

Are agreement markers in Austrian Sign Language (ÖGS) really AUX?

Julia Krebs¹ & Ronnie B. Wilbur²

¹ *Research group Neurobiology of Language, Department of Linguistics; Centre for Cognitive Neuroscience (CCNS), University of Salzburg*

² *Linguistics Program, and Department of Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences, Purdue University*

In sign languages (SLs) argument structure can be indicated by a process often termed “verb agreement”, which is expressed by spatial modulation of path movement and/or hand orientation, in order to match the location of the core arguments. In the regular case, the agreeing verb moves from the location associated with the subject to the location of object and/or the palm/fingertips face the object’s locus. Plain verbs, however, are claimed to not be able to indicate agreement by themselves (but see Lourenço & Wilbur (Manuscript in preparation) for an alternative analysis), thus some, but not all, SLs make use of manual agreement markers. Like agreeing verbs, such agreement markers indicate argument structure by path movement and/or hand orientation that coincide with the location of the arguments. One point for interpreting at least some of these agreement markers as (agreement) auxiliaries was that they help the verb to overcome the agreement gap if it cannot indicate the argument structure (e.g. Steinbach & Pfau 2007).

However, considering these agreement markers as auxiliaries and thus labeling them like members of a specific functional category defined for spoken languages is not uncontroversial. According to a widely used definition from Akmajian et al. (1979, p.2), AUX is defined as a category that is “distinct in its syntactic behavior from the behavior of other syntactic categories - labeling a constituent that includes elements expressing the notional categories of Tense and/or Modality“. With this definition, SL agreement markers show untypical behavior for category AUX, because they do not mark tense or modality. Instead their primary and often sole function is to mark verbal agreement. For some SL agreement markers, arguments have been provided for or against describing them as auxiliaries, but their auxiliary status was not tested in more detail (but see Pavlič 2016 for an exception).

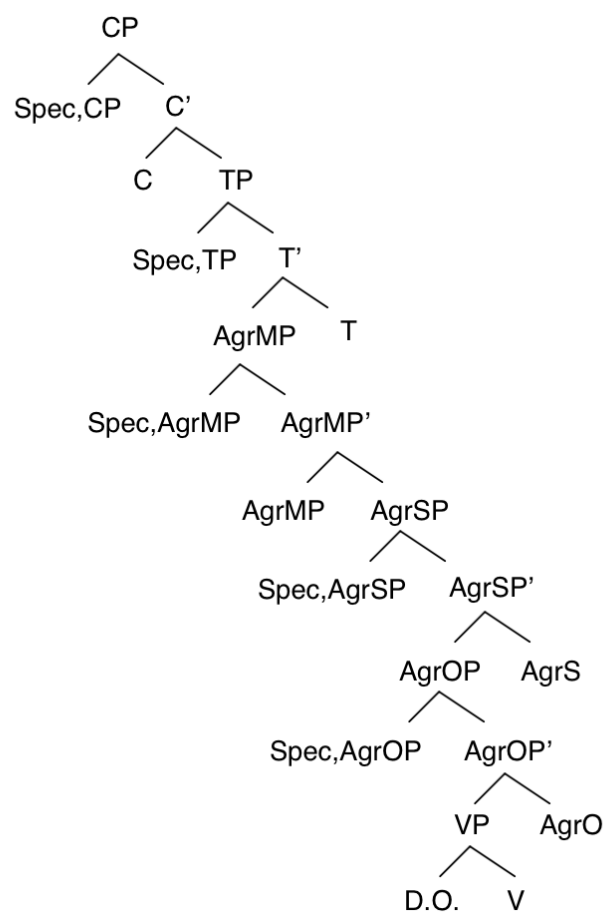
The present paper discusses the syntactic status of two agreement markers used in Austrian Sign Language (ÖGS). Using Akmajian et al.’s definition, the ÖGS markers also do not belong to category AUX because they primarily indicate argument structure, but do not mark tense or modality. We will present data from interviews with Deaf ÖGS signers as well as corpus data further arguing against auxiliary status of the ÖGS markers, even if we were to use a broader definition of AUX in which agreement marking would suffice for receiving auxiliary status. In particular, ÖGS markers often are used in the context of inflected agreeing verbs and thus may constitute redundant information. In many contexts, including with plain verbs, the markers are optional; in the context of plain verbs, basic sign order or specific non-manual markings (e.g. body shift, torso direction, eye gaze) may indicate argument structure. Additionally, there is great variability within signers with respect to usage. In our data the agreement markers can appear nearly everywhere in the sentence, with the restriction that they cannot occur in initial position or before S. Otherwise they may appear before or after the verb, before or after the object, and before or after a modal. Further comparison of ÖGS agreement markers with modal verbs, which are clearly considered AUX, reveals that agreement markers behave differently within ÖGS grammar.

Previous syntactic analyses for other agreement markers/auxiliaries (e.g. Rathmann 2003; Pfau & Steinbach 2013) cannot account for the various order possibilities of agreeing verbs and agreement markers (and modal verbs) observed for ÖGS. Also alternative analyses proposed for

some agreement markers [e.g. object pronouns (Börstell 2017), applicative morpheme (Pavlič 2016), emphasis (Steinbach & Pfau 2007)] cannot explain the observed behavior of the ÖGS markers.

We will present a possible syntactic approach for the ÖGS agreement markers that proposes an optional functional projection headed by the agreement marker which is placed in the tree above VP and below TP projections. The head of this agreement marker projection will bear the phonological features [path, facing, handshape]. The beginning and endpoint of the path movement is co-indexed with the spatial agreement features specified in the heads of AgrS/AgrO phrases respectively. This account captures the optionality of ÖGS agreement markers (the functional projection AgrMP is either available or not; Figure 1) as well as their redundancy (in combination with inflected agreeing verbs, the verbs can move to AgrO/AgrS). This analysis provides systematic derivations for all or nearly all documented orders in ÖGS.

Figure 1. Proposed syntactic tree for ÖGS



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