

Verb Agreement in Sign Languages and beyond

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Verb agreement in sign languages is known to have properties very different from those of syntactic agreement in spoken languages (Padden 1983, Mathur 2000, Meir 2002). (i) While spoken languages vary from inflectional languages to isolating languages, no mature sign language has been reported to lack verb agreement. (ii) Agreement is observed only with a subset of the verbs in sign languages, and the semantic characteristics of agreeing verbs across sign languages cannot be accidental. (iii) Verbs in sign languages agree with their object rather than with the subject. (iv) There is no indication of involvement of a functional category in verb agreement in sign languages. (v) Verb agreement is realized as the hand(s) aligned in the same direction as the personal pronoun for the referent of the object.

Those properties of sign language agreement can be shown to derive from a phonological system with a constraint against overt syllables and a lexicon with under-specification of phonological features (Kawasaki 2015). The constraint is a realization of a universal tendency in natural language to reduce articulation efforts (Kirchner 2004, Napoli et al. 2015). Its high ranking in sign languages is due to the fact that the memory span in sign languages is shorter because syllables take more time to articulate than syllables in spoken languages (Bellugi & Fischer 1972, Klima & Bellugi 1979). To the extent that this analysis is viable, it shows that sign languages employ the same mechanism as spoken languages do, not only with respect to the computational system in which syntactic objects are created as widely believed among linguists, but also with respect to externalization, where optimal phonetic realization is determined. The present study discusses the necessary and sufficient conditions for development of verb agreement in young sign languages, and explores the range of linguistic phenomena other than verb agreement that the same constraint is responsible for. The phenomena include clipping of compounds and reduction of the perfective marker in Japanese Sign Language (Nihon Shuwa).

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