

## DEAF CULTURE IN JAPAN: A LANGUAGE ATTITUDE SURVEY

Suzanne Quay

David W. Rackham

### Abstract

The concept of cultural Deafness which is prevalent in the United States is a recent import to Japan. In a 'Declaration of Deaf Culture' published in 1995, the authors, Kimura and Ichida, proposed that the deaf in Japan, like the deaf in the United States, should also be considered as a community of people who share the same culture through the use of sign language (specifically, Japanese Sign Language). A survey was conducted to find out the impact of this declaration on the Japanese deaf as well as on those who work closely with the deaf. The results show that there is a slow but steady change in attitudes towards sign language and deaf culture. Although sign language is gaining more recognition, the results of the survey suggest that a more active role will have to be taken by leaders in the deaf community to promote and increase awareness of cultural deafness in Japan.

### Introduction

In recent years, it has become accepted, particularly in North America and Europe, that sign language is a language in its own right and that the deaf have their own culture. With progress in sign language research as well as increased public awareness of this form of communication, the deaf have been able to gain more political power. In the United States, the use of the uppercase *D* in Deaf distinguishes those who consider themselves to be culturally Deaf from those who are not. The culturally Deaf identify themselves with the activities and beliefs of people who are deaf and who share sign language as their distinct mode of communication (cf. Schein

and Stewart, 1995). They do not consider themselves to be disabled according to the medical or pathological view of deafness. Instead, they often consider themselves to be more similar to an ethnic minority with sign language as their linguistic trademark.

The number of hearing impaired people (excluding the hard-of-hearing) in Japan has been estimated to be 400,000 with 170,000 to 200,000 being able to use some variety of sign language (Maher and Yashiro, 1995: 8). With increased mobility and contact with deaf communities in other countries, the Japanese deaf have in recent years become aware of their own culture and language.

### *Deaf Culture Declaration*

The 'Deaf Culture Declaration' was proposed by Kimura and Ichida and published in *Gendai Shisou (Modern Philosophy)* in 1995 (this same article is reprinted in a special edition of *Gendai Shisou* in 1996). In an interview of the first author, Ms. Harumi Kimura, who is an instructor in the sign interpreter training program at the National Rehabilitation Center for the Disabled in Saitama as well as a deaf newscaster on the NHK Sign Language News, Ms. Kimura revealed that she only realized what it meant to be Deaf with a capital *D* in 1991 after learning about the success of deaf movements in the United States. Since sign language has been accepted as a language in its own right in other countries, the Japanese authors declare that the deaf in Japan should also be considered as a language minority using specifically, Japanese Sign Language (JSL). The main points of this declaration are as follows:

- 1) The deaf community is not a community of people who cannot hear but a community of people who share the same culture through the use of their particular sign language.
- 2) Deaf culture and community are threatened by the placement of deaf children in schools for the hearing (known as 'mainstreaming') and by the use of cochlear implants which try to 'fix' deafness.

- 3) Japan is behind other countries not only in adopting the bilingual approach in deaf education (where sign language can have a prominence in the curriculum equal to the national language) but also in employing deaf teachers to teach deaf students.
- 4) Simultaneous communication (SimCom) is a manual code based on the grammar of the spoken language. Although it is not the sign language of the Japanese deaf which has its own grammatical system, those who have learned SimCom think that they are using the sign language of the deaf.
- 5) Consequently, sign interpreters who know SimCom have difficulties translating for the deaf.
- 6) A clear distinction is required between the deaf and those who are adventitiously deafened or who are hard of hearing as they do not all use the same language.

Points 1, 2 and 6 have already been made by the Deaf in the United States while the other three points focus on the situation in Japan.

### *The language attitude survey*

Given the contents of the Deaf Culture Declaration, the decision was made to investigate the current situation in Japan. Has the Deaf Culture Declaration made any impact on the Japanese deaf community? Do the deaf and those who are closely related to the deaf through family or work ties consider Japanese Sign Language to be equal in importance to spoken Japanese? Would they accept the deaf as a linguistic minority?

