Cultural Identity and the Production and Understanding of Sign Language Signs:

Identifying, Interpreting, and Preserving the Cultural Information in Iconic Signs

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1. Introduction

There are two common myths about sign languages that I often encounter in one form or another when I tell someone that I am involved in sign language research. The first myth or assumption that people seem to have is that there is one international sign language that every deaf person knows and uses. The other myth or misunderstanding that many people have, a myth that is somewhat contradictory to the first myth, is that all sign languages are surrogate languages that are merely the manual equivalent of the dominant spoken language in the region where they are used.

Though both of these myths are inaccurate, there are reasons for their existence. One reason for the first myth is that, since many of the signs of sign languages are to some extent iconic in origin, a relatively high percentage of signs are *somewhat* understandable to people from different sign language backgrounds. For example, the sign for TO MEET someone (see figure 1a in the following section), where two extended forefingers on each hand (which are sometimes called *classifiers*, see Herlofsky, 2007 for discussion), are brought together in an iconic imitation of two people meeting, is understood by most deaf people around the world, because many sign languages use (classifier-like) forefingers coming together in this way to indicate two people meeting.

As for the second myth, most sign languages studied so far do seem to have a counterpart that is, more or less, a manual version of the dominant spoken language. This is also the case in Japan as well, where there is a manual version of Japanese called *Signed Japanese* (SJ, see section 3 for discussion). Perhaps a few more details on the minority/majority language relationship, and the language-contact-like situation that exists in Japan is in order.

Most, if not all, sign languages are minority languages surrounded by majority spoken languages and cultures. On average, only about 0.1% of the general population is deaf, and so, since Japan has a population of a little over 120 million, statistically, there should be more than 100,000 deaf people in Japan (These data and what follows are based on a summary of the information found in Inaba, 2007; Nakamura, 2006; Zen-Nihon-Roa-Renmei, 2007). The definition of deafness, however, is problematic. There is a range of hearing ability, from zero to hard-of-hearing to hearing. There are also people who were born deaf, those who lose their hearing when they were young, and those who lose their hearing, for one reason or another, later in life. And it is estimated that 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents, which means only 10%, or about 10,000 deaf children, are born to deaf parents, and acquire their first language, Japan Sign Language (JSL), naturally

by observing their parents and those around them. It is also estimated that about 50, 000 people in Japan use JSL as their primary language, and maybe ten times that number, about half a million hearing and hard-of-hearing people (for whom Japanese is a first language) are studying and/or using sign language. It is this large group (which includes interpreters) that might even prefer to use SJ rather than JSL.

It is clear, then, that JSL is a minority language in Japan, dominated by a majority hearing culture and spoken language. In addition, deaf children in deaf schools in Japan, until recently, were not allowed to use JSL on school premises (This is still the case unofficially in many deaf schools, although 'officially' JSL is now allowed.). Deaf children were expected to learn the majority spoken language, Japanese, first, and it was thought that using JSL would interfere with the acquisition of Japanese. The official educational goal was to first have the deaf children become proficient at speaking Japanese, and in reading lips, so that once they graduated from the school system, they could become participating members of (the hearing) society.

Although this may be an admirable goal in theory, in practice, the language ability of the deaf children was less than ideal. The deaf children often spent considerable time and effort in special classes to help them with pronunciation and lip-reading, with mixed results. They were allowed to use sign language in their free time away from school, and it was then thought that eventually they would become bilingual in Japanese and JSL, with Japanese, the national language, as their first and primary language. In fact, the results were that instead of producing bilingual children, what often happened was there were children finishing their education semi-lingual in two languages: Japanese and JSL.

In addition to the language problem, cultural identity also becomes a problem for many young adults. With hearing parents, and an oral Japanese educational system, many young deaf children lack knowledge of what it means to be deaf, and many do not even know what JSL is, until they reach young adulthood. A full discussion of these issues is not within the scope of this paper (see Nakamura, 2006 for discussion), but some related issues that focus on language in relation to culture and identity, will be discussed in the following sections. In section 2, examples of iconicity in signs, and illustrations of differences and similarities in different sign languages will be given, and in section 3, examples of differences between JSL and SJ will be illustrated, followed by a brief conclusion in section 4.

