Directionality in British Sign Language is not obligatory: The importance of corpus data when considering “agreement”

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Directional verbs in sign languages
Most known sign languages have directional verbs: a class of verbs that move in space between locations associated with their arguments.

Too opposing views concerning the nature of these verbs
1. These verbs show grammatical agreement with subject/object which is obligatory for the object (Padden 1988, Lillo-Martin & Meier 2011). Cf. subject agreement in Spanish:
   - 1st person: Yo hablo “I speak”
   - 2nd person: Tú hablas “you speak”
   - 3rd person: Él/Ella habla “he/she speaks”

2. These verbs point to their referents – fusion of linguistic +gestural elements (verb+pointing gestures) (Liddell 2003, de Beuzeville et al. 2009)

However, few studies have attempted to understand the factors that underlie modification in these verbs using data from large datasets.

Results
Rate of modification
Directional verbs are not always modified for actor (cf. subject) and undergoer (cf. object) arguments: only 60% and 51% respectively are modified (different from citation form) or congruent (possibly modified but same as citation form & therefore impossible to tell).

Results (cont.)
Linguistic factors (Rbrul analysis)
- Person: 1st person actor arguments favour modification > 2nd/3rd person (p<0.001).
- Number: Singular actor arguments favour modification > plural (p = 0.0053).
- Animacy: Animate arguments favour undergoer modification > locative & inanimate (p<0.001).
- Coreference: Coreference with previous undergoer argument favours modification > change in reference (p = 0.00872).

No other linguistic factors were significant.

Social factors (Rbrul analysis)
No social factors were significant.

Our research questions
- Which of the following linguistic factors underlie modification of directional verbs in BSL?
- Which of the following social factors underlie modification of directional verbs in BSL?
  1. Region, 2. Gender, 3. Age, 4. Native/non native status

Using the BSL Corpus
Data collected from 249 deaf signers from 8 regions across UK (2008-2011) engaged in 4 tasks. This poster focuses on a preliminary analysis of 38 signers (3 regions) involving 651 directional verbs occurring in conversation.

Conclusions
- Low rate of modification suggests directionality is not obligatory, may be due to ongoing grammaticalisation processes (de Beuzeville et al., 2009), although no evidence for language change in our data.
- Singular 1st person arguments favour actor modification, reflecting signer’s body as default initial location for many signs and its association with actor (“body as subject”, cf. Meir et al., 2007).
- Animate arguments (cf. Rathmann & Mathur, 2002) & coreferential arguments favour undergoer modification, consistent with directionality as reference tracking system, particularly for animate referents and undergoers.
- Further analyses will consider the role of constructed action in predicting modification.
- These findings highlight the importance of using corpus data to verify or counter previous claims based on little data.

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