Very atypical agreement indeed

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1. What is agreement, anyway?

In their thorough reappraisal of the lengthy scholarly debate about pointing and directional verbs in sign languages, Lilo-Martin & Meier (LM&M, this volume) argue that (i) both pointing and directionality in sign language are comparable to person marking in spoken languages, and (ii) directionality in sign language is comparable to agreement in spoken languages. The first proposition (i) is well-argued for, but the second (ii) is not. The authors seem to assume that by arguing for (i) they implicitly have argued for (ii), but this indicates a misconception of the meaning of the term *agreement*.

Without taking any issue with Lilo-Martin & Meier's arguments themselves (which in the case of person marking seem perfectly legitimate to me), their arguments do not substantiate the claim that directionality is similar to agreement in spoken language. At most, directionality seems to be an extremely non-canonical form of agreement, which, as the authors write themselves "may [. . .] be an indication that an analysis using another approach would be more successful" (LM&M §6.0). The problem seems to be that the authors equate the term 'agreement' with 'inflectional person marking'. Unfortunately, this interpretation is widespread in current linguistic theory, but it has little theoretical or practical validity.

In current linguistic practice two rather different notions of agreement are attested. The first notion, which I will designate as *agreement/concord*, defines agreement as some kind of systematic covariance of linguistic expressions, like in Italian singular *il nuovo cuadro* ('the new picture') vs. plural *i nuovi cuadri* ('the new pictures', Corbett 2006: 9). The second usage, which I will call *agreement/inflection*, reduces the notion of agreement to subject-verb covariance only. And even more extremely, in this tradition often *agreement*

simply designates any verb inflection with reference to the subject (e.g. as in the various articles in Boeckx 2006). Although Lilo-Martin & Meier explicitly refer to Corbett (2006) as their source for the notion *agreement*, in practice they never use his definitions and criteria to evaluate the sign language phenomena. They simply interpret the similarity between directionality in sign language and person inflection in spoken language as sufficient evidence to call them both agreement. This only makes sense when agreement is interpreted as *agreement/inflection*, and not as Corbett's *agreement/concord*.

In this commentary, I will first present a concise history of the term *agreement* to clarify the origin of the contemporary terminological confusion. Following that, I will sketch the kind of argumentation needed to show that directionality is *agreement/concord*, only to conclude that this does not seem to be the most promising approach. Directionality can still be conceived as an slightly special example of *agreement/inflection*, but that only implies that directionality is a kind of inflectional person marking. If that is the desired conclusion, then I would propose to simply use the designation *inflectional person marking* instead of the confusing term *agreement*.

2.   A concise history of the term *agreement*

The basic insight behind the notion 'agreement' is that there are various phenomena in human language that cannot be left unexpressed. Or, in different terms, various parts of human language are predictable to a certain extent, up the point of being completely redundant. For example, every reader of this sentence will immediately know what the last word of this sentence should [. . .]. The investigation of such restrictions is the main objective of modern structuralistic linguistics, but the basic insight of the importance of such restrictions dates back at least to the Modists of the 12th Century. Scholarly discussion in that time developed many different analyses of purely grammatical restrictions of possible language structures, separating them from semantics. The central new concept introduced by the Modists was *regere,* of which the modern concept *government* is a direct descendant (Kneepkens 1978). Two further important terms in the current context are *concordia* and *congruitas*, apparently used as synonyms (Law 2003: 166). Although these terms are strikingly similar to the English term *concord* and the German term *Kongruenz*, it turns out that the link is not a direct one. The terms *congruitas/concordia* refer

to a notion quite similar to the Chomskyan notion of grammaticality (Covington 1979: 479–480) in the sense that a sentence like "colourless ideas sleep furiously" is nonsensical, but grammatical. *Congruitas/concordia* is attained when all structural obligations are met by a sentence. One of these obligations is proper subject-verb agreement, which was referred to as *similitudo* by Thomas von Erfurt (Bursill-Hall 1972: 104; Covington 1979: 481).

Yet, the term *similitudo* vanished with the passing of time. In contrast, the term *concord* reappears in English grammatical descriptions as early as 1513 in William Lily's *A short introduction of grammar* with a meaning similar to *similitudo*. Lily writes the following:

"Concords of Latin speech: for the due joyning of words in construction, it is to be understood, that in Latin Speech there be three Concords: The first, between the Nominative case and the Verb: The second between the Substantive and the Adjective: The third between the Antecedent and the Relative." (Lily 1503: D4r)

This notion of *concord* as covariation between words, which can be attested in various parts of the system of a language (e.g. between subject and verb, between noun and adjective, or in other constructions) will remain widespread as a common concept of linguistics for the centuries to come.

