

The difference between ASL and English signs

LEARNING TIPS | Tuesday, September 7, 2010

BY JOHN MILLER

One question many new signers ask me is: "What is the difference between ASL signs and English signs?" and "What does it mean to have an initialized sign?" These are two really good questions. It is important to understand the difference, particularly when signing to a member of the Deaf community.

Some background information

You may have noticed that sometimes people are referred to as deaf (little d) and other times as Deaf (big D). This is done for a specific purpose. People that are deaf have partial or complete hearing loss. Deaf (big D) people are not just deaf by way of auditory definition, but culturally as well. They are usually born deaf. They don't normally use their voice when they sign. Many of them may also choose not to use hearing aides, cochlear implants or any other sound enhancing devices, even if they may get hearing benefit from them. They instead choose to use sign language as their primary mode of communication. Through sign they utilize interpreters in order to communicate with the hearing world.

Most deaf people; whether big D or little d, do NOT like to be referred to as Hearing Impaired. Instead they want to be identified as Deaf or Hard of Hearing, depending on their degree of hearing loss.

I give you this brief history just to give you some background before answering the ASL versus English question. This topic can become very involved and very political and we at Signing Savvy are not wanting to lose our focus of being a sign language resource for all, so we choose normally not to get too involved in these kinds of debates.

ASL signs vs. English signs

ASL (American Sign Language) is a complete, unique language developed by deaf people, for deaf people and is used in its purest form by people who are Deaf. Being its own language, it not only has its own vocabulary, but also its own grammar that differs from English.

Signed Exact English is a system to communicate in English through signs and fingerspelling.

Signed Exact English, in most cases, uses English grammar (that is, you are signing English). The vocabulary is a combination of ASL signs, modified ASL signs, or unique English signs.

The reason English signs often vary from ASL is to add clarity to the sign so that the exact English word meant for the conversation is understood. One example would be the sign for CAR. In ASL, the sign for **CAR** is two A hands gesturing like they are holding onto and moving a steering wheel. In ASL, this sign is used for any automobile you

control with a steering wheel, including a car, truck, bus, van, etc. The English sign for **CAR** is two C hands, one on top of the other, moving away from each other. If you wanted to specify what type of car, the hand shape is modified to include the initial of the type of vehicle (c for car, v for van, b for bus, j for jeep, etc.).

This is where the term "*initialized sign*" comes from. You clarify the meaning by initializing the sign with first letter of the intended English word. Therefore, using the English version allows one to specify exactly what is communicated in English. In ASL, you would just use the ASL sign for car and if it was important to clarify the type of vehicle, you would follow the sign with a fingerspelling of the vehicle type (**JEEP**, for example). This is just one example. There are many other examples.

Just as many ASL signs are used in Signed Exact English, members of the big D Deaf camp have accepted some English signs. However, some are still not accepted, and if you use them in your everyday signing, could be frowned upon by the Deaf. It is best to watch and ask if you are in doubt.

Remember that most of the time if the sign is an initialized sign, then it falls under that English category.