

A semantic account of associations between dative verbs and constructions in English and Cantonese

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Dative verbs—verbs that take agent, recipient, and theme arguments—have received considerable attention in recent years from various theoretical and empirical perspectives. Previous studies of these verbs have made significant contribution to the study of the nature of verb meaning, constructional meaning and the relation between these two (Pinker 1989, Goldberg 1995, Krifka 2004, Levin 2004, Rappaport Hovav & Levin 2008, Lee 2020). Focusing on data from English and Cantonese, the present study examines the syntactic distribution of major semantic classes of dative verbs in syntactic constructions, and explores its implications for the study of crosslinguistic variation in verb distribution in ditransitive constructions.

While both languages have two dative constructions, the prepositional dative construction (PDC) and the double object construction (DOC), English and Cantonese differ as to the extent they extend these constructions to major dative verb classes. English dative verbs such as *give*, *send* and *throw* allow both argument realization options, as is illustrated with *give* in (1).

- (1) a. Ann gave Beth the key. (DOC)
b. Ann gave the key to Beth. (PDC)

English is in sharp contrast to Cantonese, a language in which the DOC is lexically restricted to the verb *bei*² meaning ‘give’. While all Cantonese dative verbs may be found in the PDC where *bei*² functions as a dative marker, only the verb *bei*² ‘give’ may also be found in the DOC. The verb *bei*² contrasts with other *give*-type verbs meaning ‘give (as a present)’ and ‘award’ as well as verbs of sending and throwing, which are found in the PDC only (Xu & Peyraube 1997, Tang 1998, Chan 2003, 2010, Chin 2010, 2011, among others). The syntactic distribution of *give*-type verbs and *send*-/*throw*-type verbs in English and Cantonese is summarized in (2).

- (2) a. English

Verb classes	Syntactic distribution	
<i>give</i> -type verbs	√DOC	√PDC
<i>send</i> -/ <i>throw</i> -type verbs	√DOC	√PDC

- b. Cantonese

Verb classes	Syntactic distribution	
<i>bei</i> ² ‘give’	√DOC	??PDC
other <i>give</i> -type verbs	??/*DOC	√PDC
<i>send</i> -/ <i>throw</i> -type verbs	*DOC	√PDC

An often-proposed view of the Cantonese dative constructions is that the DOC is derived from the PDC by means of the deletion or ellipsis of the dative marker *bei*², which is historically derived from the phonologically identical verb *bei*² ‘give’ (e.g., Tang 1998). Instantiations of such a derivational approach take the deletion of the dative marker to be driven by a general economy constraint which prohibits doubling of an identical form. A consequence of this approach is that the DOC will be a preferred realization pattern of *bei*² ‘give’ as it does not incur violation of identity avoidance. This can explain why the PDC of *bei*² ‘give’ is not fully felicitous. It can further account for the unacceptability of the DOC examples of other verbs as cases of violation of derivational economy.

Derivational approaches put forth by Tang (1998) and others are theoretically attractive in that they account for properties of the DOC and the PDC in terms of an independently motivated economy condition. However, there are meaning differences between the two dative constructions in Cantonese that are problematic to any approaches

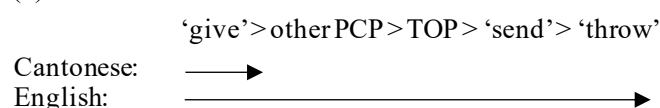
which take the DOC to be an elliptical counterpart of the PDC. Another challenge for derivational approaches to the Cantonese dative constructions is the fact that many languages with a dative marker distinct from a verb meaning ‘give’ exemplify the same pattern of verb distribution in dative constructions as Cantonese (e.g., Kittilä 2006). This motivates a more general account of verb-construction relationships that can explain verb distribution patterns attested consistently within and across languages.

This paper develops an alternative, semantic analysis of dative verbs and constructions in English and Cantonese which provides a unified explanation for verb distribution patterns observed in and across languages. On the basis of a closer examination of semantic properties of dative verbs and constructions in English and Cantonese, we argue that verb distribution in the two languages can be accounted for in a unified way by general constraints on semantic compatibility between verbs and constructions and the choice of cut-off points on an implicational hierarchy of ditransitive verbs in (3). This verb hierarchy, motivated in Lee (2020), ranks verbs in terms of the degree of compatibility with the caused possession event type.

- (3) ‘give’ > other pure caused possession (PCP) verbs > transfer of possession (TOP) verbs > verbs of sending > verbs of throwing

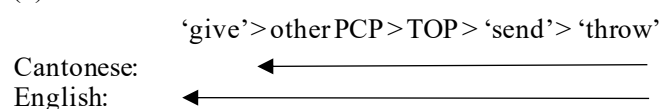
On the present account, verb distribution in the Cantonese DOC is understood as a result of choosing the cut-off point at the highest end of the verb hierarchy in (3), whereas verb distribution in the English DOC is modeled as the choice of the cut-off point at the lowest end of the hierarchy, admitting the least compatible verb class, i.e., *throw*-type verbs, in the DOC:

(4) Verb distribution in the DOC



Variation in verb distribution in the PDC may be modeled in the same way. English chooses the cut-off point at the highest end of the hierarchy, admitting all verb classes in the PDC including the verb least compatible with the PDC, i.e., *give*, whereas Cantonese disallows the least compatible verb in the PDC:

(5) Verb distribution in the PDC



In addition, we will also address the question why English and Cantonese differ in the way they are, suggesting that a more thorough account has to consider the role of diachronic factors and differences in the morphosyntactic devices available for expressing recipient and goal arguments.

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