

Construction choice and the English dative alternation: Evidence for semantic and morphophonological factors

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English has two dative constructions: the prepositional-object (PO) dative (e.g., *John gave a book to Sue*) and the double-object (DO) dative (e.g., *John gave Sue a book*). It has often been argued (e.g., Green, 1974; Oherle, 1976; Gropen et al, 1989; Pinker, 1989) that the PO- and DO- dative constructions have subtly-different semantics (roughly ‘X CAUSE [Y GO TO Z]’ and ‘X CAUSE [Z HAVE Y]’ respectively) and consequently that verbs that denote *causing to go* without *causing to have* are restricted to the PO-dative (1), whilst those that denote *causing to (not) have* without *causing to go* are restricted to the DO-dative (2):

- (1) John dragged a book to Sue (PO) vs *John dragged Sue a book (DO)
- (2) John denied Sue a drink (DO) vs *John denied a drink to Sue (PO)

Another traditional claim is that verbs with Latinate morphophonology (i.e., that are polysyllabic, or bi-syllabic with second-syllable stress) are restricted to the PO-dative (3)

- (3) John suggested the trip to Sue (PO) vs *John suggested Sue the trip (DO)

However, recent studies (e.g., Krifka, 2003; Felbaum, 2005; Bresnan & Nikitina, 2007) have shown that both the semantic and morphophonological constraints are frequently violated in naturalistic corpora, raising the possibility that these constraints are not psychologically real for actual (as opposed to idealised) speakers. Indeed, it is well known that speakers’ choice of dative construction is influenced by factors such as animacy, definiteness, NP length and anaphoricity (Bresnan, Cueni, Nikitina & Baayen, 2007). Might these factors obviate the need for independent semantic and morphophonological constraints altogether?

The present paper provides evidence from two grammaticality judgment studies that, in fact, both the semantic and morphophonological constraints are psychologically real for adult English speakers, but probabilistic as opposed to absolute (and hence may be over-ridden by discourse factors). In Experiment 1, adult native speakers were taught novel verbs whose semantics were consistent with (a) PO-only, (b) DO-only and (c) alternating semantic verb classes. Within the semantically-alternating class, morphophonology was varied such that the novel verbs were either Latinate (e.g., *toncate*, *orgulate*) or native-like (i.e., Germanic; e.g., *blafe*, *nace*). Participants then rated a PO- and DO-dative sentence for each novel verb. Importantly, in addition to matching each pair for animacy, definiteness, NP length and anaphoricity, we endeavored - as far as possible - to ensure that the values chosen for each dimension did not particularly favour one construction over the other. Linear mixed effects regression models confirmed that, as predicted, participants significantly preferred (a) PO- over DO- dative uses of semantically PO-only verbs and (b) DO- over PO- dative uses of semantically DO-only verbs. For (c) semantically alternating verbs, participants significantly preferred PO- over DO-dative uses of novel Latinate verbs, but showed no preference with novel Germanic verbs.

In Experiment 2, participants rated PO- and DO- dative forms of 301 dative verbs (every dative verb listed by Pinker, 1989 or Levin, 1993). Independently-obtained semantic judgments of the extent to which each verb denoted an event of *causing to have* versus *causing to go* were shown to be significant predictors of the relative acceptability of PO- versus DO-datives across verbs.

Together, these studies show that (together with discourse factors), both verb semantics and morphophonology are crucial determinants of dative choice.