

Deficient subject agreement in control clauses in Russian Sign Language

Evgeniia Khristoforova
University of Amsterdam, ACLC

Agreement in sign languages (SLs) is realized through modification of the movement component of the verbal sign. [1]. Generally, the verb's movement proceeds from the spatial locus assigned to the subject towards the locus assigned to the object, thus expressing subject and object agreement, respectively. Person features of referents are encoded by distinct loci: the chest of the signer corresponds to 1st person, the frontal region to 2nd person, and lateral left and right regions to 3rd person [2]. In many SLs (e.g., British SL, Australian SL), subject agreement in simple sentences is optional. A default agreement form is used instead, which employs a locus close to the signer's chest, thus coinciding with the 1st person agreement form [3]. Yet, some SLs, such as German SL, appear to exhibit a strong tendency towards full subject agreement in simple sentences [4]. As shown below, RSL belongs to this group as well.

Despite a sizeable body of research on agreement and its optionality in various SLs, to date no systematic investigation of SL agreement in subordinate clauses, e.g., control clauses, has been carried out. Any interaction between agreement and subordination will provide (a) evidence for the grammatical status of SL agreement, which has been called into questions by some scholars on multiple grounds [3] and (b) critical insights into clausal subordination in SLs, specifically concerning the notion of (non-)finiteness. The present study addresses these important issues by investigating agreement deficiency in control clauses in Russian Sign Language (RSL) using both corpus investigation and an acceptability judgement experiment.

Methodology: Our data consists of (i) control and full CP complement clauses extracted from the on-line RSL corpus [5] and (ii) acceptability judgments (5-point Likert scale) collected from 8 native RSL signers. Throughout the experiment, participants repeated and judged stimuli containing signed control clauses introduced by TRY, WANT, LOVE, or CAN, and were encouraged to propose corrections when necessary. For each predicate, at least six different stimuli were composed, involving three different agreeing verbs inflected for 3rd person (the actual person value of the subject in the stimuli) or 1st person subject agreement (the default agreement form).

Results: The corpus and acceptability judgements reveal that default 1st person subject agreement (i.e., subscript *I* preceding the verb) is judged as unacceptable in simple sentences (1a) and on the embedded verb in full CP complements with 3rd person subjects (1c), but as acceptable on the embedded verb in the control constructions (1b). Object agreement (i.e., subscript following the verb) remains full in all of the cases, thereby indicating that the verbal forms in question diverge from uninflected citation forms¹.

- (1) a. BOY_{3a} VISIT_{3b} GIRL_{3b} *simple sentence*
'The boy visits the girl'
- b. BOY_{3a} WANT/TRY/CAN [VISIT_{3b} GIRL_{3b}] *control clause*
'The boy wants to visit the girl'
- c. I THINK/KNOW [MOUSE_{3a} TEASE_{3b} CAT_{3b}] *full CP complement*
'I see/think/know that the mouse is teasing the cat.'

One could suggest that the observed pattern can be attributed to the indexical shift, where the embedded covert pronominal agreement controller shifts its interpretation towards the point of view of the matrix attitude holder [6]. The following example (2), however, indicates, that an overt indexical, i.e., the embedded possessive pronoun POSS-1, cannot be interpreted as shifted,

¹Note that agreement in SLs is overtly realized on only a subset of verbal signs. Thus, the verb VISIT is agreeing, while verbs WANT, TRY, CAN, THINK and KNOW are not.

i.e., it can only refer to the actual signer of (2), while the embedded 1st person (default) subject agreement marker is nevertheless interpreted as co-referential with the matrix subject despite feature mismatch.

- (2) BOY_{3a} WANT [₁HELP_{3b} POSS₁ FRIEND]
 ‘The boy wants to help my/#his friend.’

Discussion: Agreement deficiency in control clauses but not in full CPs suggests that control clauses with default subject agreement in RSL are headed by non-finite T equipped with a deficient ϕ probe that fails to value the features of the subject, and hence resorts to the default person feature specification. Agreement deficiency in RSL provides a novel morphosyntactic diagnostics for (non-)finiteness, which so far has been hard to obtain for SLs given the lack of Tense inflection in these languages. The fact that agreement in RSL can be affected by subordination provides additional evidence for its grammatical status, thereby also supporting a modality-independent analysis of SL agreement as suggested in [7].

Default agreement in general is well-attested cross-linguistically in contexts where feature valuation is hindered in various structural configurations. An example is downward agreement as in Standard Arabic in (3), where the predicate preceding the subject can only have a (default) singular agreement form irrespective of the plurality of the subject [8; 9].

- (3) Darab-at/*-na ?al-banaat-u Zayd-an
 hit-PAST-3F.SG/*-3F.PL the-girls-NOM Zayd-ACC
 ‘The girls hit Zayd.’

In the case at hand, agreement deficiency manifested by default feature valuation appears to be the marker of non-finiteness in RSL. That 1st person serves as a default person feature may seem unusual since it differs from common patterns in spoken languages, where default agreement is typically associated with 3rd person marking [10]. There are reasons to believe, however, that, in SLs, 1st person (and the person feature system in general) display some modality-specific characteristics, which are captured by the *Body as Subject* principle proposed by [11]. This principle manifests a connection between an abstract notion of subjecthood and its representation by the signer’s body, which in the present study is reflected by the 1st person agreement articulated on the signer’s chest being the default subject agreement value. This connection between subjecthood and the body is independently supported by studies on SL acquisition, the emergence of SLs [12] and research on argument omission [13]. The present study thus highlights both modality-specific and modality-independent aspects of agreement and (non-)finiteness in RSL, thus contributing to theoretical and typological research on SLs and beyond.

1. Mathur & Rathmann. 2012. Verb Agreement. *Sign Language. An International Handbook*, 136–157
 2. Lillo-Martin & Meier. 2011. On the linguistic status of ‘agreement’ in SLs. *Theor Linguist*, 37 (3/4), 95–141.
 3. Fenlon, Schembri & Cormier. 2018. Modification of indicating verbs in British SL: A corpus-based study. *Language*. 94 (1), 84–118
 4. Oomen. 2020. *Iconicity as a mediator between verb semantics and morphosyntactic structure: A corpus-based study on verbs in German SL*. LOT/ACLCLC .
 5. Burkova. 2015. *RSL Corpus* [Electronic resource].
 6. Deal. 2020. *A theory of indexical shift: meaning, grammar, and crosslinguistic variation*. MIT Press.
 7. Pfau, Salzmann & Steinbach. 2018. The syntax of sign language agreement: Common ingredients, but unusual recipe. *Glossa*. 3.
 8. Harbert & Bahloul. 2002. Postverbal subjects in Arabic and the theory of agreement. *Themes in Arabic and Hebrew syntax*. 45–70.
 9. Bjorkman & Zeijlstra. 2019. Checking Up on (-)Agree. *Linguist Inq.*, 50, 527–569.
 10. Ackema & Neeleman. 2018. *Features of person: From the inventory of persons to their morphological realization*. MIT Press
 11. Meir, Padden, Aronoff & Sandler. 2007. Body as subject, *JoL*, 43(3), 531–563, 2007.
 12. Kwok, Berk & Lillo-Martin. 2020. Person vs. locative agreement: Evidence from late learners and language emergence. *SL&L*. 23(1-2), 17–37.
 13. Oomen & Kimmelman. 2019.

Body- anchored verbs and argument omission in two SLs. *Glossa*. 4.