

## **Establishing Sign Language in Deaf Education in Japan: A Sociolinguistic Approach**

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### **Abstract**

The language and education problems that deaf people face now apparently symbolize the plight that has befallen linguistic and cultural minority groups of the world. Although the circumstances surrounding them are still harsh, they have surmounted various obstacles to find themselves in an increasingly improved situation in Japan. This paper attempts to describe efforts by deaf people to develop and consolidate their community and their language. The focus is on the on-going struggle to establish Japanese Sign Language as a legitimate means of instruction in the school education of deaf children

### **1. Promotion of the Social Status of Sign Language**

Deaf people have played an important part in informing hearing people of the legitimacy of their language and their way of life. They have organized national associations to assert themselves for the strengthened role they want to assume in Japanese society. As Honna and Kato (1995a) depicts, the current upsurge of positive attitudes toward deaf people and their language witnessed among the nation's general public is the result of deaf advocacy movements in Japan.

Two important developments occurred in the past decade or so that contributed to further promotion of the social status of Japanese Sign Language. One was the introduction by the Ministry of Welfare (now Ministry of Welfare and Labor) of a certification program of sign language interpreters and the other was the initiation by the Japan Broadcasting Corporation of several sign language television programs.

### 1.1. Official Certification of Sign Language Interpreters

Strongly requested by deaf groups, the former Welfare Ministry established an official program in 1989 to certify proficient sign language interpreters as specialists. At the present, the ministry program sponsors a nation-wide examination project that scrutinizes applicants' knowledge, for example, of language structure and the deaf community in addition to skills of sign interpreting. Those who pass the examination are certified as professional sign language interpreters.

The purpose of the certification program is to encourage qualified interpreters and heighten their status as interpreters. The professionalism of dedicated and certified interpreters has made it possible for deaf people to participate in social activities more often and to develop their sign language in wider social contexts. The use of sign language in public places actually gave impetus to the creation of many new signs needed to describe every phenomenon deaf and hearing signers experience in their interaction.

Former Ministry of Labor officials participated in the deliberations on the certification program. Their concern stemmed from their recognition of need to impress the importance of sign language and sign language interpreting on government offices and private companies that employ hearing-impaired persons under the law for promoting employment of physically handicapped persons sponsored by the Ministry. In fact, after the passage of these laws in 1960, deaf employment and sign language use in work places were on the increase.

Concerted efforts for the ubiquity of sign language interpreters in the deaf community culminated in the establishment in 2002 of the Sign Language Training Center of Japan, a social welfare incorporation set up by the Japanese Federation of the Deaf, the National Colloquium on Sign Language Interpretation Issues, and the National Association of Certified Sign Language Interpreters, the trinity of leading organizations in deaf and sign language matters. Based in Sagami, Kyoto, the Center started its training activity in 2003. The current business objectives are identified as:

- (1) Advice and support for deaf children and their parents/family;
- (2) Publication of sign language textbooks for deaf children and training of deaf-school teachers;
- (3) Publication of welfare education textbooks for primary and secondary school students and training of teachers;
- (4) Study of and support for communication environments of deaf persons;
- (5) Study of communication methods used by persons with hearing and other multiple difficulties;
- (6) Research and diffusion of sign language;
- (7) Creation and popularization of new signs;

- (8) Promotion of use of sign language among hearing-impaired persons;
- (9) Research of sign language interpretation;
- (10) Development of teaching programs and textbooks for sign language interpreters;
- (11) Educating sign language interpreters for specific purposes;
- (12) Educating certified sign language interpreters;
- (13) Educating sign language teachers
- (14) Implementation of registration examinations for those who have finished sign language interpreter training programs;
- (15) Educating welfare specialists for hearing impaired persons;
- (16) Study and introduction of preventive measures for health control of welfare personnel for hearing impaired persons; and
- (17) International cooperation.

## 1.2. Spreading Sign Language through Mass Media

The Japan Broadcasting Corporation (called NHK here), the nation's sole public broadcasting system, has also made an invaluable contribution. NHK's Education Channel started the first TV program for the nation's 300,000 hearing-impaired population in 1977. Currently called "For Hearing-Impaired Persons," the Sunday evening program presents current events and features in sign language, although speech and subtitles are also used to ensure the attention of people with different degrees of hearing difficulty.

