



University of Iceland

School of Humanities

Are You Deaf Enough?

The many ways to be deaf in Japan

B.A. thesis in Japanese Language and Culture

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Abstract

Being deaf does not mean the same thing everywhere in the world. The Japanese Federation of the Deaf has made a great amount of effort to understand what it means to be deaf in Japan but the definition is convoluted and heavily debated. In this essay I look at factors which separate Japanese deaf people from their country, each other, and other foreign deaf societies to determine why members of the deaf community so vehemently oppose each other's definition of deafness. I conducted three interviews comparing the Japanese disability module of deafness to Iceland and the United States of America both of which share the same oral roots as Japan but have evolved into a modern cultural module. Finally I bring historical context to understand how the Japanese mentality has developed after the Second World War to make the possibility of adopting a cultural module of deafness in the near future unrealistic.

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Introduction

*If I acknowledge another man's language I have acknowledged the man
... but if I do not acknowledge his language I have rejected him, because
language is a part of who we are. – Terje Basilier 1974*

What is your name? I was often asked at the vulnerable and impressionable age of eight having just lived in the United States for mere two years and already faced with the monumental task of juggling five languages. *My name is hearing.* I would sign back, receiving bemused expressions and odd glances that usually led to a second attempt, this time slower and with a polite smile: *No, what is your name?* They would emphasize as if I had misunderstood. *My name is hearing!* I repeated, much to my frustration and to their confusion. It was my most memorable lesson on cross cultural misunderstandings and my first insight into the nature of Sign Language. My signed name, given to me by my Deaf Icelandic parents, incidentally looks very similar to the sign for *hearing* in American Sign Language (ASL).

After a couple of confusing exchanges I learned that in American Deaf culture it is customary to fingerspell your name before giving the signed name. In Iceland I had never experienced this confusion nor even known of the existence of these cultural nuances having often encountered Deaf people of other nationalities and felt as if there were no differences in mannerisms, speech, and more often than not, cultural identity. I grew up in a world where borders were simply lines on a map and through sign language I was able to converse with people from around the world with few difficulties. Discovering the double meaning of my name it dawned on me how varied the Deaf community could be and how a national culture influences the sub-culture which I had previously believed to be an international phenomenon.

During my two semesters in Osaka, Japan I had the opportunity to study Japanese Sign Language (JSL) which opened doors allowing me to communicate with the deaf in Japan. It has given me insight into their world where I had an opportunity to compare and contrast what I have learned through my own experiences in Iceland and the United States to a remarkably effervescent culture reacting and responding to cultural shifts from multiple years of arduous wars to a period of economic prosperity with plenty in between. All of which has permeated Japan and in turn had an impact

on the Deaf community and JSL which is slowly becoming standardized and has only recently been accepted and thought of as its own fully fledged language.

While I was studying JSL I often stopped by a local coffee shop owned and run by an elderly Deaf couple where deaf people of varying ages meet to chat. There I felt a culture-gap between the generations and saw a lot of resentment towards the government and sometimes towards each other. Many pensioners felt that the government had failed them and that they had not received adequate schooling. They complained about not understanding the signed news on the government owned NHK broadcasting channel. In the same vein they would voice their complaints about the few employment opportunities available to them and how they were expected to read off lips and try to articulate using sounds and basic gestures.

The younger generation spoke with fast fluid motions and strong visual signs reminiscent to freshmen in Gallaudet University, the only university in the world for the deaf. They were often difficult to understand as slang was tossed around frequently without any obvious intuitive meaning as is so common in sign language. The differences between those born before the 1960's and those born after would be clear to an outsider but the similarities far more subtle. A reoccurring topic in my conversations with the patrons of this coffee shop was the division between deaf people among themselves and the forces which lead to this division. The big organizations that commonly cropped up in conversation were the Japanese Federation of the Deaf (JFD), Ministry of Health and Welfare, and the deaf interest group D-Pro.

Through my efforts to untangle the many viewpoints people have on the deaf and their language I have stumbled across two different modules of deafness that clash in ideologies, one propagated by the government and those who are hard of hearing, and the other from vocal members of the Deaf society. The former deny any existence of a separate culture for the deaf and do not see JSL as a separate language, the latter sees themselves as being culturally Deaf first, Japanese second. I embark on a journey to figure out how this cultural divide has formed between the generations and what it entails. I will investigate how Japan compares to Iceland and the U.S. in the realms of welfare and society, and whether or not the government's attempt to reach out to this minority has been successful when taken into a global context.

Terminology and method

I distinguish between the uppercase ‘Deaf’ and the lowercase ‘deaf’ when referring to the linguistic minority which identifies itself as being separate from those who suffer from the ailment of being without hearing. The Deaf community sees themselves as disabled by function of society, which is to say that being deaf is only a disability in so far as society is not willing or able to come to terms with their needs (McDermott & Varenne 1995). Those who ascribe to the cultural module of deafness do not believe that they need to be fixed or cured. Those described as lowercase deaf people are often those who lost their hearing later in life and therefore identify more strongly with hearing culture and often welcome improvements to their hearing. They seldom use sign language and generally ascribe to the disability module of deafness (Woodward 1972; Padden 1980).

