

GIVE or TAKE – Transitivity prominence of FinSL and SSL verbs

Tommi Jantunen¹, Johanna Mesch² & Carl Börstell³

¹Sign Language Centre, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

^{2,3}Department of Linguistics, University of Stockholm, Sweden

In this paper we apply methodology presented in Kimmelman (2016) and investigate the transitivity prominence of verbs in Finnish Sign Language (FinSL) and Swedish Sign Language (SSL). Specifically, we ask how similar or different FinSL and SSL verbs are in terms of their transitivity prominence, and how the transitivity prominence of FinSL and SSL verbs compares with that of verbs in other languages. The term *transitivity prominence* refers to the relative frequency with which a verb occurs with an object. Haspelmath (2015) has shown that in spoken languages, verbs form a ranked continuum between those that are highly transitivity prominent and those that occur with no object at all. Recently, Kimmelman (2016) has argued that Haspelmath's ranking applies also to the verbs of Russian Sign Language (RSL).

Our investigation is based on annotated corpus data comprising narratives, conversations and presentations. For FinSL, we use material from 20 signers (2h 40min, 18446 sign tokens) and for SSL from 28 signers (1h 54min, 15186 sign tokens). From this data, we identified 18 verb lexemes which all have enough tokens and which are all comparable between languages. In FinSL, the total number of verb tokens is 745 and in SSL the corresponding number is 579. All the verbs were annotated for overt direct and indirect objects and for overt clausal complements. The annotation work was carried out by different annotators following common guidelines.

Concerning the results, our data suggests that there are clear similarities in what verbs rank highest (e.g. GIVE, TAKE) and what lowest (e.g. HAPPY, COLD) in terms of their transitivity prominence in FinSL and SSL. On the basis of Haspelmath (2015) and Kimmelman (2016), these are the same verbs that are ranked highest and lowest also in spoken languages and in RSL (Table 1). However, the data also shows that certain verbs (e.g. SEARCH, TALK, PLAY) may differ considerably in the position they occupy in the ranking. Although some of these differences can be assumed to be true differences between languages, we suspect that some may, despite our best efforts, be traceable back to issues relating to the type of data as well as to the way the samples were formed and objects annotated. In our presentation, we will present the results of our comparative study and discuss the data and methodology-related issues in more detail.

Table 1. Ranking of 14 verbs (a reduced sample) in SSL, FinSL, RSL and spoken languages (SpoL).

SSL	% direct obj.	RANK.AVG	FinSL	% direct obj.	RANK.AVG	RSL	% direct obj.	RANK.AVG	SpoL	% obj.	RANK.AVG
GIVE	0,950	14	TELL	0,643	14	GIVE	0,640	14	TAKE	1,000	14
TAKE	0,429	13	GIVE	0,571	13	TAKE	0,473	13	GIVE	0,980	13
SEE	0,333	12	TAKE	0,542	12	EAT	0,244	12	EAT	0,930	11,5
SEARCH	0,302	11	KNOW	0,436	11	KNOW	0,236	11	SEE	0,930	11,5
TALK	0,233	10	EAT	0,333	10	SEARCH	0,186	10	KNOW	0,880	9,5
KNOW	0,232	9	PLAY	0,277	9	PLAY	0,146	9	SEARCH	0,880	9,5
LOOK	0,198	8	SEE	0,241	8	TELL	0,145	8	TELL	0,780	8
TELL	0,105	7	LOOK	0,188	7	SEE	0,123	7	LOOK	0,730	7
PLAY	0,083	6	THINK	0,184	6	TALK	0,106	6	THINK	0,520	6
THINK	0,059	5	TALK	0,141	5	LOOK	0,054	5	SPEAK	0,410	5
SPEAK	0,058	4	SEARCH	0,114	4	SPEAK	0,053	4	TALK	0,400	4
EAT	0,000	2	SPEAK	0,000	2	THINK	0,025	3	PLAY	0,100	3
COLD	0,000	2	COLD	0,000	2	COLD	0,000	1,5	COLD	0,000	1,5
HAPPY	0,000	2	HAPPY	0,000	2	HAPPY	0,000	1,5	HAPPY	0,000	1,5

Spearman's rank correlation: FinSL-SSL=0,5033 (p=0.067), FinSL-RSL=0,7845 (p=0.001), FinSL-SpoL=0,7043 (p=0.005), SSL-RSL=0,6254 (p=0.017), SSL-SpoL=0,6800 (p=0.007), RSL-SpoL=0,8256 (p=0.000)

References

- Haspelmath, M. (2015). Transitivity prominence. In Malchukov, A. & Bernard, C. (eds.), *Valency classes in the world's languages*, 131–147. Berlin: De Gruyter.
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