### **Method**

In order to answer these questions, a survey was conducted. A database of 97 organizations providing services for the deaf was used to establish contact with the deaf population as well as those closely related to the deaf. This information was

compiled by Matsuba (1997) mainly from a list of 84 organizations provided in the publication, *Ikuoru*, which will henceforth be referred to as *Equal* (1996, vol. 20: 130-144), by the Better Communication Society in Tokyo, and also from pamphlets gathered from additional organizations not on that list. A total of 50 of these organizations were in Tokyo, 13 on the outskirts of Tokyo, specifically in Kanagawa, Saitama and Chiba, and 34 in other areas such as Aichi, Ehime, Fukuoka, Hiroshima, Hokkaido, Ibaraki, Kagawa, Kumamoto, Kyoto, Mie, Miyazaki, Nagano, Osaka, Shiga, Shimane, Shizuoka, and Tochigi. These organizations serve 11 general functions - advocacy, research-oriented, social, sports, arts, services, media, labour, volunteer groups, promotion of American Sign Language (ASL), and religious - which, along with more specific functions, are shown in Table 1 (compiled from Matsuba, 1997: 55-98).

**Table 1. The general and specific functions of the 97 organizations providing services for the deaf**

<b>General Function</b>	<b>Specific Function</b>
Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Corporations</li> <li>•Self-Help</li> <li>•Educational/Students' groups</li> </ul>
Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Communication</li> <li>•General Problems related to the Hearing Impaired</li> <li>•Sign Language</li> <li>•Interpretation</li> </ul>
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Clubs made by the Deaf</li> <li>•Sign Language Circles</li> </ul>
Sports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•National associations</li> <li>•Local sports clubs</li> </ul>
Arts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Performing</li> <li>•Non-performing</li> </ul>
Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Information</li> <li>•Interpretation</li> <li>•Old People's Homes</li> <li>•Institutions for the hearing impaired with other disabilities</li> <li>•Rehabilitation centres</li> <li>•Other public services</li> <li>•Hearing aids</li> <li>•Cochlear implants</li> <li>•Companies</li> </ul>
Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•NHK Sign Language News</li> <li>•Captioning</li> <li>•TV Corporations</li> <li>•Satellite programmes</li> </ul>
Labour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Subsidiary companies (employing the hearing impaired)</li> <li>•Job settlement</li> </ul>
Volunteer groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Parents'/Volunteer groups (organizing workshops, study groups, etc. for deaf children and adults)</li> </ul>
Promoting American Sign Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Gallaudet Univ. Assoc-Nippon Chapter</li> <li>•World Exchange of Silent Cultures</li> <li>•Japanese ASL Signers' Society</li> </ul>
Religious	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Churches for deaf Christians</li> </ul>

The survey questionnaires were distributed by students in the World of Sign Language class at International Christian University in Autumn 1997 as part of their class project. The rationale for the students' participation was for them to learn how to conduct a survey as well as for them to find out more about the Japanese deaf community for which they had fewer accessible resources than for the American deaf community. Each student was responsible for contacting three organizations. Not all the organizations responded and not all who responded were willing to allow the questionnaires to be distributed to their members. Early on in the project, feedback about the original bilingual Japanese-English questionnaire was received from some of the contacts made. The main concern was about the questionnaire being too difficult. We were informed of the high illiteracy rate among the deaf in Japan and that the presence of English sentences could also alarm some possible respondents. At one organization, the hearing contact person felt that the deaf person would have increased sensitivity to questions concerning such things as their marital status. There were also objections to the word 'survey' used to explain the purpose of the questionnaire as it was felt that this showed the higher status of the students. As a result, the word in Japanese was changed to indicate instead a wish to learn or to be taught.

The final revised questionnaire, in Japanese only, contained a section concerning the respondent's personal information such as age, sex, marital status, occupation, education, auditory ability, and so on (although the questionnaire was to be answered anonymously, in order not to cause offence, respondents were instructed that they could consider any of these questions to be optional; consequently, many questionnaires were not fully completed). There was also a section about their means of communication - whether they used spoken Japanese, JSL, SimCom, etc.; whether, if deaf, they used any means of auditory augmentation such as hearing aids, or cochlear implants; what types of equipment they used frequently - email, fax, etc. In this section there were also questions about communication problems, membership in deaf clubs, societies or organizations, and views on the NHK Sign Language News

