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AN ANALYSIS OF SIGN LANGUAGE FEATURES USED BY HONG HEE-JOO IN KOREAN DRAMA 'WHEN THE PHONE RINGS'

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Abstract:
The underrepresentation and inaccurate portrayal of sign language in media challenged inclusivity for the deaf community. This research analyzed Hong Hee-Joo's sign language in the drama "When The Phone Rings" and compared Korean Sign Language (KSL) and American Sign Language (ASL). Using content analysis and William Stokoe's (1960) theory, the study examined five features: handshape, palm orientation, location, movement, and facial expression. The results showed that Hong Hee-Joo utilized all five features with a significant dominance of handshape features, reaching 72% in certain episodes. These findings reflected the cultural background of KSL and highlighted the importance of accurate media representation.

Keywords:
Korean Drama; Sign Language Features

INTRODUCTION

Language functions as the primary medium for human interaction. In nonverbal communication, sign language plays a vital role for individuals with hearing or speech impairments. It transcends mere communication; it embodies the cultural and linguistic identity of the Deaf community. Incorporating and representing sign language within media is imperative for raising awareness, fostering inclusivity, and accurately depicting Deaf individuals.

Nevertheless, numerous films and television programs continue to overlook or misrepresent sign language, leading in distorted public perceptions (Jan and Pervaiz, 2021). This issue is particularly pronounced in Korean media, where Deaf characters are scarce and are often depicted without cultural and linguistic sensitivity.

For instance, the Korean drama "When the Phone Rings" features Hong Hee-Joo, a Deaf woman who communicates exclusively through Korean Sign Language (KSL). Her character presents a rare and valuable opportunity to examine the portrayal and influence

of global Deaf cultures, such as American Sign Language (ASL). As Korean dramas gain international popularity, content creators bear a greater responsibility to accurately and respectfully depict minority communities, including the Deaf.

William Stokoe's theory (1960) posits that sign language, akin to spoken language, possesses distinctive linguistic features. This extensively utilized theory identifies five key parameters of sign formation: hand shape, palm orientation, location, movement, and facial expression. These elements collaboratively generate meaning, and each is crucial for understanding the grammar and syntax of a signed language (Mirus, 2019). Although initially developed for ASL, this framework has been adapted to analyze other national sign languages, including KSL (Harrington, 2017).

In practice, Deaf culture and language are often regarded as artistic add-ons rather than essential cultural elements. The media frequently employs signing characters as plot devices rather than authentic linguistic representatives (Ganguly, 2019). Furthermore, the use of incorrect signs or the mixing of sign systems, such as combining ASL and KSL, can lead to miscommunication or reinforce misconceptions among hearing viewers.

In Korean media, where sign language has only recently been officially recognized as a language (National Assembly of Korea, 2016), there is limited scholarly work critically assessing the portrayal of signing characters. This study aims to address this gap by analyzing Hong Hee-Joo's signing across all nine episodes of "When the Phone Rings." The research has two primary objectives: to identify the linguistic features of Hong Hee-Joo's sign language using Stokoe's five-parameter model, and to compare KSL and ASL as demonstrated in her signing. This investigation is significant as it provides insights for linguists, media professionals, educators, and content creators regarding the importance of authentic representation of signed languages. Additionally, it emphasizes how media portrayals influence societal perceptions of the Deaf community, either fostering inclusion or perpetuating exclusion.

By integrating linguistic theory with media analysis, this research contributes to the broader discourse on Deaf representation, cultural authenticity, and the role of sign language in global media.

1. Sign Language

   Sign language is a natural visual-manual language used primarily by the Deaf community for communication. Unlike spoken languages, which rely on sound, sign language uses hand movements, facial expressions, and body posture to convey meaning. It possesses its own grammatical structure, syntax, and lexicon, making it a complete and independent language rather than a derivative of spoken language (Mayberry and Squires, 2006).

