

Deaf Culture Question of the Week - Feb. 8-12, 2010

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"Deaf people can do everything except hear."

Many readers of Deaf Culture Question of the Week are probably familiar with that famous expression by I. King Jordan, past president of Gallaudet University. Two weeks ago in DCQW the convention related to writing about people who do not hear using either a capital "D" Deaf or a lower case "d" deaf was explained. To review, Deaf with a capital "D" means "identifying with and belonging to a linguistic and cultural minority group. Lower case "d" deaf refers to the condition of hearing loss. So when one writes "deaf person/people" it means a person who has a hearing loss. And when one writes "Deaf person/people" it means a person belonging to and identifying with Deaf culture.

So now to the question of the week.

Let's change the quotation just a little. Suppose we add an "And,... as the first word of the sentence. When you read that sentence which meaning do you attach to it?

- a. And, Deaf people can do everything except hear. (An affirmation that people belonging and identifying with Deaf culture can succeed.)
- b. And, deaf people can do everything except hear. (An affirmation that people belonging to a disability group can succeed.)

Go to the bottom of the page for the answer.

Answer: This exercise shows that the meanings of things are socially constructed. Each individual interprets what they read, hear or see based on their life experiences, background knowledge, values and perceptions. Possibly a Deaf Culture Question of the Week reader who is Deaf (identifies with Deaf culture and uses American Sign Language) will interpret I. King Jordan's quotation as an affirmation of Deaf culture. Possibly a reader who considers him/herself hearing impaired (deaf and belonging to a disability group) will interpret the quotation as an affirmation that people challenged by the disability of deafness can overcome these challenges. Hearing parents, friends, allies, and those people who claim the privilege of working with d/Deaf people will each have their own interpretation. We cannot really know what I. King Jordan meant to communicate. What do you think he meant?

Which meaning do you think I. King Jordan had in mind when he said "Deaf people can do everything except hear!" We can't tell because the rules of capitalization in English require the first word of a sentence to start with a capital letter.

There is another possibility. The convention in the answer d/Deaf would cover both meanings. But we still don't know what I. King Jordan actually intended.