

Sign language agreement

Common ingredients, but unusual recipe

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The sign language phenomenon that some scholars refer to as ‘agreement’ has triggered controversial discussions among sign language linguists. Crucially, it has been argued to display properties that are at odds with the notion of agreement in spoken languages. A thorough theoretical investigation of the phenomenon may thus add to our understanding of the nature and limits of agreement in natural language. We argue against three approaches: (i) previous non-syntactic gesture-based approaches, (ii) hybrid accounts combining syntactic and thematic agreement and (iii) analyses that treat agreement markers as clitics. Instead, we show that sign language agreement is consistently syntactic agreement and that it can be accounted for by means of mechanisms that have been independently proposed for spoken language. We argue that the modality-independent syntactic account proposed in this paper is able to capture the distinction of verb types, the behavior of backwards verbs, and the use of the agreement auxiliary. However, we suggest that the combination of mechanisms is modality-specific, that is, agreement in sign language involves modality-independent ingredients, but uses a modality-specific recipe. It is the very nature of agreement in sign languages, its spatial and gestural properties, that motivates the distinction of verb types and the existence of backwards verbs, and which thus calls for an unusual combination of independently motivated mechanisms.

1. Introduction

Sign language (SL) agreement has intrigued scholars for a long time because it seems to display properties clearly distinct from spoken language agreement (see e.g. Padden 1983, 1988; Janis 1995; Bahan 1996; Keller 1998; Meir 1998, 2002; Mathur 2000; Rathmann & Mathur 2002; Mathur & Rathmann 2012; Lillo-Martin & Meier 2011). What many sign linguists consider an instantiation of agreement involves the spatial modification of verbal signs in the signing space, as will be detailed below. A typologically striking feature of this process is that, across sign languages, not all lexical verbs partake in it in the same way. In addition, various modality-specific properties have been described.

Simplifying somewhat, three different types of approaches to the phenomenon of spatial modification have been offered in the literature. The first account argues that the SL phenomenon commonly described as agreement is actually gestural in nature. It should therefore not be considered as part of the grammar of SLs, and consequently, even the applicability of the term “agreement” is debated. Things are very different in the second approach. According to this influential account, SL agreement is hybrid in the sense that

thematic and grammatical roles determine the surface form of the verb. Consequently, spatial modification is part of the grammar. A third approach offers a purely syntactic analysis and argues that agreement markers are clitics. This means, however, that agreement in sign languages is not syntactic agreement in the strict sense. In Section 3, these three approaches will be discussed in more detail.

In the present paper, we argue for a fourth perspective – and one that is less prominently represented in the literature – by adopting the strong hypothesis that all instances of SL agreement are syntactic in nature. We show that all three approaches – the gestural, the hybrid, and the clitic account – are faced with empirical and theoretical problems, and we demonstrate that a consistently syntactic implementation is possible. It is important to note that our analysis is based on data from German Sign Language (*Deutsche Gebärdensprache* – DGS). Sign languages have been shown to typologically differ from each other in various grammatical domains (Perniss et al. 2007; Zeshan 2008; Vos & Pfau 2015), and it can therefore not be taken for granted that our analysis will be applicable to all sign languages. Yet, given that “the spatial resources available to sign languages yield relative uniformity in the pronominal and agreement systems of sign languages” (Meier 2012: 588), we do assume that our account can be applied to other SLs, at least those that use space in a similar way and to SLs that use auxiliaries to express agreement with plain verbs.¹

Let us stress at the outset that one well-known complexity of SL agreement will be neglected in the present paper: the fact that, at least in some SLs, the overt realization of agreement appears to be optional (see De Beuzeville et al. (2009) for Australian SL; Costello (2015) for Spanish SL; Fenlon et al. (in press) for British SL). In other words, we will detail how the instantiation of agreement can be formally accounted for when it is overtly realized, but we will not seek to explain under which circumstances it can remain unexpressed. For DGS, optionality of agreement has not been investigated in detail yet, and we are therefore not in a position to identify (discourse) factors that potentially determine whether agreement is realized or not.

This paper is organized as follows: In Section 2, we set the stage for the following discussion by sketching the basics of SL agreement. In Section 3, we then turn to previous gestural and grammatical accounts, namely, Liddell’s mental space approach, Meir’s Thematic Structure Agreement account, and Nevins’ clitic analysis, and we outline a number of conceptual and empirical problems that these accounts are faced with. Section 4 introduces our own analysis that is based on a standard Agree system and derives the different instantiations of agreement in DGS by means of differences in verb movement and featural content of functional heads. Crucially, our proposal is strictly syntactic and employs only mechanisms that have been independently motivated based on spoken languages. Our main aim is to show that sign language agreement can be analyzed with

¹ Some of the so-called “village” or “rural” SLs, that is, SLs that emerged in small, and sometimes fairly isolated, communities with an unusually high number of deaf inhabitants, appear to be exceptional in this respect; see Padden et al. (2010), de Vos & Pfau (2015) and Section 5 for discussion.

the same basic ingredients that are used for the analysis of spoken language agreement. However, specific features of sign language agreement might result from a special recipe including modality-specific ingredients such as the gestural origin of agreement, the use of the three-dimensional signing space, and the simultaneous realization of grammatical features. Some of these issues will be briefly addressed in Section 5. Section 6 concludes the paper.

2. Sign language agreement: the basic facts

In most SLs studied to date, discourse referents can be linked to referential loci in the signing space (Figure 1). These loci are either actual locations of present referents or arbitrary locations that are assigned for non-present referents by means of a pointing sign (which is glossed as INDEX).

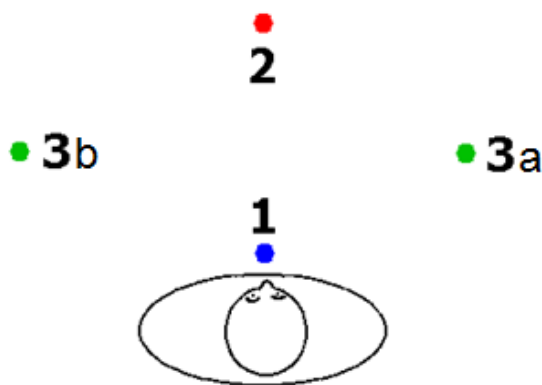


Figure 1. Localization of referents in the signing space; the signer (locus 1) and the interlocutor (locus 2) are always present, while third person referents (locus 3) can be present or non-present.

For illustration of the localization mechanism, consider the DGS examples in (1). In (1a), the non-present referent MOTHER is localized at location 3a (see Figure 1) by means of INDEX_{3a}, a pointing sign (index finger extended) targeting a locus in the front right (ipsilateral) area of the signing space.² Crucially, this location is arbitrary, that is, it does not reflect a spatial configuration in the real world (for instance, the mother living in a town that is situated in the direction of the vector projected from the fingertip). Subsequently, the agreement verb VISIT moves from locus 3a, associated with the subject, towards locus 1, associated with the object, thereby expressing agreement with a third-

² Note that DGS employs various overt and covert strategies to introduce new discourse referents, pointing with the index finger being the most explicit overt strategy. Alternatively, signers may use non-manual strategies such as body leans towards a particular R-locus or eye-gaze toward this locus or a covert ‘right-left default pattern’ (Lillo-Martin 1986; Winston 1996; Steinbach & Onea 2016; Wienholz et al. 2017).

person subject and a first-person object. The video stills in Figure 2 illustrate the beginning and end point of the verb’s movement.³

- (1) a. YESTERDAY POSS₁ MOTHER INDEX_{3a} VISIT₁
 ‘Yesterday my mother visited me.’
 b. POSS₁ BIRTHDAY PARTY, INDEX₁ INVITE₁
 ‘As for my birthday party, I will invite you.’
 c. INDEX₁ NEW TEACHER LIKE
 ‘I like the new teacher.’



Figure 2. Video stills showing the beginning and end point of the movement of the verb VISIT in example (1a): movement starts at the front right side of the signing space (locus 3a, introduced for non-present referent MOTHER) and ends close to the signer’s body (locus 1).

Yet, in a subset of agreement verbs, the so-called “backwards verbs” (Padden 1988; Brentari 1988), movement proceeds in the opposite direction, that is, from the position of the object towards the position of the subject, despite the fact that in both types of verbs, the agent is the syntactic subject (for evidence, see Section 4.3). This is illustrated in (1b) by means of the DGS verb INVITE. Note that in both (1a) and (1b), the subscript ‘1’ follows the verb, which indicates that the end point of the movement coincides with locus 1; yet, locus 1 is associated with the object in (1a) but with the subject in (1b).

However, all SLs for which such spatial modulations have been described also feature a substantial number of verbs, the so-called plain verbs, in which the movement component cannot be modified in such a way. An example of a plain verb in DGS is the verb LIKE. This verb is lexically specified for contact with the signer’s chest, that is, it is a body-anchored verb. Consequently, in (1c), LIKE cannot be spatially modified to move between the relevant locations 1 and 3a.

³ Sign language examples are given in English SMALL CAPS, which represent (approximations of) the meaning of the signs. Subscript numbers refer to locations in the signing space (as shown in Figure 1) which are employed for agreement and pronominalization. POSS is a possessive pronoun, which is signed with a flat hand (B-hand) in DGS. A line above the glosses indicates the scope of non-manual markers, in particular, a side-to-side headshake signalling negation.

Interestingly, some SLs have developed means to overcome the agreement gap caused by plain verbs, namely dedicated manual markers, generally referred to as agreement auxiliaries, which express the agreement relation whenever the main verb is not capable of doing so (see Steinbach & Pfau (2007) and Sapountzaki (2012) for cross-linguistic surveys). DGS is one of these SLs, as it employs the auxiliary glossed as PAM (Person Agreement Marker; Rathmann 2000, 2003). Actually, example (1c) would usually be signed as shown in (2). As can be seen in Figure 3, PAM (which appears clause-finally in the DGS variety we investigated) moves from locus 1 to locus 3a, thus marking the subject and object of the lexical verb.⁴

- (2) INDEX₁ NEW TEACHER LIKE ₁PAM_{3a}
 ‘I like the new teacher.’



Figure 3. Video stills showing the beginning and end point of the movement of the agreement auxiliary PAM in example (2): movement starts close to the signer’s body (locus 1) and ends at the front right side of the signing space (locus 3a, introduced for the non-present referent TEACHER).

In addition to agreement by path movement, agreement verbs also agree by means of orientation, viz., the orientation of the hand changes, depending on the object. In the following example, there is not only path movement from subject to object; additionally, the fingertips are oriented towards the object, thus also expressing further agreement with the object (under the reverse predication, the fingertips would be oriented towards the signer).

- (3) INDEX₁ MY DAUGHTER INDEX_{3a} ₁INFLUENCE_{3a}
 ‘I influence my daughter.’

⁴ Note that from a typological perspective, these auxiliaries are atypical in the sense that – unlike most auxiliaries in spoken languages – agreement auxiliaries in SLs are not used to encode tense, aspect, or modality (see Pfau & Steinbach (2007) for details).