NHK also began a 30-minute weekly program for teaching Japanese Sign Language in 1990. Called "Sign Language for Everybody," the program reaches every household in the country. Introducing Japanese Sign Language in its cultural and social context, the program is carefully presented so that (1) hearing beginners can get acquainted with signs; (2) deaf persons can examine the structure of their language and learn new signs and useful expressions.

At the same time, NHK started a daily news program in Japanese Sign Language accompanied by Spoken Japanese. At present, NHK provides a 5-minute afternoon news program and a 15-minute nightly program on weekdays, and a 5-minute news program on weekend nights. Previously, deaf persons were able to watch sign language news only once a week. These daily news programs provide a good opportunity for students of sign language to learn important signs used in news reporting.

In 1998, the Communication Satellite Broadcasting System for the Disabled (CS program) made it possible for deaf persons to watch news on real time. This CS program, called "Listening to TV with Your Eyes," provides a 1-hour program including news, entertainment and useful information for deaf persons.

In view of these developments, we have postulated six conditions that the deaf should obtain in order to secure equal social opportunities and establish sign language as a legitimate language in all dimensions of their life:

- (1) That deaf people strengthen the sense of self-pride in deaf culture and advocate the legitimacy of sign language and the rights to use it;
- (2) That deaf people encourage a sizable number of hearing people to learn sign language and have them help spread it;
- (3) That they support sign language studies to reveal the structure and function of sign language, thereby prompting its full-fledged development;
- (4) That they take further steps for better employment opportunities, thus securing their participation in a wider social arena;
- (5) That they build up a nation-wide network of sign language interpretation service in all domains of their social lives;
- (6) That they advocate sign language as a means of instruction in deaf education.

In Japan, deaf people have made remarkable progress in trying to obtain conditions 1(deaf advocacy), 2(spread of sign language), 3(sign language studies), 4(equal or mandatory employment opportunities), and 5(sign language interpretation service). It appears that they now are in the position to concentrate their efforts on a drive to establish sign language as their school language.

## **2. Seeking Sign Language in Deaf Schools**

The history of advocacy for sign language in deaf education is rather brief in Japan. In 1983, an Osaka group initiated a movement to urge the use of sign language in deaf schools. At that time it was a local campaign and was somewhat considered a "protruding nail to be hammered down" even in deaf education circles and deaf affirmative action groups.

The proposal they came up with was specific. They wanted Japanese Sign Language installed as a subject in the curriculum of deaf education. They assumed that by learning sign language as a subject children would be introduced to various aspects of deaf culture embedded in their language.

They did not intend to ask for sign language to be employed as a medium of instruction in deaf school, because they thought that the situation was not ripe to ask for that much. Yet, by demanding that their language and culture be taught at school, the Osaka association of the hearing impaired wished to reject an oralist way of life relentlessly forced upon them. They professed that they would not compel themselves to adjust to the hearing world any more.

In an attempt to gain official support, the Osaka deaf group organized a series of meetings with representatives from local Boards of Education and schools for deaf children. The deaf tried to persuade the hearing of the inadequacy of the educational system supposed to be made for their benefit. They stressed again and again that they wanted to learn about sign language

because that was their indispensable means of social communication in the deaf community.

Although this initiative did not bear fruit soon, it stimulated similar drives in many deaf advocacy groups in many localities. The Japanese Federation of the Deaf adopted the theme as its slogan and organized a national campaign to get the Ministry of Education involved in initiating improved deaf education practice in Japan.

### **3. An Official Response: Analysis of an Influential Ministry of Education Report**

In response to repeated appeals by the Japanese Federation of the Deaf for policy change and instructional innovation, the Ministry of Education (now Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology) appointed a group of specialists in 1991 to conduct a study on the means of communication needed by hearing-impaired children. The group, of which not a single deaf person was a member, came up with a much-awaited report in March, 1993, after two years of investigation of the ways communication is taught at deaf schools and hard-of-hearing classes at primary and junior high schools.

