

The Exploration of Storytelling and Visual Filmmaking with Sign Language in Japanese Animated Media

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ABSTRACT

Sign language is a method of communication that enables deaf individuals to interact with others. In fictional media, sign language is frequently used to signal a character's deafness to the audience. Many stories in fiction that showcase deaf characters utilise sign language as a primary method of communication. Sign language's visual modality aligns closely with animation's visual nature, making it a particularly effective medium for representing deaf communication. Beyond its functional role in conveying dialogue, signing within animation contributes to narrative richness by facilitating the exploration of interpersonal connections and shared linguistic identity. Japanese animation has increasingly featured deaf characters using sign language to foster communication and build emotional connections. The characters are depicted not only through the absence of a sensory capacity but also as social actors negotiating a world that frequently fails to understand or accommodate them. This paper examines the differences among the previously mentioned Japanese animations and analyses how they use sign language to communicate and convey emotional connections between characters.

Keywords: Japanese animation, sign language, communication, emotional connections, deaf representation

INTRODUCTION

Communication with individuals who are deaf involves various challenges that can differ depending on the person. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), deafness can be defined as hearing loss at a threshold of 20 decibels (dB), compared to individuals with normal hearing. There are various degrees of hearing loss, as reported by people who have experienced deafness. People who have been deaf since birth may encounter different experiences when navigating society compared to those who lost their hearing later in life.

Realities of life are sometimes reflected in fiction, whether in writing, audio recordings, illustrations, or films. In recent years, animation has served as a medium for various forms of storytelling. Globally, animation generates an average annual profit of 400 billion dollars, leading many companies to invest in its production across film, streaming services, and television (Katatikarn 2024). Upon winning the Oscar for Best Animated Feature, Guillermo del Toro stated in his speech that animation is a medium suitable for telling all types of stories and should not be seen as limited to a specific genre (Flores 2023). The evolution of animation as a contemporary storytelling medium has facilitated broader and more accurate depictions of characters, representing individuals from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds coexisting within a single society (Wikayanto et al. 2023).

Although recent years have seen notable advances in Deaf Representation, research by the National Research Group (2022) indicates that such portrayals remain inadequate. Representation continues to fall short not only in terms of quantity and accessibility but also in reflecting the intersectional diversity of the deaf community across gender, sexuality, age, race, and religion. However, with increased access to social media, individuals are now exposed to a wider range of cultures and communities. This has encouraged many to incorporate multicultural societies into their narratives in ways that are both globally relatable and celebratory of unique cultural identities, effectively sharing these diverse perspectives with the world (Fitria 2022).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Throughout history, sign language has evolved as an effective means of communication not only for individuals who are deaf, but also within monastic communities where monks observing vows of silence require nonverbal interaction. Additionally, sign language has been utilised in military contexts, enabling soldiers to communicate visually during stealth operations (Ruben 2005). Sign language has been prominent in the film industry since the age of silent films, when it started nearly a century ago. Many deaf actors and employees were hired to produce films during the silent film age and were accepted into filmmaking as the norm (Marra 2017). However, while sound design has enriched cinematic storytelling, Hamilton and Egbert (2024) argued that it has simultaneously reduced accessibility for deaf and hard-of-hearing audiences.

Information in these films is typically conveyed verbally instead of visually, which can make it more challenging for deaf viewers to follow what is happening during certain scenes. Additionally, although sign language has been featured in earlier works of films depicting characters with deafness, muteness, or other disabilities, its portrayal has frequently lacked accuracy. During that period, filmmakers were only beginning to address deafness more seriously in their narratives.

Deaf characters have been featured in various animated stories. There are multiple examples of how deafness has been represented in animation. One early example would be an appearance of a deaf character in an episode of the Little Mermaid series, released between 1992 and 1993 (Heredia 2022). In Japan, there has been an increase in the portrayal of deaf characters in both live-action and animated media, providing greater representation for deaf individuals across film and television platforms. For animated media, most examples are usually present in a series format, which can lengthen and expand on the story and journey of the deaf character and the other characters surrounding them, as well as taking their time to flesh out the components of the story (Bisharyan 2020).

A common feature among many animated projects featuring deaf characters is sign language, which these characters typically employ to communicate with others, including individuals without hearing impairments. Such situations often create communication barriers, resulting

in misunderstandings and frustration when characters misinterpret signs or struggle to understand each other (Marra 2017). On a more positive note, sometimes, sign language scenes can also serve as a bridge to eliminate communication barriers between the deaf and hearing communities, enabling both sides to understand each other better.

Filmmaking is crucial in enhancing sign language use in storytelling and world-building (Garcia 2023). Several factors contribute to establishing the desired mood and tone in visual media, including depth of field, camera angle, shot size, camera lens choice, and lighting. These elements are essential in eliciting specific emotional responses from the audience (Kennedy and Mercer 2022). Several recent animated works, particularly Japanese animation produced within the last decade, have depicted deaf characters and incorporated sign language. These portrayals demonstrate how signing enhances both emotional depth and character development, not only for the deaf characters themselves but also for others within the narrative.

Malaysia's film industry is greatly influenced by Japanese animation, particularly in promoting and introducing the country's culture to the world (Mat Omar and Ahmad Ishak 2011). This is particularly evident in the visual characteristics of Malaysian animation, which often reflects influences from Japanese animation or anime styles (Khalis et al. 2024). Although deaf characters have appeared in Malaysian live-action films, their portrayals have often been criticised for inaccuracies in representing real deaf experiences (Adam 2016). By contrast, Malaysian animation has yet to feature any deaf representation, highlighting both a gap in inclusivity and the ongoing challenge of achieving authenticity in media depictions of disability.

Representation is an important matter that reflects well on the audience's psychology and social relationships between different groups. One of the most important aspects of representations is creating a sense of relatability for those watching, by depicting characters on screen with physical, mental or emotional similarities (Benoit 2020). Additionally, such depictions serve to represent groups that may be less familiar to the public, particularly disabled individuals and minorities who make up a smaller portion of society or a specific community (Holcomb and Latham-Mintus 2022). Accordingly, filmmakers hold a significant responsibility to ensure that their depiction of characters authentically reflects real-life deaf individuals, presenting them with both accuracy and respect.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of sign language in relation to the presence of deaf characters in films and television is not new. In films such as *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1969) and *Children of a Lesser God* (1986), the deaf characters in those films, played respectively by Alan Arkin, a non-deaf actor, and Marlee Matlin, a deaf actor, used sign language as a method of communication between themselves and other characters (Marra 2017). Most of the time, the other characters that played an important part in the films are the ones who are not deaf or have hearing disabilities. These dynamics underscore the representation imbalance, where deafness is depicted as peripheral while hearing perspectives remain central. It was the need of deaf individuals to create a connection with others. However, people without hearing impairments use sign language exclusively to communicate with the deaf community (Applebaum 2020).

Although the use of sign language in films has expanded significantly over time, this trajectory has been hindered by inaccuracies in linguistic representation and the lack of fluency among actors. Such shortcomings often render portrayals unnatural to signing audiences, underscoring the importance of authenticity and cultural competence in media representation (Hamilton and Egbert 2024). For example, several portrayals of deaf characters in past films

utilised actors who are not deaf and lack the knowledge to sign and only relied on consultants with sign language expertise. Because of this, the portrayals of deaf characters and sign language often do not accurately reflect real-life experiences. This can influence public perceptions and understanding of how sign language is used, as well as the emotions conveyed by deaf characters as they communicate through signing (O’Konski 2023).