Importantly, object agreement is found with both transitive and ditransitive verbs. With the latter, it always targets the goal/indirect object. Agreement with intransitive verbs is only rarely attested; see, for instance, Costello (2015) for agreement marked on the verb *DIE* in Spanish SL (LSE).⁵

A final property of SL agreement to be mentioned here is the primacy of object agreement over subject agreement. While object agreement is quite robust, subject agreement is optional in many contexts. In addition, there are some agreement verbs, such as American SL (ASL) *ANSWER*, on which only object agreement can be marked. By contrast, agreement verbs that only mark subject agreement are not attested. The primacy of object agreement is a modality-specific property of SL agreement (Meier 1982; Padden 1988; Lillo-Martin & Meier 2011) since in spoken languages, subject agreement is generally much more frequent (but see Siewierska (2013) for exceptions).

3. Sign language agreement: perspectives and challenges

Having introduced the basics of SL agreement, we now turn to previous accounts of the phenomenon. The following discussion does not claim to be exhaustive; rather, we sketch three different approaches to SL agreement that have been advocated in the literature. We begin with the gestural account first proposed by Liddell (Section 3.1) and then turn to two accounts that consider the spatial modulation of verbs to be part of the grammar of SLs: Meir's hybrid Thematic Structure Agreement (TSA) approach (Section 3.2) and Nevins' clitic analysis (Section 3.3). In all three subsections, we highlight empirical and conceptual challenges that these accounts are faced with. Other grammatical analyses of (certain aspects of) SL agreement will be addressed in Section 4.

3.1 Gestural accounts

Liddell (1995) was the first one to propose that the spatial modifications that certain verbs may undergo, and which have been characterized as instantiations of person agreement, actually lie outside the realm of grammar. For him, the loci that appear on verbs (and pronouns) are gestural in nature, fully on a par with the loci that characterize certain co-speech gestures, such as, for instance, deictic gestures (Kita 2003; Kendon 2004). He therefore refers to these verbs as "indicating verbs" and suggests that their directionality is controlled by the (real or imagined) location of the referents, and not by a grammatical feature that is copied from a controller. In other words: the spatial modification of verbs

⁵ The fact that intransitive verbs normally do not agree can be related to the diachronic origin of SL agreement, viz., the gestural expression of transfer (see next section). Given that agreement is becoming increasingly grammaticalized (and, as we will argue below, dissociated from thematic agreement as argued in Steinbach (2011)), we would expect agreement to be instantiated with intransitive verbs as well over time (cf. Section 5.3 for further discussion).

works as a reference-tracking device through the fusion of a lexical sign with a pointing gesture.

3.2.1 Mental spaces and indicating verbs

In order to account for the surface forms of indicating verbs, Liddell resorts to Fauconnier's (1985, 1997) theory of mental spaces. When a discourse referent is present, the signer makes use of *real space*, that is, of his "current conceptualization of the immediate environment based on sensory input" (Liddell 2003: 82) – in this case, the verb will point towards the actual location of this referent. In cases in which a signer directs a sign towards a locus associated with a non-present referent, he makes use of a real-space blend, in which mental space elements are mapped onto real space, a "cognitive act [that] involves conceptualizing things as something other than what they are" (Liddell 2003: 175). This type of space is referred to as *surrogate space*. According to this proposal, directing the verb VISIT in (1a) towards a locus associated with my (non-present) mother, is like directing a pointing gesture towards an empty chair while uttering 'He recently argued against this claim' in order to refer to a (non-present) person who usually occupies this chair.⁶

Important motivation for Liddell's gestural approach comes from the so-called "listability problem". Crucially, the possibilities for directing verbs in space are indefinite, as there is an infinite number of loci. That is, what we labeled as '3a' and '3b' in Figure 1 are not specific loci but rather areas from which a specific locus is selected and assigned to a referent within a stretch of discourse. This, in turn, implies that there is also an indefinite number of agreement morphemes, and these morphemes can thus not be listed in the lexicon – a typologically highly unusual state of affairs. Unlike what is normally the case in spoken languages, agreement in SLs would thus register non-stable/transient properties.⁷

Related to the listability issue is the issue of canonicity. Based on agreement patterns in spoken languages, Corbett (2006) offers a set of 20 criteria that describe different options for agreement systems, and determines for each of them a canonical value in accordance with general principles that are taken to characterize canonical agreement. Crucially, the most canonical system is one that best conforms to the general principles and not necessarily the system that is most common among the world's languages. It has been pointed out that the system of spatial modulation present in SLs is non-canonical

⁶ Crucially, this line of reasoning should not be taken to imply that Liddell considers SLs gestural communication systems. He does assume that SLs are fully-fledged natural languages with complex grammars (see Chapter 2 in Liddell 2003). It is only the pervasive use of spatial resources that is taken to fall within the domain of gesture.

⁷ The morpheme/locus marking first person is an exception. It has thus been suggested that SLs distinguish first and non-first person, rather than first, second, and third person, in their pronominal and agreement system (see Meier (1990) and Lillo-Martin & Meier (2011) for further arguments).

according to Corbett's criteria (Corbett 2006: 264, footnote 1; Cysouw 2011), and this non-canonicity is taken as a further argument in favor of a gestural account.

3.2.2 Listability, canonicity, grammar, and variation

Since the publication of Liddell's seminal (2003) monograph, several authors have addressed the listability and canonicity issue, and have brought forward arguments – from language acquisition, neurolinguistics, language change, and syntax – that speak against a (purely) gestural account of agreement/indicating verbs (Meier 2002a; Capek et al. 2009; Lillo-Martin & Meier 2011; Quadros & Quer 2011; Quer 2011; Rathmann & Mathur 2011; Wilbur 2013; Hänel-Faulhaber et al. 2014; Hosemann 2015). Liddell himself ignored most of these arguments, but instead reiterates the crucial role of the listability problem (e.g. Liddell 2011). However, Schembri et al. (2016), who also subscribe to a gestural analysis, offer a detailed discussion of many of the relevant arguments. In the context of the present paper, we cannot address all the points they raise, but will focus on those most pertinent to our proposal, that is, arguments that deal mainly with (morpho)syntactic issues.

(i) Listability

There are actually two facets to the listability problem: first, the fact that there is an infinite number of agreement markers; second, the observation that – in different discourse settings – one and the same referent can be marked by different loci, that is, by different agreement markers.

As has been illustrated in examples (1ac), signers may point to an abstract location when a referent is not present in the physical context of the conversation. Lillo-Martin & Klima (1990) refer to this abstract location as referential locus, or R-locus, and suggest that R-loci are the overt realization of abstract grammatical referential indices (which are also assigned to referring expressions in spoken languages). It is this contextually defined R-locus that will be copied onto the agreement target (see also Aronoff et al. 2005). Lillo-Martin & Meier (2011) assume that there is only one agreement morpheme for non-first person, which is unspecified for locus. In other words, they “distinguish the physical spatial locations toward which a signer points from the notion of a R(eferential)-index, an abstract grammatical device indicating reference within and across sentences” (Lillo-Martin & Meier 2011: 99).

Similarly, Quer (2011: 190), adopting arguments first brought forward by Wilbur (2008), points out that “physical points in space are actually irrelevant as such: what counts for the linguistic system is how they can be interpreted categorically as referential locations or loci”. As highlighted by Wilbur (2013), morphemes with indeterminate, contextually determined form are also attested in spoken languages, for instance in reduplication processes whereby part of a stem is copied in order to spell out some

grammatical feature. In a language that realizes nominal plurals by means of (total or partial) reduplication, what would be the lexical entry for the plural morpheme? Also, Aronoff et al. (2005) report cases of literal alliterative agreement in which part of a controller is copied onto an agreement target. These examples may well be of an exceptional nature, but still, they are testimony to the fact that contextual determination of the form of inflectional morphemes is an option even in spoken languages.

On the other hand, there is the issue that SL agreement does not involve formal or semantic properties of the DP that controls agreement. But again, agreement in natural languages may also involve transient properties: A famous example are languages with a proximate/obviative system, that is, a special system that allows distinguishing different third person referents by treating the most salient/topical/important referent as proximate, while less important entities are marked as obviative. Such a system is attested, for instance, in Algonquian languages, and it is illustrated in the following example from Plains Cree. Note that the proximate DP is unmarked, while the obviative DP takes the suffix *-a*; verb agreement also registers the difference between proximate and obviative (Aissen 1997: 707).

- (4) Pakamahwew napew atimw-a.
 hit:3>3.OBV man:3 dog:3-OBV
 ‘The man hits the dog.’

The span within which one third person is maintained as proximate and all others as obviative can be rather large, but depending on the discourse, it can in principle change after each sentence, e.g. due to a new participant being introduced as proximate or a nominal that was previously obviative now being assigned proximate. This crucially shows that one and the same referent can be associated with either inflectional value, and agreement thus does not track a stable property of the referent but rather a property that is highly discourse-dependent and thus transient.

Note finally that Steinbach & Onea (2016) define a modified version of Discourse Representation Theory (DRT) that directly integrates the relevant geometrical properties of R-loci. They argue that discourse referents are not linked to concrete points in the signing space but to regions that are more or less specific depending on the number of discourse referents. According to their model, R-loci are abstract referential indices that are recursively introduced in discourse by the grammatical system starting with the default pattern that the first discourse referent is introduced in the ipsilateral region of the signing space. Hence, the grammatical system provides a mechanism that introduces necessary delimitations of the regions corresponding to the R-loci in the signing space. Therefore, it is not necessary to list an indefinite number of possible R-loci in the lexicon.⁸

⁸ Wienholz et al. (2017) conducted an ERP study that provides empirical evidence for the claim that signers use linguistic default patterns to assign distinct R-loci to discourse referents in the absence of overt manual or non-manual markers. Right-handed signers assign the first discourse referent by default to the ipsilateral

(ii) Canonicity

Schembri et al. (2016) refer to Corbett's (2006) notion of canonical agreement and argue that it excludes indicating verbs in SLs. Similarly, Cysouw (2011: 153) argues that "[a]t most, directionality seems to be an extremely non-canonical form of agreement". Schembri et al. do not, however, offer a detailed discussion of the criteria that Corbett proposes for what he considers canonical agreement. They do mention that SLs generally allow for pro-drop, a feature which – according to Corbett – is non-canonical. This example neatly illustrates that the presence of a non-canonical feature does not necessarily imply that the system as a whole would not pass as agreement. After all, many languages that clearly display agreement allow for pro-drop.⁹

Lillo-Martin & Meier (2011) also address the issue of canonicity and discuss two striking features of SL agreement in some detail: the existence of different verb classes (including backwards verbs) and the primacy of object over subject marking. While they acknowledge that SL agreement may well be non-canonical in certain respects, they also emphasize that "many of the properties that at first make sign language agreement seem unusual are in fact attested across the world's languages" (Lillo-Martin & Meier 2011: 127).