A group known in Japan as D-Pro is an alternative federation of the Deaf which identifies with the cultural, big ‘D’, module of deafness but goes unrecognized by the World Federation of the Deaf as countries are only allowed one official federation per country. D-Pro is in opposition to the JFD, and they often conflict in ideologies.

In order to understand why deaf identity is a sensitive topic it is important to understand how the collective view has been developed and influenced by contradicting factors and in what way they have been promoted or dissuaded. I conducted three interviews alongside my research to give a better picture of how the events I describe relate to real life and what significance they hold on an individualistic level. The goal being to provide contemporary first-hand accounts from different parts of the world and comparing them as an aid to better illustrate the points I make. The interviewees are from three different countries, they received similar questions about their lives and perception of their culture as they have grown.

An individual from Iceland, United States, and Japan were chosen for the similarities they share as a result of their deafness. They are all deaf from birth and identify to some degree with both the cultural and disability modules of deafness. They are of similar age and each sign using their countries respected sign language. Murakami, in the first interview, chose to remain anonymous. Two interviews were conducted in person and one through online video technology. Each interview was then translated from the three sign languages into English by myself.

In my research I relied heavily on Nakamura's *Deaf in Japan* (2006) as there are very few Japanese sources available on the subject of deafness and fewer still written in English, but also because Nakamura's work is highly regarded within both Deaf and hearing communities as a well-rounded collection of stories representing perspectives from all sides of society. She has written extensively on deafness in Japan and makes many appearances throughout this essay.

1 | Brief History of Deafness in Japan

There is little information on the deaf in the early 20th century and many of the cases where deafness has been documented are second-hand accounts written by hearing people. It is difficult to speak of the deaf in Japan as a homogeneous group of people as the community itself has evolved multiple times taking radical steps to gain a footing in the public eye with varying degrees of success. Circumstances have dictated the paths of these people and presented them with opposing ideologies further separating them from each other (Kanda 1989).

In a prison cell in Kyoto Furukawa Tashiro became interested in sign language after observing two deaf boys being bullied from outside his window. Finding it tragic to see the boys being teased for the way they moved, and seeing it as a crime to withhold education from them, he opened the first school for the deaf in 1875. Initially his students were educated in signs and encouraged to use fingerspelling in classrooms. In 1880 Tashiro participated in the second annual Milan conference where hearing educators of the deaf assembled to coordinate their methods. Deaf teachers were not permitted access to the conference (Nakamura 2006). No deaf person took part in deciding the future of deaf education at the largest and most influential conference that had ever been conducted. The result rapidly became the foundation for deaf schools all over the world (Salvarsson 1995).

At the Milan conference eight resolutions were agreed upon to propagate Pure Oral ideals, or Oralism as it is better known as, in which it explicitly states that using sign language alongside speech is detrimental to the pupil's education and that emphasis should be laid on adjusting and preparing them for the hearing world (Moore 2010). Students were trained to read off lips and vocalize words using various methods which are officially regarded as obsolete by both the United States and Icelandic government (Lane, Hoffenmeister, & Bahan 1996; Salvarsson 1995).

130 years later, at the 21st Milan conference an official apology was made to the deaf community, but by then the methods used and developed had already deeply saturated the hearing educators of the deaf which remains the dominant teaching method in Japan (Moore 2010).

No one event has had such an extraordinary negative effect on the lives and position of the deaf in the world as the conference in Milan. Their mother language was ostracized and stigmatized, the pedagogical language became vocal once more and the presupposition of education was broken (Salvorsson 1995, p.46).

Before education was made compulsory by the American Occupation Forces in 1948 there was no pressure to unify sign language or expressed willingness to assemble the deaf children scattered across the country. When prefectural schools first opened it allowed children who had never before seen other deaf children to meet and develop their signing. This had to be done outside classrooms as sign language was banned within schools as a result of the Milan conference. Schools quickly became the center of deaf communities as alumni groups were being formed and traveling each year to new locations, meeting old friends and interacting with the younger generation (Nakamura 2006). Without a central government supporting unification and no university akin to Gallaudet, which could produce deaf educators and serve as a factory of new signs, the schools acted as beacons of deaf societies where activities could be planned and relayed forming homogeneous groups sharing in a newfound language and culture, a stepping stone into a new era for those who did not dare dream of working anywhere but on their parent's farms.

Nakamura showed that the Kyoto school for the Deaf and Blind doubled in numbers in the last decade of the 19th century. Post-war Japan saw a boom in population which inevitably means a greater number of deaf children. The modernization of Japan brought an influx in deafness in another way as well. As a growing number of people were moving into fast-expanding municipalities with limited ways to preserve sanitation, disease spread rapidly; affecting children who were given antibiotics that saved their lives but consequently caused deafness. Most commonly this affected those between the ages of two and eight leading to a greater diversity of comprehension of spoken and written Japanese in schools (2006). Those deafened

later in life would commonly have a better grasp of Japanese than those who did not (Freeman, Carbin, & Boese 1981).