According to Prikhodko, Grif, and Bakaev (2020), sign language is a form of visual communication that can be broken down into five different elements, which are:

1. Handshape (form of wrist)
2. Hand orientation (positioning of palm and fingers against body)
3. Location (where the hand and fingers are placed)
4. Movement (direction and distance of hand motion)
5. Non-Manual (expressions and other aspects of sign language)

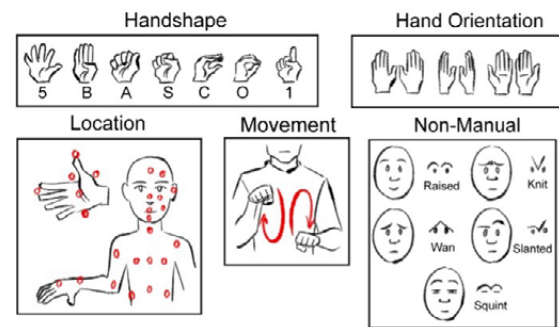


Figure 1 Elements of sign language
Source: Recreation of the original image
by Prikhodko et al. (2020)

Sign language was developed in Japan since the late 19th century, but faced a heavy setback during the pre-World War period, when lip-reading education was pushed towards the public due to the Milan Conference of 1880, a dark period when learning sign language was banned. Even children trying to communicate with each other in sign language in school were punished when they were discovered. However, after 1947, sign language in Japan was revived with the establishment of the Japanese Federation of the Deaf, which advocated for the rights of the deaf community and others to learn and communicate with sign language (Deaf Japan 2018).

In more recent films, the representation and usage of sign language have improved. For instance, in the film *The Shape of Water*, sign language is used by the main character, Elisa, who is mute, to communicate with others. It indicates that sign language is a visual communication for those who cannot verbally communicate their messages to others (Surahman et al. 2023). It uses many different aspects, not just hand shapes, but facial expressions, and the positioning of hands. While many sign language scenes accurately convey meaning, some actors’ unnatural facial expressions and signing have drawn criticism from those familiar with the language (Casey 2023).

According to Brown (2016), cinematography encompasses translating ideas, subtext, messages, and emotions through visual techniques, primarily involving camera usage and elements such as lighting and colour. The key components of cinematography in film can be summarised as follows:

1. Colour: It involves using colours to tell a story through the set dressing, characters, and other elements in the shot.
2. Cameras: The cameras deal with the type of cameras and resolution used to portray the story visually.
3. Coverage and continuity: The size of the shots and the use of the camera to portray a character’s point of view are involved.
4. Measurement: It refers to the devices and technology used to screen the media.

5. Camera movement: An element that deals with how moving the camera can assist in enhancing the storytelling visually.
6. Focus: It deals with manipulating the depth of field that shifts focus on a subject matter.
7. Lighting: Adjusting the intensity, placement, and colour of lighting affects the mood and atmosphere.

By examining cinematography's components, filmmakers can include underlying meanings that may be subconsciously understood by viewers, which can affect their perception of the scene and the characters presented (Huang 2023). In animation, camera cinematography has roots in the early days of comics, which gradually incorporated film techniques like composition, motion, and positioning (Du and Gong 2021). In animated series production, filmmakers commonly employ fixed camera positions to optimise cost-efficiency and streamline workflows. This approach ensures consistency while focusing on key elements within each frame, particularly the characters.

Additionally, when it comes to portraying sign language, filmmakers must take note of the film language, such as camera placement, positioning of cameras and the speed of signing. Although these elements may appear straightforward and remain largely consistent throughout the animation, they contribute significantly to conveying and eliciting the intended emotional responses from the audience as envisioned by the filmmakers (Brown 2016). Nevertheless, the filmmakers must identify the types of audiences they seek to please with their projects involving deaf characters and sign language, whether towards the general audience or specifically, the deaf community (O'Konski 2023).

In Malaysia, Japanese animation ranks as the second most viewed type of animation following American animation, accounting for approximately 37% of the animated content accessible to Malaysian audiences via television networks and streaming platforms (Wahab et al. 2012). Japanese animation often depicts aspects of Japanese culture, and its filmmakers have played a role in preserving national identity through their work. This approach has influenced Malaysian animation filmmakers, such as Nizam Razak, who incorporated elements of Malaysian culture in his animation, *Mechamoto*.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed qualitative content analysis to identify patterns in the portrayal of sign language in animated media and to interpret the data collected through the content analysis. This approach facilitated a thorough analysis of the filmmaking dimensions related to sign language and its depiction in animated media, examining their significance, relevance to the narrative, and contribution to the storytelling process.

The content analysis method analysed each series based on the visual filmmaking framework developed. The timestamp was recorded for each sign language scene, and the scene was examined based on shot size, character positioning within the frame, body angle toward the camera, translation presence, and signing speed. After all the data had been collected, they were summarised and compared in a table. A conclusion was drawn by analysing which visual filmmaking choices were most frequent and interpreting their significance in storytelling.

Numerous achievements within the local animation industry have stemmed from television-broadcast series, notably exemplified by Les Copaque's *Upin dan Ipin*, which has garnered domestic and international recognition. Although animated films in Malaysia have achieved

significant success through favourable audience reviews and substantial profits, most successful productions originated as animated series. To map the data collected in this research against the trends of the local animation industry, it was better to select animated media in a series format to compare with the current state of the animation industry's success in Malaysia. In addition to featuring deaf characters, Japanese animation was chosen due to its widespread popularity and significant influence among Malaysian audiences, as well as its impact on the development of the Malaysian animation industry.

Table 1 Criteria of selecting the animation for the study

Criteria	Description	Justification
Type of character	A deaf character must be present in the story	To relate the use of sign language to its role in highlighting the deaf character
Sign language	Sign language must be used as a main form of communication	To be able to get as much data as possible for the study
Role of character	A deaf character must play a major role in the story	Characters with major roles will have more screentime and provide more data for the study
Time of release	Animation was released after 2010	The release date must be newer, with a maximum cut off date of ten years, to maintain its relevancy and lasting impact on the current audience
Place of origin	Animation is made in Japan	Animation has a big influence on the industry in Malaysia and globally, so its reach to the audience here is much higher Japanese animation is also the most-watched animation in Malaysia, making it more appealing for the audience and influencing the animation filmmakers here
Format of animation	Animation is in a series format with multiple episodes	This format reflects more on the success of Malaysian animation and will be a good example for future Malaysian animation filmmakers to follow for their own IP

Through these criteria, three animated series from Japan were selected. The animation was searched based on availability and accessibility in public online streaming. In addition, the popularity and exposure of the animated media on social media and other forms of media were considered. The animations must also fit all the criteria of the study. Through these steps, animated media from Japan have been filtered, and three were selected to be part of the study. The Japanese animations selected are *Gangsta* (2015), *Ranking of Kings* (2021), and *A Sign of Affection* (2024). Each of these three animated series must meet the research criteria: it features a deaf character in a prominent role, has a recent release date, and incorporates sign language as the deaf character's primary mode of communication.

Data for each of these animated series was systematically collected using several criteria. The evaluation included: (1) analysis of the characters performing sign language within the narrative, (2) interpretation of the meanings conveyed through their signings, and (3) examination of visual filmmaking elements such as camera positioning, character body angles during signing, shot sizes, the inclusion of subtitles or verbal translations, and the signing speed. A comprehensive summary of the sign language scenes was developed to accurately assess the function of sign language in storytelling and examine how various filmmaking techniques support its integration.

A literature review was undertaken based on publications focused primarily on sign language and selected papers that examined the interpretation of sign language in films featuring deaf characters and its impact on audiences. The review was done not only to get a deeper understanding of the importance of having an accurate signing scene but also to place the

importance of the language in the context of the story. Additional topics addressed include filmmaking, emphasising camera and lens usage. As visual storytelling in animation heavily relies on sign language, camera techniques and cinematography are prioritised within the discussion.

Based on the literature review, a structured framework for collecting data on sign language usage in animated media was established. This framework examines the relationship between visual elements such as cinematography and the depiction of signing, focusing on their significance to the storytelling surrounding deaf characters and the narrative arc within animation. Storytelling includes character development through sign language, while visual filmmaking focuses on cinematography, which refers to camera techniques used in film production. Additional factors contributing to the clarity and comprehensibility of signing for other signers and the general audience included body positioning, translation through text or audio, and signing speed. These aspects assisted in making the signs clear and conveying their intended meaning. Therefore, such cinematography analysis could greatly enhance the storytelling and depth of the sign language scenes in the animated media.

