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**Department of Linguistics and Baltic Languages
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The Language and Identity of the Japanese Deaf
Bachelor's Diploma Thesis

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2013

I hereby declare that I have worked on this thesis independently,
using only the primary and secondary sources listed in the bibliography.

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Introduction

Deafness exists in all parts of today's world. For at least two centuries there have been documented studies of deaf communities¹ and it can safely be assumed that deaf people have existed in all time periods throughout all societies of the human race. Just as hearing people naturally developed their own languages, so have deaf people developed sign languages which use body movements rather than sounds to communicate meaning. Contrary to popular belief, sign languages are full-fledged languages capable of expressing any kind of concrete or abstract meaning that is expressible by language. Similarly, just as hearing people have built societies and cultures, so have deaf people in many parts of the world built their own cultures within them, exercising art, sports, theatre, and even music in a way suited to their way of life. However, since the percentage of deaf people has always been small in comparison to the percentage of hearing people, in nearly all societies – both past and present – they have been forced to function inside a hearing culture, communicate using verbal languages which they don't fully understand², and thus have frequently been viewed as inferior. This view has in fact been spread as early as by Aristotle, who in his *Historia Animālium*³ proclaims:

Men that are born deaf are in all cases also dumb; that is, they can make vocal sounds, but they cannot speak.

Hearing people often avoid interaction with deaf people, because of the natural language barrier, but also because they don't know how to deal with them and are

¹ For an early account of deafness in France, see BÉBIAN, Roch-Ambroise Auguste. *Essai sur les sourds-muets et sur le langage naturel*. Paris: Dent, 1817.

² Rare exceptions include the Massachusetts island Martha's Vineyard (see Groce, 1985) until roughly the beginning of the 20th century, and Desa Kolok in Bali (see Branson et al., 1996).

consequently often afraid or unwilling to try to communicate. Deaf people, having had to deal with their condition their entire lives, are often more eager to communicate with hearing people and usually have at hand a means to achieve satisfactory communication. It is often because of an a priori and irrational fear or uncertainty of the majority that casts the minority of deaf people into the category of disabled or inferior. Japan especially is a nation where the custom to be uniform with one's peers is remarkably strong, which leads to perhaps a higher integration rate of deaf people into society, but also to a more pronounced fear of the unfamiliar by the hearing populace. It is my hope that this thesis will help – however slightly – to achieve greater understanding and tolerance towards the deaf minority, primarily in Japan, but perhaps other places in the world as well. I would like to show that deaf people, having always been a part of society, are a fascinating if often overlooked minority from whom much can still be learned. I will do this by delving into several aspects the life of deaf people as I have experienced it during my stay in Japan.

I have spent two semesters between September 2010 and May 2011 at Kansai Gaidai University (KGU), a school found in the heart of Japanese culture, between the historic Kyōto and the bustling modern Ōsaka. I participated in KGU's Japanese Sign Language (JSL) study circle, led by the assistant professor of anthropology Dr. Steven Fedorowicz, and I also took two courses which dealt with the issues of deafness in Japan, namely *The Body and Communication in Japan* and *Deaf World Japan*. I visited a Deaf⁴ culture festival at the local Ikuno Elementary and Middle school for the deaf, as well as

³ The original Ancient Greek title is Περὶ τῶν Ζῴων Ἱστορία.

⁴ The use of the capitalized term “Deaf”, in opposition to the lowercase “deaf”, is a central issue of this

the 38th Ōsaka Deaf Culture Festival (第38回全大阪ろうあ者文化祭). I also volunteered as an English language tutoring assistant at the Daisen High school for the deaf. I took part in various events held by Deaf groups, such as a Christmas party in the local JSL circle *Atorie* (アトリエ) and – during my second semester – weekly meetings of a Kimono study circle held at the Deaf café in Ōsaka’s Tanimachi district.

Japanese Deaf people are born into Japanese families and carry the heritage of the Japanese culture. However, being Deaf and using sign language rather than spoken language, there are areas of their lifestyle which differ from what is typical for Japanese cultural life. In this thesis, I will present an insight into some of these differences. I believe that looking at and thinking about the Deaf – a cultural minority inescapably bound to the borderline between culturally Japanese and non-Japanese⁵ – can prove very interesting and inspiring to any student of Japanese culture. I also believe that the realization that we can find another native, natural language in Japan – aside from the Japanese spoken language – can lead to many interesting findings for Japanese linguistic students.

One of the reasons why participating in and studying about the Deaf culture may be interesting for a foreigner in Japan may be that both are cultural minorities. I believe that as a foreigner I may have noticed certain parts of Japanese social life which the cultural majority takes for granted and thus doesn’t even consider as potentially problematic when communicating with Deaf people. Even more, since I am from the

thesis and as such will be explained in Chapter 1.

⁵ Japanese Deaf people are arguably Japanese in that they are born in Japan and spend their lives there, but they cannot participate in some areas of cultural life in the same way as Hearing people, ranging from karaoke to speech contests, which makes their culture different; thus “non-Japanese”.

Czech Republic which even after twenty years of existence is still very often misnamed Czechoslovakia, I also belong to a culture completely unknown to the average Japanese person. So, by providing an account of my views on the issue, I am also hoping to aid in the mutual understanding of Deaf and Hearing people in Japan.

In this thesis I deal with particular aspects of the life of Japanese deaf people which form their identity and are critical to create a Deaf culture. The main focus points are language, medical conditions, and the school system of deaf people in Japan. I will show that even though there are many deaf people in Japan, they are by no means a homogeneous group and create different identities depending on the various conditions under which they live. I will also try to provide topics for further research.

Note on Japanese script and transcription

Throughout this work I will be using Japanese terms and names where appropriate and necessary. I will write the original Japanese in parentheses, the transliteration in italics and English translations in quotation marks. In the Bibliography section, brackets are used instead of quotation marks for translations. I will use translations that have already been used in other literature wherever possible, providing my own translation when lacking a different source or when I consider a different translation more fitting. The transcription system I will use is the commonly used Modified Hepburn romanization system. In the Bibliography section, I will write the surname of all authors (both Japanese and non-Japanese) in capital letters in order to prevent confusion which often arises due to the fact that Japanese names are traditionally written with the family name first and the given name second. If a name is used throughout the text, I write the given name (名) first, and the family name (姓) second.

Chapter 1 - Defining “deaf” and “Deaf”

Throughout this work, I use both the terms *deaf* and *Deaf*. While the words seem quite similar and are indistinguishable in their spoken form, they have very different semantic qualities. I will start with the discussion of these terms and the implications of their meanings. This will serve to give the reader a basic idea of Deaf culture-related discourse, and also a cursory glance at the various ways deaf people in Japan might refer to themselves.

1.1 – *Deaf* in English

For the purpose of this thesis, I must first define the term “deaf” and “Deaf” in English, in the way they are used in contemporary discourse. This section explains my usage of the terms, but also outlines how the terms are used in much of contemporary literature.