Despite the fact that the notion of canonicity has haunted the discussion for quite some time now, Costello (2015) was the first one to thoroughly apply the 20 criteria proposed by Corbett (2006) to a sign language, namely LSE (see Mathur & Rathmann (2010) for a previous, yet less thorough, attempt). Four of the criteria refer to the controller of agreement, nine to the agreement target, three to the domain of agreement, three to the features involved in the agreement process, and one to the conditions for agreement. Costello's detailed discussion of all the criteria based on LSE data reveals that the process of spatial modulation is clearly more canonical than not: for 15 out of the 20 criteria, LSE scores as canonical. Just like Lillo-Martin & Meier (2011), Costello (2015: 267) underlines that it "is important to bear in mind that most spoken languages also present varying numbers of non-canonical properties". He provides Spanish as an example, as this language displays canonical behavior with respect to 16 out of the 20 criteria. Taken together, we tend to concur with Quer (2011), who concludes that the issue of (non-)canonicity has been overstated.

(iii) Interaction of agreement and grammar

Investigations on various SLs have revealed that the possibility to spatially modulate a verb closely interacts with other components of syntax. First, in some SLs, agreement verbs license a more flexible word order; for instance, as already observed by Fischer

area and the second one to the contralateral area of the signing space, that is, they exploit the geometrical properties of the signing space in a systematic way to establish an optimal contrast between the R-loci linked to the first two discourse referents.

⁹ Actually, Corbett himself points out that this type of canonicity is limited to relatively few languages.

(1975), in ASL, the basic word order is SVO, but SOV is possible with agreement verbs. Second, in Brazilian SL, the position of the negative particle *NÃO* is more flexible in the context of agreement verbs (preverbal or clause-final) than with plain verbs (only clause-final) (Quadros 1999). Third, just as in numerous spoken languages, agreement inflection on the verb licenses null arguments (see Lillo-Martin (1986) and Bahan et al. (2000) for ASL; Glück & Pfau (1998) for DGS). Finally, there is the above-mentioned availability of agreement auxiliaries in some SLs. Steinbach & Pfau (2007) show that the distribution of these grammatical markers is rule-governed and language-specific.

Schembri et al. acknowledge this striking interplay between verb directionality and grammar, but they argue that there “appears to be no a priori reason [...] to assume that indicating verbs should not interact with the syntax of specific sign languages”. After all, as they further point out, “there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that the grammar of individual spoken languages and co-speech gesture also interacts in language-specific ways” (Schembri et al. 2016: 24). While this is certainly true, it is important to realize that in the relevant studies, language-specific aspects of the lexicon and grammar impact the use of co-speech gestures, and not vice versa – see, for instance, the study by Kita & Özyürek (2003), which reveals that lexical gaps and grammatical differences influence the shape of co-speech gestures accompanying the description of motion events by English, Turkish, and Japanese speakers. Crucially, there are no studies that demonstrate an impact of gesture on grammar – and only cases like this would support Schembri et al.’s claim. We thus maintain that the interaction of verb agreement and grammar poses a serious challenge to gestural accounts of directionality.

(iv) Synchronic and diachronic variation

Since, according to the gestural approach, R-loci that appear on verbs (and pronouns) are gestural in nature, we basically expect the same verbs to show agreement by movement cross-linguistically and diachronically. This, however, is not the case. On the one hand, we find interesting typological variation that cannot easily be accounted for in a purely gestural approach. On the other hand, the diachronic development of agreement provides evidence for the grammatical status of agreement (Pfau & Steinbach 2011; Steinbach 2011). Schembri et al. (2016: 30) acknowledge that “conventionalization provides evidence of an emergent subsystem of the grammar, but not necessarily an agreement system”. Still, it remains unclear what is meant with “emergent subsystem of the grammar”. Since a similar objection holds for the hybrid model of sign language agreement, we shall discuss both aspects in more detail in Section 3.2.2 below.

3.2 A hybrid model of sign language agreement

Ever since Fischer & Gough’s (1978) study on verbs in American Sign Language (ASL), many scholars have explicitly or implicitly assumed that the spatial modification of verbs

indeed constitutes an inflectional process, and as such is part of the grammar, more specifically the morphosyntax, of sign languages. In fact, Padden (1988) referred to verbs that can be modified as “inflectional verbs”. In this section, we sketch an influential grammatical approach to SL agreement: Meir’s (2002) hybrid model, which decomposes agreement verbs into multiple components (Section 3.2.1). We refer to her account as “hybrid”, as grammatical and thematic roles are taken to determine the surface form of agreement verbs.¹⁰ In Section 3.2.2, we offer arguments that challenge the hybrid approach.

3.2.1 Components of agreement verbs

As has already been pointed out in Section 2, SL agreement is typologically unusual because, across SLs, only a subgroup of verbs, the so-called agreement verbs, agree with their subject and object, while plain verbs cannot be modified to express agreement. In an influential paper, Meir (2002) suggests that group membership (plain vs. agreement) is determined (i) by the Lexical-Conceptual Structure (LCS) of a verb, in particular whether it expresses transfer, and (ii) by phonological factors, which may block the realization of agreement (for a similar thematic analysis of agreement in DGS, see Keller 1998). Based on Israeli SL (ISL) data, Meir (1998, 2002) proposes a unified analysis for regular agreement verbs (RAV) and backward agreement verbs (BAV). In particular, she proposes the Principles of Sign Language Agreement Morphology in (5) (Meir 2002: 425).

- (5) a. The direction of the path movement of agreement verbs is from source to goal (thematic agreement).
- b. The facing of the hand(s) is towards the object of the verb (syntactic agreement).

According to Meir, agreement verbs consist of three components: (i) the verb root, (ii) a directional morpheme, and (iii) a suffix denoting dative case. As for the first component, the verb root of an agreement verb, Meir assumes that it generally denotes concrete or abstract transfer. The LCS of an agreement verb is given in (6). Note that the LCS is underspecified for mapping of grammatical functions onto thematic functions (α =subject, β =object).

¹⁰ Similarly, Steinbach (2011) argues that SL agreement is a “hybrid category”. However, in his approach, the hybrid character, which is due to the gestural origin of agreement, gets lost in the process of grammaticalization, i.e. in the development of a morphosyntactic agreement system. The grammaticalization of abstract agreement verbs (without a thematic basis) and agreement auxiliaries are two crucial steps in the development of a grammatical category of agreement in SL.

- (6) spatial tier $\left(\text{CAUSE} ([\alpha], [\text{GO} ([]^\gamma, [\text{Path FROM } [\alpha/\beta] \text{ TO } [\beta/\alpha]])]) \right)$
 action tier $\left(\text{AFF} ([]^\alpha, []^\beta) \right)$

Second, the directional morpheme DIR indicates the direction of movement of the theme argument. Crucially, it is DIR which realizes agreement with the source and goal argument and not the verb root itself. DIR is claimed to be a bound morpheme which fuses with the root. There are two DIR-morphemes, one for regular (7a) and one for backwards verbs (7b). Note that the two only differ in the assignment of grammatical to thematic functions.

- (7) a. $[\text{GO} ([]^\gamma, [\text{Path FROM } []^\alpha \text{ TO } []^\beta]) \rightarrow$ i.e. subject to object
 b. $[\text{GO} ([]^\gamma, [\text{Path FROM } []^\beta \text{ TO } []^\alpha]) \rightarrow$ i.e. object to subject

Finally, the verb also assigns dative case to the affected possessor (i.e. the goal). The case suffix is phonologically realized by facing of the hand(s), that is, by the orientation of the palm and/or the fingertips.

Plain verbs cannot agree either because they do not express transfer (i.e. their LCS is different from that given in (6)) or because their phonological specification does not allow for fusion with DIR. The DGS plain verb LIKE in (1c), for instance, may well express abstract transfer (i.e. transfer of an emotion), but it is body-anchored and cannot be detached from its place of articulation (chest) to realize agreement.

In our alternative proposal, to be developed in Section 4, we maintain that phonological factors play a role in SL agreement. However, given a number of empirical and conceptual challenges that will be addressed in the next section, we argue against accounts which seek to explain SL agreement in terms of LCS, i.e. thematic properties, and propose that sign language agreement is consistently syntactic.

3.2.2 Conceptual and empirical challenges

Meir's account of SL agreement is attractive, as it builds on modality-independent conceptual structures (Jackendoff 1990) and offers a unified account of regular and backward agreement verbs. However, as also pointed out by Quadros & Quer (2011) and Steinbach (2011), it is faced with some challenges, the most important of which are discussed in the following.

(i) *Against the agreement-transfer bi-conditional*

As mentioned above, Meir assumes that agreement is fundamentally linked to the notion of *transfer*. Her analysis relies on the assumption that agreement verbs generally have the LCS in (6) and, vice versa, that verbs that have the LCS in (6) should agree by means of movement. This generalization, however, is too strong.

First, while a DIR-component may be plausible for verbs like GIVE, TAKE, SEND, and PAY that express concrete transfer of an entity, there are also numerous agreement verbs for which it is less clear whether transfer is involved. Meir is aware of this fact, of course, and suggests that such verbs (e.g. TEACH, INFORM, ANSWER) should be understood as expressing abstract transfer. Still, we maintain that with certain verbs, the notion of transfer is far less obvious, e.g. DGS HELP (cf. Meir 2002: 423, footnote 11; Steinbach 2011) and especially SEE (also DEFEAT in Catalan SL, cf. Quadros & Quer (2011)). More generally, the argument runs the risk of being circular in that transfer (concrete or abstract) will be postulated whenever a verb shows agreement by movement.

Second, there are agreement verbs that show agreement by orientation only even though semantically they seem to express (abstract) transfer; DGS examples include EXPLAIN, INFLUENCE, CRITICIZE, STARE-AT, and E-MAIL (see Mathur (2000) for other SLs). Meir (1998) is forced to explain these gaps by means of phonological factors: even though the verbs express transfer and are thus lexically specified for combining with DIR, the combination of [root + DIR] would lead to a phonological clash. As a consequence, unification with DIR is ruled out. This, however, seems to imply that goal and source remain unspecified in the LCS of these verbs; as a consequence, their meaning should be underspecified, contrary to fact.

(ii) Synchronic and diachronic variation

Since, according to Meir, agreement by movement is thematic, and since thematic relations associated with particular verbs should be universal, we expect the same verbs to show agreement by movement cross-linguistically. This, however, is not the case. First, verbs that differ minimally in form/meaning may be plain verbs in one SL, but agreeing verbs in another SL. Furthermore, Fischer (1996) reports that Japanese SL LIKE is an agreement verb in Western Japan, but not in Eastern Japan. Again, at least for some of these cases, Meir could probably resort to phonological blocking, but this certainly does not work for the Japanese SL case.