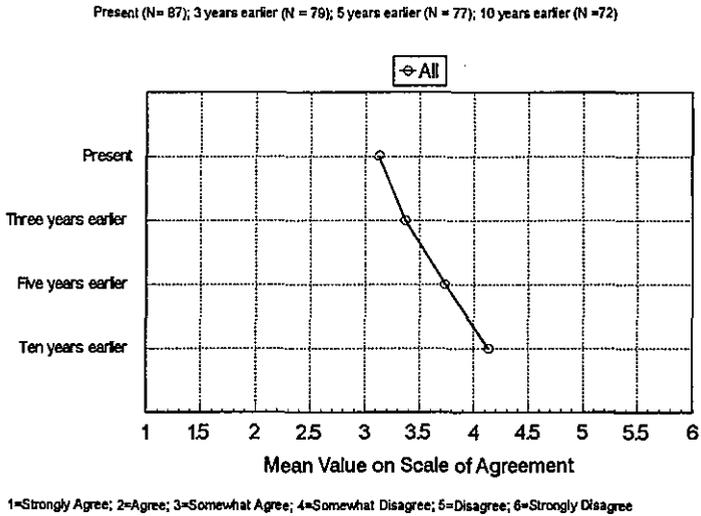
and television captioning. Finally, there was a section about attitudes towards Sign Language. What did they think about the claim published in the 'Deaf Culture Declaration' by Kimura and Ichida (1995) that 'the deaf are a linguistic minority who use sign language'? How is their current view different from their view 3 years ago, 5 years ago and 10 years ago? Since we were aware that the issue of 'cultural deafness' is a recent import into Japan, the purpose of this question was to determine whether attitudes towards sign language and the deaf have changed in recent times. Besides choosing from a scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree with regard to the above claim, respondents were asked to give reasons for their answers. We also inquired about the respondents' attitudes towards the use of sign language and their opinion about deaf education.

### **Results and Discussion**

A total of 147 completed questionnaires were returned by the various organizations who were willing to participate in this survey. The responses were coded and organized for quantitative analyses. Not all the items on the questionnaire will be discussed in this paper. The results reported here will focus mainly on changes in attitude towards the linguistic minority question over time according to age, sex, auditory and signing abilities. Since 57.8% of the respondents were hearing, we will also look at how the results are affected when the respondents are deaf according to age of onset of deafness, and means of auditory augmentation (if any).

Figure 1 shows the results of asking all respondents whether or not they agree with the statement that the 'deaf are a linguistic minority who use sign language'. There does appear to be a change in attitude towards this question in the sense that when this survey was conducted in autumn 1997, respondents were more willing to agree with this statement than three years earlier, and their response more than three years earlier is more positive than five years earlier. Their response to this statement is the most negative ten years earlier. The results of a Friedman One-Way Analysis

of Variance (ANOVA) revealed that there was a statistically significant trend toward greater agreement with the statement proceeding from 10 years ago to the present ( $X^2 (df = 3) = 40.37, p \leq 0.001$ ).



**Figure 1.** Overall response to the statement that ‘The deaf are a linguistic minority who use sign language’

These results seem to suggest that the assumption that 'cultural Deafness' is a relatively recent import may be 'psychologically real' in the minds of the respondents as there is a tendency to somewhat disagree with the view of the deaf as a linguistic minority 10 years ago and to somewhat agree at present.

Most of the respondents were between ages 20 to 60 with 141 out of 147 respondents indicating their age on the questionnaire. Among these, 35 were in their twenties, 37 in their thirties, 32 in their forties, 26 in their fifties and 11 in their sixties. Looking at the response to the language minority question in terms of age, it can be seen in Figure 2 that respondents in their twenties tended to rate the deaf as a linguistic minority more positively over time than did respondents in their sixties. Although differences between age groups are suggested by Figure 2, a series of Kruskal Wallis non-parametric tests for "k" independent groups revealed no statistically significant overall differences between the age groups by time of assessment. However, the data do suggest that compared to respondents in their 60s, those in their 20s were in greater agreement with the statement. A series of Mann-Whitney U-Tests comparing the groups in their 20s and 60s revealed a statistically significant difference for the present ( $U = 33.00$ ,  $z = -2.218$ ,  $p = 0.027$ ). This is what we would expect as the younger generation are more likely in many societies to advocate/support change than the older members. The younger respondents are also more likely to have increased mobility and contacts with deaf communities outside of Japan. The change in agreement with the linguistic minority statement over time is less drastic for respondents in their thirties than for those in their forties and fifties. What this could indicate is that older respondents were less exposed in the past to the idea of the deaf and their sign language as being a unique feature but are now willing to agree to this likelihood.

