

## Role Prominence in American Sign Language and the Proximate/Obviative Contrast in Algonquian Languages

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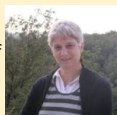
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Meir (2002: 428-429) argued:

1. In ISL, agreement is realized as the location specifications (the beginning and endpoints) of the verbs in question.
2. There are two main types of verbs in the language: verbs which do not inflect for agreement (plain verbs), and verbs which agree (agreement verbs and spatial verbs).
3. The path of movement of spatial verbs is from the location of the *source* argument to the location of the *goal* argument. Thus agreement can be said to be thematically determined.
4. The facing of the hands in agreement verbs is a mechanism distinct from the direction of the path movement. The facing of the hands is toward the R-locus of the syntactic object, and is analyzed as a dative case assigner.




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Meir, et al. (2007), *Journal of Linguistics*, "Body as Subject"

- Sandler, Meir, Padden, and Aronoff (2005; PNAS) argued for a set word order ((S)OV), but no agreement in Al Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language (ABSL), also reporting a very low occurrence of overtly expressed transitive "subject" noun phrases.
- What was described fit with Kegl, et al.'s (1999) observations regarding a tendency toward single valence verb constructions in the precursor to Nicaraguan Sign Language as well as the findings of increased valency (typically via topics) in studies of young ISN learners on the Atlantic coast. In a commentary on their findings in the 2005 LSA Summer Institute symposium, I noted the fact that while "subject-like" elements seems lacking, they were also profusely represented in the whole-body gesturing used almost exclusively by these individuals.
- In Meir, et al. 2007, Meir addressed this body issue, arguing that Plain verbs (which are body-anchored verbs) contain a lexical marking of subject (but not person) and therefore for do not show finger orientation marking on the object. Meir, viewed body as subject to be a "default lexicalization strategy."




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Primary claim:

- We argue that **role prominence** in ASL is akin to **proximate marking** in the Algonquian languages and like Meir's "subject marking" is the unmarked case.
- (Data from Penobscot, an E. Algonquian language of central Maine, but broadly representative of facts reported for a wide range of Algonquian languages)




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Algonquian Proximate vs. Obviative

- In Algonquian languages, **Proximate** is just the default and unmarked form (-ø), in contrast to the morphologically marked **Obviative (-al)**:

...nə-neman-ø kamač wə-kəsitəhama-l kə-tos-al  
**1-son-PROX** very 3-feels.intensely.for.her-OBV 2-daughter-OBV  
 '...my son (Prox) cares very much for your daughter (Obv).'

- The Proximate is the sole discourse-referentially **independent** argument in the transitive clause (Quinn 2006); all others (i.e. Obviatives) are referentially anchored to it.
- Hence only one Proximate per transitive clause (Goddard 1990, inter alia); all other arguments must be Obviative.




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Proximate vs. Obviative is about discourse status, not thematic or semantic role:

watihl <b>al</b>	wə-ihl.α-(W)-al	<i>Direct: Prox→Obv</i>
'Prox told Obv'	3-tell.Dir-W-Obv	(SDasα)
watihl <b>akol</b>	wə-ihl.əkʷ-(W)-al	<i>Inverse: Prox←Obv</i>
'Obv told Prox'	3-tell.Inv-W-Obv	(SDasα)

Instead, it is **Direct (Dir)** vs. **Inverse (Inv)** that relates thematic or semantic role to Proximate vs. Obviative status, a point which we will return to....