In modern German linguistics, the translation of the term concord is *Kongruenz*. Although the similarity to the Medieval term *congruitas* is striking, it appears that the term *Kongruenz* was introduced in the early 19th Century by Karl Ferdinand Becker in his *Deutsche Sprachlehre* of 1829, possibly in parallel to the widespread mathematical usage of the term:

"Ein Thätigkeitsbegriff z.B. *blühen*, *groß* wird auf den Begriff eines Seins, z.B. *Baum*, *Hund* dergestalt bezogen, dass beide Begriffe zu einer Einheit des *Gedankens*, z.B. "*der Baum blühet*," "*der Hund ist groß*," oder zu einer Einheit des *Begriffes* z.B. "*der blühende Baum*," "*der große Hund*" verbunden werden. Dieses Verhältniß der Einheit – die *Kongruenz* – von Thätigkeit und Sein wird durch die Kongruenz der Form ausgedrückt, welche sich in der Flexion des bezogenen Wortes *blüh-et, blühend-e, groß-e darstellt*." (Becker 1829: 14)

Now, the crucial figure that brings all these developments together was Leonard Bloomfield. He appears to have been the first to use the noun *agreement* as a technical linguistic term in his widely influential book *Language*: "in a rough way, without real boundaries, we can distinguish three general types of agreement" (Bloomfield 1933: 191–193). These three types of agreement

are called *concord/congruence*, *government*, and *cross-reference*. Interestingly, Bloomfield discusses exactly these terms already in his 1914 book *An introduction to the study of language*, though without using the overarching term *agreement* (Bloomfield 1914: 178–180), so the coinage of the term *agreement* falls somewhere in between these two publications. There is of course a long tradition to use phrases like 'agree with' or 'in agreement with' in the linguistic literature, but these phrases always appear to be used in the general meaning of the words without any specific linguistic interpretation. The usage of the term *agreement* as a technical linguistic term started with Bloomfield (1933).

There are various notable aspects in this coinage of the term *agreement*. First, Bloomfield appears to treat the terms *concord* and *congruence* as synonyms. This most likely is not because he knew about 12th Century linguistics, but because he was intimately acquainted with the German linguistic scene in which *Kongruenz* was used roughly synonymous with the English term *concord*. Second, and more importantly, Bloomfield introduced the new term as a cover term to express the intuition that there is a strong similarity between the concepts of *government* and *concord* (see Corbett 2006: 7–8 for a discussion). Both these concepts express some purely structural restrictions on linguistic expressions, which is exactly the intuition that lead to the extensive discussion in the 12th Century. Bloomfield possibly felt that there was a need for a new term to surpass the entrenched terms *concord* and *government*, and their respective analyses.

Bloomfield's attempt to introduce an overarching concept failed. In the wake of the large influence of Bloomfield on linguistics, the term *agreement* caught on in the linguistic literature, but it was not used in the sense as proposed by him. Ever since Bloomfield, the term *agreement* seems basically to have been interpreted as a replacement of *concord* (cf. Corbett 2006: 5–7 for some examples of the resulting terminological confusion). Still based in the old tradition, Hockett (1958: 214) uses the term *concord*, but he notes that it is "often called agreement". Representing the new terminology, Chomsky (1965) uses the term *agreement* to refer to erstwhile typical cases of *concord*, e.g. "the grammar must contain agreement rules that assign to the Article all of the feature specifications for [Gender], [Number], and [Case] of the Noun it modifies" (Chomsky 1965: 174–175). More recently, starting with Steele (1978) and Moravcsik (1978), and culminating in the thorough analysis of Corbett (2006), the original intuition behind Lily's term *concord* has completely been replaced

with the new term *agreement*. I think this development is unfortunate, because there is nothing gained by using the term *agreement* instead of *concord*. However, such a development is neigh impossible to revert, so the best we can do is not to confuse the situation even more.

However, this is exactly what happened. Most confusingly, there is a parallel development in the usage of the term *agreement* with a rather different outcome. In the context of *Government & Binding* (Chomsky 1981), the term *agreement* became restricted to person-number-gender inflection on verbs (abbreviated as AGR). i.e. only the first of the Lily 'concords'. As a further development, all person/number/gender inflection on the verb with reference to the subject is today often simply called *agreement* (cf. Boeckx 2006). In this conceptualization, the Bloomfieldian notions *concord* and *cross-reference* get blurred, resulting in a large confusion in the literature (see Corbett 2003; Corbett 2006: 99–112). This terminological development is likewise extremely unfortunate, but too entrenched to be changed easily.