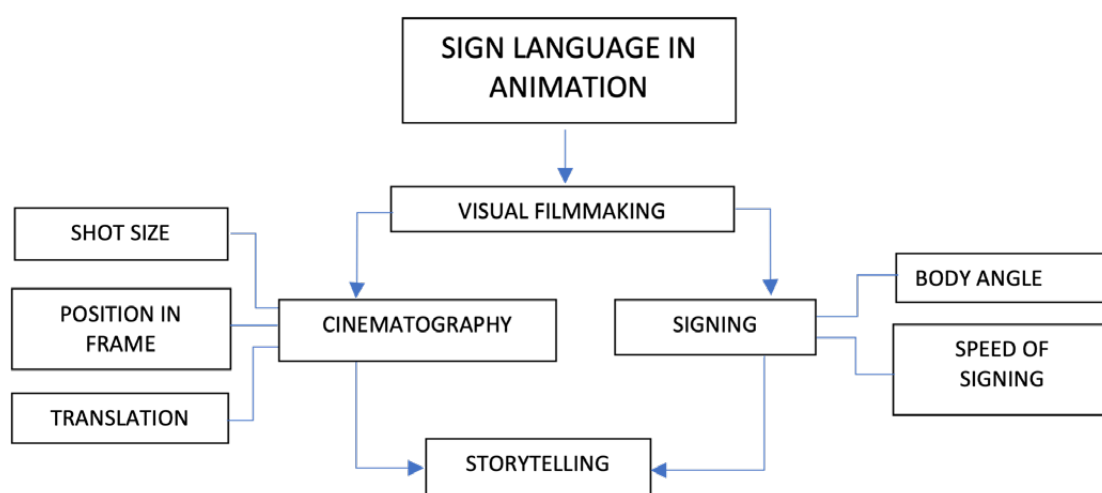


Figure 2 Framework of study

Aside from content analysis, a small focus group survey was conducted with five deaf people, who were reached out to via a local organisation that manages and advocates for the deaf community here in Malaysia: Malaysian Federation of the Deaf, or *Persatuan Orang Pekak Malaysia* in the Malay language. Given time limitations, the interview was administered online via a Google Form. All questions were initially prepared in English and subsequently translated into Malay, recognising that participants might find communicating in English challenging and prefer to respond in Malay. The participants were asked questions about various visual filmmaking elements, their preferences for these elements in animation, and their feedback on including sign language in animation.

FINDINGS

Firstly, in the findings, each series selected for the study will introduce the characters who communicate in sign language and the significance of their story. An extra section is added to explain the characters' intentions or reasons for communicating in sign language. Following the introduction of each animated series, the study presents findings on visual filmmaking, drawing on quantitative content analysis to explain the rationale behind specific cinematographic and

visual choices. These decisions are examined based on how they enhance the representation of sign language and support the development of characters within the narrative.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

Gangsta

The Japanese animated series, *Gangsta*, adapted from a Japanese comic book, is an action and drama series released in 2015. The series had 12 episodes, each lasting an average of 23 minutes. The animation was produced by Studios Manglobe, and the series broadcasts lasted approximately three months, from July to September 2015. The series has a total of 12 episodes, with each episode spanning an average of 23 minutes. Sign language communication has appeared in 11 of the 12 episodes, with 24 scenes showcasing sign language in all 11 episodes. The duration of these scenes was 12 minutes and two seconds out of the series' estimated total runtime of 276 minutes, representing 4.35% of the overall runtime in which sign language was featured.

Signers

Nicolas Brown, a deaf character in the series, is primarily responsible for most of the sign language communication depicted. Exceptions include Nina, a young girl who assists the local doctor and has known Nicolas for some time, and Alex, a recent arrival who made efforts to learn sign language to communicate more effectively with Nicolas. However, the other characters, one being his partner, Worrick, understand sign language enough to know what Nicolas is signing and help to translate to others when Nicolas is speaking using sign language. Nicolas can communicate verbally, although his voice is affected and his pronunciation is not fully clear. This allows him to interact directly with individuals who do not understand sign language.

Nina, a young girl under the care of another character named Doctor Theo, also has sufficient knowledge of sign language and can talk to Nicolas in sign language without pauses or hesitations. When communicating with Nicolas in sign language, she simultaneously provides a verbal translation of her signs, likely to ensure clarity for Nicolas and any additional individuals present. Throughout the series, Nina does not seem to have any issues with her signing as Nicolas can be seen to understand them perfectly. Another character who could be seen signing is Alex. Initially, Alex had no prior knowledge of signing. However, it was only after becoming acquainted with Nicolas that she took the initiative to learn sign language to enhance their communication, even though he was proficient at lip-reading and understood her well.

Worrick, Nicolas' partner, also knows sign language and was the one who initially taught it to Nicolas. However, Worrick rarely communicates with Nicolas through sign language, preferring to speak verbally depending on Nicolas's lip-reading ability. Doctor Theo, another long-standing acquaintance of Nicolas and Worrick, is familiar with some sign language, as Nicolas can converse with him using signs, and he can understand. Aside from these five characters, no others in the series are knowledgeable in sign language and would typically need external translation if longer signs are used in dialogue.

Purpose in The Story

Nicolas, the main character and a deaf character, primarily communicates using sign language with individuals he regularly interacts with, such as Worrick, Nina, and Doctor Theo. All three

characters have knowledge of sign language. Nina demonstrates a higher level of proficiency by frequently signing while communicating with Nicolas and doing so deliberately.

In this series, sign language is primarily used to convey or request information, especially when Nicolas seeks clarification on his assigned tasks as a member of the Handymen, a group responsible for work that law enforcement does not handle. However, he does need Worrick to help translate whatever he is signing to the person he is talking to. One example of a scene that showcases this is from Episode 1, “Naughty Boys,” where Nicolas and Worrick meet up with Officer Chad to discuss their assigned job. In addition, Nicolas can communicate using sign language with proficient individuals such as Worrick, as demonstrated in Episode 3 titled “Ergastulum.” In the scene, Worrick greets him in the morning and comments that Nicolas is early, to which Nicolas responds by signing to Worrick that he is the one who is always late.

People like Nina and Alex, who are not deaf, use sign language exclusively to communicate with Nicolas because there are no other deaf characters. Although Nicolas can read lips and interpret their shapes and movements, Nina and Alex choose to sign to make communication easier with him. Though imperfect, these gestures demonstrate their consideration and desire to connect better with Nicolas. Having known Nicolas longer and more intimately, Nina is more skilled at signing than Alex. Alex appears fascinated by Nicolas, drawn to his intimidating yet seemingly kind personality. When she learned Nicolas was deaf, she practised signing in her own way to connect with him. However, Nicolas considered her signing somewhat awkward and lacking in precision, as he noted in Episode 7, “Birth.” Nevertheless, her attempts reflected her thoughtfulness and compassion, which made Nicolas reach out to her during periods of vulnerability.

Ranking of Kings

The animated series, *Ranking of Kings*, centres on Bojji, a prince aspiring to be king who faces numerous personal and political challenges. Mainly falling into the fantasy and adventure genres, the series was produced and animated by Wit Studio. It aired from October 2021 to March 2022, comprising 36 episodes, 26 in the first season and 10 in the second, each lasting about 22 minutes. Sign language appears in 10 episodes, featuring 43 scenes using sign language. These scenes have a combined duration of 20 minutes and 24 seconds, which is about 2.81% of the series' total runtime of 726 minutes.