Second, we also observe systematic diachronic change towards ‘more’ agreement. For instance, the DGS verb TRUST developed from a plain verb into a full agreement verb. Apparently, the phonological specification blocking agreement (i.e. body-anchoredness) is no longer active. A similar change is attested for the verb TELEPHONE in SL of the Netherlands. Note that the latter verb is particularly interesting because it does not include the semantic notion of transfer (see Meir (2012) for diachronic changes in ISL agreement).

Third, the emergence of agreement auxiliaries provides evidence for the grammatical status of agreement (Steinbach 2011). Agreement auxiliaries only developed to mark agreement with plain verbs overtly, and they are not restricted to verbs denoting (abstract) transfer. Even more interestingly, agreement auxiliaries do not depend on the thematic structure of the predicate they co-occur with since they can be systematically combined with one-place predicates such as WAIT or LAUGH to extend the argument

structure of these predicates (WAIT-FOR and LAUGH-AT, respectively). We come back to the DGS agreement auxiliary PAM in Section 4.2 below.

(iii) Separate DIR-component

As is evident from the LCS in (6), Meir assumes that verb roots are underspecified for path movement, that is, it is not specified whether path movement proceeds from subject to object or from object to subject (Meir 2002: 432). Specification of the path movement obtains only through unification with one of the two pre-specified DIRs in (7). The combination of verb root and DIR, however, is faced with a serious conceptual problem. In principle, a root should combine freely with the available DIR-morphemes. In reality, however, for every verb, only one combination is instantiated. In other words, the root of a regular agreement verb never fuses with the DIR-morpheme in (7b), and the root of a backwards verb never fuses with the DIR-morpheme in (7a).

In order to exclude the non-attested combinations, Meir (p.c.) assumes that every verb root is pre-specified for combination with a particular DIR-morpheme. This assumption, however, weakens the point of having a separate DIR-morpheme. After all, if there is a lexical specification anyway, then one might as well fully specify the spatial-thematic tier in the LCS of each verb.

(iv) Agreement auxiliaries

The conceptual problems addressed above concern fairly general issues which are independent of an individual SL. We now return to DGS data that cast doubt on the assumption that the TSA-analysis can explain SL agreement across SLs. Recall from Section 2.1 that DGS belongs to the group of SLs that employ agreement auxiliaries in the context of plain verbs (Steinbach & Pfau 2007; Sapountzaki 2012). Just like agreement verbs, the DGS auxiliary PAM expresses agreement by means of path movement and orientation (see Figure 3).

PAM is a purely functional element void of lexical content. Therefore, it cannot contain a DIR-component.¹¹ Reanalyzing PAM as DIR itself is implausible because it co-occurs with plain verbs like KNOW or LIKE that do not obviously express transfer, i.e., whose second argument is a theme. Moreover, as already mentioned above, PAM can productively be used to extend the argument structure of intransitive verbs such as WAIT or LAUGH (Steinbach 2011). However, the resulting transitive meanings ‘wait for’ and ‘laugh at’ do not denote concrete or abstract transfer. Therefore, agreement expressed by PAM has to be syntactic, despite the fact that PAM includes directional path movement, which – according to Meir – is the manifestation of thematic agreement (see Quadros & Quer (2011) for a similar argument based on Brazilian SL and Catalan SL data). The mere fact

¹¹ Meir (2002: 435f) does point out that DIR can appear as an independent morpheme when it expresses literal motion, as in her example HOME INDEX_{3a} WORK INDEX_{3b} DIR_{3b} (no translation provided, but probably meaning something like ‘to move/go/proceed from home to work’). This case, however, is clearly different from the PAM case, as DIR does express transfer in this example, and there is no lexical verb.

that PAM and other agreement auxiliaries exist suggests that there is a need for syntactic agreement in DGS (and other SLs) and casts doubts on the idea that agreement in SLs is fundamentally thematic. We thus claim that agreement in DGS is consistently syntactic and comes in two guises: path movement and orientation of the hand.

3.3 A clitic analysis of sign language agreement

In a recent contribution, Nevins (2011) investigates SL agreement with respect to the clitic-affix distinction and comes to the conclusion that a clitic analysis is not only viable but may in fact provide a more adequate account of SL agreement (cf. also Keller 1998, who argues that agreement in DGS involves pronoun incorporation). Space constraints do not allow us to offer a detailed discussion of this complex issue. Therefore, we briefly summarize what we take to be the strongest arguments in favor of a clitic analysis.

The first concerns optionality: Recall that subject agreement is optional in SLs, while object agreement is not (the ‘primacy of object agreement’ mentioned in Section 2). SLs thus display a pattern that makes sense under a clitic perspective: Not only is clitic doubling more likely to be optional than agreement, it is also commonly the case that subject clitic doubling is less frequent (and less obligatory) than object clitic doubling. The second point concerns competition effects: With ditransitive verbs, object agreement in SLs always targets the goal/indirect object, while the features of the theme remain unexpressed. This is reminiscent of the Person Case Constraint (PCC), which restricts the person values of the direct object when it co-occurs with an indirect object/goal argument. Third, concerning distribution, SL agreement seems to pattern with clitics in that both display low selectivity w.r.t. their hosts: they can occur on auxiliaries and dummy elements. Furthermore, the form of agreement markers in SLs is tense-invariant. Fourth, a clitic-perspective allows for a unification of agreement verbs with spatial verbs, i.e. verbs like MOVE that agree with spatial (topographic) features: Spoken languages often have both phi-related and locative clitics; under this perspective, it is thus no longer necessary to posit two different types of “agreement” verbs in SLs (also see Quadros & Quer (2011) on that point).

Although intriguing, we believe that upon closer inspection, these arguments do not quite go through. Concerning optionality: While the clitic perspective indeed provides a motivation for the primacy of object agreement, it cannot explain why object agreement in SLs is obligatory, given that clitic doubling with objects is not obligatory in all clitic doubling languages. Furthermore, as will be shown in Section 4.3, the omission of the subject agreement marker is arguably better characterized as an instance of default agreement since there is path movement after all: the path movement simply starts in a default location. An obvious interpretation of these facts is that one obtains default agreement. Note that one important criterion to distinguish between agreement markers and clitics is what happens if Agree fails (cf. Preminger 2011): In the case of agreement,

one obtains a default marker, while with clitics, the clitic is simply absent. The situation in SLs is thus more reminiscent of agreement and would fit perfectly with the speculation in footnote 22 that subjects bear an oblique case so that Agree fails.

As for competition effects, as far as we know, there are no person restrictions with ditransitive verbs in SLs. The fact that object agreement always targets the goal in ditransitive constructions is simply a locality effect. Furthermore, it is not universally agreed-upon that PCC-effects only occur with clitics (see, e.g., Baker (2008: 94-103) for arguments that PCC-effects occur likewise with agreement).

Third, as for distribution, tense-invariance is not a helpful criterion in the case of SLs, as tense is not expressed by affixes on the verb but usually by means of adverbials. Thus, tense-related allomorphs are excluded for independent reasons. As for the occurrence with auxiliaries and dummy verbs in SLs, while some (but by no means all) of these auxiliaries – like DGS PAM that derives from the noun ‘person’ – are of non-verbal origin, it is not obvious that they are non-verbal synchronically. In the case of PAM, the fact that it displays agreement by orientation and can be affected by negation strongly suggests that it is verbal since agreement by orientation is only found with (agreement) verbs and negation typically affects the highest verbal element in the clause.¹²

Turning to the different verb classes, while a unification may surely seem attractive, it must be pointed out that path movement has very different meanings in the two verb classes: With spatial verbs, it denotes actual movement of a referent from one location to another. As discussed in Section 3.2.2 with respect to the proposal by Meir (2002), interpreting the path movement in agreement verbs as literal movement frequently fails, namely in those cases where the verb fails to denote transfer. An approach that attempts to unify the two verb classes is thus confronted with the same problem as the thematic account.

As a final point, as far as we can tell, the clitic analysis has nothing to say about backwards verbs. Since the clitics are the actual arguments of the verbs, the reverse pattern suggests that the syntactic structure is also the reverse, with the source being projected above the goal. However, to our knowledge, not only no evidence for this; rather, the fact that subject marker omission consistently targets grammatical functions and not thematic ones very much suggests that both verb classes project their argument structure in the same way into the syntax (see Section 4.3 below).

Given these arguments, we believe that a clitic perspective on SL agreement does not provide a better account of the DGS data; whether it may shed new light on the agreement systems of other SLs is a topic we leave for future research, although we hasten to add that, as far as we can tell, many of the arguments adduced above will also apply to other SLs, including ASL.

¹² Another putative parallel between SL agreement and clitics is supposed to come from the fact that both are found with non-finite verb forms. However, it is far from clear that sign languages have non-finite clauses of a type similar to that in spoken languages (see also footnote 20). Furthermore, agreement on non-finite verbs is found in spoken languages as well, cf., e.g., the inflected infinitives in European Portuguese.

4. Proposal

In this section, we will provide a consistently syntactic account of agreement in DGS. We will only use devices/assumptions that have been independently argued for in spoken languages; these will be introduced in Section 4.1. Our analysis will thus be entirely modality-independent. It will consist of three parts: We will first address the difference between plain verbs and (regular) agreement verbs and relate the asymmetries in the use of the agreement auxiliary to differences in movement of the lexical verb to *v* (Section 4.2). In the second part, we tackle backwards verbs. We propose that such derivations involve mechanisms that have been posited for ergative languages (Section 4.3). Finally, we will provide an account of agreement by orientation, which we relate to participle agreement in Romance, that is, as being due to an additional Agree operation between the verb and the object (Section 4.4).

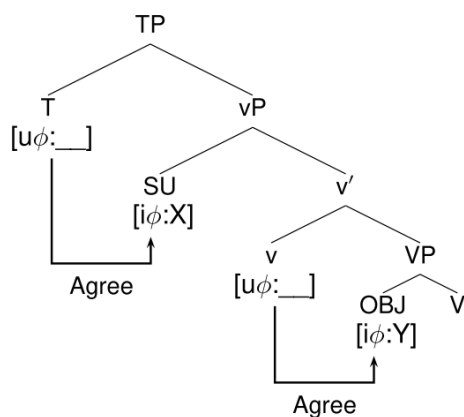
Note that for ease of presentation, we will assume in this section – idealizing somewhat – that plain verbs obligatorily occur with PAM while agreement verbs never do. As for the former idealization, we pointed out in Section 2 that our informants clearly prefer the sentence in (2) with auxiliary over the version in (1c). As for the latter, it has been observed for some SLs that inflected agreement verbs occasionally co-occur with an agreement auxiliary, resulting in double-marked agreement. At least in DGS, however, double marking is clearly dispreferred (Murmman et al. 2013); when present, it triggers a specific pragmatic effect, viz. emphasis (Steinbach & Pfau 2007: 330), and thus requires additional derivational operations. Also remember that we will not attempt to account for the possibility that agreement is optional, that is, that an agreement verb may remain entirely uninflected – a possibility that has not yet been investigated for DGS.

