Directional verbs as fusion of linguistic and gestural elements in British Sign Language: a corpus-based study

Directional verbs (‘agreement’ (Padden, 1983)/‘indicating’ verbs (Liddell, 2000)) in sign languages, e.g. GIVE in British Sign Language, can be directed towards locations in space associated with their arguments. Some (Lillo-Martin & Meier, 2011) have argued this modification is fundamentally the same as grammatical agreement in spoken languages, is obligatory (at least for object marking), and is often accompanied by grammatical non-manual markers such as eye-gaze (Neidle et al., 2000). Others (Liddell, 2000) propose this modification is fundamentally different from agreement, representing instead a fusion of linguistic and gestural (specifically pointing) elements.

Here we consider linguistic and social factors in the use of directional verbs in conversation data from the BSL Corpus (Schembri et al., 2013, n=657). Preliminary results reveal that modification of directional verbs occurs for both subject (82%, n=422/516) and object arguments (63%, n=348/549), but not obligatorily for either. Furthermore, 3rd-to-3rd person modification is rare, occurring only 10 times in our data. (Examples of prototypical directional verbs in the literature involve 3rd-to-3rd person modification (e.g. JOHN POINTa MARY POINTb ASKb “John asked Mary”). Additionally, constructed action (i.e. nonmanual enactment/embodiment) co-occurred with 65% of tokens where eye-gaze was directed towards a verbal argument. Statistical analysis revealed that constructed action and also coreference with a previous clause favour object modification (p<0.01).

The rate of modification suggests that directionality in BSL is not obligatory; while this may be attributed to ongoing grammaticalisation processes, no social factors were significant thus no evidence was found of language change across age groups. Instead, our results appear to align with the view that directional verbs represent a fusion of linguistic and gestural elements (de Beuzeville et al., 2009; Liddell, 2000). These findings highlight the importance of using corpus data for (sign) linguistics research, to verify or counter previous claims based on little data.

Word Count: 296

References


