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TWO

The Politics of Japanese Sign Language

Language choice is identity choice.

—CAROL PADDEN, American Deaf Studies scholar

As any linguist will tell you, all language claims are political. When people in the street argue that their language is distinct from another language, that someone speaks the national language correctly or incorrectly, or that this language is simply a dialect or creole of that language, they are making fundamentally political statements, not descriptive or scientific ones. Languages are part and parcel of the national borders (both physical and ethnic) of the "imagined nations" that separate us (cf. Anderson 1991)—"imagined" not because there might be tangible cultural and ethnic boundaries between two nations, but because the differences that seem so clearly defined on a map become a swirling mix of pointillistic variation on the ground. Although "French" people might carry French passports and speak French, when they try to precisely delineate what constitutes being French or French-ness (as being opposed to being Belgian or Swiss or part of the EU), they are committing political acts, not scientific ones.

The *Declaration of Deaf Culture* reproduced in the introduction was written by two of the leaders of D-Pro, the group that advocates a Deaf culture perspective. For many Americans, especially those who are liberal and educated, the declaration is framed so completely within the American discourse on ethnic and linguistic diversity that its political nature is largely invisible. Unfortunately for D-Pro, many Japanese disagree with the declaration, calling it "radical" and disputing the existence of a separate "Deaf culture." That many of those in disagreement with D-Pro are in fact deaf themselves adds some mystery to the situation.

Part of the cognitive power of D-Pro's declaration is its deft use of a seemingly linguistic argument, namely that Japanese Sign Language (JSL) is an independent, autochthonous, natural language;[1] that it is the native language of deaf persons in Japan; and, furthermore, that JSL's lexicon, morphology, syntax, and pragmatics differ from spoken Japanese because they are separate language systems. Since this premise is apparently grounded in linguistic fact (that is, the language claim appears neutrally based in science), we are less apt to deconstruct it in the same way we might other, more political aspects of D-Pro's position, such as its stance against cochlear implants, for example.

The goal of this chapter is to explore, analyze, and ultimately deconstruct this entity known as *Japanese Sign Language (Nihon Shuwa)*. However, as Japanese sign language scholar Kanda Kazuyuki has written, the linguistic situation in Japan is far from simple:

> It is commonly thought that deaf people are able to understand each other using sign. That is certainly true; however, deaf people [in Japan] use a variety of different languages based on individual differences, and we cannot say that they all use the same method of communication. For example, a deaf person may be very fluent in Japanese Sign[2] but may be unable to communicate in spoken Japanese. Another deaf person may use both speech and sign simultaneously. And yet another deaf person may use speech as well as converse using pen and paper (i.e., swapping notes). The source of that difference lies in each individual's particular language environment, especially the type of deaf education they received. (Kanda 1989:30)

While most people involved in the deaf community in Japan do not ıormally divide Japanese sign into "JSL" and "Manually Coded Japaıese," at least two terms have emerged to describe the wide variation. ʼhere is *dentōteki shuwa* (traditional signing) and *Nihongo-taiō-shuwa* (litrally "signing that corresponds to the Japanese language"). No one relly warms to the phrase *dentōteki-shuwa* (Traditional Signing) because it

1. "Natural language" is used here in the linguistic sense, as opposed to an artificial ınguage such as Esperanto, Gestuno, or Manually Coded English (developed as a pedaɔgic aid).

2. Here, Kanda adds a footnote regarding his use of the term "Japanese Sign," as many ʼholars were differentiating between variant forms of sign extant in Japan, especially in gard to the younger generation who were signing while speaking at the same time: ʼm aware of the phrase Traditional Sign (*dentōteki-shuwa*); however that was coined in ɔposition to Simultaneous Signing (*dōjihōteki-shuwa*). I believe that the term *Japanese ɣn* (as in *Nihon shuwa*) is the most appropriate one when referring to the still-changing rm of sign [being used today]" (Kanda 1989:43)."

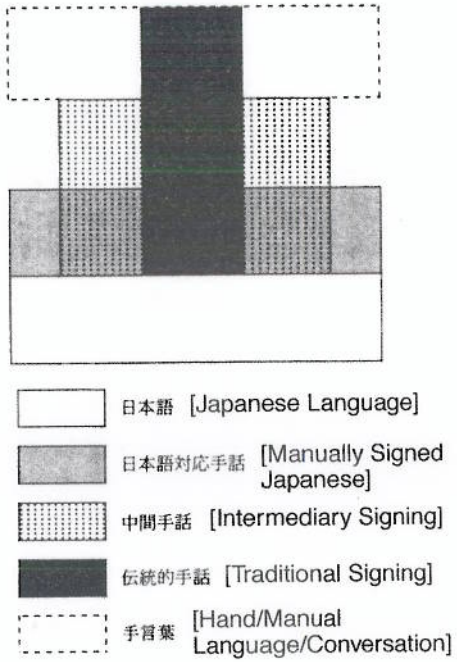

Figure 2.1. Yazawa Kuniteru's model of Japanese sign variations. Source: Yazawa (1996:29). Used with permission.

makes it sound as if the language should be in a museum, but it is the common term for the type of signing used by the older generation deaf as well as some of the younger generation who are trying to recover their traditions.

