



Ca' Foscari
University
of Venice

Master's Degree programme

in Language and
Civilisation of Asia
and Mediterranean
Africa

Final Thesis

From the Ears of the Dragons

An Ethnographic Overview
of the Japanese D/deaf
Community

Supervisor

Ch. Prof. Patrick Heinrich

Assistant supervisor

Ch. Prof. Lauri Kitsnik

Graduand

Benedetta Tecchio

Matriculation Number 884307

Academic Year

2026 / 2027

*To our inner child.
May you touch dragonflies and stars,
dance with fairies,
and talk to the moon.*

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools

The undersigned Benedetta Tecchio, student ID number 884307, enrolled at Ca' Foscari in the Bachelor's/Master's Degree Programme in Language and Civilisation of Asia and Mediterranean Africa, author of the final paper/degree thesis *From the Ears of the Dragon: An Ethnographic Overview of the Japanese D/deaf Community*, thesis supervisor Patrick Heinrich, aware of the penalties provided for in Article 76 of the Consolidated Act set out in Presidential Decree no. 445 of 28 December 2000, and of the loss of benefits provided for in Article 75 of the same Consolidated Act in the event of false or misleading statements, under his/her own responsibility pursuant to Articles 46 and 47 of Presidential Decree no. 445 of 28 December 2000,

DECLARES

- ☒ that they have **NOT** used generative artificial intelligence technologies to support various aspects of the research and writing of the final paper/degree thesis;
- ☐ that they **HAVE** used generative artificial intelligence technologies to support various aspects of the research and writing of their final paper/degree thesis, in particular:
- indicate the name of the tool (e.g., "ChatGPT" if an application or "GPT" if a model), with reference to the specific version (for example, "ChatGPT-4, version released in March 2024");
 - if more than one tool has been used, specify each of them by indicating its name and version;
 - provide information on how the tool was used:
 - ☐ revision and optimisation of texts to improve clarity and coherence;
 - ☐ generation of charts and diagrams for data presentation;
 - ☐ support for the automatic drafting of sentences;
 - ☐ production of illustrative images to complement the methodological section;
 - ☐ other;
 - indicate the sections or chapters concerned;
 - indicate how the accuracy, quality and reliability of any information or text that may have been generated were verified.

DECLARES FURTHER

that all material generated by AI has been carefully checked, reviewed and reworked by the author, who assumes full responsibility for the quality, accuracy and scientific integrity of the work.

Index

要旨	1
Introduction: A Question Asked, A Question Given	3
Chapter One: Disability	7
1.1 What is “Disability”?.....	7
1.2 The “Normal” Body in a World of “Others”	12
1.2.1 The Changeability of “Normality”	12
1.2.2 The Role of the Other.....	15
1.2.3 All the Ways to be Othered.....	18
1.2.4 An Ableist World	26
1.2.5 Flipping the Ableist World	31
1.3 The Models of Disability.....	34
1.3.1 What Is a Model?	34
1.3.2 The Belief of Moral Accountability.....	35
1.3.3 The Medical Model of Disability	36
1.3.4 The Social Model of Disability.....	38
1.3.5 A Plenitude of Models	39
Chapter Two: D/deafness.....	42
2.1 Another Framework: The Linguo-Cultural Model	42
2.1.1 deafness and Cultures.....	43
2.1.2 Deaf Cultures: Definitions.....	46
2.1.3 Deaf Cultures: Beyond Definitions.....	50
2.2 Freedom from Binaries: The WFD Proposal	53
2.3 Culture Erasure: The Cochlear Implant and the Bionic Ear	56
Chapter Three: Localising Disability and D/deafness: The Japanese Landscape.....	65
3.1 Disability in Japan	65
3.1.1 The Genesis of Japan’s Welfare System: 1940s-1950s	66
3.1.2 The First Wave of Influence: 1960s-1970s	68

3.1.3 The Second Wave of Influence: The 1980s and the UN Mandates.....	70
3.1.4 The Third Wave of Influence: The 1990s and the US Reference Model.....	72
3.1.5 2000s: Reformed Welfare System and the Adoption of the CRPD.....	76
3.1.6 2010s: Ratifying the CRPD and the Adoption of the Social Model.....	78
3.2 D/deafness in Japan	80
3.3 The Japanese Federation of the Deaf	84
3.4 Words from the D/deaf: <i>Rōbungaku</i>	88
Chapter Four: The Realities Behind D/deaf Literature.....	92
4.1 D/deaf Education.....	92
4.2 D/deaf People and the Labour Market	102
4.3 Community, Identity and... Culture?.....	107
4.3.1 D/deaf Identity	107
4.3.2 D/deaf Communities	111
4.3.3 D/deaf Culture or D/deafhood?	116
4.4 Sign Languages in Japan.....	118
Conclusion: Entering the Fourth Stage.....	126
Bibliography.....	131
Online Sources	136

Index of Tables and Figures

Figure A	82
----------------	----

要旨

本論文は、日本における聴覚障がい／ろう者コミュニティを対象とし、その歴史的で社会文化的な変化と現在の状況について、民族誌的および通時的な視点から考察するものである。

近年、聴覚障がい／ろうは単なる障がいの一種としてではなく、言語的で文化的な側面を持つものとして捉えられるようになり、特に欧米諸国で聴覚障がい／ろう者の経験、コミュニティ、手話などに関する研究が集積されてきた。一方で、日本における研究では、ろう学校や教育など特定のテーマに焦点を当てたものが多く、聴覚障がい／ろうをめぐる複数の問題を横断的に扱い、日本の聴覚障がい／ろう者コミュニティ全体の変化を捉える研究は限られている。本論文では、こうした研究状況を踏まえ、既存の国際的および日本を対象とした研究を参考するとともに、渡辺貴子氏が編集・発行する冊子シリーズ『ろう文学』に収録された寄稿者の語りを資料として用いる経験を寄稿者の言葉から捉えることを試みる。

本論文では、まず障がいという概念が社会文化的規範との関係の中でどのように社会的に構築されてきたのかを検討し、正常性、他者、他者化、エイブリズムおよび障がいモデルについて考察する。続いて、言語文化的マイノリティの視点から聴覚障がい／ろうを考察し、医学的聴覚障がいや流動的文化という概念について論じ、ろう文化の概念の概要を提示する。

後半では、日本における障がいおよび聴覚障がい／ろうの捉え方が、社会的で制度的にどのように形成されてきたのかを、戦後の福祉制度や聴覚障がい／ろう者をめぐる社会的状況の変化とともに分析する。

終章では、日本の聴覚障がい／ろうコミュニティの歴史的変化と現在の状況について、①聴覚障がい／ろう教育、②聴覚障がい／ろう者と労働市場、③聴覚障がい／ろうアイデンティティ、コミュニティ、ろう文化、④日本手話諸語をめぐる問題、という四つの分野から検討する。これらのテーマはそれぞれ独立した問題である一方で、日本における聴覚障がい／ろうの位置づけや今後の展開を理解するためには、それ

らを相互に関連づけて考察する必要がある。また、『ろう文学』に収録された寄稿者の語りの考慮で、制度や社会の変化だけでは捉えることのできない個々の経験や視点にも着目する。

以上の考察を通じて、本論文は、日本における聴覚障がい／ろうに関する既存研究に近年の動向を加え、特に中村かれんの研究（2006 年）以降の変化を通時的に整理することを目指すものである。同時に聴覚障がい／ろう者自身の語りを出発点とすることで、日本社会における聴覚障がい／ろうをめぐる問題について、より多面的理解を提示することを試みる。なお、個々人の経験や地域的で社会文化的背景の多様性で、本論文で扱うのは聴覚障がい／ろうをめぐる問題の一部だけである。

日本の聴覚障がい／ろうコミュニティに伝わる伝承では、龍は耳の聞こえない生き物であり、海に落ちたその耳がタツノオトシゴになったとされる。本論文は、この龍の耳に耳を傾けることにより、微力ながら、聴者世界と聴覚障がい／ろう世界との距離を締め、日常の中で当然視されている社会的規範や行為を問い直すきっかけを提示することを目指す。

Introduction:

A Question Asked, A Question Given

Over the last few decades, awareness of D/deaf-related issues has increased worldwide, driven by a gradual shift away from viewing D/deafness as a subcategory of disability towards a linguo-cultural perspective, leading to numerous studies on the many aspects of the D/deaf experience. In WENA¹ countries, especially in the United States, where the concept of Deaf culture was developed, the themes of D/deafness, D/deaf communities and sign languages have been both broadly and specifically examined from several perspectives with titles such as Paddy Ladd's *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood* (2003), Harlan Lane's *The Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community* (1992), or Leila Monaghan *et al.*'s *Many Ways to be Deaf: International Variation in Deaf Communities* (2003). When discussing the Japanese landscape, however, researchers have tended to focus on specific areas of the Japanese D/deaf community, particularly education and D/deaf schools, rather than broader overviews spanning multiple themes. A notable exception is Nakamura Karen's *Deaf in Japan: Signing and Politics of Identity* (2006), a thorough ethnographic study of the social and institutional history of postwar D/deaf communities in Japan.

Nakamura's work, as well as her *A Disability of the Soul: An Ethnography of Schizophrenia and Mental Illness in Contemporary Japan* (2013), especially in the development and structuring of the ethnographic research and correlated analysis of the Japanese context, has been a point of departure for this thesis, which provides an overview of the Japanese D/deaf community on two deeply interconnected levels, ethnographic and diachronic. The ethnographic core of this analysis is represented by the excerpts of accounts written by various Japanese D/deaf people and taken from the booklet series *Rōbungaku*, a space for expression created by editor Watanabe Takako in 2019; linked to this first level, the second, diachronic one centres on showing the evolution of the various dynamics at play within and factors of influence on the Japanese D/deaf community throughout chiefly the end of the 19th century up to nowadays, with the 2025 Sign Language Act as the basis for the formulation of possible prospects for the future of the community and its languages.

¹ WENA is an acronym for Western Europe and Northern America, referring to the geographically and economically developed countries in these regions. Coined by satirist Karl Sharro and later on popularised by journalist Nirmalya Dutta, it challenges the notion of "Western" exceptionalism by advocating for a more equitable and balanced scrutiny of social, political and cultural issues in every region of the world. WENA is used in this thesis as a substitute for the problematic term "Western", in accordance with the goal for which the acronym was created.

To do this, alongside a more general gathering of information on available international and Japan-centred sources concerning D/deafness and disability, a limited selection of excerpts and contributions from the comprehensive 2025 volume of *Rōbungaku* has been made to give reality to the shifts, developments and issues brought forward; additionally, with the generous collaboration of Watanabe Takako herself, it was possible to gain a better understanding of the objectives and philosophy of the booklet series, presenting a further point of view in the perception of D/deaf experiences in Japan.

Throughout this thesis, unless they specifically refer to the cultural notion or the medical condition, the slashed terms “D/deaf” and “D/deafness” are used as a more inclusive choice of wording and to indicate the broad and diversified spectrum that exists between cultural Deafness and medical deafness; the main intention is to avoid forcing a single identity onto individuals whose personal alignment might be unknown, not specified, or simply more complex than what a binary labelling can explain. Another possible wording could have been DHH (Deaf and Hard of Hearing), though it has not been chosen due to the limited focus on the specific case of hard-of-hearing people in this thesis, as well as the absence of Woodward’s typographical differentiation between lowercase “d” and uppercase “D”. Moreover, regarding the citing of the selected excerpts of *Rōbungaku*, both the English translation and the original Japanese text are quoted, as agreed upon with editor Watanabe and to show, in accordance with the booklet series’ philosophy, the efforts made by every single D/deaf author to communicate in their second language, namely Japanese. In this regard, since the majority of contributors to *Rōbungaku* use pseudonyms and there has been no direct contact with them, unless their name is indicative of pronoun usage (which, even then, is only supposed), the more gender neutral “they/them” has been adopted. Finally, precisely because this analysis is based on a selection of individual accounts and stories, it is by no means comprehensive of all issues, areas and perspectives that concern D/deafness, which remains rooted not only in wider socio-cultural norms but also in the idiosyncrasy of each person’s experience; this thesis touches on a select few broader themes, examining their evolution throughout the years and offering space for further future investigations on them, without forgetting their localised nature.

The first half of the thesis focuses on the broader concepts and processes that lay the groundwork for understanding and dissecting the more specific and socio-culturally localised dynamics discussed in the latter half.

Chapter One centres on the construction of the notion of disability and the deep link it shares with socio-cultural norms; to build a more comprehensive frame for it, other constructed concepts, ideologies and practices are examined, such as normality, the Other, and the processes of Othering that result from and

reinforce them. Having examined the by-products, the discussion then shifts to the soil that allows these notions and processes to grow, that is, ableism. The end of the first chapter presents the most widespread models for understanding disability, following the diachronic succession in which they have appeared, taken root, and inevitably influenced the broader perception of the disability experience.

Chapter Two re-engages with frameworks of understanding, redirecting attention towards D/deafness construed through a Linguo-Cultural Minority Model, and introducing the concepts of deafness as a medical condition, culture and, when intersected, Deaf culture, mainly through Paddy Ladd's study on the topic. To understand the complex interrelationship that exists between deafness and Deafness, and to recognise their frequent coexistence within the D/deaf individual as a member of a linguo-cultural minority in a dominant hearing majority, the blended model proposed by the World Federation of the Deaf is presented. This first half concludes with a brief discussion on the ethical and cultural controversy surrounding the cochlear implant and the possible future development of a bionic ear, as well as its consequences on cultural Deafness.

Chapter Three introduces the second half of the thesis, which focuses on the specific localised case of Japan and its socio-culturally determined construction of the two broader concepts of disability and D/deafness introduced in the first two chapters. On the one hand, disability is examined through the legislative history of the development of the Japanese welfare system, from the postwar period up to this day; on the other hand, the evolution of the perception of D/deafness, which within the archipelago is predominantly interwoven with disability, is summarised into four stages, all heavily reliant on the previously introduced models and on the width of the Japanese D/deaf community/ies. To gain a better grasp of where D/deafness stands in Japan and how it has been construed, the presentation of two bodies related to it follows: the first, on a national level, is the Japanese Federation of the Deaf, and the second, a private initiative and the core of this research, is the booklet series *Rōbungaku* through the words of its editor, Watanabe Takako.

Finally, Chapter Four follows the actual ethnographic and diachronic analysis of Japanese D/deaf communities, dividing it into four main themes and taking into examination their chronological evolution, their prevalent and persisting issues, and their possible future developments. The four fields investigated are, respectively: D/deaf education, the relationship between Japanese D/deaf people and the labour market, the processes of identity formation and community building as well as the question of culture when it comes to D/deafness in Japan, and the debate around Japanese Sign Language(s); all of them, while being discussed separately within the chapter, remain deeply interconnected with each other and need to be understood as such, if one is to comprehend where D/deafness stands and where it is headed in the Japanese archipelago.

The research aims to add to the existing literature on D/deafness, which already contains many ethnographic studies focused on different regions and countries of the world, and offer an updated Japan-centred perspective, hoping to contribute to and diachronically expand what Nakamura discussed in her now twenty-year-old volume through the examination of the most recent developments of the Japanese D/deaf community, starting from the words of D/deaf people themselves.

According to a tradition associated with the Japanese D/deaf community, dragons are deaf creatures, their ears having fallen into the sea and morphed into seahorses. Hence, these dragons' offspring came to represent D/deaf people themselves, both in the imagery, but also in the same Chinese character that is used to refer to them (聾), which contains the elements of the dragon (龍) and the ear (耳).² It is, then, by listening to these ears of the dragons that this thesis hopes to shorten the gap between its readers and the Japanese D/deaf world, promoting awareness on D/deafness-related issues, as well as a reflexive ethnography that invites to question everyday life processes and actions which most of the time escape critical judgement and ponderation.

² NAKAMURA Karen, *Deaf in Japan: Signing and the Politics of Identity*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2006, p. 38.

Chapter One:

Disability

1.1 What is “Disability”?

When speaking broadly about disability, the first thing that may come to mind could be what *The Oxford English Dictionary* presents as its head entry: “Want of ability [...]; inability, incapacity, impotence”¹. What emerges from this is a generally negative perception of disability as a fundamental, and pejorative, lack of capacity to function “properly”. This notion is further reinforced by common-use expressions such as “turning a blind eye to” and “falling on deaf ears”, or the frequent, and often baseless, use of terms like “bipolar”, “autistic”, etc. in everyday informal conversations. These kinds of phrases and lexical choices mostly serve to indicate someone’s shortcomings, a negative aspect of their personality, or simply communicate an action whose outcome is, at least in part, negative. It is of no surprise, then, that disability has so often and so widely been thought of as a problem that needs solving or, in the more radical cases, one that requires elimination.

Furthermore, disability typically tends to cause a sense of unsettlement because of the vague nature, and thus incredibly broad scope, of its definition, which, as seen above, is only characterised as the general lack of ability (which ability, it is not markedly specified). As pointed out by Doris Fleischer and Frieda Zames, there is no individual exempted from acquiring a disability and, on the contrary, it is unlikely that anyone will go through life without any form of impairment.² What is, on the contrary, meticulously defined are the various categorisations and diagnoses of disabilities, mostly because eligibility for services and benefits is determined based on them. These are usually organised by accurately described symptoms and manifestations of impairment, which can be classified in different ways depending on the context, the most widespread and comprehensive being physical disabilities, mental disabilities and intellectual disabilities. This categorisation, while having its advantages, like most classification systems, is unable to represent the countless and diversified realities of disability as experienced by each individual. Rather, the creation of sub-/categories of disability can lead to false claims of universality, where all those with the same impairment share identical experiences, perceptions and even personal characteristics.³ In other

¹ John A. SIMPOSON, Edmund S. C. WEINER, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd Edition, vol. 4, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989, p. 713.

² Julie SMART, *Disability, Society, and the Individual*, Austin, Pro-ed, 2009, p. 10.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 20-22.

words, what occurs is the synecdoche-like conflation of the person with their disability and, on a further level, with the category and labels this disability falls under.

Going back to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, another definition can be found after the one quoted above: “Incapacity in the eye of the law, or created by the law; *a restriction framed to prevent any person or class of persons from sharing in duties or privileges which would otherwise be open to them*; legal disqualification.”⁴ (cursive is mine). There is a discrepancy between the two definitions, one that seems to mirror the dichotomy Peter Freund writes about⁵: while the former presents disability through pathological lenses as a bio-medical status, the latter presents it not as something inherent, but as something imposed on a person or a category of people. Hence, it can be said that disability is also presented as something constructed, rather than natural. In his 1996 work, *The Making of Blind Men: A Study of Adult Socialization*, Robert A. Scott says:

The disability of blindness is a learned social role. The various attitudes and patterns of behavior that characterize people who are blind are not inherent in their condition but rather are acquired through ordinary processes of social learning.... Blind men are made, and by the same processes of socialization that have made us all.⁶

Precisely because these processes and constructions work on the self-concept of people with disabilities, who experience them daily, even from authoritative sources, the result is the internalisation of society's roles and expectations concerning them and their diagnostic category, regardless of whether the disability is congenital or acquired at any point in the individual's life. These expectations have been developing for centuries and have been held by the great majority of societies all over the world and by the very families of people with disabilities. Owing to this, before the advent of disability rights groups, it was difficult, if not impossible, for a person with disabilities to even consider doing anything but subscribing to and internalising these constructs and perceptions.⁷

The field of Disability Studies has long deemed the abovementioned definition, which centres on a deficiency that is implied to be inherent in the individual and is deeply linked to medicalisation and diagnostic categories, as highly problematic, instead identifying disability as a socio-cultural construct. In line with one of the main concepts of disability theory, Liat Ben-Moshe and Sandy Magaña state that the reason why certain conditions are delineated as pathological problems is to be found in specific

⁴ SIMPSON, WEINER, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, cit., p. 713.

⁵ Peter FREUND, “Bodies, Disability and Spaces: The Social Model and Disabling Spatial Organisations”, in *Disability & Society*, vol. 16, no. 5, 2001, p. 692.

⁶ SMART, *Disability, Society...*, cit., p. 117.

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 304-05.

understandings of normality wielded by those who have the power to impose such views and definitions on others.⁸ Moreover, disability as a biomedically-grounded construction that directly opposes this dominantly perceived normality, and that by doing so is explicitly and implicitly made to carry a negative connotation, is further complicated by the knowledge that what constitutes behaviours, appearances and cognitive processes construed as normal is not universal, but always deeply interwoven with a specific cultural and socio-material context.⁹

Disability Studies and disability activism, drawing from the actions taken by other rights movements such as the gay and feminist ones, have struggled for a long time to move definitions of disability away from the realm of pathology through stories of oppression, discrimination and pride. In this effort, the symbolic interactionist approach has helped identify institutions, policies, material resources and social conventions as key storytellers and framers when it comes to declaring which bodies are socially constructed as acceptable and which are not. By focusing on the interactions between people and how meaning is negotiated in this process, this approach has refused disability as an essential core of the person, reframing it as emergent from these very interactions and within the complex interplay of a specific situation and the broader social narratives that apply to it.¹⁰ According to researcher Nanna Mik-Meyer, when seen through the lenses of symbolic interactionism, disability, as well as normality, as well as any other meaning, including the very self, are products of social processes and are assumed to be created and continuously re-created through social interactions, making them all relational phenomena.¹¹

As a result of the many efforts made by both disability rights groups and researchers of Disability Studies, new definitions of the concept of disability have been formulated and proposed throughout the years. Ben-Moshe and Magaña assert that disability is fluid and contextual, rather than biological, and although it does undeniably influence biology, its definition is imposed upon certain kinds of minds and bodies. According to this view, if disability is reframed as constructed through historical and cultural processes, one is always dis/abled in relation to the context within they are located.¹² A similar definition is offered by Freund's previously mentioned dichotomy, for which disability refers to both a socio-cultural category and one's bio-medical status: the tangible restriction on activity caused by an impairment is transformed into disability by a particular socio-cultural context, leading to socio-political consequences as well.¹³

⁸ Liat BEN-MOSHE, Sandy MAGAÑA, "An Introduction to Race, Gender, and Disability: Intersectionality, Disability Studies, and Families of Color", in *Women, Gender, and Families of Color*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2014, p. 106.

⁹ FREUND, "Bodies, Disability and Spaces...", cit., p. 692.

¹⁰ Edmund COLEMAN-FOUNTAIN, Janice MCLAUGHLIN, "The Interactions of Disability and Impairment", in *Social Theory & Health*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2013, pp. 143-45.

¹¹ Nanna MIK-MEYER, "Symbolic Interactionism, Stigma and Othering", in Järvinen M., Mik-Meyer N. (edited by), *Qualitative Analysis: Eight Approaches for the Social Sciences*, London, Sage, 2020, pp. 53-54.

¹² BEN-MOSHE, MAGAÑA, "An Introduction to Race, Gender, and Disability...", cit., p. 105.

¹³ FREUND, "Bodies, Disability and Spaces...", cit., p. 692.

Considering the symbolic interactionist approach, a further definition could be that “disability can be thought of as an emergent and variable property, which arises out of the interaction between a heterogeneous range of impairments, as well as other characteristics [...], within the presence of social stories and norms embedded and validated in material resources and institutional practices”¹⁴. The interactional aspect of disability is also called to mind in the 2011 World Report on Disability by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the World Bank, which states that disability is the umbrella term used for impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions, and that it refers to the negative aspects of the interaction between an individual with any type of health condition and that individual’s contextual factors, especially environmental ones, since they can significantly reduce the life opportunities of people living with impairments.¹⁵

All these definitions recognise the existence of bodily differences behind the claim of the constructed nature of disability. It is undeniable that the materiality of the body is a reality that shapes and informs social encounters, decides how said body fits within normative frameworks of understanding, and allows for stories and representations to become real, reiterated and understood. Narratives are, however, contestable and constantly rewriting themselves, which creates a space for people with disabilities to challenge the norms associated with their bodies and minds, and validate their own personal experiences.¹⁶

Disability, rather than a monolithic social phenomenon, has always been heterogeneous, complex and, at times, contradictory. While there are some universal aspects of the disability experience, it is important to highlight what Julie Smart calls the “idiosyncratic elements in each narrative”¹⁷, since every disability account speaks of an intricate interrelationship between socio-cultural perceptions and norms, and individual circumstances. Just by taking into consideration these socio-cultural factors, we can easily see that disability has been defined and interpreted in numerous ways, and that multiple frameworks have been developed in different social institutions and cultural spheres to serve different social, cultural and political purposes.¹⁸ A straightforward example of this would be how the foundation of work in a society influences the perception of what it means to be “disabled”: where the economy revolves around physical labour, the definition of disability would stress the physical functions of bodies, but this would change in

¹⁴ COLEMAN-FOUNTAIN, MCLAUGHLIN, “The Interactions of Disability and Impairment”, cit., p. 146.

¹⁵ Dan GOODLEY, *Dis/ability Studies: Theorising Disablism and Ableism*, Oxfordshire, Routledge, 2014, p. 14.

¹⁶ COLEMAN-FOUNTAIN, MCLAUGHLIN, “The Interactions of Disability and Impairment”, cit., pp. 138-39; 145.

¹⁷ SMART, *Disability, Society...*, cit., p. 371.

¹⁸ Paul LONGMORE, “The Cultural Framing of Disability: Telethons as a Case Study”, in *PMLA*, vol. 120, no. 2, 2005, p. 502.

a society based on information processing and services, tasks that require a different set of abilities to function and participate in the labour market.

立って歩けない・目が見えない・耳が聞こえない等、の表面に出ている心身機能の制約が “障がい”¹⁹ と捉えられがちだろう。これは今も昔も変化はないことである。実際は社会や環境のあり方や仕組みが “障がい” という言葉を生み出しているのではないだろうかと考えている。[...] 自分達と異なる人間を【異質な存在】として敬遠したり排除したるすることを当然の様に考えて放置していたら、様々障がい者の未来は明るくない。

Physical and mental limitations, such as being unable to stand and walk, to see, or to hear, tend to be perceived as “disabilities”. This has remained unchanged, both in the past and nowadays too. In reality, I believe it is the state and structure of society and the environment that create the concept of “disability”. [...] If we take it for granted and allow ourselves to avoid or exclude those who differ from us as “different beings”, the future for people with various disabilities will not be a bright one.²⁰

These words from one of the many D/deaf writers who published their thoughts and accounts in the booklet series *Rōbungaku* express the core of the problem: widespread conceptions of disability have been constructed by processes of Othering and of acceptance of oneself as “Other” into a category that is diminishing and debilitating. This classification matured throughout the years within social dynamics which define as normal, and thus as the dominant standard to which everyone is measured against, being a person who can walk, see, hear... in other words, an able-bodied and able-minded person. Referring back to the symbolic interactionist approach, disability can also be viewed through the lenses of identity negotiation. Being relational and not essential, identity can be either co-constructed as disability, when interacting with a society and people that value able-bodiedness above all, or as a common trait or simple bodily difference, when interacting with those who share the disability experience and/or are critically aware of it. What results from this, then, is that a person is never truly “disabled” as much as they are made to be so.

¹⁹ Since the post-war period, the *kanji* 害 (*gai* “harm”) has been recognised as the approved character for writing the word “person with a disability” (*shōgaisha* 障害者) in laws and official communications. Since the 2010s, however, criticism has been rising from many local organisations that deem the 害 *kanji* negative in its connotations when speaking about individuals with disabilities and instead introduced the nomenclature 障がい者. The current situation is one for which the central government continues using the 害 character, while local administrations are increasingly shifting towards the use of 障がい. These divergencies between legal norms, prefectural decisions and opinions of involved parties and citizens with/out disabilities are still preventing the unification of the nomenclature in one manner or the other.

²⁰ SATŌ Daiki, “Chiisana Yūki” (my translation), in Watanabe T. (edited by), *Rōbungaku: dai 1 gō – dai 25 gō*, Yokohama, Rakuyō Publishing and Printing, 2025, pp. 268-69.

The following subchapter will focus on dissecting some of the socio-cultural processes and mechanisms that have been mentioned here and that make the biomedical definition of disability marked and widespread throughout the great majority of societies all over the world.

1.2 The “Normal” Body in a World of “Others”

1.2.1 The Changeability of “Normality”

Bodies are often read through established binary standards such as health/unhealth, ability/disability, attractiveness/unattractiveness, even though the body itself is not intrinsically any of those things. Yet, society is constellated of narratives on how bodies should and should not be, making these standards a powerful organising principle around which people make sense of their own bodies, lives and identities. A widespread example of these internalised narratives is all the stories linked to the athletic body as a means for young men to perform and reiterate their gender through the embodiment of culturally normative views on what it means to be a “male”.²¹ Each individual is, thus, engaged in a dynamic interplay between personal methodologies to build accounts of themselves and of other people, and influences of dominant discourses and popular culture, which construe everything that does not fit within the widely accepted standards of health, ability, gender, and so on, as an oddity, something not normal. This perceived normal body, however, to borrow Edmund Coleman-Fountain and Janice McLaughlin’s words, “is a cultural text transmitted through storytelling that has significant implications for how we approach our own embodiment”²².

In its original sense, the word “normal” does not carry any qualitative judgement, instead indicating something typical, commonplace and average. In other words, at first, it did not emerge as an appraisal, since it had no inherent value; it was simply an event, characteristic or behaviour that took place frequently, a statistical concept of what was most likely to happen based on a mean of prevalent occurrences. Despite this, throughout the centuries, the meaning of “normality” has shifted, and it has been constructed as an unmarked and dominant ideology of value judgement that elevates and typifies the norms of the power-holding classes of a given time (much like Whiteness when speaking about racial and ethnic classifications). The inseparable relationship this ideology of normality has developed with society and its socio-cultural norms makes the existence of at least some widely accepted standards of it

²¹ COLEMAN-FOUNTAIN, MCLAUGHLIN, “The Interactions of Disability and Impairment”, cit., pp. 142; 144.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 142.

necessary; yet this also means that these standards shift alongside societal values, development of the environment, revision of policies, and so on, making ideologically dominant normality a fluid variable that changes and will continue to change continuously.²³ Curiously enough, then, this new signification did not obscure the former one, but rather conflated with it, making it so that the perceived normal individual also became the average one, in a chimerical creature defined by the father of anthropometry, Adolphe Quetelet, as the “*homme moyen*”.²⁴ This reframed normality, though, possessed little of the commonplace quality of its previous definition, assuming the colours of an ideal status everyone desired but, precisely because of its nature as an ideal, no one fully measured up to. And the equation became even more problematic when normality started becoming synonymous with humanity.

The maturation and spread of this dominant ideology of normality, as well as the endorsement it got from ruling classes and dominant discourses, led to the prevalent understanding that such standards and criteria must have always existed and that anything or anyone who did not meet them was to be considered abnormal. As a result of this preconception, many individuals with disabilities have been forced to undergo unnecessary treatments or learn to adapt to an able-bodied way of living simply for the sake of a normality shaped by dominant ideologies. Considering what has been previously said regarding the relational construction of socio-cultural categories, the words of Danette Crawford and Joan M. Ostrove (2003) ring particularly true: “Lack of integration of individuals with disabilities prevents the daily interaction necessary for both disabled [sic] and able-bodied individuals to learn to negotiate the delicate balance between two cultures.”²⁵

The perceived normal individual, and its consequent abnormal counterpart, is part of the history of modernist progress, industrialisation and the ideological consolidation of the power of the bourgeois. The roots of normality ideology can be found growing in between the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century thought in the WENA landscape, strengthened by the solidifying notions of statistical analysis, Darwinist theories on the evolution of the species and, in particular, eugenicist sets of practices and beliefs.²⁶

Born from the same statistical analysis of biological traits that led to concepts such as the normal distribution curve and the conceptualisation of the norm and the deviant, eugenics is the (now mostly condemned) belief and subsequent practices of hereditary improvements of the human species through controlled and selective breeding and, in its most radical form, through the elimination of individuals

²³ SMART, *Disability, Society...*, cit., pp. 12-13; 18.

²⁴ GOODLEY, *Dis/ability Studies...*, cit., p. 11.

²⁵ SMART, *Disability, Society...*, cit., pp. 126; 556; 558.

²⁶ GOODLEY, *Dis/ability Studies...*, cit., p. 11.

with disabilities. This selection of desirable traits was endorsed by Darwin's evolutionary theory of natural selection, which stated that, at some point, individuals with disabilities would be naturally eliminated, and by those who followed in his theoretical footsteps, who concluded that normality is natural, while abnormality is unnatural.²⁷ And despite having long been discredited, the influence of eugenics and of analogous thoughts and philosophies, such as Herbert Spencer's "survival of the fittest", on the general public is all but deracinated (more on the influence of eugenics in Japan in Chapter Three).

The creation of these allegedly scientifically-informed tales of the normal embodiment results in the exclusion of all those bodies who fall short of these standards, first and foremost bodies with any sort of impairment, whose stories end up overlooked and not listened; on the contrary, the space reserved for the accounts of those labelled as deviant is instead filled with narratives of stigmatisation and "Otherness", which hold together the constructed notion of normality through the demarcation of everything that this normality should not be. Because, fundamentally, when we think about what is normal, the first things that come to mind are statements of exclusion: not ill, not deviant, not impaired, not ugly. The idea of normality is built on those clear-cut and purportedly objective descriptions of abnormality, and without those it is but a vague concept of little substance, as sociologist Nikolas Rose reminds us:

Our vocabularies and techniques of the person haven't emerged in a field of reflection on the "normal" individual, but rather, the very notion of "normality" has emerged out of a concern with types of conduct, thought, expression deemed troublesome or dangerous.²⁸

Hence, there is a deep-rooted relationship between society's construction of unmarked norms of embodiment and the marking out of bodies that are "Others" to a normality which is actually an expression of a privileged class of people, with the latter process being crucial for the sustenance of the former one. To keep this perceived normal unmarked, then, it is necessary to make what is thought of as abnormal stand out as much as possible through everyday practices of Othering. According to psychoanalysis, the construction of the Other is a method of self-protection and, at the same time, of self-definition, where the self is modelled by way of life experiences and learnt cultural representations.²⁹ These cultural representations, though, as well as all other categories that are produced through socio-cultural practices, are rarely able to faithfully represent the vast diversity that exists between and within the different individuals they are supposed to be defining. And yet society pushes towards sameness and

²⁷ SMART, *Disability, Society...*, cit., pp. 13-14.

²⁸ Nikolas ROSE, "Identity, Genealogy, History", in Hall S., du Gay P. (edited by), *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 1996, p. 131.

²⁹ Rob KITCHIN, "'Out of Place', Knowing One's Place: Space, Power, and the Exclusion of Disabled People", in *Disability & Society*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1998, p. 344.

strives to protect what it perceives as its constitutional harmony, often to the detriment of the Other, who is placed in a socially-constructed space of oppression.

1.2.2 The Role of the Other

It is quite important to make a distinction between what is thought of as diverse and what is perceived as deviant. Diversity is the differences among people, something viewed as desirable, enriching and strengthening to the larger group, as can be seen in much of the media coverage nowadays, which continuously narrates a fascination with people considered to be unlike the majority. On the other hand, though, deviance is deemed socially undesirable and inferior, not to mention a burden to the larger group, which is why society tends to avoid, isolate and reject people who fall under this label. This often translates into fear and hostile, or even harmful, reactions towards them, a mindset so deeply embedded it appears appropriate and justified. The constructed category of the deviant encompasses a wide range of attributes, from racial/ethnic groups to nationality, from religion to sexual orientation, from gender to disability, and many more. The reason behind this width is to be found in its interdependence with the idea of norm, since deviance has been moulded to be “what differs from the norm” and norm has been constructed as “what is not deviant”: these concepts do not have inherent value, they are purely constructed through the defining power of dominant groups and the daily interactions that perpetuate the norms developed by said groups. Another reason as to why there is no fixed definition for deviance is because the classification needs to be vague, so that it can adapt to the continuously undergoing changes of the societal norms and to the anxieties of the defining group it is based on. Due to the relational nature of both constructs of deviance and normality, the labelling of the two is a well-studied topic in interactionist theory. Many studies and disability accounts show how people with disabilities are occasionally not aware of their allegedly deviant status until they begin interacting with people outside the home they grew up in, and only from that point on they start understanding and assimilating the meaning disability has for others.³⁰ This happens because, in some cases, the diversity these individuals’ disability represented at home was rewritten as deviance, inferiority, shame, or, to sum these all up, stigma, in broader society.

Regarding the concept of stigma, we most often refer to sociologist and social psychologist Erving Goffman’s *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) and to his later works, which have

³⁰ SMART, *Disability, Society...*, cit., pp. 228-30.

greatly contributed to the development of a sociology of deviance (see also Edward E. Jones' *Social Stigma: The Psychology of Marked Relationships* and John E. Pachankis and colleagues' *The Burden of Stigma on Health and Well-being: A Taxonomy of Concealment, Course, Disruptiveness, Aesthetics, Origin, and Peril across 93 Stigma*). Goffman, thus, defines stigma as "undesired differentness" that changes over time and in accordance with the norms, rules and procedures in which people interact; as the tendency of dominantly labelled normal people to consider, and thus often discriminate against, the stigmatised person as different.³¹ His analysis of stigma explores the power relations embedded in the constructions of normal embodiment, which he identifies as a privileged cultural status, a vessel for expectations that are socio-culturally located and, at the same time, influenced by individual experiences. Consequently, being perceived as the polar opposite of socio-culturally established normality, disability is not inherently stigmatising but is rendered so in everyday interactions where, by attributing context-dependent and socio-culturally constructed meanings to impairments that diverge from perceived bodily norms, individuals with disabilities are belittled as quasi-people compared to perceived normal ones.³²

Another Goffmanian concept that is of vital importance when discussing disability is that of role, which is resonant with dramatist Luigi Pirandello's idea that everyday existence is a performance imposed by society. Goffman stressed that human interaction is a ritualised practice with a script, which he calls "social self", that varies according to the social situation one is acting in and to the reactions of the people one is interacting with.³³ This applies to disability as well, which is often seen as a normative experience where there are rules and expectations at play, and consequences for those who break them, such as prejudice, discrimination and, in extreme cases, social and medical neglect. On the contrary, those who learn the rules of their role and perform according to their ascribed social self are rewarded. And what is the role of the person with a disability in the play of society? The answer can be found in the ever-optimistic *Share a Smile Becky*, the Mattel Barbie doll in a wheelchair released in 1997. People with disabilities are to face their impairment with a positive outlook, strive to recover and/or regain as many capabilities as possible, and make other PWOD³⁴ comfortable with their disabilities, speaking about them in a carefree, upbeat and semi-indirect manner. Moreover, people with disabilities are compelled to maintain a balance between actively managing their disability and submitting passively to professional treatment plans and decisions. And yet, no matter if they play the so-called "pathetic cripple" role, which

³¹ MIK-MEYER, "Symbolic Interactionism, Stigma and Othering", cit., p. 69.

³² COLEMAN-FOUNTAIN, MCLAUGHLIN, "The Interactions of Disability and Impairment", cit., p. 136.

³³ MIK-MEYER, "Symbolic Interactionism, Stigma and Othering", cit., pp. 56; 69.

³⁴ Acronym for "people without disabilities".

reinforces the power and privilege of PWOD, or “super cripple” role, which assures that having a disability is not a life-ending tragedy, neither role allows them access to the dominantly established normality.³⁵

Applying this framework of stigmatisation, we see that disability has always been the ultimate “Other”, codified to symbolise the dangerous and the inferior, something that scares, repulses and causes distress, all arguments that were used as justifications for practices of marginalisation, removal and medicalisation of people with disabilities. Quoting Mik-Meyer’s definition, “to be ‘othered’ is similar to a process of stigmatisation. [...] Within the field of disability research, Othering refers to the process where a person with an impairment is made different from ‘normal people’ – a difference that includes an interest in areas of their lives that have nothing to do with their disability”³⁶. Therefore, the body with disability is, to borrow an expression from Susan Wendell, the “rejected body”, a cultural artefact of the able-bodied society that has gradually turned into a reality for most people with disabilities. Similarly, another scholar, Rod Michalko (2002), describes the monstrous Other as created in opposition to the idealised normal person, and uses it to dismantle the normative understanding that an individual deficit inevitably makes someone disabled, instead reframing disability as a place of contestation against normative, disabling culture.³⁷

As a result of this framework, then, people with disabilities have been Othered for a long time, not to mention greatly influenced by the production and reiteration of all those cultural myths and narratives that see them as freaks of nature, unproductive, non-human, tainted by disease and, precisely because of all the above, not normal. Their position in society has been heavily affected by views of disability as a pathological problem that is entirely to be shouldered by the individual, who is often depicted as a tragic victim of fate. This understanding of disability, however, fails to recognise society’s role when it comes to stigmatising processes and socio-spatial constructions that engender, sustain and perpetuate the widespread representations which regulate exclusionary practices and ensure the maintenance of the dominant ideology.³⁸

In the next subsections, only some of the many examples of Othering and exclusionary processes that exist and are continuously reiterated in nowadays society will be presented and examined more in detail. For a further in-depth analysis of these Othering mechanisms, or for a broader range of them, see works

³⁵ SMART, *Disability, Society...*, cit., pp. 181-84.