This modernization also gave birth to the first associations and national conferences such as the Japanese Association for the Deaf (JAD) which published periodicals with human interest stories and scholarly articles relating to deafness. The association predated the 1915 war alongside Germany by only a few months and worked throughout the world wars until its closure in 1944 (Nakamura 2006). Before its demise there had already been pressure from the government to register as a social welfare association in 1941, a sign of what could be expected in the decades to come (Ito 1998).

In 1947, a few years after the disbandment of the JAD, the Japanese Federation of the Deaf (JFD), an independent organization, was formed by the 1915 Tokyo alumni who had also seen to the formation of JAD. Their goals were to promote equality for all and slowly untangle the convoluted misunderstandings people had for the deaf. Though they have achieved many milestones working with the government, such as changing reforms allowing the deaf to drive and granting them equal legal and fiscal positioning to the hearing, some also felt that Deaf individuality was being compromised and that efforts made by the JAD were further skewing the misconceptions that have been commonly associated with the Deaf leading to the formation of smaller prefectural based deaf associations operating under their own philosophy, the largest one existing today being D-Pro (Ito 1998).

2 | The Japanese Federation of the Deaf

The medical profession [...] has traditionally been preoccupied with curing diseases, and has rarely concerned itself with the lives led by patients and persons with disabilities. – Yoda 2002

Nakamura explains that for an institution of its size, with approximately 27 thousand members, the JFD is considerably underfunded, and though claiming to be self-sustaining through membership and magazine fees, without needing to rely on direct support from the government in order to operate, they are reliant on crucial governmental contracts known as *Itaku* projects. In the United States non-profit organizations can apply for grants and receive funding over which they have full

control within the guidelines initially set when applying, in Japan these grants come with close governmental supervision to ensure that the money goes directly where it is supposed to, leaving the recipients of the grant with little control over the project.

Itaku projects also brings with them hearing government employees to oversee management who, more often than not, know very little of the deaf world (2006).

Government bureaucrats on their way into retirement often take up positions in companies which they were overseeing, commonly in management, on the company board, or other similar key roles. They are known in Japan as *amakudari* or “decent from heaven.” The *amakudari*, coming from a world of governmental bureaucracy, have close ties with their former branch and can secure *Itaku* projects with greater ease as they bring with them an extensive knowledge of the bureaucratic system, providing a safe and secure source of money. The drawbacks being that company favoritism can easily arise in such a situation where it is not uncommon for bureaucrats to have their own vested interests and by having one on board some degree of control must be given up, following this there is no guarantee that they are competent in the field they take on (Yoda 2002).

It becomes problematic when project managers have very little expertise in the field in which they were assigned to as was evident in notorious Bell Centre failure. The Bell Centre was intended to be a National Welfare Centre for the Deaf but experienced difficulties early on in its building process, which took nearly ten years from its conception to completion, running a ¥125 million deficit (JDN May 1, 1964). Once it had opened it saw a short life due to the management board being mostly made up of the *amakudari* who had little understanding of how to manage such a heavy mortgage and reacted by turning the top floors of the center into condominiums hoping to secure revenue. The Bell Centre went bankrupt and board members of the JFD felt first-hand that trading responsibility for resources had its price (Yoda 2002).

The influence of social welfare, and as an extension the disability module of deafness, affects the JFD on a prefectural level differently than it does nationally. The JFD operates independently as an incorporated foundation allowing them to handle finances in their own name, sign contracts, and be more or less independent. The 47 prefectural associations can remain unincorporated, but in doing so would require finances to be written under one of the members of the management board and severely stunting their ability to get *Itaku* funding (Ogura 1997), more commonly these associations incorporate in a different manner to survive.

Since incorporating is simpler in terms of managing finances most of the associations have had to choose between three levels of incorporation with varying degrees of benefits and supervision. At the lowest level of incorporation there is very little room for independence since most, and in some cases all, of the revenue is generated by *Itaku* contracts. Nakamura points out that these corporations are generally situated in social welfare buildings with hearing welfare employees under the strictest surveillance of the three options but with the most contracts available to them as well. The next option, that the majority of associations choose, allows for more financial and political independence. They are to a low degree still reliant on the *Itaku* contracts but are able to organize events which do not necessarily have to be social-welfare related. The final, and most difficult, way to incorporate allows for great political and financial control, similar to the main JFD offices, with fewer options for contracts (2006). Only the Kumamoto Association of the Deaf has been able to achieve this status. Thus most of the prefectural branches are dependent on governmental support and are under close governmental supervision (Yoda 2002).

The two largest *Itaku* projects the JFD has with the government is in cooperation with the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare which Nakamura translates to “*Research on Standardizing Signing*” and “*Popularizing and Increasing the Use of Signing*” (2002, p.22). The funding from this contract goes into mandating and standardizing new signs, educating teachers and interpreters, as well as creating textbooks and dictionaries. Within the organization is a committee whose job it is to keep the language with the times, adapting it to suite modern technology and foreign loan words. The goal is simplicity and efficiency, perusing the papers to find any new vocabulary they can add; then finding ways to get these signs into circulation and bring awareness to the deaf community through media, books, and sign language circles (Nakamura 2006). However, being under close governmental surveillance which is built on bureaucratic culture, many words are created to meet a quota and not taken into popular use but are still being issued and commercialized as official signs in a book series called *New Signs* that professions such as interpreters and news anchors are still required to use (Fedorowicz 2000).