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Role Prominence: ASL

Please note that the verb HIT has a *lot* more internal morphological complexity than is shown in this simple gloss.

j-o-h-n[i]	 HIT[j]	b-i-l-l[j]
j-o-h-n[i]	[i] HIT 	b-i-l-l[j]
*j-o-h-n[i]	 HIT 	b-i-l-l[j]

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Role Prominence shift to an object is not passive

j-o-h-n[i]	 HIT[j]	b-i-l-l[j]	direct
j-o-h-n[i]	[i] HIT 	b-i-l-l[j]	inverse
j-o-h-n[i]	∅ HIT 	b-i-l-l[j]	passive

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Overview of main points

The ASL **Role Prominence** system tracks the Algonquian **Proximate** in:

- being limited to **one** Role Prominence/Proximate per transitive configuration
- being the **default** 3rd-person form, as against the explicitly marked non-RP/Obviative
- not contrasting between 1st and 3rd, only *3rd* vs. *3<sup>rd</sup>*
- connecting to an apparent (Direct-)Inverse contrast; and to an explicitly marked Obviative. (...which in turn contrasts w/ "pure Impersonal Agent", w/no possible oblique Agent)
- Role Prominence/Proximate impossible for the Possessee of a 3<sup>rd</sup> person

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ASL: only one RP element per transitive clause

ASL only allows one **Role Prominent** element per transitive clause. Two RPs are *(also)* phonologically precluded by only having one body. \*3RP→3RP

\*[ATLOC[i] [j-o-h-n]] [ATLOC[i] [RP]] [AT LOC[j] [b-i-i-i]] [ATLOC[j] [RP]] ...  
 John at loc[i] **role prom. [i]** Bill at loc[j] **role prom. [j]**

... [AT-LOC[i] [CL:1↑]]# LOC[i] AT+FROM-TO+ON-LOC[j] [CL:S]]  
 lto(person) at loc[j] rso(fist)-goes from-loc[i]-to-loc[j]

\*'John (RP) hit Bill(RP).'




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Algonquian: also has only one Proximate per transitive clause

- It is well-established that only one Algonquian **Proximate** is permitted per transitive clause (Goddard 1990:318, inter alia):
 

...**nə-neman-ø** kàmač wə-kəsítəhama-l kà-tos-al  
**1-son-PROX** very 3-feels.intensely.for.her-OBV 2-daughter-OBV  
 '...**my son (Prox)** cares very much for *your daughter (Obv)*.'
- Two Proximates per transitive clause are unattested in any Algonquian language.




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ASL: has only one RP element per transitive clause

- The closest workaround is a biclausal, "double verb construction" where the first clause leaves the reference of the goal unspecified and the second clause is a passive or inverse with RP now on the second referent. [See next slide.]

e.g., "John (RP) hit at someone; John hit Bill (RP)"  
 or "John (RP) hit at someone; Bill (RP) got hit"




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Work around: double verb construction

Double verb construction = splitting two RPs across two separate clauses for pseudo-  
[3RP→3RP] inverse or [∅ → 3RP] passive

[AT-LOC[j] [b-i-l-l]] [AT-LOC[j] [RP]] [AT-LOC[∅]] [CL:1↑]# LOC[i] FROM-TO+WARD-LOC[∅] [CL:S]^.  
j-o-h-n at location [i] role prominence[i] lto(person)-at-loc[∅] rso(fist) moves toward[∅]

... [ATLOC[j] [RP]] [AT-LOC[j] [CL:1↑]# LOC[i] AT+FROM-TO+ON-LOC[j] [CL:S]]  
role prominence[j] lto(person) at loc [j] rso (fist) from loc[i]to on loc[j]  
'John (RP) hits at someone ^ John (nonRP) hits Bill (RP).'

= effective workaround conveying 'John (RP) hit Bill(RP).' using the inverse;  
If the material in red were omitted, it would be an impersonal passive (shown later).  
Algonquian behaves similarly.




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ASL: Both arguments cannot have Role Prominence. However, the second argument can have a projected body pronoun, which does lend it more of a full-body perspective

The next examples show the Direct and Inverse with a Projected Body Pronoun (PBP), contrasted with an Inverse involving an object classifier (CL:1). The PBP still requires the Inverse to have Proximate status.