The lowercase term, *deaf*, refers generally to people with the diagnosis of hearing loss. Any person who has problems with hearing to the point that verbal communication becomes difficult or impossible can be referred to as *deaf*. On the other hand, the capitalized *Deaf* refers to people who consider themselves as a part of a culture or community of people not relying on the sense of hearing in their lives. For example, in the USA⁶ as well as the Czech Republic⁷, Deaf people themselves very often hold the capitalized term *Deaf* (and the equivalent in Czech, *Neslyšící*) in high regard when referring to themselves, as if to stress their belonging to the given cultural group – much

⁶ Cf. the consistency of using only the capitalized *Deaf* when introducing the culture throughout Lane et al.

⁷ See the definition in Skákalová, 2011, p.30.

like is the case with cultural minorities such as Jews or the Romani (*Židé* and *Romové* respectively in Czech)⁸. In Japanese writing, however, capitalization is not an option, and so even though deafness-related discourse in Japan has been influenced especially by Gallaudet-based⁹ American literature, this issue necessarily has to be different.

1.2 – Deaf in Japanese

There are four¹⁰ major categories of terms used to describe persons with hearing loss in written and spoken Japanese, and each of these categories of terms carry specific connotations and refer to a distinct group of people. Through a semantic analysis of the individual terms, I will show how they affect the identity of people who are designated by them.

1. *rō* (ろう or 聾), *rōa* (ろうあ or 聾哑), *rōsha* (ろう者 or 聾者), *rōasha* (ろうあ者 or 聾哑者), *rō no hito* (ろうの人 or 聾の人)
2. *chōkaku shōgaisha* (聴覚障害者)
3. *nanchōsha* (難聴者)
4. *mimi ga kikoenai hito* (耳が聴こえない人), *mimi no kikoenai hito* (耳の聴こえない人)¹¹

⁸ The terms *hearing* and *Hearing* are also sometimes used, analogously to *deaf* and *Deaf* – the term *Hearing* stresses that a person belongs to a non-Deaf culture.

⁹ Gallaudet University is a university for the Deaf located in Washington, D.C., USA, and represents the center of all American deafness-related research.

¹⁰ Provided by Nakamura, 2003, p.213.

¹¹ Nakamura also mentions other terms, such as *defu* (デフ), *D* (ディー) and *tsunbo* (つんぼ), but these are used only marginally and thus will not be dealt with here.

1.2.1 *Rō, rōsha, rōa, rōasha*

Rōsha (ろう者) is a term used predominantly in Deafness-related Japanese literature. There are two ways to write *rōsha*; ろう者 and 聾者. The latter uses the rather old kanji¹² 聾, which means „deaf, hearing-impaired“. The use of the kanji is quite rare, possibly because it is rather difficult and usually isn't encountered in everyday life. A typical Japanese person doesn't use it and might not even recognize it readily.

The term *rōasha* is an alternative to *rōsha* that provides the additional semantic *a* (啞) meaning “mute, speech-impaired”. Again, the kanji version is not often used.

Rō no hito means “person who is Deaf” and is a term used marginally, and more often in speech than in literature. This reflects the custom that written text usually contains Sino-Japanese readings of kanji (such as *rōsha* or *chōkaku shōgaisha*) rather than Japanese readings (as is the case with *rō no hito*).

The terms *rō* and *rōa* without the semantic *sha* (者), meaning “person”, are also used as adjectives, such as in *rō bunka* (ろう文化), “Deaf culture”, or *rō no sekai* (ろうの世界), „Deaf world“.

The terms in this first category translate into English most precisely as the capitalized “Deaf”. *Rōsha* is the term culturally Deaf people in Japan often identify themselves with. *Rōsha* is the term of choice for Deaf authors themselves¹³. This translation also correlates with the fact that like the capitalized *Deaf* in English, the

¹² *Kanji* are characters used in Japanese text as carriers of semantic meaning; the alternatives are *hiragana* and *katakana*, syllabic characters carrying only phonetic value.

¹³ Used in much of contemporary Deaf culture related Japanese sources, e.g. Miura, 2011; Kanda, 2002; Kimura 2007; Kimura 2012, Ogata & Yonaiyama, 2011.

meaning of *rō* must often be at least briefly explained to disinterested people (since they usually use *mimi no kikoentai hito* instead).

Chōsha (聴者), “hearing person”, is used in opposition when referring to Hearing people.

1.2.2 *Chōkaku shōgaisha*

Chōkaku shōgaisha (聴覚障害者) is a term which translates literally as “hearing-sense-disabled person” (following the individual meanings of the kanji). This term is commonly used in social welfare discourse and in official texts issued by the state¹⁴. The term *chōkaku shōgaisha* encompasses not only profoundly deaf people, but also hard-of-hearing people and people with various degrees of hearing loss. It is thus useful for naming a group of all people who experience hearing loss, regardless of cultural standpoints. However, problems arise when making policies towards this whole group. Nakamura¹⁵ explains that people with different types of hearing loss require different kinds of welfare services. Furthermore, most people suffering from hearing loss due to age and a part of the people who acquired it later in life do not opt to become part of the Deaf community and adopt the Deaf lifestyle, which includes socializing with other Deaf people and using sign language. Using as a generic estimate Ross Mitchell’s¹⁶ data, at least half of the *deaf* population is over 65 years old, and I believe it to be a safe

¹⁴ For example, the *Law for the Welfare of Physically Disabled Persons*, or *Results of the 2006 Survey of the Actual State of Physically Disabled Children and Adults*.

¹⁵ Nakamura, 2002, p. 26.

¹⁶ Mitchell, 2005.

assumption that people in this age category usually lack motivation to learn to function in a different (*Deaf*) culture.

Another problem with the term is that culturally Deaf people sometimes object to the negative connotations it carries. The kanji for *shōgai* (障害) which make up the word “disabled” carry meanings of “harm” and “injury”. One of my Japanese Deaf friends is particularly opposed to the notion that she is being harmed by her deafness, and rather accepts it as a part of her culture.

From both the medical and cultural standpoints, the term *chōkaku shōgaisha* must be used carefully and with the realization that it encompasses various different categories of persons and their needs. For this reason, I avoid using it in any discussion barring its actual occurrences in text.

1.2.3 *Nanchōsha*

Hard-of-hearing, *nanchōsha* (難聴者), is a term used for people who have a degree of residual hearing that afford them the ability to communicate via oral methods (with adequate effort and also support from both the communication partner and medical methods), though this communication is often somewhat hindered and quite challenging. Many hard-of-hearing people prefer communicating using spoken language, as many are those who are in the process of losing hearing for age-related reasons. There are, however, also people who become hard-of-hearing earlier in life, and I have personally met and spoken with at least five who use either predominantly JSL or a mix of JSL and Japanese, depending on the situation.

People who identify themselves as *nanchōsha* can be viewed as culturally Deaf or culturally Hearing, as well as individuals who partake in both cultures, depending on other factors, such as family, social circles, choice of language etc.