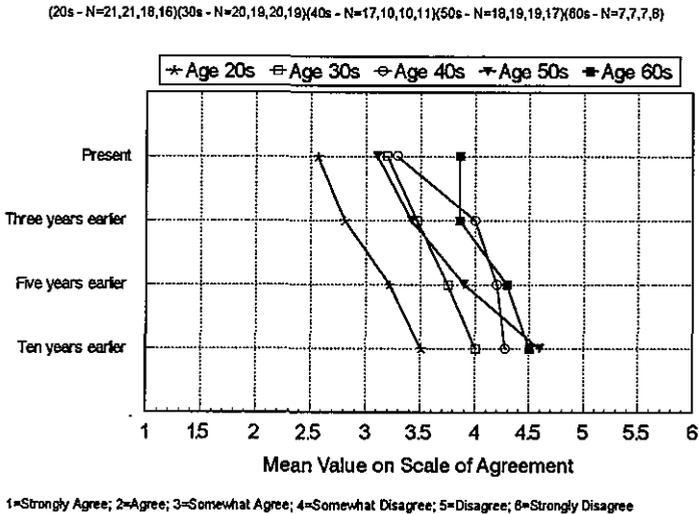
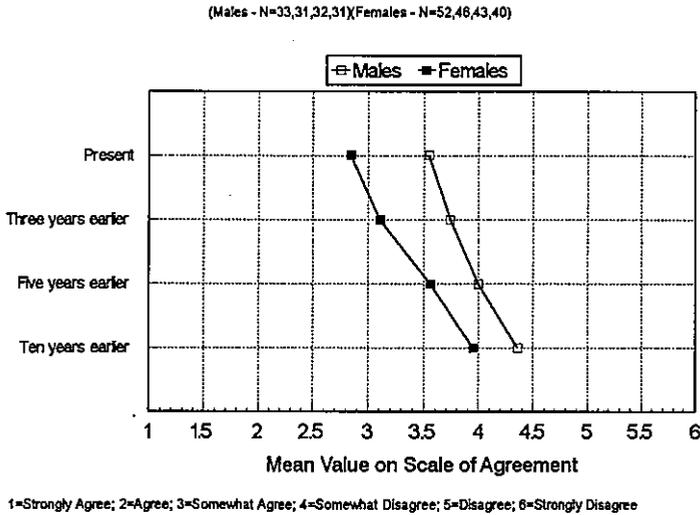


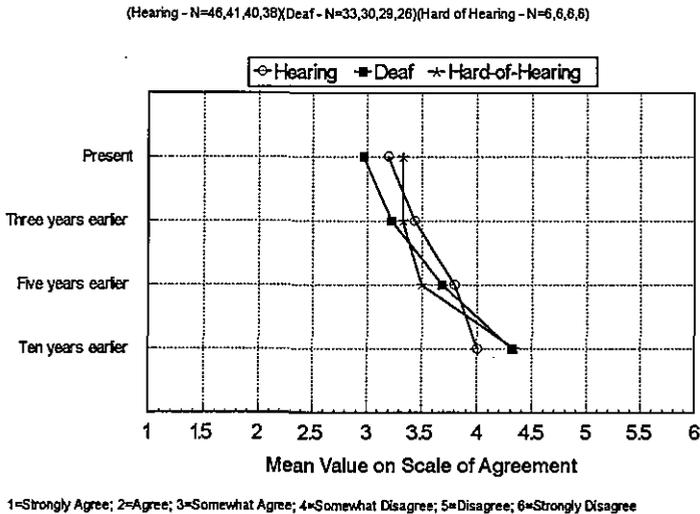
Figure 2. Response to the statement that 'The deaf are a linguistic minority who use sign language' in terms of age of respondents.

