

Deaf Culture Question of the Week – Dec. 7-11, 2009

Bill Newell, Principal Washington School for the Deaf

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

- a. ROUTINE
- b. TOTAL-COMMUNICATION
- c. SIGNING
- d. EXCITING

Scroll down for the answer.

Answer: "b" TOTAL-COMMUNICATION - This sign commonly produced with a T and a C handshape moving back and forth in front of the lower face (similar to the movement for "TO-CONVERSE") is technically a violation of the rules for how signs are made. These are called "morpheme constraints." In September a Deaf Culture Question of the Week dealt with another morpheme constraint related to ASL. In that question we examined the visual center of the signing space and marked and unmarked handshapes. You will find this question in the archive section of the Deaf Culture Question of the Week, September 21 - 25, 2009.

Recall that morpheme constraints are common to all languages. These rules govern how the words of a language may be formed. For example, in English words must have at least one vowel sound (a, e, i, o, u). The way sounds are put together and which sounds are allowed to follow one another in a spoken language are the morpheme constraints associated with spoken languages. Signed languages are no different. They also have morpheme constraints. How the handshapes, movements, locations, and palm orientations that make up every sign may be put together are morpheme constraints as well.

In ASL when two hands are moving in a sign they will have the same handshape. This is a morpheme constraint of ASL. TOTAL-COMMUNICATION is an invented sign deriving from the SEE systems that developed in the 1970s. In inventing this sign the creators of SEE sign language systems were using a principle called "initialization" where they used the first letter of English words and combined it with a traditional sign movement (in this case TO-CONVERSE). They created signs with the intention of representing specific English words. TOTAL-COMMUNICATION is an example of this type of SEE sign. The sign, however, violates the morpheme constraint; when two hands are moving they have the same handshape. By the way, SIM-COM with an S and a C handshape also violates this principle of how natural ASL signs are formed.