

Improvisational Signing: How JSL Signers Solve Word-finding Problems in Interaction

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ABSTRACT:

This paper introduces a specific feature of a self-initiated repair sequence (Shegloff et al., 1977) in sign language interaction related to word-finding problems, termed “improvisational signing”. Based on observations, I conclude that there is a bilingual and bimodal communication style prevalent among Japanese Sign Language (JSL) signers who acquire JSL and Japanese through Deaf education.

Under Hatoyama, the Ministry of Education implemented an auditory–oral approach to Deaf education in 1933. This continued until 1993, when the then-Minister of Education recommended the use of various approaches, such as sign language, simultaneous communication, and cued speech, among others, in Deaf education (Wakinaka, 2009). As result of that, JSL signers currently acquire two languages: one is JSL, used in conversation with Deaf friends and family, and the other is spoken Japanese, learned in Deaf education and used for contact with hearing people.

I claim that JSL signers who wish to represent something they cannot make clear using the signed lexicon improvisationally create temporal expressions with the simultaneous use of JSL and the mouth movements of spoken language. I introduce three cases in which JSL signers have difficulty referring to an object using the JSL corpus that we have been building since 2011.

These cases have similar sequential structures and exhibit parallel non-verbal actions. First, such a sequence includes an adjacency pair composed of a question–answer sequence in the repair segment. In detail, after the current signer (A) initiates repair in one turn, A asks for the appropriate signed expression from interlocutor (B); B then gives an answer in which both actions are structured as an adjacency pair. The three cases treated in this paper all include the following features.

- The signer initiates the repair segment by increasing disfluent signing.
- The repair outcome is collaboratively constructed using adjacency pair forms.
- In narrative talk, the signer does not look at the interlocutor; however, he/she shifts the direction of his/her gaze to the interlocutor in the adjacency pair. After obtaining the outcome of collaborative repair, he/she looks away again to re-enter narrative talk.

Next, when JSL signers represent the given object, they use a combination of hand signing (e.g., depicting signs, CL) and mouthing, which are produced simultaneously.

The improvisational signing that I discuss in this paper is a word-finding strategy that involves identifying the appropriate words or expressions with which to refer to an object to represent what JSL signers intend to express to recipients in difficult situations. Because almost all JSL signers have been educated in a bilingual and bimodal environment, they possess several original strategies to represent the objects represented in their thoughts, including the combination of hand signing as a part of JSL and mouthing

as a resource derived from spoken Japanese. I believe that the results will contribute to the interaction analysis of signed interaction as well as the more basic linguistic issue of the boundaries between native and non-native lexicons (Brentari and Padden, 2001), and lexicalization and de-lexicalization (Cormier et al., 2012).