

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

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There is little consensus in the field about whether signed languages exhibit agreement marking (e.g., Pfau et al., 2018; Schembri et al., 2018), and the literature discussing this spans over two decades (e.g., Liddell, 2000, Lillo-Martin & Meier, 2011). 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 (e.g., Padden, 1988; Lillo-Martin & Meier, 2011), 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, Schembri et al., 2018). There is also little consensus amongst those who reject the agreement analysis, with different approaches to the question of sign, gesture, and the use of space (Liddell, 2003; Wilcox & Cochlin, 2016). Judgements elicited from life-long signers in a number of signed languages appeared to suggest that such directionality was obligatory for the marking of object arguments in BSL (e.g., Morgan et al., 2006) and other signed languages. Work drawing on spontaneous data since 2009 has revealed, however, that there is in fact significant variation in the use of directionality in indicating verbs in some signed languages, and that we do not yet understand all the relevant features related to their usage. Fenlon et al. (2018) investigated a range of linguistic and social factors in 1,436 indicating verb tokens collected from the BSL Corpus. The analysis showed that directionality in BSL is not obligatory (as had also been reported for the related variety, Auslan, de Booneville et al., 2009), and is conditioned by several linguistic factors, such as constructed action (with the presence of constructed action more likely with the use of directionality), animacy (with directionality more likely to be found in clauses with animate arguments) and co-reference (with directionality more often found in clauses which shared the same referent as a previous clause). In this presentation, I investigate additional factors that may influence when a sign uses directionality. Using the BSL Corpus indicating verb dataset, this investigation explores the influence of definiteness and variable argument noun phrase presence. In order to explore whether definite referents might be established with more specific locations in the signing space compared to indefinite referents, as suggested by work on Catalan Sign Language (Barber, 2016), and thus be more likely to trigger indicating verbs being directed towards these locations, the dataset was recoded for the presence of definite or indefinite arguments. The presence of an explicitly expressed argument in the clause may also be a significant factor, something not previously explored in this dataset, despite claims in the literature that null arguments are licenced by verb directionality (Lillo-Martin & Meier, 2011). We also compared the use of directionality in double versus single argument marking verbs. Analysis of the dataset using Brule suggest 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 also found that double-argument marking verbs were more likely to show directionality than those that only mark a single argument. I will discuss the relevance of this study for an understanding of variable directionality in indicating verbs in signed languages, as well as for

the debate about whether directionality is an agreement marking system. Recently, it has become clearer that some of the assumptions about the notion of agreement marking needs to be re-examined (Kibrik, 2018; Croft, 2022), and that the difference between the different sides of the agreement verb debate may not be as great as previously assumed (Schembri, 2018). Like Hou (2022) who has called for new approaches to understand the interplay between the structure and function in directional verbs in American Sign Language, I would like to see us move away from the decades-long focus on the agreement debate and towards more data-driven exploration of the variable use of this key aspects of signed language grammar.