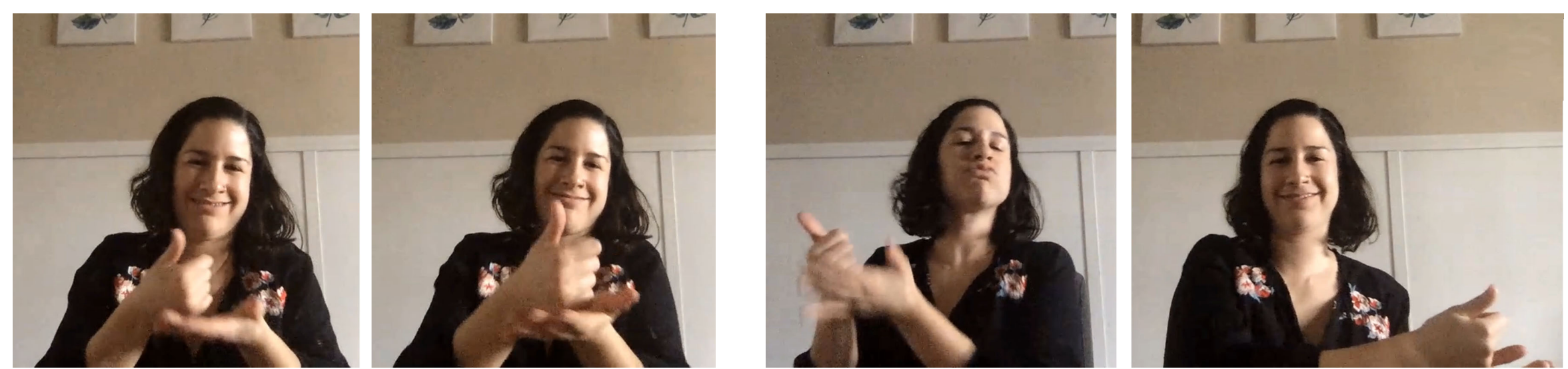# Do we agree? Reconsidering agreement in sign languages

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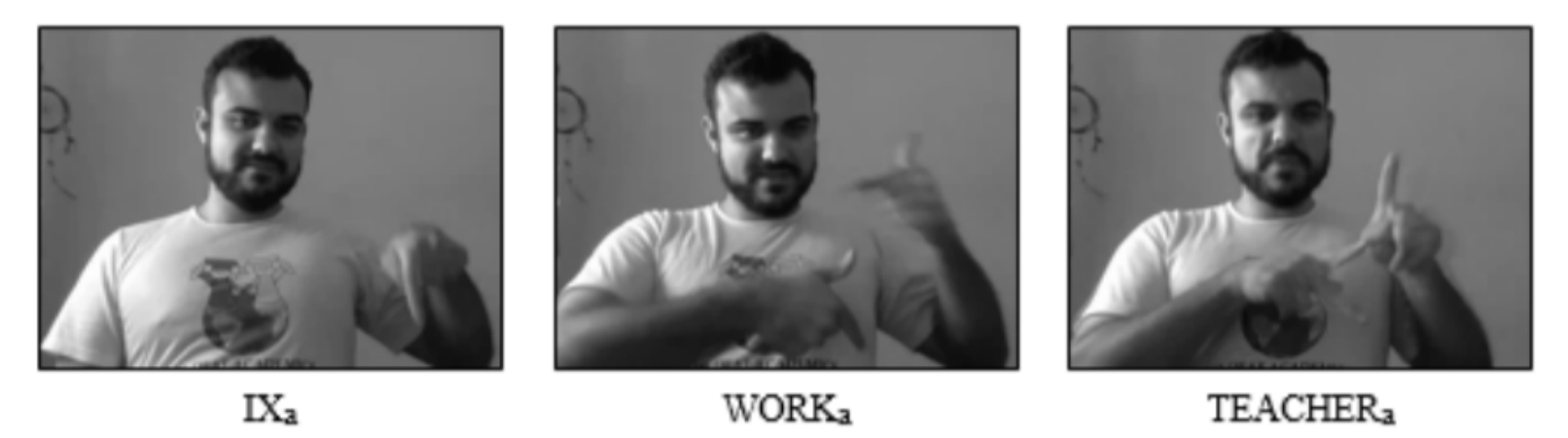
Directional Verbs

$_1$HELP$_2$ $_A$HELP$_B$
'I help you.'   'She helps her.'

Sign for a verb begins at the locus associated with the subject and ends at the locus associated with the object. [Fischer and Gough 1978; Meir 1998; Padden 1983]

The Debate

Directional verbs analyzed as:

Agreement [Fischer and Gough 1978, Janis 1995, Lillo-Martin and Meier 2011, Padden 1983, Pfau et al. 2018, Meir 1998]

Cliticized pronouns [Nevins 2011]

Gestural [Liddell 1993, Liddell 2003]

Odd Agreement

1. Object primacy
Objects are marked more than subjects.
Opposite pattern in spoken languages.

2. Subset of verbs
Only some verbs are 'agreeing' verbs.
Other verbs are **plain** [Meir 1998].

Response to Issue 2   [Lourenço and Wilbur 2018]

▸ Agreement is **colocation**, not path.
▸ All verbs in Libras can show colocation unless phonologically restricted.

