Head nods are a frequently observed phenomenon by both users of spoken Japanese and Japanese Sign Language (JSL). However, while head nods used in spoken Japanese are a paralinguistic feature, previous sign language studies show that head nods in JSL function as an important linguistic element. Among several functions of head nods, this study investigates the mechanism of head nods as a prosodic marker, occurring at Intonational Phrase (IP) boundaries. Four native Japanese speakers, four native JSL Deaf signers, and three non-native certified JSL interpreters participated in this study, and their use of prosodic head nods were compared regarding the frequency of occurrence at IP boundaries and the timing of the head nod nucleus (the lowest head nod position). The results shows that while the frequency of head nods at IP boundaries shows individual variation among the Japanese speakers, the Deaf JSL signers systematically show prosodic head nods at IP boundaries in a consistently high rate. Also, a different timing of the head nod nucleus is observed between Japanese speakers and JSL signers. A comparative analysis of Deaf JSL signers and non-native JSL interpreters reveals that the use of prosodic head nods by non-native interpreters is not as consistent as that of Deaf native signers, suggesting Japanese head nod behavior may affect JSL interpretation by non-native JSL interpreters to some degree.

Keywords: prosody, head nods, Japanese, Japanese Sign Language, non-native Japanese Sign Language interpreters