1.2.4 *Mimi no kikoenai hito*

Mimi no kikoenai hito translates as “person whose ears do not hear” or “person who cannot hear”. When discussing deaf people with disinterested Japanese people, they often don’t readily recognize the term *rōsha* at its first use and the circumscription *mimi no kikoenai hito* must be used to ensure they understand the discussion topic. This leads us to a few pragmatic meanings of these terms. There is a basic discrepancy between the custom of Deaf people to regularly call themselves *rōsha* and the failure of Hearing people to recognize the term. The marginal understanding that there are some non-hearing people in society is common, so the concept of deafness is already existent when a conversation about them is stricken up, but it is not associated with the term *rōsha*. This signifies that most people have not come into contact with the word and, by extension, with discussions of deafness-related issues.

Chapter 2 - Defining hearing loss

Hearing loss is not a binary diagnosis of “hearing” and “deaf”. There are many degrees ranging from mild trouble understanding words in conversation all the way to profound deafness and complete loss of the ability to hear. Consequently, no natural dividing line between deaf and hearing exists, and where it is drawn is largely dependent on the cultural assumptions and jurisdiction in each region. In Japan, people are legally deaf when their hearing loss reaches a certain degree, but can also be considered deaf by themselves or by other people based on less severe hearing problems.

The degree of hearing loss is measured in decibels (dB)¹⁷. The web page of the Kyoto Hard-of-Hearing Society’s Youth Division – *Kyōto nanchōsha kyōkai seishōnen-bu* (京都難聴者協会青年部)¹⁸ lists examples of hearing difficulties with corresponding hearing loss measured in decibels. I will provide a translation of the particular table for the reader’s orientation in the various levels of hearing loss:

Hearing loss (dB)	Corresponding dB level audible sound	Actual hearing ability	Degree of hearing loss
0	the most silent sounds audible to healthy humans		normal
20		problems understanding conversations, sometimes making mistakes	
30			mildly hard-of-hearing
40	quiet conversation	barely able to understand normal conversation	
50			moderately hard-of-hearing
60	ordinary speech	somewhat able to understand loud speech	
70			heavily

¹⁷ The process of measuring hearing loss is complex; it is described for instance in Skákalová, 2011, p.23.

¹⁸ www1.plala.or.jp/t_nishimura/tyoukaku.htm

80	loud speech conversation	able to hear the sound of train pulling into station	hard-of-hearing
90	shouting		
100	shouting into the ear		deaf
120	siren in the close vicinity	able to hear the sound of an airplane motor	

To be officially considered disabled, i.e. to receive the Disabled person's handbook¹⁹, a person must have a hearing loss of at least 70 dB in both ears, or 90 dB in one ear and 50 dB in the other. The precise criteria for deciding the degree of hearing disability are summarized in the following table²⁰:

Degree of disability	Criteria
2	hearing loss in both ears of 100 dB or more
3	hearing loss in both ears of 90 dB or more
4	1. hearing loss in both ears of 80 dB or more 2. the clarity of well-articulated words spoken in normal conversation voice is less than 50% in both ears
6	1. hearing loss in both ears of 70 dB or more 2. hearing loss of 90 dB or more in one ear and 50 dB or more in the other

The Handbook entitles deaf people to social benefits, such as discounts on various tickets or special welfare services such as a personal translator in certain situations. The choice whether to apply for the Disabled person's handbook is made by each individual. As such, it is also a defining criterion in the identity of hearing-impaired people. Those who do not consider themselves deaf, such as many people with age-related hearing loss, can show this by not applying. Conversely, a hearing-impaired person who applies for and receives the Disabled Person's Handbook usually accepts that he or she is deaf, and is more likely to construct a Deaf self-identity.

¹⁹ The Disabled Person's Handbook (身体障害者手帳) *shintai shōgaisha techō* is a document issued to

2.1 – Statistics

According to research conducted at the Gallaudet Research Center – a part of Gallaudet University, a prominent United States university for the Deaf – anywhere between 0.2 and 14 percent of the U.S. population can be considered *deaf* or *hard of hearing*²¹. The reason why there is such variation in this statistic is that there are many stages of hearing loss, ranging from mild trouble understanding words in conversation all the way to the complete lack of the ability to hear sounds. I will discuss this further in Chapter 2. It can be assumed that the same general percentages are to be observed in Japan. In the 2006 Japanese census²², the total population of people categorized as hearing-impaired (*chōkaku-shōgai*, 聴覚障害), combined with those categorized as verbally-impaired, (*genko-shōgai*, 言語障害), was estimated at 343 000, which amounts to 0.27 percent of Japan’s total population (127 770 000 at the time²³). While this falls at the very low end of the expected Gallaudet-indicated range of hearing-impaired population, we must take into account that this data only accounts for Japanese people who have applied for the Disabled person’s notebook, (*shōgaisha-techō*, 障害者手帳), which in practice means that quite a large number of people who may be characterized as deaf or hard-of-hearing are not being counted. When we assume that only a relatively small number of people – those for whom hearing loss poses a substantial barrier – apply for the notebook, we may safely assume that the actual number of people experiencing

persons with medically recognized disabilities, and entitles the holder to special welfare services.

²⁰ www1.plala.or.jp/t_nishimura/tyoukaku.htm

²¹ Mitchell, 2005.

²² <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/saikin/hw/shintai/06/index.html>

²³ <http://www.stat.go.jp/data/jinsui/2006/index.htm>

hearing-related difficulties of some sort may even be above 10% of the population. The number might actually be even higher than the high extreme proposed by Gallaudet, since Japan is currently home to a rapidly aging society. With the generation of so-called “baby boomers”, who were born in the post-war period, reaching their upper sixties, over 23 percent of Japan’s population is 65 years old or older²⁴. These people play an important role in lawmaking, as disability-related laws certainly affect them. With Japan’s fertility rate at 1.39²⁵, the 21st lowest of 202 countries, and average life expectancy at nearly 84, the third highest in the world²⁶, Japan is set on a course of further society aging, which will lead among other things to a higher percentage of the population having hearing problems, and jurisdiction will have to consider these in the immediate future.

2.2 – Types of hearing loss

Apart from the degree of actual hearing loss, there are two main criteria that determine different types of hearing loss: the age at which hearing loss occurred and the localization of the damage to the auditory organs²⁷. The type of hearing loss is the most varying factor that effects the identity of a deaf person. Depending on the age at which hearing loss occurs, a person is more likely to incline either towards sign language or towards spoken language. Depending on the localization of the damage, there is a greater

²⁴ According to February 2012 estimates, 3007 out of 12770 people.

<http://www.stat.go.jp/data/jinsui/pdf/201202.pdf>

²⁵ CIA World Factbook 2012 estimate,

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2127rank.html>

²⁶ CIA World Factbook 2012 estimate,

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2102rank.html>

²⁷ Horáková, 2012, p.12.

or smaller chance of utilizing residual hearing. Here I will only focus on the age criterion, because the localization criterion only has a marginal effect on the cultural identity of deaf individuals.

The most important age for when hearing loss occurs is the language acquisition period²⁸. Children start to communicate at an early age, starting to use distinctive consonants at around six months and gradually becoming able to fully use and understand language. During this time children learn language naturally and become native users of the language they come into contact with. Natural first language acquisition lasts until approximately 6 years of age²⁹. After this period, people have significantly more problems acquiring languages, especially the underlying grammatical rules.

