

Deaf Culture Question of the Week - January 5 - 9, 2009

The letter "e" in the American Sign Language Alphabet is formed with the tips of four fingers resting on top of the thumb. (For any Deaf Culture Question of the Week readers who are not familiar with the American Sign Language Alphabet and the formation of the letter "e" check this website-

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Sign_Language_alphabet)

It is sometimes acceptable to form the letter "e" with the finger tips of two fingers resting on top of the thumb. True or False?

Scroll down for the answer

Answer: True - When the "e" follows a letter like "n" which uses two fingers in the formation. For example when spelling "knee", fluent ASL signers will form the "e" with only two fingers resting on top of the thumb. This is due to a linguistic principle called "assimilation". The formation of letters of the ASL alphabet influence the formation of other letters when fingerspelling is communicated fluently. In this example the preceding "k" and "e" utilize the first two fingers in their production. The "e" following after "n" is influenced in fluent fingerspellers and is formed with only the first two fingers resting on the thumb. Assimilation is a linguistic property of all languages. There are many other examples of assimilation in ASL. The "pronunciation" of signs is also influenced by the signs coming before or after in a signed sentence. These differences due to assimilation are what distinguish "citation forms" of signs from "conversational forms". Citation forms are the "dictionary or formal" production of the sign. The way you might see a sign pictured in a sign language dictionary. The "conversational form" of a sign is the way the sign is produced when surrounded by other signs in conversational discourse. Conversational form is not "sloppy" signing. Conversational form is the way signs are produced in fluent ASL when they are being influenced by linguistic principles like assimilation. Assimilation is a property or principle of all languages. The fact that it occurs in ASL is no surprise since ASL is a natural, human language. For more information about assimilation see this article: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assimilation_\(linguistics\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assimilation_(linguistics)). For a discussion of assimilation in American Sign Language see this article:

http://books.google.com/books?id=mfS3GITLAUMC&pg=PA295&lpg=PA295&dq=assimilation+in+American+sign+language&source=web&ots=QpPfPz1gDx&sig=MI6QhpnaLp_kyMpnkbA0sJpKL0&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=1&ct=result#PPA295,M1