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Verbal Agreement in Sign Language of the Netherlands (SLN)

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Introduction

Languages over the world employ several ways to express the relationship between a verb and its arguments. SLN (like all other sign languages investigated) has two kinds of verbs: non-agreement and agreement verbs. The arguments of non-agreement verbs are expressed by lexical NPs or pronouns. Agreement verbs mark their arguments spatially. However, there are also verbs that carry a different agreement morpheme: a meaningful *handshape*.

Agreement systems

Languages employ various ways to mark the arguments of verbs. Firstly, they differ in the way they are expressed. In languages like English and Dutch they are expressed by overt NPs and pronouns. These languages also have a system of subject agreement: a verbal suffix. These systems are very poor. Many languages, however, like Spanish and Italian, have *rich* agreement systems. In general, the arguments do not have to be expressed overtly (unless the speaker wants to stress them), since the syntactic relations between verb and arguments are clear enough.

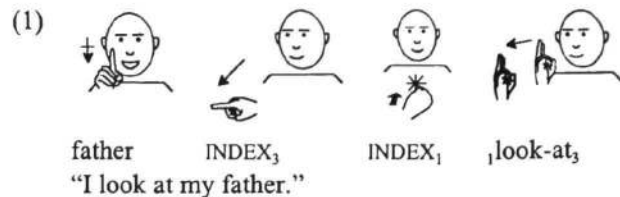
In the second place, languages vary in the number of arguments with which a verb can agree. Some languages not only have subject agreement, but also object agreement, like Choctaw. Languages like Georgian and Basque agree with direct and indirect objects.

Thirdly, languages vary widely in regard of the features the agreement affix contains. Person, gender and number are the best known. The Indo-European languages employ person and number agreement systems. Gender agreement is found in Bantu languages. Recently another way of verbal agreement marking is recognised. In many Amerindian languages verbs carry morphemes that do not have person or gender features, but refer to some salient characteristic of the argument, e.g. its shape or semantic class. These agreement markers are called verbal classifiers.

Agreement in SLN

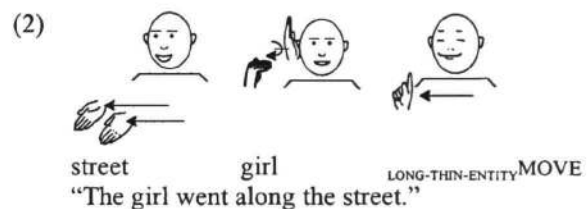
SLN non-agreement verbs do not undergo systematic changes to express the arguments. Many verbs, however, show spatial agreement markers. At first sight it may appear that this marking concerns person agreement. However, the

agreement markers do not have person features, but rather they agree with the *locations* of the referents in signing space. An example is given in (1). Subscript numbers refer to the locations in signing space.



Classifiers in SLN

SLN also has verbal classifiers. In sign languages, a verbal classifier consists of a handshape, combined with a certain orientation of the palm of the hand and the fingers. Classifiers are bound morphemes, occurring on verbs of movement and location. They typically refer to entities that move or are being moved and, thus, working in a GB-model, can be argued to carry the semantic role of *Theme*. In discourse, as soon as a referent is introduced, it need not be expressed lexically anymore: the use of a verbal classifier suffices to make clear what the argument of the verbs is. An example is given in (2). Mind that the sign for "girl" can be left out.



Conclusion

The following pattern occurs in SLN: next to spatial agreement markers, there are handshapes that refer to arguments of verbs of movement or location. In case such a handshape is used, the arguments can be left implicit. SLN has about fifteen verbal classifiers. These considerations lead to the conclusion that the SLN-classifiers form a way of agreement marking, strongly resembling the verbal classifiers in spoken languages.