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**Canonical typology of person agreement: Evidence from signed languages**

Signed languages typically have a class of verbs (known as ‘agreement verbs’) which are directed between locations in the signing space associated with the subject and/or object. Thus when the verb ASK in British Sign Language begins at the signer’s chest and ends at a location associated with a non-addressed participant, this means “I ask him/her.” In this paper, we discuss whether the spatial modification of such verbs in signed languages actually represents an example of a person agreement system.

Corbett's (2006) defines canonical agreement as systematic co-variance between a semantic or formal property of a controller element and a formal property of a target element. In the English phrase *Mary laughs*, the person and number features of the controller noun determine the ending -s on the verb. This covariance between controller and target is systematic across the English verbal system. Liddell (2000, 2003, 2007) has argued, however, that in many cases, the direction in which agreement verbs in signed languages actually point seems often to be controlled by shifting spatial properties of the referent rather than by stable formal or semantic features associated with the controller noun phrase.

Many of the responses to Liddell’s work that attempt to defend the agreement analysis do not directly respond to this important point about the relationship between controller and target, but instead point to general similarities with agreement in terms of function (e.g., Emmorey, 2002) or form (e.g., Neidle & Lee, 2006). The observation that examples of agreement verbs follow particular linguistic constraints, differ cross-linguistically, show idiosyncrasies, do not always point clearly, or follow a lengthy maturational time course both in the individual and in the community (Meier, 2002) also do not provide counter-evidence. Some conventional uses of pointing gestures appear to share some of these properties. Also the grammar of particular spoken languages along with co-speech gestures show complex inter-relationships and patterns of development (Nicoladis, 2002; Kita & Ozyurek, 2003; Kendon, 2004). Furthermore, Aronoff et al.’s (2005) claim that alliterative agreement resembles a spoken language equivalent of this system does not address Liddell’s (2000) concern that no phonological model has yet accounted for the use of space in these verbs.

We conclude by suggesting that Liddell’s account dovetails nicely with current work on grammaticalisation, cognitive/functional theories of grammar, and gesture, drawing on evidence from a corpus study of indicating verbs in Australian Sign Language currently in progress. Nevertheless, it is clear that additional linguistic, psycholinguistic and neurolinguistic evidence is required before any definitive conclusions about the nature of agreement verbs (as either a non-canonical form of person agreement, or a typologically unique gestural reference tracking system) can be made. Finally we consider the implications of both of these possibilities for the concept of canonical typology in general.