

Abstract:

**Lexical (and other) constraints on agreement in signed and spoken language:  
Case studies on NGT and Chechen**

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NGT (Sign Language of the Netherlands) and Chechen (Nakh-Daghestanian) both exhibit sporadic agreement (or differential argument indexing) in the sense that agreement/indexing is not found on all verbs in all contexts. In NGT, as in all sign languages investigated so far, there is a class of verbal signs (so-called agreeing or directional verbs), which agree with the object, the subject or both (Mathur & Rathmann 2012). In an acceptability judgment experiment, five such verbs (ANSWER, HELP, TEACH, BULLY, CALL.BY.PHONE) were found to exhibit differential argument indexing, but with different degrees of regularity. The five verbs are in an implicational hierarchy following the presentation order above: if a signer expresses agreement on a particular verb, the verbs to the left also permit agreement marking. In addition, older signers in general were less likely to produce agreeing forms than younger signers.

In Chechen, unlike in NGT, agreement (in gender with the absolutive argument) is obligatory; however, only around 30% of verbs (types) agree. This is a lexical constraint: agreeing verbs are a disparate group in terms of conjugation class, valence pattern, and semantic class (Nichols 2007: 1180). However, they have in common the fact that they are discourse-frequent: around 50% of tokens ‘in running text’ agree (Komen et al. 2021).

We present three sets of preliminary corpus findings. First, we investigate the tendencies found in NGT acceptability judgment experiments: Do younger speakers produce agreement on particular verbs more often? Does the implicational hierarchy hold? Second, we compare the token frequencies of agreeing verbs in NGT and Chechen: Are high-frequency verbs more likely to agree? Third, we consider what effect differential indexing might have in discourse: When verbs agree, are they less likely to occur with an overt argument? (Cf. the complementarity hypothesis: ‘verb agreement and overt arguments are in complementary distribution’ (Nichols 2018)). We present data from our NGT and Chechen corpora, which represent two different kinds of differential agreement/indexing systems in two unrelated languages. In the process, we hope to show that it is both possible and fruitful to compare spoken and signed languages.

## References

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