

## Deaf Culture Question of the Week - May 11-15, 2009

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An ASL grammar question this week... How is the following idea expressed in ASL?

I saw a cat sitting on a fence yesterday.

- a. ME SEE CAT SIT ON FENCE YESTERDAY.
- b. FENCE CAT YESTERDAY SEE ME CL:bent-V-on-CL:4.
- c. YESTERDAY ME SEE FENCE CAT CL:bent-V-on-CL:4.
- d. YESTERDAY FENCE ME SEE CAT CL:bent-V-on-CL:4.

Scroll down for the answer.

Answer: "c" - There are several ASL grammar rules influencing the order of this sentence.

Time-Tense: ASL generally places time signs like YESTERDAY, TODAY, TOMORROW first in a sentence. These signs clarify the time or tense of the sentence. It is clear that this is a past event that happened specifically yesterday. Verbs in ASL are not modified for tense.

After time is established then the actors and actions are communicated. In this case the signer is reporting that he/she saw something - ME SEE

Finally what was seen is reported. The signer saw a cat sitting on a fence. To express this the signer must first establish the object of the action "a fence." Next the signer tells us the subject of the action "a cat" and finally tells us the relationship of the subject to the object using a classifier construction - "small animal classifier (bent V) sitting atop classifier representing "the fence". This piece of the sentence represents Object-Subject-Verb word order. It also follows a general principle of ASL that organizes ideas from "general to specific." The fence is there before the cat sits on it. The fence is the place. It is the background, the location where the action occurs. ASL generally establishes place before telling what happens or happened in that place. So in this case the FENCE (the place) is signed then the subject CAT is signed, then finally the verb is signed. The classifier construction is the verb. The classifier expresses the "cat sitting on the fence" which is a verb (actually a predicate phrase).

Think about it this way, if you were going to draw a picture of "a cat sitting on a fence." Which part of the picture would you draw first? Of course you would draw the fence first. It is very unlikely that you would draw a cat in mid air and then try to draw the fence underneath the cat. Artists when they draw generally also start with the background (the scenery, the place), then they fill in the details (the subject). ASL is based on vision and so it makes sense that the grammatical organization of ASL would follow principles similar to the visual medium of art.

Now let's see if any of this explanation made any sense. How would the following expression be signed in ASL?

"A bird is sitting on a telephone line."

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