2.2.1 Hearing loss occurring before the language acquisition period

The causes for hearing loss before learning and internalizing language skills can be either congenital or acquired. Congenital hearing loss is present at birth, and can be due to genetic or prenatal causes, such as negative effects of X-rays, treatment of the mother using antibiotics. Later hearing loss can be perinatal (occurring at the time of birth or shortly afterwards), caused for example by asphyxia or low birth weight, or acquired, often as a result of viral diseases or traumatic damage to the central nervous system or the auditory system³⁰. A child who has hearing loss from prenatal causes or acquired before learning language will experience great problems with spoken language. Introducing sign language to a child who is physically unable to learn spoken language is

²⁸ Here used in the sense of the *first/native language acquisition period*.

²⁹ Horáková, 2012, p.20.

³⁰ Horáková, 2012, p.19-20.

the only way to achieve natural language development. A deaf child who is only introduced to spoken language but doesn't understand its principles may end up never being able to learn to communicate fully in either spoken or sign language, even if introduced to sign language later in life. It is thus important to diagnose hearing loss in children as early as possible.

2.2.2 Hearing loss occurring after the language acquisition period

Apart from traumatic damage to the nervous system or auditory system, common causes for hearing loss occurring during life are prolonged exposure to loud noise (such as at the workplace), metabolic disorders and presbycusis (age-related hearing loss). People who acquire spoken language fluency before losing their hearing usually prefer communicating using oral methods such as lip-reading and speech. They are also more likely to search medical help and use hearing aids. Since cultural Deafness is built on not *needing* sounds rather than not *being able* to hear them, people who used to hear but lost their sense of hearing are likely to compare the two states and view themselves as disabled, in contrast to those who have never experienced the ability to hear. They view sign language more as a crutch to communicate spoken language, and are likely to use Signed Japanese rather than Japanese Sign Language³¹. People who have spoken Japanese as their mother tongue and sign as a second language also usually have social networks built on relationships with Hearing people, and so they have a much harder time integrating in a Deaf community than those who grew up among other deaf people.

³¹ Signed Japanese is a system of coding Japanese using manual signs, rather than a full-fledged

Chapter 3 – Japanese Sign Language

Japanese Sign Language is the language of Japanese Deaf people. It is the cornerstone of Japanese Deaf culture and its acquisition is essential in order to participate in Deaf activities in Japan. Being a visually based language rather than aurally based one, it functions in different ways than spoken languages. I will provide an introduction to sign languages and their internal functions in general, and subsequently discuss sign language in Japan, pointing out its variations, history, and function. Lastly, I will point out how environmental conditions affect sign language and its users, and how deaf people deal with communication based on their surroundings.

3.1 – Sign language

Sign language is the naturally developed language of the Deaf. It is communicated in the visual-spatial medium, using the position, shape and movement of the hands, arms, head, and upper body of the signer. Sign language is the native language of Deaf people and hearing children of Deaf parents. There are many sign languages in the world. Sign language is tied to geographical regions, arguably more closely than spoken languages. There are examples of countries which use the same spoken language but a quite distinct sign language, such as the U. S. and the U. K. The existence of a common language in remote parts of the world is tied historically to political and military power or mass migration. Deaf people, being a minority, have never held significant power, only quite recently having received recognition as a cultural minority, and so sign languages have

grammatical language. It will be covered in the next chapter.

mostly stayed tied to local communities.

Sign languages have for a very long time been regarded as mere collections of gestures rather than full-fledged languages containing grammatical rules. It was only quite recently, since the second half of the 1960s, that scholars came with propositions that sign language might actually have underlying structure. In 1965, a *Dictionary of American Sign Language* was published by Gallaudet University teacher William Stokoe and his colleagues³². Stokoe proposed a certain type of phonology in sign language by identifying patterns in hand shapes, placements, and movements. This led to further research. The American neuroscientist Ursula Bellugi studied which part of the brain is used when signing. As Radetsky³³ writes, the “left side dominates when we talk and listen to speech; the right side lets us perceive spatial relationships.” Analyzing the language performance of people with damaged parts of the brain, she came to a definite conclusion: “Sign language, like spoken language, is predominantly processed in the left side of the brain.”

Much more research has been done in the field of neuroscience, psycholinguistics, linguistics etc., and today it is widely accepted that sign language is “a natural human language”, as put by Armstrong, Wilcox and Stokoe³⁴.

3.1.1 – General properties of sign languages

More often than not I have come into contact with the popular belief that there

³² See Radetsky, 1994, p.62.

³³ Radetsky, 1994, p.66.

³⁴ Armstrong et al., 1995, p.4. In other literature, see: Skákalová, 2011, p.49, and Kanda, 2002, p.3.

exists a universal sign language which is commonly understood by deaf people everywhere. However, this is easily disproved by their mutual unintelligibility. For example, even upon attaining proficiency in JSL at a basic conversational level, I was completely unable to understand Czech SL when I came into contact with it. All languages are tightly bound to the culture in which they exist, because their users need to have the ability to fully describe the world around them, including everything from geographical specifics to interpersonal relations. In accordance to this fact, sign languages – just as spoken languages – differ from region to region in all aspects, ranging from their genesis and evolution, grammatical and syntactical rules, to word formation or pragmatic usage.

When studied linguistically, sign languages prove to be significant sources of information because of this fact; the “first documented case of the birth of a language”³⁵ may well be the birth of sign language in Nicaragua. When schools for the deaf were first opened in Nicaragua in 1980, deaf children for the first time acquired the opportunity to communicate with others who shared their hearing disability. In a very short time, they mixed together their idiosyncratic home signs (gestures used between hearing and deaf members of a family for communication; not part of a widely culturally shared system) with newly invented signs representing their new surroundings, and through a pidgin-like grammaticalization process it came to “display characteristic rules of grammar such as noun and verb agreement, subject-verb-object sentence construction, and a distinct numbers of hand-shape and movement building blocks”³⁶. In some regions, such as

³⁵ Words of Judy Kegl, from Radetsky, 1994, p.68.

³⁶ Radetsky, 1994, p.68.

France³⁷, sign language has been studied as early as the beginning of the 19th century, so there is much room to study the differences between very young and considerably older sign languages.

3.1.2 – Elements of SL production and their grammatical function

Sign languages are visual-spatial languages that are produced mainly using the signer's hands, arms, head and torso; namely the shapes, positions, and movements of the hands, arms and head, and facial expressions.

The shape of the hands – also called hand-shape or handshape – is arguably the most variable element of sign language, as the five fingers provide for a hypothetical 32 different positions just by permuting outstretched and bent fingers, and also other possibilities like only bending the fingers halfway (the “claw-bearing paw” shape). It must also be taken into account that the signer's hands can be used simultaneously with the same shape, simultaneously with different shapes, or individually. When only one hand is used individually, it is in nearly all cases the dominant hand (except situations when the dominant hand cannot be used because it is otherwise engaged or possibly in some unusual signs). The dominant hand for signing can be either the left or right and is usually corresponding to the dominant hand for other activities, but can also be the opposite one. This can even be beneficial; one informant has told me that signing predominantly with the left hand is useful when having to hold (or use) a pen or chopsticks in the right hand. Whether a person is a right-handed or left-handed signer

³⁷ Bébien, 1817.

doesn't affect the language capabilities, but switching the dominant and non-dominant hand (for example because of injury or immediate indisposition of the dominant hand) usually leads to imperfectly formed signs, much like a swollen tongue leads to imperfectly formed phones in speech.