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Proximate: ASL Projected Body Position still requires the Inverse to carry RP/Proximate marking

j-o-h-n[i] PBP[j]#HIT[j] b-i-l-l[j] direct

j-o-h-n[i] PBP[j]#[i]HIT b-i-l-l[j] inverse

j-o-h-n[i] CL:1[j]#[i]HIT b-i-l-l[j] inverse




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### Role Prominence = Proximate

- While Proximate has long been recognized as the default form for third person animates in Algonquian, Role Prominent status has often been misidentified as the marked form in ASL.
- From comparison to Algonquian Proximates, we now recognize that Role Prominent (morpheme=signer's body) is in fact also the default form in ASL, as it is a near-obligatory part of unergative intransitive and transitive clauses alike.

j-o-h-n \*(RP) WORK++. "John (non-RP) is working."

j-o-h-n \*(RP) HIT \*(RP) b-i-l-l. "John (non-RP) hit Bill (non-RP)."




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### Role Prominence: only contrastive in 3→3, 3←3 configurations, not 1→3 (below) or 3←1 (next slide)

The Role Prominence contrast is not available in a 1→3 or 3→1 configuration: 1 is always RP, and the structures look more like 1→3, 1←3. *As per the Algonquian Inverse!*

**(RP)1→3** [no option for 1→3(RP)]

(IX1p) [ATLOC[1p] [RP]] [AT-LOC[j] [CL:1↑]]#LOC[i] FROM-TO+ON-LOC[j] [CL:S]...

pro-1p verb role prom. verb theme verb(HIT) theme

l role prominence[i] person at loc.[i] from loc [1p] to-on-location[j] by-fist

...[Ø+ATLOC[j] [b-i-l-l]]

Bill at location [j]

'I hit Bill' (RP on first person; no option of contrast of RP on 3<sup>rd</sup> person)




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### 1←3: Role Prominence again not contrastive; must be on 1 (via Inverse).

**(RP)1←3** [No option for 1←3(RP)] ...

[ATLOC[j] [b-i-l-l]] [ATLOC[1p] [RP]] [AT-LOC[j] [CL:1↑]]#

Bill at location[j] role prominence[1p] at LOC[j] by person

...FROM-TO+ON-LOC[1p] [CL:S]

moves-from-loc [j] to-on-loc[1p] by-fist(rso)

'Bill hit me.' (RP on first person via Inverse; again no option of contrast of RP on 3<sup>rd</sup> person)




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Both options (3→3, 3←3) are possible and therefore contrastive for Proximate vs. Obviative: Direct

3RP→3nonRP = DIRECT [John is RP/Proximate; Bill is Obviative]

[ATLOC[i] [j-o-h-n]] [ATLOC[i] [RP]] [AT-LOC[j]] [CL:1↑]# ...  
 John-at-loc[i] role prominence[i] at-loc[j]-by-person-(lto)

...LOC[i] AT+FROM-TO+ON-LOC[j] [CL:S]] [ATLOC[j] [b-i-l-l]]  
 from-loc[i]-to-loc[j] by fist(rso) Bill at loc[j]

'John (RP) hit Bill (nonRP).' = DIRECT




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Both options (3→3, 3←3) are possible and therefore contrastive for Proximate vs. Obviative: Inverse

3RP←3nonRP = INVERSE [Bill is Proximate; John is Obviative]

[ATLOC[i] [j-o-h-n]] [ATLOC[j] [b-i-l-l]] [ATLOC[j] [RP]] ...  
 John-at-loc[i] Bill-at-loc[i] role prominence[j]

... [AT-LOC[j]] [CL:1↑]# LOC[i] AT+FROM-TO+ON-LOC[j] [CL:S]]  
 lto(person)-at-loc[i] rso(fist)-goes from-loc[i]-to-loc[j]