2. Different Signs and Cultures in Different Countries

As stated above, many of the signs in the sign languages of the world are iconic in origin, and because of this, some, like 1a, TO MEET, mentioned in the previous section, are understandable inter-linguistically. Many other signs are not so transparent. For example, consider signs 1b and 1c below.

1a

1b

1c

1d

1e

These signs mean MAN and WOMAN, respectively, in JSL, and such thumb and pinky gender-differentiated signs are somewhat uncommon in sign languages, and not transparent to deaf people from other sign language backgrounds, even though they are iconic in nature. In fact, these signs appear to have been borrowed from the Japanese hearing culture, where they are gestural tokens, with similar but somewhat different meanings (somewhat less than elegant referential terms meaning something like 'my man' and 'my woman', respectively). These handshapes can also be used in combination with other signs, as seen in 1d, the sign for FATHER, and 1e, the sign for MOTHER (again, see Herlofsky, 2007). These examples illustrate one of the few instances of a manual bound-morpheme prefix in JSL. Since JSL is a relatively young language (as sign languages are assumed to begin when deaf people gather together and form a community, the beginning of JSL is assumed to be about 1878, when the first school for the deaf was founded in Kyoto), manual inflections and other bound morphemes, such as affixes, are still rare. The touching of the cheek in 1d and 1e is a nonproductive prefix, and means something like 'parental relative', and so, in combination with the raised thumb in 1d indicates FATHER, and with the raised pinky in 1e indicates MOTHER.

So far, the forefinger, the thumb, and the pinky have already been used to specify certain types of people, and that leaves us with only two other fingers, the middle finger and the ring finger, for specifying other people, and that is exactly what they do in the signs in 2a–d below.

2a 2b 2c 2d

These sign are used in JSL to refer to other family members. 2a means OLDER-BROTHER, and 2b means YOUNGER-BROTHER. Although 2a is somewhat iconic ('an entity who is high'), it is not understandable to deaf people outside of Japan, and in fact could cause considerable misunderstanding outside of the Japanese deaf cultural community, among both deaf and hearing people. This is a case where the use of the fingers of the hand to refer to family members has developed rather systematically within the deaf culture in Japan, but for those who do not identify with this culture and its linguistic reference system, the sign can be misinterpreted and may even cause serious intercultural problems. The signs in 2c (OLDER-SISTER) and 2d (YOUNGER-SISTER) should be safer, but care should still be taken, because at a distance, or for someone not familiar with JSL, they look much like 2a and 2b. By contrast, the sign to the left of 2a–d is the American Sign Language (ASL) fingerspelling handshape that represents the letter 'T', and therefore should be rather harmless, but this 'T', if used in Japan, would cause a reaction similar to what 2a might cause in the United States.

Now let us consider signs in JSL and ASL that have different appearances but similar meanings and similar origins. The signs in 3, that is, 3a, 3b, and 3c, all have the same meaning, and are all iconic, but they are not understandable to deaf people from different cultures and sign language backgrounds.

3a 3b 3c

How can signs that are supposed to be iconic look so different? The signs in 3a and 3b are JSL signs, and they both mean NAME. 3a is used mainly in the western part of Japan, while 3b is used in the eastern part. The sign in 3a is an iconic representation of a name card on a lapel or pocket. The sign in 3b is a bit more complicated. The sign used to be signed a bit differently, with the non-dominant left hand more in front of the body with the palm facing upwards, and the thumb of the dominant right hand was then pressed down on the upturned left palm, as if giving a thumb print. This is in fact what was iconic about the sign; it was originally an imitation of a person providing a thumb to 'sign' his/her name. Many years ago in Japan, if a person did not have a personal name stamp, or could not sign his/her name in some other way, a thumb print was provided.

