

Deaf Culture Question of the Week - April 27 - May 1, 2009

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An ASL grammar question this week....

In English to change a verb like "to eat" to a continuous, ongoing activity we add the ending "ing". Therefore, "eat" becomes "eating." "Write" becomes "writing." "Think" becomes "thinking." How is this same change in meaning expressed in ASL?

- a. Add a small outward movement of an "I handshape" that means "ing".
- b. Change the movement of the sign to repeating, small circular movements
- c. ASL doesn't really show the difference in meaning in any way. You just know that's what the person meant to say from the context
- d. Fingerspell I-N-G after you make the sign

Scroll down for the answer.

Answer: "b" Change the movement of the sign to repeated, small circular movement.

English has a grammatical rule for changing the meaning of verbs to show continuous action. For example to show that continuous, ongoing activity

in English an "ing" is added to verbs. In English when we read a word with an "ing" ending we know it means "ongoing, continuous action." When "ing" is added to verbs we know it always means "ongoing, continuous activity."

ASL also has a rule for expressing this same meaning. But instead of adding an "ing" ending, in ASL the movement of the sign changes from a single movement to repeated small circular movements. Therefore, "EAT" becomes "EATING" by changing the movement to small, circular movement of the sign EAT at the mouth. WRITE becomes WRITING by changing the movement to small, circular movements of the sign WRITE. This change is a regular rule of ASL grammar. When signers see this movement change they understand the meaning of "ongoing, continuous action." They understand the same thing that English speakers understand when they hear or read the "ing" ending.

There are many other movement modifications that can occur on signs that signal differences in meaning. There are movement changes that can indicate "over and over again," "for a prolonged period," "regularly," and many others. These changes are too complex to describe here but have been studied by linguists.

Here is a great CD program that shows examples of how signs are modified in ASL sentences to show various meanings. It is called ASL Video Dictionary and Inflectional Guide

http://www.harriscomm.com/catalog/product_info.php?products_id=17335