

NATIONAL / SOCIAL ISSUES

Silent heroes: Sign language interpreters give voice to Japan's top government spokesman

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Kohei Ehara sits quietly in the far corner of the spacious conference room in the Prime Minister's Office, largely unnoticed by a group of reporters waiting for Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga to start his daily briefing.

When he is told of Suga's imminent arrival, Ehara stands, stretches his arms momentarily and steps toward the stage as Suga walks in from the other end of the room. He then positions himself right next to Abe's taskmaster as he turns to face the press.

So starts one of the sign language interpreter's most challenging tasks: conveying the words of the government's top spokesman.

"It's a high-pressure but very fulfilling job, interpreting the words of the government for those who cannot hear," he said.

Ehara, 43, is among dozens of professional signers tasked with interpreting Suga's twice-a-day briefings, a job that pushes their skills to the limit.

Before a briefing, "I try to do quick stretching exercises to relax my body, because I sometimes need to move my hands quite fast to keep up with the pace at which the chief Cabinet secretary reads out his statement," he said.

Some might call them unsung heroes, given they are treated as all but invisible by the TV stations, which tend to zero in on Suga.

Unless natural disasters or other emergencies occur, interpreters seldom appear in news footage and their exposure is largely limited to videos of past briefings on the website of the Prime Minister's Office.

Sign language interpretation was added to the chief Cabinet secretary's news conference in March 2011, when a mega-quake, tsunami and three core meltdowns wreaked havoc on the Tohoku region, leaving the government scrambling to ensure those unable to hear would be kept abreast of the situation. Their presence has since become the norm, with sign language interpreters available 24/7 for any emergency that might strike.

Ehara is an industry veteran. His normal gigs include translating for the deaf at hospitals, court trials, municipal offices and corporate meetings. But every two weeks or so he is hired to interpret Suga's news conferences.

Even for experienced signers like Ehara, interpreting for the government spokesman is no cake walk.

The jargon permeating his briefings sometimes leads to an encounter with phrases for which there is no corresponding sign language, forcing him to improvise with *yubimoji* — a form of fingerspelling — to denote, character by character, such terms as “Aegis Ashore,” for example.

The fact Suga’s briefings cover a wide range of topical affairs requires interpreters to scour newspapers and the internet for stories that can prepare them for questions reporters might ask.

“It is imperative we peruse newspapers and closely monitor comments made by the chief Cabinet secretary on a daily basis, because any issue or incident has some necessary background information we need to be aware of beforehand,” says Tomomi Hagino, another sign language interpreter.

Hagino, 36, recalled the dread she felt upon interpreting for Suga for the first time three years ago.

At the time, the mere act of standing side by side with him under the gaze of reporters gave her stage fright, she said. Although now less nervous than before, Hagino says she still hasn’t quite got the hang of the briefings.

“When I interpret at hospitals or something, a deaf client I’m interpreting for is always in the same physical space as I am, which means they can give me instantaneous feedback” if they have trouble understanding, she said.

“But here at the Prime Minister’s Office, I can only address an audience beyond the camera, so I’m constantly left unsure whether my sign language is making perfect sense.”

Simultaneous interpretation is such an exhausting exercise in concentration that Ehara often brings along chocolate so he can take a bite whenever he feels his brain needs a sugar boost.

The form of sign language used for the briefings has a linguistic structure different from Japanese — meaning the interpreters are essentially translating Suga’s words into another language. This is partly why, he says, the signers always work in pairs, allowing one to work for no longer than 10 consecutive minutes before the other takes over to “prevent the quality of our interpretation from deteriorating.”

Of all the briefings Ehara has worked in his eight-year career, few left as lasting an impression as the special news conference held in April to unveil the next imperial era name — Reiwa, meaning “beautiful harmony.”

At that news conference, an incident befell Ehara that threw his profession into the national spotlight.

The controversy broke out when NHK, which was televising it live, accidentally ran an inset of Ehara in the exact spot where Suga held up the calligraphy for the era name, momentarily blocking the much-awaited kanji from view.

That the era name was covered by Ehara’s face the instant Suga unveiled it arguably took some shine off a historic moment. Social media immediately lit up in disbelief and amazement at the glitch.

Ehara said he feared the accident would turn public sentiment against sign language interpreters.

Of all the TV stations that broadcast the news conference, “I think it was NHK alone that devoted a picture-in-picture (format) to us,” he said. “I would consider it very sad if what happened at NHK made other broadcasters think they had made a wise decision by not giving us any coverage.”

Sign language is virtually nonexistent on Japanese television, with an internal affairs ministry survey showing that in fiscal 2017, just 0.1 percent of all airtime used by the five major broadcasters in Tokyo had signers present — although the percentage of subtitled programs rose to 61.4 percent, up 1.9 percent from a year earlier.

Underlying this underrepresentation is the media's misunderstanding of its role in keeping those with impaired hearing involved in society, said Yumi Suzuki, a board member of the Japanese Association of Sign Language Interpreters.

The fact that signers at Suga's briefings rarely make it into the news "shows how little attention broadcasters pay to the existence of sign language interpreters, and attests to their failure to imagine what inconvenience those unable to hear would incur if the chief Cabinet secretary's face monopolized the camera's attention," she said.

Suzuki said the underappreciated nature of the job is particularly evident in their predominantly unstable employment status and the fact they can be denied workers' compensation for injuries caused by their intense hand and arm movements, which strain their necks and shoulders.

A 2015 survey by the National Research Association for Sign Language Interpretation found that 82.1 percent of the 1,099 sign language interpreters employed nationwide in the fields of welfare, health and education are *hiseiki* (nonregular workers).

The government, for its part, claims it is doing what it can to raise public awareness of their presence at Suga's news conferences.

Although they used to stand a good deal away from the spokesman, "we've adjusted their standing position so it's much closer to the chief Cabinet secretary ... they can't get any closer to him now," said Chise Tahara, a Cabinet Secretariat official. "We're hoping this will make it easier for TV stations to include the signers in footage."

Progress might be glacial, but both Ehara and Hagino believe their job can make a difference.

"In the age of digitization, it's true that more and more TV programs are subtitled, but there are certain people among the deaf community who depend primarily on sign language instead of Japanese for communication, and for them, sign language is crucial," Ehara said.

"I believe conducting the chief Cabinet secretary's briefings in the presence of signers is the government's way of saying it is committed to keeping those deaf people informed. I think that's very significant."

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