Yazawa Kuniteru, a veteran (hearing) educator in schools for the deaf, has come up with the model in Figure 2.1 to describe the various sign systems in Japan.

Here, Yazawa is making a political statement (again, statements about the coherence of languages are usually political). In his model, "traditional signing" covers a broad range from purely gestural communication to manually signed Japanese. This is a broader definition than the one given above, and is somewhat controversial. The effect of his statement is that traditional signing is the central element of the deaf community, shared by all who participate in it, regardless of the exact way they sign. This is a sentiment shared by many leaders in the JFD.

I would like to emphasize that even more than "cultures," "languages" do not exist singularly, as there are no physical bounds that constitute a language system. By nature, languages are gregarious beasts. Every language

varies at the individual, familial, local, and regional levels. Even single speakers/signers can and will vary their register or styles depending on the situation. An individual signer might mix the two styles when signing to different people, or even within the same conversation. The notion of linguistic homogeneity is deceptive, since languages are in constant contact with one another and will intermingle, borrow, and blend. We are always already constantly speaking creoles of a sort. The old sociolinguist's quip that a "language is a dialect with an army and navy" applies here.

In this chapter, I am primarily concerned about language as practiced. As we shall see in later chapters, language use is intimately related to identity issues. Although the general public generally speaks of language as a static and bounded entity (so the idea of an English Only Movement in the United States has some political support), the reality is that language is dynamic and amorphous. If there was an English Only constitutional amendment, which dialects of English would be considered authoritative? The Midwestern dialect spoken by Minnesotan public radio hosts? The speech of Boston Brahmins? Texan oil tycoons? Immigrant New York City taxi cab drivers? Bilingual Hispanic schoolgirls? The English Only movement is premised on the belief that there is a pure English at the center and impure dialects around the periphery. On close examination, language purity is a purely political concept.

Sign languages are similarly messy, with many regional dialects and idiolects. Signers will change how they sign depending on whom they sign with. This does not mean that signing is not a natural language, but it does complicate pinning down *exactly* what Japanese Sign Language might be. The five women whom we will meet later in this book all sign with very distinct differences, and I would be hesitant to call any single variety Japanese Sign Language in fear that that would mean the others would be considered *not* JSL.

Who gets to determine language orthodoxy is fundamentally what is at stake in Japan. This is a topic we will return to in chapter 11. However, since it is difficult to talk about a subject without first describing it, even if we go on further to deconstruct our own creations, let us assume that there is something named Japanese Sign Language that is internally consistent and coherent and elide these political considerations for the moment so that we can return to a fuller deconstruction in the later chapters.[3]

3. In a sense, thinking mono-linguistically about Japanese signing reduces all of the interesting differences that drive this book: among them age cohorts, power, regionality, and access to formal education.

Sign Language Variation

A common misconception among many hearing people is that sign languages are universal or mutually intelligible among signers from different countries.[4] Nothing could be further from the truth. Sign languages vary as much as other natural languages, or even more, as there has traditionally been less state activism in unifying sign language dialects within nations. Sign languages with different lineages such as American Sign Language and Japanese Sign Language are of course mutually unintelligible; a JSL signer would be unable to immediately understand what an ASL signer is saying in conversation.

Although the United Kingdom and the United States share a spoken language called English, British Sign Language and American Sign Language are mutually unintelligible. Even when fingerspelling English loan words, the deaf people in the two countries use different systems—the British use a two-handed system while the Americans borrow the one-handed fingerspelling style used in France, Spain, and other continental European countries.

Because sign languages often form around schools for the deaf, students at different schools for the deaf in the same city may even use different forms. The anthropologist Barbara Le Master (2003) provides an excellent example in Ireland, where two Catholic schools for the deaf in the same city developed different signing forms. Because the schools were segregated by gender, the language variation also carried over to the adult population, with men signing differently from women. Other scholars have found variance among older Black and white signers in the U.S. South where schools for the deaf were segregated by race until the middle of the twentieth century (Aramburo 1995; Hairston and Smith 1983).