The position and movement of the hands and arms are another very variable element of sign language production. Since signs are produced in a three-dimensional space, the variability of possible placement and movements of the hands and arms may seem to be infinite. To an extent this is true; since an integral part of sign language is the ability to describe spatial relations, then for example moving an upwards-outstretched index finger (descriptor for "person" in JSL³⁸) walking from the refrigerator to the table in a kitchen that has been iconically drawn in the signing space before a signer can take place in virtually any direction. As far as signs as lexical units are concerned, a distinction must be made between the actual concrete production of signs during a signing "speech" act on the one hand, and abstract, systematic signs on the other. This distinction may be considered the same as the distinction between phones (concrete realizations of sounds, virtually unlimited in variation) and phonemes (categories of sounds sharing some characteristics and able to distinguish meaning in a language). The movement direction or placement is defined generally for every sign, which means that though a concrete realization of a sign can never be reproduced in exactly the same way it is once signed, as long as it meets the defining criteria such as starting point of movement or relative position to body, it is readily recognized by users of the language.

The rapidity and dimensions (distance) of movements may vary even while

signing the same phrase. This is relatable to volume and diction in a spoken language. Generally, smaller-scale movements indicate a calmer speech act, while larger and faster movement means more emotion or emphasis on the speech being carried out. This, however, is more a matter of pragmatics than systematic grammar, and as such will be dealt with later.

The position and movement of the head and sometimes the torso function morphologically. In Czech sign language, for instance, the difference between the signs meaning “understand” and “not understand” is the nodding and shaking of the head, respectively. The head movement here carries the function of the polarity morpheme, positive in the case of nodding and negative in shaking. A question in JSL is signified by a slight tilt of the head along with raised eyebrows. Here the head movement distinguishes between the indicative and interrogative moods, and thus carries the interrogative morpheme.

Facial expressions, including mouth shapes, are used in sign language in two ways – as parts of concrete signs, and as suprasegmentals. Many signs in JSL incorporate mouth shapes – for example the sign meaning “smoking” or “cigarette” is signed with the dominant hand with outstretched index and middle fingers moving two or three times away from the mouth, while simultaneously forming the mouth shape [u:]³⁹. This is a segmental function, since it is tied to and is an inherent part of the given sign. By comparison, the suprasegmental function of facial expressions is very rich. Much like intonation in spoken language, facial expressions in sign language can change very

³⁸ Descriptors are elements of sign language that substitute various objects.

³⁹ Ogata & Yonaiyama, 2011, p. 297.

slightly to add various nuances to a speech. My teacher of JSL, Steven Fedorowicz, has mentioned that at a local JSL study circle they were able to identify and describe over thirty different meanings of a single signed phrase only by modifying the facial expression. The same sign for “like, favor” can vary in intensity of meaning from “be slightly fond of” to “be completely head over heels for” by changing the rapidity of the movement and facial expression. Other uses of facial expression include, for example, bulging out one of the cheeks using the tongue to infer untruthfulness of the formerly signed sequence (this is related to “lie”, which is signed with the dominant index finger touching the cheek⁴⁰).

3.1.3 – Signing space

The part of space used for the production of sign language has been termed *signing space*. This is the space used by the signer’s hands, and outside of which hand positioning would be too uncomfortable or hardly understandable. It is mostly limited by the signer’s physical limitations, roughly demarcated by the signer’s “outstretched arms, the top of the head, and the waist”⁴¹. This definition holds true for most signs, but must also sometimes be challenged. The dictionary *Sugu ni tsukaeru shuwa jiten* lists the JSL sign for “leg” as “touch the leg with the right hand”⁴². This is also brought to attention in the foreword: “Signs for body parts are made by touching the various body parts [with

⁴⁰ Kanda, 2002, p.91.

⁴¹ Own translation: “...rozpaženými lokty, temenem hlavy a pasem”, Skákalová, 2011, p.50.

⁴² Own translation: “右手の手のひらで足に触れる”, Ogata & Yonaiyama, 2011, p.30.

the hand]”⁴³

It is important to note that any other space within the reach of the human body can also be used as signing space in certain contexts. For example, I have seen a JSL signer sign “pizza” (*piza* in Japanese) as the combination of the two-hand fingerspelling of the letter “p” located at the signer’s knee (which is *hiza* in Japanese). Though in this way, especially when used metalinguistically or expressively, a signed speech may expand outside the above defined space, the majority of speech events take place within it.

3.2 Sign language in Japan

There are two distinct gestural systems used to communicate language in Japan: Japanese Sign Language, *nihon shuwa* (日本手話), and Signed Japanese, *nihongo taiō shuwa* (日本語対応手話)⁴⁴. The former is used primarily by Deaf people as their means of communication with each other, while the latter is used predominantly by hearing people who learn signs, but whose primary means of communication is the Japanese spoken language. Though both of these two communication systems use signs which are even often the same or very similar, they differ quite substantially from each other.

3.2.1 Signed Japanese

Signed Japanese (abbr. SJ) is an artificial communication system that came forth

⁴³ Own translation: “体の各部を表す時は、それぞれの部分に触れることにより表現できます。”, Ogata & Yonaiyama, 2011, p.20.

⁴⁴ Since around 2012, the term *shushi nihongo* (手指日本語) is also used for Signed Japanese.

as a combination of Japanese Sign Language and spoken Japanese. Individual words of Japanese are represented as individual signs adapted from JSL, but the grammatical rules of Japanese remain unchanged. Signed Japanese is the language hearing people often use when communicating with deaf people after having learned a sufficient amount of signs. It is also based in the visual-spatial medium, but does not utilize the possibilities space provides to its fullest. Rather, it uses the grammar and syntax of spoken Japanese, and in accordance to its chronological word order places appropriate signs for Japanese words or phrases sequentially. SJ is relatively easy to understand for people whose native language is Japanese. Conversely, it is difficult for Deaf people to understand because it uses a different grammar than that which they are used to. Additionally, many signs have slightly different meanings than their counterparts in spoken Japanese. One informant told me of the difficulty in parsing the meaning of the idiom “to use one’s head” (頭を使^う), because the sign used in the place of the verb “use” carries the nuance of “physically hold and use” and is not used metaphorically in JSL. The Deaf person took this idiom to mean “take one’s head and physically carry something on it, hit it against something etc.”. Since Signed Japanese does not utilize spatial relations like sign language, many other misunderstandings arise when communicating with native signers using SJ. Harumi Kimura dedicates whole sections of her books to these⁴⁵.