Signers

In this series, the characters who communicate primarily through signing include not only Bojji, the deaf character, but also members of his palace, such as Queen Hiling, Daida, and palace staff like Domas and Hokuro. Additionally, even minor, unnamed characters, like maids and servants accompanying Bojji and the Queen, are skilled in signing and often assist by translating conversations for Bojji.

Bojji, as the deaf character, is depicted doing the most signing, accounting for about 14 out of 34 scenes, since it is his primary method of communication. He relies on sign language to convey and receive messages with staff members at his palace as well as with his family, because he cannot speak and his impaired voice is unintelligible to others. However, he can understand spoken words, as he can lip-read. His screen time is mostly shared with Kage, who can understand Bojji without him signing. Therefore, Bojji rarely signs with Kage, as Kage can help translate his words to others.

When joining the family, Queen Hiling, Bojji's stepmother, learned sign language to connect better and communicate with him. However, she sometimes prefers speaking rather than signing. For instance, in Episode 1, "Prince's New Clothes," Hiling speaks verbally to Bojji while another character, Domas, signs to him to translate her words. Similarly, Daida also communicates in sign language during casual conversations with him. For example, in Episode 32, "The Prince and His Treasures," they use sign language to communicate before he departs on a new adventure.

People working for the royal family, like Domas and Hokuro, learned sign language to communicate better with Bojji. Domas did so as part of his job, being assigned by Queen Hiling to train Bojji in sword fighting and learned sign language to make his teaching easier. Hokuro, who was not initially assigned to work with Bojji, decided to learn sign language after Bojji showed him kindness. He took the initiative to do this to serve as a personal guard for Bojji. Even minor characters, such as palace servants and staff, are skilled in sign language, often signing to translate what others are saying for Bojji.

Purpose in The Story

In the series, *Ranking of Kings*, sign language mainly serves as a way for others to communicate with Bojji, rather than for him to sign back. Apparently, Bojji is rarely seen signing to others, except in Episode 32, "The Prince and His Treasures," where he goes around the palace personally saying goodbye and giving gifts. More often, characters like Queen Hiling, Daida, and staff such as Domas and Hokuro sign to Bojji to share their thoughts, whether giving instructions, casual chatting, or translating what others say. Servants typically sign only for official royal matters and do so exclusively when Bojji is present.

Sign language connects other characters to Bojji, helping them understand him better both linguistically and emotionally. This is evident in characters like Hiling, Domas, and Hokuro, who learn sign language throughout the series. When they communicate with Bojji using sign language, they observe Bojji becoming more receptive and engaging with them. Additionally, they often start interactions with simple greetings such as "hello" or "how are you" to show they recognise the language. Even these basic words touch Bojji, demonstrating the characters' genuine effort to understand and connect with him.

In some instances, like other languages, the sign language in this series can also carry negative connotations. Queen Hiling demonstrates this by signing aggressively when she tells Bojji that he is not allowed to leave and go on an adventure to find Kage, and by calling him weak in Episode 3, "The New King." Domas also betrayed Bojji, using the same sign language he initially used to build trust with Bojji to deceive him in Episode 4, "His First Journey," when he tried to kill Bojji under Daida's orders.

A Sign of Affection

A Sign of Affection is a recent Japanese slice-of-life, romantic animated series centred on a deaf college student navigating her life and romantic relationships. The series comprises 12 episodes, each around 23 minutes long. Produced and animated by Studio Ajia-do, it was released in 2024, from January to March. Sign language features in all 12 episodes, with a total of 68 scenes. These signing scenes add up to 51 minutes and 56 seconds, making it the longest among the three series in which signing appears, out of a total runtime of 276 minutes. Overall, approximately 18.82 % of the series visually features signing scenes.

Signers

Similarly with the other two series, Yuki, the deaf character, is predominantly shown signing, with 54 out of 68 scenes featuring her signing either alone or with others. As a deaf individual living in a hearing society, Yuki depends heavily on sign language for communication, especially with those who understand sign language. She attended a sign language school to learn sign language. While she can read lips, she sometimes gets confused by similar mouth shapes representing different words. Yuki also uses written text on her phone as the quickest and most convenient communication method. Although Yuki has a voice, she chooses not to speak verbally due to insecurities.

Itsuomi, another main character, is also shown signing in the series. Initially, he did not know sign language, but became interested after meeting Yuki on the train and seeing her sign. Over the series, Itsuomi steadily learns sign language and increasingly has casual sign conversations with Yuki. He even discovers easier techniques, such as using fingerspelling instead of word signs. Another character who uses sign language is Oushi, Yuki's childhood friend. He learned sign language from a young age through books and classes and practised regularly. By the time they are in college, Oushi can communicate fully with Yuki without written text, although he still speaks aloud when signing to her.

A few other minor characters also use sign language in the series. Madoka, Yuki's friend, is deaf and can communicate with her via video call on her phone. Mio, Oushi's older sister, was seen signing in a flashback. However, she did not practice enough and has mostly forgotten it. Similarly, Rin, Yuki's college friend, knows some sign language but could not learn much because she did not attend proper classes.

Purpose in The Story

This animated series centres on sign language as a key element of the story. It serves as a means of connection and bonding between two individuals who had not known each other before meeting. For the main character, Yuki, who is deaf, sign language is her primary way of communicating. She signs to express her messages, but this is only effective if the person receiving the message is also familiar with sign language. In most daily interactions, the people she communicates with cannot sign, so she often relies on written text on her phone to communicate. For those unfamiliar with deafness, learning sign language offers an opportunity to understand and connect with the deaf community.

Between Yuki and Itsuomi, sign language served as a bridge to strengthen their connection, much like any other form of communication. Itsuomi's curiosity about the language led him to develop a fascination not only with Yuki's experience as someone who is deaf but also with her as a person. To Itsuomi, learning sign language feels similar to acquiring any new language, drawing from his personal experiences, while also allowing him to understand her life as a deaf individual better. This learning broadened his perspective on deaf experiences and fostered empathy for their challenges. Through Yuki, he grows to see her more as a person and gradually develops romantic feelings. Sign language evokes warm emotions in both characters, especially Itsuomi and Yuki. They share a special bond whenever Yuki introduces him to a new sign, and the gestures Itsuomi makes make her feel validated and cared for.

Yuki observes a notable difference in how he signs compared to another character, Oushi. She thinks Oushi's hand movements are sharper and more awkward, while Itsuomi's signing appears slower and gentler. This likely reflects their differing levels of sign language proficiency, with Oushi being more experienced and Itsuomi being a beginner at it. However, there is a contrast in the emotions conveyed through the signs. Yuki finds Itsuomi's signs more comforting, while

Oushi's signs are tinged with cynicism. This tone reflects their childhood friendship, and Oushi is envious of Itsuomi.

Oushi also learned sign language to connect with Yuki when he first met her as a child. He was clearly fascinated and a bit infatuated with her. His approach was emotionally awkward, as his first sign to Yuki was calling her "a fool." However, Yuki was pleasantly surprised by his gesture and did not focus on the negative meaning of the word. This shows that, despite being called a demeaning name, deaf individuals appreciate others' efforts to connect with them.

Table 2 Summary of each animated series, the number of characters that sign, the names of the characters and the purpose of sign language in the story

Series	<i>Gangsta</i>	<i>Ranking of Kings</i>	<i>A Sign of Affection</i>
Genre	Action, thriller	Fantasy, adventure	Romance, drama
Number of characters that sign	Three	Five	Six
Name of characters that sign	Nicolas Brown Nina Alex	Bojji Daida Hokuro Queen Hiling Domas	Yuki Itsuomi Oushi Madoka Mio Rin
Purpose of sign language in the story	Method of communication of a deaf character A way to connect and form a relationship between the deaf character and the non-deaf character A way to deliver a secret message only known to those who know the language	Method of communication of a deaf character A way to connect and form a relationship between the deaf character and the non-deaf character Conveying important information to the deaf character regarding official matters	Method of communication of deaf characters A way to connect and form a relationship between the deaf character and the non-deaf character A way to give a glimpse into the world of the deaf character and how they perceive the world

Visual Filmmaking Summary

Gangsta

In the *Gangsta* series, there is a significant number of scenes of signing with subtitles or verbal translation from characters, which is approximately 21, compared to only three scenes with no signs of subtitles or translations. For the angles of the signer's body in front of the camera when they are signing, most of the time, the signer faces the camera 11 times, and about six times, the signer has a more neutral perspective angle when they are signing. Side profiles of the characters during signing are relatively infrequent, appearing in five scenes. Other variations, such as back shots, also occur five times, while only a single point of view (POV) shot is present throughout the series.