When it comes to the forefront of new information, and with it new words, media takes the reins as the leading dissemination platform. In Japan the signed news is under NHK’s responsibility but employs people belonging to both D-Pro and the JFD who have to be quick to create signs before airing with no time to consult with

the sign language committee: *“The JFD is reacting against externalities such as the sign language news service [...] which competes in the creation of new terms”* (Nakamura 2006 p.12). Depending on whether the news anchor signs with D-Pro’s philosophy of abstaining from *yubiwai* (fingerspelling) and with a closed mouth, or the JFD’s style of signing, vocalizing and using grammar more similar to written Japanese, it is often difficult to understand the signed news. Because of the inconsistency it is not clear for the viewer which vocabulary to adopt, deepening the rift between the generational cohorts that have a separate philosophy of signing.

Though these associations serve as an important community center, where JSL can be cultivated and shared, being under strict guidelines when working under governmental contracts and having to depend on hearing government employees, who do not speak sign language, to oversee these contracts most of the associations are effectively run by the government. The co-opted associations’ goals become the government’s goal of providing a welfare service to a group of disabled individuals instead of cultivating JSL which is made evident each time a word makes its unprecedented appearance on the signed news.

3 | The Japanese Government and Linguistic Imperialism

**Children are never taught all the rudiments of language. In effect
language lives within us – it seeks only the opportunity to come out. –
Radetsky 1994**

Japanese Sign Language has frequently been dismissed as a collection of superficial symbols and its users as intellectually inferior whose minds are stunted by their inability to communicate effectively. In the government’s endeavors to respond to the poor literacy rate among the deaf JSL has been ignored as a fully-fledged language while a separate mode of signing, often referred to as manual code or simultaneous signing, has taken its place as a pedagogic tool. Manual signing is a method of speaking that follows Japanese grammar precisely, borrowing movements from JSL. It is seen as a means to an end, namely as a teaching tool for the deaf to acquire a real language.

There are several assumptions commonly at play for those who take part in the development of a completely new system of simultaneous signing; one is that Sign

Language is not really a language but a collection of gestures, the other is that deaf people themselves are inherently less competent (Freeman 1981). The former assumption stems from the idea that sign language is simple miming and that acknowledging it as a language devalues linguistics as a whole, whereas the latter is a misconception as ancient as Aristotle when he claimed that *“Men that are born deaf are in all cases also dumb; they can make vocal sounds but they cannot speak”* (Plann 1997, p.208). Walter Ong takes it even further by saying *“deaf-mutes always grew up intellectually sub-normal. Left unattended, the congenitally deaf are more intellectually retarded than the congenitally blind”* (1967: 142), but how reflective are these notions in Japanese society?

Until the end of the 1970's deaf people were classed as mentally deficient with very few legal rights for instance not being allowed to drive, write wills, or sign contracts. Those who made it through education rarely ever got to go to college, instead many were encouraged to work at something which required a hands-on approach such as becoming repairers, shoe-shiners, or beauticians. Alongside their education, which was mostly vocational, were strict methods to assimilate the deaf using oral speech methods (Fedorowicz 2000).

In the beginning years of mandatory education the Ministry of Education refused to acknowledge any separate language being used as a pedagogical tool. Teachers did not receive any special training to work with the deaf. It was entirely by chance whether teachers would be assigned to deaf or hearing students and therefore the classes were conducted similarly using the same books and methods. It may be interpreted as an attempt on the government's behalf not to discriminate between deaf and hearing students but only one language was accepted in the curriculum and JSL was not considered a language (Nakamura 2006).

Teachers would turn their backs to students to write on the blackboard and only those with auditory remains or were particularly well versed in spoken Japanese would be able to keep up with their studies. This led to a greater advantage for those deafened later in life who would rise to the top of the scoreboards and subsequently take leadership positions in the JFD. The result has been heavy criticism from members of D-Pro claiming that the JFD is not a deaf organization but a “hard of hearing organization” (*nanchosa dantai*) that follows and endorses the disability module of deafness as opposed to the cultural one promoted by D-Pro (Nakamura 2006)

The JFD's official position on sign language is that "*Japanese Sign is ... the type of signing used by deaf persons living in various parts of Japan*" (Nakamura 2006. p.29) Matsumoto Masayuki, leader of the JFD, asserts that "*Japanese sign could also be conceived as part of the Japanese language (with the spoken language consisting of one form and signing another form of the Japanese language as a whole)*" (Matsumoto 1997, p.4). He says that any use of signing is in essence JSL, including manual code, which implies that sign language is another method to speak Japanese and is not necessarily a separate autonomous language. D-Pro's manifesto is a stark contrast to this idea in which it reads: "*Deaf people are a linguistic minority who converse using Japanese Sign Language, a language that is distinct from the Japanese language.*" (Kimura & Ichida 1995: p.354) so then why the distinction and where does it come from?

