

## Deaf Culture Question of the Week – May 10 – 14, 2010

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No question this week.

### A Discussion of Metaphor in American Sign Language

Before the linguistic research of Bill Stokoe and others demonstrating clearly that the signing of Deaf people was language, many people in Deaf Education believed that “sign language was concrete and unable to express abstract ideas.” Of course nothing can be further from the truth. ASL is a complete, natural language with the same capability as any human language to express the human experience.

Recently I have been having discussions with some colleagues at WSD about occurrences of metaphor in ASL.

Metaphor is defined as the substitution of one idea or object with another, used to assist expression or understanding. When language is used in a clever, novel, or unconventional way to illustrate a point or idea a metaphor is created. Language users are constantly creating metaphors. “A blanket of snow” is a metaphor. The name of the famous Microsoft operating system, “Windows” is a metaphor. “Boiling mad” is a metaphor. The emotion of anger can’t literally “boil” but the picture created represents the feeling well.

Does ASL contain metaphors? Indeed it does. Representation of the idea that a person is witty or sharp-minded places the sign that means “glistening” on the area of the forehead. Of course the mind doesn’t glisten. On second thought maybe it does if we could see MRI images of the neural-synapses firing when someone has a thought. But nevertheless the metaphorical use of the sign TO-GLISTEN in the location of the forehead was created and used long before we had MRI images.

Another mind-related metaphor in ASL is THINK-HEARING. The sign which means to speak is moved to the forehead. This metaphor is used in a negative, derogatory way to indicate that a deaf person is violating Deaf cultural norms.

We see a metaphorical representation in the sign EXPERINCING-ANGER-OVER-PERIOD-OF-TIME. This sign is produced with the dominant hand and the non-dominant hand signing “TO-BOIL” at the abdomen. We see this same metaphor in English as “boiling or simmering” anger.

There are many metaphors in ASL but finally I want to relate a metaphor I observed in one of our WSD classrooms on Friday. The teacher was reviewing test-taking strategies with middle school students. They were being prepared to take state tests. As the

teacher focused on each of the strategies for example relaxing, breathing, reading carefully she would ask students to explain in their own words what the strategy meant. She came to “use your background knowledge.” A student’s hand shot up (by the way “shot up” is a metaphor). The student explained that using background knowledge meant that you refer to stuff you have filed in your brain from your experiences and past learning. In the course of her explanation she literally signed with flat-hand classifier at the top of her head the concept of “a file card system in her brain.” She pulled out a file card stored in her brain and lowered it in front of her face to “read” what was on the card. She pulled out another card from the top of her head and read another one of her “stored files.” This student clearly understood that background information was stored in her memory. She was using a metaphorical representation of memory files; quite a sophisticated understanding of memory and a clever, metaphorical representation of the idea.

There is a growing body of research on metaphor in ASL. The books and articles are very technical and I don’t necessarily recommend them unless you have background in linguistics but I point them out here to indicate that quite a bit of sophisticated research continues to occur with ASL.

Metaphor in American Sign Language

<http://gupress.gallaudet.edu/MASL.html>

Language from the Body: Iconicity and Metaphor in American Sign Language

<http://www.amazon.com/Language-Body-Iconicity-Metaphor-American/dp/0521770629>

Think about metaphor and observe ASL. Maybe you will see a metaphor being created.