In summary, there are two rather different meanings of the term agreement in modern linguistic theory. The first interpretation refers to some kind of structural covariance and will be called *agreement/concord* here. The second interpretation seems to treat all subject inflection on verbs as agreement and will be called *agreement/inflection*.

3.   Directionality in sign language is not agreement/concord

Returning to sign language, Lilo-Martin & Meier argue (I think convincingly) that directionality is a kind of person marking, and that directionality has characteristics of inflectional marking (e.g. lexical idiosyncrasies, LM&M §4.2). This immediately allows the conclusion that directionality is a kind of *agreement/inflection*. But, as I have argued before, it might be better to use the more transparent name *inflectional person marking* instead of using the confusing term *agreement* for this aspect of sign language.

However, Lilo-Martin & Meier also claim that "the properties discussed [. . .] show that agreement in signed languages is not canonical in Corbett's (2006) sense [i.e. non-canonical *agreement/concord*, MC]" (LM&M §6.1). Corbett indeed presents an explicit discussion of how to establish the canonicity of person agreement (Corbett 2003; Corbett 2006: 99–112), but Lilo-Martin & Meier do not follow that proposal at all. They present a few arguments that

Table 1.   *Arguments for directionality in sign language being canonical agreement. The charac-
teristics of sign language are indicated with bold face, arguing that directionality is strongly non-
canonical agreement. It might be better interpreted as cross-reference.*

	Canonical Agreement		Non-canonical Agreement
A: Morphology	**Inflectional**		Free
B: Syntax	Fixed position of full NPs		**Free ordering of full NPs**
C: Case	Single role inflection		**Multiple roles inflection**
D: Referentiality	Possibly indefinite		**Always referential**
E: Content of Reference	Anything		**Only persons**
F: Distribution of Information	Less distinctions	**Equal number of distinctions**	More distinctions
G: Multirepresentation	Obligatorily double marking	**Null arguments possible**	Impossible double marking

do not have any relation to the canonicity of agreement (e.g. the classification
of agreeing and non-agreeing verbs, and the set of backwards verbs), and the
remaining arguments actually argue against canonical agreement.

Table 1 presents the different kinds of arguments proposed by Corbett to
determine the canonicity of person agreement. The characteristics of direction-
ality in sign language are shown in boldface, making it immediately obvious
that directionality is extremely non-canonical person agreement. I will briefly
discuss these arguments in turn. Morphologically (A), directionality seems to
be alike to inflectional marking (LM&M §6.1), which is actually the only clear
argument in favor of an agreement analysis. As for the syntax (B), sentences
with directional verbs seem to have a freer word order of the full NPs in the
sentence (LM&M §7.1), which argues for the functional primacy of the direc-
tionality, and thus for non-canonical agreement. As for case (C), directional
verbs can make reference to more than one argument, which Corbett treats as
a sign of non-canonicity. The fact that there are some verbs in sign language
that only refer to the object (LM&M §6.1) has no clear influence on the status
of agreement. Referentially (D), canonical agreement can refer to anything,
including indefinites. However, in sign language pointing and directionality
seems to be used only for personal reference, so this is a further sign of non-
canonical agreement. The final two arguments are non-committal as to the can-
onicity of person agreement in sign language. First, the distribution of informa-
tion (F) is equal between pointing and directional verbs (i.e. the kind of person
distinctions attested is the same). Regarding multirepresentation (G), this cri-
terion classifies the fact how common it is for the covarying elements to be

both overtly present, i.e. whether null arguments are allowed or not. Lilo-Martin & Meier write about this that "languages with rich agreement tend to allow null arguments, so the existence of null arguments in ASL is consistent with the analysis of directionality as agreement" (§7.2). This argument has it completely backwards. First, directionality is clearly not rich agreement in any possible interpretation of richness (it has only a first vs. non-first distinction). So, the existence of null arguments in ASL does not seem to be determined by the richness of the agreement. Further, the existence of null arguments actually argues *against* canonical agreement.

In summary, directionality in sign language does not very much looks like *agreement/concord* at all. The alternative analysis, which seems to be much more suitable, is that the person marking of directional verbs in sign language is a kind of inflectional person cross-reference. There is actual content that is expressed by this marking, it is not just structural redundancy.

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