

Deaf Culture Question of the Week – January 23 – 27, 2012
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If you like ASL linguistic questions, very cool DCQW for you this week.

Which ASL verbs below are “Subject/Object Incorporating Verbs”?

- a) ***To-think***
- b) ***To-meet***
- c) ***To-give***
- d) ***To-live***

Scroll to the bottom for the answer

Answer “b” and “c” – ***To-meet*** and ***to-give*** are both “subject/object incorporating verbs.” This means that “who meets” or “who gives” (the subjects of the sentences) and “whom someone meets” and “to whom something is given” (the objects of the meeting and giving) are expressed in the location of the signer’s hands in relation to one another and the movements of the hands. For example, in the sentence “I meet you.” the dominant hand is held closer to the signer’s chest and moves toward the non-dominant hand held in front of the signer and facing toward the signer. The subject and the object are clear because the position and movement of the hands show who met whom. The same is true for the sign “***to-give***” and many other subject/object incorporating verbs including, for example, ***to-look-at*** and ***to-help***.

ASL is classified as a polysynthetic language. In *Breaking Through the Culture of Silence* (1989) linguist Sherman Wilcox says this about ASL.

[ASL] is not English; it has its own phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics. [...] Unlike English, ASL is a polysynthetic language. Words in ASL are very different from words in English. Words in ASL can be verbs that incorporate subjects and objects within themselves, while presenting also complex adverbial, temporal, and other information. (Cited from: *Breaking Through the Culture of Silence* (1989), pp. 183-84)

The “words” of polysynthetic languages are more complex than the “words” of non-polysynthetic languages. Each word has multiple morphemes. Recall from

previous questions we have considered that a morpheme is a “unit of meaning.” So in polysynthetic languages a single word can express multiple meanings. A single sign-word in ASL can include subject/object information, as in the examples we have considered here, as well as adverbial and temporal information conveyed by the manner of movement and non-manual facial expressions that accompany the sign. Because signers have access to two hands, arms and shoulders and their faces a single sign can become more complex through these elements of articulation working simultaneously. Pretty cool, huh?

Think about the implications of this for our students. When they are using ASL in the ways described here they are creating complex meaning structures as they use their ASL in social and academic communication. They can express for example that “The girl secretly handed her friend the note in class.” with one sign. [Yes, given that the context of the classroom setting, the note and the two girls had been previously established in the narrative, the whole sentence could be expressed with a polysynthetic verb sign “*second-person-hand-to-third-person-secretly*.” I’m sure most readers can picture that sign being performed].

Students must be explicitly shown how ASL expresses meanings with these polysynthetic sign-words and how English expresses the same meaning using non-polysynthetic words. They must be helped to analyze their own use of ASL. Helped to recognize that who did what to whom (the subjects and the objects) and how it was done (the adverbs) are all contained in the one sign-word. Students must learn that “secretly” is being expressed by the manner of their sign movement, where their non-dominant hand is being held while they execute the “handing-off” and the non-manual signals they are performing with their face and the turning of their body slightly to “hide” the action. All of these elements of the sign production are carrying meaning that students must become conscious of and must be helped to understand the meanings that are attached to these elements of a the very complex, polysynthetic sentence they have expressed. This is the reason why students must frequently be videotaping themselves and with guided participation with their teachers be brought to these understandings of their own sign production and how it translates to English.

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