Handout 4: The double object construction and the dative alternation
Seminar The verb phrase and the syntax-semantics interface, Andrew McIntyre

1. Introduction

- The to-alternation (also called the dative alternation):
  1. a. [s Ann [vp sent [to Mary] [a book]]] [double object construction, DOC] (1)
  2. b. [s Ann [vp sent [to Mary]]] [to-construction] (2)

- The to-alternation mainly found with the following verb classes (more details in Levin 1993):
  1. Possession relation (possibly only intended) brought about between the objects:
     a. give, pass, allow, sell, bring, lend, refund, award, allot; throw/kick (a ball)
     b. (future having): promise, bequeath, offer, guarantee, owe

- Communication verbs:
  1. a. tell (a secret), read/recite (a poem)
  2. b. (communication methods) I SMSed/faxed/e-mailed them an answer
  3. c. Exceptions: DOC is unacceptable or only marginal with verbs of manner of speaking: shout/yell/whisper/mumble/stutter her the answer

A. How do say and tell differ with respect to the dative alternation? (Use a fairly detailed dictionary to provide you with examples; ignore uses of tell which don’t involve the communication of information, e.g. *I can’t tell in the sense ‘I don’t know’.

B. The verbs teach and show allow dative alternation but don’t fit into either of these groups.

They have sometimes been regarded as supplettive causatives of other verbs. Which other verbs? Can you find evidence against this analysis? Can you think of an alternative analysis?

- Latinate/Romance verbs resist DOC (with some exceptions; see Pinker 1989 on the negative evidence problem that this raises):
  1. a. *Cuthbert donated the museum his stamp collection.
  2. b. *She explained them the subject.
  3. c. *They exhibited them the etchings.

- Verbs expressing taking something from someone disallow DOCs (unlike French, German)

- The -alternation is not the same thing as the for-alternation (=benefactive alternation).

Here there is no invariant with to. See appendix for more details.

2. Different opinions on the semantics of DOCs and to-constructions

- Information-structural approach: There are no semantic differences between DOC and to-variant. They differ only according to the following information-structural principles:
  1. a. Given (=old, pre-mentioned) material comes before new material.
  2. b. Heavy (=long) phrases come last. [after Rappaport & Levin 2008]

- This correctly predicts the fact that pronouns nearly always precede full NPs, since pronouns give old information. More evidence seen below.

- HAVE-GOAL approach (e.g. Harley, Krifka, Pinker, Richards...) says that there is a real semantic difference between DOC and to-construction. DOC involves the bringing-about of a possession (HAVE) relation between the objects, and the 1st object is a possessor. The to-construction expresses (possibly metaphorical) motion towards a goal. Example:

3. Possession and double objects

(10) a. Cuthbert sent Josephine the book = caused her to have it by sending it.
   b. Cuthbert sent the book to Josephine = caused it to go to her by sending it.

2.1. Comparing the approaches: Differences between DOC and to-variants

2.1.1. Animacy

- It is often claimed that indirect objects must be animate because of data like the following:

  (11) a. I sent the letter to Fred. b. I sent the letter to Fred’s home
  c. I sent Fred the letter. d. *I sent Fred’s home the letter

  (12) a. I sent the letter to London. b. I sent London the letter. [London = a group of people in London]

- However, the claim is wrong. Inanimate ind. objects are ok if they can have the direct objects. (This is possible if direct object is inalienably possessed or otherwise relational.)

  (13) a. The librarian assigned/gave the book a number. b. The sponsors gave the building a new roof/a chance.
  c. The guitar work gives the song a sinister feel.
  d. They denied the building a chance of restoration.

  (14) a. The putsch gave the country a new dictator. cf. The country has a new dictator.
  b. The putsch gave me a new dictator. cf. *I have a new dictator.

- The HAVE-GOAL approach explains these facts simply. Inanimate indirect objects are acceptable if they are Recipients/ Possessors. When they are unacceptable, they are just goals.

- The information-structural approach can be made compatible with the facts by saying that the equivalence between DOCs and to-constructions holds for possessive to, but not for spatial to. They differ as follows:

  (15) Possessive to indicates that its complement is a Possessor or Recipient. Examples:
  a. The book belongs to Jane.
  b. When John died, his house went to his daughter.
  c. He gave the house to his daughter.
  d. There is plausibility to this idea (=The idea has plausibility)

  (16) Spatial to indicates that its complement is a Goal (=final point of a spatial path). E.g.:
  a. I sent the book to your home address.
  b. They went to Siberia.