   Stokoe (1960) was one of the earliest linguists to scientifically demonstrate that sign language has a systematic linguistic structure comparable to that of spoken language. He introduced five fundamental parameters that form the basis of sign language analysis: hand shape, palm orientation, location, movement, and facial expression.

These parameters work together to create meaning, and any alteration in one parameter can change the meaning of a sign.

Hand shape refers to the configuration of the fingers and palm when producing a sign. Palm orientation indicates the direction the palm faces, such as upward, downward, or outward. Location refers to where the sign is articulated in relation to the body. Movement includes the direction, speed, and repetition of hand motion, while facial expressions function as non-manual markers that convey grammatical information, emotion, and emphasis (Klima and Bellugi, 1979). These five features are not merely supportive elements but are essential components of sign language phonology. Facial expressions, for instance, can distinguish between statements and questions or indicate emotional intensity. Therefore, accurate use of these linguistic features is crucial, especially when sign language is represented in the media.

2. Korean Sign Language, American Sign Language, and Media Representation
   Korean Sign Language (KSL) is the primary sign language used by the Deaf community in South Korea. It was officially recognized as a national language in 2016, marking significant progress in acknowledging the linguistic rights of Deaf individuals (Lee, 2018). KSL has its own grammar and vocabulary that differ from both spoken Korean and other sign languages such as American Sign Language (ASL).

   ASL, on the other hand, is widely used in the United States and parts of Canada and has developed independently from KSL. Although both KSL and ASL share similar phonological parameters, they differ in hand shapes, movement patterns, and cultural expressions (Padden and Humphries, 1988). These differences reflect the cultural and social backgrounds of their respective Deaf communities.

   In media representations, sign language is often inaccurately portrayed or mixed across different systems, leading to misunderstandings and misrepresentations of Deaf culture. Baker (2011) argues that inaccurate depictions reinforce stereotypes and reduce the authenticity of Deaf characters. Media plays a powerful role in shaping public perceptions; therefore, the correct use of sign language is essential to promote inclusivity and awareness.

   Korean dramas have recently begun incorporating Deaf characters and sign language into their narratives. However, scholarly analyses of how sign language is linguistically represented in Korean media remain limited. The Korean drama When the Phone Rings offers a unique case, as it features a main character, Hong Hee-Joo, who communicates primarily through sign language. This makes the drama a valuable subject for examining how KSL is portrayed and how it differs from ASL within a media context.

   Several recent studies have explored the landscape of deaf representation in media. Baker (2025) examined how children, deafness, and deaf cultures are depicted in popular media, highlighting the intersection of identity and media consumption. Furthermore, Chang and Golos (2025) provided a specific analysis of the portrayal of deaf characters within Korean movies, identifying cultural nuances and recurring tropes in the South Korean entertainment industry. However, there remains a

significant research gap regarding the micro-linguistic analysis of sign language features in contemporary Korean dramas—specifically 'When The Phone Rings'—using a formal linguistic framework like Stokoe's theory. This study fills that gap by providing a structural analysis of KSL features used by a lead character. Specifically, this research aims to answer the following questions: (1) What are the linguistic features of sign language used by Hong Hee-Joo based on Stokoe's theory? and (2) How does the KSL used in the drama reflect the structural components of handshape, location, and movement?.

METHOD

Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design with content analysis. It focused on observing, identifying, and categorizing the five linguistic features of sign language used by the character Hong Hee-Joo.

Data Collection Method

Data were collected through non-participant observation. The researcher repeatedly watched all episodes of "When the Phone Rings" to identify and record scenes containing sign language usage by Hong Hee-Joo. Relevant scenes were captured through screenshots and detailed observational notes.

Each sign was documented based on its context, duration, and communicative function within the scene. The researcher also consulted reference materials on Korean Sign Language and American Sign Language to support accurate identification of sign-language features.

