

Transforming Research into Sign Language and Identity Advocacy in the Community

Deaf Studies Conference Transformations Proceedings

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Abstract

This presentation discusses the process from moving from research results to applications through the compilation of a large-scale Japanese Sign Language corpus for both synchronic and diachronic analysis, focusing on 100 lexical items from the 49 prefectures in Japan. Also discussed is the key involvement of the Deaf community (status planning, acquisition planning, and corpus planning) including the exploring of their linguistic identities via evidence of the change of lexical sharing phenomenon from generation to generation. The implication is that humanistic framework for research on the history, spiritual value, and dialogue among Deaf individuals would be linked directly to the nature of the Deaf Studies.

Keywords

Japanese Sign Language, status planning, acquisition planning, corpus planning

Presentation Transcript

(Slide 1)

Okay. Today, my presentation is “Transforming Research into Sign Language and Identity Advocacy in the Community”. My presentation will cover three topics.

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Languages planning of sign language in the deaf community in Japan, transformation, and my research on the construction of a Japanese Sign Language database.

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Before I begin, let me explain a little about the language situation in Japan. There are no laws in Japan that define “language.” This means there is no recognition of any language in Japan. This does not only mean sign language, but also no recognition of any spoken language. There are no laws that mention language rights. There is a history behind this. We all know World War II ended in 1945. However, up until that time, the Japanese government did everything it could to take over other Asian countries in the pursuit to become one economy, with full control. In its pursuit, the Japanese government forced everyone to learn spoken Japanese, which was to be

used in school and everyday life. There was a strong emphasis on teaching everyone Japanese. When Japan lost the war, things drastically changed and no longer was everyone forced to learn Japanese. As spoken Japanese appears to be slowly becoming a world language again, some Japanese people feel uneasy about the spread of Japanese. While it is great that more people are learning the language, they have mixed emotions about the spread of the language. Perhaps that uneasiness is the reason there is no formal recognition of language. However, as we know, Japanese people from all over speak Japanese. This means the country is generally monolingual, since there is not much influence from foreign aspects. You may be aware that historically, Japan has never faced oppression or been overtaken. Although Japan lost World War II, the American intervention into the Japanese government did not equate a full takeover. I think that Americans were nice not to do that.

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Now, we'll look at the status of sign language in Japan. Just as there is no recognition of language, there is nothing for sign language. The next bullet point... There is one exception and that is the appearance of the words "sign language" in some laws, but they're mostly in relation to sign language interpreting. The Japanese government has laws that require them to provide sign language interpreters in a few instances. That's good. But all of these are in terms of welfare, the medical perspective. One example would be in a hospital setting, particularly large hospitals. If a hearing foreigner were to show up at a hospital that spoke another language, the hospital would ask what language that individual speaks. They then call for an interpreter, perhaps using the telephone. The hospital has procedures for that type of situation. The hospital is responsible for paying the interpreters themselves. However, if a Deaf patient shows up to the hospital using sign language the hospital sees that person as having a communication problem. They do not see that the Deaf person is using another language; that person has a communication problem. In that case, the hospital will write back and forth with the Deaf patient to communicate. If the Deaf patient does not feel that it is right to write back and forth, that Deaf person will be responsible for getting an interpreter themselves. The hospital does not hold that responsibility. It is clear that the hospital does not see the Deaf person as using another language, but as language disabled and as having communication problems. If you look at the laws, it says disabled but not culturally different or disabled, as that means something else. Am I being clear? That's one example. Now that I have discussed the status of language in Japan, keep that information at the back of your head as we move on. Now, we will look more at the Deaf community in Japan. I have seen and read about many Deaf people becoming more and more active regarding the promotion of sign language over time. Now, we will use the idea or concept of language planning to frame and analyze this discussion. But before we do that, we need to define what language planning means.

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That definition here on the screen is a general definition. This means when people use a language, there may be an organization or group who will intervene, so to speak, in the acquisition, structure, or language functions and different components to help direct that. If the government adopts that plan, then it becomes language policy. However, the problem is that the Deaf community is not involved with the government, so their efforts stay at the level of language planning. Most researchers have identified three different types of language planning:

Status planning, acquisition planning, and corpus planning. We will now discuss how each of these types apply to and exist in the Deaf community in Japan.