4.1 Agreement in Minimalist syntax

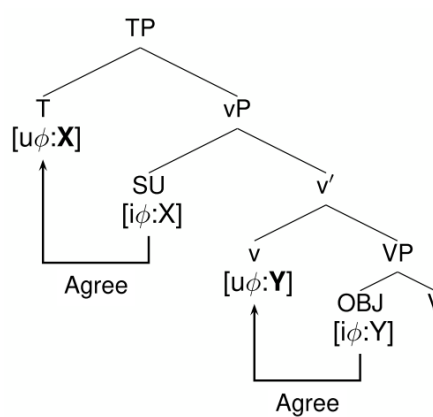
We assume a standard Minimalist system (cf. Chomsky (2000) et seq.) with unvalued phi-probes on *v* and T. These phi-probes search for a value in their c-command domain; as a consequence, the value of the subject is copied onto T and that of the object onto *v*, as shown in (7) and (8).¹³

¹³ For ease of representation we use transitive agreement verbs in the following discussion. With ditransitives, the goal argument is structurally higher than the theme (goal DPs precede theme DPs) and will therefore be the goal for Agree.

(7)

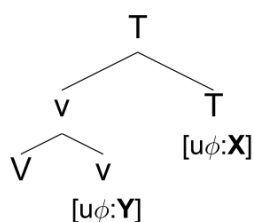


(8)

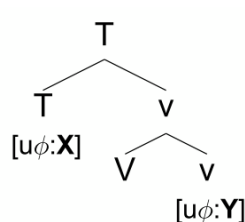


Additionally, there will be verb movement in most of our derivations. As is standard, this leads to the formation of complex heads as in (9); importantly, we assume that at PF, complex heads are linearized as in (10) in DGS:

(9)



(10)



Assuming a Distributed Morphology architecture with late insertion (cf. Halle & Marantz 1993), the agreement morphemes will be inserted into T and v while the verb root is inserted into V. At PF, (10) is realized as path-movement from subject to object (for backwards verbs, see Section 4.3). With these basic assumptions in place, we can now proceed to the analysis of the various patterns.

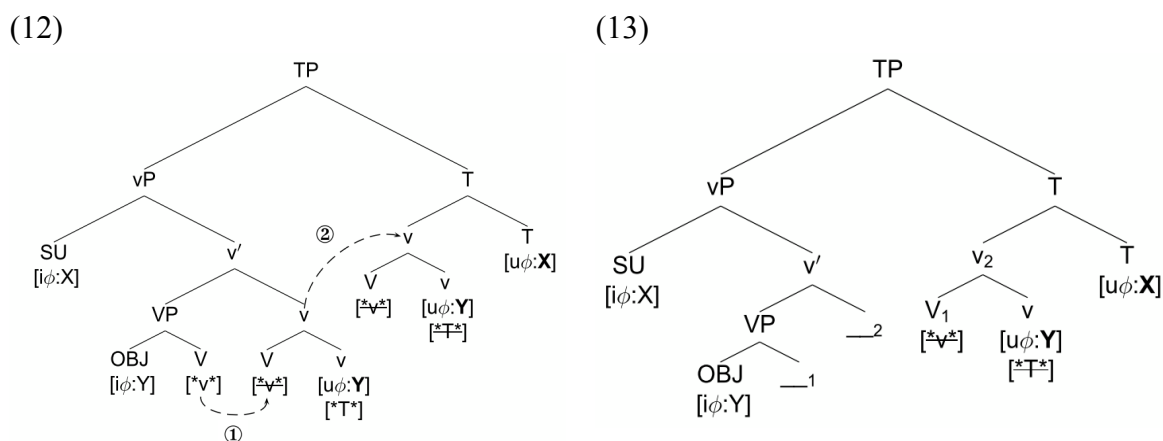
4.2 Regular agreement verbs vs. plain verbs

Recall that while RAVs show agreement by path movement from subject to object, in the context of plain verbs agreement is realized on the agreement auxiliary PAM which is realized separately from the verb root. We propose that this difference is due to an asymmetry in verb movement: While v always moves to T, the lexical V does so only in the case of agreement verbs (regular and backward, see Section 4.3). By contrast, in the case of plain verbs it stays put. As a consequence, with RAVs, a complex head will be formed consisting of V+v+T, while with plain verbs, only v+T form a complex head. We propose to capture this lexical difference by means of a Greed-perspective on head movement (cf. Adger (2003) and Bošković (2007) for discussion of Greed-based XP-

movement); that is, movement is not driven by a feature of the head projecting the landing site but rather by a feature of the moving element. For sake of concreteness, we will adopt the *-notation from Adger (2003) to indicate that a verb needs to enter an Agree relation with another head of a certain categorial type. [*v*] thus means that a verb has to enter Agree with v, [*T*] indicates that a head has to enter Agree with T, etc. The relevant specifications are given in (11).¹⁴

- (11) a. Agreement verb: [*v*] → movement to v
 b. Plain verb: no [*v*] → V stays put
 c. v always has [*T*] → moves to T

Thus, starting with (regular) agreement verbs, V first moves to v followed by movement of the V+v-complex to T, as in (12), resulting in a complex V+v+T-complex, as in (13):

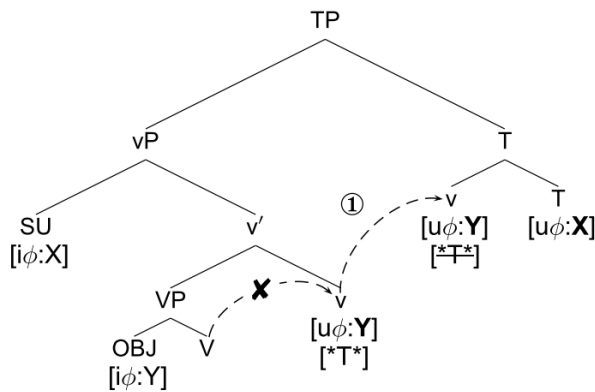


With plain verbs, the first movement step does not take place, that is, V stays put and only v moves to T, as in (14), resulting in a complex head v+T, as in (15):

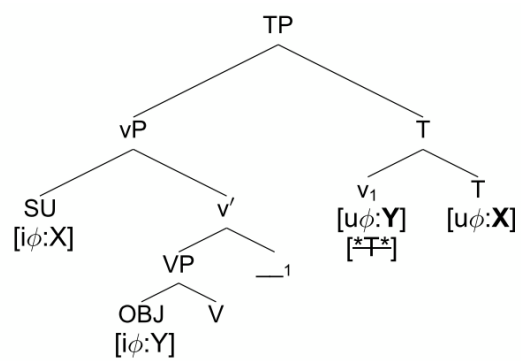
¹⁴ We assume that checking of the head-movement feature obtains in a classical head-adjunction structure. To ensure that this feature is not checked in-situ – e.g. when V and v c-command each other in a head-complement structure – one can postulate that checking of this feature requires asymmetric c-command between the moving element and the head it is adjoined to, which is the case under a definition of c-command as in Kayne (1994: 18). The same result can probably also be obtained if head-adjunction is replaced by head-to-spec movement followed by Merger, as proposed in Matushansky (2006). Another version of Greed-based head-movement is the reprojection approach, especially in the implementation of Georgi & Müller (2010); however, since head movement crucially results in complex heads in our approach, reprojection does not work for our purposes (unless reprojection is followed by Lowering at PF, thereby creating a complex head after all).

Note that under an Attract perspective, the attracting probe-feature would have to be relativized to a lexical property of V, i.e. some diacritic identifying a verb as an agreement verb. While not impossible, the Greed perspective proposed here strikes us as more economical since the difference between plain and agreement verb has to be encoded only once, viz., on the lexical verb (while it is encoded twice under Attract, viz., on V and v).

(14)

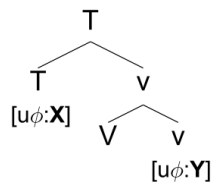


(15)

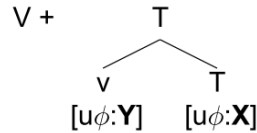


The difference in the final representation, that is, whether V forms part of the complex head or not, repeated in (16), has crucial implications for PF:

(16) a. Agreement V:



b. Plain V:



We propose that PF is sensitive to this structural difference: *v* is realized as zero if *V* is part of the complex head (hence the context restriction) and as PAM otherwise; see the spell-out rules in (17).¹⁵

(17) a. $v \Leftrightarrow \emptyset / _V$ agreement verb

b. $v \Leftrightarrow \text{PAM}$ plain verb

Note that these derivations are modality-independent. The difference between plain verb + PAM vs. RAV is comparable to the synthetic vs. analytic difference in spoken language, as evidenced, for instance, by the Latin perfect, where a synthetic form is used in the active voice (18a) but an analytic form in the passive (18b). Embick (2000) proposes to capture the asymmetry in (18) by postulating verb movement to T in the synthetic perfect but no movement in the analytic perfect.

(18) a. *lauda-v-i* – ‘I have praised’

b. *lauda-tus sum* – ‘I have been praised’

¹⁵ There is an obvious similarity to *do*-support in English and *tun*-insertion in Colloquial German in that without PAM, the agreement affixes would be left dangling (see Steinbach & Pfau (2007: 324f.) for a comparison of PAM and *tun*-insertion).

The synthetic-analytic split in sign languages differs from splits familiar from spoken languages in that it is based on lexical properties rather than morpho-syntactic features such as tense/aspect or voice. It also differs from the split in verb movement in spoken English that sets apart auxiliaries from lexical verbs and thus involves well-defined classes of verbs: The split in sign languages is synchronically relatively arbitrary. It should be pointed out, though, that lexical factors have also been documented for spoken languages, see, e.g., Haspelmath (2004: 658f.).¹⁶

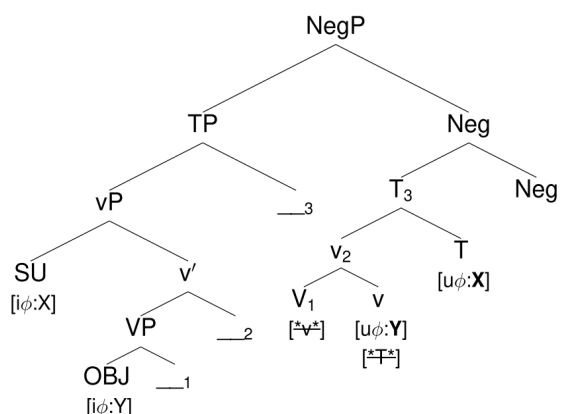
So far, the motivation for verb movement has been only indirect in that verb movement is posited whenever there is no agreement auxiliary. As in head-final languages quite generally (cf. e.g. Haider 2010), verb movement is difficult to diagnose in DGS because the verbal elements generally line up at the end of the clause, and there are no elements in that part of the clause that could be used to delineate the vP-boundary. There is one type of diagnostic, though, that does provide independent motivation for verb movement in the case of agreement verbs: This involves negation, which treats agreement verbs and PAM alike, to the exclusion of plain verbs. DGS is a so-called non-manual dominant SL, which implies that clausal negation is commonly expressed by a non-manual marker, viz., a headshake (hs) only. The headshake, which is analyzed as a non-manual affix hosted by Neg^o, obligatorily associates with the verbal element closest to it, be it an agreement verb (19a) or PAM (19b) (see Pfau (2002, 2016) for a syntactic account of DGS negation).