Even within the same language community, there can be wide variation. Signers can have "accents" or idiolects—that is, they may sign particular words using slightly different (or totally different) forms; their grammar may follow different use patterns; pacing may be rapid and clipped or slow and drawling; their gesturing may be broader or larger, or smaller and more compact. These accents can vary across gender boundaries (one sweeping generalization being, for example, that deaf

4. Another common myth is that sign languages are invented by "someone." That same *someone* is often referred to when people argue: "Why couldn't *they* make it [sign language] universal?"

women in the United States tend to sign more compactly than men do), age, or geographic region. Astute native signers can often look at another signer and tell what region he or she is from, or even what school for the deaf he or she might have attended. Hearing people who learn sign in adulthood often have particular accents that mark them as non-deaf,[5] but hearing children of deaf adults (so-called CODAs) can sign so fluently that they are considered culturally Deaf. Deaf children of deaf parents sign differently from their peers born of hearing parents, and these "deaf of deaf" are often the center of American deaf communities.

Donald Grushkin writes poignantly about the dilemma faced by the "hard of hearing" in the United States, who find themselves alienated from both hearing and deaf communities. Being hard of hearing is less a statement of audiological ability than one about language choice and community identity. Signing ASL without voicing places you with the American cultural Deaf community; using oral speech and speechreading places you within the hearing community. True biculturalism/bilingualism is difficult. Grushkin writes of the "Deaf militancy . . . [that] asserts that some aspects of being hard of hearing are proof of nonmembership within the Deaf culture" (2003:114).

The Demographics of Deafness

Genetic deafness can be found in all countries and all times although it has rarely been the predominant cause of deafness. In remote villages or islands, an isolated gene pool can cause the normally recessive gene to express at a higher rate than usual. Nora Groce analyzed the case of the population on Martha's Vineyard in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the United States (Groce 1985). More recently, a team of medical researchers has found an isolated village in Indonesia with similar characteristics (Winata et al. 1995; Morell et al. 1995; Friedman et al. 1995).

Except in such anomalous cases, it is estimated that only about 10 percent of deaf children are born to deaf parents. This also means that 90

5. We could stereotype a "hearing accent" in both Japanese Sign and ASL as including: following the spoken grammar form rather than making use of the gestural/spatial potential; clumsier transitions between signs; greater focus on discrete words, adjectives, and adverbs rather than sign classifiers and gestural/facial markings of size, speed, or distance; chronological discontinuities in storytelling; less repetition and less use of chaining.

percent of the deaf community are born to hearing parents and usually have limited access to sign language until they enter the school system.[6] Thus, schools for the deaf play an essential role in identity construction. Just being physically deaf does not imply that you will sign or that you will identify as part of the deaf community. Biology is truly not destiny here.

Just how many physically deaf persons are there in Japan? According to the latest government report (Cabinet Office 2003), there were 346,000 registered people in 2002 with hearing impairments sufficient to receive social welfare benefits. Japan has different classes of registered disabilities. Class 5, the lowest level, involves hearing loss of 80 dB in both ears, while a Class 1 or 2 severe disability is complete hearing loss in both ears with concomitant communication impairment. The total population of Japan in 2003 was 126,139,000; thus, "hearing-impaired" persons represent 0.27 percent of the populace. The way the government structures this part of the welfare system, elderly persons who lose their hearing primarily for age-related reasons do not generally register as hearing impaired.

During my field period, everyone I met who had a severe enough hearing impairment to cause communication issues with hearing people carried the government disability ID (*shōgaisha techō*). Registering as hearing impaired with the local welfare office and receiving the ID card makes you eligible to receive a large range of social benefits including a significant disability pension (over $1,700 per month for people with severe disabilities in Tokyo); discounted medical equipment; free municipal transportation; discounted travel on national and municipal railways and national highways; and discounts on a broad variety of public and private services. Even the most adamantly culturally Deaf leader of D-Pro, when I interviewed her in 1997, admitted that she was registered, carried the *techō*, and received the monthly pension.

The opposite is not true. Just because you carry the *techō* disability ID card does not mean that you sign or that you are part of the deaf community. It only means that you are classified as having a significant hearing impairment or other disability. Compared with governmental or organizational statistics, the number of "native" signers is much less clear. This is because we cannot precisely define the boundaries of Japanese

6. Even if the school is strictly oral and forbids sign language, the children almost always use some form of signing when communicating with each other. In oral schools, this is seen as a matter of grave concern.

