

## What's in a Construction? A Tale of Two Constructional Alternations

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Classic syntactic alternating pairs, such as the DATIVE and LOCATIVE alternations (*Bill sold Tom a car/Bill sold a car to Tom* and *Jack sprayed paint on the wall/Jack sprayed the wall with paint*, Levin 1993) have initially been viewed as equivalent, or as two different syntactic ways of expressing more or less the same semantic content. Later, more lexically aligned studies have begun to recognize certain meaning differences between them (e.g. partial/whole affectedness, etc.), and even more recent studies have successfully shown how structural considerations play a significant role, too (e.g. weight considerations, pronominality, etc.) (e.g. Bresnan et al. 2007).

To date, however, no precise account of these meaning differences has been articulated, let alone an explanation of the phenomenon of the alternation in situ. The present paper is part of an ongoing project that provides a more holistic description of the phenomenon in question from a quantitative, corpus-based perspective. Here I present findings based on two corpus studies: a syntactically unrestricted investigation of the LOCATIVE ALTERNATION based on data from COCA, and a more restricted study on the DATIVE ALTERNATION based on the BNC, which were both coded for various morpho-syntactic and conceptual characteristics. These were then subjected to univariate and multivariate statistical analyses (in particular *pairwise associations* and *polytomous logistic regression* (Arppe 2012)), yielding various significant differences between the two “alternations”, as well as between each of the “variants”, and other interesting clustering illustrating how conceptual (i.e. pragmatic and semantic) structure drives constructional variation and cross-constructional interaction.

So could for instance in case of the DATIVE alternation the distribution of paradigmatic argument realizations and instantiations be seen as an indication that the (“dative”) prepositional-object construction is a utilized LOCATIVE or CAUSED-MOTION construction, whose semantics are still active and continue to constrain its use on the one hand (for instance by not allowing various extended uses involving “THEMES” that cannot really be transferred such as ACTIONS or STATES: *\*She gave a call to her friend*, *\*I gave a headache to Sally*). In the case of the LOCATIVE alternation, the data likewise suggest that conceptual structure drives syntactic structure, whereby mainly verbal meanings together with other semantic and pragmatic factors such as CONVENTIONALIZATION, INTERPRETABILITY, ENTAILMENT, and COERCION BY CONTEXT drive constructional variation, yielding interesting repercussions for notions such as TRANSITIVITY or PROFILING, illustrating how these are not stative verbal *properties* based on the semantics of verbs, but rather relatively dynamic emerging characteristics based on the highly diverse interactions or complex conceptualizations of verbal frames with linguistic and extra-linguistic contextual factors against a background of shared cultural experience. This ultimately points to the conspiracy of lexical semantics, constructional semantics, and world knowledge under pressure of linguistic economy, i.e. processing and articulatory constraints vs. communicative needs.

**Keywords:** constructions, classic English alternations, linguistic motivation, linguistic economy, lexical semantics and pragmatic inferencing, polytomous logistic regression.

### References

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