- (19) a. YESTERDAY POSS₁ MOTHER INDEX_{3a} hs_{3a}VISIT₁
 ‘Yesterday my mother didn’t visit me.’
- b. INDEX₁ NEW TEACHER INDEX_{3a} LIKE hs₁PAM_{3a}
 ‘I don’t like the new teacher.’

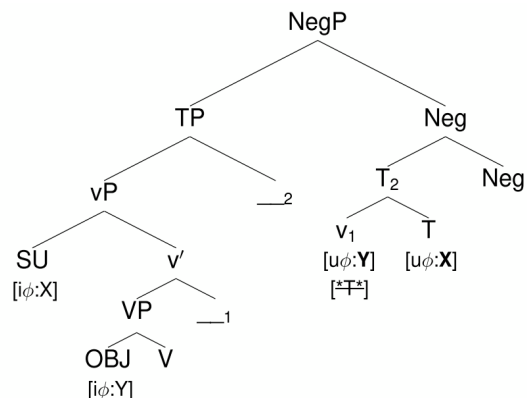
Crucially, headshake in (19b) does not obligatorily affect the plain verb, while it has to minimally accompany the agreement verb in (19a). This follows straightforwardly if negated sentences involve movement of the highest verb from T to Neg. In the case of agreement verbs, this involves the entire V-v-T-complex (20), while in the case of plain verbs, only v+T move to Neg since the lexical verb stays put (21).

¹⁶ A familiar case that may be somewhat more similar to the sign language split are English comparatives of disyllabic words like *clever*, where some (e.g. *easy*, *noisy*) require or at least strongly prefer the synthetic form while others favor the analytic version (e.g. *able*, *stable*). Importantly, the variation cannot be completely reduced to phonological factors according to Hilpert (2008). Unlike in the choice between agreement verb and plain verb + PAM, though, there is a certain degree of optionality, i.e., certain adjectives can occur both in analytic and periphrastic form. Whether comparatives involve head-movement (rather than Lowering or Local Dislocation, cf. Embick & Noyer (2001)) is an open question, though.

(20)



(21)



Neg is then realized as headshake over the entire complex head present in Neg. This affects either the entire agreement verb (22a) or, in the case of plain verbs, only PAM (22b).

- (22) a. agreement verb: [[[V+v]+T]+Neg]
 b. PAM: [[v+T]+Neg]

The verb movement asymmetry between plain verbs and agreement verbs is thus independently motivated.¹⁷

4.3 Backwards verbs

Note first that backward agreement is not indicative of a change in grammatical relations: The agent is still the syntactic subject. This can be shown by means of subject marker omission, first described by Padden (1988: 117) for ASL, which refers to the optional omission of the subject agreement marker (subject to conditions that are still poorly understood, cf. also Meir et al. 2007). Instead of starting the movement at the R-locus of the subject, movement usually proceeds from a default location, cf. the ASL example in (23a), adapted from Padden (1983: 118). Importantly, omission of the object marker is not generally observed, which is why sign languages have been described as displaying primacy of object agreement. Crucially, in the case of backwards verbs, “subject” marker

¹⁷ Evidence that V really does not form part of the complex head is particularly clear in the DGS-variety described by Rathmann (2000, 2003). A slight complication for our verb movement approach comes from aspectual marking, which can also affect plain verbs. This suggests that the aspectual head is located between v and V and that plain verbs can move up to Asp but no further, while agreement verbs move to v via Asp. Consequently, plain verbs would have to bear the specification [**Asp**]. Our proposal makes predictions for SVO languages with auxiliaries such that the agreement verb in SVO sentences occupies a higher position than the plain verb in SAuxVO sentences. We leave an exploration of this issue for further research.

omission also affects the R-locus of the agent, so that the movement proceeds towards a default location (23b), cf. Padden (1983: 119).

- (23) a. WOMAN \emptyset -GIVE₁ NEWSPAPER
‘The woman gave me a newspaper.’
b. ME _{3a}TAKE-OUT- \emptyset [FRIEND SISTER]_{3a}
‘I’m taking out my friends sister.’

If BAVs involved a reversal of grammatical functions, we would expect the agreement with the R-locus of the theme/the source to be omitted, contrary to fact. Importantly, a thematic account as in Meir (2002) makes the wrong predictions here, as in one case, viz., regular agreement verbs, the R-locus of the source is omitted, while with backwards verbs, the R-locus of the goal is omitted.¹⁸

While there is thus no reversal of grammatical functions in BAVs, it is certainly the case that with respect to agreement, the object is treated like the subject and vice versa, so that we are thus dealing with agreement reversal. We will analyze the agreement of BAVs and the difference between RAVs and BAVs by means of an approach that has been developed in the context of ergativity (cf. Lourenço (2015) for a related idea and Pavlič (2016) for an analysis in terms of reflexive ditransitives).¹⁹ Of course, agreement in SL, where there is (usually) no agreement in intransitive clauses, does not instantiate proper ergativity in that this agreement does not treat transitive objects and intransitive subjects alike. Nevertheless, we adopt insights from the approach to ergativity by Müller (2009), who proposes that alignment (i.e. direct/accusative vs. reversed/ergative) is determined

¹⁸ Further evidence that the grammatical relations are the same in backwards verbs comes from agreement by orientation, which consistently targets the object/goal, see Section 4.4 below.

¹⁹ Given that backwards verbs instantiate agreement reversal, it may at first sight seem tempting to adopt analyses that have been proposed for (superficially) similar phenomena in spoken languages, e.g. subject object reversal in Bantu languages (Morimoto 2008) or agreement reversal in Neo-Aramaic (Kalin & van Urk 2015). However, backwards verbs do not have any of the properties that characterize the other two constructions: Subject object reversal is crucially related to topicality, i.e. (simplifying somewhat), reversal is only possible if the object is topical while the subject is focal; however, topicality does not play any role in the difference between RAVs and BAVs. Neo-Aramaic agreement reversal is an aspect-based split (between perfective/imperfective in a way familiar from ergative languages) and, according to the authors, results from additional agreement potential in the imperfective; furthermore, clitic doubling plays an important role, and the two verb types differ in their sensitivity to the Person Case Constraint.

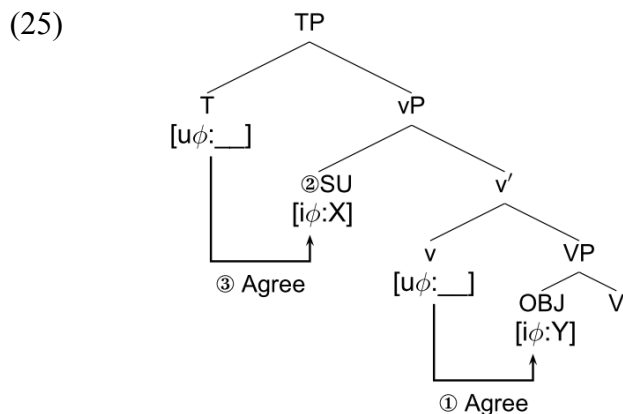
Again, none of this is of any relevance for the difference between BAV and RAV. Kalin (2015) analyzes Neo-Aramaic agreement reversal in terms of a difference in verb movement: in the reversed pattern, *v* moves across the subject to Asp in the imperfective; assuming that Agree applies at the phase level, it probes after head movement and thus targets the external argument while T then agrees with the object. In the perfective, on the other hand, *v* targets the object while T agrees with the external argument. From a technical point of view, this could be made to work for the RAV/BAV asymmetry as well, but since there is no evidence for an asymmetry in head movement between the two SL verb types, we will not pursue this possibility any further.

A very different approach to reversal phenomena is the morphological approach by Baerman (2007), where reversals simply result from explicit morphological rules. Since such rules are entirely arbitrary and extremely powerful, we refrain from adopting such a solution; furthermore, under such an approach, it is not clear how subject marker omission would have to be handled. Arguably, it would have to apply before whatever morphological rule effects reversal. For subject marker omission, see also footnote 22 below.

syntactically by the order of operations on v: v has to carry out two operations, it has an Agree probe and introduces the external argument. It is proposed that different orderings of these two operations lead to different alignments, see (24):

- (24) a. Direct/Accusative alignment: Agree > Merge
 b. Reversed/Ergative alignment: Merge > Agree

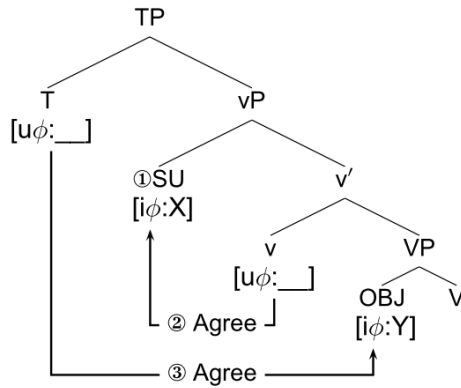
The derivation of direct/accusative alignment is standard, with Agree between v and the object preceding Merge of the external argument (followed by Agree between T and the subject (SU)):



As a consequence, the features of the subject are copied onto T and those of the object onto v. In ditransitives, where if full NPs are present, the goal precedes the theme, v always agrees with the indirect object/goal argument. This is due to the fact that the indirect object is structurally higher than the theme/direct object at surface structure and thus closer to v (we leave open whether goal arguments are introduced in SpecVP or in the specifier of a separate applicative head; we will come back to ditransitives in the section on agreement by orientation below).

Under the reverse ordering, however, v agrees with the subject (Agree is assumed to be subject to m-command and the subject is closer to v than the object according to a path-based definition of locality, see Müller (2009: 273, footnote 9)), while T agrees with the object (there is no defective intervention in this system, cf. Müller (2009, 277, footnote 20)), cf. (26) below:

(26)

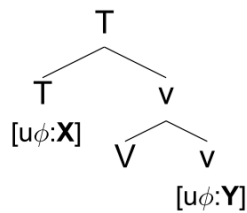


In ditransitives, T targets the indirect object/goal argument rather than the theme, because it is structurally higher.