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JFD stands for the Japanese Federation of the Deaf, which was founded in 1947. Much of the work they have done since then has been negotiating with the government and creating documents in attempts to enhance the life of Deaf people as well as create awareness about sign language. JFD has been trying to convince people to change laws that will open more doors for Deaf people. Because of its work, JFD feels that this is the right time to not only continue to fight for disability rights, but also to fight for language rights for Deaf people. JFD believes that sign language is important and there is a need to establish sign language laws. In 2010, a research committee was put together. The research committee now included people from different fields, including sociologists, psychologists, educators, linguists, and so forth. Yes, there were some Deaf people as well, and they likely had good backgrounds and knowledge of Deaf Studies themselves. The committee was separated into two groups. One group was responsible for studying how things operated in Japan. They were also responsible for studying other countries. This group went to New Zealand and Europe. They visited Finland and Ukraine as well, three countries in total. They learned that New Zealand's third official language is sign language. Ukraine and Finland did not have sign language as an official language but both countries recognized sign language as a language with established laws. The group that was responsible for studying Japan collected more than 1,000 cases. These cases focused on Deaf people in Japan who faced discrimination and disagreed with their treatment. Out of those 1,000 cases, about 800 of those cases dealt with sign language. Out of those 800 cases, the JFD was able to identify five rights and recommendations to establish sign language rights. The five rights are: for deaf children, they have the right to acquire sign language (L1 or L2). Next, in schools for subjects like science, sociology, or physical education, students have the right to learn through sign language, meaning teachers should use signs themselves, or bring in an interpreter. Thirdly, this is a bit different, although it still has to do with schools. Just as students study English, it's important that they also study sign language and its structure, history, and so on. Deaf people in different situations throughout society shouldn't have to write back and forth; they should be free to use sign language. You know how back in the old days, many people would sign secretly. No more. They should be free to sign anywhere, and if necessary, resort to writing back and forth. But it's important that we show our sign language without people looking down at us. Sign language should be protected, which means there needs to be more research and more education. These are the rights, showing that we have five types of rights. JFD is working hard to establish these five language rights. However, there still is a long way to go to establish the Japanese Sign Language (JSL) Act. Even though JFD's hard work has not been successful yet, their work is influencing change in society. One change is the establishment of sign language ordinances by municipalities across the country, which is not something JFD expected to happen. The goal was to establish a national sign language law, but it seemed to happen on a local level. Of 47 prefectures, similar to states here in the United States, 24 have enacted a sign language ordinance, similar to local laws. Also, towns are doing the same. 10% of those towns have passed those laws. These ordinances clearly state that sign language is a language. Some ordinances state that Deaf children must be provided opportunities to learn sign language. That has been successful, and we've seen growth in several areas. I'll explain that later.

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While the JSL Act has yet to be enacted, this work has led to many changes inside and outside of the Deaf community. For example, Deaf people are learning that their language, sign language, is actually a language. For many years, Deaf Japanese people always said that they used signs, not sign language, and doubted that the signs they use were actually a language. Rather, the signs they used were just means of communication. Now many Deaf people are realizing that the signs are actually a language, which has caused a huge transformation. Also, many hearing people, including those who work in government and Congress, are realizing that sign language is not just a communication method, but also an actual language that is equal to spoken language. In turn, that helps define what language rights are in general. This might not lead to the establishment of the JSL Act but it has forced all Japanese people to think more about what language means and how important language rights are to everyone's lives. That's the ultimate point.