Data Analysis Method

The collected data were analyzed using William Stokoe's (1960) five-parameter model of sign language analysis. Each identified sign was examined based on the following criteria:

1. Hand shape: the configuration of the fingers and palm used in the sign
2. Palm orientation: the direction the palm faces during articulation
3. Location: the area of the body or signing space where the sign is produced
4. Movement: the direction, speed, and repetition of hand motion
5. Facial expression: non-manual markers conveying grammatical or emotional meaning

After classification, the signs were compared to standard forms in Korean Sign Language (KSL) and American Sign Language (ASL) to identify similarities and differences. This comparative analysis aimed to determine whether Hong Hee-Joo's signing aligned with KSL norms or incorporated ASL features.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The results revealed the consistent use of all five features across the series. The table below summarizes the highest frequency by episode:

Table 1. Sign Language Features in Drama Title: When The Phone Rings

NO	EPISODE	HAND SHAPE	PALM ORIENTATION	LOCATION	MOVEMENT	FACIAL EXPRESSION
1	E01	72%	29%	27%	29%	20%
2	E02	35%	13%	19%	16%	10%
3	E03	25%	11%	14%	11%	10%
4	E04	47%	26%	29%	29%	17%
5	E05	26%	22%	10%	10%	8%
6	E06	22%	16%	8%	8%	5%
7	E08	55%	41%	35%	27%	23%
8	E09	8%	5%	4%	2%	2%

Based on William Stokoe's (1960) theories, analysis of the collected data identifies five sign language features used in the Korean drama "When The Phone Rings". Hand shape appears mostly in episode 01 with 72%, palm orientation primarily shows up in episode 08 with 41%, location is most evident in episode 08 with 35%, movement is mainly seen in episodes 01 and 04 with 29%, and facial expressions are predominantly featured in episode 08 with 23%. Additionally, the analysis reveals five differences between KSL and ASL features in the drama, as identified by the researcher.

Table 2. Differences between KSL and ASL

KOREAN SIGN LANGUAGE				
HAND SHAPE	**PALM ORIENTATION**	**LOCATION**	**MOVEMENT**	**FACIAL EXPRESSION**
Has a more complex hand shape and is different from ASL. Some letters of the alphabet in KSL have unique and distinctive hand shapes	The orientation of the palms is often facing inward or to the side, depending on the cue	Many gestures are performed around the face and upper body, with some gestures having specific locations	Some signs in KSL have smaller, more precise movements than ASL. There is also a Korean cultural influence in the way the movements are performed	Facial expressions tend to be more subtle and are sometimes influenced by the more formal Korean culture
AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE				
HAND SHAPE	**PALM ORIENTATION**	**LOCATION**	**MOVEMENT**	**FACIAL EXPRESSION**
Uses a hand shape system	More variations in orientation,	Sign locations are more varied,	Tends to have more dynamic	More expressive and often uses clearer

more similar to finger spelling in English, like a one-handed alphabet	including forward, sideways, and up, depending on the gesture used	including on the chest, head, and even around the body	movements and is sometimes more expressive in some concepts	facial expressions to indicate questions, emotions, or grammar

The differences in the KSL and ASL features used by Hong Hee Joo in the Korean drama "When the Phone Rings" are based on William Stokoe's 1960 theory, which outlines five parameters: handshape, palm orientation, location, movement, and facial expression. Notable differences include the complexity of handshapes in KSL, which are more intricate than the simpler fingerspelling-like gestures in ASL. Palm orientation in KSL is consistently inward or sideways, whereas ASL exhibits greater variation. In terms of location, KSL gestures are mainly around the face and upper body, while ASL gestures are more dispersed around the entire body. Movement in KSL tends to be smaller, whereas in ASL it is generally more dynamic. Facial expressions in KSL are subtler and sometimes influenced by Korean cultural norms, whereas ASL features more expressive, clearly defined facial movements.