With regard to the sex of respondents, 36% (N = 53) were male and 61% (N = 90) were female (of the 147 questionnaires received back, 4 respondents did not answer this question). Figure 3 suggests that female respondents view the language minority question slightly more positively than male respondents across the four time periods. A series of Mann-Whitney U-Tests for two independent samples revealed a statistically significant difference between males and females for the present time period ( $U = 607$ ,  $z = -2.335$ ,  $p = 0.020$ ). The difference between males and females for 3 years previously fell just short of statistical significance. No differences were found between males and females for 5 and 10 years previously.



**Figure 3. Response to the statement that ‘The deaf are a linguistic minority who use sign language’ according to the sex of respondents.**

In terms of auditory ability, 85 of the 147 respondents identified themselves as hearing, 52 as deaf or profoundly deaf, and 7 as hard of hearing, with 3 missing values. Figure 4 suggests increasing agreement with the statement from past to present. A series of Kruskal Wallis tests for “k” independent groups revealed no overall differences between sub-groups for the four periods of inquiry.



**Figure 4.** Response to the statement that ‘The deaf are a linguistic minority who use sign language’ according to the hearing ability of respondents.

The signing ability of the respondents was also tabulated. One person out of the 147 who completed the questionnaire did not respond to this question. Of the remaining 146 respondents, 56 had no signing ability whatsoever, 23 were proficient in JSL and 67 knew a combination of JSL and other signing methods (including for example, SimCom and ASL). Figure 5 also shows a tendency to greater agreement with the statement from past to present. A series of Kruskal Wallis tests for “k” independent groups revealed no overall differences between groups with differing signing abilities across the four times of inquiry.

(None - N=34,30,31,31)(JSL - N=12,10,9,9)(JSL plus other signing ability - N=40,38,36,32)

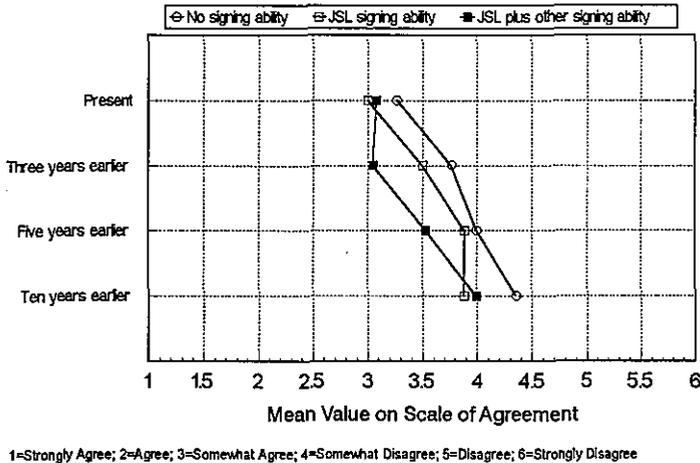


Figure 5. Response to the statement that ‘The deaf are a linguistic minority who use sign language’ according to the signing ability of respondents.

*The deaf respondents*

Among the 52 deaf respondents, 42 answered the question about the onset of deafness. Of these, 7 were born deaf, 31 lost their hearing at some point after birth and up to age 20, while 4 lost their hearing between ages 21 to 40. Figure 6 suggests increasing agreement with the statement by those who became deaf at some point after birth up to the age of 20, at least for 10, 5, and 3 years earlier. Among those who became deaf between the ages of 21 and 40, there is no change in agreement over the period from the present to 3 and 5 years previously. For those born deaf, there seems to be a change toward greater agreement between 10 years ago and the present. A series of Kruskal Wallis tests for “k” independent groups revealed no overall differences between the three sub-groups for the four periods of inquiry. Overall, it might

be said that those who became deaf later in life are less convinced of being part of a linguistic minority than those who became deaf before the age of 20.