The phi-features are thus distributed differently in the two alignment types, which has consequences for the spell-out at PF. The RAV/BAV-asymmetry in SLs can now be analyzed as resulting from the use of the direct/“accusative” v in RAVs and the reversed/“ergative” v in BAVs.²⁰

Recall from above that complex heads are linearized as in (27) in DGS:

(27)



Given the different Agree operations, we find the following features on the functional heads in the two alignment types:

²⁰ We have adopted this theory of ergativity because it allows for a very simple formulation of the reversal between RAV and BAV. Alternative approaches to different alignments developed in the context of ergativity may work as well. They generally differ with respect to whether ergativity is handled in morphology or in syntax and, in the latter case, with respect to the location of the Agree probes (e.g. both probes on T, both probes on v, or one on T and one on v as proposed here; see Deal (2015) for a recent overview). Since there is no morphological case in SLs, the morphological approaches will not work. As for alternative syntactic approaches, an approach where both probes are on v or on T may be a possibility as well to capture BAVs. However, given that one needs to establish a link between the lexical verb and the functional head responsible for reversal, postulating at least one of the two agreement probes on v is technically more straightforward. Locating both probes on v (rather than one on T and one on v) may be an alternative.

Unfortunately, the necessary empirical evidence to choose between the two options does not seem to exist: the crucial diagnostic that is usually applied to determine the location of the probes is the behavior in non-finite clauses, i.e., which argument goes missing and which agreement morphemes get lost. However, since SLs do not have non-finite clauses in a straightforward sense (see Padden 1983; Göksel & Kelepir 2016), this diagnostic cannot be applied: Tense is not marked on the verb, and agreement verbs that occur in the translational equivalents of non-finite clauses are fully inflected and thus license pro-drop. Thus, one cannot check which argument goes missing in non-finite clauses (even if they existed in SLs). Finally, since intransitives do not agree, one does not know whether T is involved in agreement at all. Given the absence of the relevant diagnostics, we will not speculate any further.

- (28) a. T-V-v → direct: RAV
 SU-V-OBJ
 b. T-V-v → reversed: BAV
 OBJ-V-SU

At PF, this is realized as path movement from subject to object with RAVs (28a) and as movement from object to subject with BAVs (28b).

What is special about the reversal in backwards verbs is that it is a property of certain verbs, not a property of certain tenses/aspects or clause types (as in tense/aspect-based split ergativity/Neo-Aramaic agreement reversal) or a phenomenon governed by information structure. Since the different alignments are encoded on *v*, this implies that there will be a selectional relationship between *v* and *V* – with the “ergative” *v* only selecting BAVs and the “accusative” *v* selecting RAVs. This selectional property seems to be a remnant of the thematic origin of verbal agreement in SL discussed in Section 3.2.1 above.

We have not been able to find a perfectly parallel analogue in spoken languages, but there are cases of split-ergativity where the split is at least partly conditioned by lexical factors. This concerns for instance clause-type based splits as, e.g., in Sierra Popoluca, where certain clause types, viz., temporal adjunct clauses headed by the native temporal complementizer and complement clauses of certain intransitive verbs, take accusative alignment, while ergative alignment is prevalent elsewhere (e.g. in temporal clauses headed by a Spanish complementizer), cf. Marlett (1986). Another possibly related case may be deponent verbs in languages like Latin where the inflection of certain verbs (that do not form a natural class, see Embick (2000)) is systematically passive despite transitive syntax (29).²¹ As with agreement reversal in SLs, this is a lexical property of individual verbs (or roots).

- (29) a. hort-or – ‘I exhort.’
 b. horta-t-us sum – ‘I have exhorted.’
 (cf. latuda-t-us sum – ‘I have been praised.’)

The primacy of object agreement, that is, the fact that subject markers can be omitted while object markers cannot, does not yet follow from our analysis. The challenge posed by the phenomenon is that under our analysis, this involves features on different heads, as shown in (30).

- (30) a. RAV: T-V-v ~~SU~~-V-OBJ
 b. BAV: T-V-~~v~~ OBJ-V-~~SU~~

²¹ The parallel is not perfect in that the different agreement paradigm is not due to the fact that the verb agrees with a different head but rather due to its having a lexical specification that has consequences at PF.

One can formulate an impoverishment rule that optionally deletes the features of the subject; since this affects different heads, depending on the verb type, the impoverishment rule would require a context restriction. The obvious feature for such a restriction would be case: Under the assumption that case assignment precedes agreement and that external arguments always get the same case, one can assume that under Agree the case-features of the arguments are copied onto the functional heads as well. The impoverishment rule can then refer to whatever case characterizes external arguments, cf., e.g., Georgi (2013).²²

We conclude the discussion of backwards verbs by briefly commenting on two alternative proposals that have been brought forward. Quadros & Quer (2011) also argue against a thematic account for BAVs, and the arguments they offer intersect with those that we presented in Section 3.2.2. Based on data from Brazilian SL (LIBRAS) and Catalan SL (LSC), they claim, however, that BAVs should be removed from the group of agreement verbs proper and should actually be treated as “handling [classifier] verbs with path, where the path actually agrees with locations and not with syntactic arguments”, that is, BAV are analyzed as spatial verbs like MOVE. Consequently, with BAV, the agreement is locative and not syntactic. Obviously, for this solution to work, they have to assume metaphorical transfer from a literal handling operation to an abstract one, for instance, for BAVs like UNDERSTAND and INVITE. However, it remains unclear why such metaphorical transfer should only be observed with BAVs and not with RAVs. The verb ASK in DGS, for instance, features a handshape that could readily be analysed as a handling handshape (‘to take an object from the mouth’) but it is an RAV and not a BAV.

Geraci et al. (2016), working on Italian SL (LIS), maintain that BAVs belong to the class of agreement verbs but claim that they are actually not backwards, as they do not agree with the subject/agent, but rather with two internal arguments. By means of syntactic tests, Geraci et al. demonstrate that the endpoint of the path movement does not coincide with a subject/agent. That is, in a sentence like ‘Mary copied the text from the book’, the verb COPY moves from the locus of the book to the locus of the copied text, not the locus associated with Maria. While at least some verbs that would usually be classified as BAVs thus no longer belong to this group, it is also clear that they are not RAVs (according to Geraci, they are middle/pseudo-passive constructions). Also, while thought-

²² While doable, such a solution leaves unexplained the fact that impoverishment only ever affects features of the subject. An alternative but more speculative solution would posit that the subject in SLs bears quirky/oblique case and, as in other languages, cannot be the goal for Agree (cf. Bobaljik 2008). As a consequence, the probe targeting the subject does not find any features and is deleted. Agreement would then become possible if the opacity-inducing features of the external argument are deleted before Agree. This could be done by means of impoverishment, which can apply in syntax, as in Keine (2010), or at PF, as in Arregi & Nevins (2012) (thus before the features are copied). This would work for both RAVs and BAVs (and would be compatible with both Agree-based and Dependent-Case-based models of Case). The obliqueness of the subject’s case might be motivated diachronically, as a residue of the oblique encoding of source in the expression of transfer (assuming that this is what SL agreement originates from). Admittedly, this solution does not directly extend to BAVs.

provoking, the analysis cannot be extended to DGS, as in DGS, the end point of the movement does coincide with the locus associated with the subject.²³

4.4 Agreement by orientation

Agreement by orientation raises one major challenge for any syntactic analysis of SL agreement: It is consistently direct, that is, it always targets the object, even with BAVs. Hence agreement by movement and agreement by orientation cannot be treated as a case of multiple exponence of just one Agree relationship. Rather, agreement by orientation has to have a separate source.²⁴

The crucial observation for the analysis comes from the fact that PAM also displays agreement by orientation. Given that PAM has been analyzed as the realization of *v*, agreement by orientation must be the result of an Agree operation that is also initiated by *v*. Since it always targets the object, this agree operation obviously does not interact with the one that is responsible for the two different alignments. Therefore, we propose that there is an additional probe on *v*, which is ordered both before the external Merge of the external argument and the phi-probe. The closest goal at this point of the derivation will be invariably the (indirect object). At PF, the probe-feature is realized as orientation towards to object.

Importantly, the probe that leads to agreement by orientation is not a full phi-probe: There is good evidence that it only involves [person (= π)] but not number.²⁵ This becomes clear e.g. in the (collective) plural form of verbs like DGS HELP or ANSWER, where orientation changes towards the object during path movement, but remains constant on the arc that marks plural.

The order of the probes on *v* is thus as follows:

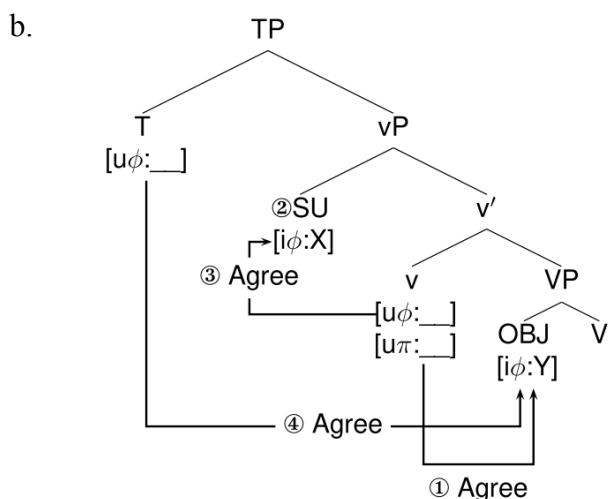
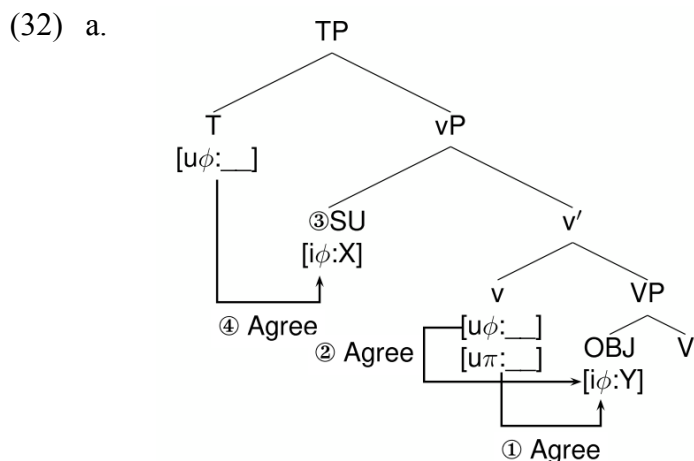
²³ A somewhat similar analysis has been put forward in Pavlič (2016). Pavlič argues that BAV are reflexive ditransitive verbs that agree with an oblique source argument and an indirect (reflexive) goal argument which might be bound by the subject if it is an animate beneficial argument. As a consequence of this analysis, BAV show regular thematic agreement between source and goal as proposed by Meir (1998, 2002). Accordingly, Pavlič's analysis is faced with the same problems as Meir's hybrid account discussed in Section 3.2 above.

²⁴ It has been observed that not all verbs show agreement by orientation, e.g. GIVE and ASK in DGS. Furthermore, there seem to be verbs that show agreement by orientation only (but not by path movement). We believe that in both cases, there are good reasons to believe that the absence of an agreement feature is due to phonological reasons. Specifically, (i) verbs whose phonological specification prevents path movement cannot express agreement by means of movement; (ii) verbs in which the orientation of the fingertips or palm is not either away from or towards the signer's body, i.e. verbs that do not involve facing (Meir 2002), cannot express agreement by orientation (e.g., in DGS GIVE and ASK, the palm is oriented upwards and the fingertips are oriented contralaterally).