Most Japanese people consider Japan to be a homogenous society where 88.9% of people answered that "it is better for society if groups maintain their distinct customs and traditions", in the same survey 78% of people feel that the Japanese language is important or very important to be considered truly Japanese (Burgess 2008). Deaf people are different to other minorities in that the parents of deaf children are usually not deaf themselves as opposed to an American-Hispanic child being born into a Hispanic family for instance. Deaf individuals commonly discover Deaf culture and identity later in life, but by then most have already been subjugated to oral methods and indoctrination (Nakamura 2006). Generally students that spend time learning how to speak come out with poorer education than their peers as the time which could have gone to the same subjects able-bodied children learn is instead spent on assimilating the deaf into the hearing world.

Generally when attempting to standardize sign language hearing experts from the medical, interpreting, and educational field are consulted, all under the notion that a service needs to be provided to come to terms to those who cannot hear. Often ignoring the social aspect of deafness and sign language many countries fall into the pitfall of creating an exact signed version of the national language, under the impression that they are giving the deaf their first real language and better preparing them for joining society. The same experts who work on creating and promoting the manual code work under "*the assumption that the Deaf are not a community but rather scattered 'disabled' individuals. The assertion of the existence of Deaf communities is frequently greeted with disbelief*" (Branson & Miller 1998, p.13). The

manufacturing of signs by hearing educators with little understanding of sign language has been contested and considered both obsolete and detrimental to virility of Deaf culture in other parts of the world.

4 | American Module of Deafness

The United States have come the furthest in recognizing the Deaf as a homogenous group of people sharing in language and culture and is home to the only existing university for the deaf named after the Congregationalist minister Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet. The United States is known in the global Deaf community as the Deaf capital of the world regarded by most deaf studies scholars (Lane, Hoffenmeister, & Bahan 1996; Padden & Humphries 1989; Stokoe, Casterline, & Croneberg 1976) as the center of activism and social equality thanks to a combination of well-documented history and cultivation of sign language. It is the birthplace of the cultural module of deafness, producing the largest amount of deaf literature, educators, and research in the world (Padden & Humphries 1989).

Hereditary deafness has been well documented in the United States but particularly in the early 19th century on an island called Martha's Vineyard. Statistically one out of every 5728 Americans is born deaf but on Martha's Vineyard the number was one in every 155. On the island a majority of the residents were bilingual and did not think of the deaf as a separate group of people, but rather as unique individuals, often forgetting who was deaf and who wasn't. A resident of the island points out "*I didn't think about the deaf any more than you'd think about anybody with a different voice.*" while another remarks "*those people weren't handicapped. They were just deaf.*" (Groce 2009; p5)

As cities grew and more people moved inland to seek out better opportunities in work and education the Vineyard's deaf population took a steep decline and is no longer considered a Deaf environment. The effects of the island never completely died out and are today used to point out that culture creates or removes disability (McDermott & Varenne 1995). The island also provides historical context that show what dangers threaten contemporary locations with a high number of hereditary deafness such as Bali, Indonesia (Branson, Miller, & Marsaja 2001).

Though it may appear to be insignificant that hereditary deafness existed on an island over 150 years ago Lane, Hoffenmeister and Bahan claim that it is proof deaf

people can live alongside those who hear with minimal restrictions. Their deafness acted as no hindrance and was commonly mentioned as an afterthought if ever at all by inhabitants who remembered a time where everybody spoke sign language. A similar environment exists on the Gallaudet campus where every employee from janitor to dean is required to know ASL regardless of hearing capability (1996).

The abundance of minority groups in the United States has helped the Deaf community gain momentum in achieving cultural recognition, by leveraging and adjusting arguments made by the gay and lesbian movement, as well as uppercase 'b' Black culture advocates, they were able to demonstrate cultural originality using a pre-existing framework for cultural separateness. The presence of minorities in Japan is much less visible and often ignored leading the JFD to find their own way of achieving recognition, namely through humanitarian arguments pertaining to disability rights and society's duties to take care of those who the government deem unfit to take care of themselves (Nakamura 2006).

4.1 | American Interview

Jeremy Sebelius was born and raised in North Dakota, USA in 1975 as the only deaf child to a hearing family. He identifies himself as being bi-cultural, belonging to two cultures and having two languages, American Sign Language and English. He attended Gallaudet University but currently lives in Iceland with dual citizenship as a student at the University of Iceland. Having gone to both schools for the deaf and hearing Jeremy is familiar with both worlds. As someone who has lived as a minority in more ways than one he is very aware of the multi-layered social discrimination on all levels of society and in various countries.

There is great accessibility getting phone interpreters, sign language interpreters, and using a videophone to speak with professionals. It is very convenient because of the ADA system.

Jeremy answered when asked whether or not the United States is performing adequately in coming to the needs of the deaf and disabled in general. The ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990) prevents discrimination in the workplace, governmental services/facilities, and public accommodations as well as mandating the telephone relay service where the deaf have a right to a phone interpreter without

additional charge. The ADA is an unprecedented bill building on strong legal foundations classifying discrimination against the disabled as a breach of federal law and has no parallel in Japan or Iceland (Bagenstos 2001).