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Sign language acquisition has not been the main focus of JFD's work. The focus of sign language acquisition should take place in schools. However, much like most of the world, schools have mostly focused on the oral method. No more! Sign language should be used in classrooms everywhere. In 1989, however, Deaf associations, parents, and educators came together to establish a national network. The purpose of this network was to discuss the future of Deaf education. This led to the creation of many non-profit organizations that in turn created free schools or changes to existing schools. The sign language ordinances that I mentioned previously also led to the creation of after-school programs as well. Students would go to school during the weekend but on Saturdays and Sundays, there were places that Deaf students would go to socialize with other Deaf students and learn sign language. These programs were for the Deaf students as well as their hearing parents and family members to learn sign language. Most of these programs were funded by non-profits but some were supported by city government funds due to the sign language ordinances.

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Sign language acquisition was not only geared towards Deaf children, but towards hearing people as well. Historically, Japan has had a government department that focuses on healthcare, employment, and welfare. This department has established sign language acquisition support programs that encourage learning sign language, not interpreting. This means that it is beneficial to all so that everyone can communicate with each other in all aspects of life. This is great, because all of the prefectures have made this happen for some time now. However, there are no interpreter training programs (ITPs) at the college level. None at all. The only exception to that is a national school with a very small program. There are sign language classes at universities and colleges, but no interpreter programs, which is a difference compared to the United States.

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Now we will discuss corpus planning in Japan. In 1969, JFD established the Sign Language Research Committee. During that time, socialization opportunities increased because of the opportunities that trains provided to Japanese people. However, it became hard to communicate with each other because Japanese people came from different regions that used different regional signs. It was problematic, and many people felt there was a need for standardization to allow communication to be successful. That was how people thought back in that era. JFD established that committee, which then published a series of 10 vocabulary books titled “Our Signs” from 1969-1987. These books featured illustrations rather than pictures. Again, the goal of these books was to establish a nationwide standardization of vocabulary without focus on standardized grammar.

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Here you can see examples of the illustrations from these books. You see the sign for “cat,” “monkey,” and “Japan.” Again, the driving factor behind the creation of these books was the variation of signs used at that time.

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Now, JFD has shifted its focus after realizing that creating a standard vocabulary might not have been the right approach. Once the books were published, many Deaf people in various locations contested the idea of standardization because they felt like they were forced to change all their signs. They didn’t like that idea. JFD then clarified that the intent of creating a standard vocabulary was to make communication easier between people from different regions, a component of language planning. “Our Signs” was then no longer published. JFD began publishing a new series in 1990, “New Signs.” The goal behind the new series was to help enhance vocabulary as many people felt that the original series did not have enough vocabulary included. Here are some examples from the “New Signs” series.

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You can see the sign for “four seasons.” Previously, people had used a sign for each individual season. In the new publication, the simplified sign for “four seasons” was created. I do not hope this sign will spread throughout the United States, though! Another example is the sign for “life.” Before, the concept of “life” was expressed through a lengthy explanation. In the new publication, the more direct sign for “life” was introduced using the handshape that means “people” in Japan. The last example is the sign for “from birth to death.” If you are sick and you go to the hospital, you might reach the “death” part. But if you are healed, your life might be extended. But it cannot be extended forever! At some point, you will reach the death part, sorry!

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Now that I have explained language planning in the Deaf community in Japan, we will now focus on the transformation phase.

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I will explain a little bit about my background from the past 30 years. Yes, I moved to America and stayed in Rochester, NY. I received academic training under Ted Supalla, who was wonderful. I am still so thankful for that experience and everything that I learned. After 10 years of that training, I returned to Japan. My hope was to get a job as an educator but there were no positions available at that time. Fortunately, JFD hired me to work in its Korea office, which I gladly accepted. I worked on various projects to advocate for Deaf people and their lives. I remember working long nights, trying to negotiate and work with government officials and Congress. During this time, I was also involved with WFD in Asia, which allowed me to travel to many countries in Asia.

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You might not be able to see all the country names on the map, but I have been to almost all of the countries in Asia. I had the opportunity to learn about the status of each country and understand the role that Japan played in other countries. I worked with them for six years. Then I began my current position as a researcher and educator at Tsukuba University of Technology in Japan. I work with deaf and hard of hearing students. Even though I no longer work for JFD, I still have a strong bond with them. This is because JFD is a stakeholder of the university I work at and is at the same level as the university. I need the JFD's local and worldwide network of Deaf people for my research. In addition, JFD needs the results of my research to help support its work. It is a mutually beneficial relationship, which is extremely important for the future.

