

Deaf Culture Question of the Week – Oct. 19-23, 2009
Bill Newell, Principal Washington School for the Deaf

TYPING, LIKE YOU?

The above sentence is an example of which type of ASL sentence structure?

- a) Rhetorical Question
- b) Yes/No Question
- c) Topic/Comment
- d) Relative clause structure

Scroll down for the answer.

Answer: “c” Topic/comment. One common ASL sentence structure is topic/comment structure. With topic/comment structure a signer first communicates the “topic” or “focus” of the sentence and then uses a predicate phrase to complete the thought (the comment).

This sentence structure is accompanied by non-manual signals which indicate that a topic and a comment are being expressed. The topic portion of the sentence is marked by raised eyebrows and head tilted slightly back and the comment portion of the sentence is marked with the non-manual signals appropriate to the type of sentence being expressed. For example, if the comment portion of the sentence is a statement, then it will be accompanied by affirmative head nod. If the comment portion of the sentence is a yes/no question, then it will be accompanied by yes/no question non-manual signals. There is a slight pause between the topic and the comment portions of the sentence.

In the example above the Object of the sentence “TYPING” is being expressed first with a yes/no question as the comment “LIKE YOU?”

But either the Subject or the Object can be the topic or focus. For example the meaning Mike likes cake. Can be expressed in ASL “CAKE, MIKE LIKES. This focuses on the Object of the sentence CAKE. Or it can be expressed MIKE, LIKES CAKE. This focuses on the Subject of the sentence it is like saying “It is Mike that likes the cake.” Not someone else. Or “Speaking of Mike, he likes cake.” The focus is being drawn to Mike in particular. The meaning is different than the simple declarative sentence MIKE LIKES CAKE. So does Joe like cake and Tom, Dick and Harry. The circumstance doesn’t require me to emphasize Mike for some reason.

If the object is the focus as in CAKE, MIKE LIKES, then it is like saying “Cake (as opposed to pie) is Mike’s favorite.” Or “Speaking of cake, Mike likes it.”

The meaning differences are subtle but real. Topic/comment structure has a specific pragmatic purpose in ASL. Learners of ASL sometimes overuse this structure because they don’t understand its function and purpose in ASL communication. Observe ASL communicators. Every sentence “off their hands” is not a topic/comment sentence but when they use this structure it serves the purpose that I have attempted to explain here. The topic/comment structure puts a focus on either the subject or the object of the sentence because in the communication situation that focus is required.