

## **Deaf Culture Question of the Week – Jan. 11-15, 2010**

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It is a new year and the beginning of a new decade. My how time flies! Seems only yesterday that we were all concerned about “Y2K.” Maybe some of the readers of Deaf Culture Question of the Week will remember. Would computers suddenly flip out? Would we lose all of our data? Well, as it turned out nothing much happened.

At this same time back in the period of 1999 through 2000 the Deaf community was debating and trying to determine how we should all sign the years 2000 through 2009. As it turned out users of ASL, following the natural morpheme constraints of ASL [Readers of DCQW should know about morpheme constraints] came to the common practice of signing these years with a “double 0 slide” in the middle as in 2 00 1, 2 00 2 and so forth. Initially various proposed ways of signing were put forward from the totally unacceptable 2 + THOUSAND to TWENTY 00, TWENTY 02 etc.

Now as we enter the decade of the teens and the decades and years that will follow, discussion and debate within the Deaf community is raging about how the year 2010 and the years beyond should be signed. But before addressing what seems to be the emerging consensus let me make the following aside to discuss who should decide this.

Who decides what is correct in language use?

“Correctness” in language use is decided by users of the language. Correctness is not decided by fiat of a “Royal Academy of ASL Purity.” Languages grow and evolve through communicative use by persons who are native or near-native in their sense of the language. There are many users of a language who are not all that proficient in the language. I don’t count these persons in my definition of users when discussing who decides what is correct. Naturally we should look to native users when we ask questions about what is correct. But given the nature of ASL as it exists in a predominantly English speaking country we have to also be concerned that even native users of ASL may be influenced in their opinions about what is correct by oppressive forces that surround them. So we should be cautious in any regard. But ultimately it is the users of a language who decide what is acceptable, grammatically correct etc.

There is a tension in all of this business of correctness between two forces. On the one hand there is a “conservative force” which works to slow the pace of change and maintain grammatical correctness, language purity etc. We will call this force “the self-appointed definers of correctness.” Some people have called this force “the language police.” They have a sense of what is correct based on their education and experience with the language in question. English teachers are a good example of this conservative force. There are after all grammar books that “define” what is correct in any language. And there is something to be said for standardization. However, very few users of any language speak, write or sign like the “grammar books” say they should. The only place we see language in practice is through communication and when people communicate the goal is not correctness from some theoretical perspective or defined grammatical perspective. The goal is to be understood and to understand. The visible form of language; communication, is messy. Yet, the conservative force that maintains some notion of “standard” is necessary else we indeed would devolve into a “Tower of Babel”.

On the other hand there is a “creative force.” The creative force exists in all human language users. This force accounts for the constant generational lingo, new words, slang, play on words and signs etc. This creative force is constantly at work to “develop the language.” In a sense it is this creative force that keeps

a language alive. Latin is the ultimate case of the conservative forces overcoming the creative forces. Latin is dead.

So my point in this little diversion is to say that ultimately the users of a language will decide what is correct. (And sometimes what one might predict based on “the rules” won’t be what users ultimately accept as correct.) But, generally speaking, such things as linguistic principles will influence users to come to solutions that work. Solutions that follow the morpheme constraints.

In the meantime, however, as users wrestle with “what is correct” various solutions will be proposed. Usually one solution will win out and become widespread in everyday use. This then will be what users have determined to be correct.

Now back to the current debate among users of ASL. How should the year 2010 and beyond be signed? (Yes I was eventually getting to a question.)

- a. 2 0 10 (Sign the two palm forward, the zero and then the sign 10)
- b. 2 THOUSAND 10 (Sign the two palm forward, then the sign THOUSAND and then the sign 10)
- c. 20 10 (Make the sign 20 and then the sign 10)
- d. 2 0 1 0 (Sign each number separate TWO ZERO ONE ZERO)

Scroll down for the answer to this week’s question.

Answer: “c” - Consensus among users of ASL who have native or native-like sense of the linguistic principles (morpheme constraints) is to sign 20 10; that is TWENTY TEN. But the discussion and debate is currently ongoing. Over time a consensus will develop and the matter will be decided. I wouldn’t say we are at that point yet. See discussion of this at the following websites.

Dr. Lynn Jacobowitz, Professor of ASL at Gallaudet University  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQPryqWI6AM>

Dr. Jacobowitz discussing why 2010 can’t be a “lexicalized fingerspelled loan sign” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OP8xlvoj7Oc>  
First graders at California School for the Deaf at Riverside thinking about and demonstrating how they think 2010 should be signed (cute).  
<http://csdr-cde.ca.gov/2009/12/18/asl-year-2010-1st-grade/>