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In terms of my training at the University of Rochester, I would like to talk about two projects that I was involved with during that time.

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The first project was the life history of a Deaf immigrant. The person I studied was born in 1934 in Osaka, Japan. This person moved to the United States in 1969, around there, and spent the rest of his life here in the United States. I had the opportunity to interview this person and gather so much information. While the presenter yesterday, Yoko Kobayashi, focused on Deaf women, my research focused on this man's life story. I collected a lot of data about his life story. I learned that he was born to a Deaf family so he was exposed to sign language at birth. He also attended a school that strongly believed in using sign language, which created a rich environment and exposure to language. This experience allowed him to develop the skills necessary to successfully navigate society. However, moving to the United States did not prove to be an easy life. He was discriminated against not only for being Deaf but for being Asian as well. There was a lot of pressure. He struggled to navigate through life in the United States. Learning about his life story, I learned the importance of Deaf children being exposed to sign language at an early age. Early exposure helps Deaf children develop a strong self-identity, which leads to social competence and the ability to successfully navigate life. If a Deaf child is exposed only to spoken language, they will never learn those important skills. That is still a hypothesis of mine, but I do feel like that is accurate.

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As a linguist, I studied his expressive language skills during our interviews. I learned that he was fluent in both Japanese Sign Language and ASL (American Sign Language). Despite that, we still experienced moments of miscommunication during our interview. When we were both using ASL, we had no issues communicating with each other. Once we started using Japanese Sign Language, we ran into issues. Once this man moved to the United States in 1969, he stopped using JSL altogether. In my assessment of his language, I would say that he used “old” signs. That is not nice to say, but that is what I would call it. Not only did he stop using JSL once moving to the United States, but there were also regional differences in the signs we used. I am from the eastern part of Japan, Tokyo, while he was from the southwest part, Osaka. Therefore, the dialects were different. However, it was great interacting with him because I was able to learn his language. One example was “school.” The current sign for “school” in Osaka is this. [Demonstrates sign] His sign for “school” is this. [Demonstrates sign and repeats slowly] The sign he used has four distinct parts to the sign even though they are signed in a smooth flow. During our interview, I would take notes of the “old” signs he would use and took that list back to show the older people in Osaka. They were excited to see the use of those signs, because that was what they had once used as well. The neat thing about that sign was that it showed the school building, the teacher, and many people gathered in one place. It clearly expressed the concept of “school” and that was why the sign was created that way. These findings help us to learn about the Osaka Deaf communities in the 1940s.

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Another one of my research projects was the study of gestural systems on Amami Island in southern Japan.

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There is a small, semi-remote community on the Amami Island that has a small population of Deaf people. The people in that community, whether hearing or Deaf, use a gestural system to communicate. This community is also known as a fishing community. The Deaf people on this island did not attend school until the 1960s. Clearly the Deaf people on this island did not use JSL.

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Upon studying their gestural system, I learned that they used single gestures for some concepts and multiple gestures for other concepts. I will show you two examples of this.

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How to read this graphic is that the symbol you see represents a person. If it is colored black, it represents a Deaf person and if it is colored white, it represents a hearing person. You can also see columns labeled A, B and C. Column A represents an isolated Deaf person. Column B represents a Deaf person with Deaf and hearing family members. Column C represents a hearing person with no Deaf family at all. Then there is a list of different gestures that are used to express the concept of “egg.” [demonstrates signs] You can see in the graphic, in column A there is a Deaf person who uses the gesture for “cracking an egg open” and you can see that no one else used the same gesture. I found out later that person had traveled to Tokyo for job training and

that experience influenced his gesture choice. This is because this person was by himself, not with other Deaf people. In column B, you can see there was one person who used all four gestures combined to show "egg". This person did not use all four gestures slowly but combined them all together fast to show "egg." [Attempts to demonstrate a combination of those signs quickly.] What I noticed was that the younger generation used fewer gestures to convey the concept of "egg". [Demonstrates signs] The order of the gestures used followed the natural order of how an egg is produced. You do not see the gestures being used out of logical order. You can see the dynamic system being shown through these gestures.