The positioning of characters within the frame is evenly distributed, with an equal number of occurrences, 14 each, of centre frame placement and placement on either the left or right side. Regarding camera shot size, specifically the proportion of the character within the frame, medium shots, including medium, medium close-up, and medium wide, are the most prevalent, appearing in 18 scenes. There are nine instances featuring wide or extreme wide shots, compared

to only four scenes utilising close-up or extreme close-up shots. Signers predominantly maintain a standard signing pace, with deviations towards faster or slower signing occurring infrequently throughout the scenes.

Scene Sample Analysis

A scene from an episode featuring sign language is selected for study. The chosen episode is Episode 1, “Naughty Boys.” In the scene, Nicolas (the signer) is talking to the police with his partner, Worrick, about a possible job.

Table 3 Timestamp, shot description, filmmaking elements, and number of signs identified in a scene from *Gangsta*

Timestamp	Shot description	Filmmaking elements	Number of signs identified
10:23–10:27	Nicolas signs to the police chief, asking him if they could keep a trophy from their upcoming job, as translated verbally by Worrick, his partner	There are two shots. Both are still cameras. The first shot is medium wide, showing Worrick's facial expression and Nicolas's hands as he signs, but leaves out his face. The second shot only shows a close-up of Nicolas' face as his hand points to himself. Body angle is between perspective and side view, speed of signing is medium to fast, subtitles are not present, but the signing is translated verbally.	5
10:38–10:40	Nicolas signs, asking about disposing of the bodies appearing from their job	Still camera, shot size is medium, showing only Nicolas's side view and his hands and a portion of his body, while showing Worrick clearly from above the waist, body angle is side view, speed of signing is slow, subtitles are not present, but signing is translated verbally.	1

Ranking of Kings

In the series *Ranking of Kings*, scenes with subtitles or verbal translations involve more than twice as many signings as scenes without subtitles, totalling 24 times versus about 11 times. Like in *Gangsta*, most singers face the camera directly, which happens 26 times. The perspective neutral angle and side profile are each used ten times, while there are only two back shots of the characters during signing.

Regarding character positioning during signing, characters are centred in the frame 25 times and placed on either the left or right side 16 times. In terms of size, most of the time, characters appear in medium, medium close-up, or medium wide shots, totalling 27 instances, followed by wide or extreme wide shots at 17 times, with only four close-up or extreme close-up shots. Regarding signing speed, the signers typically perform at a normal or fast pace, with 17 and 19 occurrences, respectively, while only four instances show the characters signing slowly.

Scene Sample Analysis

A scene from an episode featuring sign language is selected for the study. The chosen episode is Episode 3, “The New King” from Season 1. In this scene, Queen Hiling talks to Bojji, the deaf character, about his desire to travel and become stronger.

Table 4 Timestamp, shot description, filmmaking elements, and number of signs identified in a scene from *Ranking of Kings*

Timestamp	Shot description	Filmmaking elements	Number of signs identified
13:48–13:51	Bojji is sitting at the table with food in front of him, signing to his stepmother in front of him The signing is not translated, in text or verbally, but the scene's context suggests that Bojji is pleading with his mother to let him go on his travels to become stronger	Still camera, medium shot and over the shoulder, to show the perspective of Queen Hiling talking to Bojji, and to show Bojji's facial expressions and hands signing clearly, body angle is frontal, speed of signing is fast, subtitles not present	6
13:51–13:44	Queen Hiling responds to Bojji angrily, forbidding him from leaving and verbally stating, "Of course, you cannot go off on a journey"	Still camera, medium wide shot, showing Queen Hiling's facial expression and her signing clearly as the hand position does cover her body as well, body angle is frontal, speed of signing is fast, subtitles are not present but verbally translated by the signer	5
13:55–13:56	Queen Hiling continues signing to Bojji, asking what Bojji can do by himself	Still camera, shot size is close-up with emphasis on the hands and Queen Hiling's mouth as she is talking, body angle is perspective angle, signing speed is fast, subtitles are not present but verbally translated by the signer	3
13:59–14:00	Queen Hiling continues to berate Bojji, calling him deaf and not strong	Still camera, shot size is medium, body angle is frontal but at a low angle, covering parts of Queen Hiling's face, signing is fast, subtitles are not present but verbally translated by the signer	2
14:02–14:03	Queen Hiling calls out on Bojji's past behaviour, saying that he only embarrasses himself when he leaves the castle	Camera tracks with the movement of the hands as the signing is being done, shot size is close-up with emphasis on the hands and Queen Hiling's mouth as she is talking, body angle is side view, signing speed is fast, subtitles are not present but verbally translated by the signer	2
14:06–14:08	Queen Hiling reminds Bojji about his status as the king's older brother	Still, the camera, shot size, is close-up, showing a clear view of Queen Hiling's facial expression, and the signing of her hands at her facial body angle is in perspective The signing speed is fast, and subtitles are not present but are verbally translated	3

A Sign of Affection

In *A Sign of Affection*, the pattern of scenes with subtitles or verbal translations compared to scenes without any subtitles or translations is consistent with the other two series discussed, featuring a high count of 53 signing scenes with subtitles and translations. Nonetheless, there is a significantly larger number of scenes without subtitles or translations, 15 times more than the other series. Regarding body angles facing the camera, the most common position is the signer facing the camera directly, with 42 instances, followed by 22 neutral perspective shots, 21 side profiles, six back shots, and four POV shots.

The characters in the frame are almost evenly distributed, with 52 instances in the centre and 49 on the left or right side. Regarding character size, medium close-up, medium, and medium wide shots are most common, totalling 61 uses. In this series, close-up or extreme close-up shots are more frequent than wide or extra-wide shots compared to other series, with 28 uses, while only eight instances feature wide or extreme wide shots during signing scenes. For signing speed, normal speed occurs most often at 41 times, followed by slow or still shots at 30 times, and faster speeds are used only eight times.

Scene Sample Analysis

A scene from an episode featuring sign language is selected for the study. The chosen episode is Episode 2, "Towards Affection." The scene summary depicts Yuki greeting and chatting with her friend Oushi using sign language while sitting with another friend, Rin, at the college cafeteria. The following scene in the same episode, which is also analysed, shows Oushi talking to a deaf person at the train station and warning him about not paying his train fare.