A careful examination of the report indicated that although it claimed to contribute to the promotion and enrichment of deaf education, it theoretically failed to accommodate accumulated scientific discoveries on the nature of sign language and desires continuously expressed by deaf people to establish their language as a medium of school instruction. Most significantly, the Monbusho paper did not overcome the traditional assumption that the objectives of language programs from kindergarten to senior high were to teach Japanese language and that sign language was a hindrance to these objectives.

Japanese Sign Language was described in the following way:

- (1) Research is still underway and has not clarified its nature as a full-fledged language;
- (2) It is characterized by a small vocabulary insufficient for expression;
- (3) Its signs are not in grammatical and semantic correspondence with Japanese words; and
- (4) It is strongly marked by iconicity.

It was clear that these interpretations emanated from the group members' lack of understanding of sign language as a linguistic system different from spoken language. With the nature of sign language being what it is, Japanese Sign Language has to differ from Spoken Japanese grammatically and semantically. More arbitrary than iconic, its vocabulary is expanding to accommodate the needs of the deaf community for more linguistic sophistication.

The Ministry-commissioned specialists did not commit themselves to examine why traditional oralism did not succeed in educating deaf students who were three years behind hearing students in academic performance. They did not try to understand why deaf students who were orally educated from kindergarten to senior high were semilingual in both spoken language and sign language and why deaf students who were not taught the deaf way in a deaf school suffered from serious self-identity problems when they faced the reality of the world immediately upon graduation.

The fact was that deaf children were deprived of opportunities to acquire sign language, their first and most useful symbolic means to overcome hearing disabilities. With the help of sign language they could have developed a strong sense of self-identity. Learning of spoken language and other school subjects could have been better facilitated. Without formal learning of sign language, they were confronted with communication problems even among themselves. The situation deteriorated when they left school and found a job in the hearing world if they were not sure of themselves.

Of fundamental importance, however, the report recognized the fact that sign language was used as an indispensable means of social communication in the deaf community. Based on this observation, the specialists agreed that deaf students should be given opportunities to acquire the basic ability to use signs and finger alphabets to prepare themselves as members of the deaf community and to participate in mainstream society independently. By so saying, the report officially recognized the relevance of sign language for the first time, although the sign language they were talking about in this connection was more like Signed Japanese rather than Japanese Sign Language.

The report also approved of the use of sign language interpreting at ceremonial functions to which parents are invited, such as the school's entrance, commencement, athletic meet, and dramatic performance days. This approval was remarkable in view of the fact that there still are a considerable number of deaf schools in Japan where deaf teachers were not assisted by sign language interpreters at faculty meetings.

Thus, despite its extreme limitations, the report generally was received as a good signal by those involved in the promotion of the language rights of deaf people. In order to further their cause, the Japanese Federation of the Deaf decided to take advantage of the extent to which the then Ministry of Education had accepted the use of sign language in deaf schools. The reference to Japanese Sign Language as a community language of the deaf in the report was particularly highlighted.

The report proposed that the former Ministry of Education prepare a guidebook to pave the way for putting the recommendations into practice. When the Ministry organized a preparation committee, it was known that deaf representation was not taken into consideration. Among the appointed members,

furthermore, there were no sign language specialists or deaf community specialists, deaf or hearing.

The Japanese Federation of the Deaf (JFD) immediately filed a strong request with the Minister of Education to rectify the situation. The JFD emphasized that the Japanese Government had failed to comply with the United Nations recommendations adopted in 1981 for the full and equal participation by persons with disabilities themselves in the policy and decision making process for the programs designed for them. The deaf group asked that the Government respect opinions of educated deaf people and experienced sign language interpreters in making a policy on deaf education. Their plea went unheeded at that time.