Now, the question is how the ASL sign in 3c can look so different and still be iconic, with the same meaning of NAME. The reasons are both cultural and historical. In the United States as well, there were many people who sometimes needed to sign their name, but were not able to read or write. This group included many deaf people. In the United States, instead of a thumb print, people were often asked to draw an X where a signature should be. That is the X was provided in place of the signature or *name* of the person. The sign in 3c, the shape of the fingers, is intended to represent the X of the signature. In this way then, both 3b and 3c are iconic representations, from different cultures and different countries with different histories, for ways of providing some sort of substitute for a name; a thumb print in Japan, an X in America. These signs, then, illustrate how signs that look very different can still be iconic representations for the same thing, a name, even though the NAME has a bit different etymology in each country.

Cultural differences and similarities can be seen in other signs as well.

4a 4b 4c

The sign in 4a is a sign in both ASL and JSL, but it has completely different meanings. In ASL the sign means HISTORY, and is an initialized sign with the fingerspelling handshape for H, the first letter in HISTORY, and then a movement something like a movement from the past (from behind) to the future (the front). In JSL it means something like SEEMS or MAYBE, and originated with tracing something like a question mark (?) in the air after a statement, to indicate that there is some

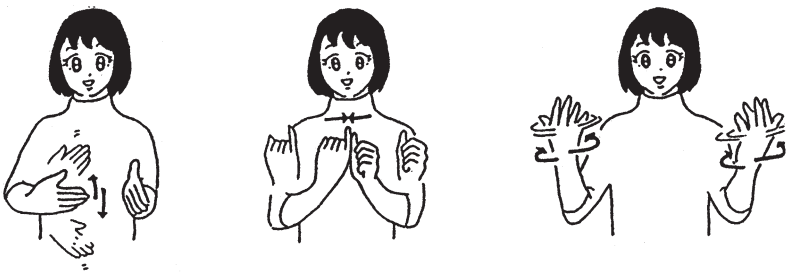
doubt about the statement. This, then, is an example of the same sign with different meanings in different sign languages.

Now let us consider the signs in 4b and 4c. Although some people seem to think that creating an international sign language (one does exist) would make communication for deaf people around the world much easier, 4b and 4c are just two examples (although many, many more exist) of why much would be lost if an international sign language replaced many of the local sign languages. For example, the sign in 4b is the JSL sign for EAT. It is iconic in that the two extended fingers of the right hand represent chopsticks, an important part of the Japanese culture. The sign for EAT in ASL is a hand shaped like it's holding a part of a sandwich up to the mouth. Both signs are not just words of a language, but part of the culture and heritage they represent.

This internal culture and heritage is even clearer in 4c, although the iconicity and culture is not apparent without some explanation. Many years ago (and to a lesser extent, even today), the job possibilities for deaf people were rather limited. Many were employed, however, in places where the noise of workplace machines was very loud. If there was one advantage to employing deaf people, it was that they weren't bothered by loud noises in the workplace. One of the places deaf people were often employed was at printing shops, where they worked around noisy printing presses. The motion imitated in 4c is the motion of evening off sheets of paper before stacking them, and so the sign means WORK. That is, this is the work that many deaf people had in the old days. Eliminating this sign and the one in 4b in favor of some international sign might make some communication smoother, but it would be at the loss of much cultural heritage of the deaf community in Japan.

3. Different Signs and Cultures within Japan

As mentioned, in Japan, as in most countries, along with the natural signed language of the deaf, there is also a somewhat artificially constructed manual version of the dominant spoken language of the region. And, as indicated in the introduction, the manual version of Japanese is referred to as Signed Japanese (SJ). SJ is used by many hearing and hard-of-hearing people for whom Japanese is a first language, and it uses many of the handshapes of JSL, but with the grammar of Japanese. To begin to understand some of the differences, consider first the SJ sentence below, which means YET (5a), MARRIED (5b), NOT (5c), or '(I'm) not married yet'. (Notice that MARRIED (5b) is the MAN (thumb) and WOMAN (pinky) coming together.)



