**Why don’t deaf people use terms like**

**“Ms.” or “Mister” when addressing people?**

Ch. 112 - For Hearing People Only

*Calling a teacher by his last name is considered rude and inconsiderate in the Hearing culture. My first teaching experience was at Rochester School for the Deaf, and I could not understand why my students would not use “Mister” when addressing me. I was always called “Palmer.” I thought this to be rude and inconsiderate, being naïve of Deaf culture at the time.*

*- Inspired by Carl Palmer, Rochester, NY*

Certain social customs or behaviors considered dispensable in one culture are so much excess baggage in another. In the case of terms of address, hearing people have been using the polite terms “Miss,” “Mrs.,” and “Mr.,” for a couple of centuries. “Ms.” is more recent addition, although it’s based on an old usage. Like “Mrs.” and “Miss,” it was originally an abbreviation for “Mistress,” a respectful term of address (back then, at least) and the female counterpart of “Master.” Other common terms are “Doctor,” “Captain,” “Sergeant,” “Reverend,” “Senator,” “President,” and “Your Honor.” In England, you will also find a complex system of terms for the nobility and royalty: “Sir James,” “Lady Sarah,” “Your Grace,” “Your Highness,” and “Your Majesty,” for example. All this protocol can get complicated, which is why we have etiquette books, charts, and guides for travelers. Other cultures have their own standards of protocol. Terms, of course, vary from language to language: *Senorita/Senora/Senor, Fraulein/Frau/Herr, Mademoiselle/Madame/Monsieur, etc.*

Deaf culture dispenses with terms almost completely. Nowhere do you find terms employed in everyday communication. When Jan Jones is introduced to a Deaf group, her name will be spelled out by whoever is introducing her, or she’ll do it herself and show her name sign, (ex. “J” on her left wrist, where she wears a gold wristwatch). She will never be addressed as “Ms. Jones,” just by her name sign or a fingerspelled J-A-N or J-O-N-E-S.

This isn’t rude or thoughtless, just practical. Terms like “Mr.” and “Ms.” serve nicely for hearing communication, but they’re absolutely superfluous in ASL conversation. For one thing, they’d need to be spelled out every time they’re used, which wastes time and energy. Sign language is an admirably concise form of communication. True, ASL users have devised a system of abbreviations, but they have found it easier not to bother using these terms at all. There are, of course, signs for “lady,” “gentlemen,” “captain,” “doctor,” “president,” “judge,” and “police,” for example, but these are used descriptively like other occupational nouns for example, “teacher,” “superintendent/boss,” or “performer.” There is no ASL equivalent to “Ms.” or “Mr.” If a Deaf ASL user wanted to specify whether a certain person is a single or married adult, descriptions, not terms, are used:

“MAN, NAME S-A-M S-M-I-T-H, AROUND AGE-35, MARRIED…”

Hearing persons use terms to indicate respect or, more commonly, as a matter of automatic everyday politeness (Ma’am and Sir). How, then do deaf people show respect if they don’t use the common terms of politeness that hearing society takes for granted? They do so physically – through touching, patting, hugging. Bonnie Brown, who’s introducing Jack White, gives him a friendly shoulder –pat or a one-armed hug. Both communicate: “This person is esteemed/liked by me.” Needless to say these usages are more or less nonstandard (or sometimes seen as taboo) in some hearing societies, where touching and physical contact are restricted.

There are two exceptions to the no-term rule in Deaf culture: onstage and at professional meetings. During staged performances and events, the master or mistress of ceremonies will formally address the audience and the guests/performers: “Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to introduce Jan Jones, a lady of accomplishment…” At professional meetings, where the rules of parliamentary procedure are followed, the presiding speaker will use similarly formal terms: “Present White, Vice President Black, and members of the Board I wish to introduce a gentleman, Sam Smith, whom some of you have already met…”

In written communication, of course, terms of address *are* used: “Dear Ms. White…” or “Please forgive me Mrs. Deaf people generally know how to negotiate them.

If you’re baffled by Deaf people’s apparent rudeness in the matter of terms of address, and their stubborn refusal to stop calling you by your first name or last name only, take heart. If Deaf people *really* want to be rude and inconsiderate, they’ll refuse to communicate with you at all. Pay attention to the substance, not the apparent lack of social niceties.

**Why don’t deaf people use terms like**

**“Ms.” or “Mister” when addressing people?**

**Questions**

Vocabulary

*Find this word in the article. Read the sentence carefully.*

*(1) Circle the words that are synonyms (2) cross-out the words that are antonyms.*

1. Superfluous

excessive needed important

dispensable extravagant necessary

1. Presiding

controlling neglecting

opposing directing

1. Niceties

impropriety decorum indecency

courtesy rudeness etiquette

Multiple Choice

1. Terms of address such as “Mr.” and “Ms.”
   1. Ought to be abolished completely, as they’re superfluous
   2. Should be employed more frequently, since they enhance social graces.
   3. Have never gained much currency in ASL, since they are considered dispensable.
   4. Are best employed in written, not personal, communications.
2. What terms are least likely to be used in ASL?
   1. Ma’am, sir, mister, and missus
   2. Man, professional, worker, single, engaged
   3. Career woman, teacher, professor
   4. Gentleman, captain, officer
3. Being called by one’s last name
   1. Is acceptable usage in some cultures and situations
   2. Shouldn’t be construed as an insult in Deaf culture
   3. Can be an insult or taunt in Hearing culture (outside of the military)
   4. Any of the above.

Short Answer

1. Why isn’t the sign “Doctor” – as in person with their doctorate – not used in ASL?
2. What two situations are terms of address used in ASL?

True or False.

\_\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. Terms of address have long been employed as means of preserve social distinction and rank within the Deaf culture.
2. ASL has ways to communicate respect and esteem.
3. Special ASL signs are now used for “Mr.” and “Ms.”
4. Deaf people, when writing letters, usually omit terms of address, because they are not used to this practice.