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Another example is the concept of "year." "Year" is an abstract concept that is hard to physically see, unlike "egg" which you can physically see. I initially thought because "year" is an abstract concept that these people would not have a way to convey this concept but I was wrong. [Presenter gestures "year".] I saw that gesture being used so many times but I did not understand what it meant. Sorry, Asian people — I don't mean that! In my research, I found that every year there was a special event where all the families would come together to kill a pig and cook the entire pig to eat. In addition, they made rice cakes. [Presenter gestures "pig kill tear roll".] They used four gestures to signify "year." Now, they just gesture KILL TEAR to signify "year." In linguistic terms, this is a compound process being expressed. You can also see how different aspects influence each other. These two research projects in the United States allowed me to learn more about the process in which words in sign language are created. Now, we will focus on my work since these two projects.

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First was my work in Japan to create a JSL map. I had help from 94 Deaf informants from each of the 47 prefectures. There were two informants from each prefecture, one in their 70s and the other one in their 30s. Both informants attended the same Deaf school. I asked them to show their signs for 30 different concepts.

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Again, you see the signs for "cat" in Japanese sign language. In this graphic, you can see the 30 vocabulary words listed on the left side and you can filter them by age group below the list. You can see the variation of signs for "cat" for those informants in their 70s. The Japanese symbols around the video represent each of the 47 prefectures. If the color is the same, it means the expressions of the concepts were the same. If the color is different, it means that the expressions of the concepts were different. The color white means the informant was the only one who used that sign. Now we are looking at the informants in their 30's. You can see that the informants share the same sign. Once we showed this to the hearing community in Japan, they were shocked to see the results.

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Now we are looking at the sign for "monkey." Now the video is showing the informants in their 30s. You can see that the signs are more similar. So you can see the colors green and blue. Which color is the highest? It is green. This shows that even though the JSL book shows one way to sign something, what actually is used is different. It seems that another sign for "cat," for

example, is used more than the sign in the JSL book. You can see how JFD's language planning has influenced language, which some people stay faithful too. But you can also see the response from sign language users and how that differs. Moving forward, JFD will allow these changes to happen organically and give up controlling these changes. There can be further discussion on that.

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My second project was the early JSL database project. I used a sign vocabulary book published in 1909, the third edition, with the first edition being published in 1902. Over one hundred years ago. The book that I used included 528 signs that were described in Japanese text without illustrations. It is extremely hard to understand at first. After reviewing the book, all signs were re-enacted and documented as video data. This process felt much like being an archaeologist, digging up artifacts from the past. All the videos of the re-enacted signs were then published online.

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This is all in Japanese, so don't worry about it. I'd like to show an example. The book that we used was not published in Tokyo but in a southern prefecture named Kagoshima. However, Deaf schools were established in Tokyo and Kyoto. Teachers from these schools went to Kagoshima and realized that students could read and write so the book was created and disseminated with signs from back then. You can see here the sign for "100." Now, the sign for "100" looks like this. Looking at the book, the sign is described as being the same. What is interesting is that in the book, you can find the sign for 100, 200, 600 and 700. But the signs for 300, 400 and 500 are missing. However, it is easy to assume what the signs are for those numbers based on the sign for 100. Once you get to 600, however, the sign is different. [Presenter shows the signs for 100, 200, 300, 400, 500, 600, and 700]. Even though the signs for 300, 400, and 500 are missing from the book, it is easy for linguists to understand the pattern and know what the signs look like. The root of the sign used to be a two-part sign, much like how 600 and 700 are signed. As time changed, however, the sign became a one-part sign. After figuring that out, I was curious as to why the base of the sign is what it is. What I found was that the base of the sign represents the physical bills used for 100 yen. From there, a diachronic database was built and a synchronic database was built. The diachronic database was built from old videos and data that could not be changed. The synchronic database represents signs that are used currently with data collected from multiple sources. Once the two databases were combined, we were able to find out more.