²⁵ An alternative to a person feature would be the feature [uIdent] proposed in Costello (2015), who argues that postulating an [uPerson] feature for sign languages leads to certain complications. Since this issue is orthogonal to the questions pursued here, we stick to the traditional feature for ease of legibility.

- (31) a. regular agreement verbs: v [uperson] > [uD] > [uphi]
 b. backward agreement verbs: v [uperson] > [uphi] > [uD]

The following diagrams show the full derivation of regular (32a) and backward agreement verbs (32b).



Note that as a side-effect, this property of the additional probe on v also avoids complications with the Activity Condition (Chomsky (2000) et seq.): Since the object is not affected by a complete phi-probe, it remains active for further Agree with v. Our analysis of agreement by orientation thus bears certain similarities to participle agreement in Romance (and beyond), which only involves [Number] and [Gender], so that in the case of unaccusatives (and passives), the subject remains active for Agree with T, see (33).²⁶

²⁶ Agreement of the same DP with several heads in the clause, is, of course, also found in auxiliary-verb constructions in many languages (cf. e.g. Baker 2008), in which case all phi-features can be involved. Different notions of the Activity Condition are thus involved in the two cases, one related to phi-completeness, one to case marking.

The possibility of multiple probes on the same head has been postulated for a number of phenomena, including agreement in ergative languages (e.g. Bobaljik & Branigan 2006), and more generally for languages that show agreement with direct and indirect objects at the same time (cf. Baker 2008: 99ff.). It

- (33) Les fille-s sont venu-es
 the.PL girl-PL be.PL come-FEM.PL
 ‘The girls have come.’

5. Discussion: A recipe for sign language agreement

In the previous section, we argued that sign language agreement can be analyzed within a purely syntactic account that makes use of mechanism and derivations that have been independently motivated in studies on typologically diverse spoken languages. In other words, we made use of modality-independent ingredients to account for the peculiarities of SL agreement. Below, we provide a list of these ingredients, and we also comment on how they compare to previous accounts.

- **Ingredient I** (Section 4.2): Greed-based perspective on head movement; i.e. movement is driven by a feature of the moving element – this distinguishes RAVs from plain verbs. The distinction is lexically based (cf. English lexical verbs vs. modals). Probably, as suggested by Meir (2002), class membership is (diachronically) motivated by phonological and semantic factors.
- **Ingredient II** (Section 4.2): Asymmetry in verb movement resulting from Ingredient I: the lexical verb moves to *v* only in the case of agreement (regular and backward) verbs, while in the case of plain verbs, it stays put, and consequently, PAM-insertion is triggered. Comparable synthetic vs. analytic splits are attested in spoken languages (e.g. the Latin perfect).
- **Ingredient III** (Section 4.3): Variation in the order of Agree and Merge, which leads to different alignments; the asymmetry between RAVs and BAVs results from the use of the direct/“accusative” alignment in RAVs and the reversed/“ergative” alignment in BAVs. This pattern is reminiscent of split ergativity in spoken languages; however, it is a lexically specified property of certain verbs. Recall that the same is true in Meir’s account, as she needs to guarantee that each verb combines with the appropriate DIR morpheme in (7).
- **Ingredient IV** (Section 4.3): An impoverishment rule that optionally deletes the features of the subject; this rule accounts for the fact that subject markers can sometimes be omitted. In contrast, Meir et al. (2007) argue that subject marker omission is the result of a sort of default rule, which treats the ‘body as subject’.

may not be coincidental that in the cases described by Baker, as in SL agreement, this usually goes along with one of the probes copying only a subset of the features (so-called ‘two and a half-agreement’, viz., PCC-effects). A proposal where multiple probes on the same head target the same goal is offered by, e.g., Georgi (2013), who analyzes agreement in local person scenarios.

- **Ingredient V** (Section 4.4): An additional probe on *v*, which is not a full phi-probe (only involves person but not number); this probe leads to agreement by orientation. We thus offer a formalization of the observation made by Meir (2002) that agreement by orientation is syntactic, and we point out similarities to participle agreement in French.

The grammatical system provides these five ingredients in a way that they are available in both modalities. Still, the way these ingredients are combined, i.e. the recipe, appears to be specific to SLs. We suggest that the following three properties of SLs favor this modality-specific recipe for sign language agreement.

First of all, the use of space to express topographic and grammatical relations is unique to sign languages (Meier 2002b, 2012; Aronoff et al. 2005). Unlike spoken languages, sign languages make systematic use of the three-dimensional properties of the signing space to express various grammatical features such as agreement, plurality, telicity, topographic relations, specificity, or plurality of relations, among others (Wilbur 2003; Pfau & Steinbach 2006; Barberà 2015; Strickland et al. 2015; Pfau & Steinbach 2016).

Second, the overt spatial realization of these features depends on the physical properties of space. Especially location and movement in space are two important aspects of agreement marking in SLs. Since both location and movement are phonological parameters in SLs at the same time, the lexical specification of these two parameters plays an important part in the expression of agreement. Consequently, verbs that are lexically specified for these two phonological parameters cannot express agreement. Interestingly, plain verbs may lose such a lexical specification and turn into agreement verbs, as is true, for instance, for the DGS verb TRUST. Hence, an idiosyncratic phonological specification blocking the expression of agreement can be abandoned for the sake of agreement. As already mentioned in Section 3, we observe a general change towards ‘more’ agreement in SLs.

Third, SL agreement is not only expressed in space, it also has a spatial gestural origin. The prototypical agreement relation denotes a spatial transfer of an entity from source to goal. This transparent gestural basis has paved the way for a semantic implementation of agreement in SLs as proposed by Meir (1998, 2002). In a second step, the thematic basis of agreement triggered a syntactic reinterpretation of some agreement features (in Meir’s account the facing of the hand(s)). Finally, in some SLs, the emergence of agreement auxiliaries, which are not restricted to verbs denoting transfer, gave rise to a grammatical reinterpretation of the agreement system as described in Section 4 above.

The three verb classes directly reflect the spatial properties and gestural origins of agreement in SLs. Unlike RAVs, BAVs are subject to specific semantic restrictions and plain verbs to phonological and semantic restrictions leading to the modality-specific recipe described above. As opposed to RAVs, plain verbs do not involve movement of *V* to *v* because of a (phonologically and semantically motivated) difference in the feature

specification of V. The difference between RAVs and BAVs follows from a difference in the featural specification of the v-head which the verbs combine with, which leads to direct alignment in RAVs and reversed alignment in BAVs. We argue that this specific lexical property of BAVs is a remnant of the gestural origin of agreement in SLs.

Let us finally turn to a typological consequence of the specific recipe for SL agreement. Since the ingredients of syntactic agreement are combined in a modality-specific way in SLs, we expect a bigger uniformity of agreement in the visual-gestural modality. At various points throughout this article, we already alluded to the fact that our analysis, although meant to account for the DGS data, is also applicable to other SLs. The existing descriptions of the agreement systems of other SLs indeed suggest that many SLs use the same – or at least a very similar – agreement recipe as DGS does. Still, this should not be taken to imply that in the realm of agreement, all SLs behave in the same way. Let us briefly consider some of the attested variation.

First, there are SLs that do not employ agreement verbs at all. Sticking to our recipe metaphor, one could say that these SLs are frugal in this respect. Kata Kolok (a SL used in a village in Bali: Vos 2012; Vos & Pfau 2015) and Al Sayyid Bedouin SL (used in a community in the Negev desert in Israel: Aronoff et al. 2008; Padden et al. 2010), two rural sign languages, are prominent examples. In both SLs, the direction of the path movement “did not reflect the transfer of an entity from source to goal” (Aronoff et al. 2008: 148). Instead, signers typically use an uninflected citation form of the verb and indicate the subject and object by means of pointing signs.²⁷

Second, some SLs seem to be on the way to develop a grammatical agreement system, i.e. a system that loses its gestural basis and uses the modality-specific grammatical recipe described above. Senghas & Coppola (2001), for instance, describe an interesting change in the use of spatial modulations indicating shared reference in Nicaraguan SL. Spatially modulated verbs occur more frequently in the (early-exposed) second cohort than in the (early-exposed) first cohort. This means that the grammaticalization of an agreement system, as described above, can also be observed in emerging SLs such as Nicaraguan SL.

A third source of variation is the absence or presence of agreement auxiliaries. Agreement auxiliaries are attested in many typologically different SLs (Steinbach & Pfau 2007; Sapountzaki 2012). However, some SLs such as ASL and British SL do not use agreement auxiliaries at all. This does not necessarily mean that SLs without agreement marker do not have syntactic agreement. Interestingly, it has been argued that ASL uses head tilt and eye gaze to realize subject and object agreement non-manually (Bahan 1996; Bahan et al. 2000). Following this line of argumentation, non-manual markers would be an alternative strategy to express agreement features with plain verbs, making the development of (manual) agreement auxiliaries redundant in such non-manual agreement

²⁷ Interestingly, these SLs also do not make use of abstract loci in signing space. Also, for Kata Kolok, it has been observed that the sign GIVE is the only verb that is occasionally modified in space, which is not unexpected given that this verb most concretely encodes the transfer semantics.

languages. However, Thompson et al. (2006) provide empirical evidence that eye gaze is not systematically used to express object agreement with plain verbs in ASL. We leave for further research whether or not non-manual agreement marking is a typological alternative available in SLs to express syntactic agreement with plain verbs.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that agreement in DGS is consistently syntactic agreement – contra previous gestural and hybrid (thematic and syntactic) analyses (Meir 1998, 2002; Liddell 1995, 2003; Schembri et al. 2014). Furthermore, unlike previous syntactic approaches that have reinterpreted SL agreement as clitic doubling (Nevins 2011), we argue that the spatial modulation of verbs in SLs indeed represents syntactic agreement. A central piece of evidence for our claim comes from agreement auxiliaries, which express agreement by path movement without having a corresponding thematic structure or gestural basis.

In our analysis, agreement by movement results from Agree operations between object/subject and v/T, respectively. To accommodate backwards verbs, we suggested that they show ergative/reversed agreement. Agreement by orientation, finally, realizes an additional Agree relationship between v and the object. We argued that the basic facts of SL agreement can be analyzed with the same basic ingredients that are also used for the analysis of spoken language agreement, that is, the proposed mechanisms are independently motivated and modality-independent. We take this to be a strong argument in favor of our approach. We argue that the underlying grammatical structures are basically modality-unspecific. Some specific features of SL agreement may result from a special recipe including modality-specific ingredients such as the gestural origin of agreement, the use of the three-dimensional signing space, and the simultaneous realization of grammatical features.

It remains as a task for future research to investigate whether all SLs can be subsumed under the syntactic account or whether sign languages, which are probably less grammaticalized and do not have developed agreement auxiliaries, must be analyzed in a fundamentally different approach.

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