IX$_A$ WORK$_A$ TEACHER$_A$

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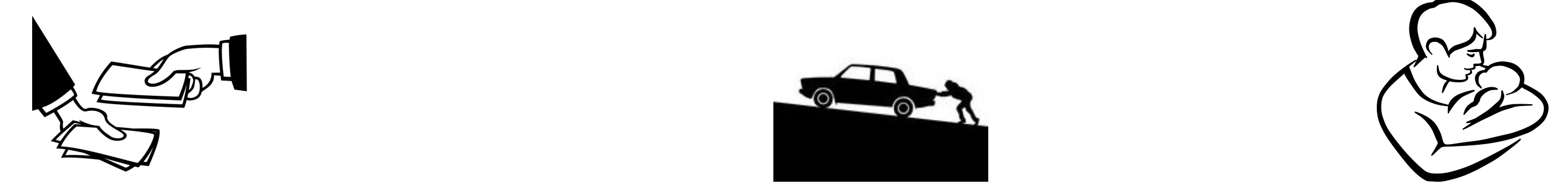
More Odd Agreement: Optionality

Directionality is **optional** and **not predictable**.   [Schembri et al. 2018]

▸ 70% of tokens show directional modifications (BSL corpus).
▸ Idiosyncratic: PUSH (5/12) vs. PAY (20/26)
▸ Directionality as memorized constructed action (following Liddell 2000).

Our Hypothesis

Contrast and **Context** as predictors?
If referent is clear, directional modification is less needed.

PAY (bank, person)   vs.   PUSH (car, person), LOOK-AFTER (baby, cat)

More like pronouns and clitics (Benincá 1983), and not like agreement!

Data: ASL

▸ Consultation with 3 native ASL signers (grammaticality and preference)
▸ 30 sentences that varied on contrast (number of refs) and reversibility

Subset of data (with fraction of signers judging acceptable):

I. Contrast affects verb locus use: 1 vs. 2 refs

(1)   BOY ENTER CLUB. MUSIC IS-ON. DANCE.   (3/3)

(2)   BOY ENTER CLUB. SEE GIRL READ.
        MUSIC IS-ON. DANCE.   (1/3)

(3)   BOY IX$_A$ ENTER CLUB SEE GIRL IX$_B$ READ.
        (IX$_A$) **DANCE$_A$**.   (3/3)

        'A boy entered a club. (He saw a girl read.) Music went on. He danced.'

II. When referent clear, directional modification is not necessary:

(4)   SUE HANG-OUT MARY. PUSH.   (0/3)

(5)   SUE IX$_A$ HANG-OUT MARY IX$_B$. (IX$_A$) $_A$**PUSH$_B$** (IX$_B$).   (3/3)

(6)   SUE HANG-OUT MARY. MARY SAY SOMETHING.
        SUE ANGRY. PUSH.   (3/3)

        'Sue was hanging out with Mary. (Mary said something. Sue got angry.) She pushed her.'

III. Non-modified verbs okay if IX shows who:

(7)   SUE IX$_A$ HANG-OUT MARY IX$_B$. IX$_A$ PUSH IX$_B$.   (3/3)

Analysis

Directional modification: **CLITICS**
▸ Semantically a full pronoun
▸ Phonologically reduced

IX$_A$ as a modifier.   [Ahn 2019]

▸ Motivation: introductory usese of IX to locus

(8)   Jin **IX$_A$** MEET DOCTOR IX$_B$. IX$_A$ HAPPY.

(9) $[\![IX_{LOC}]\!] = \lambda a. \lambda x.$ x is signed at a

▸ Introductory IX$_A$:   'Jin who is signed at a'
▸ Anaphoric IX$_A$: $\varnothing + IX_A$ 'the one signed at a'

IX$_A$ tracks with contrast.   [Ahn, Kocab, and Davidson 2019]

$[\![_A HELP_B]\!] = [\![HELP]\!] ([\![IX_B]\!]) ([\![IX_A]\!])$
'The one at A helped the one at B'

Conclusion

Directionality shares semantic/pragmatic properties with pronominal elements.

To the extent that we may also see evidence for agreement, this may be due to multiple grammars occurring through language change.

Diachronic Change?
Agreement systems develop from pronominal elements and involve **intermediate stages of cliticization** (phonologically/syntactic reduced, but retains status as an argument of verb) [Hopper and Traugott 2006; Ariel 2000; Griffith 2015]

French   [Legendre et al. 2010; Culbertson 2010]
▸ **Standard French**: subject clitics (real arguments)
▸ **Colloquial French**: agreement affixes

We would expect variability/gradibility

[Lillo-Martin and Meier 2011; Meier 2002]
▸ Evidence for diachronic change in directional verbs (new directional verbs added to lexicon)

[Engberg-Pedersen 1993]