³⁶ MIK-MEYER, “Symbolic Interactionism, Stigma and Othering”, cit., p. 56.

³⁷ GOODLEY, *Disability Studies...*, cit., pp. 12-13.

³⁸ KITCHIN, “‘Out of Place’...”, cit., pp. 351-52.

such as the abovementioned Erving Goffman (1963), Julie Smart (2009), Nanna Mik-Meyer (1996), Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2001), Iris M. Young (1990), and many others.

1.2.3 All the Ways to be Othered

A form of Othering can be identified in the hypervisibility and over-observation, with a consequent detriment to privacy and anonymity, that people with disabilities, particularly those whose impairment or assistive technology is visible, experience daily. After all, one of the dominant modes of looking at disability is the very act of looking, or better, of staring. As Garland-Thomson notes, however, “staring is an intense form of looking that enacts a relationship of spectator and spectacle between two people” and thus “manifests the power relations between the subject positions of ‘disabled’ and ‘able-bodied’”. This relationship construes the one who stares and holds the defining power as the normal, while the object of the staring is constituted as the Other.³⁹

The imposition of this power relationship through the act of staring, as well as the lack of privacy that derives from it, is exhausting on an emotional, mental and physical level, and, most importantly, is not something that can be avoided, especially if the disability is evident to the eye. The theatre-like everyday social performance mentioned by Goffman is, therefore, particularly true for people with disabilities who are subjected to such hypervisibility and are expected to act out their role at any moment, both in public and, in case they are the only family member with a disability, even in their private space. This leads to the paradox embedded within this over-observation: people with disabilities are stared at, often asked intrusive questions and approached with misinformed attitudes towards their impairment, yet no one sees them as people, but rather as their disability alone. It is important to specify that much of the attention they receive is not necessarily malicious; on the contrary, in most cases it is well-meant and devoid of any intention to annoy or inconvenience. And yet, unwanted attention directed solely at the disability, despite the intended benevolence behind it, still comes off as irritating and troublesome.⁴⁰

This particular mechanism of Othering is very curious because, in many cultural landscapes, staring is considered to be an extremely inappropriate form of looking; nevertheless, the body with a disability seems to bend this socio-cultural rule. The result is a parallel type of staring that is not the socially condemned solitary gaping, but a type of collective gazing that is allowed social sanction since the bodies of people with disabilities have been exhibited as clinical cases and constructed as abnormal and monstrous for a long time. While individual staring is prompted by the visible differentness of the single

³⁹ LONGMORE, “The Cultural Framing of Disability...”, cit., p. 502.

⁴⁰ SMART, *Disability, Society...*, cit., pp. 316-18.

individual, collective gazing on people with disabilities is not a casual single occurrence, but something that has been institutionalised as a semi/public event within designated arenas for dealing with people labelled as physically or physiologically anomalous (sideshows or hospitals as prime examples). With the formalisation of these displays not only where they happen, but also in broader society, the power relationship between PWOD and people with disabilities Garland-Thomson talks about became ritualised, developing into a cultural tradition that works to reinforce such ideology and power dynamics, and that imparts staring the power to define normality, abnormality, membership, marginalisation and exclusion.⁴¹

A fundamental concept when talking about Othering and disability is that of salience, that is, the assumption that disability is the most important, if not the only, aspect of the individual, who in turn also self-defines through disability alone. Ascribing such salience and importance to the impairment, however, functions only to highlight and exaggerate the difference that exists between PWOD and people with disabilities, successfully Othering the latter through their identification with their disability, which now becomes the reason behind every one of their thoughts and actions instead of their value system, their experiences, their preferences, and so on. Conversely, after medical stabilisation, disability is but one aspect of the individual and, at times, a relatively minor one in the person's self-concept; the ones who ascribe such salience to disabilities are actually, in most cases, PWOD themselves, who often see them as a bigger limitation than they really are.⁴²

Within the framework of salience, disability is treated as what philosopher Søren Kierkegaard would call an *aut-aut* proposition, namely a socio-culturally constructed situation where a person either is or is not disabled, an essentialist categorisation that elevates disability as the person's "*Masterstatus*", as sociologist Stefan Hirschauer would call it. Such *Masterstatus* essentialisation, however, has been heavily criticised by Disability Studies and disability rights groups, who, in order to prevent it, devised many strategies, one of them being the development of the so-called "person-first language": by saying "person with a disability" rather than "disabled person", the perceiver is slowed down both verbally and cognitively and is led to place the emphasis on the person in preference to the impairment. It is through these efforts, which avoid monolithic labels, that the chances of stereotyping, ignoring individual differences and segregating people into social categories of stigma are gradually decreasing.⁴³

⁴¹ LONGMORE, "The Cultural Framing of Disability...", cit., pp. 502-03.

⁴² SMART, *Disability, Society...*, cit., pp. 146-49.

⁴³ Kathleen R. BOGART, Dana S. DUNN, "Ableism Special Issue Introduction", in *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 75, no. 3, 2019, p. 653.

In a very similar way to other exclusionary mechanisms such as pity and paternalism, preferential treatment and lowered expectations can be both demeaning and insulting towards the individual they are supposed to be helping and could be defined as forms of discrimination. Some concrete examples of these behaviours and attitudes that do not allow people with disabilities to be equal partners to those they interact with are hiring and promotion preferences, admission to school or graduation from it on the sole basis of one's disability, tolerance for poor performance and, more generally, the application of different standards than the ones used for PWOD. This particular form of Othering can be controversial and problematic because it is widely thought of as a way of levelling the playing field, an appropriate compensation for the well-documented history of prejudice and discrimination experienced by people with disabilities; yet there are many other ways to provide equal opportunities without, in the long run, incurring resentment and rivalry from those who do not receive such preferential treatment (for instance, the provision of accommodations for individual disabilities, which is not to be mistaken for a lowering of standards). And while PWOD believe they are making amends, being kind or offering necessary help to people with disabilities, preferential treatment actually communicates that the recipients are not capable of doing the same thing as the conferrers, that they should be excused from the dominantly established normal standards commonly applied to everyone else; in other words, it puts into question their competence and credibility and keeps them in an inferior and dependent position without allowing them growth opportunities. Conversely, it can be equally demeaning to express surprise and praise people with disabilities for minor accomplishments that would not get the same reaction if completed by everyone else. Overprotection and sheltering are also forms of lowered expectations, although they tend to be perceived by PWOD as simple protection rather than a handicap to these people's independence and achievement; the same thing goes for tolerance of inappropriate behaviour based on pity towards people with disabilities, which is often observed in the field of education of children with disabilities, where the overprotection and relaxation of discipline frequently results in lack of competence and self-confidence in the most basic of tasks (dressing or washing themselves, placing a telephone call, interacting with others, etc.). Due to the application of different standards, many people with disabilities see their educational, professional and social opportunities significantly reduced, mainly because the presence of a disability functions as an immediate disqualifier in the minds of many people, regardless of whether this actually affects the requirements to gain said opportunities.⁴⁴

Connected to the theme of lowered standards, euphemisms may also be perceived as insulting since they imply that disability is a predominantly negative and unfortunate reality, as proved by the language usually

⁴⁴ SMART, *Disability, Society...*, cit., pp. 211; 311-13; 446.

used when discussing the disability experience, which has been for the most part condescending, trivialising and euphemistic. An example of this is the popular and widespread use of demeaning qualifying statements in the attempts to be optimistic and complimentary (a typical phrase is the “even if they are... they still manage to...”), while still placing the burden of the disability on the single individual without recognising the role played by society’s norms and environments. Once again, much like in the case of preferential treatment and lowered expectations, there is no malicious intent behind this kind of language, but it ends up being perceived as such, since these types of statements suggest that the speaker acknowledges the exception of the individual they are talking about, but at the same time holds on to biases and prejudices against the category to which they belong, that is, people with disabilities.⁴⁵

Misguided acts of perceived kindness are a much harder construct to deal with than even overt negative discrimination. One of the reasons for this is generally neither party understands the pernicious effects of this behavior. It may be years before the person with the disability realizes that he/she has been victimized by inadequate preparation and a lack of necessary independence.⁴⁶

These words from R. W. Harris (1992) introduce a very important issue within these un/malicious forms of Othering which can be applied to many other aspects of disability, such as its relationship with medical developments (as will be discussed in Chapter Two when examining the controversy of the cochlear implant). There is a deep-rooted tendency to think about everything in binary terms of black and white, right and wrong, but there are times when this mindset limits us from understanding the much more complicated circumstances that surround a certain issue. If something is not wrong, it does not necessarily mean that it is right, and this is because an assumption is rarely absolute and always has to be located geographically, historically and socio-culturally. Disability in an able-bodied society indeed faces many difficulties, but that does not mean that people with disabilities are exclusively individuals to be pitied, that their lives are spent in misery and suffering, and it certainly does not mean that, unless they find a way to become “normal”, they require the help of PWOD to enjoy life to its fullest.

Following the *fil rouge* of the exclusionary processes whose definition blurs the lines between maliciousness and benevolence, care is a central theme in literature on disability, often discussed in conjunction with Othering and infantilising practices, as well as a starting point of dependent and asymmetric relationships between the giver and the cared for. Mik-Meyer’s analysis of relationships within Danish workplaces through a symbolic interactionist perspective focuses on this aspect, showing the

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 99.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 313.

existence of a dominant caring approach to people with disabilities, which results in unintentional practices of Othering, stigmatisation and marginalisation. This sometimes-exaggerated positioning of people with disabilities as in need of care generates a stigmatising interaction that challenges the norms of equality and respect in a way that, however, cannot be fully equated to bullying, harassment and the widespread understanding of discrimination.⁴⁷

We use the word [independence] in a practical and commonsense way to mean simply being able to achieve our goals. The point is that independent people have control over their lives, not that they perform every task themselves. Independence is not linked to the physical or intellectual capacity to care for oneself without assistance; independence is created by having assistance when and how one requires it, being able to choose when and how care takes place.⁴⁸

Just like it has been said about perceived normality, abnormality and disability, the words of Jenny Morris (1991) express how the original meaning of the word “independence”, which is to control one’s life and decisions, is nuanced differently according to socio-cultural context and individual circumstances. For people with disabilities, this control translates into medical care, full and accessible information about their impairments, assistive technology, and other services; most of these things, however, are not necessarily included in PWOD’s definition of independence, according to which some forms of physical dependence are acceptable (moving with a car, letting a hairdresser wash a person’s hair, etc.), while others are not (moving with a wheelchair, letting a care attendant wash a person’s hair, etc.). No one is completely self-reliant and, to quote Deborah Marks’ words (1999), “people who are identified as being particularly dependent are made this way because social organisation and distribution of resources are arranged in such a way that discriminated against them...”. While this is true, people with disabilities define and interpret in/dependence differently, often without the glorification associated with the concept of independence. A practical example would be the role of personal care attendants, whose presence and common tasks would generally be connected with feelings of dependence and helplessness; for some people with disabilities, however, being able to direct paid attendants is a way to regain control of their lives and feel autonomous. Independence and autonomy are still valued as fundamental rights by individuals with disabilities, who interpret and frame these concepts differently through the manipulation of their immediate personal environment and their understanding of disability in order to achieve the greatest degree of independence possible, while also being aware that society’s structure and PWOD’s mindsets cannot be easily changed to adapt to their understanding of these notions.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ MIK-MEYER, “Symbolic Interactionism, Stigma and Othering”, cit., pp. 61; 67-68.

⁴⁸ SMART, *Disability, Society...*, cit., p. 554.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 337-39; 554.

It is not rare for PWOD to misinterpret behaviours of people with disabilities: requests for accommodations or assistance are often read as signs of dependence and passivity, while refusal of those very services is seen as rude and ungrateful, without stopping to consider if their imposition may be perceived by the recipients as an attempt to control them. And society can, and does indeed, impose unnecessary dependence on people with disabilities. As will be examined later in this chapter, the prevalent Medical Model of disability has never encouraged the assertiveness, independence and participation of people with disabilities, instead promoting the normative Goffmanian role of the disabled with its absolute passivity when it comes to acceptance of physicians' diagnoses, counsellors' advice, treatments, benefits and rehabilitation. Residential schooling, institutionalisation and prolonged hospitalisation were also crucial in the construction of dependence, especially since decision-making is a gradually learnt skill which has no space to develop in institutions where people are not even allowed to decide when they sleep or eat. And this is because, rather than viewing the needs of people with disabilities as situated in the relationship between them and their environment, most PWOD consider those needs solely as inherent to the individual's body. This is not to say that impairments and their functional losses have no influence on people's dependence, but it must be recognised that society further and needlessly promotes this dependence and the helplessness of people with disabilities by lowering expectations for them, incorporating financial disincentives that discourage them from going to work, giving children with disabilities inferior education, being unwilling to provide reasonable accommodations, accessible environments, assistive technology, and so on.⁵⁰

二十四時使えて手話で連絡出来るからすぐ伝えられて便利だなと思った。それにしても「聴者が助けてくれればいい」という考えは果たして良いのだろうか？いつまでも聴者に頼るのはどうなのかなと思った。

(. . .) ろう者でも過ごしやすく、便利になってきている現在でもまだ聴者に頼っている。

I thought it was convenient that [the telephone relay service] can be used 24 hours a day and allows communication in sign language, so you can get your point across right away. That said, is it really a good mindset to think, “It’s fine as long as hearing people help us”? I wondered about relying on hearing people forever. [...] Even now, as the world becomes a more convenient and accessible place for D/deaf people to live, we are still relying on hearing people.⁵¹

Yasupi's words in *Rōbungaku* regarding the Telephone Relay Service allow a glance into the specific form of dependence imposed on D/deaf people, alluding to a much larger system that is wholly structured to

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 327; 339-40; 553.

⁵¹ YASUPI, “Rōsha no Arikata” (my translation), in Watanabe T. (edited by), *Rōbungaku: dai 1 gō – dai 25 gō*, Yokohama, Rakuyō Publishing and Printing, 2025, pp. 159-60.

establish and perpetuate it. If the alternative for the ordinary D/deaf individual is the internalisation of a self-image that has been built around their impairment, their vocational and economic limitation because of a simplified and inferior education, and the inhibition of their emotional growth because of isolation, services such as rehabilitation, counselling, outreach programs, and so on will naturally appear as the lesser evil. The hearing establishment, therefore, unwittingly shapes D/deaf people to be what it thinks they should be, and they strive to comply with these expectations in order to please those in power and receive all sorts of services and benefits in return. Through this system, D/deaf individuals are not simply dependent, but also Othered, since when inserted in the hearing society they are bound to feel deviant, to experience first-hand their difference from everyone else, especially when it comes to communication.⁵²

Another fundamental process of exclusion is discussed by Rob Kitchin in his article “‘Out of place’, Knowing One’s Place: Space, Power, and the Exclusion of Disabled People” (1998), where he claims space is socially produced and constructed to exclude people with disabilities by putting them “in their place” or by conveying to them that they are “out of place”. In other words, space does not naturally exclude people with disabilities and perpetuate discriminatory practices towards them, but it is made to do so through individual interactions, State policies, building regulations, and architectural and planning practices, all in order to maintain the hegemony of able-bodied people. This is evident when looking at environments and buildings designed as if people are all the same, with same being synonymous with able-bodied.⁵³ Spatial organisation, as also shown by Freund’s “disabling city” and the increasingly fast pace of its life, is never neutral, but rather political in the way it prioritises some people and handicaps others. This organisation of society and of its physical structures is a product of the post-war period, when designers often produced and perpetuated exclusive and segregated spaces because of a stereotypical conception that saw every individual similar to one another in their capacities to get access and move around the built environment. The inevitable result was the frequent exclusion of people with disabilities from public spaces and their sequestration in private and institutional ones; furthermore, the disabling features of socio-material environments also contributed to the production of the consciousness of one’s disabled body, making people with disabilities feel alienated not only from the space they are in, but also from their very physical and impaired bodies.⁵⁴ A well-known example of spaces that have been historically built to deliberately separate the public from people with disabilities are the institutions that, even today, segregate people with mental disabilities while also prescribing

⁵² Harlan LANE, *The Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community*, New York, Knopf, 1992, pp. 90; 92.

⁵³ KITCHIN, “‘Out of Place’...”, cit., pp. 344-46.

⁵⁴ FREUND, “Bodies, Disability and Spaces...”, cit., pp. 696-98.

treatments that aim to make them more befitting the dominant ideal of normality, or sedate them to stop them from harming themselves and those labelled as normal people (a more in-depth and localised analysis of the constructed and contested spaces for people with mental disabilities can be found in Karen Nakamura's *Disability of the Soul: An Ethnography of Schizophrenia and Mental Illness in Contemporary Japan*). A similar marginalisation can also be observed towards people with physical and sensory disabilities, who have been, by and large, forced to live their lives in different spatial spheres, such as segregated schools, employment training and day-care units; moreover, denied access to employment and social events has been restricting their ability to earn, automatically confining them to inadequate housing and welfare-dependent lifestyles.⁵⁵

Good inclusive design will send positive messages to disabled people, [...] if the way that disabled people are expected to get into a building is round the back, past the bins and through the kitchens, what does that message communicate? How will it make a disabled person feel?⁵⁶

Sue Napolitano (1995) here identifies a vicious cycle where space and its physical features are ascribed and convey cultural signifiers that communicate, explicitly or implicitly, whether someone belongs there or not; these meanings are taught through socio-cultural practices whereby people, with/out disabilities, know how to read cultural landscapes and act accordingly (for example, to be silent inside religious places, libraries and museums); the continuous reiteration of these socio-cultural practices reproduces these meaning conveyed by specific spaces; and finally, through this cycle, distinct spatialities, landscapes of exclusion which keep people with disabilities “in their place”, are reproduced and come to be perceived as natural and commonsense. This cycle of production of meaning through space is so entrenched that the majority of people are generally unaware of the exclusionary practices it produces, unconsciously accepting them as doxa without taking into consideration the perspective of the people with disabilities it marginalises, who in turn are indoctrinated into accepting these able-bodied conceptions and coming to “know their place”. In other words, socio-spatial relationships are ordered and maintained through a dominant ideology which tells people with disabilities that they are different and thus “out of place”; all of this is further reinforced by a combination of popularised cultural representations and constructed narratives of the disabled Other. Understanding space therefore becomes necessary to acknowledge that mechanisms of Othering can also manifest as “socio-spatial phenomena”⁵⁷, to borrow Brendan Gleeson's expression, since socio-material contexts are instrumental in the reiteration, maintenance and resistance

⁵⁵ KITCHIN, “‘Out of Place’...”, cit., pp. 347; 349.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 349.

⁵⁷ FREUND, “Bodies, Disability and Spaces...”, cit., p. 694.

of disablist practices and power relations within society. The latter part is particularly important as people with disabilities have been resisting this dominant ideology for a long time by reclaiming a what they perceive as a normal life in individual-based ways; only in recent years, disability rights groups have started exploring more collective and confrontational ways to turn sites of oppression and discrimination into spaces of resistance, as it is the case with, for example, the policial activities and efforts of the Japanese Federation of the Deaf.⁵⁸

1.2.4 An Ableist World

Having taken a closer look at the socio-culturally constructed nature of the concepts of disability, normality and abnormality, as well as some of the resulting, and mostly unconsciously accepted, Othering processes that permeate nowadays' daily social and private life, it is now time to introduce the soil that allows these socio-cultural relational phenomena to grow and flourish; that is, ableism.

According to researcher Fiona Kumari Campbell (2001), "Ableism refers to a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability then is cast as a diminished state of being human"⁵⁹. As it has already been shown, some of the categories of difference used to label human beings can also lead to their devaluation, and one of these categories is ability, the capacity to perform occupations in a conventional way. Ableism, as the social norm of being able, expects a person to be able to walk, see, hear, decide what they want to do, manage their daily life independently, and so on, in order to be fully acknowledged as human within society; whoever does not possess the expected level of skills is classified in the category of dis/ability⁶⁰. That is to say, ableism is a prevalent worldview where it is tacitly accepted that all people should possess a norm-level of skills to complete daily occupations in the context they are inserted in. This canon level of skills, however, is not fixed, but highly subject to change over time. For example, while the ability to read and write is nowadays seen as self-evident in many societies all over the world, especially WENA ones, it was not so commonplace two centuries ago, and its importance can vary depending on which region of the world is taken into analysis.⁶¹ Due to the focus on people's abilities, ableist accounts conceal the role of socio-cultural environments and institutions generally designed in accordance with PWOD's needs, instead treating disabilities as

⁵⁸ KITCHIN, "‘Out of Place’...", cit., pp. 349-51; 353-54.

⁵⁹ BOGART, DUNN, "Ableism Special Issue Introduction", cit., p. 651.

⁶⁰ Dis/ability is a term coined by Dan Goodley in 2018 to express that all people can be classified within this category throughout their lives, both because a person might change over time, but also because the very category is highly subjected to change.

⁶¹ Georg GAPPMAYER, "Disentangling Disablism and Ableism: The Social Norm of Being Able and its Influence on Social Interactions with People with Intellectual Disabilities", in *Journal of Occupational Science*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2020, p. 105.

exclusively negative differences that are entirely inherent to, and thus the responsibility of, the individuals who experience them.

Considering how ableism expresses specific ability-related ideals and preferences valued by dominant social groups and structures, it is not only people with disabilities who fall under the label of a diminished humanity on the grounds of real or perceived deviation or lack of “essential abilities”. This preference for specific abilities over others has been a constant throughout history and, nowadays too, continues to shape a significant portion of society, making ableism not only one of the most socially embedded and unwittingly accepted forms of -isms, but also, as researcher Gregor Wolbring (2008) points out, the umbrella -ism that encompasses other -isms such as racism, sexism, casteism, and many more. Historically, ableism has been used by various dominant social groups to justify their elevated level of rights and status in relation to other groups. When leading to sexism, ableism allowed for women to be viewed as biologically fragile and emotional, thus not able to bear the responsibility of voting, owning their own property or receiving the same high education as men; similarly, ableism has been, and continues to be, used to justify hierarchies of rights, leading to racist arguments based on judgement on cognitive abilities, or to casteism based on the notion that specific groups of people have natural abilities which make them fit for determined social positions and occupations. In the specific case of ableism against people with disabilities, there is a medical-supported preference for species-type normative abilities which leads to these individuals’ discrimination as disabled people, to the rejection of the idea of bodily difference, and to the misguided goal of “fixing” these people or at least preventing more of them from being born.⁶²

A particular form of ableism was introduced by Harlan Lane (1992) to indicate the corporate establishment for dealing with D/deaf people by making statements about them, governing their educational path and, in some cases, their way of living as well. This hearing way of dominating, restructuring and exercising authority over the D/deaf community is termed audism⁶³, and is reminiscent of colonialist practices in the clear division that exists between how the audist endeavour views D/deaf people and how D/deaf people see themselves, not to mention in the significant divergence between their ideas and agendas. This becomes especially evident when observing how hearing experts do not factor in D/deaf people’s opinions in the management of their own affairs, often operating to the economic advantage and sustenance of the audist establishment rather than to the interest of the D/deaf community.⁶⁴

⁶² Gregor WOLBRING, “The Politics of Ableism”, in *Development*, vol. 51, 2008, p. 253.

⁶³ “Audism” is a term originally coined by academic Tom L. Humphries in one of his unpublished papers in 1975.

⁶⁴ LANE, *The Mask of Benevolence...*, cit., pp. 43-44; 47.

Keeping this in mind, then, we must always be careful to understand the difference between an emic perspective and an etic one: people with disabilities know and experience first-hand what it is like to have a disability and how this is but one part of their self-concept; on the other hand, PWOD tend to make ableist assumptions regarding disability, understanding it as a continuous and solely negative influence on a person's behaviour, choices, thoughts and life in general. These negative implicit and explicit attitudes towards people with disabilities inevitably affect the quality and nature of interactions, which for the most part tend to be awkward encounters that heavily rely on stereotypes and expected social roles; the reason for this, as previously mentioned, is to be found in the insufficient, if not lacking altogether, conscious contact that PWOD have with actual people with disabilities, which is contrasted with the greater and significantly influential exposition to cultural and media images that underrepresent or negatively depict disability.⁶⁵

娘が生まれ、私たちと同じくみみが聞こえないという障害があることについて、近所の方、職場の同様の
ような反応をされることもあった。（．．．）当時は、これが普通の受け取り方だと思っていた。しかし、
ろう者に関わる専門家である小児科の言語聴覚士、ろう学校の先生、手話通訳士などからは、「ろう
者で良かったね。手話で楽しくコミュニケーションができるというのは素晴らしいことだよ。本当におめでと
う！」

When our daughter was born and had a hearing impairment just like us, people in our neighbourhood
had a similar reaction to that of our colleagues. [...] At the time, I thought this was the normal way to
react. However, professionals involved with D/deaf people, such as paediatric speech-language
therapists, teachers at schools for the D/deaf, and sign language interpreters, said, “How wonderful that
she’s D/deaf! It’s fantastic to be able to communicate joyfully in sign language. Congratulations!”⁶⁶

The contrast between emic and etic perspective is evident in the words of Tomita as he recounts the reactions of the people around him to the birth of his daughter. From this small excerpt, one can immediately recognise the emotional response commonly referred to as distressed identification, that is, the automatic assumption of PWOD that a disability is one of the worst scenarios that can ever happen to someone. And once again, while disability certainly presents many obstacles and difficulties, this does not immediately translate to misfortune. Shifting to an emic perspective that is also shared by Tomita himself, it has been proven that many D/deaf expectant parents wish for their child to be D/deaf, since

⁶⁵ BOGART, DUNN, “Ableism Special Issue Introduction”, cit., p. 656.

⁶⁶ TOMITA Junji, “Watashi no Musume” (my translation), in Watanabe T. (edited by), *Rōbungaku: dai 1 gō – dai 25 gō*, Yokohama, Rakuyō Publishing and Printing, 2025, p. 232.

D/deafness is seen not as a tragic flaw, as the often exaggerated complete silence and isolation many PWOD believe it to be, but as a fundamental part of the identity parents want to share with their children. Etic points of view rarely take into consideration that the disability experience can be a vital part of a person's self-concept and that it can be linked to feelings of accomplishment and growth.⁶⁷

Campbell identifies two core elements in the regimes of ableism: the notion of the normative and the normative individual, and the enforcement of a constitutional divide between the naturalised humanity and the quasi-human hybrid. In other words, one of the results of ableism is the ingrained belief that the social norm of being able is natural, and that this norm is the ideal everyone should aspire to. On the practical level, this translates into a reinforcement of the tendency to “normalise” people with disabilities, which can be seen in the majority of medical and human institutions, from hospitals to schools, where the final goal is the dominantly perceived normal bodily functions and behaviours, that is, the ideologically constructed normal (able-bodied) person.⁶⁸

One of the most oppressive features of the prejudice which disabled [...] people experience is the assumption that we want to be other than we are, that is, we want to be normal [...]. Do we only have value, even to ourselves, in direct relation to how closely we can imitate “normal” appearance, function, belief, and behavior? The only way in which it seems we can gain acceptance is to emulate normality.⁶⁹

Morris (1991) here introduces a fundamental concept when talking about ableism, namely, ableist normativity, the more often than not erroneous belief that people with disabilities' greatest wish is to be “normal”. On the topic, Campbell writes that, “Internalised ableism means that to emulate the norm, the disabled individual is required to embrace, indeed, to assume, an ‘identity’ other than one's own.”⁷⁰. Desiring a socio-culturally determined ideal of normality for a person despite of the fact that they have a disability is a common phenomenon of unintentional ableism amongst PWOD; although it may appear as a well-intentioned (it has already been discussed earlier that well-meant practices can result in inadvertent discriminatory behaviours) line of thought, its problematic core emerges when the same logic is applied to any other minority status, such as race or ethnicity. It is absurd to encourage individuals to be something that they, ultimately, are not, even more so when the implied message turns out to be that it would be better to be something else, a PWOD, and that there is indeed a significant difference between people with and without disabilities.⁷¹ On a broader level, the underlying ethos of ableist normativity

⁶⁷ SMART, *Disability, Society...*, cit., pp. 185-86.

⁶⁸ GAPPMEYER, “Disentangling Disablism and Ableism...”, cit., p. 106.

⁶⁹ SMART, *Disability, Society...*, cit., p. 231.

⁷⁰ GOODLEY, *Dis/ability Studies...*, cit., p. 22.

⁷¹ SMART, *Disability, Society...*, cit., p. 243.

follows the State's policies of integration and assimilation, which most of the time aim at the achievement of a certain degree of homogeneity within its borders when it comes to ability through the rehabilitation of people with disabilities into dominantly established normal individuals, rather than endeavouring to change the system to accommodate them and their bodily differences.⁷² Nowadays, still, the most common answer of society when faced with disabilities is to ameliorate, cure or eliminate them, since the dominant ableist understanding equates them to suffering; this is further emphasised in the realm of medicine, where normality is perceived as opposite to disability, which is in turn constructed as an unfortunate problem that requires treatment to be solved.⁷³

Every -ism has two components: something that is valued, and something that is devalued. Therefore, just as racism carries the valorisation of one race over another and the discrimination against the devalued race, so does ableism carry the valorisation of certain abilities and the discrimination against people perceived as disabled, a practice referred to as disablism. The two may seem similar and are often confused or used interchangeably, but they point to two different phenomena.⁷⁴ Where ableism is the social norm that values, and obsesses with, in a sense, ability, disablism is, borrowing Campbell's definition, "a set of conscious or unconscious assumptions and practices that foster the different or unequal treatment of people because of their actual or presumed disabilities."⁷⁵ To help understand the difference between the two concepts, one could think of ableism as the fertile soil in which exclusionary disablist practices grow, namely all those practices that exclude people with disabilities from everyday occupations, and that result in forms of social, cultural, political and economic oppression. To oppose these kinds of practices, it is not enough to foster inclusion and support people with disabilities' participation and skills improvement in mainstream society; we must get to the root of the issue and challenge the ableist belief that human beings make sense of themselves based on ability. Without doing so, the cemented tendency to "normalise" people and the socio-culturally constructed expectations of participation based on a dominantly established norm level of skills will remain. What is needed to challenge both ableism and disablism, as highlighted by Georg Gappmeyer, is the deconstruction of the ideology of normality and a new and valued reframing of bodily differences, which resonates with the arguments adopted also by queer, feminist and antiracist discourses. Quoting physiotherapist Barbara E. Gibson (2016), "differences do matter but the meaning and significance attached to particular kinds of differences comes from discrete notions of 'normal as good' that should be radically reformulated".⁷⁶

⁷² KITCHIN, "Out of Place...", cit., p. 347.

⁷³ GAPPMEYER, "Disentangling Disablism and Ableism...", cit., pp. 107-08.

⁷⁴ WOLBRING, "The Politics of Ableism", cit., p. 252.

⁷⁵ GAPPMEYER, "Disentangling Disablism and Ableism...", cit., p. 106.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 110-11.

Campbell and Wolbring themselves, in their works, push for a de-neutralisation of allegedly neutral spaces of normality and body politics, since the glorification of socio-cultural norms regarding human bodies inevitably brings with it the idealisation of some forms of life over others.⁷⁷

1.2.5 Flipping the Ableist World

Ableist thought is so deeply entrenched in every aspect of our daily lives, our realities and the very way we view other people and interact with them, that it might be hard, if not downright impossible, to think of deconstructing it. Even only imagining a social world where valued abilities and bodily functions are different from what they currently are may prove to be quite difficult. In these cases, it can be useful to think about it in the same way Ruth Frankenberg does with Whiteness in her “The Mirage of an Unmarked Whiteness” (2001): we need to stop and think critically about who is behind the ableist gaze, about why and how ableism has made itself invisible to the point of being assumed as a universal social norm. One way to do this is to remember that, as much as the ableist eyes gaze upon those it deems pitiful and unfortunate because they do not meet the broadly accepted level of skills to be normal, the observed “Other” is not just a suffering entity; they are a person with their own thoughts and their own gaze. And this gaze can, and on many occasions does, topple the ableist one from its standpoint of structural, socio-cultural, political and economic advantage.

The most straightforward way to force ableists to come to face with the discrimination and oppression they have caused and are still causing is perhaps to shock them by overturning the perspective, flipping what today is considered able-bodied into disabled and what is considered disabled into able-bodied. This, of course, happens only in works of fiction, but examining these restructured realities can be quite useful, since, when ableists are lowered to the same disadvantageous position they put “Others” in, the asymmetrical power relationship underlying ableism can be more easily unmarked and explicated, and the consequences of the devaluing practices and beliefs towards people with disabilities emerge as well.

In the 25th volume of the booklet *Rōbungaku*, Akiko writes a short piece of fiction, “Daako” (inverting the syllables of the acronym CODA⁷⁸), that follows the vicissitudes of a classroom where a new transfer student is coming, a lovely girl who just happens not to be labelled as normal since she has a hearing disability (*kikoeru shōga*): the girl is, in fact, a rare case of hearing person in a world of D/deaf people. This girl can speak orally, but she cannot understand sign language, which is why she is accompanied and

⁷⁷ GOODLEY, *Dis/ability Studies...*, cit., p. 25.

⁷⁸ Acronym for Children Of Deaf Adults, referring to a hearing child born to a family of D/deaf parents.

has to constantly rely on a *daako* interpreter, that is, a hearing person born to D/deaf parents. This prompts various reactions from her new classmates, from curiosity to pity, and one of them even asks himself, “I wonder why there are people who can hear. It would be easier if everyone was D/deaf” (my translation).⁷⁹ In this short story we briefly see the same practices of exclusion and Othering that have been discussed in this chapter: the assumption that disability equates with tragedy and the subsequent feelings of pity and paternalism, the “even though/even if” language and role entrapment of hearing people as disabled, the elevation of disability as the girl and the interpreter’s *Masterstatus*, the imposition of needless dependence, and so on. The practices and beliefs do not change, and neither do the results; the only different thing is who wears the labels of able-bodied and disabled, which once again proves exactly their nature as socio-culturally constructed notions that are heavily reliant on the context they are developed in.

A similar fictional scenario can be found in the 1904 story *The Country of the Blind* by Herbert G. Wells, though the circumstances of this story are quite different, since we see the ableist and colonialist mindset of the protagonist, Nunez, clashing against the ableist one of the villagers of the country of the blind, an isolated place he finds after falling down a cliff. The story, then, follows the trials and tribulations of Nunez throughout the realisation that his valued proverb, “In the Country of the Blind the One-Eyed Man is King”, is actually of no value at all when he is a minority inside of a society that has labelled him as mentally ill and abnormal. The coloniser thinks himself a god in the colony, yet when he is there, he discovers he has now become the Other and not the other way around. And once again, disability is proved to be dependent on the socio-cultural context and the interactions whereby it is constructed. The climax of the story comes when, in order for him to get married, the elders of the village decide he needs to remove the ailment that is purportedly making him abnormal, that is, his very eyes, the source of his perceived disability. It would be better to gouge them out, so that he can befit the ideologically constructed ideal of normal of that specific community.⁸⁰ The horror and shock one might feel when reading of such a decision is immediately put into question when thinking that, exactly like the villagers of the country of the blind, our own society used to promote eugenic sterilisation and interruption of pregnancy for the sake of dominantly perceived normality. Looking at nowadays’ society, too, there is really no difference between teachers expecting D/deaf pupils to understand oral language, and the blind villagers expecting Nunez to stop seeing. Both are trying to make a person with a perceived disability into something they are not.

⁷⁹ AKIKO, “Daako”, in Watanabe T. (edited by), *Rōbungaku: dai 1 gō – dai 25 gō*, Yokohama, Rakuyō Publishing and Printing, 2025, pp. 309-12.

⁸⁰ Herbert G. WELLS, “The Country of the Blind”, in *The Country of the Blind and Other Stories*, Leipzig, Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1926, pp. 9-48.

“And I think I may say with reasonable certainty that, in order to cure him completely, all that we need do is a simple and easy surgical operation – namely, to remove these irritant bodies.” “And then he will be sane?” “Then he will be perfectly sane, and a quite admirable citizen.” “Thank Heaven for science!”⁸¹

These are quite extreme and fantasy scenarios, but they mirror exactly what has been happening in society for a long time now because of ableism and disablist practices of exclusion and discrimination. There are, however, other examples, real ones, which show that the deconstruction of normativity and the reframing of bodily differences as positive and valued is possible. First and foremost, the case of Martha’s Vineyard, an island south of Massachusetts. In 1694, Jonathan Lambert, a sailor who carried an inherited trait of deafness, arrived on the island and, because of geographic isolation and intermarriage, by 1850 one out of 25 residents in one of the main towns was D/deaf. This resulted in a general lack of disability identity on the island: on Martha’s Vineyard, D/deafness was a natural part of human existence, a trait as unremarkable as having curls or red hair. Precisely because D/deafness was not deemed as abnormal or pathological but simply as a bodily difference, the use of sign language was also not considered an accommodation, but a widespread communication system universally understood, which played a crucial role in making sure there was no disability identity linked to D/deaf people. Moreover, not being disabled and handicapped by society, there was no social nor economic disadvantage for being D/deaf. This is linked to the model of universality of a disability, according to which everyone in a community having the same impairment leads to the socio-material context evolving to accommodate it, with a corresponding absence of prejudice, stigma and discrimination towards that category, since it encompasses the whole community. It is important to specify, though, that this did not lead to a lack of disability identity for *all* people with physical or sensory impairments: disability was still a constructed concept, but the socio-cultural context made it so that D/deaf people were not included in it.⁸²

A similar situation of universality of disability on a smaller scale is what is observable with CODAs, since they tend to naturally grow up bilingual, learning both a sign language from their parents and the national spoken language in school and from the hearing people around them. Before coming into contact with society and its norms and views on disability, CODAs assume that D/deafness is nothing abnormal or deviant, that there is no need for their parents to adhere to society’s expectations on normativity, a view that is heavily influenced by CODAs’ knowledge of a sign language, which allows for smooth communication with their parents. This situation is quite different from that of hearing parents of D/deaf

⁸¹ Herbert G. WELLS, “The Country of the Blind”, cit., p. 42.

⁸² SMART, *Disability, Society...*, cit., pp. 17-18.

children, who have no way to communicate with their child if they do not learn sign language and thus push for them to enter the hearing world instead.⁸³

As Lane says, “Social problems, it seems, are partly what we make of them”⁸⁴. The way in which society understands ability, and consequently disability, normality, and many other categories, determines the meaning of these labels and the treatment reserved for those who fall under them. Just like that, a D/deaf person becomes disabled in a hearing society, a blind man is able-bodied in the country of the blind, and a person could be either one or the other depending on the context they are placed into and its socio-cultural norms.

1.3 The Models of Disability

1.3.1 What Is a Model?

As previously discussed, specific types of embodiments are framed as different by some people and within specific contexts, and the implications of these frameworks position disability in the middle of a complex relational interplay that involves both the personal level and the political one. In other words, how we make sense of the social world and of our identity is linked to our bodies and to the stories about them that circulate and are rooted in wider society. According to the tradition of symbolic interactionism, these interpretations of reality in turn affect the shape of our encounters and experiences through the establishment of roles, settings and interaction orders that are acted out on a daily basis, changing and being changed by said views on ourselves and others.⁸⁵ And, within the literature of disability, these frameworks of understanding are often termed “models”.