'John (nonRP) hits Bill (RP).' = INVERSE




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Same in Algonquian: Prox-Obv only contrastive for 3<sup>rd</sup> relative to 3<sup>rd</sup>, not 1/2 relative to 3<sup>rd</sup>

nàtihlα      nà-ihl.α-(W)      Direct: 1→3  
 'I tell Prox'      1-tell.Dir-W

nàtihlak<sup>m</sup>      nà-ihl.αkw-(W)      Inverse: 1←3  
 'Prox tells me'      1-tell.Inv-W

wàtihlαl      wà-ihl.α-(W)-al      Direct: Prox→Obv  
 'Prox told Obv'      3-tell.Dir-W-Obv      (SDasα)

wàtihlakol      wà-ihl.αkw-(W)-al      Inverse: Prox←Obv  
 'Obv told Prox'      3-tell.Inv-W-Obv      (SDasα)




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**Summary**

- In both systems, the discourse contrast of Prox/RP is only meaningfully available between 3rd persons.
- Both ASL and Algonquian languages show transitive-verb morphology---namely, Direct vs. **Inverse**---alternating to reflect which argument role is discourse-/perspectively primary (Prox/RP), and which is secondary/dependent (Obv/non-RP).
- So the **Inverse** is crucial here, in mediating which thematic role/semantic role the Proximate holds.




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**Same pattern re Indefinite/Impersonal Agent:**

This 3→3, 3←3 Direct vs. Inverse system clearly contrasts w/an Indefinite (Impersonal, "Passive") Agent form, w/no licit overt Agent (the case mentioned earlier):

*Indef/Impers*→3RP

[ATLOC[j] [b-i-i]] ATLOC[j](RP) [AT-LOC[j] [CL:1↑]]# (∅ overt source)-TO+ON-LOC[j] [CL-S]  
 Bill-at-loc[j] role prominence[j] Ito(person)-at-loc[j] contact-loc[j]-by fist(rso)

'Bill (RP) gets hit.' (*impersonal passive; Source deleted; no agent possible*)




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**Same pattern in Algonquian**

Algonquian systems show the same restricted, no-Agent-permitted forms (often also w/"stripped of the Agent component" patterns, and/or elements partly resembling the UNDERGO-like Inverse):

	tákamα	takam.α-(W)	
	'Prox was struck'	hit.Dir-W	(awehsosak:12)
cp.	nətákamα	nə-takam.α-(W)	
	'I hit Prox...'	1-hit.Dir-W	(PD:447)
	nətákaməke	nə-takam.əke-(P)	
	'I am hit'	1-hit.ImpersAgt-P	(S:70:10)




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Nominal possession:

Algonquian \*Proximate-Possessee-of-3<sup>rd</sup>

- Algonquian languages completely disallow the **Possessee of a 3<sup>rd</sup> person to be Proximate**:

w-ikawəss-al	3-mother-OBV	'his/her mother'
*w-ikawəss	3-mother	(unattested; ungramm. in Alg lgs in general)
vs. k-ikawəss	2-mother	'your mother'
n-ikawəss	1-mother	'my mother'

- This is because in 'his/her mother,' the MOTHER referent is discourse-referentially dependent on the (necessarily already established) HIS/HER referent. (Quinn 2006)
- Proximate is the discourse-referentially **independent**; Obviative is its *dependent*.




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Nominal possession:

ASL also shows \*RP/ht-Possessee-of-3<sup>rd</sup>

Head tilt (ht) = **Role Prominence** = Proximate

Eye Gaze (eg) = Non-Role Prominent = Obviative

We observe in ASL: \*ht-Possessee-of-3<sup>rd</sup>

= Algonquian: \*Proximate-Possessee-of-3<sup>rd</sup>




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ASL: both DPs and Clauses show evidence of transitivity (in Algonquian too!)

transitive                      intransitive

Parallels between noun phrase and clause	
Noun phrase with possessor	Noun phrase without possessor
_____ ht <sub>i</sub> _____ eg <sub>j</sub>	_____ ht <sub>i</sub> and/or eg <sub>j</sub>
45. DP <sub>i</sub> [POSS] <sub>AGR<sub>i</sub></sub> [ ] <sub>AGR<sub>j</sub></sub> NP <sub>j</sub>	47. [DET] <sub>AGR<sub>i</sub></sub> NP <sub>j</sub>
Transitive clause	Intransitive clause
_____ ht <sub>i</sub> _____ eg <sub>j</sub>	_____ ht <sub>i</sub> and/or eg <sub>j</sub>
46. DP <sub>i</sub> [ ] <sub>AGR-S<sub>i</sub></sub> [ ] <sub>AGR-O<sub>j</sub></sub> V DP <sub>j</sub>	48. DP <sub>i</sub> [ ] <sub>AGR-S<sub>i</sub></sub> V