Table 5 Timestamp, shot description, filmmaking elements, and number of signs identified in a scene from *A Sign of Affection*

Timestamp	Shot description	Filmmaking elements	Number of signs identified
06:56–07:03	Oushi signs, asking Yuki, "Who is that guy?" referring to Itsuomi	Camera panning up to reveal Oushi to simulate Yuki's point of view, shot size is medium close-up to focus on Oushi's facial expression and hand shapes and movements, body angle is frontal, speed of signing is slow to medium rate, subtitles present	2
07:06–07:08	Yuki, with Rin, looks back up at Oushi. Yuki signs to him, "A friend," to answer his question	Still camera, shot size is medium to medium close-up, slight over the shoulder to show both characters in frame and their facial expressions to show their reactions, body angle is side view, speed of signing is slow, subtitles present	1
07:08–07:16	Yuki and Oushi continue their chat, going back and forth between each other. Oushi asks in sign, "Oh, really?" referring to Yuki's answer. Yuki signs back to him, asking, "What is up?" he replies, "Nothing much"	Still, the camera shot size is wide to show Yuki's perspective of seeing Oushi above her and far away. However, still being able to see him visibly enough to see his hand movements, body angle is frontal, speed of signing is slow, and subtitles are present	3
08:04–08:05	Yuki signs to Oushi, asking him, "What is it?" as he looks her way	Still camera, shot size is medium wide, with Yuki's legs covered by the table, her body angle is a perspective angle, speed of signing is slow to medium rate, subtitles are present	1
09:56–09:58	Oushi is signing to a person he had noticed was wearing a hearing aid earlier, "The turnstiles were closed," indicating that the train gate that the person went through had not verified his passing through and caused an issue with another passenger	Still, the camera shot size is medium close-up and over the shoulder to show the perspective of the deaf person talking to Oushi and to show Oushi's facial expression and lip movement as he is signing to him. Body angle is frontal, speed of signing is slow, subtitles are not provided originally, but were added by the streaming service	2

(continued on next page)

Table 5 (continued)

Timestamp	Shot description	Filmmaking elements	Number of signs identified
09:58–10:04	The deaf person reacts, horrified by what has happened and looks back to Oushi, signing “I am sorry” repeatedly and runs off back to the station	The camera pans up slightly to follow the deaf person returning to the station Shot size is medium close-up and over the shoulder to show the perspective of Oushi talking to the deaf person, body angle is frontal, speed of signing is medium rate, speed of signing is slow, subtitles are not provided originally, but were added by the streaming service	1

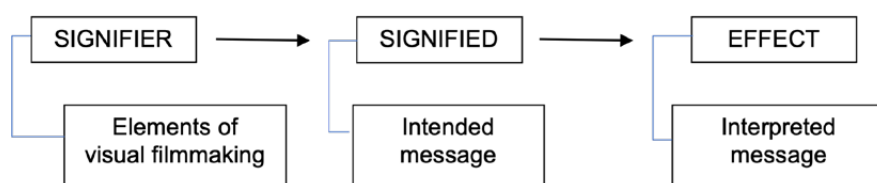
Table 6 Comparison of percentages of shot size, position of character in frame, translation, angle of character’s body and speed of signing between the three animated series

Series/elements	<i>Gangsta</i>	<i>Ranking of Kings</i>	<i>A Sign of Affection</i>
Shot size	58% medium 29% wide 13% close-up	56.3% medium 35.4% wide 8.3% close-up	67.7% medium 8.9% wide 23.3% close-up
Position of character	50% centre 50% side	61% centre 39% side	51.5% centre 48.5% side
Translation	87.5% with translation 12.5% without	68.5% with translation 31.5% without	78% with translation 22% without
Angle of character’s body	39.3% front angle 21.5% perspective 17.8% side 17.8% back 3.6% POV	54.2% front 20.8% perspective 20.8% side 4.2% back 0% POV	44.2% front 23.2% perspective 22.1% side 6.3% back 4.2% POV
Speed	Majority moderate	42.5% moderate 47.5% fast 10% slow	51.8% moderate 10.1% fast 37.9% slow

CINEMATOGRAPHY – DATA ANALYSIS

Visual Analysis

The concept of structuralism of film sign and semiotic theory is used to analyse the meanings and the connection between the visual filmmaking elements and their impact towards the scene and the narrative. The concept underscores the capacity of visual language in film to convey messages, as demonstrated by elements highlighted in this research, including shot size, character positioning within the frame, and body angle. These aspects also relate to the principles of *mise-en-scène*, which consider how the arrangement of subjects in the frame can communicate the filmmaker’s intended message. The theory supports the idea that the

**Figure 3** Visual analysis framework

messages conveyed in visual film language could induce certain emotions and engage the audience consciously and subconsciously. However, the intended message might differ from how the audience would perceive it, which is what Stuart Hall's Reception theory plays a part in.

The key concept of structuralism suggests that two elements are involved in inducing an emotional reaction in the audience in terms of semiotics: the signifier (visual/auditory) and the signified (the concept it represents). Other terms are denotation and connotation, which refer to the literal meaning of a sign (denotation) and its associated cultural symbolic meanings (connotation). Codes and conventions describe the rules and norms used to interpret signs (Wijekoon 2024).

Shot Size

As observed, many shots that include signing use medium-sized shots, which include a regular medium shot above the waist. This medium close-up is a shot above the chest and a medium wide shot, including the character above the knees. In accordance with the elements of sign language, signing involves not just the hand gestures, but also the movement and position of the hands across the body, as well as the facial expressions of the signer. Medium-sized shots are the most adequate in portraying signing as they can showcase the whole-body parts needed for signing, while maintaining clarity of the position and movements of the hands. In several instances, wide shots depicting signing are employed to establish the setting and illustrate the presence of additional characters within the scene. The signing can be seen clearly at certain times, but at other times, they are not. However, it is usually compensated for with verbal translations from the signer, those who are not deaf. As for close-up shots, they are only used occasionally, usually to bring focus to a certain sign important to the scene's context, such as the sign "more" in *A Sign of Affection*, or "kill" in *Gangsta*.

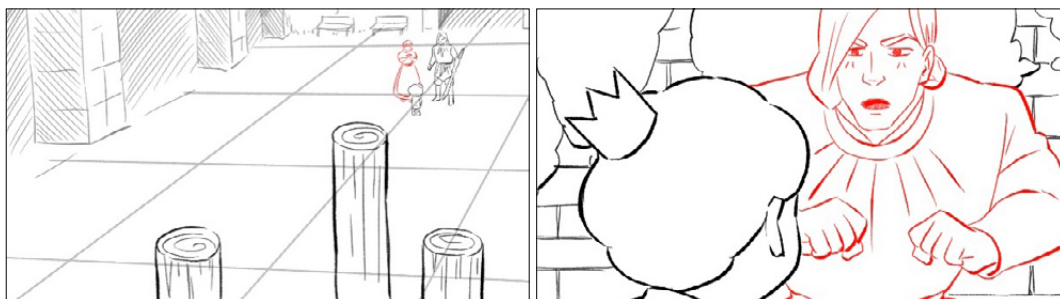


Figure 4 An example of signing in wide and medium shots in *Ranking of Kings*, signer highlighted in red

Source: Recreations of stills from the show *Ranking of Kings*, produced by Studio Wit

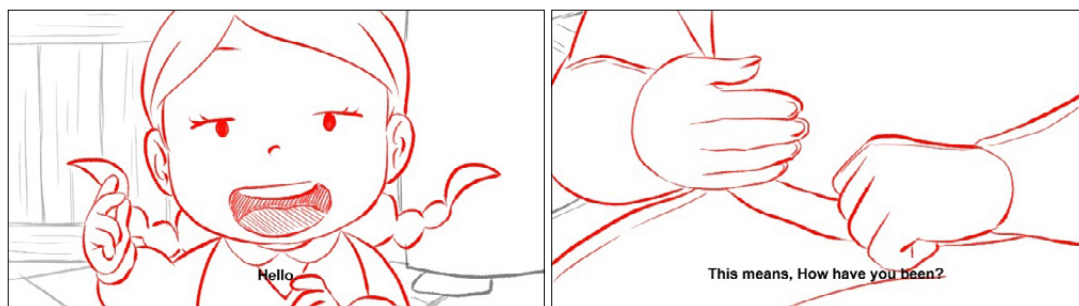


Figure 5 An example of signing in close-up shots in *Ranking of Kings*, signer highlighted in red

Source: Recreations of stills from the show *Ranking of Kings*, produced by Studio Wit

Position of Characters in Frame

The positioning of characters in frame is split equally between the centre frame and the left and right sides. Ideally, positioning the character centre in frame would make it the most obvious choice. However, from the perspective of film language, centring the subject within the frame often results in overly symmetrical compositions that may lack visual interest. Therefore, whether the character is positioned in the centre or left and right during the signing scenes, it does not matter much if the hands doing the signing are visible and not cut off from the frame, which it rarely does in all three animated series. The centre frame is typically used when only one character appears in the shot, while the left or right side is employed during conversations between the signer and another individual. The best composition would follow the rule of thirds, where the subject matter in the scene is placed on one of the three lines of division of the camera framing.