A model is, then, a human-made set of concepts for understanding determined phenomena or experiences, and a human-made set of guidelines to act accordingly to what is understood. Precisely because they are human-made, there is no model that is not subject to error, or that offers a perfect reading of reality: each one of them is a product of its time and of the context in which it was formulated, therefore adapting to the needs and preconceptions of that time. Smart provides a list of the various functions of models: they offer a definition of what disability is thought to be, they help identify its cause and who is to be held responsible, they determine needs, they regulate which academic disciplines study the experience of disability, they shape people with disabilities’ self-identity through definition, diagnoses

⁸³ *Ibidem*, p. 449.

⁸⁴ Harlan LANE, “Constructions of Deafness”, in *Disability & Society*, vol. 10, no. 2, p. 172.

⁸⁵ COLEMAN-FOUNTAIN, MCLAUGHLIN, “The Interactions of Disability and Impairment”, cit., pp. 137; 142.

and theories of cause and responsibility, and they can cause prejudice and discrimination. All these functions show how, despite models being theories that do not actually exist in reality, they have the power to shape it and, on some occasions, to cause harm.⁸⁶

1.3.2 The Belief of Moral Accountability

Much of the stigma that has been directed towards individuals with disability in the past was a result of society ascribing the responsibility, and thus the blame, of the impairment to the individual's lifestyle choices and lack of character or self-control, especially when talking about mental disabilities. While nowadays the aetiology and pathogenesis of many impairments is well-known and researched, in the past many societies considered disabilities to be caused by a sin or a wrongdoing committed by the person in question or their parents/ancestors. Due to this moral accountability, whether the source of the disability was ascribed to ill fortune or the anger of the gods, it was thought to be exclusively the individual and their family's responsibility, who had to manage it without burdening other blameless people with requests for assistance, accommodations or rights. This rationale, which philosopher Jerome E. Bickenbach (1993) calls "primitive retributivism" in the following definition, freed society from any responsibility and feeling of guilt for isolating people with disabilities and not allowing them their civil rights.⁸⁷

Primitive retributivism is the view that people who are manifestly defective are living out a just punishment for sins, vices, or other moral faults, known or unknown, that they have been inflicted by some powerful and moral force. At most, in this view, these manifest sinners are entitled to our pity; but it is our duty to dissociate ourselves from them.⁸⁸

This belief of moral accountability can also be observed in some countries of central Africa, where it was reported that, upon the discovery that their child would be deaf, mothers' first response was to verify whether their ancestors had been properly buried. This is a specific example, but in many societies, there was, and there still is, a belief that disability is somehow connected to moral failing (in some branches of Hinduism and Buddhism, for example, disability is thought to be the result of the accumulation of negative karma in a previous life).⁸⁹

⁸⁶ SMART, *Disability, Society...*, cit., pp. 58-59.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 173; 175-76.

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 176.

⁸⁹ LANE, *The Mask of Benevolence...*, cit., p. 11.

Considering the unscientific grounds on which belief of moral accountability is based, however, the development of medicine has brought to its gradual abandonment as a model of understanding disability. As researcher G. Thomas Couser (2011) states, medicine “tends to demystify and naturalise somatic anomaly, stripping away any supernatural or moral significance and characterising physical variation solely as a matter that science may investigate and attempt to remedy.”⁹⁰.

1.3.3 The Medical Model of Disability

The Medical Model of disability centres on the anatomy and physiology of the individual, using objective and standardised measures and being endorsed by experts who provide clear-cut and largely agreed-upon characteristics, causes, diagnoses and methods of treatment. According to this framework, then, a person is either labelled to be normal or pathological (as we have previously examined, the former often just means a lack of the latter).⁹¹ This model is the most familiar and more widely understood conception of disease and disability because of its long history and of how much it permeated society and its institutions. The advent of industrialisation in WENA countries brought forth the so-called Enlightenment period, when, amongst other practices and sciences, eugenics was also developed and used as a method to classify people with the goal of normalising the ones who deviated from the established average, that is, from the norm based on the ruling classes; this was also when medical professions around disability and segregated spaces for this process of ideologically grounded normalisation started to emerge. On the other hand, though, those who were deemed too abnormal or unfixable were prevented from socialisation and reproduction, in order to eliminate all allegedly defectives individuals from the chain of evolution of the species.⁹² We can see, then, that, despite a different rationale and through a different framework, the Medical Model also constructs disability as an individual, and now pathological, problem, where once again people with disabilities are simply tragic victims of nature; and, in the same vein as the belief of moral accountability, society is automatically absolved of blame and guilt for its stigmatising practices.

The most commonly held belief about [this model of] disablement is that it involves a defect, deficiency, dysfunction, failing or medical “problem” that is located in an individual. We think it is so obvious as to be beyond serious dispute that disablement is a characteristic of a *defective person*, someone who is fundamentally limited or anatomically abnormal, diseased, or pathoanatomical, someone who is

⁹⁰ GOODLEY, *Dis/ability Studies...*, cit., p. 4.

⁹¹ SMART, *Disability, Society...*, cit., p. 60.

⁹² KITCHIN, “‘Out of Place’...”, cit., p. 348.

biologically inferior or subnormal. The essence of disablement, in this view, is that there are things *wrong* with people with disabilities.⁹³

Bickenbach (1993) clearly illustrates the Medical Model's focus on pathology and on the individual's biology, or, to borrow an expression from medical sociologist Peter Conrad, the "medicalisation of disability". This tunnel vision, however, allows for the overlooking of the individual's role functioning, the environment they live in and their personal circumstances; that is, social and relational factors are not taken into account in this model of understanding disability, which emphasises the individual solely as a patient to be cured, or a problem to be fixed depending on who one asks. And because of its frequent use of terminology such as "patient", "treatment", "pathology", the Medical Model is perceived to be that of omniscient medical experts delivering services to recipients, who are expected to be compliant and to whom little information is provided. And although these patterns are changing, many people with disabilities still face attitudes that devalue and frame them as inferior beings unable to manage their own lives, both from individual people and from social institutions where the medical methodology and mindset have taken root and influenced policies and decisions (for example, we see many times physicians tasked with the direction of state residences and schools for people with disabilities despite those being places for sociality and culture, or policymakers asking physicians instead of people with disabilities opinions regarding disability services).⁹⁴ The conceptual framework of the Medical Model, which sees and interacts with people with disabilities only by seeing them through their perceived bodily defect, has become implicit, acquired in the course of acculturation. Society, to put it another way, has come to look at people with disabilities in a certain way, to use a certain vocabulary of medicalisation and infirmity, and these practices are so prevalent and endorsed by medical and paramedical professions that they seem correct and natural rather than constructed and political.⁹⁵

It is important to highlight, however, that only in the Medical Model and in the belief of moral accountability, disability is constructed as the problem entirely inherent in the individual. Obviously, there is no intention to deny the importance of medicine or, even less, to demonise its practice and its practitioners; above all, we cannot deny that the concept of disability is constructed upon real bodies with real differences.

Medicine has given many people, with or without disabilities, their lives, and it is thanks to the evolution of the medical field that nowadays so many people with disabilities are born without complications and

⁹³ SMART, *Disability, Society...*, cit., p. 60.

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 61-63; 65.

⁹⁵ LANE, *The Mask of Benevolence...*, cit., pp. 18; 22.

can live longer. What is being criticised of the Medical Model is that, when phrased solely through medical knowledge, disability is understood as an exclusively biological, genetic, neurological and physiological issue, confining it within the single individual with the disability.⁹⁶ These categories of medical definition play a crucial role in shaping and informing interactions, obscuring the fact that while the impairment is connected to the body, disability is instead produced by labels that have no neutral meaning beyond the medical processes that translate them into realities.⁹⁷

1.3.4 The Social Model of Disability

The Social Model of disability, developed by the British activists of the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) in the 1970s, is the main critical voice against the medicalisation and individualisation of disability. This framework was born as a device for mobilising around disability as a political category, and it provided a new vocabulary that contested the mechanism of disablement, namely, the socio-cultural barriers that prevent people with disabilities from living like those without. In line with many other political movements that had emerged during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, such as those of racial, gender and sexual minority groups, the Social Model turned disability from a practice of impairment to one of oppression. According to Nirmala Erevelles (2002), this framework distances itself from the Medical Model through a socio-political analysis of disability, describing it as an ideological construction “to justify not only the oppressive binary cultural constructions of normal/pathological, autonomous/dependent, and competent citizen/ward of the state but also the social divisions of labour”, identifying the roots of disablement in the segregation of people with disabilities from educational settings, and in the marginalisation from or within the labour market through institutionalisation or special employment schemes, both processes that result in the deskilling of these people.⁹⁸ Moreover, it overcomes the limitations of seeing disability linked only to the isolated and individual body, introducing what Freund calls the “body *in situ*”, that is, a body which engages with a specific socio-material environment and that is inseparable from it. The question, thus, is now not which bodies can function in a particular context, but what type of structures can accommodate the widest range of bodies.⁹⁹

According to the Social Model’s framework, since society is behind the disablement of people with disabilities, it should be society itself to bear the responsibility for managing it: while the Medical Model addressed disability by preventing, curing or, in extreme cases, eliminating it, the Social one found the

⁹⁶ GOODLEY, *Dis/ability Studies...*, cit., p. 4.

⁹⁷ COLEMAN-FOUNTAIN, MCLAUGHLIN, “The Interactions of Disability and Impairment”, cit., p. 138.

⁹⁸ GOODLEY, *Dis/ability Studies...*, cit., pp. 6-7; 9.

⁹⁹ FREUND, “Bodies, Disability and Spaces...”, cit., p. 691.

solution to this socio-culturally constructed problem to be the lack of civil rights and accommodations. It does not deny the existence of a biological component to disability (though it has been criticised for its reductionist tendencies that separate the actual body from the disability, see Ruth Pinder's 1995 "Bringing Back the Body without the Blame?"), but it also claims that nothing in this component warrants the prejudice and discrimination people with disabilities had to face throughout the centuries; any inferiority experienced by these individuals is the one conferred to them by society and its socio-cultural norms around normativity of the body and the mind, and since it was socially constructed, it can also be socially *de*-constructed.¹⁰⁰ And, as the World Federation of the Deaf states in their 2018 Position Paper, the Social Model states that the response to disability should not be to "fix" the impairment, but to reduce or eliminate the barriers that create disability in the first place, since, once done, society will stop being disabling.¹⁰¹

1.3.5 A Plenitude of Models

For the reason that they are human-made tools for understanding and are deeply interwoven with the context they emerge from, besides the ones discussed above, which are the most widespread and recognised, there are many other models for understanding disabilities.

For example, Smart proposes four different models of disability: besides the already mentioned Medical and Social Models, which she calls respectively Biomedical and Environmental/Sociopolitical Models, she also provides a Functional Model. This latter framework of understanding revolves around the role of functions in defining disability, a relationship that can be very specific for each individual, since two people can have the same type and degree of impairment but extremely different experiences depending on both functions and environments (for example, an amputated finger is barely a disability for most people, but a life-changing one for someone who works with their hands, such as pianists or sculptors). Work and daily living play an important role in this framework, which is why the Functional Model is also called the economic model, and is primarily concerned with the earning capacity of people with disabilities and the availability of services and assistive technologies. To summarise Smart's classification of models of disability: the Biomedical Model centres on treatment methods to "fix" the individual; the Functional Model centres on provision of assistive technologies to accommodate the functions of the individual; the Environmental Model aims to change both the physical and social environments of the

¹⁰⁰ SMART, *Disability, Society...*, cit., pp. 72-74.

¹⁰¹ WORLD FEDERATION OF THE DEAF, *Complementary or Diametrically Opposed: Situating Deaf Communities within 'disability' vs 'cultural and linguistic minority' constructs: POSITION PAPER*, in "World Federation of the Deaf", 2018, <https://wfdeaf.org/resources/complementary-or-diametrically-opposed-situating-deaf-communities-within-disability-vs-cultural-and-linguistic-minority-constructs/>, p. 9.

individual; and the Sociopolitical Model aspires for civil rights and equal social status for people with disabilities. Smart claims that we should work in combining and comparing them to understand how they relate to each other, since, if taken singularly, each one of these models has a purpose, yet none of them is perfect in understanding the full disability experience.¹⁰²

Other frameworks and disability models can be found in widespread media portrayals of disability, the so-called media models of disability. Below are only some of them, mainly those discussed by journalists John S. Clogston (1990) and Beth Haller (1995), which can be observed as a *fil rouge* in the representation of people with disabilities across various regions all over the world:

- ❖ Medical Model: disability is presented as a deficiency that needs a cure, and the lives of people with disabilities are depicted as severely limited because of it.
- ❖ Social Pathology Model: people with disabilities are represented as wards of the State, completely dependent for economic support, which is framed as an act of generosity rather than a right of these people as members of society.
- ❖ Supercrip Model: people with disabilities are depicted as extraordinary because they manage to overcome their impairments and perform dominantly established normal occupations despite their disability.
- ❖ Minority/Civil Rights Model: people with disabilities are presented as part of a politically active minority group fighting to improve its civil rights.
- ❖ Cultural Pluralism Model: people with disabilities are depicted as multifaceted and diverse.
- ❖ Business Model: people with disabilities and their issues are represented as a drain and an economic burden to society and its businesses.
- ❖ Legal Model: centres on the legal framework that protects the rights of people with disabilities.
- ❖ Consumer Model: people with disabilities are represented as an underutilised workforce and consumer group that could help enhance society if allowed employment.¹⁰³

Finally, another alternative model of disability is the interactionist one presented by the World Report on Disability in 2011, which is closer to the Nordic relational model in the way it sees disability as a person-environment mismatch, a category that is situational and, most importantly, as the name suggests, relational. This framework sees disability as a collection of difficulties that are either problems in bodily

¹⁰² SMART, *Disability, Society...*, cit., pp. 67-69; 74-75.

¹⁰³ Liz SHEK-NOBLE, "Media Framing of Disability and Employment in Japan: Traditional and Progressive Approaches", in *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2020, p. 148.

functions, limitations in the performance of occupations or participation restrictions in any area of life, and which arise when particular health conditions interact with environmental and personal contextual factors. In other words, disability is established to be a dynamic phenomenon that requires the immediate attention of nation states, their governments and their citizens. Regarding this model, critical Disability Studies stress the importance of recognising that, as a supranational document, the World Report on Disability necessarily shifts away from the socio-cultural relativism of the category of disability to favour universality instead; however, this approach risks whitewashing the historical, cultural, economic and political specificities of disabilities that exist all over the world and that are fundamental in the understanding of the disability experience.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ GOODLEY, *Dis/ability Studies...*, cit., pp. 15-18.

Chapter Two:

D/deafness

2.1 Another Framework: The Linguo-Cultural Model

In the previous chapter, the most widespread models for understanding disability were discussed; there is, however, a further framework that was introduced in 2006 with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (hereinafter referred to as CRPD or Convention), an international human rights instrument of the United Nations which had a major impact on disability policies and views in its 192 signatory countries¹. This new framework is commonly called the Human Rights Model of disability.

The treaty was the first global one concerning people with disabilities, and it sets out measures to realise their human rights and promote their dignity. This focus on human rights is explicitly stated and highlighted in the document's preamble and in Article 1, where the issue is reiterated multiple times in terms of the universality and interrelatedness of all human rights and fundamental freedoms, the need to promote and protect them, and the promotion of full enjoyment and participation by people with disabilities, also mentioning to the need to incorporate a gender perspective for all these objectives to be translated into realities. In accordance with this framework and with Article 2 (Definitions) and Article 4 (General Obligations), developing from the Social Model, the Human Rights Model advanced by the CRPD works on changing the system of human rights and freedoms to allow people with disabilities to participate in the discourse of rights on an equal basis with others, and to abolish discrimination stemming from disability. To guarantee this, the following articles provide guidelines for securing these rights and fundamental freedoms across a wide range of fields, from equal recognition before the law (Article 12) to education (Article 24), from liberty and security (Article 14) to health (Article 25).² A critical point, however, emerges in Article 30:

Article 30: Participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport

4. Persons with disabilities shall be entitled, on an equal basis with others, to recognition and support of their specific cultural and linguistic identity, including sign languages and *deaf culture*.³

¹ UNITED NATIONS, *UN Treaty Body Database*, in “United Nations Human Rights”, 2026, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?Treaty=CRPD.

² UNITED NATIONS, *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, in “United Nations Human Rights”, 2006, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities>, pp. 1-6; 10-11; 16-18.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 23. Cursive is mine.

Through these words, the CRPD gave a formal and international footing to the concept of Deaf culture that had been circulating in various fields of study and to a new model that broke away from the ones centred on disability, instead introducing a framework tailored around experiences, beliefs, mores, history, traditions and norms shared by D/deaf communities. In other words, a Linguo-Cultural Model that construes D/deafness as the mark of a linguistic and cultural minority.

2.1.1 deafness and Cultures

The development of this model, though, raises the question of why it applies to D/deafness and not to other disabilities as well. Before delving deeper into what it means to be Deaf, we must first understand what it means to be deaf.

Hearing loss is the most common sensory deficit worldwide, and it is deemed disabling when it exceeds 40dB for adults and 30dB for children; specifically, degrees of hearing loss are classified as mild, moderate, moderately severe, severe or profound. Although there are no clear-cut and widely shared definitions, the term “hard of hearing” is used for mild to moderate hearing loss, while “deaf” for severe or profound hearing loss. Besides severity, however, there are many other ways to classify the impairment, such as aetiology, age and time of onset in relation to language acquisition, anatomic defect, and so on. Aetiology-wise, the most common type of genetic hearing loss, characterised by prelingual onset and a severe-to-profound degree of hearing loss in both ears, is the autosomal recessive non-syndromic one; there are many cases, though, of complex aetiology that involves combinations of both genetic and environmental factors, as it is the case with otosclerosis and age-related hearing loss (presbycusis), the latter of which is the most common chronic condition and sensory deficit affecting ageing adults. Amongst young people, on the other hand, the World Health Organisation, in its 2017 report on deafness, identified cumulative exposure to loud noises as the most common modifiable cause of hearing loss, highlighting how the majority of recent cases were the result of chronic exposures to intense noise over time during recreational and/or work-related activities.⁴ Knowing what deafness is becomes fundamental to understanding the grounds on which the Linguo-Cultural Model is based: in essence, since the main channel through which the national spoken language is acquired is not naturally accessible to deaf people, the majority culture that is spread and reinforced via that same language results inaccessible as well; accordingly, what happens is the development of an alternative language suitable for the bodily difference

⁴ Abraham M. SHEFFIELD, Richard J. H. SMITH, “The Epidemiology of Deafness” in *Cold Spring Harbor Perspectives in Medicine*, vol. 9, no. 9, 2019, pp. 1-3; 7-8; 12.

of deaf people, a method of communication that develops in the interaction between members of D/deaf communities and that functions as the lifeblood of subsequently developed Deaf cultures.

Definitional problems regarding the concept of culture have been a well-known fact in multiple fields of study ever since 1952, when Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn identified no fewer than 164 definitions of the term. Generally speaking, cultural analyses have focused on authors' individual and, precisely because of that, widely diversified orientations and priorities, which make reaching a complete consensus a daunting task.⁵ What follows is but a summary of some of the various theories about culture that have emerged in the anglophone WENA sphere across the last few centuries; despite it not being exhaustive and universally applicable, it will serve as a context to the issue of Deaf cultures.

First descriptions of the concept, going back to the end of the 19th century, consider culture as a totality that encompasses knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws and any habit acquired by members of a society, as stated by Edward B. Tylor (1871); further definitions developed in those years followed this taxonomy, stressing distinct aspects but all agreeing that culture embraces the whole. By the late 1950s, the English-speaking field of anthropology had divided into two traditions, which have been gradually reconciling over time: Social Anthropology, according to which culture was incorporated into the concepts of society and social structure, and Cultural Anthropology, for which this relationship between culture and society is inverted, with culture being the learnt and transmitted ways of people, thus including the various models of social organisation as well. A successive theory of the 1970s was that of culture as an adaptive cycle that allows human beings to survive by maintaining a relationship with their surroundings, as stated by Betty Meggers (1971); alongside this current of thought, there were also several types of theories that viewed cultures as ideational constructs, either cognitive systems, models for perceiving, relating and interpreting reality, or community systems of symbols and meanings shared between social actors. However, these all-encompassing interpretations listed so far risk being overly abstract, to the point of lacking concreteness, not to mention growing crystallised and not accounting for cultural change or for the dynamic relationship between the individual and their socio-cultural context. To find a definition that factors in cultural change, one has to examine Roger M. Keesing's (1974) conceptualisation of cultural competence and performance, according to which an individual's actions have the potential to alter culture. A significant change came in the 1980s with the reassessment of the fields of anthropology, whose origins are deeply related with colonialism and imperialist projects. This led to heavy criticism of the tendency to reify and naturalise culture, both practices that resulted in overlooking questions about social change and the power relations between majority and minority cultures. This shift, conveyed clearly

⁵ Paddy LADD, *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood*, Clevedon, Multilingual Matters LTD, 2003, p. 197.

in the works of Brian Street, offered a new understanding of the dynamics of minority and oppressed cultures, also by virtue of the analysis of philosopher Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, which elicited questions on how social actors accept, manipulate, use or contest dominant ideas; in other words, it became widely accepted that cultures are shaped by hegemonic principles. Consequently, the 1990s saw a growing focus on power relations and cultural change, especially with respect to historical time: an example is the work of Paul Bohannan (1995), who created a new vocabulary for this novel direction of Anthropology Studies, with concepts such as turbulence, cultural lock-in, cultural traps, or cultural dissonance. The final and current stage of this defining effort has seen, and continues to see, the creation of a space for the inclusion of emic perspectives and accounts of culture, while also being conscious of the degree of representation, accuracy and positionality they offer. Postcolonial Studies have started examining how to reclaim and rebuild cultures, incorporating the future as a concrete and essential feature of cultural analysis, especially for oppressed minorities, for whom an alternative vision of a cultural future may be vital to maintain their existential equilibrium.⁶

If we look at anglophone WENA Cultural Studies, though, we see a slightly different path of development of the concept of culture, one that Raymond Williams traced back to the 15th century and charted towards the two meanings still commonly used nowadays, respectively the arts and intellectual pursuits that society deems necessary for an individual to be cultivated, and the way of life of a determined group of people. Building from these definitions, academics such as the abovementioned Williams, Richard Hoggart and Edward T. Hall laid the groundwork for Cultural Studies, analysing the relationship between culture, society and social actors, as well as phenomena of resistance and cultural conflict, which eventually shifted the focus towards minorities. Within Cultural Studies, the concept of ideology was expanded from the Marxist view of a cultural filter imposed on the working class to, according to Hall (1983), the site where different social groups struggle for control within their own cultural reality. As later stressed by postmodernist approaches to Women's Studies and Black Studies, ideology shapes our self-concept, fashioning it into a multiplicity of subjectivities that are both contradictory and changeable, not to mention indicative of both the origins behind them and the discourses they reproduce. Gramsci's concept of hegemony was brought up again in terms not only of the continuous struggle for control, but also of the production of consent of those governed, since, to maintain hegemonic control, both the suppression of opposition and the absorption of opposing cultural interests into one's ideologies are needed. Through this concept we can also better understand how the widely accepted norms discussed in the previous

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 200-04; 206-08.

chapter have been defined and normalised, and how to deconstruct the dominantly established norm imposed on members of minorities and oppressed cultures.⁷

It is evident, then, that the concept of culture is not easy to define, and even today there are multiple schools of thought, each one highlighting different aspects, mechanisms and factors of influence. This complexity must be applied to any monolithic definition of Deaf cultures as well, constructing them as pluralistic and fluid sites of constant change, contradiction and contestation, or, to borrow the well-known expression from Street, as verbs.

2.1.2 Deaf Cultures: Definitions

This leads to the question of what Deaf cultures are, at least on an etymological and conceptual level. To answer this question, we will look at D/deaf scholar Paddy Ladd's *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood* (2003), which offers an integrated outlook and constructs a historical narrative from the perspective of D/deaf people themselves. Ladd's contributions to the discourse on Deaf cultures have been recognised as a turning point in Deaf Studies because of his reframing of previous research. And yet, despite rejecting traditional homogeneous definitions of culture, when defining Deaf cultures, he ends up falling into the essentialist trap himself, which is to some extent inevitable when working with categories. Nonetheless, his work is fundamental as a counter-narrative that aims to dismantle dominant discourses and contests the boundaries that until then had been surrounding the concepts of Deaf cultures and D/deaf identity. As we will see, previous theories had the tendency to define D/deaf communities vaguely or solely as groups of native users of sign languages, thus suppressing their internal diversity and standardising them in linguistic terms; Ladd revises this uniform model, instead presenting them as fluid, pluralistic spaces where the meaning of the term "Deaf" is continuously negotiated by those who identify with it, what the researcher calls the shift from Deaf cultures and D/deafness to D/deafhood.⁸

The expression "Deaf Culture" first appeared in the anglophone WENA sphere within hearing academic circles during the 1970s, alongside others such as "subcultures", "Deaf community life" or "social aspects of deafness". Discourses around Deaf cultures began and largely developed in the United States, starting with William Stokoe *et al.*'s *A Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles* (1965), which referred to the "social and cultural characteristics of deaf people". However, it was not until D/deaf

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 209; 211-14.

⁸ YAMASHITA Eri, "Deafhood With/Out Deafness: Gengo to Shintai no Kōsa-suru Chiten", in *Quadrante: Areas, Culture and Positions*, vol. 14, 2012, pp. 207; 211.

academic Carol Padden (1980) that a specific definition of Deaf culture was attempted, based on the idea that culture is a set of learnt behaviours of groups of people who share a language, values, traditions, and so on⁹:

Members of the Deaf culture behave as Deaf people do, use the language of Deaf people, and share the beliefs of Deaf people towards themselves and other people who are not Deaf. [...] The most striking characteristics of the culture is their cultural values – these values shape how Deaf people behave and what they believe in.¹⁰

From that moment on, the use of the term “culture” in research and studies centred on D/deaf communities increased significantly, despite never going beyond stating the existence of the concept and its connection to sign language and shared norms. The 1980s saw a growing number of accounts of D/deaf community life, introducing the themes of membership and of the interrelationships between different D/deaf groups, effectively spreading the use of the expression throughout the anglophone WENA countries in two main ways: on the one hand, Deaf culture was used to describe particular aspects of the phenomenon rather than its totality; on the other hand, scholars began using it in an all-encompassing manner along with taxonomic descriptions. As for the fields in which the term appeared, they were mostly pedagogical (to inform D/deaf people of its existence), linguistic (to promote the bicultural theory or to demonstrate the relation between language, culture and D/deaf identity) and political (to stress the need for a shift from a Medical Model to a Linguo-Cultural one).¹¹

The signed version “DEAF CULTURE”¹² appeared in the BSL Teaching Agency in 1985 out of necessity to translate the spoken English term for teaching purposes. Similar signs, such as “DEAF WORLD”, “DEAF COMMUNITY”, “DEAF CLUB” or “DEAF WAY”, had actually been appearing in D/deaf periodicals and literature from the 19th century onwards, though they were often presented as givens, without going into detail on their meanings; moreover, the absence of research into these 19th-century publications makes it unclear whether these signs originated from sign language or spoken language. It was only in the 1990s that the expression “DEAF CULTURE” started being accepted.¹³

Delving deeper into where the concept of Deaf cultures has spread, there have been numerous references in academic articles and journals from a wide range of perspectives. First and foremost, with the general acceptance of the category, it became a priority to formalise the criteria of its membership, with one of

⁹ LADD, *Understanding Deaf Culture...*, cit., pp. 233-35.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 235.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 235-36.

¹² When putting sign language into written form using spoken-language words (a process commonly referred to as glossing), all capital letters are used. This transcription rule will be respected throughout the whole thesis.

¹³ LADD, *Understanding Deaf Culture...*, cit., pp. 233; 237-38.

the first definitions of it being the still widespread division made by linguist James Woodward in “Implications for Sociolinguistic Research among the Deaf” (1972): lowercase “deaf” to refer to the audiological condition of hearing loss, and uppercase “Deaf” to refer to the group of D/deaf people who share a language and a culture. This definition is significant as it represents a first step away from the earliest ones, which were heavily influenced by the Medical Model. The criteria for membership of Deaf cultures were further developed by Charlotte Baker-Shenk and Dannis Cokely (1980), who identified four membership levels: audiological, linguistic, social and political (with participation in one of them not necessarily entailing participation in Deaf cultures). The issue of membership, though, remains one of the most controversial and discussed, with particular attention given to peripheral members of the communities and differentiation based on geographical and socio-cultural context, as will also be discussed in later chapters. By the end of the 1980s, D/deaf activist Marie Jean Philip (1987) proposed a set of categories that dictated the trajectory of future understandings of Deaf cultures: a material aspect for observable phenomena, a normative one for behavioural rules and a cognitive one for attitudes, values and worldviews. In the following decades, numerous other perspectives emerged, such as the symbolist ones influenced by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who believed human behaviours are guided by the presence of sets of shared symbols he renamed as culture; linguist interpretations centred on sign language as the pillar and unique characteristic of Deaf communities; processual views of Deaf cultures in terms of ethnicity are less widespread, and they are inclined towards using definitions of ethnicity rather than social processes, deeming the former more suitable for explaining Deaf experiences; finally, Simon J. Carmel, whose approach Ladd calls “anthropological”, focuses on the examination of difference within Deaf communities, claiming it represents the most important cultural phenomenon in Deaf cultures.¹⁴

We can see that the same definitional problems characterising the general concept of culture naturally recur when discussing Deaf cultures as well. Instead of focusing on the development of a single, all-encompassing definition, though, it may be useful to follow Ladd’s methodology, which shares some similarities with Smart’s when discussing models of disability: a comparative analysis that combines various defining efforts of diverse fields and times, allowing for a wider and more in-depth examination of the concept of Deaf cultures.

Anthropological approaches, especially adaptational theories, can help in understanding Deaf cultures’ strategies and spaces of reaction within the socio-cultural environment in which they are located, that is, the hearing world; furthermore, reflections on power relations and authenticity are also fundamental for

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 238-43.

studies of Deaf cultures, since they undermine the grounds on which both the Medical and Social Model were built, effectively creating a space for Deaf cultures to emerge alongside other minorities, which are equally subjected to the oppression from the majorities. For example, Bohannon's concept of cultural dissonance can be used to both analyse the rapid changes within Deaf cultures and determine the role played by the conflict between Social-Medical and Linguo-Cultural Models on the lives of D/deaf people; his focus on the future, "futurography" as he calls it, can also be a possible frame of interpretation for the perceived threats to Deaf communities, both medical (genetics and cochlear implants) and educational (oralism and mainstreaming). Likewise, the endeavours of Cultural Studies in creating a space for accounts of oppressed minorities can take the study of Deaf cultures a step further, offering an understanding of them as cultures of resistance that strive to maintain their own values in the face of oppression, thus reframing everyday occupations and beliefs as political and/or oppositional. In this respect, the emergence of the D/deaf text, which conveys its emotional resonance and range without necessarily being caged in previously developed academic categories, is a vital tool to recognise the true breadth of and difference embedded in Deaf cultures.¹⁵

Additionally, it is useful to consider not only research on macro-cultural groupings but also theories about the micro-level of subcultural groups. Although the term "subculture" originates within sociology, it became a branch of Cultural Studies that initially focused on studying the social phenomenon of youth cultures. Mike Brake (1985) defines subcultures as "meaning systems, modes of expression or life styles developed by groups in subordinate structural positions [...] which reflect their attempt to solve structural contradictions arising from the wider societal context". Over time, the term has been expanded to include all the subgroups that rebel against their shared national culture for various reasons and create a new set of cultural signifiers to serve their own purposes. Therefore, many scholars, taking into account their responses to majority societies, classify Deaf communities as subcultures, a position not shared by Ladd, who, while acknowledging the many similarities between them, affirms their fundamental difference and the categorisation of Deaf cultures as minority ones. The case of Deaf people is, in fact, more similar to that of other minorities such as Native Americans, Ryūkyūans or Ainu people, who all originated from within the borders of their current nation-state, yet whose evolution took place separately from the majority cultures. Specifically, despite originating from within majority societies, D/deaf communities have developed (or have been made to do so) separately from them through marginalisation policies, segregated institutions and what Kitchin has defined as distinct spatialities; moreover, the claim to a different culture rather than a subculture is strongly supported by the existence of a different language

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 202; 205; 207-08; 211; 214.

from the dominant one that shapes their worldview and how they organise reality. In other words, even though they coexist with majority societies, D/deaf people, once they learn sign language and start seeing reality through lenses that do not necessarily owe to dominant cultures, gain access to a different space altogether, the DEAF WORLD.¹⁶

2.1.3 Deaf Cultures: Beyond Definitions

As seen in the previous chapter, applying the Medical Model to members of a group is synonymous with regarding and interacting with them based on the socio-cultural conception of bodily defect; on the contrary, applying a Linguo-Cultural Model invokes a completely different framework, one that raises questions about interdependent values, behaviours, social organisations and language, as well as reflections on the relationship between the culture at issue and its physical and social environment. The shift from deafness-as-disability to Deafness-as-culture is characterised by the rejection of the widespread view of it as a personal tragedy and the endorsement of many aspects of disability rights movements, which condemn society's construction of disability and its discrimination against people with disabilities through societal policies regarding education, the employment market, accessibility, and so on. As explained in Ladd's work, however, what makes D/deaf communities more similar to ethnic groups than disability ones are their cultures and languages: membership is not dictated by diagnoses, but rather obtained through various culturally determined behaviours, language being the most significant one. Indeed, most people who were born deaf or became so early in life see themselves as fundamentally visual people with their own visual language, social organisation, history and, more in general, culture; all the obstacles encountered, from the inferior education in school to the discrimination in employment, are perceived as products of the hearing society rather than individual faults. This, however, is not a universal statement that can be applied to every D/deaf person, since amongst the thousands of people who lose substantial hearing every year for various reasons, only a part of them decides to approach Deaf cultures.¹⁷

Accurate representation of the members of another culture can be achieved only through a change in frame of reference: from the perspective of Deaf people, D/deafness is not a disability and thus, as long as the Medical Model is not set aside and an effort is not made to understand that D/deafness can be, and indeed is for many people, cultural, there will not be a complete understanding between hearing and D/deaf people or a successful education for D/deaf children. Lane's words, then, ring particularly true:

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 221-25.

¹⁷ LANE, *The Mask of Benevolence...*, cit., pp. 5-6; 18-20.

To know what it is to be a member of the deaf community is to imagine how you would think, feel, and react if you had grown up deaf, if manual language had been your main means of communication, if your eyes were the portals of your mind, if most of your friends were deaf, if you had learned that there were children who couldn't sign only after you had known dozens who could, if the people you admired were deaf, if you had struggled daily for as long as you can remember with the ignorance and uncommunicativeness of hearing people, if... if, in a word, you were deaf.¹⁸

Within D/deaf communities, as mentioned before, the first signs of a change in framework emerged with a new vocabulary that reflected this shift and a new self-concept of community members as D/deaf people and of their lives in cultural terms. This alternative perception consequently affected sign languages as well, which started demanding their place in the heterogeneous array of natural human languages. As for where this shift translated into reality, many scholars and members of D/deaf communities point towards D/deaf schools, which, due to their physical separation from mainstream schools, created a strong sense of demarcation and allowed previously scattered D/deaf communities to gradually reorganise themselves in larger groups, often centred around these schools or their alumni associations. Such a legacy is both isolating in its spatiality and comforting in its role. In the great majority of cases, D/deaf children spend their early childhood alone, with their families rarely being D/deaf or learning sign language; on the contrary, D/deaf schools offer these children a chance to be with other D/deaf people. What happens is similar yet opposed to the phenomenon of recognition by mirror philosopher Michael Foucault observed in the prison context: when inmates realise their insanity is not unusual, the result is a demoralisation exploited by the caretakers. Conversely, the recognition of shared bodily difference becomes an opportunity for D/deaf people to flourish due to being surrounded by real-life versions of themselves for the first time.¹⁹

The growing awareness of Deaf cultures observed within D/deaf communities and among scholars, however, has not yet fully reached mainstream schools of education, human services and medicine, all fields where the perception of deafness-as-disability and the Medical Model are still deeply rooted and dominant. People who have little familiarity with the discourses and changing frameworks discussed in this chapter find the biomedical and pathological construct of disability self-evident and the linguo-cultural minority one confusing; what is problematic, though, is that amongst this group are many policymakers and, more generally, people who hold the power to decide about teacher training programmes, university research facilities, promotions and salaries, not to mention the great influence they have over media and law-making bodies. This “audist establishment”, as Lane calls it, resists efforts

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

¹⁹ Carol A. PADDEN, “Talking Culture: Deaf People and Disability Studies”, in *PMLA*, vol. 120, no. 2, pp. 509-10.

to recognise the linguo-cultural understanding of D/deafness and, perhaps even just for convenience's sake, is inclined to consult experts who are fluent in speaking and writing the national oral language rather than D/deaf signers.²⁰ Audism, moreover, benefits from promoting the medicalisation of cultural Deafness, since it is precisely the pathological construction of D/deaf inferiority that legitimises the audist establishment itself, whose whole *raison d'être* is the treatment and correction of this constitutional flaw. As a result, the audist efforts to validate the Medical Model of infirmity undermine D/deaf communities and their claim to their status as linguo-cultural minorities and to the right to participate in and shape the decisions regarding their own present and future.²¹

In opposition to this, social forces have emerged in recent years to assist D/deaf communities in their endeavours to promote the Linguo-Cultural construction of D/deafness: from the body of knowledge that has been developing in various academic fields, as briefly shown above, to bureaucratic decision-making and legislation in countries all over the world, not to mention the civil rights movement, which was a crucial stepping stone for the belief that minorities should define themselves and that their leaders should actively participate in the conduct of minorities' affairs.²²

In this subchapter, fundamental concepts such as culture, Deaf cultures and D/deafness have been discussed. However, it is important to reiterate that what has been examined shows a bias towards WENA literature, more specifically anglophone and US ones. The reason for this is that Deaf Studies, and more in general the D/deaf discourse, began and developed for the most part in the United States, mainly because of the US Deaf movement and the significant influence of Gallaudet University²³. Consequently, the discourses and theories that emerged in this context have had a considerable impact worldwide, shaping and guiding D/deaf studies in other regions and countries. Japan is one example, as Shibuya Tomoko (1998), amongst several other scholars, stressed, and its policies and approaches to both D/deafness and disability were greatly inspired by those adopted in the United States. The importance of understanding this bias will be discussed in the next chapter when investigating Japan's specific socio-cultural context, where, despite the considerable influence of US policies and discourses, the situation has evolved differently throughout the decades, both in terms of models of disability and of understanding the D/deaf experience.

²⁰ LANE, "Constructions of Deafness", cit., p. 184.

²¹ LANE, *The Mask of Benevolence...*, cit., p. 80.

²² LANE, "Constructions of Deafness", cit., p. 186.

²³ Gallaudet University is the world's only higher education institution where all programs and services are specifically designed to accommodate D/deaf students. Located in Washington D.C., it was founded in 1864 as a grammar school for deaf and blind children and, ever since, it has developed to be one of the most influential establishments of and a benchmark in D/deaf affairs, from education to the activism of D/deaf rights movements.

