

Deaf Culture Question of the Week – Sept. 27 – Oct. 1, 2010
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How are signs created?

- a. The Committee on the Purity of American Sign Language headquartered at Gallaudet University creates new signs
- b. The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) has a committee that creates new signs because educational interpreters need many signs to interpret technical topics in schools
- c. Most new signs come from the Signing Exact English authors who change traditional signs by using the first letter of the English word for the handshape of the sign
- d. ASL and other sign languages have productive processes which signers use naturally to capture meanings that need to be expressed.

Scroll down for the answer.

Answer: “d” – ASL and other natural sign languages use productive processes of the language to create signs for concepts that need to be expressed. Native signers like native users of any language develop a sense for acceptable combinations of the productive properties of the language that create words or signs. In English for example native speakers know that words need to be a combination of vowels (a, e, i, o, u) and consonants (b, c, d, f... and so forth). Native English speakers will know that “dab”, “dub”, and “dib” are words or possible words in English. These are words or possible words because they have a correct combination of consonants and vowel sounds. Combinations like “dfc” or “bgk” are recognized by English speakers as unacceptable in English. The rules that govern how the sounds of a language may be combined and may not be combined to form words are called morpheme constraints. A morpheme constraint in English requires that words have at least one vowel sound and that the vowel sound occur in certain positions in words.

This same principle holds for sign languages like ASL. Native users of ASL understand how handshapes, movements, locations and palm-orientations may be combined to form signs. They understand that when two hands move in forming a sign that they both have the same handshape. Think about the sign for “signing” or for “walking” or for “shoes”. Both hands move in the formation and both hands have the same shape. This is one of the morpheme constraints of sign languages. There are other morpheme constraints (rules about how the parts of signs may and may not be combined). For this purpose it is enough to understand that morpheme constraints govern acceptable and unacceptable combinations of the parts of signs and that native signers develop a natural sense of these rules. When there is need to express a concept and a signer “invents” a unique, new sign for this concept, if they have a native sense for how sign language works their “new sign” will likely fit the morpheme constraint rules.

Underlying the process for creating new signs in ASL is the productive system of classifiers. Classifiers are handshapes that are used to represent aspects of the real world. For example “flatness” – the “B-handshape” represents the idea of flatness. We see this representation of meaning in signs like WALK, BOOK, and WALL. The “A-prime handshape” is used to represent “object in a location”. We see this meaning expressed in signs like “ESTABLISH”, “TOGETHER”, “BEHIND”, and “AHEAD-OF”. Often new signs are generated from the productive use of classifiers.

An important take away from this DCQW is to understand that signs are not created (most naturally) by “a committee”. And, there is no Committee on the Purity of the American Sign Language sitting in a room somewhere determining what sign language will be like. The users of any language determine what is acceptable and unacceptable in the language and the users of ASL who have a native sense of the language will have a natural sense of acceptable and unacceptable combinations of the parts that make up every sign. Most of these native users of ASL will not even know they have this sense just like native speakers of English don’t realize they have developed a sense for what is acceptable and unacceptable as sound combinations that make words.

Fascinating huh?