The ADA plays a huge role in ensuring that deafness does not hinder anybody from getting a job due to their disability, but according to Jeremy only a minority within the Deaf community would consider themselves disabled despite using the services provided by the ADA.

I consider myself to be first and foremost Deaf, this is easy to answer.

[Gallaudet] is an excellent school, it is the Deaf mecca of the world. There you can meet all types of people. Even if they are French or Swedish they are all Deaf and we are equal because of it [deafness].

Jeremy points out in his experience that the notion of Deaf people identifying themselves as Deaf first and anything else as secondary is a global phenomenon and exists inherently within the individual at birth. One does not choose to be Deaf; comparably people born gay do not choose to be so, he later adds. Similarly those outside the groups have a difficult time understanding or accepting that there exists a separate culture because of this inherent quality which is fluid in nature and often proves difficult to express, like trying to capture a fragrance in words.

It was difficult for my parents to understand that there is a Deaf world, I told them that their hearing world and my world are different and they have slowly come to realize that. Today my family sees that ASL is my native language. My family is capable of communicating with me through ASL. Without ASL, I would never comprehend the function of a nuclear family and, also, it would force me to be greatly isolated. Thanks to American Sign Language which helps me connect with everything.

Jeremy mentions how the communities view is becoming more understanding of the cultural module of deafness in the United States where Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan calculate ASL as being anywhere from the third to fifth most popular language to study in schools in the U.S. (statistics vary from 500 thousand to 2 million users in the United States alone) despite only acting as a bona fide language without ever having been acknowledged as a nation language by any governmental authority (1996).

Neither the U.S. Constitution nor federal law recognizes ASL but only because there are no official languages. English isn't recognized as an official language either. I am bilingual with both languages.

Though Jeremy never had to undergo the oral method he has an excellent comprehension of spoken and written English even taking English as a major at university.

I am lucky because I am bi-cultural, I feel very rich belonging to both worlds.

When approached with the subject of SEE (Signed Exact English) he, like many others (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996; Branson & Miller 1998), claims that it is not a real language but a tool mimicking English grammar precisely without emulating any of the linguistic elements or syntax used in ASL.

Deaf people who are advanced native speakers of their national sign language should also be recognized as the legitimate arbiters in the correct usage of the indigenous sign language, and should hold significant positions in research efforts to develop graphic educational materials in the sign language (Branson & Miller 1998; p.4)

As the interview was nearing its conclusion I asked Jeremy if there are any qualities of Iceland that he prefers over the United States to which he replied that the absence of a constructed sign language works greatly to Iceland's favor and that progress through the cultural module of deafness is gaining momentum similar to the United States only a few decades ago.

5 | Icelandic Module of Deafness

Iceland is home to one of the smaller language minorities in the world, Icelandic Sign Language (ITM – Íslenskt Táknmál), with a rough estimate of 300 deaf people living there, or 0.1% of the population. ITM has been accepted as an official language as of February 2011 and is in the process of becoming standardized by The Communication Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (*Samskiptamiðstöð Heyrnarlausra og Heyrnarskerta*) (Guðmundsdóttir & Egilsson 1989).

The history of deafness is young, only a few documents on the lives of the deaf are available, all of which have been written by hearing authors. The majority of whom were former educators of the deaf such as Brandur Jónsson, Páll Pálsson, and Margrét B. Rasmus all of whom taught using the oral method. Bryndís Guðmundsdóttir and Guðmundur Egilsson are an exception to this rule with their historical overview in 1989 titled *Deaf People in Iceland* or *Heyrnarlausir á Íslandi* (Þorvaldsson 2010).

From the beginning of deaf education in 1867 until 1981, when Brandur Jónsson stepped down as principle from the, then called, School for the Dumb (*Málleysingjaskólinn*), every principles had been educated in Denmark using the oral method. Before priest Páll Pálsson took on the role as the first deaf educator in Iceland children were sent to a deaf school in Denmark where mandatory education had already been in full swing, it was considered natural at the time that teachers be sent there to learn from seasoned veterans (Salvarsson 1995).

In 1922 Margrét took over the school after an unexpected death of her predecessor and implemented a Danish system called the “mouth-hand-system” (*mund-hånd-system*) focusing entirely on the oral method and banning the use of sign language in classrooms. Brandur, who would take over from Margrét and remain for almost 40 years, laid more emphasis on using hearing-aids and undergoing speech therapy with little focus being put on sign language whether it be promoting it or restricting its use, allowing it to develop autonomously (Guðmundsdóttir & Egilsson 1989).

According to Þorvaldsson the deaf school mainstreamed with the hearing school, Hlíðaskóli, in 2002 whose principle is culturally Deaf and uses sign language in classrooms. A majority of the deaf students attended Sólborg, a kindergarten that uses ITM alongside speech to communicate with both hearing and deaf students indiscriminately. The government has abandoned all speech therapy programs and curriculums and now focus on cultivating both Icelandic and ITM, recognizing that those born deaf are bi-lingual and setting it into stone with the acknowledgement of sign language as an official language (2010).