2.2 Freedom from Binaries: The WFD Proposal

As it has been examined, the most prevalent constructions of D/deafness see it either as a category of disability or as a mark of belonging to a linguo-cultural minority. For lack of better guidelines, late deafening and hard-of-hearing cases are usually associated with the first construct, while early and profound deafness, which implies a complete reorganisation of the individual's language, worldview and experiences, is often linked to the second. Nevertheless, one of the reasons why the line separating the two is so blurred is that there is no clear-cut criterion for identifying where most children are located. 90% of D/deaf children are born to hearing parents and are caught in a relentless tug of war where advocates of the disability construct see them as hearing-impaired sharing their parents' culture, while supporters of the linguo-cultural minority framework affirm that their primary language is a manual one and that they will eventually orbit towards D/deaf communities. Despite the common ground that these two constructions indisputably share, their core and priorities are bound to differ, and this becomes evident when seeing Deaf people's demands, which are less about rehabilitation and support services, and more about acceptance and promotion of their language in educational institutions, the labour market, public events, and so on. Considering labels, for instance, the "person-first" approach suits disability groups, but not Deaf ones, who affirm that one's culture is never an incidental trait, and that it should be recognised just as it always is when talking about other cultures: there are Mexican people, Japanese people, Navajo people, and thus also Deaf people. Integration, too, assumes two different colours depending on the construction: while being a primary goal of the disability movement, it can become an anathema for the Deaf one, since mainstreaming deprives D/deaf children of the opportunity to be surrounded by people like them and to learn their primary language through these interactions. A concrete example of this is the issue of segregated schools, which, when seen from a disability rights standpoint, are symbols of oppression and discrimination, but that actually become hubs of cultural and linguistic development and social relations when considered from a Deaf point of view. Once again, this is a complex discussion topic that requires taking into account different frameworks at the same time, since neither claim is wrong. However, it cannot be denied that a complete adherence to the disability rights standpoint results in enormous damage to D/deaf communities as well as a disregard for the difference between forced and elective segregation.²⁴

Notwithstanding these and many other divergences, it is undeniable that culturally Deaf people share many common causes with people with disabilities, such as the price of social stigma, the socio-material

²⁴ LANE, "Constructions of Deafness", cit., pp. 173-74; 179-81.

environment and industries built around the construction of their identity as pathological, and also the struggle for the right to access the dominant culture and broader society as full-fledged citizens. To create a society that is accessible to people with sensory, cognitive and physical impairments, D/deaf communities have collaborated with disability movements, achieving many services, commissions and laws that the Deaf movement probably could not have accomplished alone. But, very often, in order for this cooperation to work, D/deaf communities had to embrace the representation of their members within the construct of disability, endorsing the very principle of oppression they want to overthrow. By denying their cultural, linguistic and historical reality, by legitimising an education that fails to incorporate their children's language and that isolates them from their peers, and by supporting medicine aimed towards dominant practices of normalisation, D/deaf communities, in a process similar to the Pygmalion effect, will indeed become disabled.²⁵

This multi-layered intersectionality of language, identity, culture and accessibility needs has been at the heart of much discussion, since it requires a vision that encompasses multiple models instead of focusing on a single framework. In this regard, the World Federation of the Deaf (hereinafter referred to as WFD) has proposed a dual model of applicability of language minority rights alongside disability rights in its 2018 position paper *Complementary or Diametrically Opposed: Situating Deaf Communities within 'Disability' vs 'Cultural and Linguistic Minority' Constructs*.²⁶

Starting from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and moving towards today, there is an abundance of treaties outlining the need for each group of people to have their human rights recognised and for efforts to be made in order to concretely realise this goal, all of which become legally binding in the moment of their ratification or adoption. When speaking about D/deaf people's affairs, their linguistic rights and anti-discriminatory treatment, though, the most frequently cited are the CRPD, the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (hereinafter referred to as ICCPR), the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (hereinafter referred to as CRC) and the 1992 Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (hereinafter referred to as Minorities Declaration).²⁷ The recognition of Deaf communities' minority status, however, is still not widespread, especially not amongst governments, legislators, educators and the media, many

²⁵ LANE, *The Mask of Benevolence...*, cit., pp. 22; 84.

²⁶ WORLD FEDERATION OF THE DEAF, *Complementary or Diametrically Opposed...*, cit., p. 3.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

of whom either believe applying the disability construction to them is a consequence-free act of goodwill or have been influenced by negative bias against manual languages.²⁸

A *minority* is a national or ethnic, religious or linguistic group, fewer in number than the rest of the population, whose members share a common identity. Usually, minorities are non-dominant in comparison with majorities in the economic and political spheres of their country.²⁹

According to this definition approved by the United Nations, D/deaf communities meet all the prerequisites to be defined as minorities in their respective countries and, looking at Article 1, Article 2 and Article 4 of the Minorities Declaration, one can see that States have the obligation to protect their existence and ensure they can not only enjoy their respective cultures, but also have adequate opportunities to learn their “mother tongue”³⁰ or with their “mother tongue” as the main medium of instruction. Therefore, building from this international acknowledgement that sets the standard for appropriate legislative measures to secure the rights of minority groups, the WFD references to various treaties and human rights provisions to defend Deaf communities’ linguistic rights, starting with Article 27 of the ICCPR, according to which “minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language”³¹, and quoting also Article 30 of the CRC, where it is clearly written that a child from a minority group “shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practice his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language”³². It can be said, then, that D/deaf children should be given the choice and opportunity to learn a sign language and participate in D/deaf communities; any denial of these rights in any environment is an unequivocal breach of all the abovementioned articles and more.³³

To fully participate in society on an equal basis with other people, however, besides language-related rights, D/deaf people also need to access information and services that are provided mainly in spoken languages, something that is achievable through the provision of reasonable accommodations (for

²⁸ WORLD FEDERATION OF THE DEAF, *Complementary or Diametrically Opposed...*, cit., pp. 4-5.

²⁹ UNHCR, *Minorities and indigenous people*, in “UNHCR”, 2023, <https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/protect-human-rights/safeguarding-individuals/minorities-and-indigenous-peoples>.

³⁰ “Mother tongue” is used to describe the language usually spoken in one’s home or early childhood, but the expression is not suitable for the complex and unique language experience of D/deaf people. With the exception of D/deaf children growing up in D/deaf families, the term “mother tongue” is somehow unsuitable, since in most cases D/deaf children cannot acquire their family’s language through hearing and they learn sign language either alongside their parents or through interactions with their D/deaf peers. An expression more apt for describing the particular circumstances of D/deaf people and sign languages could be “spontaneous language”.

³¹ UNITED NATIONS, *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, in “United Nations Human Rights”, 1996, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>.

³² UNITED NATIONS, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, in “United Nations Human Rights”, 1989, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>.

³³ WORLD FEDERATION OF THE DEAF, *Complementary or Diametrically Opposed...*, cit., pp. 5-7.

example, information in text or video, availability of sign language interpreters, etc.) and that is highlighted in Article 5 (Equality and non-discrimination), Article 9 (Accessibility) and Article 24 (Education) of the CRPD. The lack of said provision is to be considered a discrimination against not only D/deaf communities, which are approached by the Convention through both the language minority and the disability framework, but also a wide range of people with various disabilities. We can see then how the rights Deaf people strive for and those espoused by the disability movement can overlap. Rather than the overlap itself, though, the problem at hand is the refusal of the dominant interpretation to acknowledge such overlap, positioning D/deaf communities within the disability category alone without recognising their intersection with linguistic minorities. Refusing this intersectionality means not accepting the pluriculturalism that characterises D/deaf communities, since they are both linguo-cultural minorities and groups of people with disability when considering the currently prevalent constructions of able-bodiedness and norm. This dual model and understanding of D/deaf communities is what the World Federation of the Deaf calls for in its position paper, hoping to recognise and eliminate the discrimination faced by D/deaf communities whose intersectional status as minorities is still not being recognised. While aware of the complexity this may represent for many States, the WFD stresses the importance of not limiting the grant of linguistic rights within a disability frame: D/deaf communities deserve their human rights and freedoms, amongst which are also linguistic rights as linguistic rights, not as part of the disability discourse.³⁴

2.3 Culture Erasure: The Cochlear Implant and the Bionic Ear

Considering and applying a different model for understanding D/deafness entails completely reframing many aspects that are taken as givens within particular frameworks. One of these is assistive technology, more specifically invasive operations such as cochlear implantation surgery.

Cochlear implantation is a surgical procedure in which an incision is made behind the operated ear to drill a depression in the skull, through the mastoid bone, all the way to the membrane of the inner ear; at this point, a wire is pushed through to settle around and up the cochlea, sometimes resulting in a rupture of the microstructure of the inner ear, in order to reach the auditory nerve and stimulate it directly. The operation, beyond the usual risks associated with general anaesthesia and surgery, has low failure rates, but it may require further operations in case of malfunctions of the implant or of one of its parts, or simply for improvements in the technology.³⁵ Despite them both being assistive technologies, cochlear

³⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 7-8; 10-11; 13.

³⁵ LANE, *The Mask of Benevolence...*, cit., pp. 3-4; 217.

implants are not to be mistaken for hearing aids, which are fully removable and battery-operated devices that amplify sounds; on the contrary, cochlear implants are only partially removable and suitable chiefly for sensorineural hearing loss that affects the inner ear (although recently hybrid models of cochlear implants have been developed for people with residual hearing). A further difference is that, by directly stimulating the nerve that interprets auditory signals, sounds can result artificial and difficult to localise, especially for formerly hearing adults; additionally, to guarantee the success of the operation and the resulting auditory gains, implanted individuals need extra support after the surgery in the form of counselling for the parents, lip-reading training for the child, frequent assessments of the recovery of hearing, rehabilitation, and so on.³⁶ Regardless of that, it has been confirmed by medical research that the child continues to be hearing impaired even after the implantation, and to parents who wish for their child's deafness to be cured, an otologist's answer cannot go further than a prediction that the implanted individual will be able to improve their speech features. Notwithstanding, in most cases, the intelligibility of these children matches that of D/deaf children with hearing aids, with a notable 75% judged incomprehensible by their teachers and likely still needing some form of manual communication throughout schooling and everyday life.³⁷

Given these preconditions, one may ask why cochlear implantation is often advised as the preferred option. The answer is quickly found in ableist normativity thinking, according to which being deaf is a plight and a sentence to silence, uncommunicativeness, inferior education and underemployment; compared to this scenario, then, even potential language and cultural erasure seem justifiable.

To better understand the linguo-cultural consequences of the cochlear implant, and more broadly of ableist normativity, for cultural Deafness, we first need to analyse closely what language endangerment and language diversity loss are. According to linguist Gerald Roche (2017), language endangerment is a process external to the population involved, a product of historical contingency better explained through contextualised histories rather than generic and universal patterns. One must be careful not to mistake it for language change, a process caused by internal factors; in contrast, language endangerment occurs, in the majority of cases, because of systemic power imbalances, especially between minorities and dominant majorities, such as empires or nation-states. Within unequal power relations, some linguistic features become detrimental to language vitality, including small number of speakers, unbalanced bilingualism or a high degree of lexical borrowing. In other words, language endangerment is typically produced in a context of power disparity that restrains the language revitalisation and maintenance efforts of minority

³⁶ Rachel A. TEE-MELEGRITO, *Hearing Aids vs. Cochlear Implants: How to Choose*, in "Medical News Today", 2021, <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/hearing-aids-vs-cochlear-implants>.

³⁷ LANE, *The Mask of Benevolence...*, cit., pp. 220-21; 225.

communities, which are faced with the overwhelming force of state-sponsored assimilationist programmes.³⁸ In the particular case of sign languages, however, it is not only state-sponsored assimilationist programmes and policies that result in their endangerment, but also the pathological discourse, which deemed the use of visual manual languages as highly detrimental to children's language acquisition.

A related concept is the language diversity loss discussed by John Wendel and Patrick Heinrich (2012), that is, the changes to the socio-economic organisation of communities triggered by external contacts. These contacts, for their part, cause disturbances to the language ecology, which is the “dynamic network of relationships and interdependencies between the sociocultural, economic, and environmental contingencies that impact on the use, function, structure, and ways of meaning of languages and their speakers”³⁹. Considering our focus on D/deaf communities, it is important to highlight competitive language ecologies, whose social organisations are a hierarchy that currently sees the nation-state at its apex; in this kind of ecology, smaller languages end up suffocated by the growth of dominant ones and marginalised into geographical and/or societal peripheries, when they are not displaced altogether. This happens because the modern state endeavours to maintain uniformity within society, a process through which nations and their borders ideologically obfuscate their historical novelty and start being construed as quasi-natural entities instead, leading to the belief that the perceived homogeneity of the large community within them is also a primordial and inherent quality. This phenomenon of “invention of tradition”, as called by historian Eric Hobsbawm, is one of the main tasks of modernity and is accomplished also via linguistic unification, to the detriment of the dominated communities: during the process of nation building, the marginalised peripheries of modern states are pressured to adapt to the invented model and imposed socio-cultural environment, resulting, in most cases, in language diversity loss and unequal power relationships.⁴⁰ Having thus examined the central role of external power in the production of both language endangerment and language diversity loss, it is important to stress a parallel issue, namely, agency. As shown by both Roche (2017) and Wendell and Heinrich (2012), subaltern agency is a factor of influence within situations of power imbalance, and, as such, it should never be denied, especially considering the key role it plays in language maintenance activities and in the quest for greater autonomy for the endangered languages.

³⁸ Gerald ROCHE, “Linguistic Vitality, Endangerment, and Resilience”, in *Language Documentation & Conservation*, vol. 11, 2017, pp. 209-10.

³⁹ John WENDEL, Patrick HEINRICH, “A Framework for Language Endangerment Dynamics: The Effects of Contact and Social Change on Language Ecologies and Language Diversity”, in *International Journal of Sociology of Language*, vol. 2012, no. 218, p. 147.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 146-47; 149; 156-57; 159-61.

Having illustrated which ideological practices and imbalanced relationships lead to language and culture erasure, we can now apply these concepts and reframe cochlear implantation surgeries according to a Linguo-Cultural Minority Model rather than simply a Medical one. Cochlear implants are, as explained before, a type of assistive technology that attempts to cure deafness, and the number of yearly surgeries is gradually increasing, especially in children as young as two years of age, with the aim of restoring some hearing and improving their chances of speaking oral languages. In accordance with the view of Deafness as a threatened linguo-cultural minority, it is not a surprise that a sizeable portion of D/deaf people is opposed to the development of this technology, a trend commonly known as the cochlear implant controversy, centring on the rejection of medicine's attempts to find a cure for Deafness, going as far as calling the surgical practice a genocide.⁴¹ Borrowing from the earlier discussion on language ecologies, the case of D/deaf communities could be considered a “replacement ecology”⁴², where collapse and replacement of minority languages are caused by the spread of disease or by genocide. This pattern, moreover, is older than the cochlear implant, since there have been many other historical antecedents in medical experimentation and reproductive regulation to eliminate D/deafness (eugenics practices, for instance).

医師と相談する中で人工内耳を勧められ、とても悩んだか 2 歳になってすぐ左耳に人工内耳埋込手術をした。いろんなリスクがある中の手術、本当にこれでよかったのかわからないまま、これまで通り毎日手話と言葉で語りかけた。術後、今まで反応しなかった音に反応したり [...]。だからと言って息子に手話は必須。

While discussing with the doctors, we were advised to consider a cochlear implant. We struggled greatly with the decision, but shortly after he turned two, our son underwent cochlear implant surgery in his left ear. It was a surgery that involved various risks, and even without knowing whether we had truly made the right decision, we continued to communicate with him through both sign language and spoken language every day, just as we did before. After the surgery, he began responding to sounds that he never reacted to before [...]. That said, for our son, sign language is still essential.⁴³

This excerpt comes not from a D/deaf person but from the hearing mother of one, Murakami Erika, who, in her entry in *Rōbungaku*, recounts her family's experience with assistive technology. And yet, as she underlines, the surgery did not cure her son's D/deafness: her child still needed sign language to

⁴¹ Robert SPARROW, “Defending Deaf Culture: The Case of Cochlear Implants”, in *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2005, p. 135.

⁴² WENDEL, HEINRICH, “A Framework for Language Endangerment Dynamics...”, cit., p. 150.

⁴³ MURAKAMI Erika, “Sekando Suteeji” (my translation), in Watanabe T. (edited by), *Rōbungaku: dai 1 gō – dai 25 gō*, Yokohama, Rakuyō Publishing and Printing, 2025, pp. 168-69.

communicate with others, his development was still slower than that of perceived normal children, and he had to attend a local child development support centre and go to a D/deaf school once a week at least. A similar experience is presented in Miyūki's contribution to the booklet series, where they describe how they were introduced to the cochlear implant by a colleague and later on chose to undergo the surgery. In line with what was previously explained about the device, Miyūki, too, had a disorienting experience at first when they regained part of their hearing, the sounds merging and sounding artificial and metallic; yet, through regular rehabilitation, their hearing improved to the point that they consider themselves hard-of-hearing rather than profoundly deaf.⁴⁴ These examples do not aim to criticise cochlear implantation surgery as a medical practice or doubt the medics performing it; while acknowledging the undeniable convenience of being as close as possible to the able-bodied ideal society has constructed as the norm, what is called into question is the mindset that brings parents of D/deaf children or people who are D/deaf for a range of different causes to believe it is preferable to undergo such an invasive surgical operation rather than letting a person be D/deaf, especially in the case of children. By choosing cochlear implantation, we are once again adhering to the Medical Model, which positions the correction of the individual as the priority, rather than striving for the modification of the socio-material context in which D/deaf people live. This choice is, of course, personal and tied to the individual circumstances of every person, and the cochlear implant is a valid and medically tested option for those who wish to have better chances to participate in society; however, the Linguo-Cultural Minority Model of D/deafness offers a further point of view on the matter, one that prompts questions about ableist normativity, the rights of minority cultures and the socio-cultural constructions of disability that this particular kind of assistive technology ends up reinforcing.

One of the risks of early cochlear implantation surgery that often goes unsaid at the moment of counselling with the parents is cultural homelessness, a feeling of alienation towards both the majority group implanted children do not fully measure up to, and the minority one society, the medical establishment and, in many cases, their own parents are steering them away from. According to researcher Robert Sparrow (2005), these children may end up “trapped ‘between cultures’, unable to function effectively in a hearing context but also lacking the facility with sign language available to those who grow up with it as their first language”. To rephrase, cochlear implantation may lead to difficulties in relating with peers, both within hearing and D/deaf communities alike, and with identity formation, with the child caught in a liminal space where they are neither hearing nor D/deaf yet are both at the same time.

⁴⁴ MIYŪKI, “Kikoeru – Kikoenikui – Kikoenai”, in Watanabe T. (edited by), *Rōbungaku: dai 1 gō – dai 25 gō*, Yokohama, Rakuyō Publishing and Printing, 2025, pp. 246-47.

The implanted child remains deaf to some extent and, as also shown in Murakami Erika's story, will still need sign language, lip reading or additional hearing aids in order to communicate smoothly with others; occasionally, to avoid over-reliance on sign language, the parents may be encouraged to dissuade its use in favour of speech training, judging even the barest level of speech acquisition better than fluency in sign language. In the worst-case scenario, being unable to acquire adequate auditory levels via the device and having been deprived of early contact with sign language, these children may present cognitive, developmental and educational problems, potentially leaving them with no secure membership of any culture, thus with fewer opportunities than if they had learnt to sign right away.⁴⁵ Delay in intellectual growth has been linked to the postponement in giving the child an opportunity to master sign language and use it to exchange messages and learn about the world; by contrast, not taking into consideration possible relational, economic, socio-cultural and other individual-specific conditions, it has been generally observed that D/deaf children of D/deaf parents, who do not experience said delay, have substantial educational and psychosocial advance.⁴⁶ That is to say, the cochlear implant does not make a hearing child out of a D/deaf one. Arguing that, because of it, they are "less deaf" has little to no meaning since, within the socio-culturally constructed category of disability and infirmity, there is no "more deaf" or "less deaf"; there is only the disabled. The child will still be pitied and discriminated against (maybe to a lesser degree because of their speech abilities, or maybe to a greater degree because of the visible assistive technology); additionally, they may also be distanced from D/deaf communities by the hearing people around them, who would pull the child towards a world they cannot fully hear, or by the communities themselves, with whom they cannot smoothly communicate since they haven't been given the opportunity to learn to do so.

Searching for a cure for D/deafness implies the desire of a majority culture to impose its worldview, constructions, language and values on D/deaf people rather than endeavouring to change its institutions and create a space to welcome their views and needs as members of a minority culture. Considering the Social Model, the Human Rights Model, the Linguo-Cultural Minority Model and what has been discussed about language endangerment and language diversity loss, the cochlear implant could be framed as an attack towards Deaf culture, since it aims to impose oral languages on D/deaf people, thus threatening their communities. However, most people consider the cochlear implant through the Medical Model, seeing only a possible cure to the plight of disability rather than a threat to the preservation of a minority culture.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ SPARROW, "Defending Deaf Culture...", cit., pp. 143-45.

⁴⁶ LANE, *The Mask of Benevolence...*, cit., p. 226.

⁴⁷ SPARROW, "Defending Deaf Culture...", cit., p. 136.

Once again, then, if we delve into the root of the problem, we come face to face with ableism and ableist normativity. As it was discussed in the first chapter, ableism creates and reiterates exclusionary discourses through the creation of an ideal and able body that is defined by not being its opposites, the disabled and inferior ones. The result is ableist normativity, the emergence of the allegedly well-intentioned desire to change these dominantly constructed Other bodies to bodies that can hear, see, speak, read, write, or, in summary, to able bodies ideologically fashioned to be perceived as normal. In his article “Ableism toward Language by People with Disabilities: The Relationship between the Body and Ideology” (2025), Nakashima Takeshi clarifies how these processes translated into realities for D/deaf people, dividing into three stages the interventions historically foisted on their bodies: technical linguistic training in the form of pronunciation and lip reading drills to bring D/deaf individual’s communication closer to that of able-bodied people, hearing aids as technological devices that capitalise on residual hearing, and regenerative medicine technology, or cochlear implants, that restore some of the hearing, usually converting profound-to-severe hearing loss to mild hearing loss. These interventions are not merely technological and medical in nature, since they inevitably represent the byproducts of ideologies of communication, language and ableism that are deeply rooted in and reproduce inequalities. Moreover, Nakashima identifies a possible fourth stage in the evolution of interventions on D/deaf bodies, namely genetic research on the genes responsible for hearing loss. While the objective of such research is theoretically classification and improved support for hearing impairments, such knowledge could lead to practices of selective non-birth of people with hearing loss, similarly to the medical trend of increased selective abortion cases occurring with Japanese children with Down syndrome ever since non-invasive prenatal genetic testing was introduced in Japan in 2013.⁴⁸ Rather than being an isolated case, however, this advance towards the fourth stage can be observed in many other countries, as shown by the 2003 declaration of the National Institutes of Health, one of the world’s foremost medical research centres, according to which the completion of the sequencing of human genome was aimed at relieving human beings of debilitating and fatal genetic conditions that deserve a cure; amongst these conditions, deafness was also listed, hinting at the entrenched conviction that people need to be returned to speech and that, as a consequence, sign languages are not languages but rather adjustments for those who do not, but should, have speech abilities.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ NAKASHIMA Takeshi, “Ableism toward Language by People with Disabilities: The Relationship between the Body and Ideology”, in Heinrich P., Grosser F., Santalahti S. (edited by), *Ideologies of Communication in Japan: Speakers, Interaction and the Creation of Difference*, Bristol, Multilingual Matters, 2025, pp. 166-68.

⁴⁹ PADDEN, “Talking Culture...”, cit., pp. 512-13.

In their short novel “Delusion of an Ideal Future” (my translation), Akiko writes of an imagined future where a particular kind of microchip implantation procedure has spread throughout the world, effectively curing all sorts of impairments, physical, mental and intellectual. The scenario is initially presented as a blissful reality wherein people think of disability labels, certificates, pensions, and so on as mere shadows of a long-gone past. That is, until one of the characters in the story suddenly shifts away from the disability framework and into the cultural one, though it is applied to disability as a whole and not specifically D/deafness. Through these lenses, what had appeared earlier as a wonderful invention and a miracle of medical advancement is reread as a threat that can, and in the novel already did, lead to cultural erasure and loss in the endeavours towards conforming to the perceived norm.⁵⁰

What would happen, then, if a cure was actually developed? A bionic ear, for instance. The abovementioned danger of entrapment between two cultures would disappear, the crossroads now being a choice between growing up as a member of a Deaf culture or of the broader national hearing society. On the one, more liberal-based, hand, one should choose the option that offers more opportunities, which is undoubtedly the spoken language culture of the dominant majority; depriving a child of the opportunities they could have had with a bionic ear may be seen as a form of abuse, strengthening the perception within the hearing communities of the unwillingness and uncooperativeness of D/deaf people. On the other hand, however, D/deaf communities may give greater value to participation in Deaf cultures and in the opportunities they offer, rather than complete access to the hearing world and the risk of losing contact with the Deaf ways. The most sensible answer to this conundrum may seem to leave the decision of whether or not to go through with the bionic ear to the child’s parents, taking as given that children will be more comfortable sharing the cultural context of their families. Yet, following this path would not protect Deaf culture in the end, since 90% of D/deaf children are born to hearing parents, who would be more likely to choose the bionic ear and bring their child into their own cultural sphere, regardless of Medical or Linguo-Cultural Models. As a result, the size and the opportunities available within Deaf cultures would decrease substantially, to the point that even D/deaf parents themselves would consider the bionic ear in order not to trap their child in a marginalised existence.⁵¹

This is why advocating the Linguo-Cultural Minority Model is vital: while individuals have no formal obligation to consider the prospect of culture erasure, governments of multicultural societies should be reluctant to side with practices that lead to the disappearance of one of their cultures. Following this thread, research into cochlear implants for pre-linguistically D/deaf children, which seems to be going

⁵⁰ AKIKO, “Risō no Mirai no Mōsō”, in Watanabe T. (edited by), *Rōbungaku: dai 1 gō – dai 25 gō*, Yokohama, Rakuyō Publishing and Printing, 2025, pp. 152-54.

⁵¹ SPARROW, “Defending Deaf Culture...”, cit., pp. 145-46; 148-49.

towards the development of the bionic ear, becomes extremely controversial, since it does not simply work towards ensuring children with hearing impairments can share their parents' culture, but by pushing these potential members away from what has been internationally defined as a minority, sentences Deaf cultures to their inevitable extinction. In other words, public funding for the development of cochlear implants implies an adherence to the Medical Model and a refusal to acknowledge both the Social and Linguo-Cultural Minority Models, construing the D/deaf individual as an unfortunate victim of disability, rather than someone being disabled by socio-cultural constructions and environments, or a member of a minority culture. And this is further aggravated if considering that, while Deaf cultures are gravely endangered by the development of said technology, hearing cultures face no threat from the bionic ear. Within this controversy, then, even the presumed neutrality of the State is reframed, since, if we were to grant equal consideration to the interests of the disputing cultural groups, a truly neutral State would not fund the development of a technology that imperils one of the cultures under its protection but would rather favour a course of action that allows both dominant majority and minority groups to flourish.⁵²

⁵² *Ibidem*, pp. 149-52.

Chapter Three:

Localising Disability and D/deafness: The Japanese Landscape

In Chapters One and Two, we laid the groundwork for a critical understanding of the constructs of disability and D/deafness, amongst many other practices, frames, and ideologies entrenched in our everyday social and private lives. Above all, it has been demonstrated that definitions are neither monolithic nor fixed, but rather heavily influenced by the socio-cultural context and socio-material environment that surround and give birth to them. This means that, while on paper the most globally widespread and accepted theories and perceptions about disability and D/deafness are the ones described up to this point, these concepts, in practice, rarely remain untouched and unmodified by specific socio-cultural locations, political objectives, historical agents and processes, creating a complex and dynamic interplay that one must always bear in mind. For this reason, this chapter examines the place occupied by disability and D/deafness in Japan and how these constructs have been modified and defined to adapt and address localised and specific needs, both socio-cultural and political.

3.1 Disability in Japan

Whose lives, self-concepts and social selves do these constructs involve in the first place? According to the 2023 report of Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, surveys have registered a total of 11.6 million people with disabilities in the archipelago (around 9.2% of the total population of that year), specifically 4.36 million people with physical disabilities, almost 1.1 million people with intellectual disabilities and almost 6.13 million people with mental disabilities.¹ These data, however, are not representative of the actual number of people with disabilities in Japan, since the surveys include only those who carry an official disability certificate or handbook (*shōgaisha techo*), which classifies the impairment of the holder by category and severity (from most severe, grade one, to least severe, grade six).²

¹ MINISTRY OF HEALTH, LABOUR AND WELFARE, *Reina 6-nendo no Dōji Hōshū Kaitei ni Muketa Iken Kōkan-kai (dai 2 kai) Shiryō*, in "Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare", 2023, https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/shingi2/0000162533_00002.html, p. 13.

² Katharina HEYER, *Rights Enabled: The Disability Revolution, from the US to Germany and Japan, to the United Nations*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2015, pp. 129; 147.

At the centre of this subchapter is the examination of the decade-by-decade legislation that has developed within the interrelationship of these people and the constructions of disability in Japan, starting from the nation-state's laws and policies to then delve deeper into understanding what it means to be perceived as disabled, how and under which influences these perceptions changed, and, most importantly, how rooted and pervasive politics of disability are in Japan.

3.1.1 The Genesis of Japan's Welfare System: 1940s-1950s

Before the Second World War, there was no specific legislative system for supporting people with disabilities, who were instead all lumped together with other beneficiaries of poverty relief policies. This changed in 1949, when three welfare laws were enacted, amongst which was the Law for the Welfare of Physically Disabled Persons (Shintai Shōgaisha Fukushi-hō), a federal programme initially devised to provide relief charity, rehabilitation and reintegration into society and the labour market for war-wounded veterans. In its first stages, however, there was no real focus on impairments, even more so because, at the time, disability was construed as the hindrance to the occupational capacities of a person due to a physical impairment; such a vision borrows from the Marxist definition of disability, which sees people with impairments as burdens to society and to the State. Those who did not fall within this category had to rely solely on family protection or public assistance rather than government measures, thus triggering the parallel emergence of numerous initiatives in the private sector.³ The 1949 welfare act also introduced the previously mentioned *shōgaisha techō*, not as a mandatory measure but as a necessary tool to receive welfare and tax benefits, such as subsidies for mechanical or electronic aids, public assistance, tax reductions and/or exemptions, and so on, without which the costs for maintaining a basic standard of life would be intolerable for most with a disability. However, throughout the years, many disability activists have come to refuse this handbook, seeing it as a remnant and a physical manifestation of the impurity (*kegare*) that had long been associated with people with disabilities and that had brought many of their families to keep them out of public view.⁴

Further legislation was enforced in 1951, the Social Welfare Services Law (Shakai Fukushi-hō), which laid more concrete foundations for the establishment of Japan's post-war social welfare system, mandating the state provision of welfare services according to each individual's financial capacity.⁵

³ Rafael LINDQVIST, Kamal LAMICHHANE, "Disability Policies in Japan and Sweden: A Comparative Perspective", in *ALTER, European Journal of Disability Research*, vol. 13, 2019, p. 4.

⁴ HEYER, *Rights Enabled...*, cit., p. 129.

⁵ MINISTRY OF JUSTICE, *Social Welfare Act*, in "Japanese Law Translation", 1951, <https://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/en/laws/view/3813/jc>.

To summarise, Japan's response to welfare demands in the immediate post-war period was the establishment of residential rehabilitation-centred institutions, often secluded and strictly regulated, which were initially targeted at war veterans and then gradually expanded to meet the needs of people with disabilities as well. An element of significant influence in the creation of these first welfare-related acts was undoubtedly the newly enforced 1946 Constitution, whose Article 25, guarantees that "All people shall have the right to maintain the minimum standards of wholesome and cultured living", and that "the State shall use its endeavours for the promotion and extension of social welfare and security, and of public health"⁶. This article was one of the byproducts of the Allied Occupation's government division tasked with rewriting the constitutional text after the Japanese capitulation, and it established the basis for the extensive welfare and rehabilitation system for which Japan progressively became a benchmark in Asia.⁷

ろう学校にいる間は温室のように先生方、父兄の皆様、関係者の皆様に守られていたために温室から一人前に巣立つのは無理があります。それでも何事も一歩踏み出さなくては何も変わりません。

While at the school for the D/deaf, I was protected by my teachers, parents, and everyone involved, much like a plant kept in a greenhouse, which made it difficult to leave that sheltered environment and become fully independent. Even so, nothing can change unless I take that first step forward.⁸

As Nakase Teiju's words express well through the image of a greenhouse, though he refers it specifically to the realm of education, the themes of protectiveness and sheltering are central when discussing Japan's understanding of disability. Japanese law has traditionally invested PWOD, especially relatives, with the role of protectors of people with disabilities, a behaviour that today is defined as patronising and infantilising by many disability activists; these ableist attitudes of perceived benevolent paternalism and segregation were, and in some part are still nowadays, characteristic of the welfare system and the disability policies that emerged in the post-war period. Therefore, the sophisticated rehabilitation-focused network of welfare institutions and segregated schools that resulted from the application of a predominantly Medical Model of disability, too, is inevitably built and unwittingly reinforces the same ableist practices we have analysed in the first chapter, at the expense of equal rights and integration. In other words, the rehabilitation paradigm adopted in this first and founding stage of legislation frames

⁶ MINISTRY OF JUSTICE, *The Constitution of Japan*, in "Japanese Law Translation", 1946, <https://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/en/laws/view/174>.

⁷ HEYER, *Rights Enabled...*, cit., p. 128.

⁸ NAKASE Teiju, "Sessatakuma" (my translation), in Watanabe T. (edited by), *Rōbungaku: dai 1 gō – dai 25 gō*, Yokohama, Rakuyō Publishing and Printing, 2025, p. 212.

disability as an individual problem and its elimination as the solution, one that can be achieved through the adoption, as much as is possible, of the dominant construction of normative able-bodied lifestyles.⁹

3.1.2 The First Wave of Influence: 1960s-1970s

The end of the 1950s saw an evolution in the global trend towards de-institutionalisation and a consequent increase in care homes throughout the archipelago. One of the reasons behind this phenomenon was the emergence of the principle of normalisation, as developed by reformer Niels E. Bank-Mikkelsen, according to whom people with disabilities should not be enclosed within the walls of an institution but taught self-help skills and supported in their participation in society.¹⁰ This principle quickly spread beyond the Danish context where it was born and was further developed in Sweden in the 1960s by medic Bengt Nirje, who highlighted the need for people with disabilities to have a say in the direction of their lives.¹¹ Eventually, this philosophy arrived in Japan as well, and contributed to the enforcement of the 1960 Law for the Welfare of the Intellectually Disabled Persons (Seishin Hakujakusha Fukushi-hō, originally Law for the Welfare of Mentally Retarded Persons before the 1999 amendment), which focused on increasing care homes to provide protection for people with intellectual disabilities and fostering their vocational and daily independence.¹²

European-style initiatives, such as free medical services for the elderly and universal child allowances, started spreading widely in Japan from the 1970s, though they soon had to be morphed into a public system better suited to the Japanese welfare landscape and socio-cultural norms. The WENA-style welfare state clashed with a local system that owed much to Confucian heritage and thus had developed along the lines of individual self-help and cooperation within families and local communities. The current Japanese welfare system is the result of the contact between these apparently contrasting systems. More specifically, this first wave of external influences, incited by the social tensions of the 1960s in WENA countries, culminated in the emergence of Japan's disability rights movement in the 1970s, which voiced criticism of the discriminatory treatment in segregated institutions and, more broadly, of ableist society. The outcome of this activism was the 1970 Basic Law for Persons with Mental and Physical Disabilities (Shinshin Shōgaisha Taisaku Kihon-hō), a unified piece of legislation based on prevention and protective

⁹ LINDQVIST, LAMICHHANE, "Disability Policies in Japan and Sweden...", cit., pp. 5; 13.

¹⁰ Pamela BLOCK, *Niels Erik Bank-Mikkelsen*, in "Britannica", 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Niels-Erik-Bank-Mikkelsen>.

¹¹ HEYER, *Rights Enabled...*, cit., p. 144.

¹² JAPAN PAST & PRESENT, *Disability Legislation Timeline*, in "Japan Past & Present", <https://japanpastandpresent.org/en/projects/disability-studies-in-japan/research/disability-legislation-timeline>.

measures that brought together the disability-related laws promulgated until that point. This Law became the foundation of all subsequent disability legislation in the archipelago.¹³

Noteworthy in the 1970s is also the amendment to the 1960 Act to Facilitate the Employment of Persons with Physical Disabilities (Shintai Shōgaisha Koyō Sokushin-hō), which was originally designed to promote the employment of war-wounded veterans in the general labour market, but had to be revised after the oil crisis of 1973 led to the burst of Japan's economic bubble, heavily impacting the employment of people with disabilities. This amendment changed the quota system regulating employment for people with disabilities from a moral obligation to a mandatory requirement by introducing a Levy and Grant system that is still crucial in the relationship between people with disabilities and the labour market nowadays (more on this in Chapter Four).¹⁴

A core issue that can be observed in these first decades of disability legislation, and in the Constitution as well, is the deeply rooted philosophy of equal treatment that is prevalent in Japan. This very principle also emerges in Takahashi Mayumi's contribution to the special 2020 New Year edition of *Rōbungaku*, a story about a hearing man falling in love with a D/deaf woman. Here is a brief excerpt from the D/deaf woman's point of view as she recounts her experience with higher education:

入学してからの苦労はすさまじかった。高校の先生とは違って、大学の先生は私に配慮してくれる先生もいれば、平等性をきして見向きもしない人もいた。レジュメや友達のおかげでなんとか授業についていってはいけれど、くじけそうになった時もあった。必死に頑張って卒業したところで就職先はあるの？

The difficulties I faced after entering university were overwhelming. Unlike my high school teachers, some of my university professors were considerate of my needs, while others, in the name of equal treatment, paid me no attention at all. Thanks to the course handouts and my friends, I somehow managed to keep up with my classes, but there were times when I felt like giving up. Even if I worked desperately hard and managed to graduate, would there even be somewhere I could work?¹⁵

The issue of equal treatment can be summarised by the adverb that frequently appears in legal texts when discussing not only disability, but also guaranteeing rights and freedoms: *hitoshiku*, which means “equally” but with a nuance that communicates something identical, something that is given to A in exactly the same manner in which it is given to B.

¹³ LINDQVIST, LAMICHHANE, “Disability Policies in Japan and Sweden...”, cit., pp. 2-4.

¹⁴ MINISTRY OF JUSTICE, *Act to Facilitate the Employment of Persons with Disabilities*, in “Japanese Law Translation”, 1976, <https://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/en/laws/view/3845/jc>.

¹⁵ TAKAHASHI Mayumi, “Ano Kasenjiki” (my translation), in Watanabe T. (edited by), *Rōbungaku: dai 1 gō – dai 25 gō*, Yokohama, Rakuyō Publishing and Printing, 2025, p. 45.

In other words, in Japan there is the prevalent misconception that treating all people the same way is egalitarian; however, erasing people's bodily differences under the guise of this supposed equality actually results in reproducing inequality, since the grounds for judgement use as their only reference the ideologies, abilities and practices of the dominant majority (able-bodied people), to the detriment of everybody else.¹⁶ One must understand that, in this type of equality where everyone receives equal opportunities, the outcomes will not be the same and will not be all equal. For example, following this logic, a student who is D/deaf in a mainstream classroom should not be supported by a sign language interpreter since the other students are not provided with one. Levelling the playing field, as it is often said, means very little when the field has been constructed to leave only a specific few standing. The kind of equality that should be promoted and guaranteed, instead, is, borrowing Smart's classification, one where "everybody receives what they need", where individual differences are taken into consideration to allow individuals their rights and opportunities. Beyond ideological constructs, one should always remember that disability is indisputably linked to biological and functional bodies for which accommodations are legitimate and necessary to actively participate in society and maintain a reasonable standard of living. This view of equality is, thus, the complete opposite of the one that has been and still is dominant in Japan: with the philosophy of equal outcome rather than equal starting line, every individual would be earning the same rewards at the same standards, just with different accommodations.¹⁷

3.1.3 The Second Wave of Influence: The 1980s and the UN Mandates

The beginning of the 1980s was marked by the proclamation of the International Year of Persons with Disabilities by the United Nations in 1981, an initiative that aimed at drawing attention from all over the world to the rights and opportunities of people with disabilities to participate fully and be integrated into society; this was followed a few years later by the beginning of the International Decade of People with Disabilities (1983-92). At a time when people with disabilities in many countries were starting to organise political and social movements against discrimination and stigmatisation of embodied difference, the Japanese disability rights movement, too, enthusiastically embraced these UN global call and mandates, responding with the formal adoption of the previously mentioned normalisation principle (*noomarizeeshon*), which was employed as a guideline for the reform of disability law and policy. The issue at hand at the time was how to apply the standards of self-determination and self-advocacy born in the Scandinavian

¹⁶ NAKASHIMA, "Ableism toward Language by People with Disabilities...", cit., p. 164.