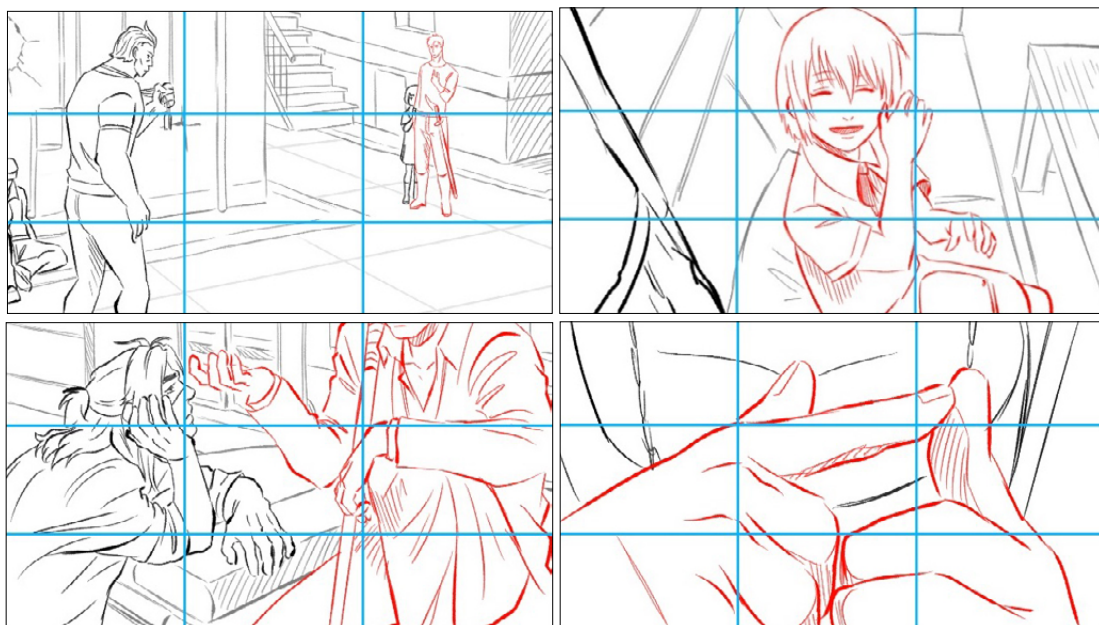


Figure 6 Sign language scenes from *Gangsta* show various positions of the signing character; the signer is highlighted in red

Source: Recreations of stills from *Gangsta*, produced by Studio Manglobe

Translation

Subtitles are typically provided in scenes that involve signing to support translation needs. Displaying only subtitles during signed communication places the audience in the position of a deaf character, who comprehends sign language without reliance on auditory information. In several scenes, when verbal translations are involved, they are either spoken by another character who understands sign language or by the signer who is not deaf. The deaf character themselves relies on subtitles or verbal translations from other characters to be understood by the audience. There are only a few moments where the absence of subtitles contributes to the storytelling aspect. The absence of subtitles creates an element of intrigue in the meaning conveyed by the signer to both the audience and other characters within the scene. This message remains undisclosed until later in the narrative, when its significance becomes more apparent. Another reason for the missing subtitles is the repetitive use of the same sign. In *A Sign of Affection*, the sign for “thank you” is initially translated with subtitles in one scene. For subsequent uses, subtitles are not included, as the meaning can be inferred from the context and the ongoing conversation between the characters.

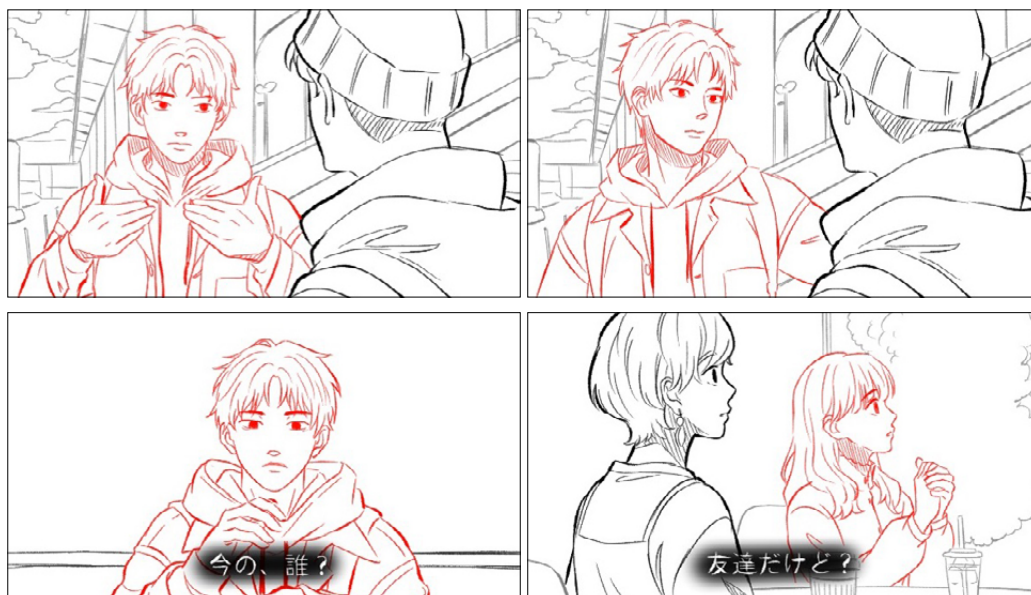


Figure 7 Scene of signing without subtitles in *A Sign of Affection*; the signer is highlighted in red

Source: Recreation of stills from *A Sign of Affection*, produced by Studio Ajia-do

Angle of Character's Body

The signer faces the camera directly or angles their body at a neutral perspective whenever they sign. Front-facing or perspective angles are commonly used to offer clear visibility when signing, including hand signs, their positions relative to the head and body, hand movements, and facial expressions. This angle allows the audience to view the communication as it occurs with the deaf character. On certain occasions, the signer faces sideways, showing their side profiles, and this usually occurs when the signer speaks to another character. Sometimes, the signers have their backs facing the camera, which is usually not the most practical angle to show signing. However, the hands are usually visible enough for both angles (side and back shots) to see the signing. However, the characters' facial expressions can be unclear or hidden completely from the audience. On very rare occasions, the signing is done from the POV of the signer themselves, to put the audience into the shoes of those who are signing and see the hand gesture up close.

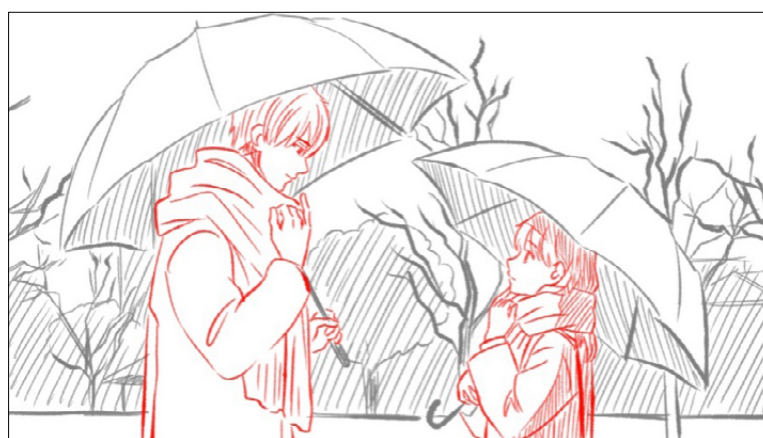


Figure 8. Signs from the side camera angle show active interactions between two characters, adding some intimacy to the scene; the signers highlighted in red

Source: Recreations of stills from *A Sign of Affection*, produced by Studio Ajia-do

Speed of Signing

Most of the sign language scenes are at a moderate speed, where the signs are understandable enough for a normal audience to catch the movements and gestures, but also shown at a speed where the signer is comfortable. In some cases, the signing is done faster, and this only occurs when the characters involved in the conversation are highly knowledgeable in sign language, whether both are signing or only one. In certain cases, when the signing is done at a slower speed, it is usually done as an educational moment towards the audience or another character being taught the sign. Slower speeds indicate that the signing person might be new or still learning the language, like Itsuomi in *A Sign of Affection*.