Sign, and whether those who are hard of hearing or late-deafened, for example, can be said to be using it. As of 2001, approximately 20,000 hearing people passed the JFD affiliate-run sign training courses and there were over 6,000 registered interpreters for the deaf in Japan.[7]

The number of members in the Japanese Federation of the Deaf (which allows only people who are deaf to join) was 25,518 in 2003 (JFD 2004:113). While we can make the assumption that nearly all members of the JFD can sign, not everyone in the JFD signs the same way; some sign while at the same time simultaneously speaking in Japanese, using a temporal/sequential grammar; others turn their "voices off" and sign without voicing, using a signing form that makes heavy use of spatial/simultaneous grammar forms. There is no precise division between these two forms, and for the most part they are mutually intelligible. I will resist, for the most part, the tendency to label the latter form "true JSL" (*hontō no Nihon shuwa*) and the other just "Signed Japanese" (*Nihongo-taiō shuwa*) as this is precisely the topic of later chapters. The most I can say is that more than 25,000 and perhaps less than 400,000 people use sign communication in some form in their daily life activities in Japan.

Sign Linguistics and the History of ASL

The American scholar William Stokoe is often referred to as the founding father of sign *linguistics* (it must be stressed, not sign *language*). A professor at Gallaudet University in the 1950s and '60s, he noticed an apparent structure to the sign communication among his deaf students. At that time, signing was thought to be merely a form of miming or a derivative/broken form of English. Stokoe brought linguistic analysis to bear on signing and, to his astonishment (and that of the rest of the hearing world), discovered that sign communication was a natural language system with a very different structure from spoken English. He gave it the appellation "American Sign Language" to make it clear to other linguists that a language system was involved (Stokoe 1960).

Stokoe set up the basics of sign linguistics. He noticed that in sign languages there were parallel analogues to phonemes, morphemes, lex-

7. For an explanation of the procedures by which interpreters are examined and licensed, see the report by the Culture and Information Center for Hearing-Impaired Persons (1998).

emes, grammar, and pragmatics. For example, in ASL there are basic handshapes (phonemes) that make up component, meaningful parts of words (morphemes) such as the word ending –PERSON used to sign things such as TEACHER or WAITER. Stokoe discovered that morphemes also have a spatial dimension; for example, the temple area of the head signifies MALE while the cheek area signifies FEMALE in ASL morphology. Other researchers continued his analysis of the syntax and pragmatics of sign languages. It quickly became apparent that this was a totally new and unexplored area of linguistics.

ASL is an amalgam of French Sign Language (brought by the Deaf educator Laurent Clerc), modified French initialized sign forms (what we would call today Manually Coded French/English), and the native, local, and home sign language systems used by deaf children in the United States before Thomas Gallaudet founded the first school for the deaf in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1817. The graduates of Gallaudet's school went on to become educators of the deaf themselves, spreading across the country. This development is often cited as the reason why ASL is relatively uniform across the United States, and indeed we do see relatively little regional variation. However, we have to remind ourselves that this is a constructed story line that centers a pure and unchanging ASL in the narrative. Owen Wrigley puts it as follows in the preface to his *Politics of deafness:*

> Rather than search for the origins of Deaf culture and the fall from grace of sign language, which is the hagiographic frame of Harlan Lane's dominant study, Foucault would have us recognize that "History teaches how to laugh at the solemnities of the origin." He calls on Nietzsche in reminding us that the "lofty origins is no more than 'a metaphysical extension which arises from the belief that things are most precious and essential at the moment of their birth.' " (Wrigley 1996, xvi)

Wrigley is referring to the American deaf studies historian Harlan Lane's singular focus on the contributions of particular American and European educators and leaders: Thomas Gallaudet, Laurent Clerc, Abbé de L'Epée, Abbé Siccard, and others. Traced this way, American deaf history gains a particularly singular teleological course: from L'Epée, to Siccard, to Clerc, to Gallaudet, in a manner reminiscent of the Catholic lives of the saints. This hagiographic method ignores the widespread political, social, and linguistic variation in the community as well as the contributions of many other people who were not in leadership positions.

We can read elements of the contemporary cultural Deaf movement in the United States as resistance to this hagiography of elite, well-educated men. The recent blooming of the cultural Deaf movement has centered the "deaf-of-deaf"—the deaf children of deaf parents—as the core elements of Deaf culture, the bearers of the purest and most beautiful ASL, the sign poets, the storytellers, the leaders, and the political activists. In this counternarrative, the deaf-of-deaf served as the protectors of Deaf culture in the United States during the long period when it was pushed underground, between the Milan Congress of 1888 and the rediscovery of Deaf culture and ASL in the late 1960s (cf. Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan 1996; Preston 1994).[8] ASL and cultural Deaf values are passed down, mother to child. This version foregrounds the contributions of working-class deaf people against Lane's hagiographic frame that centers on the educated and privileged. Read this way, the story of the purity of the ASL lineage is also one of class struggle (Monaghan 2004).