¹⁷ SMART, *Disability, Society...*, cit., p. 218.

context to the Japanese landscape of disability and provision of services. The Japanese interpretation of the concept was defined in a 1982 report as “the creation of a society where all people can lead ordinary lives in their communities, regardless of the presence of any disability”, and it was translated into the need to reread, in terms of civil rights and freedoms, the purpose of the rehabilitation centres at the heart of Japan’s welfare system, in a first attempt to join the global trend that was shifting away from the Medical Model of infirmity towards an understanding of disability and disability policy that was, instead, socially and politically constructed. And, while this report did not ultimately lead to the substantial policy reforms or shift in models desired by the activists, it managed to broaden the term “disability” within Japanese law, which had been limited to physical impairments until that moment, and to revise in 1984 the concept of rehabilitation in the foundational 1949 Law into that of independent living and provision of opportunities.¹⁸

This UN equality and integration mandate was the seed from which a new generation of disability activists in Japan was born. Comprised mostly of national associations of people with physical impairments, psychiatric therapists and social workers, this first generation adopted a language of rights, equal access and pride in the disability identity, centring on daily life issues, such as the right to integrated education, equal employment and accessibility, and independent living, each one of them needing different strategies and being welcomed with different degrees of enthusiasm. Amongst them, particular importance was given to the concept of independent living, which is also one of the main pillars of the normalisation principle.¹⁹ Activist Adolf Ratzka (2009) defines it as such:

Independent Living does not mean that we want to do everything by ourselves, do not need anybody or like to live in isolation. Independent Living means that we demand the same choices and control in our every-day lives that our non-disabled brothers and sisters, neighbors and friends take for granted. [...] We are profoundly ordinary people sharing the same need to feel included, recognized and loved.²⁰

And yet, according to the Japanese welfare model established through the 1951 Law, service choice and management were handled by service providers and not directly by customers with disabilities, strengthening practices of paternalism and unnecessary dependence, not to mention depriving people with disabilities of the agency to make decisions about their daily lives.

¹⁸ HEYER, *Rights Enabled...*, cit., pp. 126; 144-46.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 140; 151; 154.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 155.

The independent living philosophy was imported into Japan by activists who travelled to the United States to learn more about it, one of them being Nakanishi Shōji, founder of Human Care, Japan's first independent living centre established in 1986, where people with disabilities were supported during their transition from institutions or group homes to independent housing through counselling services, training sessions and arrangements for attendant care. However, transplanting the concepts of self-determination and self-advocacy from the US to Japan was not as direct a process as one might think, especially because people with disabilities had been taught from an early age to interiorise their dependence on the care (in whatever form it may come) they receive from their families and the government and to be grateful for it. In other words, the import of the independent living philosophy has been arduous precisely because, as we already introduced in Chapter One, within the Japanese setting independence is defined and valued differently than in the United States, since the socio-cultural and socio-material environment and circumstances at play are different. For example, while independence in the US may be synonymous with separation from one's family, in Japan such distance is not necessarily positive, especially when it comes to Japanese women with disabilities, whose imposed expectations often do not involve said separation or marriage in the first place. First-generation disability activists in Japan were thus faced with the complex task of maintaining a balance between integrating foreign concepts that challenged widespread assumptions of disability as a source of stigma and shame, while also tempering them through socio-culturally appropriate modifications. The results were new welfare policies based on well-developed but still segregated and special needs-centred facilities.²¹

3.1.4 The Third Wave of Influence: The 1990s and the US Reference Model

Once again, the decade opened with the enforcement of a law that had a significant impact on Japanese disability legislation and triggered a new wave of reforms and activism: the US Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (hereinafter referred to as ADA), the first comprehensive antidiscrimination piece of disability legislation, welcomed as a ground-breaking step in the fight for equal treatment, equal rights and integration. Fuelled by the sense of lagging behind WENA countries in many fields and by partially seeing itself as the banner of WENA values in Asia, Japan's disability rights movement saw the onset of a second generation of activism, which set the ADA as its ultimate goal in the disability rights field, challenging the widespread segregation of people with disabilities in the archipelago and encouraging discussion on the meaning of antidiscrimination, in the hopes of a future enactment of Japan's own Disabilities Act. This was done through the novel framework borrowed from the US disability rights

²¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 155-57.

movement, which construed people with disabilities' political and legal demands as human rights issues; additionally, by using the imported language of self-determination, self-advocacy and independent living, disability rights were being presented as a progressive WENA initiative that Japan had to adhere to in order to close the gap with other international developed countries. Yet, as we have seen many times already, a direct importation of this Act and of the principles behind it was not possible: Japan's disability laws and policies are a reflection of specific historical, legal and socio-cultural assumptions on the meaning of disability and equality, not to mention that the relevance of law as a tool for social change is not as marked in Japan as it is in other countries. Therefore, unable to apply the US framework as it was, this second generation, much like the first one a decade prior, took inspiration from the political movements active at the time in Japan and from the discrimination and human rights frames they had already worked to establish.²²

Amongst these frameworks of inspiration, the most relevant are perhaps the ones developed by the *Burakumin* liberation movement. *Burakumin* are a social minority group unique to Japan, typically defined as a caste group, since there is virtually no difference between them and the majority of Japanese society in terms of race, ethnicity, language, culture, religion or citizenship. The construction of this group dates back to the Tokugawa period (1603-1868), when people whose occupations involved killing and death were classified as tainted, and, because of this, marginalised and discriminated against as an outcast group dominantly perceived to be biologically different, thus justifying the hierarchical social organisation of the time. Despite the abolishment of the status system during the Meiji period (1868-1912, official family registries retained records of it, either as labels or as information inferable from one's permanent residence, leading to the institutionalisation of the stigmatised status. The situation improved after activists of the *Burakumin* liberation movement managed to obtain the passage of the 1969 Law on Special Measures for Dōwa Projects (Dōwa Taisaku Jigyō Tokubetsu Sochi-hō), which was later replaced by the 2016 Law Concerning the Promotion of Elimination of Buraku Discrimination (Buraku Sabetsu no Kaiketsu no Suishin ni Kansuru Hōritsu) after the former Act was not reviewed in 2002.²³ Therefore, considering that the rationale behind discrimination against *Burakumin* was a perceived notion of impurity, opposed to the constructed one of cleanliness, a connection can be found with the idea of *kegare* that was associated with people with disabilities; furthermore, both forms of discrimination, be it casteism or disablism, can be traced back to dominant and normative ableist views, making the framework used by the *Burakumin* liberation movement suitable to people with disabilities' quest of claiming their human rights.

²² *Ibidem*, pp. 124-25; 127; 140.

²³ Jane H. YAMASHIRO, "The Social Construction of Race and Minorities in Japan", in *Sociology Compass*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2013, pp. 153-54.

A further example of a framework that paved the way for the Japanese disability rights movement is the one adopted by *Aoi Shiba no Kai*, a national association of people with cerebral palsy that became the forerunner of disability activism in Japan. While their successful lobbying for the welfare disability pension in 1961 is considered a milestone in Japanese disability history, the group actually gained recognition in 1970 for the public debate over the umpteenth case of so-called “mercy killing” infanticide, a crime quite frequent at the time in Japan. *Aoi Shiba no Kai* openly criticised the general tendency of the public opinion to side with and show sympathy towards mothers’ decision to end their child’s misery, instead drawing attention to these children and to the eugenics-based ideologies of an able-bodied society. That was the starting point of *Aoi Shiba no Kai*’s radical activism against ableist practices, from the care offered by society, which they interpreted as pity and oppression, to eugenicist practices and beliefs. And while their claims showed a lack of interdisciplinary awareness when it came to the social stigma women bear when they give birth to a child with disabilities, it is undeniable that their endeavours helped lay the foundation of rights-based disability activism.²⁴

The *Aoi Shiba no Kai* example opens another sensitive issue when it comes to disability in Japan, that is, eugenics. The practices and beliefs of eugenics were introduced in Japan in the late 19th century, and gained increasing popularity at the beginning of the 20th century, eventually leading to the enactment of the 1940 National Eugenics Law (Kokumin Yūsei-hō), which was heavily inspired by the Nazi German sterilisation law of 1933 and allowed for both voluntary and involuntary sterilisation; under this Law, 583 people were voluntarily, or so the documentation reports, sterilised. The purpose of the National Eugenics Law was to increase the number of healthy citizens and decrease that of people suffering from various hereditary diseases. However, following Japan’s defeat, the focus shifted towards population control and the necessity of strengthening the existing eugenic legislation, especially in light of the perceived reverse selection (i.e. the disproportionate reproduction of people deemed unfit), which was already present at the turn of the century, though at the time it was tackled by repressing birth control rather than reinforcing eugenicist practices. The result of this anxiety produced by perceived reverse selection was the 1948 Eugenic Protection Law (Yūsei Hogo-hō), a piece of legislation that aimed to prevent the birth of children deemed eugenically inferior and to protect the health of mothers through voluntary and involuntary sterilisations and abortion under determined circumstances. Amongst these circumstances to receive the approval for a eugenic operation were hereditary physical impairments, hereditary mental illnesses, hereditary mental deficiencies, hereditary diseases, and so on (sterilisation of people with non-hereditary mental conditions was added after the amendment in 1952). Furthermore,

²⁴ HEYER, *Rights Enabled...*, cit., pp. 142-44.

even if the patients or their families appealed the decision, if the committee found the sterilisation necessary, it could proceed with it even through coercion, with the explicit approval of the Ministry of Justice. There are several reasons as to why the Law's passage was not questioned at the time: firstly, it was probably understood as an abortion law rather than a eugenic one; secondly, eugenicist practices and beliefs continued well beyond the Second World War in many democratic countries, becoming a controversial issue only in later years; and finally, sterilisation was often rationalised in many ways, one of the most frequent ones being preventing the birth of children who would, according to the dominant majority in power (able-bodied people), inevitably be unhappy. As reported by the documentation of the Ministry of Health and Welfare, around 16,500 people were involuntarily sterilised, and an additional 8,500 were voluntarily sterilised under the Eugenics Protection Law, without counting those who were sterilised involuntarily using methods not legally approved, as sometimes happened in some institutions for the disabled or the mentally ill. About 70% of those operated on were women, which made eugenics a gender issue as well. Throughout the years, many doubts about the appropriateness of sterilising people against their will emerged, with the same Ministry of Health and Welfare stating that the sterilisations were inhuman, and a breach of the human rights guaranteed by the Japanese Constitution. Despite that, however, the Ministry of Justice maintained that the practice did not go against the spirit of the Constitution since it represented an endeavour towards the public good. Eventually, in 1996, in the wake of international criticism and pressure from disability rights activism, the Law was amended to abolish mentions of eugenicist practices and renamed the Maternal Health Act (Bōtai Hogo-hō); nevertheless, the shadow of eugenics lingered even after the turn of the millennium, with the Japanese Parliament enacting a law to compensate the victims of forced sterilisation and ruling the Eugenics Protection Law as unconstitutional only in 2019.²⁵ As the Japanese Federation of the Deaf stated following the offensive and disablist remarks made during a civil lawsuit for the killing of a fifth-grade D/deaf student in Osaka in 2021, “eugenic thought and eugenic policies are clearly not just a problem of the past, but continue to take root in everyday life and society in areas such as employment, medical care, and education”²⁶.

Returning to the 1990s' legislation, two more major events are worth noting. Firstly, the 1993 amendment to the 1970 Law, which was renamed the Basic Law for Persons with Disabilities (Shōgaisha Kihon-hō) to reflect the broadening of the definition of the term “disability”; this Act is the foundational legislation of Japan's current welfare system for people with disabilities, gathering under its protection physical,

²⁵ Astghik HOVHANNISYAN, “Preventing the Birth of ‘Inferior Offspring’: Eugenic Sterilizations in Postwar Japan”, in *Japan Forum*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2021, pp. 385-89; 391-95.

²⁶ JAPANESE FEDERATION OF THE DEAF, *Special Resolution: Strengthen the Movement to Eliminate Eugenic Thought*, in “Japanese Federation of the Deaf”, 2021, <https://www.jfd.or.jp/en-archive/sla>.

mental and intellectual impairments and stating that prefectures and municipalities are legally obliged to formulate arrangements for people with disabilities under their jurisdiction.²⁷ Even so, as Katharina Heyer highlights, there were still limits to this amendment, since it did not define nor prohibit discrimination based on disability, instead only outlining the responsibilities of the State and the importance of independence and participation in society in accordance with the normalisation principle.²⁸

Secondly, with respect to such principle, the year 1995 marked the beginning of the Seven-Year Normalisation Strategy (Shōgaisha Puran), whose key priorities were securing housing and employment opportunities, promoting social participation and expanding residential care facilities. This was a first, gradual step in dismantling the previous welfare system that acted as an intermediary between people with disabilities and the autonomous choice of their services. Nevertheless, the connotation given to normalisation was that of an increasingly greater integration in mainstream society, that is, people with disabilities had to conform and adapt to able-bodied lifestyles and, when that was not possible, receive support from their families and from income-tested social protection programmes.²⁹

3.1.5 2000s: Reformed Welfare System and the Adoption of the CRPD

At the turn of the millennium, to overcome the trailing feeling in terms of social welfare management, Japan felt the need to adopt a customer-end model of services. Thus, mirroring the 2000 overhaul of the social insurance system for the elderly (*kaigo hoken*) with the implementation of such consumer control, the Assistance Funding System (*shienbi seido*) was established in 2003, confirming the shift from a system of compulsory provision, where, without much attention to the user's particular needs, the local city hall would approve and arrange for service providers, to a contractual tax-based entitlement system, where people with disabilities were allowed to choose the services they wished to receive and their own service providers. However, while in its initial stage the *shienbi seido* was incredibly popular, allowing people with disabilities to translate into reality the philosophy of independent living with low user fees, less than a year after its introduction the system faced large budget overruns, leading to its conflation with the *kaigo hoken* and the creation of a unified system financed through premiums and co-payments. The response from the Japanese disability community was so negative, with disability associations organising and coordinating protests throughout the whole archipelago and accusing the government of privileging the

²⁷ MINISTRY OF JUSTICE, *Basic Act for Persons with Disabilities*, in “Japanese Law Translation”, 1993, <https://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/en/laws/view/4929/je>.

²⁸ HEYER, *Rights Enabled...*, cit., p. 146.

²⁹ PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE, *The Government Action Plan for Persons with Disabilities*, in “Disability Information Resources”, 1995, <https://www.dinf.ne.jp/doc/english/law/japan/100002e/100002e01.html>.

interests of the elderly, that the State had to pass the 2005 Services and Supports for Persons with Disabilities Act (Shōgaisha Jiritsu Shien-hō) in response.³⁰

A first step towards the much-coveted Japan's own antidiscrimination Disabilities Act came in 2004 with the amendment of the 1970 Basic Law for Persons with Disabilities to include an antidiscrimination provision in Article 4, which increased the responsibility of local governments to create plans for their residents with disabilities, include them in government policy decisions, design barrier-free buildings and promote information provision. As is often the case with Japanese disability law, though, these clauses did not include any administrative or judicial penalties, making their effectiveness and binding force rather weak.³¹ Instead, what truly brought Japanese legislation on the path towards antidiscrimination against people with disabilities was the adoption of the CRPD in 2007: by signing it and in preparation for its ratification, the Japanese government took the commitment to develop the necessary legal framework for an antidiscrimination law in line with the Convention's mandate of reasonable accommodations and prohibition of discrimination based on disability. This proved to be a major pressure on policymakers, who spent the following years examining the disability legislation of other countries which had adopted the Social Model of disability to find a solution that suited Japan's policies, thus gradually realising the need to rethink the definition of disability in terms of the complex relationship it has with the socio-cultural and socio-material environment. The biggest obstacle to adopting such a model, however, was, once again, the difficulties of applying it in a disability landscape that centred on difference and segregation, not to mention the norms surrounding care and gratitude. In other words, while the WENA-based Social and Human Rights Models were a source of inspiration to many activists with their notions of self-advocacy and antidiscrimination, many people with/out disabilities did not wish for a complete shift away from the Medical Model; instead, they blended these imported and locally interpreted models to create a framework that could make space for the pillars of the Japanese welfare system, namely segregated education and employment quota, on which so much effort was spent throughout the decades.³²

The result of this blended formula was a focus on independent living, antidiscrimination, disability rights awareness and, above all, barrier-free access to public buildings and transportation, which has become a cornerstone of modern disability activism in Japan. Since the 1980s, activism has been raising awareness of the need to reorganise socio-material structures that make it harder for people with disabilities to navigate the public sphere, an effort that led to a gradual adaptation to the global trend towards universal

³⁰ HEYER, *Rights Enabled...*, cit., pp. 158-59.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 161.

³² *Ibidem*, pp. 162-64.

design and achieved the passing of laws such as the 1994 Law for Building Accessible and Usable by the Elderly and Physically Disabled Persons (also known as the Building with Heart Law, *Haato Biru-hō*). However, as can be seen with this Law and the previously mentioned reform in the welfare system, responses to many disability-related issues in Japan often arise to answer the needs of one of the world's most rapidly ageing societies, rather than the demands of people with disabilities themselves.³³

3.1.6 2010s: Ratifying the CRPD and the Adoption of the Social Model

In the previous subchapter, the 2005 Services and Supports for Persons with Disabilities Act was mentioned. This piece of legislation entered into force in 2006 with the aim of enabling people with disabilities to become independent members of society through welfare services supporting independent living. However, a few issues emerged in the years following the passage of the Act, such as the need to reduce out-of-pocket expenses for people with disabilities and their families, and to refine and strengthen the network of local authorities to standardise the quality and quantity of services provided throughout the archipelago. Because of this and following the abovementioned pattern of prioritising the needs of the elderly, the law was amended in 2013 to become the Act on Providing Comprehensive Support for the Daily Life and Life in Society of Persons with Disabilities (*Shōgaisha no Nichijō Seikatsu Oyobi Shakai Seikatsu wo Sōgōteki ni Shien suru tame no Hōritsu*). This new comprehensive legislation broadened the scope of the previous 2005 Act by addressing several issues: the provision of services is now based on individual needs rather than fixed classifications, the emphasis is placed on self-determination of people with disabilities, and the overall framework has been revised to further support independence and social participation. The recent and increasing influence of the shift towards the Social Model can also be seen in the Act's fundamental principles, one of which endeavours to remove social barriers.³⁴

The shift towards Japan's interpretation of the Social Model and the ratification of the CRPD began with the 2011 amendment to the Basic Law for Persons with Disabilities. The influence of the rights-based framework can be seen in the new definition of a person with disability as “a person with a physical disability, a person with an intellectual disability, a person with a mental disability (including developmental disabilities), and other persons with disabilities affecting the functions of the body or the

³³ *Ibidem*, pp. 152-54.

³⁴ MOTOYAMA Yuzuka, *Shōgaisha Jiritsu Shien-hō kara Shōgaisha Sōgō Shien-hō ni Kawatta Rīyū ha?*, in “Care Tasukeru”, 2025, <https://caretasukeru.com/disability-support-law/3143/>.

mind [...] and who are in a state of facing continuous substantial limitations in their daily life or life in society because of a disability and social barriers”³⁵. Within this definition, the element that undeniably calls upon the Social Model of disability is the mentioning of social barriers, which are further defined in Article 2 as the “items, institutions, practices, ideas, and other things in society that stand as obstacles against persons with disabilities engaging in daily life or life in society”³⁶.

Finally, in 2013, the efforts in laying the groundwork for the ratification of the Convention culminated with the Act for Eliminating Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities (Shōgai wo Riyū to suru Sabestu no Kaiketsu no Suishin ni kansuru Hōritsu), which centres on the prohibition of discriminatory treatment based on disability and demands the provision of reasonable accommodation; it is important to mention, though, that the Law is addressed to public institutions and private businesses, leaving out of its scope single individuals. Nonetheless, this allowed Japan to ratify the CRPD the following year as its 141st State Party (the US, the perceived ideal model of disability policy Japan had yearned to emulate, still has not ratified the Convention to this day). The Antidiscrimination Act was amended in 2021, with the amendment enforced in 2024, to change the reasonable accommodations³⁷ clause from a moral to a legal obligation for private business as well, since the previous version legally bound only public institutions. In case of the violation of the antidiscrimination and reasonable accommodations legal obligations, however, as we have seen is often the case with Japanese disability legislation, there are no penalties; on the contrary, the authorities will offer the necessary guidance and corrective advice to provide reasonable accommodations, and fines and public disclosure of non-compliance with the Antidiscrimination Act’s mandates are provided for only as a precaution against companies not reporting or falsely reporting on these administrative recommendations (it is not specified whether these reports need to show actual progress in their realisation).³⁸

Having summarised the legislative history of welfare and disability in Japan, we can conclude, then, that the archipelago’s social welfare system is a sophisticated mixture of medicalisation and productivity-driven values, with families still representing primary providers of social protection and care, thus outlining disability as an issue that, at least in part, belongs to the family domain. In other words, the Social Model did indeed arrive in Japan, but it inevitably changed in the process of adapting to the socio-

³⁵ MINISTRY OF JUSTICE, *Basic Act for Persons with Disabilities*, cit.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ Reasonable accommodations, as defined by the CRPD, are the “necessary and appropriate modifications and adjustments not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden, where needed in a particular case, to ensure persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise on an equal basis with others of all human rights and fundamental freedoms” (p. 4).

³⁸ MINISTRY OF JUSTICE, *Act for Eliminating Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities*, in “Japanese Law Translation”, 2013, <https://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/en/laws/view/3052/jc>.

cultural, political and historical setting of the archipelago, distancing itself from the approach that promotes people with disabilities' full independence as citizens of a local community, and instead becoming what Shinkawa Toshimitsu (2008) defines as a “familial welfare-mix model”, where private and public welfare provision are irremediably intertwined and whose foundation is still represented by the medical and pathological understanding of disability, that is, the Medical Model.³⁹

3.2 D/deafness in Japan

Hence, a pertinent question arises: where is D/deafness located in Japan? The answer is all but straightforward. By analysing the sophisticated and quite complex Japanese social welfare system, several persistent issues have emerged: the synthesis of disability policies with those related to the rapidly ageing population of the archipelago, the controversial notion of equality and even more controversial rootedness of eugenics, the entrenched ableist practices of creating unnecessary dependence and paternalism, and the still recent and tentative shift towards a Social Model of *disability* that still much to the Medical one. These are all D/deafness issues as well, since, in the Japanese landscape, D/deafness is in great part still seen through the lenses of disability frameworks. In other words, everything that has been discussed up to this point relates to disability as much as it relates to D/deafness.

If we were to ask where D/deafness, seen through a Linguo-Cultural Minority Model, is located in Japan, the answer would change, but not in the way one might expect, since it does not follow the WENA-like patterns described in Chapter Two, creating instead a path that is unique precisely because it is not abstract and generalised, but localised. The core of this answer would be that Japan is a multicultural country that not only is not partial to admitting to its multiculturalism but is even more reticent when it comes to recognising the *plurilingualism* and *pluriculturalism* of its inhabitants.

The construction of Japaneseness has come to include ideas of not only race, but also culture, citizenship and language, leading to the subsequent labelling of everything within nation-state borders that does not meet those dominant categories as non-Japanese or marginal Japanese. This process of ideological construction started within larger contexts of imperialism and nation-building in the late 19th century, when Japan was looking at WENA countries as models of civilisation, industrialisation and military power, and developed into a claim of Japanese superiority over other internal minority groups, such as the Ainu and the Ryūkyūans, as well as other Asian populations, thus legitimising the imperial conquests and unequal treatments that followed. While during the Pacific War the dominant discourse of Japaneseness

³⁹ LINDQVIST, LAMICHANE, “Disability Policies in Japan and Sweden...”, cit., pp. 10-12.

was that of an all-encompassing and mixed nation, after the capitulation, and especially since the 1970s, the invented tradition of a primordial Japanese homogeneity and uniqueness grew dominant throughout and outside the archipelago, and became a crucial factor in the formation of Japanese national, ethnic, cultural and linguistic identity, fostered by the ethnocentric genre of literary works (both domestic and international) called *nihonjinron*. Precisely because it is an *invented* tradition, despite its claims of racial homogeneity and absence of minorities (a point that was also highlighted by former Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro in 1986)⁴⁰, it does not reflect the actual situation of the archipelago, which has been hosting minority populations who continue to struggle for social inclusion, cultural recognition, and political and economic equality. In other words, Japaneseness as a constructed racial and ethnic category is utilised by mainstream society with normative connotations, making itself unmarked against the marked “Otherness” of the archipelago’s minorities, who are stuck between their identity as an often oppressed and marginalised minority culture and the assimilationist pressures from the dominant majority with whom they share citizenship.⁴¹

There is no emergent Korean-Japanese culture discussed positively in the mainstream press; Okinawan nationalism is largely ignored by mainland media; and the Ainu native culture (while still alive) has been encased behind museum glass in the popular consciousness. This underscores the powerlessness of the ethnic minority frame in Japan, not the lack of minority groups in general.⁴²

We could add D/deaf people to Nakamura’s brief list of minority groups whose voices and opinions are often overlooked or, perhaps even worse, looked at as if they belong to the peripheries of the Japanese majority, marginalised but still within its allegedly homogeneous borders. The complex core of the issue, however, is that they are, to a degree, part of this majority, because more than a century of policies and ideologies has made them so, on both a public and individual level. In a perfect example of what we have already seen with Gramsci’s theorisation of hegemony, many members of minorities in Japan not only are anxious to be accepted but have also come to accept themselves as Japanese citizens and members of the dominant majority, with no space for a minority identity that would only be detrimental on multiple levels, first of all the social one. In this light, the issue broadens beyond the field of multiculturalism, crossing to that of pluriculturalism as well, or better, of the non-recognition of pluriculturalism, that is, of the idea that a single individual can be host to multiple cultures and that cultural identities are relational

⁴⁰ John MAHER, “Linguistic Minorities and Education in Japan”, in *Educational Review*, vol. 49, no. 2, 1997, p. 125.

⁴¹ YAMASHIRO, “The Social Construction of Race and Minorities in Japan”, cit., pp. 147-49.

⁴² NAKAMURA Karen, *Deaf in Japan...*, cit., pp. 9-10.

constructions which emerge from the interactions between people and with the socio-material environment they are inserted into.

More concretely, the diachronic evolution of the situation of D/deafness in Japan can be summarised with the following recapitulatory diagram:

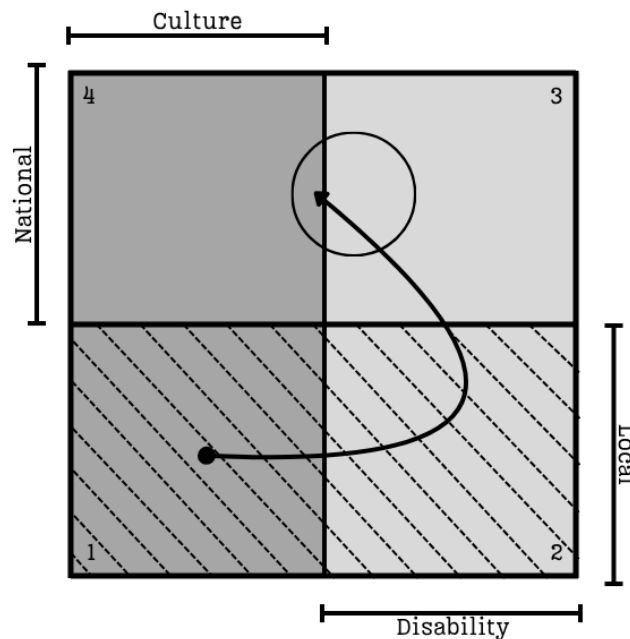


Figure A

As we can see in Figure A, the evolution of D/deafness in Japan can be roughly divided into four main stages (quadrants from 1 to 4), each one characterised by two markers, either “Culture” or “Disability”, referring to the framework of interpretation of D/deafness, and either “Local” or “National”, referring to the breadth of such framework. The central arrow represents the mostly chronological evolution of the concept⁴³, while the circle indicates the current interpretation of D/deafness within Japanese society. Looking more closely at each stage, they can be classified and described as follows:

1. School Communities (Tokugawa period – Prewar period):

⁴³ There is no clear-cut passage from one stage to the other, precisely because the D/deaf experience is extremely multifaceted and involves both broader nationwide policies and directions, but also individual idiosyncratic experiences.

This first stage is defined by the tentative emergence of earliest-known congregations of D/deaf people. Facilitated by the creation of new, more densely populated urban centres during the Tokugawa period, D/deaf people now had more opportunities to interact with one another and develop social communication methods.⁴⁴ There is little evidence to the development of these small local communities up until the Meiji period, when the first schools for the D/deaf in Japan were established. These, alongside the alumni associations created by former students, became the cradles of budding forms of sign language and Deaf culture. The local aspect of this first stage is particularly pronounced, with cultural and linguistic forms changing from school to school, even within the same cities (the amalgam of individual home signs and local signs developed in different schools or associations led to the creation of an abundance of regional dialects).⁴⁵

2. Pathologisation (Postwar period – 1980s):

The second stage remains at the local level but presents a crucial shift in framework from culture to disability. The factors of influence behind this change are chiefly two: the first one is the dissemination of the Medical Model, which, as described in the first half of this chapter, reframed the lives of people with disabilities, conflating and encapsulating D/deaf people within this category as well; the second element of influence was mainstreaming, which removed D/deaf children from D/deaf schools, their cultural hubs, to place them in mainstream institutions, isolating them and instilling the disability identity in them to the point that, after the 1960s, the following generations of D/deaf children stopped identifying with D/deafness and started applying dominant ableist ideologies on themselves.

3. Social Minority (1980s – Ongoing):

The third stage is the most widespread conception of D/deafness nowadays and is coherent with what was previously said about disability in this chapter: D/deaf people are perceived as a sub-category of people with disabilities, with disability understood according to the blended Medical, Social and Human Rights Model commonly accepted in Japan. We have thus moved away from a local level to a national one, owing in great part to the establishment of a national welfare system and the activism of the Japanese disability rights movement, yet we are still firmly rooted in the concept of disability, with the culture remaining exclusively that of the dominant majority. To further confirm this, the Japanese Federation of the Deaf itself, which often represents the

⁴⁴ NAKAMURA, *Deaf in Japan...*, cit., p. 36.

⁴⁵ Patrick MCCLUE, “Setting the Standard: An Overview of the History and Politics of Prohibiting and Promoting a National Japanese Sign Language”, in *Tokyo Joshi Daigaku Kiyō Ronshū*, vol. 63, no. 2, 2013, pp. 209; 211.

opinions and needs of the Japanese D/deaf community on a political level, has often claimed the fundamental Japaneseness of D/deaf people in Japan⁴⁶.

4. Linguo-Cultural Minority (1990s – Ongoing):

The final stage of this evolution has not yet been fully entered, since there is no standardised and widespread definition of what it means to be Deaf in Japan. Organisations promoting D/deafness as the mark of a linguo-cultural minority separate from Japanese culture have attempted to adopt US-originated definitions of Deaf culture, but a direct transplant of concepts from one socio-cultural setting to the other, as we have already seen multiple times, is not feasible in most cases. That is to say, Deaf culture as a concept is still a very recent import in Japan, one that has seen some radical approaches in the 1990s and that, since then, has been slowly and cautiously been emerging as a topic of discussion through the influence of international Deaf Cultures. Only in the last few years, Deaf culture seems to have found a shape suitable for the Japanese socio-cultural setting and local interpretation of D/deafness in the “sign language culture”⁴⁷ (*shuwa bunka*) mentioned in the 2025 Sign Language Act.

This diachronic division in stages of how D/deafness has been and is construed in Japan helps both with understanding where it is located within the previously discussed legislative evolution of disability in the archipelago, and with contextualising what follows, that is, a brief overview of D/deafness-related organisations and initiatives. On the official level, the Japanese Federation of the Deaf is briefly examined as the main point of reference and representative organisation of D/deaf people in Japan; on the other hand, on the unofficial level, the *Rōbungaku* booklet project, and the person behind it, Watanabe Takako, is introduced as not merely one of the many D/deafness-related initiatives active in Japan, but as the source material that has been giving a real, human weight to this thesis through the words, opinions and worldviews of ordinary D/deaf Japanese people.

3.3 The Japanese Federation of the Deaf

The Japanese Federation of the Deaf (Zen-Nihon Rōa Renmei) is a general incorporated foundation (*zaidan hōjin*), as well as the only national-level organisation of D/deaf people in Japan, with affiliated associations in all 47 prefectures. Its aim, as stated by former chairman Ishino Fujisaburō, is the creation

⁴⁶ NAKAMURA, *Deaf in Japan...*, cit., p. 2.

⁴⁷ JAPANESE GOVERNMENT, *Shuwa ni kansuru Taisaku no Suishin ni kansuru Hōritsu*, in “E-Gov”, 2025, <https://laws.e-gov.go.jp/law/507AC0100000078>.

of a society where D/deaf people can flourish as full-fledged members, an inclusive society of “barrier-free minds” (*kokoro no baria furii*) where everyone can live with dignity.⁴⁸

The first alumni association of D/deaf people was established in the archipelago in 1891; its leaders, feeling the need for a national organisation that could represent the D/deaf Japanese population, created the Japan Association of the Deaf in 1916, which continued reporting on D/deaf-related news and providing cultural activities up to the association’s disbandment at the end of the Second World War.⁴⁹

In its place, in 1947, the Japanese Federation of the Deaf (hereinafter referred to as JFD or the Federation) was born as an “organisation of the D/deaf, for the D/deaf and by the D/deaf”⁵⁰ (*rōsha ni yoru rōsha no tame no rōsha no soshiki*). The Federation’s first years were described as an “era of pleading”, mostly because the young and politically inactive leaders had to go to government offices to plead for the resources and services they needed.⁵¹ The official recognition of the JFD as a registered social welfare organisation in 1950, the advent of a younger generation of leaders in the 1960s, influenced by the turbulent social tensions of those times, and an increasing spread of awareness of D/deaf issues brought a change in its political activity and launched an era of intense activism for the Federation. As a *zaidan hōjin* under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Welfare, the JFD had to continuously submit numerous reports on each of its projects, all of which needed to be within the scope of welfare activities in order to continue receiving *itaku* contracts⁵² from the government. But even then, the Federation had been particularly clever at avoiding excessive entanglement with the State by using legal and bureaucratic loopholes in its favour. One example of this is the fact that, by making it mandatory for members of the organisation to be D/deaf, there are no *amakudari*⁵³ amongst its Board members, which allows for greater independence from the government but also unfavourably influences the number of *itaku* projects the Federation receives and their size. Due to being the only national-level D/deaf organisation, however, the JFD has received some significant *itaku* projects by the Ministry of Health and Welfare throughout the years, such as the standardisation and development of sign language vocabulary, or the promotion of the use of sign language by hearing people through the organisation of sign language interpreting classes and formal and informal sign language classes and circles.⁵⁴ After the change in status to general

⁴⁸ JAPANESE FEDERATION OF THE DEAF, *Hitori Hitori ga Kagayakeru Mirai he*, Tokyo, Japanese Federation of the Deaf, 2018, pp. 3; 7.

⁴⁹ MCCLUE, “Setting the Standard...”, cit., p. 209.

⁵⁰ JAPANESE FEDERATION OF THE DEAF, *Hitori Hitori*..., p. 3.

⁵¹ NAKAMURA, *Deaf in Japan*..., cit., p. 65.

⁵² *Itaku* contracts are a way for the government to manage its tasks by assigning them to other organisations. However, it is also a way of shifting responsibilities, since, by tasking others to manage implementation processes and details, the government guarantees State control over these projects without risking culpability in case of their failure or of any mishap.

⁵³ An *amakudari* is a retired high-ranking government official who has been given a lucrative job in a private or semi-private corporation. These figures are quite common amongst Board members of Japanese organisations, associations, companies and so on.

⁵⁴ NAKAMURA Karen, “Resistance and Co-Optation: The Japanese Federation of the Deaf and its Relations with State Power”, in *Social Science Japan Journal*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2002, pp. 20-22.

corporation (adding *ippan* to its previous nomenclature) in 2013, which was due to the new changes in the Civil Code regarding corporate entities, most of the national level *itaku* contracts started being granted to public interest corporations, reducing significantly the number of projects managed by the Federation.⁵⁵ Nowadays, the JFD mainly focuses on raising awareness of the necessity of sign language and its interpreting, eliminating discrimination based on hearing impairment, and promoting social participation and independence of D/deaf people; its main activities involve the yearly National Deaf Convention, the winter and summer National Sports Festival for the Deaf and the more general organisation of committees, meetings and training sessions focused on finding concrete solutions to the various issues D/deaf people face on an everyday basis.⁵⁶

The 47 prefectural associations of the D/deaf are affiliated with the JFD and are part of the same umbrella network, while simultaneously being nominally separated from it. This strategy of establishing itself as a federation of independent prefectural associations works on two levels: on the prefectural level, associations are more entangled with the government, which increases their chances of being granted *itaku* contracts, and are thus delegated with member services; on the national one, as a mostly self-sufficient *zaidan hōjin*, the JFD has a wider agency, especially when it comes to taking adversarial stances (which needs to be contextualised to the milder forms of protests that are more frequent in the Japanese setting) against the government. And when such positions are oppositional to the point that the JFD cannot openly put its name on them, the Federation has developed an “amoeba-like”, to quote Nakamura, ability to create subgroups or temporary branches to engage with the State in these specific situations, capitalising on the idea of participatory welfare (*sanka fukushi*) in which the JFD strongly believes. This system developed by the Federation is, to borrow an expression from political scientist James C. Scott, a perfect example of “weapons of the weak”, where oppressive social structures are manipulated by the oppressed themselves in order to engage in everyday acts of resistance.⁵⁷ For a more comprehensive analysis and study on the JFD, refer to Nakamura’s works *Deaf in Japan: Signing and the Politics of Identity* (2006) and “Resistance and Co-Optation: The Japanese Federation of the Deaf and its Relations with State Power” (2002).

Drawing upon the needs of its members and the experiences of D/deaf people who have faced discrimination and exclusion from society, the JFD has been working for almost a century to organise campaigns and has achieved many goals, some of which are examined hereunder.

⁵⁵ ŌNUKI Hajime, *Kōeki Hōjin Seido Kaikaku Kanren Sanpō*, in “Hijō Riyōgo Jiten”, n.d., https://www.koueki.jp/dic/hieiri_256/.

⁵⁶ JAPANESE FEDERATION OF THE DEAF, *Hitori Hitori...*, p. 3.

⁵⁷ NAKAMURA Karen, “Resistance and Co-Optation...”, cit., pp. 23; 28-30; 33.