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Now, the last part is my current work with a hearing linguist named Bono. Her work focuses on analyzing dialogue, and her current research focuses on JSL with the inclusion of tactile JSL. So we have collaborated to work on a large project called the JSL Colloquial Corpus. The project goal is to work with informants from all 47 prefectures, totaling 1,000 informants. Right now, we have a small number of 121 Deaf informants from seven prefectures, but we are still expanding our database. There are two parts to this project: dialogue between two people and the other part being lexical elicitation. The reason for the two parts of data collection is to collect data on specific vocabulary but also to see how they appear in natural conversation. The participants in the dialogue task are given the topic of how to cook curry. In the dialogue, the participants must

talk about cooking the curry using potatoes, carrots, and onions. These participants were also asked their signs for different vocabulary terms, including the signs for meats and vegetables that would show up in the dialogue portion. We want to see how the informants use the vocabulary in natural dialogue. The informants in the study are also age-balanced, from being in their 30s to their 80s. In addition, the informants are gender-balanced with about 15 to 20 of each gender from all the prefectures.

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The database shows the history of Deaf people's lives over 60 years. It represents those who went to an oral school and then later learned sign language. It represents those who were not allowed to use sign language in the classroom but still used it in the hallways or dorms. The data shows the heritage of these people. One positive thing about this data is that it shows that sign language has been passed down from generation to generation. One negative thing about this data is that oral education influenced their signs. Now we are looking at the website for this project.

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Thankfully, there's an English version so you can view the website on your own if you wish. There are women and men. Now we will look at the signs for "water." You see the signs [demonstrates]. You see the location of the sign slightly varies. You can see everything so clearly and beautifully. You will notice variations based on age. I think this is a great representation of change through — well, not "change" through life, they are all still alive — but the variations of signs show that language does change over time. This is also a great tool because I do not have to explain everything myself; it is all right here for all to see. That means hearing people, educators, or parents can look at this website and see that sign language does change over time, just as spoken language does. This means that sign language is a language, period. All of this information and data shows just that.

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From my work on building the JSL corpus database, I was able to uncover several important findings. JSL, just as any other sign language, has regional variations, and those changes can be shown over time. In addition, age variation — sorry, I am switching the second and third findings around from the slide. As I have explained, analysis of diachronic and synchronic databases reveal processes of word formation. They have the power to help us learn more.

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With the work of JFD and other organizations on language planning, it is interesting to see how that influences the Deaf community and the reaction of that language planning from the Deaf community. Will the reactions from the Deaf community influence changes, stop research or the development of more resources? Their reactions are helpful in guiding further research. One thing I have observed is that with Japanese Sign Language, there is still variation within the language. Through research for the corpus database, I realized with surprise that Japanese Deaf people do not share many of the same signs for everyday concepts, such as vegetables. For example, onions, carrots, potatoes, etc. With these concepts, you will see so much variation in the signs that are used. Even within one prefecture, you will see variation. Even though I feel like

vegetables are an everyday concept, I have realized that when Deaf people get together, the chances of them discussing cooking is very low. When Deaf Japanese people get together, they will discuss current events or things happening within the government. Therefore, the signs for those concepts are standard and are easily shared. Nevertheless, those everyday concepts might only be discussed within the home, especially within a Deaf family. With that in mind, I understand why that variation happens so often. My partner in this project coined the term “improvisational signing.” Naming this phenomenon “improvisational signing” is new, but the concept has been occurring all this time. This refers to when you meet another Deaf person, and you both do what you can to make communication successful. Improvisational signing is an important term that will continue to be used in future research.

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I want to summarize everything with one key point on the importance of revitalizing heritage sign language. It is important to use the humanistic framework for research on the history, spiritual value, and dialogue among Deaf individuals. This will help us transform the research results into sign language advocacy and identity in the Deaf community. That is my closing.

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Our research supports the notion of protecting sign language through collaboration with the Deaf and hearing communities moving forward for Deaf Studies and the community.

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That is all that I have for you today. Thank you!

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