The language mythology of a singular ASL is sustained in part by the American construction of cultural Deafness that excludes the hard of hearing, orally deaf (that is, deaf people whose primary form of communication is speech and speechreading), and late-deafened. These deaf persons, while they may use ASL-related sign communication forms, are specifically excluded from inclusion as "Deaf" or the recognition of their signing as "ASL"—for example, Heather Whitestone, a former Miss America who is orally deaf (she does not sign except on stage), and I. King Jordan, the first deaf president of Gallaudet University (installed after the DPN movement in 1988), are both late-deafened. Neither is considered real "Deaf" by the "Deaf militants," to borrow Grushkin's (2003) phrase, nor are they said to sign ASL. Instead they are somewhat dismissively said to use "pidgin sign English" (PSE) or "Manually Coded English" (MCE). It is easy to claim language and ethnic/cultural homogeneity when one is willing to exclude outliers.

In Japan, there has been no similar veneration of the deaf-of-deaf until very recently with the D-Pro generation. None of the leaders within the JFD, famous sign poets, or *rakugo* storytellers have been deaf of deaf until the last decade. As the story of the deaf community in Japan develops, we will see that the struggle between the JFD and D-Pro is not only

8. Conversely, the "oral deaf" (those taught speech/speechreading skills over sign language) or "hard of hearing" have been seen as on the periphery of deaf culture and politics in the United States. This has not always been the case. A stigma used to be attached to the "low verbal," but this later developed into a pride in being an "oral failure."

generational but also linguistically bound with similar but different aspects of class distinction.[9]

The Origins of Japanese Signing

Unlike the American case, no one is quite sure where Japanese signing came from.[10] Japanese Sign is unrelated to sign language forms used in the United States, Europe, or China. There are some similarities between Korean and Taiwanese Sign Languages and Japanese Sign, but this has been attributed to the colonial period rather than pre-modern language transport.[11] There are no founding language fathers such as Thomas Gallaudet or Laurent Clerc within the Japanese deaf community. There are some important contributors, such as the founder of the first school for the deaf in Japan, Furukawa Tashirō. But they are not credited with creating Japanese Sign or even standardizing it. For the most part, signing in Japan is best described (and is seen by deaf persons there) as an autochthonous language. The title of the JFD's series of sign books sums up this perspective nicely: *Watashi-tachi no Shuwa* or *Our signs*.

What we can deduce is that before the Meiji period began, a hundred and forty years ago, there was very little sense of a unified Japanese sign language (Kanda 1989:31).[12] Natural sign languages typically form around schools for the deaf, as these provide the ideal conditions of communities of deaf children. Sociolinguistic research done in Nicaragua (Senghas and Kegl 1994; Senghas 2003), for example, has shown that a

9. Judy Kegl writes in the production notes for BBC TV's *Silent Children, New Language* (BBC TV 1997) that there were *no* deaf-of-deaf and very little genetic deafness in Nicaragua until the advent of schools for the deaf. This is because deaf individuals were sequestered in their houses and not allowed to marry—very similar to the situation in Japan until the advent of compulsory education.

10. Okamoto (2000) has an innovative foundation theory based on a correlation between sign handshapes and Kanji. This has not yet been broadly accepted by other sign scholars. The cultural critic Donald Richie writing informally in a 1980 essay published in his 1992 collection, *A Lateral View*, notes how culturally embedded Japanese gestures are, then gives as examples a series of gestures familiar to any Japanese signer (thumbs referring to men, little fingers as women, and others). Japanese culture is certainly rich in its gestural vocabulary, especially within its many niche segments (fishermen, sushi chefs, gangsters, and the like). I am not aware of any studies that have yet explored these specialized gestural systems and their impact or influence on Japanese signing.

11. For more information, see JFD (1994). This report notes that although the older generation uses a sign form that is still reminiscent of Japanese signing, the authors cannot see that same influence in the new generation of younger signers.

12. Scholars interested in the genealogy and transformations of Japanese Sign would do well to read Kanda's (1989) short monograph (in Japanese).

natural sign language (that is, one complete with its own syntax and morphology) appeared within a few decades of the founding of a school for the deaf. Before that time, there were only home signs, incomplete sign language systems used in the homes of families with deaf children.

Unless there is a genetic disposition toward deafness within a closely bounded community, the natural level of hearing impairment within a population (often less than 0.5 percent) is not a sufficiently critical mass for a language community to form in rural areas. The process of modernization, with its shift toward great population densities, greater incidence of epidemic influxes, and improved infant mortality (the diseases that used to kill children now are survivable, though sometimes with deafness as a result) bring larger numbers of deaf children together and help create deaf communities. Thus industrialization and urbanization are necessary components for a deaf social identity to develop.