#### **4. Sociolinguistic Obstacles to Overcome**

There were several reasons for delays in the improvement of the status of Japanese Sign Language. The most conspicuous was the objection to the use of sign language that was repeatedly and authoritatively expounded by specialists in deaf education, who were mostly hearing. This objection had five facets:

- (1) Japanese people are distinguished by Japanese culture. Japanese national culture is only conveyed by the Japanese national language. All Japanese people are expected to share this common linguistic and cultural heritage. Children with hearing difficulties should not be excluded from this expectation if we are to guarantee them a happy life as Japanese citizens.
- (2) As a majority of hearing impaired children are born in hearing families, it is natural that their parents should want them to acquire Japanese spoken language as well, because the Japanese language is the symbol of Japanese norms of behavior.
- (3) If current oral training does not achieve the desired goal, it is either because the practice is not well performed or because the practice needs further improvement. The major fault is with lack of qualified teachers due to inefficiency in teacher training at the nation's schools of education. The failure is not because the objective and its means are wrong.
- (4) Japanese Sign Language is different from Japanese Language in patterns of expression. Sign language lacks various particles that are characteristic of Japanese Language. Sign language also is deficient in its vocabulary whose items mostly are iconistic and therefore not appropriate for abstract thinking.
- (5) Thus, Japanese Sign Language cannot afford to be an alternative to Japanese Language for the deaf population of the nation if deaf people are to take part in the economic and cultural prosperity of Japanese society. If signs are to be taught at all at junior and senior high levels,

they have to be presented as Signed Japanese, an auxiliary gestural system created on the basis of speech.

Among these arguments against the use of sign language, deficit theories of sign language are now being seriously challenged. Structural analysis elucidates that deaf signs are constructed from a set of formative elements. Called 'cheremes' by some scholars, these formative elements are comparable to phonemes of spoken language. Specialists agree that sign language is composed of those three different categories of formative elements: hand form, place of operation, and movement.

Signs organized by these units show a high degree of formative regularity and are characterized by simultaneous and multidimensional arrangements of formative elements, making sign language a unique property as well structured as spoken language. By extended use, many patterns are being standardized and vocabulary extended (Honna and Kato, 1995b). Thus, the deaf education specialists' arguments are losing force and influence.

However, arguments dealing with the Japanese identity issue remain difficult to wipe out. The claim put forward by educational authorities that you cannot be Japanese without learning to speak Japanese made a strong impact upon hearing parents of deaf children. Thus, the nation's parents' associations of deaf children frequently expressed their wish to see their children speak Japanese and pledged their all-out support for the policy.

Even if they had doubt about the effectiveness of oralism, they hesitated to question the conventional wisdom built up by specialists in deaf education. Occasionally, parents tenaciously opposed the formal learning of sign language and its use as a language of instruction in deaf schools. They were led to believe that learning sign language could hamper effective learning of Japanese Language.

The Japanese identity syndrome haunted deaf leaders, too. Many of them experienced a difficult intellectual and emotional stage in their life where they tried to answer soul-searching questions whether they belonged to the deaf community or Japanese society. They often expressed their dislike for the concept of deaf culture. To them it seemed a deviation from Japanese culture.

As such, in the not so distant past, deaf leaders worried that if they identified themselves with deaf culture, they would be deprived of membership of Japanese culture. Influenced by the oralist tradition in deaf education, deaf persons were strongly opposed to the idea of a relationship between the deaf and the hearing as intercultural. Differences in language and culture were considered denials of Japanese nationality.

## **5. A Light at the end of the Tunnel**

Boosted by the advancement in sign language studies, however, deaf people have gradually developed confidence in their language and culture. Furthermore, their self-assertiveness has won them a heightened public understanding of sign language as a natural means of self-expression and social communication distinct from, but as useful as, spoken language.

While Japanese people in general have become more tolerant of different ways of life practiced in the country, the concept of difference has also lost its negative, exasperating connotation and has gradually assumed a rather positive, pleasant nuance. As deaf people form their sociolinguistic communities, they have created a deaf way of life.

These patterns of behavior, attitudes, beliefs, and values have been recently referred to as the "Deaf Culture." Deaf people now assert that sign language is not the symbol of their disability but the symbol of their different ability. To them now, living a deaf life is not contradictory to living a Japanese life. As such, some deaf people began to identify themselves not as handicapped, disabled, or hearing impaired, but as members of a linguistic minority group.

Encouraged by these trends in the deaf community and general Japanese society, the Japanese Federation of the Deaf redoubled their efforts to press for the use of sign language in deaf schools, in addition to the guarantee of sign language interpreting services at campaigns for public offices and superimposed written scripts in TV programs.

