

Deaf Culture Question of the Week – Mar. 22 – 26, 2010

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In ASL how many signs are used to express the subject of this sentence?

“The two of us went to the store.” (For the grammatically challenged the subject of the sentence is in bold print.)

- a. One sign
- b. Two signs
- c. Three signs
- d. Four signs

Go to the bottom of this message for the answer.

Answer: “a” One sign. Hopefully for most DCQW readers this was an easy one. In ASL these pronouns are in a category called “dual pronouns” which means that the pronoun expresses more than one person. In this case, two people. Pronouns in this category can express multiples greater than two; for example, the three of us, the four of us, the five of us etc.

In the case above, “the two of us,” is expressed with one sign which involves the “two handshape moved back and forth between the two people referenced”. (A picture is included in the attached document.)

This DCQW may have been relatively easy but why ASL has developed to include “dual pronouns” may be more fascinating to readers.

Efficiency Principle of Languages

A universal property of human languages is that they develop to be efficient. This is a very complex topic but the general idea is that all human languages are generated from the same human cognitive capacity for language and share universal properties. One of these properties is to be efficient. This principle probably accounts for the “short cuts” that appear in languages like contractions in English (did not becomes didn’t etc.) “Didn’t” is more efficient than “did not” although some circumstances or pragmatic contexts would require “did not” and others “didn’t.” This is just one example in English.

So what does this have to do with ASL?

ASL is a natural human language and so we would expect to see these universal properties of human language at work in ASL as well. Using the number handshape with the movement between two points of reference, “you and me,” is more efficient; certainly more efficient than signing each concept individually. The grammatical principle of including the number handshape on a basic sign is called “Number Incorporation.” It appears in the pronoun system in these “dual pronouns” and it appears in other places in ASL, for example, when expressing time; TWO-WEEKS, THREE-WEEKS, THREE-O’CLOCK. When expressing age; AGE-TWO, AGE-THREE etc.

The ability to incorporate the number within one sign creates a sign with complex meaning. It expresses more than one concept, “how many,” and the noun, simultaneously and it does this because it can (number handshapes can be added within a sign) and because languages tend to be efficient in how they express ideas.

Pretty cool, huh?



WE-2