The first school for the deaf in Japan was founded in 1875 in Kyoto by the aforementioned Furukawa Tashirō. Prior to founding the school, Furukawa saw deaf children signing outside the window of the prison cell where he was temporarily detained for forging documents related to a peasant protest. This was one of his inspirations for using signing in the classroom when he founded his school. His observation provides some evidence for the early existence of signing in Kyoto. Unfortunately, soon after it opened in 1875, the Kyoto School switched to an oral form owing to the global effects of what is called the Milan Conference (1880), an international meeting in which hearing teachers at schools for the deaf unilaterally decided that oralism was to be the main method of deaf education. Deaf teachers were not invited to attend (Van Cleve and Crouch 1989).

Looking at elderly deaf who grew up in Japan before the Pacific War, we see only limited evidence of a unified national sign language system prior to the 1940s. Teachers of the deaf had founded a few regional schools, but only a small portion of the deaf population was able to attend. For example, Nakano-san, whom we will meet in chapter 4, went to school only for a year. She is fairly typical. As a result, she and many other deaf persons born before the war tend to use a sign language composed of an amalgam of home signs, local signs, greater use of classifiers, and otherwise nonstandard sign forms.[13] Their sign grammar departs even further from spoken Japanese than current signing. As a result,

13. Jill Morford (1996) has an excellent review essay on home signs and language acquisition.

very few people (mostly deaf adults who are in daily contact with these individuals) can communicate smoothly with them.

That the older deaf people do not use a standard signing is not surprising, because there was little social or political pressure for a single national sign language before the war. The Japanese government was not a unifying factor, as it did not recognize the use of sign in schoolrooms until the 1990s.[14] The Japanese Federation of the Deaf, which encouraged social activities among local and regional deaf groups, had much more impact on language unification in the postwar period. It is through these social activities as well as movement of people from rural to urban areas that the various types of signing in Japan begin to consolidate.

After the end of the Pacific War the American Occupation Forces mandated compulsory education for all Japanese, including the deaf and blind. Schools for the deaf sprang up all over Japan, at least one in each prefecture. While signing was officially not permitted in these schools, ancillary effects happened. First was the conglomeration of children who had never met other deaf children before. It has been well documented in sign linguistics that natural (sign) languages emerge in this type of situation. After the first cohort graduated, they created alumni groups, centering deaf community life around the schools.

The Japanese Federation of the Deaf drew much of its strength from these alumni associations.[15] Although it was not very politically active until the 1960s, the nascent JFD served a crucial socializing role. The annual Deaf Meeting was a huge attraction (and continues to be so), drawing members from all across Japan. The location of the meeting rotates among the 47 prefectural organizations and usually draws 2,000–4,000 people. For many, it is a time to reconnect with friends, travel, and see Japan. This central purpose has not changed over its fifty-year history.

Nevertheless, there was no central institution that served to homogenize Japanese signs for most of the modern period. There was no Gallaudet University churning out deaf teachers and professionals, serving as the ivory tower from which new knowledge and new signs could disseminate; nor was signing broadcast widely on TV until the 1990s. The

14. The Ministry of Education still does not recognize sign language as a valid form of educational communication in elementary schools. It has not developed any special curricula for schools for the deaf at any grade level. The ministry has, however, "accepted" that use of sign language may be necessary at the middle and high school levels.

15. The first national deaf meeting was held in 1906; the first deaf association was formed in 1914 as the Tokyo Deaf Club. The Japanese Association of the Deaf formed in 1916. A large cadre of the original members came from the alumni groups of the Kyoto and Tokyo Schools for the Deaf, the two oldest schools in Japan.

only homogenizing forces were the school systems, which could standardize signing only at the local level, and the admixture of individuals at JFD meetings. This changed starting in the 1960s, as the JFD became more interested in codifying the lexicon, teaching interpreters, and otherwise standardizing the vocabulary of Japanese Sign.

But even now, Japanese Sign is a relatively diverse language system. Despite the JFD's best efforts, the lexicon is not standardized. Even relatively basic words such as STUDENT and NAME differ from Sapporo to Tokyo to Kyoto and among signers. There are at least three main variant ways to sign "Deaf": one brings the open palm from the ear to the mouth; a second uses the index finger (much like the ASL "DEAF"), and the third has the dominant palm cover the ear while the non-dominant palm covers the mouth.[16] There are also synonyms in use such as *mimi ga kikoenai ("ears can't hear")*, which has the dominant palm waving toward the ear.