One of the long-cherished wishes of Japanese D/deaf people has been the opportunity to obtain driving licenses. The long battle to review the 1960 Road Traffic Act (Dōro Kōtsū-hō) began in 1967 on the occasion of a lawsuit against a D/deaf person in Iwate Prefecture, where the JFD provided support, seeing the incident not as an individual episode but as something that involved the whole Japanese D/deaf community. Owing in considerable part to the petitions submitted by the Federation, in the 1970s, the National Police Agency permitted the use of hearing aids during hearing tests for obtaining a driver's license. Since then, the JFD continued its campaigning, eventually achieving the amendment of the Road Traffic Act in 2015, making it possible, the next year, for D/deaf people to obtain a Class 2 driving license, with the first-ever D/deaf bus driver beginning to work in 2017.⁵⁸

According to the original 1896 Civil Code (Minpō), people of diminished capacities, the deaf, the mute, the blind and the spendthrifts could be labelled quasi-incompetent and have a guarantor assigned to them; this Article 11 had been a major handicap for the participation of D/deaf people in society and their independent living, since, without a guarantor, they were not allowed to purchase or sell property, initiate legal proceedings, renovate a house or even get married, effectively reducing their status as that of *protégées*, without recognising them as full-fledged individuals. The JFD, since the 1970s, has endeavoured to eradicate this kind of legal discrimination, calling for the abolition of not only Article 11 (now modified), but also of Article 40 (now deleted) of the Penal Code (Keihō), according to which a reduction of punishment could be granted to D/deaf people as individuals unable to make their own judgements and express their own opinions. As a result of the JFD and the D/deaf rights movement's efforts, the expression "the deaf, the mute, the blind" (*rōsha, asha, mōsha*) was removed from Article 11 of the Civil Code, rejecting the notion that physical impairment equated with quasi-incompetence. This was, however, only a first step against a system based on a plethora of laws that declared the inability to speak or hear as a disqualifying clause for obtaining licenses and qualifications, especially in the medical field. The Federation and other organisations representing the D/deaf campaigned for decades in order to amend all these discriminatory disqualifying clauses, which led, in 2001, to the removal of "people who are blind, deaf or unable to speak" (*me ga mienai mono, mimi ga kikoenai mono mata ha kuchi ga kikenai mono*) as disqualifying criteria from 27 laws and 31 systems, including the regulations of medical professions.⁵⁹

One of the JFD's main fields of activity, under the banner "Sign Language is life" (*shuwa ha inochi*), has been the promotion of sign language, sign language interpreting and the enactment of laws and by-laws on these issues, claiming the interconnectedness between sign language and human rights. This conviction led to the draft of a Sign Language Act proposal by the Federation, where sign language is

⁵⁸ JAPANESE FEDERATION OF THE DEAF, *Hitori Hitori*..., pp. 9-10.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 10-12.

defined as a language, and five rights are guaranteed for its users: the right to acquire it, to learn through it, to learn it, to use it and to protect it. Starting from Tottori Prefecture in 2013 and through the establishment of an increasingly wide national network of municipal and prefectural authorities that enacted sign language ordinances, by 2016, all local authorities in the archipelago adopted the JFD's statement calling for the enactment of such a piece of legislation. These endeavours culminated in the enactment of the 2025 Sign Language Act (Shuwa ni kansuru Jisaku no Suishin ni kansuru Hōritsu).⁶⁰

These are some of the main achievements of the Japanese Federation of the Deaf; besides those, the organisation has also been involved in many other fields, from the Telephone Relay Service to D/deaf sports, from disaster relief to the path that led, in 2022, to the enactment of the Act on Promotion of Policies for Facilitating Access to Information and Smooth Communication by Persons with Disabilities (Shōgaisha Jōhō Akuseshibiriti-Komyunikeeshon Taisaku Shinshin-hō). Moreover, symbolising the active participation of the JFD in D/deaf affairs, both nationally and internationally, the position of Director of the Asia Regional Secretariat of the World Federation of the Deaf was held by directors of the Federation from 1984 to 2019.⁶¹

There is no doubt that Japanese society in recent years has made tremendous improvements to create an environment where D/deaf people can participate in society and live alongside the hearing majority on an equal basis, especially when considering the numerous promotion activities, initiatives and ordinances concerning sign language that have constellated the past decades, as well as the abolishment of obstacles to D/deaf people's accessibility and opportunities to flourish professionally. Nonetheless, the path towards eradicating discrimination is still long, even more so when it comes to the everyday discriminatory and ableist mechanisms of Othering discussed in Chapter One, which have taken root in people's minds, society's established norms and the State's legislation.

3.4 Words from the D/deaf: *Rōbungaku*

Moving away from the official macro-organisations, there are hundreds of smaller-scale initiatives, groups, circles and associations dedicated to or comprised of D/deaf people throughout Japan. This thesis has chosen a specific one as its beating heart and starting point: the booklet series *Rōbungaku*. The words of D/deaf people have helped, up to this point, give substance to what has been discussed, and, in the following chapter, issues and changes within various areas of the Japanese D/deaf community are

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 35.

examined more closely starting from their words. This subchapter, then, focuses on outlining what *Rōbungaku* is and the story of its editor and founder, Watanabe Takako.

Watanabe Takako is someone who was born in Japan, grew up there, went to school, works, has relationships, cultivates passions and, amongst many other elements that make up her identity, is D/deaf. She attended the Yokohama Municipal School for the Deaf from nursery through to the first year of upper secondary school, and, after completing compulsory education, she took and passed the entrance exam for senior high school at the Special Needs Education School for the Deaf affiliated with the University of Tsukuba. Despite attending two schools for the D/deaf, though, during her school years sign language was not viewed positively; because of this, she had to undergo regular speech therapy from a very young age and receive an education that attached particular importance to Japanese language acquisition through the teaching of writing skills via diaries, essays and book reviews, which she managed to complete also owing to her keen interest and passion in reading. Watanabe admits that, after finishing senior high school, going to junior college was not her initial intention and that her choice to proceed in that direction was influenced by her tutor, who encouraged her to advance her education so as to gain an advantage in the upcoming search for employment as well. With this new objective, she went on to study at the Women's Junior College of Bunkyo University (now closed); the experience, however, was not positive: there were no information support measures for D/deaf students, who were also prohibited from arranging sign language interpreters from outside the institution, making it an environment not conducive to her academic growth. During these years, she realised that simply being good at Japanese was not enough to navigate society, and, maybe even more importantly, she came to terms with the fact that she needed to cherish and build her own identity around being a D/deaf person and, starting from there, approach and learn Japanese through interactions with hearing people. She was familiar with sign language, having attended two schools for the D/deaf and interacted with other students who used it, but only after finishing her education and starting to work she realised that she had been using Japanese-based sign language. Through the relationships she developed both on a professional and personal level, she discovered Japanese Sign Language and found in it the ideal vessel to express herself as a D/deaf person. Moreover, something that was of crucial help to Watanabe whenever she struggled because of her hearing impairment, whether in her daily life or in relating with others, was her interest in and passion for reading, which became her source of solace; this feeling of gratitude she holds towards books and literature was perhaps the budding seed that eventually led her to create *Rōbungaku*, in the hopes that the written world would be of comfort to other people like it was for her. A turning point that gave these feelings concrete form was her work at the sheltered workshop Kagayaki Yume Kōjō, where she ran a Japanese language study group. Through this job, Watanabe realised that for many D/deaf people in

Japan, Japanese is their second language; and that while they can express their thoughts, intentions and requests clearly and in detail using sign language, which is their first language, they still need to communicate in Japanese to live within the broader hearing society. Furthermore, because Japanese society's understanding of D/deaf people who cannot speak Japanese is still quite shallow, their hesitancy and difficulties with the national oral language are a constant pressure and source of insecurity. Her project started from there, from wanting to create a space where D/deaf people could share their thoughts and feelings and build their confidence while doing so. Watanabe did not want to portray the lives of D/deaf people often represented in media, those who perform great feats or take on impressive challenges; on the contrary, she wished to focus on those who, even without boasting any achievement that society may deem exceptionally remarkable, are living each and every ordinary day to the fullest. Additionally, she thought that contributing to *Rōbungaku* would become not only a tool for building D/deaf people's confidence in their Japanese, but also a way for more and more D/deaf people to approach the written Japanese language with a positive and inspiring outlook, especially since it is something written not by hearing people but by someone with whom they share experiences, feelings and an identity. The project did not encounter particular obstacles, with many D/deaf people around Watanabe enthusiastically joining in, encouraged by her to overcome their hesitation and give writing a try. The first volume was printed in May 2019 and, up to the publication of the comprehensive volume used for this thesis, *Rōbungaku* published 25 regular issues and 3 special/seasonal issues, with more than one hundred D/deaf people contributing to the initiative. Watanabe edits every manuscript she collects, while also making the conscious effort to cherish the unique ways in which D/deaf people express themselves in Japanese (their second language), thus avoiding major revisions. As she says, “there are many kinds of writings as there are people” and “their hearts shine through their writing”⁶². In conclusion, Watanabe believes that Japanese Sign Language is indispensable to the identity of Japanese D/deaf people, it is “their very soul”⁶³ (*tamashii sono mono*); but, at the same time, Japanese language is essential for communicating with the hearing society that surrounds them, making it just as important. When asked about the core of *Rōbungaku*, she answered that, ultimately, it is the feelings each D/deaf person has about their own life, and the moment those feelings are put into writing, they become “D/deaf literature”, that is, *Rōbungaku*.⁶⁴

⁶² WATANABE Takako, “Owari ni” (my translation), in Watanabe T. (edited by), *Rōbungaku: dai 1 gō – dai 25 gō*, Yokohama, Rakuyō Publishing and Printing, 2025, p. 358.

⁶³ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁴ WATANABE Takako, personal written interview, 2026.

だれでも光り輝く何かを持っています。
文字という手段を通じて表現したいと願う、
その叫びを、私はすくい上げていきたい。
そんなろう者のために、
私はこれからも「表現の場」を用意し続けます。

Everyone has something within them that shines brightly.
For those who wish to express themselves through the written word,
I want to give shape to that cry.
For such D/deaf people,
I will continue to provide a “space for expression”.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ WATANABE Takako, “Owari ni”, cit., p. 358.

Chapter Four:

The Realities Behind D/deaf Literature

This chapter centres on the words and experiences of *Rōbungaku* writers, which offer a tangible contribution to the identification of the dynamics and practices discussed so far. Through the accounts of their lives or of their close relatives' lives, it was possible to analyse four broad areas, namely education, the labour market, community, identity and culture, and sign language, thus offering, as much as is possible, both an emic and an etic perspective on how they have been, are and will be structured in relation to D/deafness in Japan. The topics are examined one by one in relation to their diachronic development, their observed issues, and their prospects when taking into consideration new legislation, research, and changes in frameworks of interpretation.

4.1 D/deaf Education

ろう学校や地域の学校に通うことはなく、手話、日本語で話すことができなかった。[. . .] 耳が聞こえないことで狙われ、襲われるかもしれないと家族は恐れていた。それ故、秋ちゃんは一日中家で過ごし、大人になっても一人で外出することはなかった。姉は自身の結婚で上京するにあたり、秋ちゃんを連れて婚家に入った。[. . .] 私が小学校に入学する頃に父から「学校で秋ちゃんのことを誰にも話してはいけない」と言われた。[. . .] 重ねて、「耳が聞こえない人が身内にいることを知られてはならない」. . .

[My great-aunt Aki] did not attend either a school for the D/deaf or a local school and was unable to communicate in either sign language or Japanese. [...] Her family feared that, because she was deaf, she might be targeted and attacked. As a result, Aki-chan spent her entire days at home and, even after she became an adult, never went out on her own. When her older sister moved to Tokyo to get married, she took Aki-chan with her and brought her into her husband's family home. [...] Around the time I entered elementary school, my father told me, "You mustn't tell anyone at school about Aki-chan." [...] He repeated, "No one must find out that there is a deaf person in our family".¹

Before the Meiji period, there was no evidence of an organised and widespread system of schooling for deaf children in Japan; the only schooling establishments that accepted deaf children were privately run

¹ ANONYMOUS, "Rōsha to no Deai" (my translation), in Watanabe T. (edited by), *Rōbungaku: dai 1 gō – dai 25 gō*, Yokohama, Rakuyō Publishing and Printing, 2025, p. 251.

elementary schools called *terakoya* (a term that originally referred to small private temple schools). Between 1854 and 1868, hundreds of these establishments, where children learnt how to read, write and do basic math, opened yearly, and, according to scholar Ototake Iwazō, who interviewed more than 3,000 former students at these schools, 8.6% of them had an impairment, with the most frequent being deafness. However, it is important to specify that not everyone could send their children to *terakoya*, as confirmed by the anonymous writer's account of their great-aunt. Unless the family was wealthy and did not need their labour, either on the fields or in child-rearing, deaf individuals were kept at home, leaving them uneducated, and they were not allowed to interact with other deaf people in the area, if there were any. The government did not start operating D/deaf schools until the Meiji period, but, even then, widespread D/deaf education did not occur until it was made compulsory after the Pacific War.²

To find the first instances of D/deaf education in the archipelago, one needs to go back to the nation-building period spanning between the Edo and Meiji periods, when several scholars and politicians travelled to Europe to learn about the makings of a modern country. Amongst these figures were Yamao Yōzō and Fukuzawa Yukichi. Yamao, in 1863, while touring British shipyards, noticed the presence of D/deaf workers and realised the need for every single citizen to participate in society in order to create a modern state; on the other hand, Fukuzawa, amongst his numerous observations, also documented his visits to the schools for the D/deaf in Great Britain, France and the Netherlands. The information they brought back to Japan aided Furukawa Tashirō in establishing, in 1878, the first Japanese school for the D/deaf in Kyoto, the Kyoto School for the Blind and the Deaf (Kyōto Mōa-in).³ As the school's first headmaster, Furukawa made various attempts, from pronunciation and speech production to essay writing and dictation, to facilitate Japanese language acquisition for his pupils; eventually, these attempts resulted in the development of the "Sign Language Method" (*shuwabō*), where he linked concepts to signs and then to the correspondent word in Japanese, following the sequence Object-Sign-*Katakana-Hiragana-Kanji*. The first phase in Japan's education for the D/deaf, in other words, was focused on visual and manual methods; it is important to stress that this Sign Language Method, regardless of the influence it had on Japanese Sign Language (hereinafter also referred to as JSL), was not equivalent to it, since, while JSL is a language, the former is an educational tool developed in a scholastic context to learn an oral language, that is, Japanese. Furukawa's Sign Language Method remained the prevalent educational approach in Japanese D/deaf schools until the first half of the 20th century, when another method started gaining support, the Oral Method (*kōwabō*). One of the reasons for the growing dissatisfaction with using visual-manual language to teach D/deaf pupils was the perception of many (hearing) scholars and

² NAKAMURA, *Deaf in Japan...*, cit., pp. 39-40.

³ MCCLUE, "Setting the Standard...", cit., pp. 208-09.

educators that signing was not fully developing children's skills (in oral language). The rationale for this gradual rejection of visual-manual language as means of instruction would be later on published by Kawamoto Unosuke, headmaster of the Tokyo School for the Deaf and a pioneer in the promotion of Oralism in D/deaf education, in his 1940 *Rōkyōikugaku Seisetsu*, where he described sign language as rudimentary, primitive to the point of hindering complex and logical thought, and confusing grammar-wise when transcribed word-for-word in Japanese (the common ethno-centric “extrapolative leap” Lane talks about when discussing perceptions of sign languages as underdeveloped and ungrammatical).⁴

In 1880, the International Congress on the Education of the Deaf was held in Milan and led to the declaration that the use of sign language in schools for the D/deaf should be prohibited in favour of Oralism, that is, a method based primarily on speech production, lip reading and capitalising on residual hearing (especially after the development and introduction of assistive technology like hearing aids).⁵ The propagation of the Oral Method reached most countries around the world and, in the specific case of Japan, began in the 1920s, which marked a transitional period for D/deaf education, seeing both oral and visual-manual methods coexisting in classrooms. The starting point was the establishment in 1920 of the Japan Deaf Oral School (Nihon Rōwa Gakkō) by August Karl Reischauer and his wife Helen, who introduced the US-inspired method of oral education to the archipelago; this was soon followed by the enthusiastic promotion of oral-based instruction by various headmasters of D/deaf schools throughout Japan, such as the previously mentioned Kawamoto (Tokyo), Hashimura Tokuchi (Nagoya) and Nishikawa Yoshinosuke (Shiga).⁶ Eventually, in 1933, the then Minister of Education, Hatoyama Ichirō, issued a directive that promoted oralist education and explicitly banned sign language from educational settings;⁷ furthermore, it is important to stress that the development of Oralism in Japan dovetailed with the militaristic education that spread in the decade before World War II, resulting in a very domineering and punishment-based approach where a good pronunciation was equated with positive qualitative judgement of the pupil, while a tendency to use sign language over vocalising was immediately labelled as shameful. In other words, what developed in those years was a form of Oralism that twisted education into fashioning D/deaf children into being, as much as possible, like hearing ones and that resulted not only in a lower quality of instruction, but also, for those who did not meet the oralist standards, in severe linguistic repression and punitive measures.⁸

⁴ ITŌ Shunsuke, “Shuwa wo Meguru Shisō – Sono Rekishi to Konnichiteki Kadaï”, in *Shuwa Tsūyaku Mondai Kenkyū*, vol. 14, 1981, pp. 1-4.

⁵ JAPANESE FEDERATION OF THE DEAF, *Hitori Hitori...*, p. 19.

⁶ ITŌ Shunsuke, “Shuwa wo Meguru Shisō...”, cit., p. 5.

⁷ JAPANESE FEDERATION OF THE DEAF, *Hitori Hitori...*, p. 19.

⁸ ITŌ Shunsuke, “Shuwa wo Meguru Shisō...”, cit., pp. 5-7.

先輩各氏の体験では、バケツを手に廊下に立たされる。発音の授業では顎下にナイフや千枚通しの器具を置いて指導する例もあったようです。私が体験したのは「チョークを投げつけられた事」だけです。

[. . .] 新任教師の得意技がチョーク投げでした。あくびをする生徒にはチョークのカスを食べさせる風習がありました。

According to the experiences of the students who came before me, they were made to stand in the hallway holding a bucket. Apparently, there were also cases in which, during pronunciation lessons, students were instructed by having a knife or awl placed beneath their chin. The only thing I personally experienced was having chalk thrown at me. [...] One of the new teachers' specialities was throwing chalk. It was customary to make students who yawned eat chalk dust.⁹

Kumai Toshio's story is only one of the many examples of severe disciplinary practices that have been published in *Rōbungaku*'s contributions when recounting about D/deaf education after the introduction of Oralism, with another common measure being teachers tying their students' hands behind their back to prevent them from signing, as explained by MICHIKO¹⁰. The JFD also confirms Kumai's story of students being made to stand in the corridors holding up a bucket filled with water, adding that they were often made to wear an incriminating sign around their necks with the phrase "I used sign language" (*watashi ha shuwa no tsukaimashita*).¹¹ The result of these punitive practices is the construction of a direct connection between sign language and shame and humiliation, much like it was done with Ryūkyūan children, who were made to wear the *bōgen fuda*, a punitive wooden placard, whenever they spoke in their autochthonous language instead of Standard Japanese. More generally, then, we can see that these policies of language repression through prohibition and correctional measures had been applied ever since the Meiji Restoration as part and parcel of the new ruling class's efforts to create a harmonious nation, to the detriment of minorities' languages, which ended up suffocated under this colonialist and homogenising educational approach. Such strict normative assimilation and shaming of inland linguo-cultural minorities, however, is not a phenomenon limited to Japan, as it has been observed also in the 19th and 20th century treatment of indigenous populations in the US and Canada, with the doctrine of "kill the Indian, save the

⁹ KUMAI Toshio, "Watashi to Shuwa Gengo" (my translation), in Watanabe T. (edited by), *Rōbungaku: dai 1 gō – dai 25 gō*, Yokohama, Rakuyō Publishing and Printing, 2025, p. 284.

¹⁰ MICHIKO, "Jibunshi", in Watanabe T. (edited by), *Rōbungaku: dai 1 gō – dai 25 gō*, Yokohama, Rakuyō Publishing and Printing, 2025, p. 72.

¹¹ JAPANESE FEDERATION OF THE DEAF, *Hitori Hitori*..., p. 19.

man”, one of the founding principles of Indian Boarding Schools where indigenous children were forced into normative assimilation.¹²

Historical trends in Japan’s education for children with disabilities allow it to be divided into four stages, going from exclusion, through to segregation, integration and, finally, inclusion. The first theoretical step from segregation to integration was marked by the postwar 1947 School Education Act (Gakkō Kyōiku-hō), which, besides establishing the national school system, guarantees free compulsory education from elementary school to junior high school for everyone, including children with disabilities; in practice, however, compulsory school attendance for children with disabilities was implemented only in 1979, a year often considered to be the start of the mainstreaming phenomenon within Japanese D/deaf education. Now allowed to attend regular local schools, there was a significant flow of D/deaf children transferring out of D/deaf schools and into mainstream ones, with numbers further increasing after the launch of the authorised school attendance system in 2002.¹³ Moreover, in the early 2000s, as a result of the adoption of the normalisation principle discussed in the previous chapter, it became clear that the Special Education framework in use in Japan, where facilities were set up according to type and degree of disability, was not properly supporting students with disabilities, and this prompted the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (hereinafter referred to as MEXT) to propose a shift towards Special Needs Education, where educational support was provided according to the individual needs of every student. This shift has resulted in the four current available learning environments for students with disabilities in Japan: special needs schools (for D/deaf people, D/deaf schools), special needs classrooms and resource rooms within mainstream schools, and general education classrooms.¹⁴ Japan has, thus, reached the final stage of inclusion, at least for people with disabilities. From D/deaf people’s point of view, however, the situation is slightly different. While the government promotes an ideology of inclusive education, the experiences of mainstreamed D/deaf students show that they never advanced beyond the integration phase: within mainstream schools, these children are still facing pressures to assimilate from inadequately trained teachers and a general negative attitude towards disability, a diametrically opposite situation compared to the community building and identity formation opportunities offered by D/deaf schools.

¹² Addison KLEWER, Miranda MAHMUD, Brooklyn WAYLAND, “*Kill the Indian, Save the Man*”: Remembering the Stories of Indian Boarding Schools, in “Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication”, 2021, <https://www.ou.edu/gaylord/exiled-to-indian-country/content/remembering-the-stories-of-indian-boarding-schools>.

¹³ YONEDA Hiroki, “Development of the Japanese Inclusive Education System: From Special Schools to Curriculum Modification for Special Needs Education in Regular Schools”, in *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, vol. 464, 2019, pp. 1032.

¹⁴ KAIZU Akiko, TAMAKI Munchisa, “Current Issues and Future Directions of Inclusive Education in Japan”, in *Remedial and Special Education*, vol. 45, no. 6, 2024, pp. 370; 372.

We have already seen how Japan holds on to a philosophy that emphasises uniformity and a type of equality where everyone does the same thing in the same way. However, this philosophy becomes an obstacle to inclusive education, since it often fails to account for society's existing diversity and translates into an effort-oriented education that pressures students to fit within the dominant normative category. In practice, this means Special Needs Education in mainstream classrooms is handicapped by reluctance to recognise diversity amongst students and to provide accommodations, which are often perceived as special treatment.¹⁵ Another core issue that has emerged with the advent of mainstreaming and the growing awareness of D/deaf education is the role and qualifications of the teachers, which HIROKO discusses in their “Rōgakkō toiu Genba”. Remembering their own school experiences, they recall their teacher's general lack of preparation and information about D/deafness, as well as their defeatist attitude towards D/deaf students' ambitions and prospects.¹⁶ Such claim is proved by a 2022 MEXT report, which confirmed that around 70-76% of principals of elementary and junior high schools have no experience with Special Needs Education whatsoever; moreover, Japan does not have a teacher licensing system that guarantees expertise in Special Needs Education within mainstream schools (the only existing license being for special needs schools) nor an educational training system offered by universities, which resulted in a 76% shortage of teachers qualified in Special Needs Education in 2020. In addition to this general lack of qualifications, the education system in Japan functions on a seven to ten years teachers rotation for regular schools, shortened to three to five years for D/deaf schools, which means that, as soon as a teacher starts gaining said qualifications through first-hand experience, they need to move to another school and vacate the role for another unqualified teacher to fill. In 2017, regulations regarding teaching licenses and their requirements were revised, making it mandatory to acquire at least one credit in a subject related to Special Needs Education; and despite this meaning that all universities with teaching courses now are obliged to include Special Needs Education in their offer, one credit alone is, most of the time, not sufficient to be professionally prepared to engage with such an educational system within mainstream schools.¹⁷ It is, however, a first step forward, and HIROKO themselves comments that, compared to when they went to school, the situation is changing, and the distance between D/deaf schools and mainstream schools is narrowing because of the presence of non-stigmatised sign language users in classrooms and the slow increase in number of D/deaf teachers as well.¹⁸

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 374.

¹⁶ HIROKO, “Rōgakkō toiu Genba”, in Watanabe T. (edited by), *Rōbungaku: dai 1 gō – dai 25 gō*, Yokohama, Rakuyō Publishing and Printing, 2025, p. 28.

¹⁷ KAIZU, TAMAKI, “Current Issues and Future Directions...”, cit., pp. 376-78.

¹⁸ HIROKO, “Rōgakkō toiu Genba”, cit., p. 28.

But what does it mean, from an emic point of view, to be mainstreamed? In her 2020 study, “Who am I with Others?: Selfhood and Shuwa among Mainstream Educated Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Japanese Youth”, Jennifer M. McGuire examines this question thoroughly. It is well-known in Deaf Studies that D/deaf people deem the Oral Method difficult within mainstreaming settings, especially due to the one-to-one nature of lip-reading and its objective of performing communication rather than facilitating its comprehension. In other words, *kōma* is a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it allows D/deaf education to be ahead of general simplified education for students with disabilities, but on the other hand, the pressure of academic integration pulls D/deaf students away from their most spontaneous language, isolating them from their peers and role models. The downsides of the Oral Method emerge particularly in the shift from the more nurtured and student-centric approach of elementary school to the achievement-focused and large-group instruction system of junior high school. Differently from the experiences in D/deaf schools, commonly associated with close friendships and lasting bonds, mainstreaming has been referred to as a lonesome experience by D/deaf people, who often try to improve their circumstances by passing¹⁹ as members of the majority and employing interaction strategies to mitigate differences in the presentational dimension (for example, concealing marks of difference, rejecting provided accommodations, mimicking hearing peers and performing communication competence). While this Goffmanian role-playing can marginally improve the social isolation of D/deaf students in mainstream schools, it rarely results in the inclusion promoted by the Special Needs Education system, functioning as a coping strategy to adapt to hearing people instead.²⁰

幼い私は何もわからず、先生や親たちに従うしかありませんでした。人の唇を読んで理解すること、発音で聞こえる者に通じることを中心に学びました。[. . .] 小学部2年生の時、先生や母から普通の学校へ行きたいか？と聞かれ、普通の学校ってどんなところか、興味をもっていた私は行きたいと答えました。それで小学部3年生になる前に難聴学級があるE小学校に転校しました。[. . .] 普通学校に入り、先生に紹介され、びっくりしたのが、生徒の数が多いのと担任の先生の話がさっぱりわからなかったことでした。クラスメイトも早口でろう学校とまるっきり違っていてカルチャーショックを受けました。

As a young child, I did not understand anything and had no choice but to follow the instructions of my teachers and parents. I was mainly taught to understand others by reading their lips and make myself understood by hearing people through my pronunciation. [...] In second grade of elementary school,

¹⁹ Passing is a social interaction strategy for which a person belonging to a certain identity, social or class group (be it racial, linguistic, ethnic, sexual, disability, and so on) is perceived or accepted as a member of a different group than their own.

²⁰ Jennifer M. MCGUIRE, “Who am I with Others?: Selfhood and Shuwa among Mainstream Educated Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Japanese Youth”, in *Contemporary Japan*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2020, pp. 202; 206-07; 212.

my teacher and my mother asked me, “Do you want to go to a regular school?” Curious about what a regular school was like, I answered that I wanted to go. As a result, before entering the third grade, I transferred to E Elementary School, which had a special class for students with hearing loss. [...] When I entered the regular school and was introduced to the class by my teacher, what surprised me was the large number of students and the fact that I couldn’t understand what my homeroom teacher was saying at all. My classmates also spoke so quickly that I experienced a culture shock. It was entirely different from the schools for the D/deaf.²¹

As expressed by Himawari’s words as well, the advent of mainstreaming brought with it an educational choice for parents: whether to have their child receive instruction in a spatially separated special needs school or in what is prevalently accepted as a normal school, located within the larger community but far removed (physically and socially) from D/deaf communities. The most common choice, mainstream schools, is informed by an array of factors, one of the strongest being ableist normativity: contrary to the constructed abnormality of D/deaf schools, regular schools are thought to help the child reach the dominantly perceived standards of normality, and, in the long term, facilitate their integration (rather than inclusion) and participation in society.²²

Ableist normativity, though, can be observed not only in the decisions that led to an increase in the number of mainstreamed D/deaf students, but also in the teaching approaches and didactic choices prevalent in special needs classrooms and resource rooms within local schools, and in schools for the D/deaf as well. And we see this in many contributions within *Rōbungaku*, starting with the previously mentioned HIROKO, who stresses that the main objective of their education had not been the curriculum but rather getting as close as possible to hearing people.²³

Along the same lines, in her “Watashi no Oitachi”, Ukigaya Kazuko writes about her father’s unconscious ableist views in telling her that her linguistic and social growth and development depended on her oral language skills rather than on the small local communities that helped her through these processes. The central issue that arises, then, and what McGuire has focused on in her research, is what happens when these values of community and identity formation that typically occur within D/deaf schools are taken away from mainstreamed children. Considering the environments they end up being mainstreamed into, it is no wonder that phenomena like the “U-Turning”²⁴ described by Nakamura in her “U-Turns, ‘Deaf

²¹ HIMAWARI, “Subete no Koto ni Kansha” (my translation), in Watanabe T. (edited by), *Rōbungaku: dai 1 gō – dai 25 gō*, Yokohama, Rakuyō Publishing and Printing, 2025, p. 91.

²² MCGUIRE, “Who am I with Others?..”, cit., p. 212.

²³ HIROKO, “Rōgakkō toiu Genba”, cit., p. 27.

²⁴ Nakamura names “U-Turning” the trend in which mainstreamed D/deaf students “U-turn” back into schools for the D/deaf.

Shock’, and the Hard-of-Hearing: Japanese Deaf Identities at the Borderlands” (2003) have been increasing yearly ever since D/deaf education entered its mainstream era.

高校時代から、校内でも手話の使用がようやく認められ、先生達も手話を使うようになりました。これが本格的な " 手話との出会い " でした。また大学時代、構内ではろう者にとって学びやすい環境が整備されており、手話を使った授業が実施されていました。また手話や聴覚障害学に関する勉強もあったため、手話の歴史や種類などを楽しく学ぶことができ、ろう文化を知ることができました。

From my high school years onward, the use of sign language was finally allowed in schools, and teachers also began using it. This was my first real “encounter with sign language”. In addition, during my university years, the campus provided an environment that made it easier for D/deaf students to learn, and classes using sign language were offered. As there were also courses on sign language and Deaf Studies, I was able to enjoy learning about the history and different types of sign language, as well as discovering Deaf culture.²⁵

In light of the issues discussed above, the Japanese D/deaf education landscape is indeed in need of improvements and of an approach towards D/deafness that considers the linguo-cultural frame as well; however, as shown by Koike Yūsuke’s experience, the situation is not bleak but rather improving year by year, with the recent Sign Language Act opening new official doors for the legitimacy and use of sign language in Japanese D/deaf education.

There have been two prominent movements in the promotion of sign language implementation in classrooms in the archipelago. The first one is experimental classes in bilingual education, a shift that owes much to the dissemination of information in the 1990s on the successful bilingual D/deaf education adopted in some Scandinavian countries, chiefly Sweden and Denmark; spurred by these international developments, many Japanese D/deaf researchers and educators organised study meetings nationwide to promote bilingual education and sign language as a subject and a means of instruction. One of the key points in these deliberations was how to translate the methods adopted in Sweden and Denmark to the Japanese pedagogical environment, concluding that D/deaf people should not be deprived of sign language, which is not only a fundamental part of their human rights, but also the best way to facilitate the acquisition of Japanese language and thus for them to access broader society.²⁶ Following these discussions, several D/deaf schools in Japan tried implementing sign language in some preschool and

²⁵ KOIKE Yūsuke, “Shuwa to no Deai” (my translation), in Watanabe T. (edited by), *Rōbungaku: dai 1 gō – dai 25 gō*, Yokohama, Rakuyō Publishing and Printing, 2025, p. 297.

²⁶ HONNA Nobuyuki, KATŌ Mihoko, “Establishing Sign Language in Deaf Education in Japan: A Sociolinguistic Approach”, in *Intercultural Communication Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2003, pp. 45-46; 48-49.

primary school classes, with teachers using either a simplified or oral language-based forms of signing, or the method of Simultaneous Communication²⁷ at the language contact situation, sometimes also involving D/deaf adults in daily activities. The results of these experimental classes have been extremely promising: there was a general positive influence observed on children's learning activities; students communicated more actively with the teachers and between each other; an increased independence and initiative was observed in classroom and extra-curricular activities; and achievement scores in Japanese language improved, at least concerning writing and reading, which are the main skills developed through sign bilingualism.²⁸ The second movement has been free schools where sign language is the means of instruction, with the most notable example being Meisei Gakuen. Initially established as Tatsunoko Gakuen in 1999, the educational facility developed due to the support of parents of D/deaf children and was staffed almost entirely by D/deaf personnel and D/deaf teachers. In 2007, it received approval as a school cooperation, allowing it to be established as Meisei Gakuen in 2008, officially becoming the only private bilingual-bicultural school for the D/deaf in Japan.²⁹

With the enforcement of the Sign Language Act in 2025, however, a turning point has been introduced, one whose development will have to be observed in the following years, but that holds much promise for the realisation of bilingualism, and to some extent biculturalism as well, for D/deaf children, in conformity with how D/deafness has been construed within Japan.

Article 7: Sign Language Education in Schools

In accordance with the principle of equal opportunity in education, the State and local governments shall promote initiatives to ensure that schools attended by children who use sign language are appropriately staffed with teachers proficient in it, sign language interpreters, and other personnel capable of providing the necessary support related to it, so that such children may receive education through sign language while their wishes are respected to the greatest extent possible.³⁰

²⁷ Simultaneous Communication is a dual modality of communication where speaking aloud and signing happen at the same time. Often referred to as "SimCom".

²⁸ TORIGOE Takashi, "Deaf Education and Bilingualism: Signed and Spoken Languages", in *Studies in Language Sciences*, vol. 3, Tokyo, Kurosio Publishers, 2004, pp. 58-59.

²⁹ KWAK Jeongran, *Examining Deaf Education with Japanese Sign Language as a Medium of Instruction*, in "Institute of Ars Vivendi, Ritsumeikan University", 2015, <https://www.ritsumeikai-arsvi.org/en/essay/essay-254/>.

³⁰ JAPANESE GOVERNMENT, *Shunwa ni kansuru Jisaku no Suishin ni kansuru Horitsu*, cit.

4.2 D/deaf People and the Labour Market

Contrary to what we have seen with education, where a clear demarcation between disability and D/deafness could be drawn, when talking about employment this distinction blurs to the point of disappearing altogether, especially because, except for extremely specific cases, a differentiation is rarely made between D/deaf people and people with disabilities within the Japanese labour market. Having made this preliminary remark, the most frequent situation D/deaf workers face daily can be summarised by Honma Kōichi's words in *Rōbungaku*:

一九九一年十月一日、二十六歳で東芝小向工場に中途入社しました。最初の四年間は本格的な仕事をさせてくれませんでした。機器分解、ごみ捨て、清掃、手伝い、商品分けしかやらせてくれませんでした。すごい差別があったので、とても苦しかったです。[. . .] 資格取得の時「ろう者だから無理ではないか」と言われました。

On October 1st, 1991, at the age of twenty-six, I joined Toshiba Komukai Complex as a mid-career hire. For the first four years, I was not allowed to do any real work. They would only let me dismantle equipment, dispose of rubbish, clean, help with various tasks, and sort products. I suffered greatly because I faced a great deal of discrimination. [...] When I was seeking to obtain a qualification, I was told, “You’re deaf, so wouldn’t it be impossible?”³¹

As mentioned in Chapter Three, the Act to Facilitate the Employment of Persons with Physical Disabilities entered into force in 1960 as the first employment law for people with disabilities, and it introduced, amongst other incentives, the Quota System that would become one of the main pillars of Japan's disability policy. Initially, the disability employment quota was 1.3% for private companies and 1.6% for government organisations, and, most importantly, it was defined as a moral obligation rather than a legal requirement; despite this, following its enactment, the employment rate of people with mild physical disabilities gradually increased, especially in small and medium-sized companies, both because of the new piece of legislation and also owing to the high economic growth that Japan saw between the 1960s and early 1970s. The situation changed with the burst of the Japanese economic bubble after the 1973 oil crisis and with the rapid increase in the number of elderly people and individuals with severe disabilities, leading to a rethinking of the welfare approach of the time and to the 1976 revision of the Law, which raised the employment quota and made it a legal obligation. Another revision of the Act

³¹ HONMA Kōichi, “Watashi no Oitachi” (my translation), in Watanabe T. (edited by), *Rōbungaku: dai 1 gō – dai 25 gō*, Yokohama, Rakuyō Publishing and Printing, 2025, p. 235.

came in 1987, under external pressures from both the United Nations and the International Labour Organisation, forcing Japan to raise the quota once more and include other disabilities besides the physical ones, which led to a change in the Act's name to the Act to Facilitate the Employment of Persons with Disabilities (*Shōgaisha no Koyō no Sokushin tō ni kansuru Hōritsu*). Following that, starting from the second half of the 1990s, the Japanese government started raising the Quota System every lustrum according to the relationship between the total number of employees and the total number of *registered* people with disabilities; however, most enterprises still fall short of the required rate, with only 47% of Japan's private companies managing to fulfil the quota requirements.³² The most recent raise was decided in 2023, going from 2.3% to 2.7% for private enterprises by the end of the fiscal year 2026, while national and local governments are to raise their employment figures for people with disabilities to 3%.³³

Along with the change from moral obligation to legal requirement, the 1976 revision introduced a Levy and Grant System, under which employers who do not comply with the employment quota are levied monthly and urged to devise a plan to reach it, the costs of which are to be covered by grants comprised of the same collected levies. This levy, then, is not to be interpreted as a mere fine, but rather as a tool that promotes greater participation of people with disabilities in the labour market, while also recognising and equalising the financial burden borne from providing necessary accommodations. There is, however, another consequence of not complying with the established employment rates, namely the public listing by local labour bureaus of the names of companies, both public and private, that fall short of the quota.³⁴ It was perhaps in fear of this that the Japanese government ministries padded, apparently by more than one thousand, the number of their employees with disabilities for decades by using names of retired or deceased people to meet the required quota; this scandal emerged in the news media only in 2018, leading to large-scale criticism of Japan's regressive attitudes towards people with disabilities despite the existing legislation to counter these kind of prejudices. One of the measures adopted to prevent this from happening again was the introduction of fines for central government and agencies in case they do not meet the mandatory legal quota for employment of people with disabilities.³⁵

The nature of the Quota System and Levy and Grant System, along with what happened in the 2018 scandal, prompts the question of whether these policies and approaches foster true inclusion or merely a subtly coerced version of it. The revised 1960 Employment Act is based on a numeric quota to promote economic independence of individuals with disabilities, including D/deaf people, but does not act on the

³² HEYER, *Rights Enabled...*, cit., pp. 131-33.

³³ ISHIDA Natsuko, *Japan Gov't to Raise Employment Rate of People with Disabilities*, in "The Mainichi", 2023, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20230114/p2a/00m/0na/003000c>.

³⁴ HEYER, *Rights Enabled...*, cit., pp. 132-33.

³⁵ SHEK-NOBLE, "Media Framing of Disability and Employment in Japan...", p. 149.

root of the problem, namely the same ableist mindset that clearly emerges in the abovementioned question “You’re deaf, so wouldn’t it be impossible?”, which Honma recalls being asked in his workplace. Working on rates and informing companies and agencies that they should not discriminate, as the 2013 Antidiscrimination Act does, has a negligible impact on the marginalisation, infantilisation, distrust and pity people with disabilities face every day in their working environment. It does not, in other words, equate to actively and concretely working on changing prejudice and reducing discrimination; it just changes how Othering and disablist mechanisms are expressed. The results of this ableist mindset also emerge from the words of Ukigaya Katsuyuki:

給料なんかよりもコミュニケーション、人の付き合いがいい会社の方が、ろう者にとって有難いですね。何十年働いてもコミュニケーションはうまくいきませんでした。淋しいね。仕事自体は面白かったのですが、コミュニケーションに支障が出ると仕事も面白くなくなりますね。会社の雰囲気が好きになれなかったです。会合で皆がわいわい話し合ったり、笑ったりしていて、私は何も言われませんでした。孤立してしまう時がありました。[. . .] ストレスが溜まるので頭がおかしくなることもありました。耳の聞こえない人がいるのに、先輩がどうやって伝えようか考えてくれないの？と思いました。2年後、ろう者の新人が入社してきました。[. . .] 私がコミュニケーションはどうやっているの？と聞いたら、紙に書いてくれるそうです。しかし、文章が難しくて読めないと言われました。私みたいに声が出せる人は紙に書いてくれない、初めから声を出さなければよかったのではないかと後悔しています。

For D/deaf people, rather than a high salary, it’s more important to work in a company where communication and relationships with others are good. Even after working there for decades, I was never able to communicate well. It was lonely. The work itself was interesting, but when communication becomes difficult, even that stops being enjoyable. I could never come to like the company’s atmosphere. At meetings, everyone would chat and laugh together, but no one said anything to me. There were times when I was isolated. [...] The stress would build up so much that there were also times when I felt like I was losing my mind. I wondered, “Even though there is a person who cannot hear, don’t my senior colleagues think about how they could communicate with me?” Two years later, a new D/deaf employee joined the company. [...] When I asked them how they communicated at work, they said that people would write things down on paper for them. However, they told me that the sentences were too difficult for them to read. People don’t write things down for me, since I can vocalise. Sometimes I think that perhaps I should never have used my voice in the first place.³⁶

³⁶ UKIGAYA Katsuyuki, “Daikazoku” (my translation), in Watanabe T. (edited by), *Rōbungaku: dai 1 gō – dai 25 gō*, Yokohama, Rakuyō Publishing and Printing, 2025, p. 200.