However, in March, 1995, the Ministry of Education published the guidebook for deaf education along the lines specified in the report mentioned above. The teaching and use of sign language was belittled, based on the oralist principle of giving the top priority to practicing Japanese language. Where sign language was referred to as an instructional aid, it was always understood as Signed Japanese, a gestural system invented for teaching Japanese, which deaf people do not consider as their own sign language.

Deaf people did not approve this official policy and continued the campaign to win their right to use their language in the education of their children. More and more hearing teachers of deaf children were throwing themselves behind the cause, learning sign language themselves by joining study circles and interacting with deaf students and their parents.

## **6. Education of the Deaf, by the Deaf, for the Deaf**

Although there still is no official approval of the use of sign language in deaf education a decade later, there seems an upsurge of awareness of its legitimacy and desirability among enlightened teachers of deaf children. Currently, two movements are conspicuous: experimental classes in bilingual education and "free schools" where sign language is a means of instruction.

Deaf education in Japan is definitely moving toward the use of sign language. The most influential factor in this trend is the dissemination of

information in the latter half of 1990's concerning the success of bilingual education for deaf children achieved in Sweden and Denmark. The bilingualism in educational contexts of deaf children presupposes use of sign language as their first language and learning of spoken language (writing and reading) through this primary language.

Informed of the developments in Sweden and Denmark, Japanese deaf specialists became more critical than before of the traditional educational practice of hearing impaired children, and organized discussion and study meetings nation-wide focused on bilingual education. At these meetings attended by deaf school teachers, parents of deaf children, and professors of education and linguistics, a wide range of relevant theoretical aspects of language acquisition was explored and shared.

Inspired by these new winds, the Japanese Sign Language Research Institute (sponsored by the Japanese Federation of the Deaf) initiated a comprehensive research project on deaf education. The project was intended to study means of early sign language instruction. Thus far, textbooks were prepared and positive results were reported. As part of the project, textbooks of spoken Japanese used at deaf schools are translated into sign language, some of which are being used experimentally at some schools for hearing impaired children. The research fellows are now working on guidelines for effective instruction while planning to feed back results of classroom activity into improved sign language instruction of Japanese reading and writing.

Thus, indications are that educational environments of deaf children have a better chance of improvement, with an increasing interest in bilingual and bicultural education witnessed at deaf schools. Currently more than ten deaf schools have introduced sign language into their kindergarten classrooms, with more expected to follow suit at high speed in the very near future.

Furthermore, "free schools" for deaf children are being established throughout the country, where sign language is the main means of instruction and communication. Established in 1999, Tatsunoko Gakuen (School of Dragon Kids) is the first one of this kind, staffed by deaf personnel and taught by deaf teachers. Although classes are organized only once a month at the time of this writing, deaf children are encouraged to move their hands freely and sign their own symbols, the way hearing children are invited to coo and later form one word or two-word sentences. Preparing to teach reading and writing in sign language, those schools also offer programs for hearing parents with deaf children.

Some of the high lights of these attempts are listed below:

- (1) Use of sign language in all domains of activity prompts children's linguistic and interactive ability, so that deaf children can make progress

and improve their communication skills taking delight in making themselves understood;

- (2) Deaf adults play a role model for deaf children through various interactive activities, making children self-confident to live being deaf;
- (3) Hearing parents with deaf children are informed of deaf ways of life by interacting with deaf adults;
- (4) Various information is offered to deaf children and their parents concerning what hearing difficulties constitute; and
- (5) Hearing parents can learn sign language or receive sign language support (such as interpretation), thereby making child-parent communication more meaningful.

Interestingly, an increasing number of parents took interest in what bilingual and bicultural education could bring forth to their deaf children. In October, 2002, the Dragon Kids Free School and the Association of Parents of Deaf Children established the Society of Bilingual and Bicultural Education for the Deaf. The purposes of this society are declared as:

- (1) To use Japanese Sign Language and written Japanese to teach deaf children;
- (2) To raise deaf children in the deaf culture and the hearing culture as well;
- (3) To develop teaching theories, methods and curricula for deaf education; and
- (4) To offer deaf children education opportunities equal to those enjoyed by hearing children in terms of quality and quantity and provide an environment for them to bring their abilities into full play.

