

Understanding directionality in British Sign Language verbs: Pointing away from the agreement debate

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Indicating verbs in British Sign Language (BSL) and other signed languages can be directed towards locations in space associated with their arguments. This directionality has been widely analysed as a form of person agreement marking (Lillo-Martin & Meier 2011, and Padden 1988), although some typologists have rejected this account (e.g., Corbett 2006). Indicating verbs have been variously analysed as exhibiting canonical agreement (Costello 2016), non-canonical agreement (Lillo-Martin & Meier 2011), semantic agreement (Engberg-Pedersen 1993), or no agreement marking at all (Liddell 2003, and Schembri et al. 2018, and Wilcox & Occhino 2016). Judgements elicited from life-long signers appeared to suggest that such directionality was obligatory for the marking of object arguments in BSL (e.g., Morgan et al. 2006). Corpus-based evidence, however, does not support this claim. Fenlon et al. (2018) investigated a range of linguistic and social factors associated with 1,436 indicating verb tokens in the BSL Corpus, showing that directionality in BSL is not obligatory, and is conditioned by several linguistic factors, such as constructed action, animacy, and co-reference.

In this study, we investigate additional factors that may influence when a sign uses directionality. Using the BSL Corpus indicating verb dataset (Cormier et al. 2015, and Fenlon et al. 2018), this investigation explores the influence of definiteness (cf. Barbera 2015) and variable argument noun phrase presence (cf. Lillo-Martin & Meier 2011).

Preliminary analysis using Rbrul suggests that definiteness is indeed a significant factor, with definite arguments more likely to trigger directionality in indicating verbs than indefinite arguments. Variable argument presence was also important with spatial modification more likely in clauses with null argument expression. We will discuss the relevance of this study for an understanding of variable directionality in indicating verbs and also the notion of agreement in signed languages. Recently, it has become clearer that some of the assumptions about agreement marking even in spoken languages need to be re-examined (Croft 2022, and Kibrik 2019), and that the difference between the different sides of the agreement verb debate may not be as great as previously assumed (Schembri et al. 2018). Like Hou (2022) who has called for new approaches to understand the interplay between the structure and function in directional verbs, we would like to see us move away from the decades-long focus on a purely theoretical agreement debate and towards a more data-driven exploration of the variable use of this key aspect of signed language grammar.

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