions (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013). This is of high value for deaf people and therefore are expected to be lexicalised in sign languages (Loon, Pfau & Steinbach, 2014; Morgan, 2016).

In West Africa, there seems to exist a set of emblems shared by hearing non-signers across ethnic, linguistic and national borders (Brookes & Nyst, 2014), that seems to have been incorporated in the lexicons of sign languages. These emblems thus are part of a shared gestural substrate of these sign languages.

Methodology

The on-going Gesture Research in Africa (GESTURA) database project aims at documenting emblems of hearing speakers of African languages. A relatively large number of emblems are found to recur across languages and cultures. Out of these, **30 emblems** were selected.

1. **20 hearing** participants were asked to produce gestures in response to the messages of the 30 emblems selected.
2. **46 deaf** signers, as expert observers of hearing communication, were asked about the emblems used by hearing people.

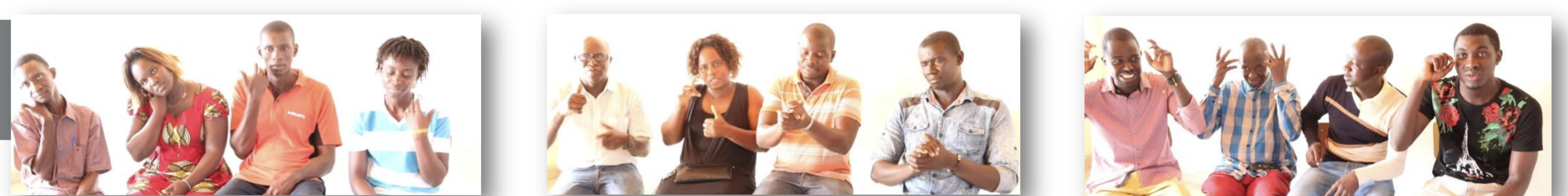
Research questions

LGG background

In Guinea-Bissau, deaf people were brought together for the **first time in 2004** (first school for the deaf).

Since then, the Sign Language of Guinea-Bissau (LGG) has been emerging spontaneously in a fast growing deaf community of currently **around 400 deaf people**, with little, if **any, influence of other languages**, signed or oral (Martins & Morgado, 2016, 2017).

In Guinea-Bissau, **hearing** people in social interactions with deaf people seem to use a particularly extensive set of **common, conventional gestures**.



Participants were interviewed in **groups of 4**, highlighting aspects such as:

- a) time of response, b) general agreement, c) discussion about its real use, d) pragmatic examples in daily communication, e) explanation of its original pantomimic.

Identified emblems were then compared in form and meaning to their **lexical counterparts**, as documented in LGG dictionary (Martins & Morgado, 2017).

1. How are emblems incorporated in the lexicon of LGG?
2. What changes do they undergo in the process?

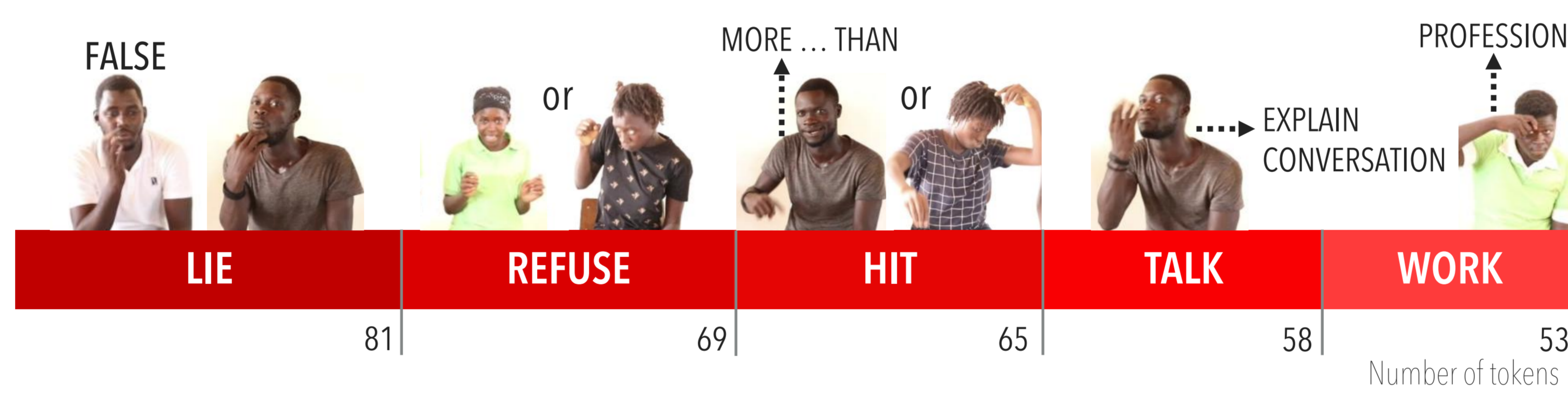
1. Incorporation of emblems in LGG

All hearing emblems identified have been incorporated in the lexicon of LGG. The form and meaning relation between an emblem and its lexical counterpart in LGG comes in the types:

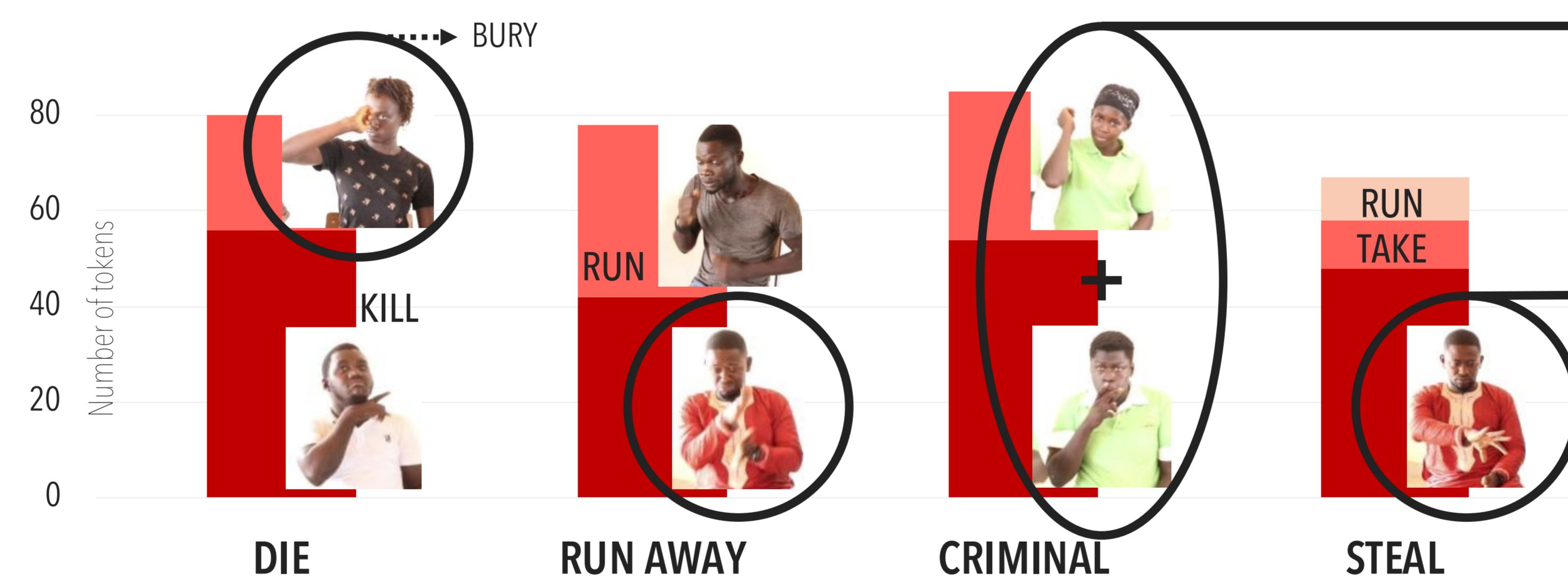
- **one-to-one** relation,
- **few-to-few** relation,
- **many-to-many** relation,

as illustrated in the right. In LGG, there is a tendency for the first type.