Through the two passages cited in this subchapter, we can see that one of the main forms of disablist Othering towards D/deaf people in Japanese work environments is marginalisation, whether voluntary or involuntary. But while both experiences recounted by the *Robungaku* writers are set in regular companies and the marginalisation processes in question happen within a spatiality shared with hearing people and other people without disabilities, a common phenomenon observable in Japan is that of sheltered workshops and, thus, sheltered employment.

Companies, especially large ones, have developed a strategy of creating barrier-free subsidiary branch companies (*tokurei kogaisha*), where hiring priority is given to people with disabilities in order to meet the required employment quota. The result of this widespread trend, which is considered and promoted by the government itself as the ideal way to comply with the law without having to alter the main company, is a (re)segregation of people with disabilities into separate workplaces. Despite being born as facilities for vocational training and rehabilitation, these sheltered workshops have been a vital source of employment for D/deaf people and people with disabilities since the 1950s, when they started emerging across the whole archipelago to employ people with disabilities who were overlooked by the law. This network of sheltered workshops gradually grew over the years, with the government relying on it as well in order to compensate for its shortage of organised public facilities, to the point that, by the early 2000s, privately run sheltered workshops were approximately 6,000, more than twice the number of government-run ones. Japanese scholars and disability activists have claimed multiple times that the Japanese disability employment system remains highly segregated, and there is ongoing debate on the effectiveness of the employment quota in terms of equal opportunities and integration. In other words, while the Levy and Grant System was devised to reduce the costs of employing workers with disabilities and should provide incentives, albeit of a financial nature, for overcoming prejudice and stereotypes in hiring them, the question of whether this system promotes inclusivity or merely a performance of it remains.³⁷ After all, according to political theorist Iris M. Young (1990), oppression can be found in the marginalisation of people with disabilities within society and social life through social means, in their exclusion from and/or marginalisation within the labour market through discriminatory practices and peripheral positions, and in the maintenance of unequal power relationships through the use of normative ideology that leads people with disabilities to interiorise it and perceive themselves through patterns of self-blame, self-shame and self-doubt.³⁸ These patterns and mechanisms of unwitting oppression emerge clearly from Satō Daiki's words about his personal D/deaf experience:

³⁷ HEYER, *Rights Enabled...*, cit., pp. 134-35.

³⁸ KITCHIN, "“Out of Place’...”, cit., pp. 345-46.

" 耳が聞こえない "、という事に対してどういう印象をもっているだろうか。『足手纏い』、『役立たず』、『何を言っても分からないから仕事を押し付ける事が出来る都合の良い存在』など思われていないだろうか。[. . .] 前述した通りの内容が都度発生、それが積み重なっていくことで徐々に社会に行く気が無くなっていた。『こんな社会はもうやめるべきだろうな』と日々を重ねていく毎に膨らんでいった。それと同時に、『苦勞して入社したし、自分を採用して下さった方に対して恩を仇で返すことになるのか。』

What kind of impression do people have of the fact that I “cannot hear”? Do they see me as a “burden”, “useless”, or perhaps as a “convenient person onto whom they can dump work because, no matter what they say, I will not understand”? [...] As described above, these things happened repeatedly, and as they accumulated, I gradually lost the desire to go out into society. With each passing day, the thought that “perhaps I should just leave this kind of society” grew stronger. At the same time, I wondered, “I worked so hard to find a job, and wouldn’t leaving mean repaying the person who hired me with ingratitude?”.³⁹

In light of what has been said up to this point, what are the prospects for D/deaf and disability employment in Japan? In 2024, the employment rate of people with disabilities was positive, reaching 2.41% in the private sector and 3.07% in national public institutions, with a yearly increase in the number of graduates from special needs schools entering regular employment. In the context of recent years’ workforce shortages, a trend of strengthening pathways for people with disabilities to enter the labour market has started emerging in Japan.⁴⁰ This budding framework for understanding disability spreading throughout the archipelago is referable to Haller’s Consumer Model, already mentioned in Chapter One. Fostered by new media narratives that represent the disability community as a valuable social group within Japanese society, this model reframes people with disabilities as an untapped potential workforce whose employment leads to personal fulfilment and social harmony. In other words, disability employment results in both individual benefits, seeing that people with disabilities would participate in society and be recognised as full-fledged contributors, and societal benefits, since the struggling labour market would be able to capitalise on this underutilised workforce. Moreover, increased prospects for employment of people with disabilities would also reduce, as much as is feasible considering their particular impairment and the socio-material environment they are inserted in, their reliance on the State’s support by providing them with a disposable income.⁴¹

³⁹ SATŌ Daiki, “Chiisana Yūki” (my translation), cit., pp. 268-69.

⁴⁰ TOCHIBAYASHI Naoko, *Building an Inclusive Workforce through Disability Employment in Japan*, in “World Economic Forum”, 2025, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/all/building-an-inclusive-workforce-through-disability-employment-in-japan/>.

⁴¹ SHEK-NOBLE, “Media Framing of Disability and Employment in Japan...”, pp. 151-53.

More specifically on D/deafness, Article 9 of the 2025 Sign Language Act mandates that the State and local authorities are to take all necessary measures to create a working environment where sign language use is promoted and allowed, citing as possible measures the provision of information, consultation services and so on.⁴² This article, in combination with the legal obligations of providing reasonable accommodations stated by the 2013 Antidiscrimination Act, offers stable groundwork for a possible increase, in the next years, in employment of D/deaf people beyond sheltered workshops and separated branch offices.

For further and more in-depth ethnographic analysis on the relationship between D/deaf people and the labour market, a closer examination of photographer Saitō Harumichi's project *Hataraku Rōsha no Tazunete*⁴³, for which he travels around Japan to photograph and interview D/deaf workers who use sign language in their daily lives, could offer a valuable insight into the complex dynamics of the normative expectations that are characteristic of the D/deaf experience, as well as into the true breadth of possibilities that D/deaf people can access once these expectations and constructs are put aside.

4.3 Community, Identity and... Culture?

4.3.1 D/deaf Identity

The first half of Yutappe's narrative account of his life, "Taikibansei", is constellated with episodes of bullying, discrimination and hardships throughout their experience with compulsory education, from being kicked down the stairs and mocked for their pronunciation to the isolation and shame they kept bottled up and hidden away from their parents and teachers. Eventually, having entered high school, the only possible solution to escape this nightmare-like situation seemed to be passing, as much as was possible, as a hearing person.⁴⁴ In another word and following the underlying ableist normativity that we have seen characterises D/deaf education in Japan, assimilating.

"When lacking power, difference is interpreted as obsolesce, and progress is associated with assimilation to the dominating community"; Heinrich's (2012) words effectively summarise the processes at play in the Japanese landscape with respect to community building and identity formation in relation to D/deafness. We have already seen that Japan has historically associated, and to a certain degree still associates, uniformity within national borders with equality and progress, with its nation-building

⁴² JAPANESE GOVERNMENT, *Shuwa ni kansuru Jisaku no Suishin ni kansuru Hōritsu*, cit.

⁴³ See SAITŌ Harumichi, *Hataraku Rōsha no Tazunete*, in "Kokoko", 2026, <https://co-coco.jp/series/hataraku/>.

⁴⁴ YUTAPPE, "Taikibansei", in Watanabe T. (edited by), *Rōbungaku: dai 1 gō – dai 25 gō*, Yokohama, Rakuyō Publishing and Printing, 2025, pp. 155-56.

processes suffocating minority languages and cultures in the name of a modernisation that construes multilingualism and multiculturalism as signs of backwardness. This dominant ideology thus labels difference from its established norm as a deviation in need of remedy, which comes in the form of either assimilation or exclusionary practices, both resulting in the gradual erasure of the languages and cultures of the minorities living on the nation-state's physical and ideological borders.⁴⁵ It is precisely this ideology and subsequent assimilationist practices that underlie Yutappe's decision to choose passing, i.e. assimilation, rather than continuing to face the other so-called remedy of the dominant society to what it perceives as a problem, that is, exclusion and discrimination.

We have mentioned the theme of passing when talking about D/deaf education, as it is a common social strategy adopted by mainstreamed D/deaf students to improve their circumstances by role-performing as part of the hearing majority while concealing their difference; once again, though, while passing may temporarily improve the standing of one's social self in a majority context, it is not synonymous with true social inclusion, remaining a strategy of mimicry and identity homogenisation instead. D/deaf identity remains suppressed until the individual undergoes what McGuire calls "*jibun sagashi*", the gradual understanding of the needs and goals of the self, starting with the most basic one, communication.⁴⁶ For a large number of D/deaf people, in a time like nowadays when mainstreaming and Oralism-based education are prevalent, this first step in the discovery of their D/deaf identity is less a step and more a bolt from the blue, a D/deaf shock.

そんな中、私の人生の転機が訪れました。[. . .] その時に初めて聾学校の選手たちの手が動いている姿に出会いました。顧問の先生に「あれは何ですか？」と伺ったら、「あれは手話といって手でお話しているんだよ」と言われ、その時に大きな衝撃と電撃が私の体の中を走りました。聞こえてないのに喋れる？目でお話できている？目から鱗というのはこのことなのでしょうね。その時の試合は手話に見とれながらも何とか勝ちを得たのですが、「手話」が頭から離れず。 . . .

Amidst all this, a turning point in my life arrived. [...] It was then that, for the first time, I stumbled upon the sight of the players from the school for the D/deaf moving their hands. When I asked the coach, "What's that?", he told me, "That is sign language. They're talking with their hands". At that moment, a tremendous shock, an electric current, ran through my body. They can speak even though they cannot hear? They can communicate through their eyes? Perhaps this is what an eye-opener is.

⁴⁵ Patrick HEINRICH, *The Making of Monolingual Japan*, Bristol, Multilingual Matters, 2012, pp. 96-97; 99; 122-23.

⁴⁶ MCGUIRE, "Who am I with Others?...", cit., pp. 206-07.

Although I was so captivated by their sign language that I could hardly take my eyes off it, we somehow managed to win that day. But I couldn't get this "sign language" out of my head...⁴⁷

This D/deaf shock Yutappe explicitly mentions in the excerpt above, involves individuals who, through accidental encounters with other D/deaf people, switching to D/deaf schools or joining sign language circles, discover their D/deaf identities later in life and gradually start perceiving themselves as D/deaf. We can say, then, that D/deaf identity emerges in social networks and socially engaged processes that revolve around bonds built on shared difference. As we have seen, most people in Japan share a medical understanding of D/deafness as a disability, which seldom includes knowledge of the D/deaf community, its history and its linguo-cultural facet; moreover, with 90% of D/deaf children born to hearing families who rarely learn more than some fingerspelling to communicate with their children, the majority of D/deaf youths grows up in their families as a minority of one, both in their homes and, if mainstreamed, at school. Therefore, the role of D/deaf peers is crucial precisely because they become language teachers, agents of socialisation, cultural intermediaries and role models in D/deaf people's families' stead, negating the Otherness experienced in mainstream settings and laying the foundation for the development of an identity based on sameness, communication and belonging. This realisation of finding sameness in difference leads to a reflexive analysis of one's self, both inner and socio-interactional, and positionality, the abovementioned *jibun sagashi*. This process is divided by McGuire into two interconnected stages: firstly, the D/deaf person recalls a suppressed true self, a stage of their life before the prioritisation of verbal communication led to their labelling as abnormal and their marginalisation from socialisation clusters; secondly, having stepped voluntarily (and not always with the approval of the hearing people around them) into the stigmatised spatialities and experienced a new communication modality that transforms their linguistic practices, D/deaf people reveal their new self, which emerges from the need to cease adapting to others. In other words, in this second phase, the inner self, having remembered a time when it was included, interconnected and perceived as normal, learns to (re)engage with others in a new context and through new communication channels. The D/deaf identity formed through these processes is generally framed as an improved and positively constructed self, especially when compared with the previously interiorised dominant deficit view of D/deafness, which had led to strategies of passing and mechanisms of self-rejection. What had once been internalised and accepted as the Other is

⁴⁷ YUTAPPE, "Taikibansei" (my translation), cit., p. 156.

now reframed as a peer belonging to the same community as the self and playing a transformative and supportive role in the development of the self's identity as a D/deaf person in a hearing world.⁴⁸

Applying Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke's study of identity and social identity theories, we can place D/deafness between Japanese social identity and the idiosyncratic identity role of each individual. A social identity is based on uniformity of perception and action within a particular group, while a role identity is grounded in fulfilling and reproducing the expectations of a role whose actions and perspectives differ from, yet are interconnected with, those of other roles within the group. Nevertheless, both the depersonalisation typical of a social identity and the self-verification paradigmatic of an identity role imply an identification with a socio-culturally constructed and located category and with the behaviours associated with it. The self exists within society, influencing and being influenced by it, and through these processes develops its own identity. When examined within the Japanese landscape, however, D/deaf identity lives in between social identity and identity role as a social-role-identity, since dominant social structure in Japan has been ideologically constructed to refuse pluriculturalism and plurilingualism, thus suffocating D/deafness as a linguo-cultural group; and yet, dissimilarly to an idiosyncratic identity role, D/deaf identity, while experienced differently by each individual, operates, as we have seen, on a highly relational and sameness-based group level.⁴⁹

Under the influence of essentialist and difference-denying schools of thought typical of modernity, identities have been constructed as largely harmonious, with little to no space for change, downplaying the struggles in their formation, the tension born from the coexistence of multiple and fragmented identities, their political nature and their changeability. This tension between singular and plural identities is unavoidable precisely because of the unfixed nature of identity itself, which, as a personal and political project one participates in, changes constantly within interactions and specific socio-cultural locations.⁵⁰ In other words, an individual identity role always exists within a shared social identity, while a shared social identity is always influenced by the individual identity roles within it. The resulting tension from this plurality and interconnectedness can become, in many cases, the site of a personal struggle. And such struggle is the one often seen in D/deaf people's, especially D/deaf leaders', "Japanese identity syndrome"⁵¹, as Honna Nobuyuki and Katō Mihoko call it: we are once again faced with a Kierkegaardian *aut-aut* dilemma that sees the D/deaf identity as sharply opposed and apparently irreconcilable to the

⁴⁸ MCGUIRE, "Who am I with Others?...", cit., pp. 199; 203; 205; 207-12.

⁴⁹ Jan E. STETS, Peter J. BURKE, "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory", in *Social Psychology Quarterly*, vol. 63, no. 3, 2000, pp. 226-27; 231-32.

⁵⁰ Craig CALHOUN, "Social Theory and the Politics of Identity", in Calhoun C. (edited by), *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, New Jersey, Wiley Blackwell, 1994, pp. 23-25; 27-28.

⁵¹ HONNA, KATŌ, "Establishing Sign Language in Deaf Education in Japan...", p. 44.

Japanese one, leading to one membership necessarily excluding the other. This perceived impossibility in reconciling multiple identities, as already mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, is due to the assimilation policies adopted by Japan ever since its nation-building period, whose exclusionary approach to linguo-cultural identity took away the grounds for a more Hegelian *et-et* approach of dialectical reconciliation that could open the doors to multimembership as a fundamental aspect of one's identity, that is, the ability to move between different communities that are not separate units but deeply interwoven ones. According to communication scholar Étienne Wenger, identity exists as a cross-cutting notion, as multimembership construed as “an intersection of many relationships that you hold into the experience of being a person, at once one and multiple”⁵². This understanding of identity as a complex and multifaceted construct that relates to a person's interactions with the environment around them and emerges from experiences and relations is promoted by the World Federation of the Deaf as well, according to which a D/deaf identity “manifests from personal experience of being deaf, [D/deaf people's] use of sign language, one's membership of a language community with its history, and common experiences of oppression, resistance and solidarity”. Within the framework of multimembership, though, D/deafness is not the sole identity developed by a D/deaf person throughout their life, and it may also not be the most salient at all times, being only one tassel in the identity patrimony of each individual.⁵³

4.3.2 D/deaf Communities

かがやきでは、夢工場に通う人のことを「利用者」とは呼ばず、一緒にかがやきを盛り上げていく中間として「メンバーさん」と呼んでいる。[. . .] 年齢や性別、生まれ育った環境などはみんなバラバラなので、当然手話も全く違う。そんなたくさんのろう者に毎日囲まれながら、私の手話は鍛えられた。そして、ありがたいにメンバーさんも辛抱強く私の手話に付き合ってくれた。かがやきは「自立から自律へ、そしてかがやく人へ」というテーマで活動している。[. . .] そのために自分たちができることを持ち寄り、お互いに協力しながら社会に役立てるように成長していく。私もメンバーさんと一緒に、かがやきの中で成長していきたい。

At Kagayaki, the people who come to Yume Kōjō are not referred to as “users”; instead, they are called “members”, as fellow members who work together to help Kagayaki thrive. [...] Since everyone is different in terms of age, gender, the environment where they were born and raised, and so on, naturally,

⁵² Étienne WENGER, “Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems”, in *Organization*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2000, p. 242.

⁵³ WORLD FEDERATION OF THE DEAF, *Complementary or Diametrically Opposed...*, cit., p. 2.

their sign language is also completely different. Being surrounded by so many D/deaf people every day, my sign language was honed. I am also deeply grateful that the members patiently put up with my sign language. Kagayaki operates under the slogan, “From independence to self-determination, all the way to becoming a person who shines”. [...] To this end, everyone brings together what they can and, supporting one another, we grow so that we can contribute to society. I, too, want to continue growing together with the members at Kagayaki.⁵⁴

Nonaka Shūichi’s words about Kagayaki and Yume Kōjō (the same workshop already mentioned in the previous chapter by Watanabe) introduce a fundamental element in the discussion about D/deaf identity and D/deaf communities in Japan: the pivotal role these initiatives, associations and groups play in identity formation and community building alongside D/deaf schools, especially in a time when mainstreaming numbers are on the rise.

D/deaf communities could be defined as social learning systems, and, as such, belonging to one can occur at a different level, from local to global, and take different forms, from simple engagement, to a process of imagination of the self as a member of the community, up to an alignment of perspectives that is typical of social identities. Each of these modalities shapes both the social learning system itself (the specific D/deaf community) and the personal identity of the participant (D/deaf person). The core engines of these social learning systems, though, are what Wenger calls “communities of practice”, which in the Japanese D/deaf communities can be identified with D/deaf schools, initiatives like the Kagayaki group and Yume Kōjō workshop, and local D/deaf associations. These communities of practice become the building blocks of the social learning system, acting as sites of development of the competences that make up the system in the first place, above all, in this case, sign language learning. It is through the participation in these communities and in the interactions within them that individuals form their identities and sense of belonging based on a shared repertoire of communal resources, be it language, mores, history, worldviews, and so on.⁵⁵

The notion of communities of practice, however, implies the existence of their boundaries, which, no matter how fluid, are a natural result of different ways of interacting, different bodies of knowledge and experience, and different capabilities; and communities of practice, while indeed being keepers and actors of their socio-cultural traditions and practices, can also become hostage to them. Conversely, though, these boundaries can also be construed as new, complementary opportunities rather than mere difficulties

⁵⁴ NONAKA Shūichi (hearing), “Anata no Okage desu” (my translation), in Watanabe T. (edited by), *Rōbungaku: dai 1 gō – dai 25 gō*, Yokohama, Rakuyō Publishing and Printing, 2025, pp. 43-44.

⁵⁵ WENGER, “Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems”, cit., pp. 227-30.

or liabilities, since they have the potential to become spaces of intersectional learning and cradles of new perspectives.⁵⁶

These boundaries are exactly what can be seen through the idea of *Rō-sekai* (D/deaf world), which appears frequently in *Rōbungaku* and is an expression often used to discuss Deaf cultures. Such an image, which immediately conjures its opposite, the hearing world, can be a double-edged sword, as also examined in Wenger's analysis of boundaries: while the Japanese D/deaf communities and D/deaf world have been developing around communities of practice situated in segregated schools, workshops and sign language circles, allowing them to create a nationwide network, they remained at the peripheries of a society that has held onto negative views of them not as a linguo-cultural minority, but as a deficit section of itself in need of remedial assimilation or, when not possible, exclusion. In recent years, however, the gap between the two worlds has slowly but steadily been decreasing, owing to the efforts of activists and of national and local associations, as examined in Chapter Three, but also because of individual initiatives scattered across the archipelago and raising awareness of D/deaf communities through sign language and, above all, interaction.

On the local level, in “Watashi no Shumi kara Yume no Jitsugen he”, Koike Yūsuke recounts the invaluable role local D/deaf associations and university alumni associations had in helping him reconnect with other people, D/deaf and hearing alike, in his daily and working life, and in honing the skills and competences he had cultivated through his pastimes.⁵⁷ Yutappe's previously cited account also highlights the sense of accomplishment in being able to participate in society through events, committees and projects organised on a national and prefectural level by the same JFD.⁵⁸ Himawari, too, writes about her experience with D/deaf shock and how this, along with the encouragement and guidance of their senior colleagues at their workplace, led them to join a sign language circle and improve not only their linguistic skills, but also their interpersonal relationships and their confidence as a D/deaf person.⁵⁹

In many excerpts of *Rōbungaku*, several D/deaf writers point to sign language interpreters when discussing much-needed bridges between the two worlds; one of them is Saruko Mina in her “Jibun no Jinsei no Hanamichi wo Arukō”, where she addresses the necessity for D/deaf people, in the absence of accessible information for them, to have a figure who can fill this information void.⁶⁰ The 2025 Sign Language Act stresses the need for reasonable accommodations and support provided by State and local

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 232-34.

⁵⁷ KOIKE Yūsuke, “Watashi no Shumi kara Yume no Jitsugen he”, in Watanabe T. (edited by), *Rōbungaku: dai 1 gō – dai 25 gō*, Yokohama, Rakuyō Publishing and Printing, 2025, p. 48.

⁵⁸ YUTAPPE, “Taikibansei”, cit., p. 157.

⁵⁹ HIMAWARI, “Subete no Koto ni Kansha”, cit., p. 92.

⁶⁰ SARUKO Mina, “Jibun no Jinsei no Hanamichi wo Arukō”, in Watanabe T. (edited by), *Rōbungaku: dai 1 gō – dai 25 gō*, Yokohama, Rakuyō Publishing and Printing, 2025, p. 107.

authorities, including sign language interpretation, which is currently registering scarce numbers compared to the high demand for it; in light of this new piece of legislation, there is legal foothold for a possible increase in sign language interpreters in the archipelago in the next years. For further information on the history of sign language interpretation in Japan see Itō (1981) and Honna and Katō (2003).

Linked to sign language interpreting, an accomplishment that shortened the gap between D/deaf and hearing worlds was the introduction of the Telephone Relay Service⁶¹ (*denwa riree saabisu*), which, as mentioned by Mori Sōya in his “Rōsha to Nihongo” amongst many other D/deaf contributors, has revolutionised communication by facilitating conversations between people who use sign languages and those who do not, as well as shortening the time needed for D/deaf people to acquire necessary and complete information.⁶²

Finally, a factor of significant influence in raising awareness of the D/deaf community and sign languages among broader society has been media representation and the phenomenon of sign language booms (*shuwa buumu*). Productions that address D/deaf-related issues and sign language, as well as the simple appearance of a D/deaf character on screen, sparked the interest of hearing viewers in learning a sign language and approaching the D/deaf world. A result of this new media attention to D/deafness has been the growth in the number of sign language interpreters across the archipelago beyond individuals related to D/deaf people or D/deaf contexts. However, as pointed out by Yonekawa Akihiko (2002), these *shuwa* booms must be interpreted not only as a phenomenon that brought new waves of awareness, but also as fashionable trends inspired by television dramas, where representation is not always accurate and often romanticised or dramatised. In other words, the spikes in sign language learners these booms have brought did not always translate into actual change in society or in people’s mindsets and approaches to D/deafness. In his recent 2024 study, “The Representation of Deaf People and Sign Language in Visual Media”, Taira Eiji has identified three main *shuwa* booms: the first one, which he positions in a period of social awareness, was in the 1960s, with films such as *Happiness of Us Alone* (*Na mo Naku Mazushiku Utsushiku*, 1961) and *Yottsū no Shūshifu* (1964), all productions that took the first steps in the portrayal of D/deaf people’s daily lives in society; the second *shuwa* boom came in the 1990s, with productions that explored the social issues and environments surrounding D/deaf people, such as *Distant Kōshien* (*Hakanaru Kōshien*, 1990), and also more fashionable tv series with popular actors and actresses, such as *Your Hands Are Whispering* (*Kimi no Te ga Sasayaiteru*, 1997), which brought more attention to sign

⁶¹ The Telephone Relay Service is a welfare-provided service that facilitates telephone communication for people with hearing and speech impairments by having an interpreter relay the conversation in sign language in either text or speech to the interlocutor. In Japan, this service is available all year round, 24 hours a day, and handles emergency services as well.

⁶² MORI Sōya, “Rōsha to Nihongo”, in Watanabe T. (edited by), *Rōbungaku: dai 1 gō – dai 25 gō*, Yokohama, Rakuyō Publishing and Printing, 2025, p. 190.

language and resulted in an increase of sign language circles across the archipelago; finally, the third *shunwa* boom came with the 2004 tv drama *Orange Days* (*Orenji Deizū*) and saw the establishment of numerous sign language clubs in Japanese universities as a result.⁶³ According to the words of *Rōbungaku*'s writers, however, there seems to have been a fourth *shunwa* boom coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic period and the growing trend of sign language users creating online videos and social media content on *shunwa*, leading not only to an increase in interest and awareness of D/deaf-related issues and participation in sign language online courses, but also to a significant shortening of the gap between hearing and D/deaf people through language exchange and mutual learning. The following excerpt from Macha expresses this growing proximity between the D/deaf world and the hearing world:

コロナが広がり、家での自粛が強られ、当たり前でできていた友達との対面での手話ベリが出来ない生活はとても苦痛であった。たまたまネットを見ていたらオンライン手話交流がある事を知り、参加してみた。その当時はスマホを使ってのズーム交流。全国から一斉に集まる手話学習者、ろう者、難聴者との手話ベリ、日本語が苦手なろう者が集まった日本語勉強会、もっと日本語力をつけたくて手話を使ったマンツーマンレッスンを受講して、日本語の楽しさがわかってきた。[. . .] そして、聴文化、ろう文化の違いを沢山、知ることができ、聴者の考え方は一つではないこと、色んな考え方があることを知り、色んな聴者と友達になってみたいと思えるようになった。

As COVID-19 spread and I was forced to stay home, life became extremely distressing. I could no longer meet my friends face-to-face and chat with them in sign language, something I had always been able to do on a daily basis. One day, while casually browsing the internet, I discovered online sign-language exchanges, so I decided to participate. At the time, these were Zoom gatherings held on smartphones. Sign language learners, D/deaf people, and hard-of-hearing people from all over Japan would come together to chat in sign language. There were also Japanese study sessions attended by D/deaf people who struggled with Japanese. Wanting to further improve my Japanese, I took one-on-one lessons conducted in sign language, and, little by little, I began to understand the joy of the Japanese language. [...] I was also able to learn a great deal about the differences between hearing culture and Deaf culture. I came to realise that there isn't just one way of thinking amongst hearing people, but that they have all kinds of different perspectives and mindsets. Eventually, I began to feel that I would like to make friends with all kinds of hearing people.⁶⁴

⁶³ TAIRA Eiji, "The Representation of Deaf People and Sign Language in Visual Media", in *Shitenōji Daigaku Kiyō*, no. 73, 2024, pp. 163-66.

⁶⁴ MACHA, "Jibun no Sekaikan" (my translation), in Watanabe T. (edited by), *Rōbungaku: dai 1 gō – dai 25 gō*, Yokohama, Rakuyō Publishing and Printing, 2025, p. 260.

4.3.3 D/deaf Culture or D/deafhood?

The expression “Deaf culture” (*Rōbunka*) first appeared in Japan in 1996 in a homonymous special issue of the monthly academic magazine *Gendai Shisō*, gradually spreading ever since, especially with the influence of imported notions of Deaf culture from the United States. The result of the introduction of these new ideas was a paradigm shift: D/deaf people, which up to that point had been incorporated within the category of people with disabilities, now came to be reframed as a linguo-cultural minority whose native language is not Japanese, but sign language, more specifically JSL, which has unique structures and systems and is independent from the national oral language.⁶⁵ We have already discussed the difficulties of talking about Deaf culture within the Japanese landscape, and how, despite the ideologies and subsequent policies of the Japanese nation-state to refuse and repress multi/pluriculturalism, linguo-cultural minorities still exist within its borders and are active in their struggle to have their rights recognised, and their languages and cultures protected and revitalised. While the main framework for understanding D/deafness remains the dominant Medical-Social-Human Rights blended model of disability, Deaf culture as a concept did arrive in Japan, and it led to the emergence of smaller-scale groups promoting it through the Linguo-Cultural Minority Model. As explained by Nakamura (2003), because of the scattered and not unified nature of these groups, none of which has managed to gain hegemonic control of the discourses surrounding D/deafness to this day, a singular definition of what it means to be Deaf in Japan has not been developed yet. This fragmentation is also linguistically reflected in the diversification of ways to refer to D/deaf people, confirming the unfixed status of D/deaf identity and the in-between situation between models that is prevalent in Japan. The most frequently used terms, which often appear in *Rōbungaku* as well, are: *rō/rōa/rōsha/rōasha* (D/deaf or D/deaf-mute), *defu* (from the English counterpart), *chōkaku shōgaisha* (hearing impaired), *nanchōsha* (hard-of-hearing) and *mimi ga kikoenai hito* (person who cannot hear); moreover, there are at least six ways of signing “DEAF”, “HEARING IMPAIRED” or “HARD OF HEARING”. The terminology preferred by the government is that of hearing impaired (*chōkaku shōgaisha*), in line with the prevalent framework for understanding D/deafness. Despite this going against the tide compared with the WENA trends of de-emphasising the material body and privileging the cultural identity (a tendency that can be seen also with the shift from black to Black, or from homosexual to Gay/Lesbian), it is, once again, socio-culturally and historically contextualised to the Japanese setting and discourses.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ YAMASHITA, “Deafhood With/Out Deafness...”, cit., p. 207.

⁶⁶ NAKAMURA Karen, “U-Turns, ‘Deaf Shock’, and the Hard-of-Hearing: Japanese Deaf Identities at the Borderlands”, in Monaghan L., Schmaling C., Nakamura K., Turner G. (edited by), *Many Ways to be Deaf: International Variation in Deaf Communities*, Washington DC, Gallaudet University Press, 2003, pp. 213-14.

The most active promoter of Deaf culture in Japan was the organisation D-Pro (which has recently disbanded between 2023 and 2024). Established in 1993 in Tokyo, the members of this group were born during the mainstreaming era, and their visions openly opposed the milder and welfare-positive ones of the JFD, with which the group rarely collaborated. Directly importing the US definitions and strict boundaries between Deaf-born-Deaf, hard-of-hearing and hearing people, D-Pro attracted many youths with the promise of a community with its own language and clear-cut identity. Because of some of its ideas, considered too radical and exclusionary like many other new identity-based movements of those years, D-Pro received harsh criticism from both hearing people involved in D/deaf communities and older generations of D/deaf people, particularly because the group rejected everyone who was not culturally Deaf and born and raised within Deaf communities (more on the sign language-related ideas of D-Pro will be discussed in the next subchapter).⁶⁷

As briefly introduced in Chapter Two, the issue of membership in relation to Deaf culture is widely discussed in Deaf Studies, with the boundaries of D/deaf communities being extremely fluid and dependent on the socio-cultural context of reference. Broadly speaking, advocates of the disability construction, like the JFD's assimilationist stance, see the D/deaf community as encompassing all people with some degree of hearing loss in a mostly non-cultural interpretation; on the contrary, advocates of the Linguo-Cultural Minority Model tend to either narrow down the membership group to the sole Deaf-born sign language users, like D-Pro, or, in accordance with Ladd's definition of Deaf world, broaden it to a linguistic, cultural and social organisation where what matters is not hearing status, but social behaviours and language.⁶⁸

What is, then, Deaf culture in Japan? There is no definitive and singular answer to this question. But perhaps we can answer what *D/deafhood* is in Japan. Ladd (2003) defines D/deafhood as the space where D/deaf beliefs and values can be articulated, collected and examined, as a counterbalancing positivity to the negative atmosphere existing within pathological and social-welfare domains; moreover, he affirms that D/deafhood is not a finite state of being, but rather a process towards which one is constantly moving and that endeavours to lift, layer by layer, the weight of oppression.⁶⁹ Bearing this in mind, D/deafhood in Japan can be represented by the communities of practice that have developed despite the current dominant understanding of D/deafness continues to perceive it as solely a disability; and, in light of the recent enactment of the Sign Language Act, we could say that the current stage of D/deafhood in

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 223-24.

⁶⁸ LANE, "Constructions of Deafness", cit., p. 179.

⁶⁹ LADD, *Understanding Deaf Culture...*, cit., pp. 408-09.

Japan is the newly recognised Sign Language Culture and the pathways it will open for Japanese D/deaf people.

4.4 Sign Languages in Japan

Ideologies about what a “real” language is and beliefs that languages can be compartmentalised, counted and distinctly identified have been, for a long time, processes of social domination with a significant influence on judgement on the humanity and civility of specific groups of people; these ideologies have qualified and disqualified languages from institutional use and their speakers from access to privilege time and again.⁷⁰ Sign languages across the world have been amongst the many victims of a fusion of such language ideologies and ableist practices and views, leading to associating them to a less than full linguistic ability, even more so because of their general lack of orality. For a long time, in Japan and in most other regions of the world, they were not languages but rather incoherent gestures, deficient methods of communication for people who could not express themselves in a way that was perceived as proper, welfare tools of charity and goodwill from hearing people. In the Japanese archipelago, sign language was recognised as a language only in 2025, but that does not mean it suddenly became one from the coming into force of the Sign Language Act. For Japanese D/deaf people, who have been communicating through it throughout all their lives, sign language has always been not only their language, but also the core of their communities and socio-cultural selves.

Nihon Shuma, that is, Japanese Sign Language (JSL), is a family of complex and highly differentiated visual-spatial languages used by D/deaf communities in Japan. As visual-manual languages, they are constructed from a set of formative elements called “cheremes” (from the Ancient Greek *χῆρῆ*, “hand”; they are the correspondents of oral languages’ phonemes), which are further divided into three categories: hand form, place of operation and movement through space; signs organised by these units are additionally distinguished by simultaneous and multidimensional arrangements, such as facial expressions, mouthing, nodding, posture, and so on.⁷¹ Besides manual and non-manual signs there is also fingerspelling (*yubimoji*), whose current form was introduced in the early 20th century and is based on Spanish, French and US sign languages; however, fingerspelling is not widely used, with other elements such as air writing, mouthing and *kanji* signs (Chinese characters in sign form) being more common. Generally speaking, JSL differs from Japanese spoken and written language in both lexicon and grammar, which are closer to systems observable in other sign languages. Like Japanese, however, JSL uses a topic-comment grammatical

⁷⁰ Kathryn A. WOOLARD, Bambi B. SCHIEFFELIN, “LANGUAGE IDEOLOGY”, in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, VOL 23, 1994, p. 63.

⁷¹ HONNA, KATŌ, “Establishing Sign Language in Deaf Education in Japan...”, p. 44.

system, which has favoured the creation, development and spread of Signed Japanese (*Nibongo Taiō Shuwa*), voiced JSL and Pidgin Signed Japanese (*Chūkan Shuwa*).⁷² It is important to stress, though, that while JSL is an independent language developed through the interactions of native signers, and with a distinct syntax and grammar, Signed Japanese and Pidgin Signed Japanese are byproducts, visual-manual systems based on and in great part encompassed within Japanese language. In his 1981 article “Shuwa wo Meguru Shisō – Sono Rekishi to Konnichiteki Kadai”, Itō explains that, already in the 1980s, there was a distinction between Traditional Sign Language (*dentōteki shuwa*), today’s JSL, and Simultaneous Sign Language (*dojibōteki shuwa*), the vocalised version of nowadays’ Signed Japanese; being against this division, he then argues that there is no need to classify different forms of sign language, since it ultimately remains sign language, and people should be free to use it according to their preferences and in conformity with the context and situation they are in.⁷³ The lack of such division, however, can become problematic, especially when it implies an erasure of JSL’s historicity and socio-cultural values as a minority and community-based language. We can see in the following excerpt by K how many D/deaf people themselves perceive this differentiation between JSL and Signed Japanese, along with the awareness of the increasingly endangered status of the former:

日本手話は表情豊かで情景が目浮かぶような表現。「こんな手話、今まで見たことない！！」衝撃を受けると同時に魅力を感じました。ろう者のコミュニティで受け継がれてきた日本手話は手指だけでなく表情や顔き、上体の動きなどにも意味を持つとても奥深い言語。しかし、日本語対応手話の広がり、日本手話の存在が小さくなってきていると聞きました。こんな魅力的な言語が使われなくなるのは、とても寂しい。

Japanese Sign Language is a language rich in facial expressions, with imagery so vivid that scenes seem to appear before your eyes. “I have never seen sign language like this before!!” I was deeply shocked, yet at the same time, I was captivated by it. Japanese Sign Language, which has been passed down within D/deaf communities, is a profoundly rich language in which meaning is conveyed not only through hands and fingers, but also through facial expressions, nodding, movements of the upper body, and other elements. However, I heard that with the spread of Signed Japanese, the presence of Japanese Sign Language has been gradually diminishing. It would be such a shame to see this fascinating language fall out of use.⁷⁴

⁷² NAKAMURA Karen, *About Japanese Sign Language*, in “Deaf Resource Library”, 2002, <https://www.deaflibrary.org/jsl.html>.

⁷³ ITŌ, “Shuwa wo Meguru Shisō...”, cit., pp. 19-20.

⁷⁴ K, “Shuwa no Manabi wo Tōshite Omou Koto” (my translation), in Watanabe T. (edited by), *Rōbungaku: dai 1 gō – dai 25 gō*, Yokohama, Rakuyō Publishing and Printing, 2025, p. 175.

Therefore, distinguishing between the two is fundamental. On the one hand, JSL is a sign language that D/deaf people naturally develop through interactions with their peers, and is the vessel of a history of oppression, assimilation, identity formation and community building within segregated spaces. On the other hand, Signed Japanese is a communication system fashioned to mimic the grammar, syntax, lexicon, and so on, of the dominant oral language D/deaf people have been drilled to interiorise as their so-called “mother tongue” through decades of Oralism-based education and repression of JSL. This is by no means a way to say that Signed Japanese has less value than JSL, but rather a reminder that the two should be valued as what they are, that is, two different languages. *Nihon Shuwa*, in all its varieties, is the autonomous and autochthonous language of the Japanese D/deaf minority group; Signed Japanese is for the most part Japanese, although in a visual-manual form, and was created both so that the Japanese D/deaf minority would be able to communicate more smoothly with the broader Japanese-speaking majority, but also, as also expressed by HIROKO in her “Nihongo Taiō Shuwa to Nihon Shuwa”, as a tool that facilitates and aids chiefly those D/deaf people that wholly embrace the disability understanding of D/deafness and seek to communicate with the broader hearing society in their language, namely Japanese.

