

Deaf Culture Question of the Week – April 16-20, 2012
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Just when we think we understand something, they go changing it. If I say “classifier” what’s the first thing that pops into your head?

Wrong! Well, sort of....

“A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”

Get where I’m going here?

Has Bill gone completely bonkers?

Okay, I give up... Here is the Deaf Culture Question of the Week.

What is the new name linguists give to ASL classifier predicates?

- a) Indicating Verbs
- b) Plain Verbs
- c) Locative Verbs
- d) Depicting Verbs

Answer: “d” – Depicting Verbs. The study of ASL as a language began with the ground breaking work of Dr. William Stokoe in the early and mid 1960s. Following in his footsteps many linguists took up the fascinating idea that the signing of Deaf people is language occurring in a completely different modality than most languages. ASL and other sign languages used by Deaf people all over the world are expressed by the hands, face and body and received by the eyes. This is unlike other languages and it has fascinated linguists to try to discover the similarities and differences that the different modalities of expression and reception have on the grammar of ASL.

In the early days of the study of ASL linguistics the effort was to show that ASL possessed the same fundamental properties as spoken languages. There was strong opposition to the acceptance of the idea that ASL was even a language. Linguists were showing that ASL was a language because it shared many of the same linguistic forms as spoken languages. One of these was classifier predicates. The

history of this is worth quoting from the textbook, *Linguistics of American Sign Language* (2011).

“In the late 1970s the term classifiers was introduced to describe structures noticed in spoken languages. The definition and one proposed classifier type (predicate classifiers) introduced by Allan (1977) seemed to help explain some structures found in ASL. Sign language linguist adopted the term classifier predicate to describe certain types of signs in ASL... By the mid-1990s spoken language researchers had significantly redefined classifiers in spoken languages based on analysis of many languages. The new definition proposed by Grinevald (1996) no longer adequately described the structures found in ASL, especially signs that express motion, location, handling, and description. Sign language researchers have proposed several labels for describing these types of signs: polycomponential verbs, polymorphemic verbs, and depicting verbs. We have selected depicting verbs as this seems to offer the best description of how these signs function.” (Cited from: Valli, Lucas, Mulrooney, and Villanueva, *Linguistics of American Sign Language: An Introduction*, Fifth Edition, 2011, p. 139)

The above shows that the linguistic study of all languages is a dynamic process. Our understanding of ASL grows deeper and the terminology used to describe grammatical principles of ASL changes. The change from classifier predicates to depicting verbs is one such change.

Is this just a new name for the same thing?

Well, yes and no. It depends on how you understood what classifiers were. The word “depicting” means “showing” and if you understood that predicate classifiers were used to show the actions or states of being of people and things with your hands, face and body then you understood what classifier predicates were and you now understand depicting verbs. Congratulations! Of course it is a bit more complex than this but this is the basic idea. When you use your hands, face and body to show what a person or thing is doing you are using a depicting verb. Actually, I like the new label for this property of ASL. It seems that it describes better what signers do to show the actions and states of being of people and things. I urge readers who are interested to read a more complete explanation in the book, *Linguistics of American Sign Language*, published by Gallaudet University Press, 5th edition, 2011.

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