5.1 | Icelandic Interview

Kristinn Jón Bjarnasson is one of many who was born deaf due to the Rubella outbreak of 1964 and grew up with hearing aids for most of his life. He has completed the highest level of education of the deaf with two bachelor degrees and a master's in business (Þorvaldsson 2010). He currently works at the Gallaudet University. Like Jeremy, Kristinn is also familiar with the disability module of deafness as he was subjected to Oralism throughout grade school and got involved in the Deaf community later in life.

At the time, it was very important to speak, to learn how to speak and Oralism [was important] too. Brandur was the principle at the time; he and HTI¹ put a lot of emphasis on speaking. There were high standards to be met in order to be considered hard working. Learning to read lips has helped me a little bit. Through school and life there have always been hindrances, most importantly accessibility.

It is easy to understand Kristinn's voice when he speaks but he chooses to sign without vocalizing when he doesn't need to. Despite his infrequent interactions with other deaf people as a teenager he took the initiative in his 20's and offered to be the editor for the monthly magazine for the deaf in Iceland, feeling a magnetic pull towards the community.

I always identify as being Deaf, of course being Icelandic is also a part of this but I am first and foremost Deaf.

Unlike the United States there is no bill similar to the ADA which ensures equality in the workplace and there seems to be a lack of initiative by members of the deaf community themselves.

Compared to Iceland, the United States is more organized in their work, the accessibility is poor in this country and the hindrances seemed to be getting more and more [worse and worse]. Deaf people need to create a strategy and lobby their members of parliament, it would take time but it would allow the government to understand the needs of deaf people.

¹ *Heyrnar og Talmeinstöð Íslands* or The National Hearing and Speech Institute of Iceland

He admits that there have been some major improvements in recent years and though there is much left to be done in terms of how the deaf community is perceived by the rest of society it is becoming increasingly more obvious that dream of being transformed, in the eyes of the public, from disabled individuals to a cultural and linguistic minority group is manifesting into reality.

The government is still doing their part, for instance recently recognizing Icelandic Sign Language as a national language where every single [parliament member] agreed to the bill. It was a huge victory in the Deaf community.

As the topic of Oralism was revisited atmosphere changed and the mood took on a somber tone as Kristinn became more introspective.

It is generally accepted within our community that the death of Oralism is the best thing that has happened to us. Sign Language is our birth right. The Deaf are fighting to be seen as equal to hearing people, we have nothing against them, we just want equality.

Kristinn had prior experience of living in the United States and Iceland, he claims that both countries have their advantages and considers them to be among the most advanced nations when it comes to accessibility and progressive social thinking. He chooses not to disclose his preference for either.

6 | Japanese Interview

Murakami was born completely deaf in 1965, Kyoto, Japan to hearing parents. He agreed to an interview under the condition that his identity would not be revealed due to fear of being ostracized from D-Pro. Murakami is a member of the, self-proclaimed militantly deaf, D-Pro organization as well as the JFD, due to membership benefits such as monthly magazines at a reduced fee. The fear of being ostracized is very real within the D-Pro for they are very selective of their members and have strict conditions about what constitutes as being really Deaf. I was advised by a mutual friend to be delicate in how I signed to him, careful to keep a closed mouth and to refrain from accidentally using Manually Signed Japanese.

In our introduction Murakami signed his name using kanjis, Chinese characters, before giving me his signed name, as I began to sign back using the Japanese fingerspelling system (*yubiwa*) I was stopped right away and asked to have it spelled again using the American fingerspelling system. Immediately we were off to a bad start but gradually Murakami warmed up to me and talked passionately about his past and the injustice he has had to face.

I remember many things. Growing up was hard. Becoming an adult was hard, but I am here. I did it. When I was a child I learned to speak [Japanese]. Everybody had to speak. They hit us with long canes on our fingers if we did not use our voices. I was hit often.

Murakami showed his knuckles which protruded slightly from his hands giving them a peculiar shape. He laughs and adds that he was the most disobedient student.

There are 97 deaf schools in Japan. Only one uses JSL. [Almost] all of the children there have Deaf parents. All other schools use Oralism. The government [Ministry of Education] is blind to sign language. It is very simple, just look.

Although the Ministry of Education has lifted the ban on JSL it has done nothing to promote its use or incorporate it into the curriculum (Nakamura 2006). The one school that uses JSL is privately funded where most students have Deaf parents themselves. Murakami admits that though there is a lot to be left wanting the one school is still an improvement to his days of punishment.

I am one hundred percent Deaf, only Japanese second. I always feel a strong connection with Deaf people. I was born on a very important year. It was the year where everything changed. Deaf people got education, and smarter. We had [heroes]. I was born then. Born into the big Deaf year.

Murakami was not deafened due to the Rubella outbreak of 1964 but identifies with the *ru-roasha* or rubella-‘deafies’, a group formed for those born around 1964, large part of the rubella-deafies are also a part of the D-Pro.

I remember Matsumoto. He inspired all of us. Many became educated and professionals because of him. I wanted to speak like him both in writing [and signing]. I am sad he choose the JFD, but he is still a very close friend.

Matsumoto is who Murakami most looked up to for inspiration. Matsumoto was the first deaf lawyer in Japan and later became the chairman of the JFD. Murakami shares a story about the atrocious ways he feels the justice system has worked against them in the Tokyo sushi restraint incident.