Discussion

1. Sign Language Features Used by Hong Hee-joo in Korean Drama "When The Phone Rings"

   The findings validate Stokoe's framework as a dependable tool for analyzing sign language in visual media. Hong Hee-Joo's signing utilizes all five linguistic parameters, confirming the drama's effort to portray sign language accurately representation.

   a. Hand Shape

      In episode 01, hand shapes appear 72% of the time, with pointed hand shape appearing 10 times, open hand shape 8 times, bunched hand shape 2 times, V shape 2 times, fist 3 times, claw shape 3 times, rounded bundle shape 2 times, L shape 3 times, thumb shape 2 times, zero shape once, close pinched shape 3 times, flat hand shape 5 times, flattened O once, baby O once, bent B once, little finger once, and bent V once. In episode 02, hand shapes appear 35%, including pointed shape 5 times, Y shape twice, fist 3 times, thumb shape twice, claw shape once, baby O once, F shape once, flat shape twice, small closed C shape twice, open hand shape twice, 1-I shape once, and little finger once. In episode 03, hand shapes appear 25%, including thumb shape 3 times, open hand shape twice, little finger 3 times, F shape twice, V shape twice, Y shape once, flat shape twice, L shape once, fist shape once, baby O once, and bent V once. Episode 04 shows hand shapes 47%, with Flat hand shape appearing 3 times, Claw shape 2 times, Pointed shape 6 times, open hand shape 3 times, B shape twice, F shape once, Thumb shape 2 times, Y shape once, baby O shape once, C shape once, fist shape twice, V shape once, and little finger once.

      In episode 05 Hand shape appears 26 %, including Open hand shape 2 times, Flat hand shape 5 times, O hand shape 1 times, Pointed hand shape 2 times, B hand shape 1 times, Y hand shape 1 times, Claw hand shape 1 times, Thumb hand shape 2 times, Baby O 1 times, and Fist hand shape 1 times. In episode 06 Hand shape

appears 22%, including Pointed hand shape appeared 2 times, O hand shape 1 times, Claw 1 times, Fist 2 times, L hand shape 1 times, V hand shape 1 times, Baby O 1 times, Flat hand shape 2 times, Bent L 1 times, Thumb hand shape 1 times, and Little finger 1 times. In episode 08 Hand shape appears 55%, including 3 hand shape appeared 1 times, L hand shape 3 times, Y hand shape 3 times, Pointed hand shape 6 times, Flat hand shape 6 times, Bent V 1 times, Thumb hand shape 4 times, F hand shape 2 times, Little finger hand shape 2 times, V hand shape 1 times, Open hand shape 1 times, H hand shape 1 times, Flattened O 1 times, Fist hand shape 1 times, B hand shape 2 times, Baby O 1 times, and Bent B 1 times. And in episode 09 Hand shape appears 8%, including 8 hand shape appeared 1 times, Flat hand shape 1 times, Fist hand shape 1 times, Pointed hand shape 1 times, Baby O 1 times, and Claw hand shape 1 times.

b. Palm Orientation

In episode 01, palm orientation occurs 29%, with specific positions including palm facing upward 7 times, to the side 3 times, inward 7 times, outward 2 times, and downward 1 time. In episode 02, palm orientation appears 13%, consisting of inward (4 times), upward (3 times), and downward (3 times). In episode 03, it appears 11%, with inward (4 times), outward (2 times), upward (1 time), and to the side (1 time). In episode 04, palm orientation is 26%, including to the side (5 times), outward (4 times), downward (1 time), and upward (2 times).

In episode 05, palm orientation occurs 22%, with specific positions including palm facing downward 3 times, inward 4 times, to the side 5 times, and upward 3 times. In episode 06, it appears 16%, with palm facing upward 3 times, inward 4 times, downward once, outward twice, and to the side once. Episode 08 shows palm orientation 41%, with downward 6 times, outward 3 times, upward 6 times, and inward 6 times. In episode 09, palm orientation occurs 5%, with inward 2 times, downward once, and outward once.

c. Location

In episode 01, the Location appears 27%, with "In front of the chest" occurring 14 times, "In the head" 4 times, and "On the face" 1 time. In episode 02, the Location appears 19%, with "In front of the chest" 7 times, "On the face" 3 times, and "In the head" 3 times. In episode 03, the Location appears 14%, including "In front of the chest" 7 times and "On the face" 3 times. In episode 04, the Location appears 29%, with "In front of the chest" 12 times and "On the face" 8 times.