Although Signed Japanese is not a full-fledged language, but rather a manual code for a spoken language, it can prove to be a very interesting tool for the study of spoken Japanese. Most notably, the category of “word” that is very hard to define in a language

⁴⁵ Kimura, 2012, pp. 16-45. Kimura, 2007, pp.84-131.

that uses no spaces between units in its graphical representation could be studied via SJ. A native speaker of spoken Japanese signing in SJ must always decide which parts of speech to represent as individual units and which parts are inherently coherent and constitute a single “word”. I believe a “word” in spoken Japanese could be defined as “a part of the Japanese language that a signer of SJ signs as a distinct unit”. This, however, is outside the scope of this work, and I only present it as a topic for further research.

3.2.2 Japanese Sign Language

Japanese Sign Language is the natural language of the Japanese Deaf. It evolved in communities of deaf people as their common language. It is based in the visual-spatial medium and has a grammatical structure built on using the possibilities that three-dimensional space provides. Relations between signs are both chronological and spatial, i.e. based on not only the flow of time, but also their distances and position. Grammatical relations can be expressed synchronously to a much larger scale than in spoken languages. Japanese Sign Language utilizes mainly hand and arm shapes, position and movement, and also facial expressions and upper body position. Skákalová lists three specific characteristics of sign language that distinguish it from spoken language. I will accept the first two, but argue against the third and present a different characteristic, in my opinion much more typical for Japanese Sign Language.

The list of “specific characteristics, which make sign language different from spoken language”⁴⁶ as presented by Skákalová, is as follows:

⁴⁶ Own translation: “specifické vlastnosti, kterými se [znakový jazyk] liší od mluveného jazyka”, from

- incorporation = the combination of more meanings in one sign, the addition of other qualities to signs (e.g. next week, a butterfly flying, a ship sailing on a river);
- classifiers – “substitute signs” (...) – serve to specify information about the location, size, and shape of objects, serves for easier orientation in space etc.
- signs – various kinds:
 - demonstrative
 - imitating
 - symbolic (abstract character)
 - specific (express emotions, mood, etc., have no literal translation into [spoken] language)⁴⁷

While incorporation and the use of classifiers is an important part of how JSL works, the various sign categories listed above aren't an exclusive paradigm to sign language. Spoken Japanese also uses various word categories, and while there definitely exist signs that don't have literal translations to sign language, this is also true for different spoken languages and thus doesn't differentiate between signed and spoken languages. A principal difference that is not mentioned is degree variation; JSL's ability to show various yet greatly precise degrees to which an action was carried out or to which a property holds true, etc. For example, given two objects represented by classifiers, it is very easy for a signer to delineate exactly where between them an action took place, how long a distance was travelled etc., or a simple outline of how long one object is affords the signer the ability to show by comparison the length of a different object. These spatially based properties provide an important difference between spoken Japanese and

Skákalová, 2011, p.50.

⁴⁷ Own translation, examples based on Czech sign Language omitted. Skákalová, 2011, p.50.

JSL.

3.2.2.1 History of Japanese Sign Language

Some form of manually coded communication can be assumed to have existed anywhere in the world, possibly even earlier than verbal communication. As William Stokoe discusses in his paper *Gesture to Sign (Language)*⁴⁸, humans probably started using meaningful sets of manual gestures before spoken signals gained any complexity. However, the emergence of a *sign language* was noted at different times in various regions of the world much later. Two basic properties can be considered necessary for a visual-spatial communication system to be considered a sign language; *culturally universal comprehensibility* and the *existence of grammar*. A language is by definition a culturally shared phenomenon⁴⁹ and as such must be shared by all members of a given group. Within this cultural group, all members are capable of both producing and understanding the language, which makes it *universally comprehensible*. Secondly, though many particular gestures – such as pointing to one’s nose to indicate oneself – are also used in communication and carry a culturally shared meaning intelligible to all members of even non-Deaf societies, they cannot be considered part of a sign language because they are only solitary signs used complementarily to speech. They do not carry relations to other gestures, even though they may be used within the same speech event. In contrast to this, the foundations of a sign language are the relations between individual signs. For example, altering the direction of the sign “to see” towards a sign that had been

⁴⁸ Stokoe, 2000.

placed in a particular point in the signer's signing space identifies this sign as the direct object. The existence of grammar sets a sign language apart from sets of gestures.

Sets of gestures known as *home signs* were undoubtedly in use in households with deaf members across Japan at any point in history. Even today, in families where it is impossible to communicate using sign language – be it due to the unwillingness or inability of other family members to learn it, or for any other reasons – it is often the case that a set of gestures with specific given meanings is used as a crutch in communication between family members. These sets of gestures, however, generally aren't productive and lack grammar. Even more importantly, they are only used inside a small social circle and aren't shared by a larger community. They can thus not be considered language. It is only when deaf people from various backgrounds first got the opportunity to socialize and come into contact on a regular basis that a widely shared Japanese sign language could come into existence. The first such institution, where deaf people came into contact with each other, was a deaf school in Kyoto, established in 1878⁵⁰. Nakamura writes that “There is little evidence that Japanese Sign Language as such existed as a uniform sign language system before the Meiji Restoration (1968).” However, even after schools for the deaf opened, many families still opted to keep their deaf children at home, because even if uneducated they were fully capable of household labor. Nevertheless, Japanese Sign Language as a unified system seems to have originated during the latter half of the 19th century – as Nakamura⁵¹ writes:

As a historical side note, when the Japanese colonized Taiwan (1895-1945) and Korea

⁴⁹ Erhart 1990, p.6, §1.2.1.

⁵⁰ Nakamura, 2003, p.170.

(1910-1945) in the early part of the last century, one of the many changes was the establishment of Japanese-style schools. The regular schools taught the students Japanese whereas Japanese Sign Language was evidently used in the schools for the deaf. Even now, many older, hearing Koreans and Taiwanese can still speak Japanese while signed languages used in Korea and Taiwan remain heavily influenced by JSL, enough so that they are still mutually intelligible.

From this, we can draw the conclusion that by the end of World War II, Japanese Sign Language as a uniform and codified language had been established widely enough that it had even been used as a teaching language in colonies, and that education in JSL extended over a reasonable time period to significantly influence the sign languages in these colonies.

Since the colonial times and World War II, sign language has existed continually in all parts of Japan. Since JSL is a living language, many different regional dialects have come to exist in various parts of Japan. The main two dialects are those of the Kantō and Kansai regions. In dictionaries, the Kantō dialect is usually presented, with some specific Kansai signs noted as alternatives⁵²; this is paralleled by spoken Japanese and the normative language *hyōjungo* (標準語) which also originated in the Kantō area.

3.2.2.2 – Pragmatics in JSL

Pragmatics is a field of linguistics which studies how languages are used in regard not- to the precise meaning, but to the conversational intent of the user. Compared to

⁵¹ Nakamura, 2003, p.227.

⁵² For example the signs for “name” are listed in both their Kantō and Kansai variants in Kanda et al., 2002, p. 395.

systematic study of grammar in languages, pragmatics is a relatively new field of linguists' interest. Consequently, since there yet remain many questions open to study, it is definitely a very interesting topic, and especially in sign languages which have only been studied for some fifty years. Looking into how, where and to what end sign language is used is an important part of defining the cultural habits of Deaf people.