7 | The Injustice System

During a period in 1965 where the deaf were often making the news, the Bell Centre had been recently opened and students at the Kyoto School of the Deaf were on strike, an incident occurred at a sushi restaurant in Toyko where two deaf men got into an argument with a three hearing men that escalated into a fist-fight. As the owner intervened he was pushed back and fell on his head consequently losing his life and the two men were put on a well-publicized trial which has been used by the JFD to point out that discrimination exists within the justice system, and as an extension, society. The conclusion of the trial set in motion a ripple of change leading the JFD to rethink their approach towards fighting discrimination moving their focus from individual cases to confronting the administration and system makers directly (JDN January 1, 1969).

After the Japanese Deaf News wrote about the murder accusation many people from the deaf community were quick to lend their monetary support. Though they were able to raise enough money to cover the legal defense and pay for lawyers the trouble was finding ones who would be willing to take on the case which proved to be far more difficult than anticipated. Many lawyers did not want to represent deaf clients due to the communicational barriers and lack of a proper way to overcome these obstacles. Sign Language interpreters were not allowed in interrogation rooms as most of the interpreters at the time were volunteers at a time no legal certification pertaining to their work conduct existed, marking the interpreters with same rights as civilians (Nakamura 2006). Furthermore, one of the defendants had only graduated from a deaf middle school and the other never went further than third grade in a Taiwanese school; this made communicating through writing near impossible. Functionally, the men were illiterate (Kawai 1991).

Nakamura points out that the courtroom provided further challenges as most interpreters had little understanding of the legal jargon being used and would therefore not be up for relaying information with their limited vocabulary, especially if their interpretations would ultimately affect the lives of these men. The situation was unprecedented but no special measures were introduced and the trial and questioning went on without an interpreter present for the majority of the time (2006).

The men were found guilty and both sentenced to time in prison along with hard labor which the JFD immediately appealed the following year (Itabashi 1991). Matsumoto Masayuki, having graduated recently from the Legal Research and Training Institute, joined the legal team as the first deaf lawyer in Japan taking on his first deaf case in which he raised questions about the quality and qualifications of the interpreters used and whether or not full disclosure had been ensured given the defendants poor level of literacy. One of the defendants issued several personal statements to the court but it was mostly ignored on account of the justices not being able to understand his writing. The court determined due to the men's illiteracy and passivity, which could be a misinterpretation of their inability to participate, that they were mentally retarded. The prison time had been reduced to hard labor for that reason solely. Kawai, a member of the legal defense team, states that when Matsumoto spoke with the defendants in JSL it was apparent that they were completely capable of articulating their thoughts in an intelligent manner and showed understanding at the severity of their situations with full linguistic capabilities (1991).

Realization dawned on the leaders of the JFD that although the courts were a good tool to publicize the injustices toward the disabled it had no permanent effects and that effort would need to be applied on a national level, directed towards the legislators and lawmakers themselves to truly have an effect. The shift in focus played a monumental part in both earning the deaf the right to drive, less than a decade from the trials, and in 1979 when the Incompetence Law, which prevented the deaf from being financially independent, was challenged at the National Diet marking one of the most important victories for the deaf as they no longer shared the same legal standings to children. The heavy publication and increasing social awareness to discrimination lead the JFD to cooperation with the Ministry of Welfare and the transformation of some of the prefectural associations into social welfare branches was in full effect (Nakamura 2006).

Conclusion

The Japanese Federation of the Deaf has come a long way from its post-war foundations and has arguably been one of the most successful minority groups in Japan. They have grown out of a period of strong political activism into a web of independent prefectural associations working alongside the government managing to avoid full cooptation while maintaining a good degree of autonomy. Their success is made even more remarkable given the bureaucratic political minefield they have had to transverse. However deaf people in Japan are still seen by the government and society as fundamentally Japanese in language and culture, and have argued among themselves on that point for decades, inspiring independent organizations such as D-Pro that clash with the ideologies of the JFD.

Most of the prefectural associations have been mainstreamed into social welfare centers that focus on disability services, whereas others are less dependent on governmental supervision allowing for internal decision making and direction. Each association operates under their own ideas of deafness as diverse as their leaders themselves making claims to homogeneity an unrealistic statement. The differences in schools of thought have to do with the nature of identity, rendering the community split on a fundamental part of who they are.

Like Iceland and the United States a group of Deaf cultural activists campaign to be seen as a language minority that do not wish to hear again but, unlike these countries, have no minority framework to adopt and adjust. The result has been close cooperation with the government under the existing framework of social welfare to secure deaf people independence and basic human rights.

Unlike Iceland and the United States manual signing and Oralism are still the predominant methods used to train interpreters and teach children. Japan has been relying on hearing experts to manufacture all types of systems for the deaf from schooling to legal assistance. However, as sign languages across the world are being accepted as complete natural languages countries have begun approaching Deaf communities with a newfound curiosity and respect. Japan is a country a rich history and deep cultural roots, adapt at joining the traditional with the new. There are many ways to be deaf in Japan, but in order to be considered as truly part of the community the question still remains: are you Deaf enough?

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