5a 5b 5c

The problem with this sentence is that the word order would be different in JSL, and the JSL sentence would also include the appropriate non-manual facial expressions. For example, consider 6 and 7 below. The sentence in 6 is a neutral statement of not being married, '(I'm not) married yet.', similar to 5 but with the JSL word order, while 7 is a little bit more 'worried' statement, in which facial expressions and the distance between the hands in YET (7b) indicates marriage may

be still a long way off, and so the English translation might be something like '(I'm not) married *yet*!!'

6a

6b

7a

7b

Non-manual facial expressions, then, play a very important role in JSL grammar, while this aspect of deaf culture and language is often neglected in SJ. Now consider the SJ sentence in 8a–e below. The signs, in Japanese word order, are YESTERDAY (8a), EASILY (8b), SLEEP (8c), DIFFICULT/COULDN'T (8d), DONE/-ED (8e), or 'I couldn't sleep very well last night.

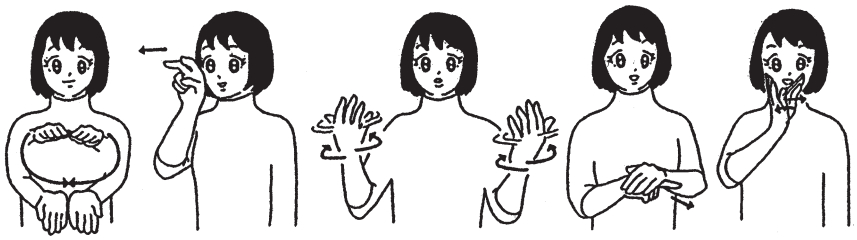
8a 8b 8c 8d 8e

The JSL version below, uses three of the same signs, but in different order, with a little bit different effect.

9a 9b 9c

In the JSL sentence in 9, which has the same meaning as the SJ sentence 8, the EASILY/READILY sign in 9c (and 8b) is used without an overt manual negation marker (as is often the case in JSL), but the non-manual facial expression provides the necessary trigger for negation. Even hearing people who are proficient in JSL are sometimes reluctant to use the facial expression necessary for fluent JSL. This aversion is probably partially cultural in nature. Compared to European and deaf cultures, the hearing Japanese culture utilizes fewer and less exaggerated facial expressions in normal spoken conversations. This tendency seems to be carried over when sign language is used.

Let us consider another SJ sentence. Sentence 10 is a SJ sentence that means ENTIRELY (10a), SEE (10b), NOT (10c), REASON (10d), NOT-SAY (10e), '(I'm) not saying (that I) don't watch (movies) at all'.



10a 10b 10c 10d 10e

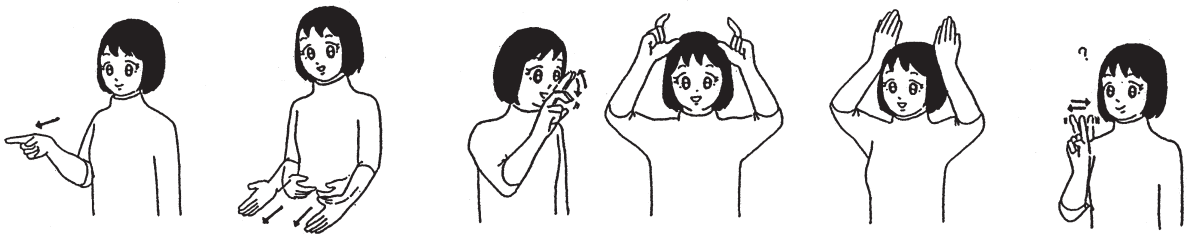
The JSL sentence in 11, with the same meaning as 10, is a model of brevity.

11a 11b 11c

There are signs in 11 that do not appear in 10, and these signs help to make the JSL sentence more efficient. The signs in 11 are SEE (11a) ZERO (11b) DIFFERENT (11c), or 'It's not (that I) see zero (movies).' In a case where an interpreter is interpreting from Japanese for deaf people, 11 is much easier to understand than 10, though 10 is the more probable translation for an interpreter that has Japanese as a first language.

From the above discussion it might appear that JSL sentences are always shorter and more efficient that the SJ sentences. This is not always the case. Consider, for example, the SJ sentence in 12 below, followed by the JSL sentence with the same meaning in 13.

