Agreement and Word Order
in American Sign Language (ASL) *

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1. Introduction

American Sign Language (ASL, hereafter) is a natural language used by most deaf people in the U.S. and Canada. This paper considers the correlation between number agreement and different word orders, SVO and OSV, in ASL. The characteristic of ASL, being a topic-prominent language, yields various sentence orders. Nowadays, most researchers agree upon the basic order to be SVO although few decades ago there were disagreements with what basic word order is and whether it is a free word order language (e.g. Fischer 1975, Friedman 1976, Lidell 1977, 1980). On the other hand, there have been debates on whether grammatical agreement exists in ASL (e.g. Lillo-Martin 1986, 1991; Bahan 1996; Liddell 1990, 2000; Rathmann and Mathur 2002). The ones arguing that agreement is a grammatical phenomenon in ASL limit their research on the description of verb morphology; and thus little attention has been paid to number agreement with agreement triggers.

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My research, based on data that I have collected from native ASL signers, supports the idea that the basic order of ASL is SVO. The data show that the agreement patterns are not identical in different word orders - SVO vs. OSV. According to this discovery, I argue that these two structures are syntactically different and that number agreement shown in ASL is systematic. I propose that ASL shows strict number agreement between verbs and objects in basic SVO order, while anaphoric agreement between dislocated topic and incorporated pronominal object in OSV order.

Before providing the crucial data in regard to the agreement patterns, I first begin with a brief presentation of debates on word order that have existed and discuss phi-features of triggers and targets.

1.1. Debates on word order in ASL

This section summarizes the debates on the basic word order of ASL. The word order seems to be very flexible in ASL due to its topic oriented characteristic. Not everyone has consented to the idea that SVO is the basic word order of ASL. Friedman (1976) argued that ASL is a free word order language, with the exception of the tendency for the verb to be last. He also argued that there is no break in between O and SV in OSV order, which is not accepted in the current signed linguistics. Along the same lines, Bouchard and Dubuisson (1995) and Bouchard (1996) proposed that sign languages do not set basic word order and it is not functionally necessary.

On the other hand, there are several important studies arguing that the basic word order of ASL is SVO. Fischer (1975) argues that subordinate clauses with any two noun phrases exhibit SVO order although the main