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Agreement verbs in Icelandic Sign Language (ÍTM)

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Background

- ÍTM (íslenskt táknmál) is the native language of some 250 deaf Icelanders.

- The historical origins of ÍTM are largely unknown but ÍTM is probably about 150 years old.

- There is no geographical variation between speakers but significant variation between age groups with respect to lexicon and grammar.

The tripartite division

- We assume the tripartite classification of verbs in SLs first argued for by Padden (1983/1988), despite criticism of this division (see e.g. Quadros and Quer 2012).

- The tests offered by Padden (1983/1988) and Rathmann and Mathur (2008) to distinguish agreement verbs from spatial verbs hold for ÍTM.

Reciprocal marking

- One of these tests is reciprocal marking which is only possible with agreement verbs:

  (1a) a-GIVE-b/b-GIVE-a

      'They gave something to each other.'

  (1b) a-PUT-b/b-PUT-a

      'I put them in each other´s place.'

Wh-words

Another test concerns wh-words as the GOAL argument in agreement verbs cannot be questioned by WHERE:

(2a) WHO/*WHERE JOHN-i i-GIVE PAPER

'Who/*where did John give paper to?'

(2b) *WHO/WHERE JOHN-i BRING-a PAPER

*Who/where did John bring paper to?

Agreement verbs

- In the first in-depth study of verbs in ÍTM Thorvaldsdóttir (2011) identifies 25 AVs

  – including (only) two backwards agreement verbs (FETCH, TAKE).

- Agreement is in person (first and non-first) and number (singular, dual, multiple and exhaustive).

Agreement features, 1

- The agreement features in ÍTM are expressed in (at least) three ways which are familiar from other SLs:

- 1. By motion from one referential locus to another.

  – Only three AVs in ÍTM express agreement in this way (e.g. HELP).

Agreement features, 2

- 2. By the orientation (facing) of the hands (fingertips directed towards the object locus).
  - Eleven AVs in ÍTM express agreement in this way (e.g. TEACH).

- 3. By motion and orientation.
  - Eleven AVs in ÍTM express agreement in this way (e.g. VISIT).

Signwiki

- Many AVs with first person singular subject and second person singular object can be seen on the new Signwiki page for ÍTM

  – see http://signwiki.is

  – For HELP, TEACH and VISIT, look up the words *hjálpa*, *kenna*, and *heimsókn*.

Two-handed signs

- With two-handed AVs, the order of the hands may be changed as part of expressing agreement features (see Rathmann and Mathur 2008)

- A change in the order of the hands only appears with one verb in ÍTM (VISIT).

Important facts

Agreement verbs in ÍTM show all the basic properties associated with AVs across SLs:

- AVs select two or three arguments.

- AVs agree with subject and object (double agreement) or only with object (single agreement).

- AVs agree with the indirect object of ditransitive verbs (not the direct object).

Agreement patterns, 1

- As in other SLs, there is no plural form for subjects in ÍTM.

- This limits the combinations of features that can be marked in AVs across sign languages (see Mathur and Rathmann 2010):

Agreement patterns

Subject – Object

- (a) 1sg. – 2/3sg. (e.g. *I to you*)
- (b) 2/3sg. – 1sg. (e.g. *you to me*)
- (c) 2/3sg. – 2/3sg. (e.g. *you to him*)

- (d) 1sg. – 2/3pl. (e.g. *I to y'all*)
- (e) 2/3sg. – 1pl. (e.g. *you to us*)
- (f) 2/3sg. – 2/3pl. (e.g. *you to them*)

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Attested patterns

- The following three agreement patterns are found in ÍTM (with the possible exception of the verb REPLY):

- Only singular (a-c) (INVESTIGATE).

- All forms except for first person plural object (a-d, f) (VISIT).

- All forms (a-f) (CRITICIZE).

Hierarchy

- These agreement patterns can be expressed as an implicational hierarchy:

- ÍTM hierarchy: (a,b,c) < (d,f) < (e).

- This is very similar to the implicational hierarchy proposed by Rathmann & Mathur (2005).

Syntax or semantics?

- As in other SLs, the facing of the hands in ÍTM agreement verbs is always in the direction of the object

  - for both regular and backwards agreement verbs

- In that respect, agreement is syntactic in ÍTM as in other SLs that have agreement verbs.

Semantic restrictions

- A thematic approach to agreement (along the lines of Meir 2002) seems appropriate for ÍTM in view of the semantic restrictions on agreement verbs

  – cf. the fact that there are no agreement verbs in ÍTM that have experiencer subjects

- Morever, ÍTM does not have any agreement auxiliary of the sort discussed by Steinbach and Pfau (2007) and others.

Classification of AVs

- Still, agreement verbs in ÍTM do not form a semantically coherent class as they can be divided into three basic classes.

- The core class involves source-goal verbs, i.e. verbs denoting literal or metaphorical transfer (e.g. GIVE, TEACH, SEND, FEED, ANSWER).
  - These verbs only agree with animate DPs.

The other two classes

- Verbs denoting verbal or social interaction (CRITICIZE, TEASE, VISIT, HIT-ON).
  - Some of these verbs may agree with an inanimate object.

- "Iconic" verbs (PUNCH, SHOOT-WITH-A-GUN, VIDEOTAPE; FETCH, TAKE).
  - Some of these verbs employ classifier handshapes as they are derived from spatial verbs.

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