

“Long distance” agreement: spatial modulations in Inuit Sign Language

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1.1. Sign Language Typology

- Studies on village sign languages (SLs) have contributed significantly to our understanding of sign language typology (Zeshan 2008).
- Urban SLs: used in urban settings, mainly in Western world.
- Village SLs: used in village community settings, mainly in rural, non-Western areas. High incidence of deafness in community. Hearing community members are fluent in SL.
- Village SLs have been claimed to share certain linguistic characteristics that distinguish them as a group from urban SLs (Zeshan 2008; Nyst, in press).

1.2. Verb Agreement in SLs

- Traditional three-way distinction (Padden 1988; Mathur 2000; Meir 2002):
 - Plain verbs: do not allow for spatial modulations to show agreement.
 - Agreement verbs: agree spatially with person/number features.
 - Spatial verbs: agree spatially with location features.
- Complications: backwards verbs, auxiliaries, optional object agreement.

3. Methodology

- Preliminary data is from three fieldwork trips to Rankin Inlet, Baker Lake and Taloyoak (see map).
- Data comes from spontaneous as well as elicited material (picture tasks, cartoon clips).

4. Results: Verb Agreement in IUR

- The IUR verb system also exhibits the well-known three-way distinction:

Plain verbs: e.g. THINK, COMMUNICATE, SIT, DRINK, EAT, CALL-ON-PHONE

(1) OTTAWA INDEX-LOC CALL-ON-PHONE LONG-AGO
'Long ago, I phoned Ottawa.'

Agreement verbs:

- Intransitive verbs: e.g. ICE-FISH, USE-ICE-AUGER, BEING-LOUSY

- Transitive verbs: e.g. BULLY, SEE, SHOOT

(2a) USE-ICE-AUGER₁ PRO_{3a} USE-ICE-AUGER_{3a} PRO_{3a}

'I use an ice auger, and so does he.'

(2b) PRO₁ COMMUNICATE PRO_{3a} SEE_{3b} PRO_{3b} PAY-ATTENTION

'I tell him to watch me do it, to pay attention.'

Spatial verbs: e.g. GO-TO, VEHICLE-MOVE, PLANE-FLY

(3) WINNIPEG INDEX-LOC_{Winnipeg} W_{peg} PLANE-FLY-WITH-STOP₃ INDEX-LOC₃
'The plane flies from Winnipeg, with some stops, to here (Rankin Inlet).'

- Localization of referents is not obligatory, as in (4), where the destination of GO-TO can only be recovered from real-world knowledge.

(4) PRO₁ ELDER BAKER-LAKE GO-TO_{3a} DOGSLED DOG
'My dad went from Baker Lake to (Back River) by dogsled.'

- Similarly to village sign languages, IUR makes use of an absolute frame of reference (Marsaja 2008). Spatial modulations refer to actual locations, even when they are 250km apart (“long distance” agreement).

(5) MUSK-OX BAKER-LAKE GO_{Baker} GOOD SHOOT
'Musk ox can be shot in Baker Lake.' (recorded in Rankin Inlet)

- Interestingly however, even the **overt specification** of the referent is **not** obligatory. Association is based on real-world context (passive construction?).

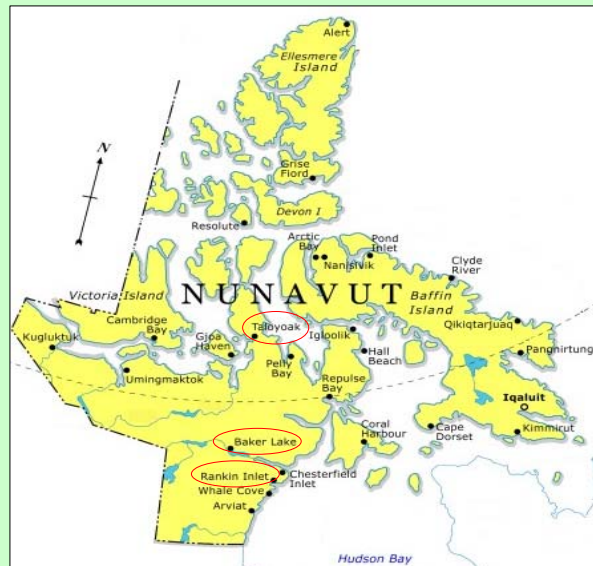
(6) PRO_{3a} BULLY_{3a} PRO_{3a} LONG-AGO INDEX-LOC_{3b}
'(They) bullied him, long ago over there (at school).'

5. Conclusion

- Though IUR shares sociolinguistic properties with village sign languages, it also shares grammatical properties with urban sign languages.
- IUR makes use of verb agreement in a similar way to urban sign languages, but makes use of an absolute frame of reference like village sign languages.
- Moreover, signers rely considerably on real-world context.
- Non-localization of referents might be passive constructions.

2. Inuit Sign Language: IUR

- A language native to the Inuit people. In former times, the people were nomadic; probably, there was more contact among deaf Inuit. Nowadays, contact is limited to deaf within a community.
- Communities are spread across the Canadian territory of Nunavut (see map), which is about 2 million km².
- The climate of the territory is Arctic (influence on language use?).
- Estimation: 5.7/1000 Inuit are deaf. MacDougall (2000) estimates that only 47 out of 155 deaf Inuit use IUR; all others use a form of Manually Coded English or ASL. Deaf Inuit children nowadays go to school with an ASL interpreter.
- IUR is highly endangered.
- IUR is used in multilingual environment: spoken languages are Inuktitut and English, and contact with ASL occurs in some communities.



Research question:

With respect to spatial modulations, does IUR pattern with urban or with village sign languages?