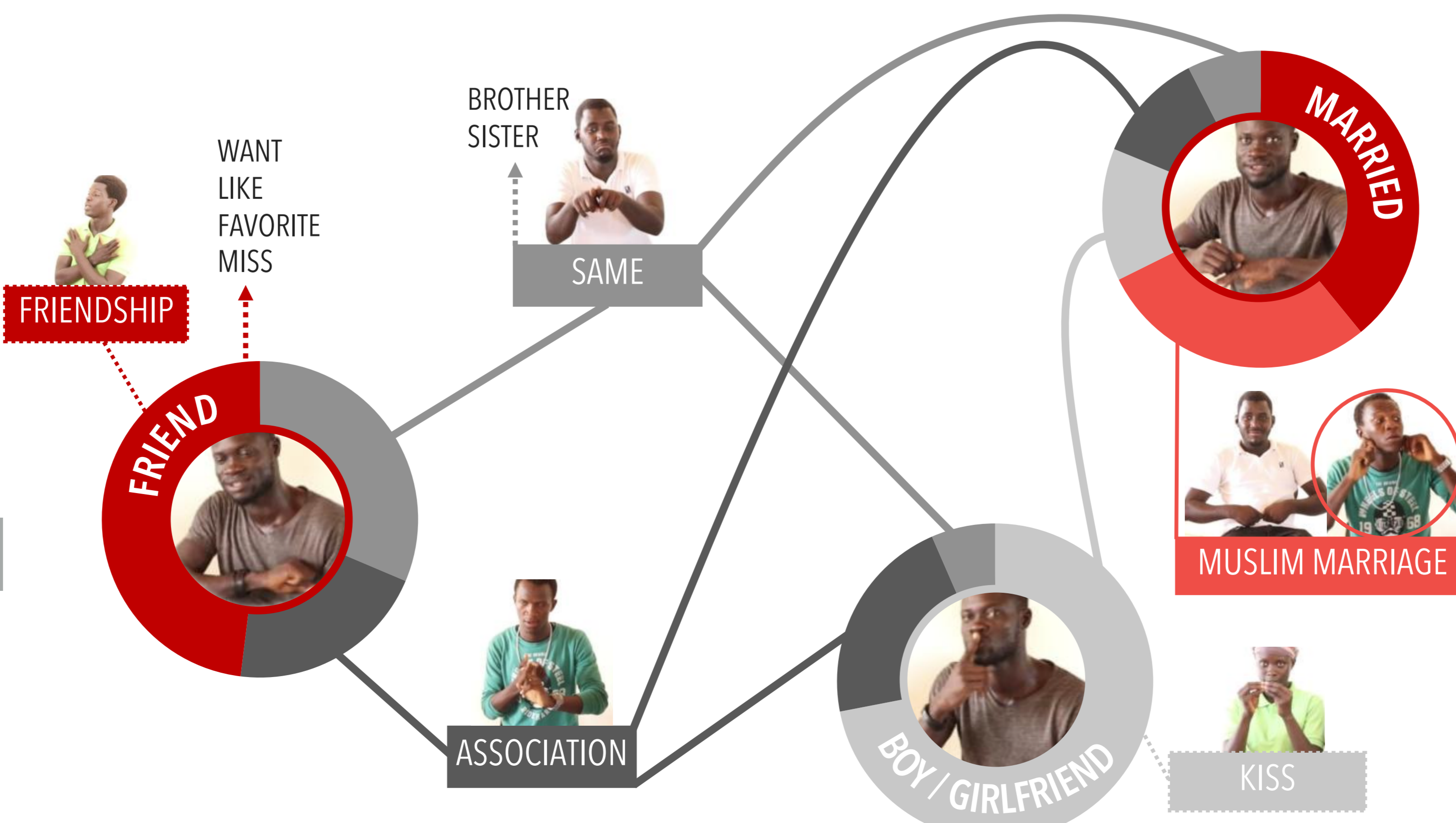
ONE-TO-ONE RELATIONS in emblems lead to direct recruitment into LGG lexicon.



FEW-TO-FEW RELATIONS in emblems are reduced to one-to-one in LGG lexicon.



MANY-TO-MANY RELATIONS in emblems are reduced to one-to-one in LGG lexicon.

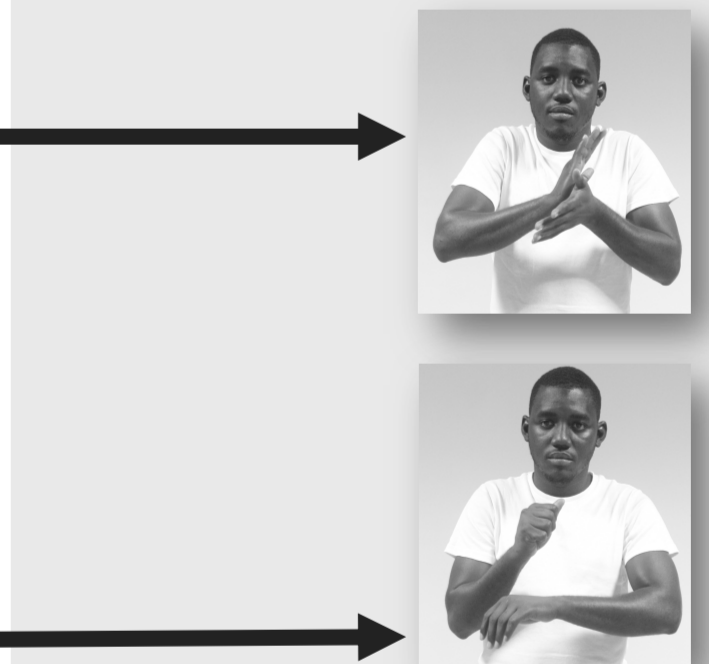


2. Specialization of meaning in LGG

Emblems with more than one form to meaning relation are incorporated in the lexicon with **specialized meanings**.

For example, the two emblems given for 'dead/die' were lexicalized as **DIE** and **KILL**.

For some sensitive semantic domains, **new signs were created** to reduce its understandability by hearing non-signers, like in **CRIMINAL** and **STEAL**:



Once recruited into the lexicon, these signs, like any other, participate in **morphological operations**, such as compounding and derivation (examples with an arrow-->).

Hearing emblems lexicalised in LGG

ONE-TO-ONE	FEW-TO-FEW	MANY-TO-MANY
WORK	WITCHCRAFT	THANK YOU
WOMAN	WHITE (SKIN)	MARRIED
WHY	STEAL	CHIEF
TALK	RUN AWAY	FRIEND
SICK	NUMBERS	ELDER
REFUSE	FAR	BOYFRIEND
PAY	DIE	BEG
MAN	CRIMINAL	
LIE	A LITTLE	
HUNGER		
HIT		
FINISH		
CHILD		
ADULT		

Some of these emblems are found in **other West African SL lexicons** as well.

For example, the distinction in form and meaning of the signs **LIE** and **FALSE** is also found in Malian SL.

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