

Head Movement and Head Position in Japanese Sign Language

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In the grammar of sign languages, non-manuals, especially head movement and head position, have an important role. In previous studies, it is pointed out that head movement/head position involves headnod (up and down), headshake (side to side), head thrust (forward), and head tilt, as well as ‘body lean’ (backward leaning of the head), ‘cheek to shoulder’, etc. (Wilbur 2000).

In studying head movement and head position in Japanese Sign Language, systematic patterns have emerged. First, head movement involves nod (down), nod (up), shake, thrust, and change of head position. Each of these have four associated head positions (chin up, down, forward, and back), as well as other parameters. In the case of nods, other parameters include whether the movement appears simultaneously with the final word of the intonational phrase or after it, and whether or not the movement is repeated. In the case of shake and position change, the other parameter is whether the movement is held after the expression of the final word finishes or is released immediately. This gives a total of 40 possible variations in head movement/head position.

The difference in the head position (position of chin) produces different meanings. For example, the difference in the meaning of four types of shake in the response to a negative question will be shown below. The photographs below illustrate four types of shake as responses to the question, TANAKA MARRY NOT-YET? "Is Mr. Tanaka not yet married?"



1. No, not married. 2. “Yes”, married. (Not unmarried) 3. No. (You’re wrong) 4. No, I don’t know

Similarly, in the case of nod (up), the four head positions indicate 1) command, 2) persuasion, 3) proposal, and 4) evasion of responsibility. The chin position of ‘up’ and ‘down’ is related to whether the signer’s attitude is subjective/imprudent (‘up’) or objective/prudent

(‘down’). The chin position of ‘forward’ and ‘back’ is related to whether the signer’s attitude toward addressee is interfering (‘forward’) or indifferent (‘back’).

Head position also induces a difference in meaning in non-manual adverbs. Non-manual adverbs involve mouth gesture and head position. Photographs below show four types of ‘relaxed mm.’



1. ordinarily, submissively 2. forcibly 3. undauntedly 4. defiantly

If the mouth gesture is ‘th’, it will have the following meanings: 1) imprudently, 2) unwillingly, 3) halfheartedly, and 4) disgustedly. In non-manual adverbs, head position is related the attitude of agent to the situation; nonresistance (passive acceptance) (‘up’), resistance (non-acceptance) (‘down’), acceptance (positive acceptance) (‘forward’), difficulty in acceptance (‘backward’).

Head position in sign languages seems to be iconic. For example, ‘forward’ represents interference with an addressee, and ‘back’ represents distancing from him/her. This being the case, similar studies of other sign languages may show similar systematic correlations.

References

Wilbur, R. B. (2000). Phonological and prosodic layering of non-manuals in American Sign Language. In K. Emmorey & H.Lane (Eds.), *The signs of language revisited: An anthology to honor Ursula Bellugi and Edward Klima* (pp.215-243). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.