

Deaf Culture Question of the Week – Dec. 6-10, 2010
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If you haven't taken the opportunity to complete our brief DCQW survey, please do so. It will only take a few minutes and will provide us with valuable feedback. See link at bottom of this week's question.

Which sign below violates rules about how signs can be formed?

- a. WALK
- b. TRY (initialized sign using "T" handshapes)
- c. UGLY
- d. TWINS (initialized sign using "T" handshape)

Scroll down for the answer.

Answer: "b" TRY – You may have picked TRY because it is an initialized sign but that would not be the reason the sign violates a rule about how signs are formed. There are many traditional and fully accepted ASL signs that are initialized signs. (But we will save a discussion of initialized signs for another DCQW). TRY violates a rule about how signs are made called a "morpheme constraint." In the September 21 – 25, 2009 DCQW we explained this particular morpheme constraint. You can look that explanation up here:

<http://www.wsd.wa.gov/deafculture/deafcultureqq09-10-09.aspx>

To review briefly, a morpheme constraint is a linguistic rule that governs how signs may be formed. In other words, which combinations of handshapes, movements, locations and palm orientations are acceptable and which are not. In this case the rule (morpheme constraint) is related to where the eyes focus when viewing signing and which kinds of handshapes may be used depending on whether the sign is produced close to or farther away from the visual center/focus point for viewing signing.

Simply stated (and overly generalized) your eyes should maintain eye contact with the person you are communicating with when signing. The face then is the visual center/focus point for viewing signing. Signs may have more specific or complex handshapes the closer they are performed to the visual center of the signing space.

The initialized version of the sign TRY is performed in neutral space in front of the signer's body. This sign, in its initialized form, uses a "marked handshape;" that is, a T which carries meaning. The handshape is supposed to trigger a specific English word connection in the mind of the viewer of the sign. For this reason it would require the viewer of the signing to focus his/her eyes on the sign itself to see the specific handshape being incorporated into the sign. The formation of this sign violates the "morpheme constraint" that signs performed away from the visual center of the signing space will have basic, unmarked handshapes and signs that are performed in and around the face may have more marked handshapes. The traditional sign "TO-PUT-FORTH-EFFORT" is performed with unmarked, closed-fist handshapes.

"Wait a minute!" you may protest. "I answered 'd' TWINS. That is an initialized sign too. Yes TWINS is an initialized sign and there is a more traditional form of this sign using a "V" or "TWO" handshape. But the initialized form, TWINS doesn't violate the morpheme constraint. It uses a "marked handshape" within the visual center of the signing space. The initialized "T" handshape is visible to viewers. It is therefore an "acceptable" sign according to the morpheme constraints of ASL. It may be unacceptable (in some signers' minds) for other reasons. Some signers may have a general aversion to "initialized signs" despite using them frequently in their own signing. (But let's leave a discussion of "initialized signs" for another day).

Finally, to hopefully clarify this morpheme constraint I included the signs UGLY and WALK in the answer choices. UGLY is a sign with a complex combination of two handshapes and a movement across the face, under the nose. This sign

illustrates the morpheme constraint clearly. It is a complex movement with two handshapes embedded during the formation of the sign. It is acceptable according to the morpheme constraint because this complex sign is performed within the visual center of the signing space. The sign WALK on the other hand is performed in approximately the same location as “TRY” and uses basic “flat hand/B handshapes”. It also conforms to the morpheme constraint that requires basic, unmarked handshapes for signs performed away from the visual center of the signing space.

Please take a few minutes to complete the DCQW Survey:

DCQW has been published weekly during the school year since January 2008. We want to collect information about who reads DCQW, how you use it (which how is it?), which kinds of questions you like best, etc. We created a short survey to collect information. It is completely anonymous. Please take a few moments to complete our survey. Your feedback will be greatly appreciated.

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/L7RQNVX>

Note: All previous issues of DCQW are archived at the Washington School for the Deaf website: www.wsd.wa.gov