2.1.2. Themes not pre-existing the event

- Argument for HAVE-GOAL approach (e.g. Krifka): DOC is good but to-variant bad if theme doesn’t exist before the event and cannot move to a goal, as predicted by (10).

  (17) a. *The noise gave me a headache. [cf. I have a headache]
  b. *The noise gave a headache to me

- However, the argument has a problem because the to-variant is possible if the to-phrase is heavy, or if coming-into-existence entity is not new information in discourse, as (7) predicts.

  (18) a. Cuthbert’s data gave me an idea
  b. Cuthbert’s data gave an idea to me

- However, the argument has a problem because the to-variant is possible if the to-phrase is heavy, or if coming-into-existence entity is not new information in discourse, as (7) predicts.
2.1.3. Idioms

- Harley (2002), Richards (2001): argument for HAVE-GOAL approach from idiom data like:

(20) a. The psycho gave me the creeps
   b. *The psycho gave the creeps to me
   c. I had got the creeps

(21) LIKEWISE: give x the sack: give x the cold shoulder; give x a hard time

- Reply: (20b) is bad because parts of idiom chunks aren’t given info (Rappaport/Levin 2006). Moreover, the to-variant is ok if recipient is heavy:

(22) a. The psycho gave the creeps to everyone who noticed the machete he was holding.
   b. The boss gave the sack to everyone who disagreed with his unethical practices.

2.1.4. Inalienable possession

- Inalienable possession: possession relation which cannot be cancelled:

(23) INALIENABLE POSSESSION: Mary has red hair; Mary’s parents; give the house a new roof

(24) ALIENABLE POSSESSION: Mary has a cat; Mary’s dog. I gave Mary a dog.

- Relevance of inalienable possession to the to-alternation:

(25) a. They gave a (table/patient) a new leg. [→table/patient has leg]
   b. *They gave a new leg to a table.
   c. *They gave a new leg to a patient. [to put on her mantle piece?]

- The HAVE-GOAL account explains this easily: give forces possession interp. In (b,c), leg moves to possessor. It can’t be relational while moving, since not part of possessor. Hence only interp. is alienable possession (which is impossible with inanimates).

- But it is unclear if the HAVE-GOAL approach is needed to explain this, as inalienably possessed NPs must be c-commanded by their possessors anyway:

(26) a. John broke a leg.
   b. Poor John! A leg broke on him. [cf. his leg broke on him]
   c. Poor John! A leg was broken. [cf. his leg was broken]

2.1.5. Immobile possessions

(27) a. They gave her a house.
   b. They gave a house to her.

- HAVE-GOAL account has problems here because the house does not move. The contrast is not a problem for the information-structural approach.

2.2. Conclusions

- The information-structural approach is superior to the HAVE-GOAL approach, provided we distinguish between spatial and possessive to.

3. Appendix 1: The benefactive alternation (for-alternation)

- Benefactive alternation: indirect objects paraphrasing with for PP. Four classes:

PERFORMED OBJECTS:

(28) a. He played/sang them a song [for/to them]
   b. He danced her a jig [for her/to her]

OBTAINED OBJECTS:

(29) a. He [got/fetched/bought/found/picked] her some flowers
   b. He stole her some flowers [=for her, not from her]

CREATED OBJECTS:

3. Appendix 2: Possessors as locations and the decomposition of have

- Some linguists (e.g. Benveniste 1966, Freeze 1992, den Dikken 1997) argue that have itself should be decomposed:

avoir n’est rien d’autre qu’un être à inverser + [Benveniste 1966:197]

- The two sentences in (34) only differ in terms of information structure:

(34) a. Marie a un livre.
   b. Le livre est à Marie.

- Most languages lack a verb functioning like have, and would have to express I have a book with a sentence like At me is a book (Freeze 1992, Benveniste 1966). Two examples:

(35) a. larkeekee paas kuttaai hai [Hindi]
   b. Le livre est à Marie.

- Exterior possessor inalienable domain.

5. References


Freeze, R. (1992), „Existentials and other locatives.” Language 68: 1, 353-598