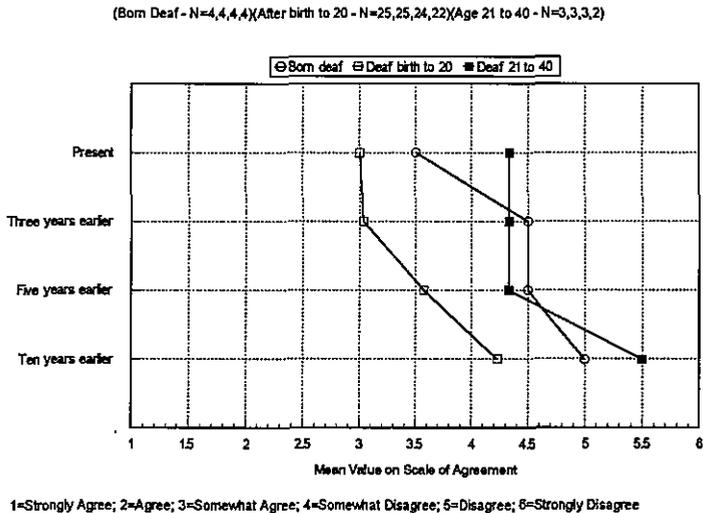


Figure 6. Response to the statement that 'The deaf are a linguistic minority who use sign language' according to the age of onset of deafness of respondents.

Only 36 respondents indicated whether they used any means of auditory augmentation. Of these, 16 wore hearing aids while 10 had cochlear implants. Of this subset, half of those wearing hearing aids responded to the language minority question while 9 who had cochlear implants also responded. Figure 7 indicates a common tendency toward greater agreement with the statement moving from past to present for those using hearing aids as well as for those with cochlear implants. A series of Mann-Whitney U-tests revealed no differences between the two groups for the four intervals of inquiry.

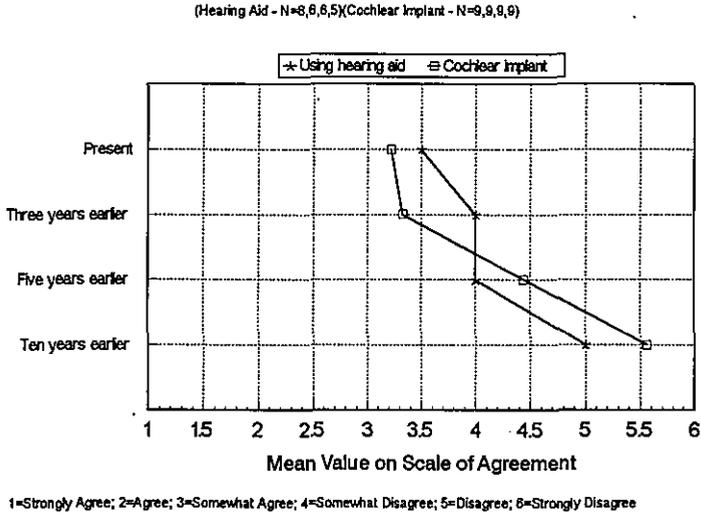


Figure 7. Response to the statement that 'The deaf are a linguistic minority who use sign language' according to the means of auditory augmentation used by respondents.

### Comments about the 'deaf as a language minority' question

Although 147 questionnaires were collected, 60 respondents felt that they could not answer the main question about whether the deaf are a linguistic minority who use sign language. This section was thus left blank by 41% of the respondents. A total of 64 respondents gave a reason either for not answering or for the answer given. The reasons given for doing so are described below according to comments from hearing versus deaf respondents.

*Comments from hearing respondents*

The most common reason given for leaving the question unanswered was that the respondent could not understand the question due to a lack of knowledge about the situation, sign language, and culture of the deaf. Some of these respondents felt that the Deaf Culture Declaration statement ignored the deaf person's disability which should not be ignored even if one accepts the deaf as a language minority. Others felt that the line of thinking advocated by the statement would detrimentally isolate deaf people from society. Although signing was accepted as being important, some respondents stated that it was not the only way to communicate nor the form of communication for the majority of society. This Declaration could thus cause a rift between the hearing and the deaf and affect cooperative ventures. Some respondents considered the concept of a linguistic minority to be still discriminatory in Japan, while others pointed out that the deaf are given a certificate of handicap which seems strange if they are in fact not disabled. They maintained that in Japan, the deaf are still considered more as being handicapped than as being a minority. One respondent who clearly knows a lot about the rights of the deaf stated that there was nothing to agree or disagree about as it is already a fact that the deaf whose first language is sign language are a minority according to the Kyoto 3.3 Declaration (the Declaration of the Rights of the Deaf) and recommended that reference should be made to this declaration before the Deaf Culture Declaration. Finally, statements were made that the Deaf Culture Declaration excluded those who used residual hearing, as well as those who did not or could not sign. These respondents did not think that the sign language race should be separated from the Japanese race and would agree with the statement only if sign language were excluded from the definition of deaf culture.