Nihon Shuwa is highly non-standardised, with signs varying significantly from the northernmost part of the archipelago to the southern prefectures, to the point where communication between signers from different areas can become problematic; although the Tokyo variation has gained a somewhat hegemonic status due to media representation and to the various national meetings and congresses sponsored by Tokyo-based D/deaf organisations, there is no standardised form when it comes to JSL.⁷⁵ Besides geographical variety, however, another factor of linguistic diversification is generation. Nakamura (2003) made a broad diachronic and intergenerational categorisation of languages of the D/deaf in Japan, classifying them by lexicon, grammar, presence of fingerspelling and voicing: Prewar (JSL and home signs, JSL grammar, no fingerspelling, no voicing), Postwar (JSL, mixed JSL and Japanese grammar, voicing), New generation of Hard-of-hearing (JSL, Japanese grammar, fingerspelling, full voicing) and New generation of D-groups (JSL, new JSL grammar, no voicing).⁷⁶ A further phase of JSL can be identified in recent years’ trends, with a more blended form of signing that is heavily influenced by the advent of social media and the import of international signs as well.

The question that presents itself, thus, is why JSL never standardised across the archipelago. Patrick McClue, in his “Setting the Standard: An Overview of the History and Politics of Prohibiting and Promoting a National Japanese Sign Language” (2013), answers by identifying three elements that

⁷⁵ NAKAMURA Karen, *About Japanese Sign Language*, cit.

⁷⁶ NAKAMURA Karen, “U-Turns, ‘Deaf Shock’, and the Hard-of-Hearing...”, cit., pp. 224-25.

hindered standardisation. The first is physical segregation, which had been the dominant approach to D/deafness and D/deaf people in Japan until the Second World War; in these times, signing existed either as individual-specific home signs for basic communication with family members or as the extremely confined sign language hubs that developed in each local school for the D/deaf. While this blend of home signs and local signs contributed to the creation of a plenitude of regional dialects, the marked segregation of D/deaf people and absence of compulsory education were the main reasons why a widely used signing system was never fully developed. The second element was the Oralist agenda adopted after the Milan Conference of 1880, already mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Rooted in the belief that sign language was a primitive form of communication and would lead to the insularity of D/deaf people within broader society rather than their assimilation into it, Oral education was promoted as a symbol of social progress and implemented in Japan as well, further hindering the development and standardisation of JSL (the resolutions of the Milan Conference were rejected only at the Vancouver Conference of 2010, with the promotion of sign language education instead). Finally, the third element has been MEXT's determination to continue using oral education in light of this perceived notion of social progress and of the dominant principle of equal treatment in education, which in this case is represented by the same oral-aural curriculum being adopted across the archipelago, regardless of a student's hearing capacities. Despite the attempts by local organisations and concerned parents to introduce sign language in schools to help D/deaf children not necessarily develop their linguo-cultural identity but simply communicate better with their teachers, these requests and petitions have always been met with resistance from the Ministry, which holds its position that priority should be given to oral education, ignoring both the fact that Oralism is not an effective didactic approach for D/deaf students, and the data proving that the use of sign languages in classrooms improves Japanese language acquisition.⁷⁷

These three elements have been identified as the main events and processes that led to the great diversification and lack of standardisation existing within the category of *Nihon Shuwa*, an expression which, echoing Kathryn A. Woolard and Bambi B. Schieffelin's observations on the ideological nature of well-defined and singular languages, would be better contextualised if the suffix *-shogo* ("group of languages", "language family") was added to it.

初めて手話を知ったのは小学時代のときで、学校でろうの友人が手話でおしゃべりしているのを見て興味を持ったのがきっかけでした。その後、友達に手話や指文字を通して少しずつ手話を覚えていきました。

⁷⁷ MCCLUE, "Setting the Standard...", cit., pp. 210-14.

しかし、当時覚えたのは完全な日本手話ではなく日本語と手話のまじった日本語対应手話でした。また、手話の使用は、ろうの友人同士のやりとりのみでした。

I first encountered sign language in elementary school, my interest piqued after seeing my D/deaf friends signing with one another at school. After that, I gradually learnt sign language from my friends through signing and fingerspelling. However, what I learnt back then was not full-fledged Japanese Sign Language, but Signed Japanese, which combined Japanese and sign language. Moreover, I used sign language only to communicate with my D/deaf friends.⁷⁸

Throughout this thesis, we have examined how sign language has been stigmatised and negatively construed, observing more general ableist views and disablist practices that reinforced such perceptions, such as the Medical Model and consequent pathologisation of D/deafness, as well as, through the words of *Rōbungaku*'s D/deaf writers, the more specific measures implemented because of Japan's homogenising and assimilationist efforts and the widespread Oralist school of thought, which resulted in the punitive measures described in this chapter and the sense of shame towards one's signing that resulted from them. And yet, despite all of this, sign language remains D/deaf people's most spontaneous language, as is reiterated by Macha's words in their "Nihongo to Macha" and by the same editor Watanabe (though they use the expression *dai-ichi gengo*, "first language"); and, precisely because it is the most natural form of communication for many D/deaf people, it is around sign language as the interpersonal pillar of D/deaf communities that D/deaf individual formed their personal and social selves, their interactions and their daily occupations. In other words, as Koike Yūsuke's experience expresses well in the excerpt above, sign language is framed as a language for peer bonds, socialisation and interaction, learnt with the help of and alongside D/deaf peers through a method embedded in the daily routine and made of playful corrections and mutual teaching of new signs. Because of periods of prohibition and reluctant acceptance in schools, sign language has been primarily learnt on an informal level through daily usage, with friends filling the void left by formal learning environments during the slivers of time between lessons, when D/deaf peers interact with each other and co-construct their linguo-cultural, individual and social selves.⁷⁹

The role of sign language, however, depends on each person and/or group's perceptions of it, much like the concepts of D/deafness or membership. The stance espoused by the majority of the D/deaf writers of *Rōbungaku* cited thus far and by editor Watanabe herself is a pluri/bilingual one: as D/deaf people, sign language is the way they can more easily and truly express themselves, their "soul", as Watanabe

⁷⁸ KOIKE Yūsuke, "Shuwa to no Deai" (my translation), cit., p. 297.

⁷⁹ MCGUIRE, "Who am I with Others?...", cit., pp. 210-11.

writes in the Foreword of *Rōbungaku*'s comprehensive volume; this does not, however, exclude Japanese from their lives, especially since it is the language of the broader society they are inserted in, making it necessary for Japanese D/deaf people to learn it in order to live alongside hearing people and to access more opportunities on a interpersonal and professional level. The two languages, to rephrase, coexist within Japanese D/deaf people, each with its role and functions, and contribute to the growth of the individual and social self.

Another take on sign language is offered by the previously mentioned D-Pro, especially considering that the cultural organisation absorbed much of the bicultural/bilingual model of Deaf society as promoted by Deaf activists in the United States in the 1990s. D-Pro's "Deaf Culture Declaration", proposed in 1995 by Kimura Harumi and Ishida Yasuhiro, stated that:

Deaf people have two languages, spoken and written Japanese and JSL. We live in two cultures, the culture of hearing people and the culture of the Deaf. Even though Deaf people have two languages and two cultures, JSL and the culture of the Deaf have always been regarded as inferior and worthless, ignored and not respected. Even Deaf people themselves have believed themselves to be worthless and inferior. Now, Deaf people have come to understand their own language, Japanese Sign Language, is as perfect a language as many other languages in the world and is not inferior at all. They have realized that even if their own way of communication, activity, behavior, value, belief and so on, is different from that of hearing people, who are the majority, they do not have to feel inferior and/or guilty. These differences are the result of "cultural difference". Of course, it is important for the Deaf people to acquire Japanese and the culture of hearing people. Bilingualism/biculturalism is the philosophy that those two languages and two cultures should be equally, but separately, respected.⁸⁰

While such a school of thought may seem to share some common ground with *Rōbungaku*'s own philosophy, the divergence is represented by the meaning attached to JSL: one of the pillars of D-Pro's ideology was the pureness of *Nihon Shuwa*, that is, the complete absence of mouthing, voicing and any form of Japanese grammar; moreover, the group also claimed that only congenitally Deaf children of Deaf parents raised within Deaf communities (which is an exceptionally low percentage of D/deaf individuals) knew pure JSL. It is no wonder, then, that the JFD leaders, who had been heavily criticised by D-Pro for mouthing and voicing when they signed, compared the group's radical and almost clannish ideology to a form of "sign fascism", as reported by Nakamura (2006).⁸¹

⁸⁰ NAKAMURA Karen, "Creating and Contesting Signs in Contemporary Japan: Language Ideologies, Identity, and Community in Flux", in *Sign Language Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2006, pp. 18-19.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

Despite the numerous existing interpretations of the breadth of JSL and the role of sign language, the JFD has been endeavouring for years to maintain the monopoly over *Nihon Shumwa*'s standardisation (as much as possible given its marked diversification); these efforts translate mostly into lexicon management through the yearly publication of textbooks and vocabularies, and into the organisation of several interpreter-training programmes throughout the archipelago. On the whole, the Federation's official stance is significantly more lenient than D-Pro's, accepting within the definition of D/deaf anyone with hearing loss, regardless of signing fluency or D/deaf heritage, and within that of JSL also elements from spoken Japanese, as well as mouthing and voicing. This assimilationist view, also by force JFD's status as an incorporated foundation under governmental control, is congruent with the disability-centred model embraced by the Ministry of Welfare, which is responsible for all sign language-related policies⁸². The Federation's firm claim that sign language is a full-fledged language is thus not accompanied by a cultural claim; on the contrary, the JFD promotes D/deaf people's unitary identity as Japanese citizens with different linguistic needs, maintaining the construction of D/deafness as disability rather than adopting the Linguo-Cultural Model.⁸³ It is perhaps also because of the adoption of Japan's dominant blended Medical-Social-Human Rights Model of disability that the Federation's opinions on the cochlear implant controversy are rather vague, with the complete absence of the ethic and cultural issue the surgery represents from a Linguo-Cultural Minority point of view.

In Japan, the first cochlear implantation surgery was performed in 1985. Ever since the 1990s, the operation, including pre-operative testing, hospitalisation and post-operative follow-ups, is mostly covered by the national health insurance programme (in case of preschool children, costs are generally paid in full by the government, with exceptions made according to prefecture and private income). From the turn of the millennium, a considerable increase in the number of surgeries was registered, with more than 500 operations in 2005 and more than 1000 in 2015, showing a general balance between children and adults.⁸⁴ According to the continuously updated guidelines of the Oto-Rhino-Laryngological Society of Japan, the lower age limit for candidacy was 18 months up to 2016, when it was lowered down to 1 year of age. However, despite cochlear implantations being on the rise in Japan, numbers remain lower than those registered in WENA countries, where the "younger is better" message promoted by medical research is approached less cautiously than it is in the archipelago.⁸⁵

⁸² The fact that sign language-related policies and decisions in Japan are in the hands of the Ministry of Welfare and not of the MEXT or of the Ministry of Education underscores the disability model adopted by the Japanese government in respect of D/deaf people and their languages.

⁸³ *Ibidem*, pp. 12; 19; 21.

⁸⁴ KASHIO Akinori, TAKAHASHI Haruo, NISHIZAKI Kazunori, YAMASOBA Tatsuya, MORIYAMA Hiroshi, "Cochlear Implants in Japan: Results of Cochlear Implant Reporting System Over More than 30 Years", in *Auris, Nasus, Larynx*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2021, pp. 623-24.

⁸⁵ Janette OLIVER, "New Expectations: Pediatric Cochlear Implantation in Japan", in *Cochlear Implants International*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2013, p. 14.

In 2016, the JFD published its views on the cochlear implant, affirming that, even when fitted with this assistive technology, the child retains a degree of hearing loss and, just like all other D/deaf children, inevitably relies on two languages to develop on a personal and social level: a spoken one, Japanese oral language, and a visual-manual one, sign language. The statement's focus, rather than the possibility of language loss and culture erasure, is the need to inform parents of future D/deaf children, at the prenatal screening phase, of not only medical procedures such as hearing aids and cochlear implantation surgery, but also of the fundamental role of sign language in D/deaf children's development and interpersonal life.⁸⁶

Article 1: Goal

In light of the fact that sign language constitutes a language and an essential means of communication for its users in their daily and social lives, the purpose of this Act is to comprehensively promote policies concerning sign language [...] by establishing basic principles, clarifying the responsibilities of the national government and local public entities, and setting basic matters regarding policies concerning sign language, including policies for the acquisition and use of sign language, those for the preservation, transmission, and development of *sign language culture*, and those to promote public understanding and awareness of sign language.⁸⁷

The recent enactment of the Sign Language Act opens multiple doors for the future of D/deaf people and D/deaf communities in Japan, encompassing several fields, from education and workplaces to adjustments to current legislation and the “preservation, transmission and development of sign language culture”. In the next years, we will see the results of this long-dreamt achievement for Japanese D/deaf people and whether the official recognition of a Sign Language Culture will herald the Linguo-Cultural Minority stage of D/deafness in Japan under the banner of plurilingualism.

⁸⁶ JAPANESE FEDERATION OF THE DEAF, *Hitori Hitori*..., p. 21.

⁸⁷ JAPANESE GOVERNMENT, *Shuwa ni kansuru Taisaku no Suishin ni kansuru Horitsu*, cit., cursive is mine.

Conclusion:

Entering the Fourth Stage

How should D/deafness be constructed, then? Once again, there is no straightforward or universal answer as to how it *should* be constructed; this thesis, however, has examined some of the several ways it *can* be constructed, none of which is an absolute truism, all of which could be a D/deaf person's everyday reality. That is the nature of constructions: they inevitably depend on individual experiences and socio-cultural and socio-material contexts.

In 1991, the Open University course *Issue of Deafness* inferred the changes society would undergo if it were to adopt a disability construction of deafness for most late-deafened children and adults, and a linguistic minority construction of Deafness for pre-linguistically D/deaf people. The adoption of these different constructions were hypothesised to bring forth shifts in the construction of behaviours and expectations, in legitimate authority with respect to education and provision of services, in the legal status of the two groups, one a disability group and the other a minority group, in the processes of identification and labelling as a social variety rather than a pathological defect in need of remedy, and in the typology of intervention, since Deaf children would not be operated on for Deafness but brought together with other Deaf people.¹ In light of what has been said regarding the impossibility of universally applying constructions of D/deafness, though, while this distinction between Deaf people and people who are deaf may be welcomed by many and may reflect the framework evolution towards a Linguo-Cultural Minority Model, it remains a generalist assumption that does not take into consideration the individual situation and socio-cultural context of many D/deaf people around the world, who, rather than living in a binary system between medical condition of deafness and cultural Deafness, exist in the complex interplay and spectrum between them. In this sense, then, the model proposed by the World Federation of the Deaf, which recognises the multimembership of both disability group and linguo-cultural minority community, is more flexible and allows for continuous negotiation of the meaning of D/deafness for every individual, without encapsulating them within a binary label, much like the slashed term “D/deafness” itself aims to do.

It is important to specify that this thesis does not want to criticise assistive technology's advances or declare a need for society to change completely in order to become a bigger-scale version of Martha's Vineyard or to reorganise itself by putting people with disabilities at its centre, because, realistically

¹ LANE, “Constructions of Deafness”, cit., p. 183.

speaking, it would be unfeasible in the immediate future, not to mention that focusing on just one or a few groups of people inevitably leads to discrimination and inequalities towards others. Many societies around the world have made enormous improvements in terms of the provision of accommodations, the promotion of accessibility and universal design, the development of legal frameworks, educational policies, assistive technology, and so on. Denying such achievements is impossible and counterproductive when discussing D/deaf-related issues. Recent years have seen a general increase in participation of D/deaf people and people with disabilities in policy-making, not just for matters related to them, but also for everything they experience daily and that could become more inclusive and accessible with small expedients; moreover, there has been a growing number of cases of funds redistribution based not only on the needs dictated by the Medical Model, but also by other frameworks that do not ascribe the full responsibility for disability to the individual.

In other words, what has been called into question in this research is not the undeniable practical shift to the Social Model, Human Rights Model and, in some cases, Linguo-Cultural Model of understanding D/deafness and disability, but rather the mindset which, at least in part, remains entrenched in the Medical Model. This becomes evident in the many unquestioned ableism-rooted mechanisms of Othering and stigmatisation that constellate daily life and are especially hard to deracinate precisely because they are unilaterally thought to be byproducts of care and kindness.

In the first half of this thesis, we have seen how disability has been understood, across the centuries, through a succession of models, all deeply linked to major events, established ideologies and perceptions, and socio-cultural norms. While, as also shown above by the Open University course's hypotheses, WENA countries generally present a Human Rights Model of understanding disability and a Linguo-Cultural Minority model of understanding Deafness as the universal benchmark to aspire to, realities and everyday practices are still partially rooted in their once dominant pathologic constructions. This was shown through the examination of widespread ableist beliefs and disablist (and often unwitting) Othering practices that do not manifest as openly malicious forms of discrimination, but rather as remnants and traces deeply ingrained in people's everyday actions. After having discussed dominantly constructed concepts, ideologies and processes such as disability, normality and Otherness, as well as having introduced the just-as-constructed and debated notion of culture, Deaf culture was presented not as a fixed noun but as a fluid verb that is heavily influenced by and itself influences the socio-cultural norms and context of its interpretation. The cochlear implant controversy was also briefly examined as the most paradigmatic example of a same topic viewed through different models of interpretation, but also as a

concrete and contentious issue that has been at the centre of much debate withing D/deaf communities all over the world.

Chapter Three opened the second half of the thesis with a shift in focus to the Japanese landscape. Japan has spent decades since the end of the Second World War building a welfare system and establishing national disability policies that are entrenched in the Medical Model, which, together with the assimilationist and monocultural/monolingual tendencies adopted by the archipelago's nation-state ever since the Meiji period, have left no space for a direct translation of the Linguo-Cultural Minority Model of D/deafness promoted by many WENA countries. Referring to the diagram presented in the third chapter, then, D/deafness in Japan, has been stagnating in the third stage, encompassed and, to a certain extent, trapped within the label of disability. In other words, in Japan, D/deafness is still predominantly construed as part of the broader category of disability and through a model that blends both the Social and the Human Rights one while remaining grounded in a pathological framework typical of the Medical Model.

Chapter Four presented the actual ethnographic and diachronic analysis of the Japanese D/deaf community, divided into four broad areas.

Broadly speaking, D/deaf education in Japan has been investigated by many recent studies, especially because of the key role D/deaf schools play in the linguistic, individual and social growth of D/deaf children in a context of segregation like the Japanese one. The evolution from the visual-manual method, through Oralism and to mainstreaming has been analysed by several scholars, who have in large part highlighted the necessity for these pupils to learn sign language, if not through sign language. The current situation in Japan sees a conflict between government-promoted policies of inclusion via Special Needs Education based on a disability understanding of D/deafness and the promotion of bilingualism/biculturalism in classrooms across the archipelago, more in line with the Linguo-Cultural Minority framework of D/deafness. However, the recent enactment of the Sign Language Act in 2025 and its mandates on education open pathways to the future nationwide implementation, either as a subject or a means of instruction, of sign language in schools.

The institutionalised segregation pattern characterising the lives of people with disabilities in Japan emerged not only from episodes of Othering through marginalisation within workplaces, but in particular from the widespread phenomenon of sheltered workshops in the archipelago. Throughout the decades, legislation has been enforced to prevent discrimination against people with disabilities in working environments, in particular with the Quota System and the Levy and Grant System, which, however, do not target the root issue of Othering, that is, the ableist mindset supporting it. It will be seen in the next years whether the, albeit limited, attention given to promotion of sign language in workplaces, combined

with the legal obligation to provide reasonable accommodations mandated by the 2013 Antidiscrimination Act, will bring about a shift away from segregated workplaces towards an increase in regular employment for D/deaf people in the archipelago.

The process of D/deaf identity formation is linked to both language and community, which are either approached segregationally when the individual grows up in the marginalised spatialities provided by Japanese broader society to the D/deaf community, or through a D/deaf shock that leads to an introspective (re)discovery of the self as a D/deaf person when the individual follows the nowadays predominant path of mainstreaming and passing as a hearing, and thus perceived-as-normal, person. Hence, D/deaf communities play a crucial role in the formation, both personal and interpersonal, of the D/deaf self, and sign language underscores this process by positioning itself as a relational language of bonds and friendships, co-constructed in interactions that shape the person's individual and social selves. There is, however, a persistent dilemma, namely the conflict born from Japanese identity having been ideologically constructed as irreconcilable with the notions of identity multimembership and pluriculturalism within the individual. The difficulties in directly transplanting the WENA notion of Deaf culture are a consequence of this assimilationist and homogenising linguo-cultural ideology, which is why Deaf culture remains mostly undefined in Japan, despite scattered attempts of US-inspired groups to gain hegemonic control over it. Instead, the milder Japanese solution mentioned in the Sign Language Act is a “sign language culture” (*shuma bunka*) that seems to focus on language rather than culture, even though the two are deeply interconnected, as has been largely researched in both Deaf Studies and Cultural Studies.

To speak of Japanese Sign Language is to speak of Japanese Sign Languages, a group of complex visual-manual languages with no officially recognised and widespread standardised form, mostly due to the history of segregation and assimilationist practices that have characterised D/deafness-related policies in the archipelago. Despite the efforts of the Japanese Federation of the Deaf to standardise JSL as much as possible, due to these policies and to the spread of oral language-based forms such as Signed Japanese and Pidgin Japanese Sign Language, JSL remains to this day a highly non-standardised group of languages with a multitude of local and generational varieties, some more similar to spoken/written Japanese and others unaffected by it. The 2025 Sign Language Act mandates the promotion of sign language in schools, workplaces and daily life environments, though it does not specify *which* of the many forms of JSL is to be promoted. This omission could lead to many possible outcomes, from an inevitably political selection of one variety as Standard JSL, to the assimilationist decision of equating sign language with Signed Japanese. It is still too early to draw definite conclusions on the subject, but there is a high probability

that the following years will mark a significant and delicate turning point for the standing and direction of sign languages in Japan.

There is ample space to expand research on D/deafness in Japan, either through general overviews, like the one presented in this thesis, or through a more specific focus on single areas, from education to the variation between Japanese Sign Languages varieties. An example already mentioned in Chapter Four could be the ethnographic study of the relationship between socio-culturally dictated expectations regarding work, D/deaf people and their working experiences through an analysis of Saitō Harumichi's project *Hataraku Rōsha no Tazunete*. Furthermore, considering the recent enforcement of the Sign Language Act, the changes it will bring (or will not bring) could be themselves a topic of study, also to expand on the diagram presented in this thesis regarding the evolution and direction of D/deafness in the Japanese archipelago.

The question, at this point, is whether Japan is actually (re)entering a cultural stage of D/deafness, and whether people, in the next years, will be able to find their JSL textbooks not in the *shakai mondai* ("societal issues") aisle, but rather in the languages section of a bookshop, since they will be looking forward not to use a welfare tool but to learn a language and acquire the key to interact with the D/deaf world, its culture and its actors.

Bibliography

- BEN-MOSHE, Liat, MAGAÑA, Sandy, “An Introduction to Race, Gender, and Disability: Intersectionality, Disability Studies, And Families of Color”, in *Women, Gender, and Families of Color*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2014, p. 106, pp. 105-14.
- BOGART, Kathleen R., DUNN, Dana S., “Ableism Special Issue Introduction”, in *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 75, no. 3, 2019, pp. 650-64.
- CALHOUN, Craig, “Social Theory and the Politics of Identity”, in Calhoun C. (edited by), *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, New Jersey, Wiley Blackwell, 1994, pp. 9-36.
- COLEMAN-FOUNTAIN, Edmund, MCLAUGHLIN, Janice, “The Interactions of Disability and Impairment”, in *Social Theory & Health*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2013, pp. 133-50.
- FRANKENBERG, Ruth, “The Mirage of an Unmarked Whiteness”, in Birgit Brander Rasmussen, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J. Nexica, Matt Wray (edited by), *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2001, pp. 72-96.
- FREUND, Peter, “Bodies, Disability and Spaces: The Social Model and Disabling Spatial Organisations”, in *Disability & Society*, vol. 16, no. 5, 2001, pp. 689-706.
- GAPPMAYER, Georg, “Disentangling Disablism and Ableism: The Social Norm of Being Able and its Influence on Social Interactions with People with Intellectual Disabilities”, in *Journal of Occupational Science*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2020, pp 102-113.
- GOODLEY, Dan, *Dis/ability Studies: Theorising Disablism and Ableism*, Oxfordshire, Routledge, 2014.
- HEINRICH, Patrick, *The Making of Monolingual Japan*, Bristol, Multilingual Matters, 2012.
- HEYER, Katharina, *Rights Enabled: The Disability Revolution, from the US to Germany and Japan, to the United Nations*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2015.
- HONNA Nobuyuki, KATŌ Mihoko, “Establishing Sign Language in Deaf Education in Japan: A Sociolinguistic Approach”, in *Intercultural Communication Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 37-50.

HOVHANNISYAN, Astghik, “Preventing the Birth of ‘Inferior Offspring’: Eugenic Sterilizations in Postwar Japan”, in *Japan Forum*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2021, pp. 383-401.

ITŌ Shunsuke, “Shuwa wo Meguru Shisō – Sono Rekishi to Konnichiteki Kadaï” (Ideas on Sign Language: Its History and Contemporary Issues), in *Shuwa Tsūyaku Mondai Kenkyū*, vol. 14, 1981, pp. 1-26.

伊東雋祐編『手話をめぐる思想—その歴史と今日的課題』、手話通訳問題研究、第 14 券、1981 年、pp. 1-26.

JAPANESE FEDERATION OF THE DEAF, *Hitori Hitori ga Kagayakeru Mirai he* (Towards a Future where Everyone Can Shine), Tokyo, Japanese Federation of the Deaf, 2018.

全日本ろうあ連盟編、一人ひとりが輝ける未来へ、東京、全日本ろうあ連盟、2018 年。

KAIZU Akiko, TAMAKI Munehisa, “Current Issues and Future Directions of Inclusive Education in Japan”, in *Remedial and Special Education*, vol. 45, no. 6, 2024, pp. 369-79.

KASHIO Akinori, TAKAHASHI Haruo, NISHIZAKI Kazunori, YAMASOBA Tatsuya, MORIYAMA Hiroshi, “Cochlear Implants in Japan: Results of Cochlear Implant Reporting System Over More than 30 Years”, in *Auris, Nasus, Larynx*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2021, pp. 622-29.

KITCHIN, Rob, “‘Out of Place’, Knowing One’s Place: Space, Power, and the Exclusion of Disabled People”, in *Disability & Society*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1998, pp. 343-56.

LADD, Paddy, *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood*, Clevedon, Multilingual Matters LTD, 2003.

LANE, Harlan, “Constructions of Deafness”, in *Disability & Society*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 171-90.

LANE, Harlan, *The Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community*, New York, Knopf, 1992.

LINDQVIST, Rafael, LAMICHHANE, Kamal, “Disability Policies in Japan and Sweden: A Comparative Perspective”, in *ALTER, European Journal of Disability Research*, vol. 13, 2019, pp. 1-14.

LONGMORE, Paul, “The Cultural Framing of Disability: Telethons as a Case Study”, in *PMLA*, vol. 120, no. 2, 2005, pp. 502-08.

MAHER, John, “Linguistic Minorities and Education in Japan”, in *Educational Review*, vol. 49, no. 2, 1997, pp. 115-27.

MCCLUE, Patrick, “Setting the Standard: An Overview of the History and Politics of Prohibiting and Promoting a National Japanese Sign Language”, in *Tōkyō Joshi Daigaku Kiyō Ronshū*, vol. 63, no. 2, 2013, pp. 207-20.

MCGUIRE, Jennifer M., “Who am I with Others?: Selfhood and Shuwa among Mainstream Educated Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Japanese Youth”, in *Contemporary Japan*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2020, pp. 197-217.

MIK-MEYER, Nanna, “Symbolic Interactionism, Stigma and Othering”, in Järvinen M., Mik-Meyer N. (edited by), *Qualitative Analysis: Eight Approaches for the Social Sciences*, London, Sage, 2020, pp. 51-72.

NAKAMURA, Karen, *A Disability of the Soul: An Ethnography of Schizophrenia and Mental Illness in Contemporary Japan*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2013.

NAKAMURA Karen, “Creating and Contesting Signs in Contemporary Japan: Language Ideologies, Identity, and Community in Flux”, in *Sign Language Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2006, pp. 11-29.

NAKAMURA Karen, *Deaf in Japan: Signing and the Politics of Identity*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2006.

NAKAMURA Karen, “Resistance and Co-Optation: The Japanese Federation of the Deaf and its Relations with State Power”, in *Social Science Japan Journal*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2002, pp. 17-35.

NAKAMURA Karen, “U-Turns, ‘Deaf Shock’, and the Hard-of-Hearing: Japanese Deaf Identities at the Borderlands”, in Monaghan L., Schmaling C., Nakamura K., Turner G. (edited by), *Many Ways to be Deaf: International Variation in Deaf Communities*, Washington DC, Gallaudet University Press, 2003, pp. 211-29.

NAKASHIMA Takeshi, “Ableism toward Language by People with Disabilities: The Relationship between the Body and Ideology”, in Heinrich P, Grosser F., Santalahti S. (edited by), *Ideologies of Communication in Japan: Speakers, Interaction and the Creation of Difference*, Bristol, Multilingual Matters, 2025, pp. 161-74.

Janette OLIVER, “New Expectations: Pediatric Cochlear Implantation in Japan”, in *Cochlear Implants International*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2013, pp. 13-17.

- PADDEN, Carol, “Talking Culture: Deaf People and Disability Studies”, in *PMLA*, vol. 120, no. 2, pp. 509-13.
- ROCHE, Gerald, “Linguistic Vitality, Endangerment, and Resilience”, in *Language Documentation & Conservation*, vol. 11, 2017, pp. 190-223.
- ROSE, Nikolas, “Identity, Genealogy, History”, in Hall S., du Gay P. (edited by), *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 1996, pp. 128-50.
- SHEFFIELD, Abraham M., SMITH, Richard J. H., “The Epidemiology of Deafness” in *Cold Spring Harbor Perspectives in Medicine*, vol. 9, no. 9, 2019, pp. 1-15.
- SHEK-NOBLE, Liz, “Media Framing of Disability and Employment in Japan: Traditional and Progressive Approaches”, in *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2020, pp. 145-59.
- SHIBUYA Tomoko, “Deaf Culture as a Minority: How People See Deafness”, in *Hikaku Bungaku – Bunka Ronshū*, vol. 15, 1998, pp. 25-34.
- 澁谷智子編『マイノリティとしてのろう文化』、比較文学—文化論集、第 15 巻、1998 年、pp. 25-34.
- SIMPSON, John A., WEINER, Edmund S. C., *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd Edition, vol. 4, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989.
- SMART, Julie, *Disability, Society, and the Individual*, Austin, Pro-ed, 2009.
- SPARROW, Robert, “Defending Deaf Culture: The Case of Cochlear Implants”, in *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2005, pp. 135-52.
- STETS, Jan E., BURKE, Peter J., “Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory”, in *Social Psychology Quarterly*, vol. 63, no. 3, 2000, pp. 224-37.
- TAIRA Eiji, “The Representation of Deaf People and Sign Language in Visual Media”, in *Shitennojō Daigaku Kijō*, no. 73, 2024, pp. 163-90.
- 平英司編『「手話ドラマ」におけるろう者・手話についての描写に関する一考察』、四天王寺大学紀要、第 73 巻、2024 年、pp. 163-90.

TORIGOE Takashi, “Deaf Education and Bilingualism: Signed and Spoken Languages”, in *Studies in Language Sciences*, vol. 3, Tokyo, Kurosio Publishers, 2004, pp. 55-65.

WATANABE Takako, *Rōbungaku: dai 1 gō – dai 25 gō* (Deaf Literature: Volumes 1-25), Yokohama, Rakuyō Publishing and Printing, 2025.

渡辺貴子編、ろう文学―第1号 - 第25号、横浜、洛陽出版印刷株式会社、2025年。

WELLS, Herbert G., “The Country of the Blind”, in *The Country of the Blind and Other Stories*, Leipzig, Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1926, pp. 9-48.

WENDEL, John, HEINRICH, Patrick, “A Framework for Language Endangerment Dynamics: The Effects of Contact and Social Change on Language Ecologies and Language Diversity”, in *International Journal of Sociology of Language*, vol. 2012, no. 218, pp. 145-66.

WENGER, Étienne, “Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems”, in *Organization*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2000, pp. 225-46.

WOLBRING, Gregor, “The Politics of Ableism”, in *Development*, vol. 51, 2008, pp. 252-58.

WOOLARD, Kathryn A., SCHIEFFELIN, Bambi B., “LANGUAGE IDEOLOGY”, in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, VOL 23, 1994, pp., 55-82.

YAMASHIRO, Jane H., “The Social Construction of Race and Minorities in Japan”, in *Sociology Compass*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2013, pp. 147-61.

YAMASHITA Eri, “Deafhood With/Out Deafness: Gengo to Shintai no Kōsa-suru Chiten” (Deafhood With/Out Deafness: The Intersection of Language and Body), in *Quadrante: Areas, Culture and Positions*, vol. 14, 2012, pp. 207-13.

山下恵理『Deafhood With/Out Deafness―言語と身体の交差する地点』、四分儀：地域・文化・位置のための総合雑誌：クアドランテ、第14巻、2012年、pp. 207-13.

YONEDA Hiroki, “Development of the Japanese Inclusive Education System: From Special Schools to Curriculum Modification for Special Needs Education in Regular Schools”, in *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, vol. 464, 2019, pp. 1031-40.

Online Sources

BLOCK, Pamela, *Niels Erik Bank-Mikkelsen*, in “Britannica”, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Niels-Erik-Bank-Mikkelsen>, Last Accessed on 4th September 2026.

JAPAN PAST & PRESENT, *Disability Legislation Timeline*, in “Japan Past & Present”, <https://japanpastandpresent.org/en/projects/disability-studies-in-japan/research/disability-legislation-timeline>, Last Accessed on 4th September 2026.

JAPANESE FEDERATION OF THE DEAF, *Special Resolution: Strengthen the Movement to Eliminate Eugenic Thought*, in “Japanese Federation of the Deaf”, 2021, <https://www.jfd.or.jp/en-archive/sla>, Last Accessed on 5th September 2026.

JAPANESE GOVERNMENT, 手話に関する対策の推進に関する法律 (Act on the Promotion of Measures Relating to Sign Language), in “E-Gov”, 2025, <https://laws.e-gov.go.jp/law/507AC0100000078>, Last Accessed on 11th September 2026.

KLIEWER, Addison, MAHMUD, Miranda, WAYLAND, Brooklyn, *“Kill the Indian, Save the Man”: Remembering the Stories of Indian Boarding Schools*, in “Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication”, 2021, <https://www.ou.edu/gaylord/exiled-to-indian-country/content/remembering-the-stories-of-indian-boarding-schools>, Last Accessed on 10th September 2026.

KWAK Jeongran, *Examining Deaf Education with Japanese Sign Language as a Medium of Instruction*, in “Institute of Ars Vivendi, Ritsumeikan University”, 2015, <https://www.ritsumei-arsvi.org/en/essay/essay-254/>, Last Accessed on 11th September 2026.

MINISTRY OF HEALTH, LABOUR AND WELFARE, 令和 6 年度の同時報酬改定に向けた意見交換会（第 2 回）資料 (Documents for the Second Meeting to Exchange Views on the Simultaneous Remuneration Revision for 2024 Financial Year), in “Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare”, 2023, https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/shingi2/0000162533_00002.html, Last Accessed on 3rd September 2026.

MINISTRY OF JUSTICE, *Act for Eliminating Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities*, in “Japanese Law Translation”, 2013, <https://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/en/laws/view/3052/je>, Last Accessed on 6th September 2026.

MINISTRY OF JUSTICE, *Act to Facilitate the Employment of Persons with Disabilities*, in “Japanese Law Translation”, 1960, <https://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/en/laws/view/3845/je>, Last Accessed on 4th September 2026.

MINISTRY OF JUSTICE, *Basic Act for Persons with Disabilities*, in “Japanese Law Translation”, 1970, <https://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/en/laws/view/4929/je>, Last Accessed on 5th September 2026.

MINISTRY OF JUSTICE, *Social Welfare Act*, in “Japanese Law Translation”, 1951, <https://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/en/laws/view/3813/je>, Last Accessed on 4th September 2026.

MINISTRY OF JUSTICE, *The Constitution of Japan*, in “Japanese Law Translation”, 1946, <https://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/en/laws/view/174>.

MOTOYAMA Yuzuka, 障害者自立支援法から障害者総合支援法に変わった理由は？ (Why was the Act on Support for the Independence of Persons with Disabilities replaced by the Comprehensive Support Act for Persons with Disabilities?), in “Care Tasukeru”, 2025, <https://caretasukeru.com/disability-support-law/3143/>, Last Accessed on 6th September 2026.

NAKAMURA Karen, *About Japanese Sign Language*, in “Deaf Resource Library”, 2002, <https://www.deaflibrary.org/jsl.html>, Last Accessed on 15th September 2026.

ŌNUKI Hajime, 公益法人制度改革関連三法 (The Three Acts Relating to the Reform of the Public Interest Corporation System), in “Hijō Riyōgo Jiten”, n.d., https://www.koueki.jp/dic/hieiri_256/, Last Accessed on 7th September 2026.

PRIME MINISTER’S OFFICE, *The Government Action Plan for Persons with Disabilities*, in “Disability Information Resources”, 1995, <https://www.dinf.ne.jp/doc/english/law/japan/l00002e/l00002e01.html>, Last Accessed on 5th September 2026.

SAITŌ Harumichi, *Hataraku Rōsha wo Tazunete*, in “Kokoko”, 2026, <https://co-coco.jp/series/hataraku/>, Last Accessed on 12th September 2026.

TEE-MELEGRITO, Rachel A., *Hearing Aids vs. Cochlear Implants: How to Choose*, in “Medical News Today”, 2021, <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/hearing-aids-vs-cochlear-implants>, Last Accessed on 29th August 2026.

THE INDIC PACIFIC GLOSSARY, *WENA*, in “Indic Pacific Legal Research”, 2025, <https://www.indicpacific.com/glossary-v-z/wena>, Last Accessed on 17th August 2026.

TOCHIBAYASHI Naoko, *Building an Inclusive Workforce through Disability Employment in Japan*, in “World Economic Forum”, 2025, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/all/building-an-inclusive-workforce-through-disability-employment-in-japan/>, Last Accessed on 12th September 2026.

UNHCR, *Minorities and indigenous people*, in “UNHCR”, 2023, <https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/protect-human-rights/safeguarding-individuals/minorities-and-indigenous-peoples>, Last Accessed on 29th August 2026.

UNITED NATIONS, *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, in “United Nations Human Rights”, 2006, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities>, Last Accessed on 26 August 2026.

UNITED NATIONS, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, in “United Nations Human Rights”, 1989, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>, Last Accessed on 29th August 2026.

UNITED NATIONS, *Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities*, in “United Nations Human Rights”, 1992, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-rights-persons-belonging-national-or-ethnic>, Last Accessed on 19th August 2026.

UNITED NATIONS, *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, in “United Nations Human Rights”, 1996, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>, Last Accessed on 19th August 2026.

UNITED NATIONS, *UN Treaty Body Database*, in “United Nations Human Rights”, 2026, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?Treaty=CRPD, Last Accessed on 26 August 2026.

WORLD FEDERATION OF THE DEAF, *Complementary or Diametrically Opposed: Situating Deaf Communities within 'disability' vs 'cultural and linguistic minority' constructs: POSITION PAPER*, in “World Federation of the Deaf”, 2018, <https://wfdeaf.org/resources/complementary-or-diametrically-opposed-situating-deaf-communities-within-disability-vs-cultural-and-linguistic-minority-constructs/>,
Last Accessed on 21st August 2026.