In episode 05, the Location appears 10%, with 'In front of the chest' appearing 6 times and 'On the face' once. In episode 06, Location appears 8%, with 'In front of the chest' 3 times and 'On the face' 4 times. In episode 08, Location appears 35%, including 'In front of the chest' 15 times and 'On the face' 9 times. In episode 09, Location appears 4%, with 'On the face' 2 times and 'In front of the chest' once.

d. Movement

In episode 01, Movement appears 29%, with Straight movement occurring 9 times, Circular motion once, Repetitive movement twice, and movements changing direction 8 times. In episode 02, Movement appears 16%, including 5 instances of movement changing direction, 4 of Repetitive movement, and 2 of Straight movement. In episode 03, Movement appears 11%, with 1 Straight movement, 4 movements changing direction, and 3 Repetitive movements. In

episode 04, Movement again appears 29%, featuring 9 Repetitive movements, 9 movements changing direction, and 2 Straight movements.

In episode 05, Movement appears 10%, with Repetitive movement occurring 3 times, direction changes 3 times, and Straight movement once. In episode 06, Movement appears 8%, including 3 instances of changing direction, 2 of Repetitive movement, and 1 of Straight movement. In episode 08, Movement appears 27%, featuring 9 Repetitive movements and 10 direction changes. In episode 09, Movement appears 2%, with 1 Straight movement and 1 direction change.

e. Facial Expression

In episode 01, facial expressions account for 20%, with Angry appearing 3 times, Neutral 4 times, Upset 6 times, and scoffing once. In episode 02, facial expressions make up 10%, including Neutral once, Confused once, Feeling guilty once, Happy twice, Curious once, and Sad once. In episode 03, facial expressions also account for 10%, with Happy appearing twice, Neutral once, Serious once, and Sad three times. In episode 04, facial expressions comprise 17%, with Happy once, Neutral six times, Serious four times, and Surprised once.

In episode 05, facial expressions account for 8%, with Neutral appearing once, Happy twice, and Annoyed three times. In episode 06, they make up 5%, including Angry two times and Neutral two times. In episode 08, facial expressions are observed 23%, with Neutral eight times, Confused twice, Serious once, and Happy five times. In episode 09, they appear 2%, with Happy appearing twice.

2. Difference Between KSL and ASL that Hong Hee-Joo used in Korean Drama “When the Phone Rings”

The researcher identified five key features of sign language: handshape, palm orientation, location, movement, and facial expression, drawing on William Stokoe's (1960) theories. In the Korean drama “When the Phone Rings," the depicted sign language is Korean Sign Language (KSL). According to Stokoe, these five features are not exclusive to American Sign Language (ASL) but are shared across various sign languages. Based on this research, which highlights these five features, the following outlines the differences in how Korean Sign Language (KSL) and American Sign Language (ASL) utilize these features.

a. Korean Sign Language (KSL)

KSL possesses distinctive features that set it apart from other sign languages like American Sign Language (ASL), as noted in Lee (2018). Its structure resembles ASL in phonological aspects, including handshape, palm orientation, location, movement, and facial expression, according to Stokoe (1960).

1) Hand shape

KSL has as a more complex hand shape and is different from ASL. Some letters of the alphabet in KSL have unique and distinctive hand shapes.

2) Palm Orientation

In KSL, the palms are often oriented inward or to the side, depending on the cue.

