

Deaf Culture Question of the Week – Feb. 14 - 18, 2011
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We still want your input and feedback. If you haven't completed the DCQW survey there is still time to do it. Click on the link to the survey on the bottom of this page. We appreciate your time in completing our short survey. We want to especially hear from our parents.

Another ASL question this week. Two in a row... They are the favorite type according to the survey.

Which of the descriptions below are examples of classifiers? There may be more than one correct answer.

- a. two index finger handshapes come together in neutral space (*to-meet*)
- b. one index finger handshape turns and moves off/away from signer (*he – turned-and-walked-off*)
- c. two “b” handshapes held together in neutral space, palms up open (*to-open-book*)
- d. two “b” handshapes in neutral space both palms down one on top of the other, top hand moves up (*stack-of-flat-objects*)

Scroll down for the answer.

Answer: “b” and “d” - Item choices “a” and “c” represent signs; that is, these handshape, movement, location, palm-orientation configurations are “frozen” vocabulary items in ASL. They can’t be used flexibly. They are comparable to words in English. When a signer uses these signs they mean the same thing every time. These signs “a” and “c” have handshapes that are the same handshape used by the classifier examples. In the case of “a” (*to-meet*) the handshapes are the closed fist with index finger extended on both hands. In the case of “c” (*to-open-book*) the handshapes are the “b” handshape on both hands.

The closed fist with index finger extended and the b-handshape are also used in forming the classifiers in answer choices “b” and “d” but these answer choices are considered classifiers not frozen sign-words.

What’s the difference?

Classifiers are handshape, movement, location and palm orientation configurations that are *not frozen*. A classifier is used flexibly and creatively to form predicate constructions that are unique every time they are used. A classifier must have an antecedent; that is, the person or thing the classifier represents must be named first or be clear from the context of what is being discussed. Standing alone a classifier is vague. In “b” the index-finger handshape is representing a person (man, woman, or child) who is described by the classifier as “walking away from the signer”. To be used correctly the signer would need to tell us it was his/her friend, an unknown boy, his girlfriend, someone. In “d” the b-handshapes are being used to describe an array of some flat objects in a location. What exactly these flat objects are hasn’t been named. To use the classifier correctly the signer would have to name the objects the classifiers represent. For example, the signer could sign *book* and then use the classifier as it is described. This would mean “there are a stack of books. If the signer was walking through Home Depot he or she might use the same “stack of flat objects” classifier to describe pieces of plywood stacked up or a stack of drywall. If the plywood were standing upright as it is sometimes displayed for sale then the orientation of the classifier handshapes would be fingers pointing up and the movement would be sideways instead moving up in space.

How can we tell the difference if something is “a sign” or “a classifier?” The distinction is not based on the handshape alone. After all handshapes are a part of signs as well as classifiers. You know it is a classifier if it is “standing in/representing” something and it is “showing how this something or someone looks, acts, behaves, etc.” and you can “use the classifier to represent a number of different people, places, things that share a common characteristic (tall, thin things; flat things, things that are round in shape, things that occupy space etc.).”

There are many different kinds of classifiers. In future DCQW we will explore some of these different types.

Please take a few minutes to complete the DCQW Survey:

DCQW has been published weekly during the school year since January 2008. We want to collect information about who reads DCQW, how you use it, which kinds of questions you like best, etc. We created a short survey to collect information. It is completely anonymous. Please take a few moments to complete our survey. Your feedback will be greatly appreciated.

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/L7RQNVX>

Note: All previous issues of DCQW are archived at the Washington School for the Deaf website: www.wsd.wa.gov