As has been mentioned, sign language utilizes the visual medium, which has both advantages and disadvantages compared to the aural medium. Differences arise in such basic elements as where an utterance can take place. For a language to be successfully communicated there needs to exist a communicator (speaker, signer), a communicat  (listener, viewer), a mutually intelligible code (language) and a medium through which this code can be communicated. The first three are the same in the case of spoken and sign languages, but the differing medium casts several limitations and benefits for both. A spoken language can be communicated through any medium where sound can be transmitted, such as through air or telephone wire. There can be a physical barrier between the communicator and the communicat , such as a wall or a corner, provided there is sufficient audible permeability. For sign languages, even a paper-thin wall or a theatre curtain presents an obstruction that makes communicating impossible. Circumstances where the eyes are being utilized for other tasks, such as when driving a car, also render signing impossible or at least inhibit it⁵³. On the other hand, it is possible to communicate in sign languages through glass walls or underwater, over longer distances, in places where silence is required (such as public libraries), or conversely in places with high noise levels. I have even witnessed people singing in a crowded room

with various people at various distances, so that it was impossible for an outsider to discern who was signing to whom. The significance of the contrast between the visual and aural medium is so great that it can safely be assumed to play the most important role in constructing Deaf identity.

3.2.2.3 – The relations between environment and JSL

The Hearing majority have shaped the environment around them to suit the fact their language takes place in the aural medium. Similarly, ever since Deaf groups have gained some economical power as a group, they adapt their environment to better suit their visual communication and orientation. This applies to the adaptation of their own living space in their homes, gathering places and – to some extent – workplaces. There are several architectural elements that are used or constructed differently by the Deaf.

The primary elements of architecture are walls and doors. They function as barriers between people and places that are semi-permeable to sound. They allow Hearing people to get each other's attention when necessary using audible signals, such as knocking, speaking loudly, or using doorbells, while still protecting them from unwanted trespassers. However, these signals naturally have to be altered for Deaf⁵⁴ people. Doorbells and knocking can be substituted in different ways.

Doorbells can be substituted by light signals. Since Deaf people rely primarily on sight, light signals are the best way to get their attention. At the Ikuno Elementary and

⁵³ See for example Fedorowicz, 2000, p.33-34.

⁵⁴ There is an important difference between *Deaf* and *deaf* here; deaf people who don't act as culturally Deaf and are integrated into Hearing society adapt to the customs and spatial management of this society,

Junior High school, there is a system of lights resembling traffic lights which informs students of such things as the beginning and ending times of classes as well as potential threats⁵⁵. These lights are accompanied by sound signals which also get the attention of hearing teachers as well as students with residual hearing.

In places where Deaf people are likely to come into contact with one another, there is a custom to leave the door slightly open. Miura⁵⁶ discusses this in a hotel setting where only one of two roommates has access to the room key. I have been told that there is a custom to leave the doors of toilets slightly open to indicate occupancy. There is also a tendency to leave slits between doors at schools for the deaf, even during lessons, which I experienced when assisting at the Daisen high school for the deaf. Sliding doors, which are the norm in many public buildings in Japan, are well suited to being left slightly open, because opening them doesn't take up space in hallways or rooms. Harumi Kimura, having been a lecturer at a school for hearing JSL interpreters, notes how leaving her office door open and expecting students to come in when they need to discuss an issue rendered Hearing students nervous⁵⁷. This is a good example of a context where Deaf culture is the norm and Hearing culture the minority, showing that though deafness is often viewed as a disability by the general populace, the disability may be imposed by the majority culture rather than by the inability to hear in itself.

Leaving doors open breaks down the actual and psychological barrier which is naturally provided by walls and shut doors. The most problematic are places where

whereas culturally Deaf people develop their own customs.

⁵⁵ Japan is a land where natural disasters such as earthquakes, heavy rains, floods, hurricanes, or even volcanic eruptions aren't exceptionally rare.

⁵⁶ Miura, 2012, pp.55-56.

contact between Deaf and disinterested Hearing people can be assumed, such as the doors to the houses of exclusively Deaf families. This is particularly noticeable in the case of restroom doors, which are culturally required to be shut by the Hearing majority. This custom disrupts the barrier between a strictly private space and a shared one, and a study of the differences between how these barriers are constructed for Deaf and Hearing people would likely be very interesting.

In places where the Deaf have control over the construction, there tend to be more windows to let as much light as possible inside, as well as between individual rooms. Miura⁵⁸ mentions this at the beginning of the description of Meisei Gakuen⁵⁹. Light is not only essential to sign language, but also important to deaf people generally since they visually receive about the same amount information that hearing people receive through hearing and sight combined.

⁵⁷ Kimura, 2007, pp.146-147.

⁵⁸ Miura, 2011.

⁵⁹ Meisei Gakuen is the only school in Japan where only JSL is used for teaching and will be covered in the next chapter.

Chapter 4 – Education

When Deaf people in Japan first meet, one of the questions that they often pose to each other is about their academic backgrounds. In this chapter I will deal with how schools form and affect the individual and social identity of Deaf individuals.

There are two main types of schools which Deaf children in Japan can visit; schools for the deaf and schools for the hearing (regular schools). In addition to this, there is one Deaf school in Tokyo named Meisei Gakuen which differs from schools for the deaf in that JSL is the primary language used for teaching (unlike schools for the deaf, where Japanese is used). In this chapter, I will present the advantages and disadvantages of each of these types.

4.1 Schools for the deaf

There are about a hundred schools for the deaf across Japan⁶⁰. These schools are designed to accommodate the needs of hearing impaired students and to teach them both the usual curriculum taught at other schools of the same level and special skills and knowledge to help them better function in the Hearing world. There are two noteworthy factors of this system that affect the identity of the students; namely the presumption that deaf people must be taught to communicate verbally and the loss of general education time that needs to be spent teaching these special skills.

The presumption that deaf people need to be able to communicate with hearing

⁶⁰ A list is available at <http://www.normanet.ne.jp/~zenichro/joho/2003/school.htm>.

people verbally is an ongoing topic in Deaf identity discourse. In Japan, where all⁶¹ schools for the deaf teach primarily in spoken Japanese, the idea that verbal communication is essential is instilled in all deaf children very early. As Prof. Fedorowicz of Kansai Gaidai University covers in his lectures, children tend to create a competitive environment in classes where each student's main goal is to master verbal communication. However, there is quite a large variation between the individual children's aptitudes. The factors here are varying degrees of hearing loss due to differing residual hearing capacity, using or not using cochlear implants and having received them at various ages, et cetera. At the presentation at the deaf school in Ikuno I visited, the students did a play about bullying those who weren't able to understand the teachers as well as the others. One of the leading social problems in contemporary Japan is bullying in classrooms⁶². The existing system expects children to compete in a field where their starting points are not and cannot be the same. It seems necessary for deaf children to learn to function in an environment created by the hearing majority even if the system is inherently discriminatory. However, in actuality this system proves to be much less effective than desired, as mentioned in Miura⁶³:

As the result of verbal-method education, the number of [deaf] children who learn to properly understand and produce verbal communication is in the range of zero to one in a hundred. The remaining 99 are not only unable to use verbal language, but they find themselves having grown up

⁶¹ With the exception of Meisei Gakuen.