12a 12b 12c



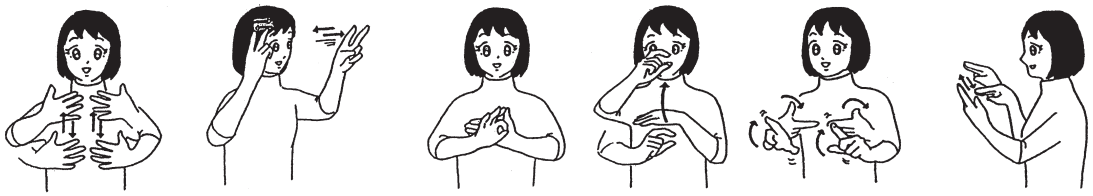
13a 13b 13c 13d 13e 13f

A translation of the signs in 12 is YOU (12a), SEXAGENARY-CYCLE (12b), WHAT?, and means 'What is your sexagenary sign?'. The signs in 13 are YOU (13a), BORN (13b), MOUSE (13c), COW (13d), RABBIT (13e), WHAT, and mean, 'You were born in (the year of) the mouse, cow,

rabbit, what?' The main difference between 12 and 13 is that 12 uses the Sino-Japanese word *eto*, that means the sexagenary cycle of 12 years (which in 12b is simply fingerspelled E+TO), while 13 provides examples of the animals in the cycle, and then asks which animal in the cycle the person is.

One more example of giving examples instead of Sino-Japanese words is 14 and 15 below.

14a 14b 14c 14d 14e 14f 14g

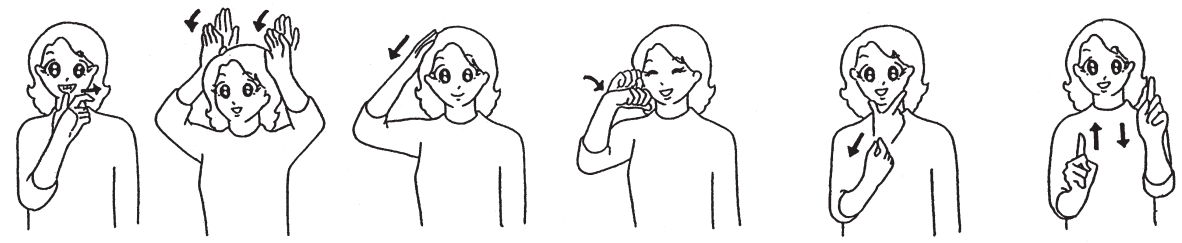


15a 15b 15c 15d 15e 15f

15g 15h 15i 15j 15k 15l

The signs in 14 are SOCIETY (14a), BROADCAST (14b), VARIOUS (14c), COMPANY (14c), CAPTIONS (14d), REQUEST (14e), APPLY (14f), and mean to 'Apply to request captions from various broadcast companies'. The sentence in 15, like 13 above, provides examples and avoids the translation of Sino-Japanese. The signs in 15 are TELEVISION (15a), COMPANY (15b), FOR-EXAMPLE (15c),ASAHI ('rising sun') (15d), MAINICHI ('everyday') (15e), YOMI ('read') (15f) URI ('sell') (15g), VARIOUS (15h), SAME (15i), CAPTIONS (15j), REQUEST (15k), APPLY (15l), and mean to 'Request the same captions from various television companies, for example, Asahi, Mainichi, and Yomiuri.' Again, sentence 15 is different from 14 in that it avoids the direct translation of Sino-Japanese and instead gives examples.

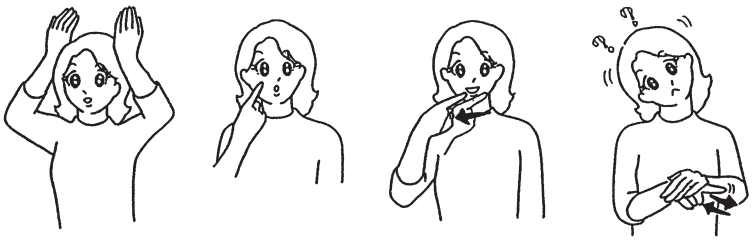
Let us consider two more examples before we conclude. Sentence 16 is a question.