*Comments from deaf respondents*

The comments from the deaf respondents showed that they looked at the Deaf Culture Declaration from a different perspective from the hearing respondents. Some

wrote that they understood the idea but felt there had been no future direction or policy to act upon such a movement, thus rendering the statement vacuous. Some, like the hearing respondents, indicated that they did not know enough about the Declaration to answer the question but their reason for not knowing enough was quite unlike the reasons given by the hearing respondents. The lack of knowledge among the deaf was due to the fact that many among them did not understand written language. Some felt that to consider the deaf as a linguistic minority would limit their potential and discriminate against the deaf who have not had the opportunity to learn sign language. As suggested by some of the hearing respondents, the deaf respondents also pointed out that not everyone used JSL. Many used the spoken language. Furthermore, the question did not differentiate between different levels of hearing loss so that the Declaration actually discriminated against those who lost their hearing later in life and those who were hard of hearing. There was also an observation from one deaf respondent that not everyone who signed was deaf and she did not want those hearing people with knowledge of sign language to be excluded from the world of the deaf.

### **Summary**

This initial study suggests that there is an overall change in how the deaf and those who work with the deaf view the status of the deaf as a language minority over a time period of 10 years. Although there is some indication of statistically significant results when the 'deaf as a linguistic minority' question was analyzed according to age and sex of respondents, the auditory and signing abilities of respondents did not seem to affect their answers. Also, the number of deaf respondents was too small to show any statistically significant differences in responses according to onset of deafness and to use of auditory augmentation. The general results do not show particularly strong agreement with the statement, just more agreement in the present than in the past. This implies that the concept of cultural deafness is still quite new in

Japan and is not yet fully understood. In the future, it would be interesting to see whether the trends suggestive of change shown in this small sample can be replicated with a larger sample. Whether or not these trends will continue will probably depend on the active promotion of cultural deafness in Japan by leaders in the deaf community.

### References

- Better Communication Society. (1996). Dantai Shoukai (List of organizations). *Ikuoru (Equal)* vol. 20, p.130-144.
- Kimura, H. and Ichida, Y. (1995). 'Robunka Sengen: Gengoteki shosusha toshiteno rousha' ('Declaration of Deaf Culture: Deaf as a Language Minority'). *Gendai-shisou (Modern Philosophy)* vol. 23-03, p.354-362. [reprinted in *Gendai-shisou (Modern Philosophy)*, April 1996 Special Edition]
- Maher, J., & Yashiro, K. (Eds.). (1995). *Multilingual Japan*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Matsuba, M. (1997). *Current Trends for the Deaf in Japan - From a Pathological to a Cultural View of Deafness*. Unpublished senior thesis at International Christian University, Tokyo.
- Schein, J. D., & Stewart, D. A. (1995). *Language in Motion: Exploring the nature of sign*. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press.

### Acknowledgements

Special thanks to the students in the World of Sign Language class in Autumn 1997 for their assistance in collecting the data and to Yuki Takai for clerical assistance and translation of materials.

## 日本におけるろう文化 言語態度調査

スーザン・クエイ

デービット・ラッカム

## 〈要 約〉

現在米国で、広く浸透している言語的少数者としてのろう者という概念は最近になって日本でも知られるようになってきた。1995年に木村晴美氏と市田泰弘氏によって出版された「ろう文化宣言」では、米国に倣い日本の聴覚障害者も、手話を通して同じ文化を共有する文化的集団であるという視点で認識されるべきであると述べている。本論では、このろう文化宣言の影響を見るべく日本の聴覚障害者、及び聴覚障害者と共に働く人々を対象に調査をしたところ、ゆるやかではあるが、ろう文化、手話に対する態度の変化が見受けられた。しかし、手話に対する認知度は高まってきているものの、さらなるろう文化に対する認識を広める為には、ろう・コミュニティの積極的行動が必要とされると思われる。