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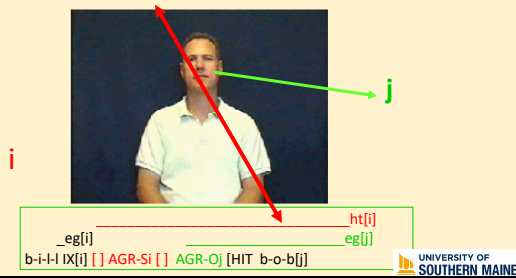
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Head tilt (ht-proximate) in a transitive clause:




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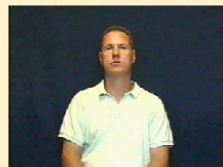
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John's Friend



ht<sub>a</sub>  
JOHN<sub>a</sub> POSS-a FRIENDb



ht<sub>a</sub>  
JOHN<sub>a</sub> POSS<sub>a</sub> FRIENDb

\* Head tilt only over FRIEND

This is just spreading of ht over the possessive phrase.




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### ASL Role Prominence = Algonquian Proximate

The ASL **Role Prominence** system tracks the Algonquian **Proximate** in:

- being limited to **one** Role Prominence/Proximate per transitive configuration
- being the *default* 3rd-person form, as against the explicitly marked non-RP/Obviative
- not contrasting between 1st and 3rd, only 3rd vs. 3<sup>rd</sup>
- connecting to an apparent (Direct-)Inverse contrast; and to an explicitly marked Obviative. (...which in turn contrasts w/"pure Impersonal Agent", w/no possible oblique Agent)
- Role Prominence/Proximate impossible for the Possessee of a 3<sup>rd</sup> person




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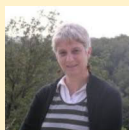
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Let's return to some links back to Irit Meir's work.

- It is unusual for a language to have object agreement and not subject agreement, but it is not unusual for case marking (like nominative/accusative marking to have nominative unmarked while accusative and dative are marked).
- Case marking in ISL is not on the nouns, but rather on the verb, which is typical of head marking languages.
- Three argument verbs are applicative and obligatorily agree with the dative object.
- The subject agreement marker is optional, whereas the object agreement marker is not. Padden (1983) argued for subject agreement omission in ASL which is parallel to what happens in ISL.




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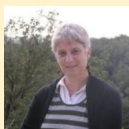
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The perplexing case of Padden's "backwards verbs":

Padden noted that "backwards" verbs like TAKE and INVITE don't fit with thematic verb agreement because they optionally omit the goal instead of the source. Therefore, Padden argued for two distinct verb types (one backward), where movement was toward the syntactic subject. Meir (2002), instead, argued for a co-occurring syntactic form (the direction of the fingers) marking the dative object and that it was the movement to the other argument (the unmarked subject) that could be omitted.




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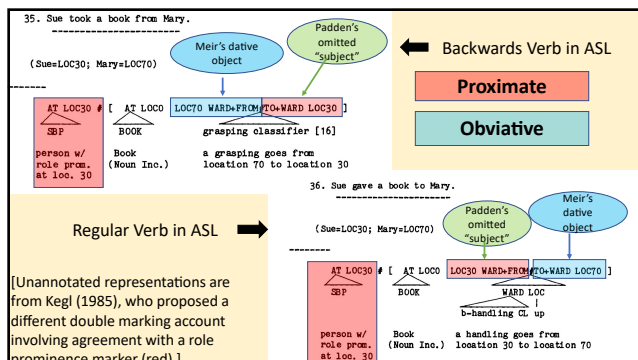
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