The hard of hearing or *nanchōsha* are given a particularly descriptive sign: an open palm splits the face in two. This is similar to the sign for *half*, referring to Japanese with mixed ancestry. Although deaf politics are constructed differently in the United States and Japan, the liminal position of the non-signing hard of hearing is the same.

In addition to the variations in the actual signs used, there are also visible regional differences in grammar and syntax. Although the various strains of sign remain mutually intelligible, I have noticed that two signers from different regions will often drop down into a register that more closely approximates spoken Japanese grammar concomitant with verbal mouthing, in order to facilitate the use of speechreading to aid the sign communication.

For example, Tochigi Prefecture just north of Tokyo is often cited as having a very different sign language than the rest of Japan. The lexicon used there is relatively consistent with other regions, but the grammar system is different. Twenty-odd years ago, Tanokami Takashi, a hearing teacher at the Tochigi Prefectural School for the Deaf (the only school for the deaf in Tochigi) introduced *dōjihō*, simultaneous signing while speaking. He borrowed this system from Britain in order to improve the understanding of spoken Japanese among the students at the Tochigi

16. For right-handed signers, the dominant hand is the right hand and the non-dominant hand is the left. The reverse is true for left-handed signers (although many will sign "right handed"). However, many signers will switch hands in various circumstances, for example, when text messaging with a cell phone or driving.

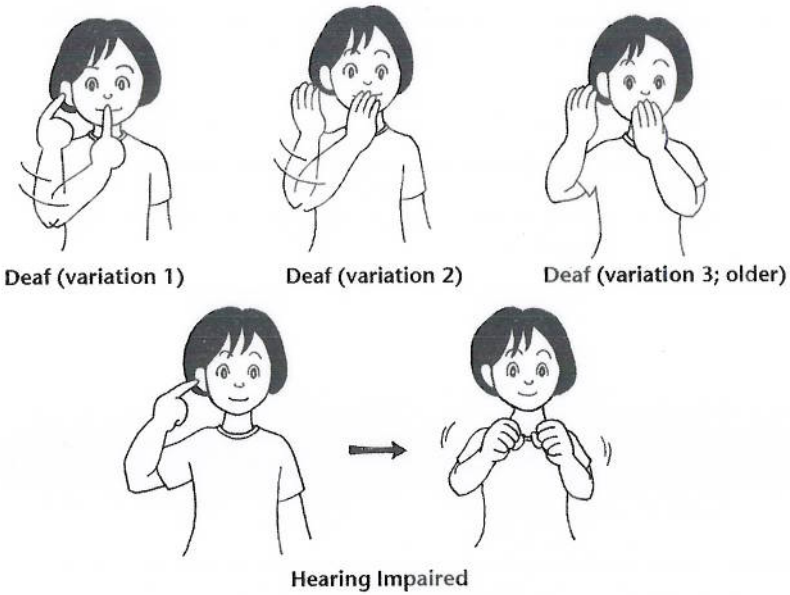

Figure 2.2. There are many ways to sign the word DEAF in Japanese sign. Illustrated by Hattori Akiko.

School. Several generations later, the Tochigi students, now adults, still sign with a strong Japanese grammatical influence.

Unlike signers in other areas, Tochigi deaf people in their forties and fifties use a sequential syntax (words have meaning because of their word-order placement), and they use sign words or fingerspelling conjunctions, prepositions, and topic particles ("*ha*" in "*kore ha pen desu:* this [topic] is a pen)." Signers from outside Tochigi, in contrast, tend to drop both prepositions and pronouns, either relying on the pragmatics of the conversation to carry the meaning or using a spatial/gestural indexical relationship (pointing to an object, and signing "PEN" to indicate that *this* is a pen).

Other Japanese deaf persons complain that they cannot understand Tochigi dialect signers. This perhaps has more to do with politics than with reality. The signing used in Tochigi is indeed different in that it follows Japanese spoken grammar and syntactical structures more closely than other dialect forms, but within the grand scheme of dialects of Japanese Sign it certainly does not seem different enough to render it mutually unintelligible. Instead, Tochigi Prefecture is engaged in complex lan-

guage politics. Tokyo residents see Tochigi as a rural backwater, and the Tochigi dialect of spoken Japanese is considered country bumpkinish. This metropolitan snootiness carries over to Tochigi signing, which is considered awkward and strange.[17]

LANGUAGE codification requires political power. In the case of the deaf this would mean either the establishment of schools that all use the same sign language, or the development of deaf cultural institutions that have the power to define the bounds of sign language. Neither of these exists yet in Japan. Only in the last ten years has a unified sign dictionary emerged (Yonekawa 1997), and preliminary attempts are just being made at codifying the syntax (Matsumoto 2001).[18] There is a wide variance of vocabularies in local dialects as well as different syntactic systems in use, ranging from those in perfect alignment with spoken Japanese to those that use a spatial-temporal grammar.