3) Location
   Many gestures in KSL are performed around the face and upper body, with some gestures having specific locations.
4) Movement
5) Some signs in KSL have smaller, more precise movements than ASL. There is also a Korean cultural influence in the way the movements are performed.
6) Facial Expressions
   Facial expressions in KSL tend to be more subtle and are sometimes influenced by the more formal Korean culture.

The distinction between KSL and ASL can be explained by William Stokoe's 1960 theory, which identifies five parameters in each sign language: handshape, palm orientation, location, movement, and facial expression. In KSL, hand shapes are usually more intricate, the palm often faces inward or to the side, gestures are predominantly near the face and upper body, movements tend to be smaller, and facial expressions are more subtle, sometimes influenced by traditional Korean cultural norms.

b. American Sign Language (ASL)
   ASL is more than a communication tool; it embodies the culture, traditions, and values of the deaf community. Padden and Humphries (1988) highlighted how ASL helps reinforce the community's identity. Key features of ASL include hand shape, palm orientation, location, movement, and facial expressions. These components of American Sign Language were first described by Stokoe (1960).
   1) Hand Shape
      ASL uses a handshape system more similar to finger spelling in English, like a one-handed alphabet.
   2) Palm Orientation
      In ASL, More variations in orientation, including forward, sideways, and up, depending on the gesture used.
   3) Location
      ASL locations are more varied, including on the chest, head, and even around the body.
   4) Movement
      Tends to have more dynamic movements and is sometimes more expressive in some concepts.
   5) Facial Expressions
      More expressive and often uses clearer facial expressions to indicate questions, emotions, or grammar.

The difference between ASL and KSL can be understood through William Stokoe's theory (1960), which states that each sign language has five parameters: hand shape, palm orientation, location, movement, and facial expressions. In ASL, hand shapes follow a system like fingerspelling in English. Palm orientation has more variation. The location of signs is more diverse, even around the body. Movement tends to be more dynamic. Additionally, facial expressions in ASL are more expressive and often involve clearer, more pronounced facial cues.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the sign language features used by Hong Hee-Joo in the Korean drama "When The Phone Rings," based on William Stokoe's five-parameter theory (1960). The findings confirmed that the character consistently uses all five parameters, though the frequency varies significantly across the series. Data analysis revealed that the distribution of these features is most pronounced in Episodes 01 and 08. Specifically, Episode 01 showed a high density of handshape features, accounting for 72% of the linguistic markers in that segment. Meanwhile, Episode 08 emerged as a critical point of analysis, accounting for 41% of total gestures, with palm orientation (35%) and facial expressions (23%) dominating. Additionally, Episode 04 also showed significant usage, contributing to the overall 29% frequency observed in the early half of the drama.

The research also identified key differences between KSL and ASL, underscoring the importance of cultural context in the depiction of sign language. The presence of mixed features suggests possible influence from global sign language exposure, which media creators should consider when portraying Deaf characters. These findings are important for media producers, educators, and disability advocates. As Harrington (2017) notes, authentic sign language and Deaf culture in storytelling can help reduce stigma and promote inclusion. This research advances discussions on Deaf representation in media, encouraging more accurate and inclusive narratives. Future studies should explore different media formats, involve Deaf consultants directly, and assess audience perceptions to broaden the impact (Jan and Pervaiz, 2021).

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, several recommendations are proposed for future research in the field of sign language representation in media. Future studies should move beyond the linguistic analysis of a single character by conducting comparative analyses across multiple drama series or different media formats, such as variety shows and web series, to identify broader patterns in sign language portrayal. Furthermore, it is highly recommended to shift the focus to audience reception studies involving both Deaf and hearing viewers to evaluate how these portrayals affect cultural understanding and public perception. To ensure higher representational accuracy, future researchers and media producers should prioritize direct collaboration with the Deaf community through interviews or by involving Deaf consultants in the creative process. Finally, exploring the stylistic evolution of sign language across an entire season could provide deeper insights into the development of linguistic fluency in fictional storytelling, ultimately fostering more inclusive and authentic narratives in the global media landscape

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