Summary

Table 7 summarises the interpretation of each element and the type of decision made in conveying the sign language in storytelling.

Table 7 Summary of the elements of visual filmmaking in portraying sign language in the three Japanese animated media

Elements	Justification
Shot size	The most used shot size is medium shot, from waist up, as this is the most optimal way to showcase sign language, since it requires the user to use hand gestures that point to the body up to the head. This choice will provide the most clarity to the audience while still allowing the audience to showcase all the body parts required for signing.
Framing	The framing for the characters in the shot usually does not matter as long as the hands are visible to the audience. However, characters' faces are preferably in frame, as facial expressions are necessary to convey more meaning behind the signs. There are certain creative choices to let the faces be unseen, to add more mystery and let the audience interpret the scene themselves.
Subtitles/translation	Subtitles are needed for the general audience to understand. At times, the scene showcases verbal translation from the characters so that they can better convey the meaning to both the audience and the other characters in the scene. The choice to omit subtitles or translation is to put the audience in the perspective of the deaf characters themselves, to allow us to understand what it is like not to understand what another person might be saying in a different language.
Angle of signer's body	The clarity of the sign language portrayed depends on how the character faces the camera. For the most part, the optimal angle would be the character facing the camera directly to enable the audience to see the signs clearly. In terms of storytelling, having the characters face the camera would also make the audience feel as if they are conversing with the signing character.
Speed of signing	In a neutral conversation, the characters who sign usually sign at a medium speed, which shows their competency and experience in communicating in that language. However, they would have to slow down if the other characters were inexperienced with it, which shows their consideration towards them. Slower speeds of signing indicate an importance to show a specific meaning of the sign, to enable the character in the scene to learn, as well as the audience, who are unfamiliar with sign language.

INTERVIEW DATA RESULTS

This section will organise and summarise the data into various parts: Introduction of participants, preferences for shot size, character positioning in the frame, subtitles and translation, character's body angle, signing speed, and a summary of the interview.

Introduction

This section investigates the general background of the interview participants. All five participants regularly used sign language to communicate and were taught it in school. Some received instruction at special education schools, while others were taught in regular schools. One participant reported improved sign language skills through frequent communication with other deaf individuals. They emphasised that the frequency of sign language usage depends on who they communicate with. For example, with other deaf people, it would be better to communicate completely in sign; with people who are not deaf and have no sign language knowledge, it is preferable to communicate in written text. In addition, they sometimes need a sign language translator for official business to communicate accurately. Two participants have learned sign language and consider themselves proficient, while the other three consider themselves less knowledgeable.

Shot Size

Most participants prefer to have the character in medium shot above the waist when showing sign language in animation. They agreed it would be easier for deaf people who watch the animation to understand the sign language. They also found it acceptable for the character to be positioned farther from the camera, provided that no objects block the view of the character signing. When asked about the camera distance for storytelling, they responded that keeping the camera close to the signing character would help ensure the scene remains readable. Furthermore, a participant noted that adequate lighting in the scene is essential to ensure clear visibility of the signing character. The background should be minimally distracting and provide sufficient contrast with the character, and it is important always to keep hand placement within the frame.

Position of Characters in Frame

Most participants prefer to have the characters at the side of the frame rather than at the centre. However, they agreed that having the characters at the centre would be more understandable for the audience. Three out of four participants are also fine with the characters' faces being hidden from the audience's view as long as the hands are visible. Yet, one participant emphasised that facial expressions are an important part of sign language, so it would be better not to have them hidden from the view of the audience.

Subtitles/translation

When it came to subtitles, the consensus is that having them in the story would help convey the message and meaning to the audience, especially those who are not deaf or do not have knowledge of sign language. They all also agreed that having the character speak while doing the signing would not affect the authenticity of the scene of character signing. They concurred that omitting subtitles to interpret the meaning of the sign language would effectively convey to the audience the challenges that deaf individuals frequently encounter when attempting to communicate within society.

Angle of Character Body Signing

All participants agreed that positioning the character's body to face the camera was considered the most effective way to present the sign language scene, as it offered maximum clarity and

ensured the audience could read and understand the signs more easily. When participants were asked about various camera angles, such as facing sideways or with their backs to the camera, they indicated that visibility of the hands was sufficient. However, they generally preferred that facial expressions remain visible, which are important components of sign language communication.

Speed of Signing

When asked about their speed preference, most participants preferred to have the characters in the animation sign at a slower speed rather than a faster speed. Some opinions indicated that the speed of signing may influence the audience's perception of a character's proficiency in sign language; for example, faster signing might be interpreted as greater skill, while slower signing could be viewed as less familiarity. However, participants do not personally evaluate the characters' signing speed; instead, they emphasise the value of incorporating sign language into the narrative. Furthermore, witnessing a character's progression from beginner to advanced proficiency in sign language can serve as an inspiring element within the story. They agreed that excessively fast signing reduces audience comprehension, diminishing their enjoyment and interest in the story.

Summary

Some participants felt neutral about seeing sign language in animation, as they are not used to it. However, two participants showed excitement and happiness. They agreed that sign language plays a crucial role in stories about deaf culture because it is a significant part of deaf identity. Including sign language makes the story more authentic and can inspire non-deaf audience members to learn it.

Limitations and Future Research

For this research, the authors faced some limitations, mostly regarding time constraints and networking resources, which prevented the authors from acquiring a Japanese sign language expert before submission. In the future, the researchers would like to explore other aspects of deaf representation in more depth, focusing on what is essential to include or exclude for a good portrayal of a deaf character in animation. The researchers also seek increased participation from the deaf community in studies related to deaf representation in animation and aim to conduct in-person interviews to enhance the research data.

CONCLUSION

An analysis of sign language scenes in these three Japanese animated series indicates that multiple factors contribute to effectively depicting sign language in animated contexts. Similarly, all three series that were analysed include deaf characters as the front and centre of their stories. The manner in which the three series address the characterisation of deaf characters and their use of sign language within these scenes for narrative and character development purposes exhibits both commonalities and distinctions.

Visual filmmaking elements such as the size of shots, the angle of characters, the speed of characters' movements during signing and the positioning of characters in frame also play a part in eliciting different types of emotions from the audience. Minimal changes to the visual filmmaking sometimes will not make a stark difference in the emotional context of the

scene. However, their combination will create a stronger impact on the audience. Therefore, filmmakers need to ensure that their knowledge of creating accurate signing is supported by a good understanding of filmmaking, so that the sign language scenes are conducted respectfully and accurately and strengthen the story's emotions.

Based on the interview findings and insights from members of the deaf community, sign language and authentic portrayals of deaf individuals are closely interconnected in achieving accurate representation on screen. Sign language is closely linked with the deaf community and typically signals to viewers that a character in a narrative is deaf. Consequently, animated portrayals of sign language must be accurate and respectful, fostering appreciation and constructive interest in the language and in deaf individuals more broadly.

ETHICAL ISSUES

The researcher used third-party copyrighted images from animated media produced by Japanese animation studios, which could infringe on the copyright act. Following the panel's recommendation, the image was redrawn and traced using Clip Studio Paint to mitigate potential copyright concerns during publication. Appropriate attribution was provided to the animation studio responsible for the original animated media beneath each recreated image.

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