Unfortunately, the main Japanese Sign lexicon remains relatively small. The aforementioned comprehensive sign dictionary published by the JFD in 1997 has only 4,800 individual signs. One major reason for this remains that signing is not widely used in classrooms. While many high schools for the deaf use sign informally, there is no formal usage at the secondary school level. Signing is not used at the college level either, and there is no central institution such as Gallaudet University where seminars are conducted at the undergraduate and graduate level, a situation in which new signs and specialized vocabularies are created by necessity.

One method of compensating has been the use of Kanji signs, signs representing Chinese characters for technical terms. For example, anthropology (*jinruigaku*) is signed using its three component Kanji signs: HUMAN-VARIATION-STUDY. However, unless the listener is conversant in spoken Japanese, can speechread the pronunciation, or has encountered the term before, this string of Kanji signs is incomprehensible.

In her (1995) ethnography *Do you see what I mean?*, Brenda Farnell

17. Non-deaf (hearing) Japanese play the same language games. Much is made of Japan's cultural homogeneity, which ostensibly includes language. Yet at the same time, language is used to reinforce difference and centrality, for example, during NHK (public television) documentaries about the northern regions of Japan. The dialogue of residents is often open-captioned (subtitled) because their speech differs from standard (Tokyo) dialect. The U.S. equivalent of this would be PBS subtitling remarks made by an older Southerner because Northerners would not understand. In the 1996 movie *Trainspotting*, Scottish brogue was subtitled and (mis)translated, to comic effect.

18. In contrast, the Gallaudet "Green Book" series (Baker-Shenk and Cokely 1980) has long served as a technical description of ASL and a teacher's guide to teaching the grammar.

poses questions about the narrowness of Western concepts of language by expanding the definition of language to include gestural and performative aspects. In Japan, the question of Japanese signing's *language* status has been ignored by all except D-Pro, who are using it toward the particular political goal of redefining deafness into cultural Deafness. They are doing this by codifying Japanese Sign Language grammars and attempting to create a "pure JSL," which would de-center the late-deafened and hard-of-hearing college-educated elites who dominate the leadership of the JFD.

The JFD's official position has been that "Japanese Sign (*Nihon shuwa*) is . . . the type of signing used by deaf persons living in various parts of Japan" (JFD 1998b:2)." In other words, if you are a deaf person living in Japan and you sign, you are using Japanese Sign by definition. There has been resistance in the JFD leadership and membership to narrowing this tautological definition any further. In a pivotal essay, in contrast to a specific definition of Japanese Sign as only those forms of signing that do not involve synchronous mouthing, JFD leader Matsumoto Masayuki writes:

> Establishing a definition for the term Japanese Sign (*Nihon shuwa*) is difficult because of the linguistic and social problems relating to the question of what the Japanese language (*Nihongo*) itself is. If you characterize the Japanese language as "the forms of language (*kotoba*) used in Japan (both past and present)," then 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). . . . Defining Japanese Sign as "only the type of signing that does not involve mouth movements," is based on the same principle as establishing the Tokyo dialect as the common language (standard Japanese [*hyōjungo*]), in contrast with other regional dialects. . . . It all boils down to how you want to define the term "Japanese Sign." (1997b:4)

Here, Matsumoto underscores the JFD policy of blurring the difference both between the Japanese language and Japanese Sign and between the variations of Japanese Sign that are closer to or further from spoken Japanese grammar (in that they use mouth movements or not). In line with this, the main focus of the JFD's linguistic efforts in the 1980s and 1990s was to codify the lexicon and to introduce new vocabulary words to match new or existing terms in spoken Japanese. Almost no effort was made in syntactic analysis until the end of the twentieth century.

The avoidance of syntax is deliberate; *syntax*, more than anything else, is divisive. It divides both Japanese Sign from spoken Japanese and tra-

ditional signing from manually coded Japanese. It splits the deaf community from the hearing, and the hard of hearing from the deaf of deaf. That is why the JFD avoided focusing on grammar and syntax in order to build their mass movement and why D-Pro seized on it as central to their notion of cultural Deafness and pure JSL in order to differentiate themselves from the previous generation.

To get to the roots of this emerging language war between the JFD and D-Pro, we must start at the very beginning. The next several chapters examine the history of the deaf in Japan and explore the lives of five deaf women through their own words. Then we will return to the issue of Japanese Sign Language.