At their first memorial meeting in October, 2002, the Parents' Association issued "The Declaration of Deaf Children's Human Rights." Its contents are as follows:

- (1) Our children are deaf;
- (2) Deaf children are to be deaf adults;
- (3) The mother tongue for both of deaf children and deaf adults is Japanese Sign Language;
- (4) We ensure deaf children of an environment in which they can use their mother tongue and exercise their education rights;
- (5) We promote bilingual education, teaching written Japanese as their second language.
- (6) We intend to raise deaf children as deaf children;
- (7) We hope deaf children will be proud of deaf human beings;
- (8) We understand deaf adults and children have their own deaf culture;

- (9) 'Hearing disability' is not ill fortune; and
- (10) We protect the human rights of deaf children.

Thus, the crux of the matter now is not whether it is desirable to use sign language in deaf education, but how it is taught as a subject and how it is used as a language of instruction. Studies of deaf education in Denmark and Sweden categorically indicate the *raison d'être* of sign language in deaf schools (Hansen, 1987; Lewis, 1995). In those Nordic countries, the goal for deaf children is to become actively bilingual, with sign language successfully taught as their primary language and spoken language as their first foreign language (Bergmann, 1994; Mahshie, 1995).

Yet, teaching methods cannot always be universally applicable, and should be developed in accordance with the pedagogical environment of each country. In order to pave the way for rational and systematic education of deaf children as soon as possible in the 21st century, we are expected to confront the following problems:

- (1) To train teachers who teach Japanese Sign Language as a subject, explore teaching methods, and prepare textbooks;
- (2) To train teachers who teach Japanese reading and writing in sign language and establish teaching methods;
- (3) To train teachers who teach mathematics, science, social studies, and other subjects in sign language and study teaching methods;
- (4) To train teachers who teach English as a subject in sign language and construct teaching methods;
- (5) To study means to make sign vocabulary large and flexible enough to codify knowledge and information from various domains of life in the present world;
- (6) To train specialists in sign language studies and further develop Japanese Sign Language as a full-fledged language; and
- (7) To study bilingual education and find methods to produce persons proficient in Japanese Sign Language and Japanese Language.

With sign language spreading among hearing people and linguistically recognized as a legitimate language, it is only natural that it should be adopted as a school language in deaf education. However, in order to establish the principle not as a merely symbolic slogan of deaf advocacy, but as a really effective means of deaf education, further concerted efforts are called for.

Research cooperation is urgently needed among those who have worked in this field to discuss and evaluate each project. Research coordination and integration are imperative to produce better viable theories and methodologies.

Simulation studies will be productive and useful if done with a variety of factors included and examined.

Human beings normally are born with language. Loss of hearing has little to do with this language faculty. Rather than speech that depends on hearing, the deaf develop sign language that maps out concepts in spatial dimensions with hands and facial expression. As language develops in the process of socialization, it is imperative that deaf children be brought up in the sign language environment. The use of sign language in deaf education is one part of this socialization process.

## **7. Conclusion**

The hearing consider it abnormal not to be able to speak and hear. But the deaf are living a complex life without the use of speech and hearing, but with the use of sign language. Treating the use of sign language as some kind of deviance, deficiency, or pathology, therefore, stems from ignorance of the nature of sign language on the part of the hearing population.

If language is the most important manifestation of the self, as is often argued in the theory of bilingual education, and if sign language is a natural human language, as is demonstrated in current sociolinguistic research, then deaf persons should not be deprived of their language of signs. Sign language is part of their natural rights and its use should be guaranteed and protected if necessary.

Of course, there is no need to dwell upon the fact that Japanese language (reading and writing) is the door to a wider society in which a deaf person is encouraged to participate through the acquisition of appropriate forms of spoken language. But Japanese language acquisition will be more comfortably facilitated if it is based on sign language than if it is not, as second-language acquisition is more naturally facilitated if it is based on the native language than if it is not.

Today, deaf people are increasingly aware of their cause. Continued efforts certainly will set the stage for sign language as a legitimate instructional medium in the school education of deaf children. Deaf advocacy could also help meet the challenges of linguistic and cultural diversity, a situation that is gaining momentum in many domains of Japanese society.

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