⁶² The question why bullying based on differences between individuals is so widespread in Japan, which is usually considered a largely homogeneous society, is a very promising topic for culturally anthropological study.

⁶³ Own translation: “口話教育の結果、きちんと音声を聞き取り自分でしゃべれるようになる子は、100人中1人いるかいないかです。残りの99人は音声言語も繰れず、かといって自分たちの言語である手話も習得することができないまま大人になってしまう。”, Miura, 2011, p.17.

not even being able to use sign language, their own tongue.

Certainly there is value in introducing children to situations where they are linguistically helpless, but there is just as certainly much room for considering the implementation of a different system that would be fairer to all children and more effective. The approach of Meisei Gakuen, which will be covered further in this chapter, seems to eliminate these issues. Also, changing the general populace's view that deaf people are dumb or don't want to communicate to a view that supports finding alternative communication systems (such as writing on paper) in daily communication would certainly prove effective. Ray McDermott and Hervé Varenne⁶⁴ explain that disability exists only when a trait of a person or persons is viewed by mainstream society as unnecessary or lacking, and it is not necessarily the inherent trait that creates the disability, but rather the view of society. However, raising awareness of this in the entire Japanese population would be a herculean task.

The second issue the oral-method education brings is that the time spent on teaching children verbal communication must necessarily be taken out of the time available for general education. Especially in Japan where students must study very hard to pass entrance tests for senior high schools and universities, it is very hard for students who are leaving lower-level deaf schools to continue with higher education. When I asked the students at the deaf high school in Daisen what they would like to do after they finish the school, almost exclusively the answer was to try to find some work they'll be able to do. There were very few students who wanted to continue to the college level. Also, though they were capable of understanding spoken word to a certain degree, I

noticed that their knowledge in fields such as geography or mathematics I brushed up against while teaching English were lower than those of hearing students in the same level classes in hearing schools (which I also had had the opportunity to visit). Though the assumption that deaf children are slower to develop their education is historically and interculturally widespread (proven by the existence of the English term “deaf and dumb” or its Japanese equivalent 聾啞, where the 啞 component means “dumb”), the hypothesis that graduates of deaf schools are less educated because a portion of their time is spent developing other skills is also valid. A quantitative and qualitative comparison of knowledge between graduates in deaf schools and hearing schools would definitely be a great topic for further research, especially if it were a comparison of deaf students who study at deaf schools and deaf students who study at hearing schools.

Since there are a comparatively small number of deaf schools in Japan, deaf people often ask each other where they had gone to school. When they come across a teacher or student they both know, they can find a common topic of conversation even with people they don't well know. This shows that deaf schools create social networks that support deaf relationships, which is a very important role for the construction of identity. Having shared the same hardships and experiences in school, and knowing some of the same people, deaf people can feel to be a part of a deaf group and feel proud of it. This is somewhat more difficult for those deaf people who were integrated into mainstream hearing schools.

⁶⁴ Culture as Disability, McDermott & Varenne, 1995.

4.2 Schools for the hearing

While sending a deaf child to a deaf school seems to be a natural choice, many parents in Japan choose instead to have their children attend mainstream schools⁶⁵. The disadvantages of this are apparent. In a mainstream classroom, individual assistants for students with disabilities are not provided, so children with hearing loss must find their own ways to understand what the teacher and classmates say. Deaf students who are integrated into mainstream classrooms also often don't come into contact with other deaf people. Many of the deaf people I met who had gone to hearing schools told me that they learned to sign only after having left school, usually in their twenties. On the other hand, sending a deaf child to a hearing school also has various benefits. The people who were integrated in mainstream classrooms during their school life are more accustomed to communicating with hearing people and tend to be more independent. They tend to be more adept at oral communication, both speaking and lip-reading. Students from hearing schools more often socialize with hearing people than those from deaf schools. However, this may not be true for all students who are integrated into hearing schools, as some move from mainstream schools to a deaf school at some point, some for not being able to keep up with the academic standards⁶⁶. Generally, deaf students will have a higher degree of knowledge and better abilities to communicate with members of the Hearing world when exiting a mainstream school, but the process of becoming integrated in such a classroom can be very challenging and psychologically difficult and mainstreamed students also tend to have fewer connections with other deaf people.

⁶⁵ The term "mainstream" here is adopted from Nakamura, 2003.

⁶⁶ Called "U-Turn Deaf" by Nakamura, 2003, p. 222.

4.3 Meisei Gakuen

Meisei Gakuen (明晴学園) is a school located in Tōkyō's Shinagawa district that falls into the category of deaf schools, but is distinct because it is the only school in contemporary Japan where teaching, as well as all other communication, is carried out solely in Japanese Sign Language. The principal idea behind this is that children can utilize their learning potential fully only when they learn using a language that is entirely comprehensible to them. Though it only has about 60 students⁶⁷, it is well known in deaf education discourse for this unique approach. Japanese is taught as a mandatory language, but as a “foreign” or second language⁶⁸, and only in its written form. Students of Meisei Gakuen are taught that being Deaf is not a hindrance, but that they should take pride in their identity as members of a linguistic minority.

While the type of school where deaf people receive education is not the only place where their social network and identity are formed, it is arguably one of the most important. Depending on how the trait of being hearing-impaired is presented and viewed by a child's teachers and peers, the child is more or less aware and more or less proud to belong to a group of Deaf people. While those individuals who visited mainstream classes may feel to be primarily members of the Japanese group and view their deafness as a marginal trait, people who visited deaf schools are more likely to identify themselves more with other deaf people, seek out activities that they can enjoy with their deaf friends,

⁶⁷ Official website of Meisei Gakuen, <http://www.meiseigakuen.ed.jp/english/index.html>.

⁶⁸ As Michio Saitō, the board chairman of Meisei Gakuen, says, to deaf children “Their mother tongue is

and thus create a culturally Deaf identity.

JSL, and Japanese is a foreign language.” (母語とは手話のことであり、日本語は外国語なんです。).
Miura, 2011, p.17.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have presented the most important topics that characterize Japanese deaf people – their various degrees of hearing loss, their communication methods, and their education opportunities. Through this, I have summarized the aspects which form the identity of deaf people, and which stand at the base of constructing the concept of a Deaf culture. I have shown that being deaf is not necessarily only a hindrance, but that deaf people can also take pride in being members of a linguistic minority with an independent and very interesting language.

Within the scope of this work I was only able to focus on the essentials that form deaf identity, and the field is open to the description of other aspects of the life of deaf people. I have presented concrete examples of topics where such research could take place, such as the qualitative and quantitative comparison of knowledge between deaf students from hearing schools and deaf students from deaf schools. I have also presented an interesting topic for research outside the scope of this work but potentially very beneficial to spoken Japanese study, that is the theory that a “word” in the Japanese language could be defined as “a part of the Japanese language that a signer of SJ signs as a distinct unit”.

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