

**Translation as an investigative tool:
Searching for a common ground for examining mimetics in Japanese and JSL**

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*Any comparison of two languages implies an
examination of their mutual translatability.*

Roman Jakobson

In an attempt to discover some common ground for a discussion of mimetics in Japanese and Japanese Sign Language (JSL), this paper consists primarily of an investigation into the possibilities of translating Japanese mimetic expressions into JSL. The inspiration for this approach is the quotation above from Roman Jakobson (1959), where he claims that any comparison of two languages, to a certain extent, involves the two languages mutual translatability. Since, to my knowledge, there is no research dealing with the translation of mimetic expressions of a spoken/written language into a signed language, this paper is, in a sense, breaking new ground, and therefore the analysis presented is preliminary, and the conclusions reached are tentative.

The first section of this paper provides some basic background information on the range of deafness in Japan, and also on the range of JSL, from home sign to pidgin JSL to JSL. The second section will introduce the Japanese mimetic-filled passage from Jorden (1982) that is used for analysis. In addition to providing the passage, Jorden also includes a brief discussion of the difficulties of translating Japanese mimetic words into English. This opinion is echoed in Hasegawa's (2011) discussion of the same passage in her volume on translation, where she also claims that it is often not possible to translate Japanese mimetic words into English mimetic words. The difficulties with the English translations from Jorden and Hasegawa will be briefly discussed, and in the following section, it will be illustrated how much more difficult it is to translate the passage into JSL.

The third section of the present paper describes the method used and provides a number of examples that illustrate some of the difficulties encountered when trying to translate the mimetic expressions of a spoken/written language into a signed language. Three deaf Japanese signers were asked to attempt to translate the Japanese passage from Jorden. Two of them tried, but then gave up because they stated they could not understand the passage, since it was filled with mimetic expressions. This, then, is one of the tentative findings: many deaf Japanese people, probably because of the lack of phonetic input, have difficulty understanding Japanese mimetic expressions.

Relying on the translation of the remaining Japanese deaf person, another of the

tentative findings of this preliminary investigation was that since sign languages are manual/visual languages, they tend to favor phenomime-like signs rather than phonomime-like signs in translations/interpretations. And therefore, rather than sound imitation, location, motion and the visual aspects of the scene described in the passage were dominant in the iconic JSL signs used to translate the original Japanese mimetic words. Example of these types of JSL signs will be described and discussed, and possible directions for future research will be suggested

References

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