16a 16b 16c 16d 16e 16f

The signs are WHITE (16a), DOG (16b), BLACK (16c), CAT (16d), LIKE (16e) WHICH (16f), and mean, 'Which (do you) like (better), white dogs or black cats?' There are two things interesting about this sentence. One is the sign in (16c), BLACK, that is formed by touching the hair. This, of course, assumes that the signer will have black hair, which is not true for the author of this paper. This sign, therefore, assume a certain amount of racial homogeneity. The other point of interest is that the WH-word is in the sentence final position.

Now consider 17 below.



17a 17b 17c 17d

The signs are RABBIT (17a), EYE (17b), RED (17c), WHY (17d), and mean, 'Why are a rabbit's eyes red?' This sentence is of interest because, like 16, the WH-word is again in the sentence final position. This will be discussed again in the conclusion.

4. Conclusion

As discussed and illustrated in the previous sections, sign languages are not part of some internationally interpretable communication system. Each country has its own sign language, and many countries have more than one sign language, and these languages often include many dialects, and manual versions of the dominant spoken language. There are also many kinds of *deaf* people, and many kinds of *non-deaf* people who use different kinds of sign languages.

Iconicity, however, does aid in making many concrete expressions understandable to people from different backgrounds (like TO MEET in 1a). On the other hand, the iconicity of sign language signs is not always transparent. Notice that since metonymy is also often involved in the formation of many signs, the only difference between a DOG (16b) and a RABBIT (17a) in JSL is the orientation of the hands. And since sign formation is also often influenced by cultural factors, intercultural differences can cause misunderstandings, like the JSL sign for OLDER BROTHER (2a), or the ASL fingerspelling for T, for people from different cultural backgrounds. And although there is a tendency for iconicity to be lost over time, and for there to be considerable influence from the dominant spoken language(s), there is much (deaf) cultural information contained in the sign language signs (as with EAT (3b), WORK (4c), and even BLACK (16c)), and aspects of grammar (i.e., questions and negation, see below), that reinforce the identity and solidarity of Deaf people (with a capital 'D', to indicate cultural identity), and so there are many aspects of present-day sign languages that should be preserved.

For linguists, a number of sign language phenomena should be of interest. First, as illustrated in sentences (5–11), though spoken Japanese and SJ use negative sentences, JSL conveys the same meaning without directly using manual negatives, utilizing instead signs like YET (6b and 7b), EASILY (9c), and DIFFERENT (11c), and non-manual markers. Another point of interest is the fact that WH-words appear sentence finally in the example sentences 13f, 16f, and 17d. And, it appears that interpreters (who often identify with the hearing culture and have Japanese (spoken

and written) as a first language) should try to avoid the direct translation of Sino-Japanese in sign language (12b and 14a–d), and instead use examples that can illustrate the meaning of the Sino-Japanese words (13b–e and 15a–h).

I would like to conclude with one more comparison of SJ and JSL in 18 and 19 below:

18a 18b 18c

19

The SJ signs in 18 are WHY/HOW (18a), THAT+THING (18b: pointing finger for THAT, and cupped hands for THING) and KNOW+? (18c: the chest thump for KNOW, and the extended hand at the end of a question for the '?'), meaning 'How did you know that?'. The JSL sign in 19 has the same meaning but appears to be a holistic sign that includes all the semantic content of 18. It would be nice if the present research paper helped some of the false myths about sign languages disappear, and maybe even encouraged others to do more research on JSL and other sign languages, so that some day, deaf people might ask hearing researchers, 'How did you know that?'

* I would once again like to thank the deaf group *kusa-no-ne* ('Grassroots') for their permission to use JSL illustrations from their book *akusesu! rou-sha no shuwa* ('Access! Deaf Sign Language') Akaishi-Shoten, Tokyo, 1998.

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