

# On competition and constructionalisation in Middle English ditransitives

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The present paper discusses the potential advantages of taking an evolutionary linguistics approach to the diachronic development of ditransitive constructions in English (cf. e.g. Croft 2000; Ritt 2004). In particular, it is concerned with the rise of the ‘dative alternation’, i.e. the availability of two different patterns – a more synthetic double object construction (DOC; 1) vs. a more analytic variant in which the indirect object is marked by a preposition (2) – for verbs such as *give*. The latter pattern is found increasingly frequently from late Old English/ early Middle English onwards, and its emergence is often seen as a consequence of the general erosion of the morphological case marking system at that time, which would have created ambiguity concerning the nature of the two objects, and therefore a functional gap (cf. Allen 1995; Fischer 1992; Mitchell 1985; Visser [1984]).

(1)  $\exists$ if **me**<sub>IO</sub> vnderstondynge<sub>DO</sub> ‘give me understanding’ (c1350; Early Ps.)

(2) They gaff the godis<sub>DO</sub> **to their knyghtes**<sub>IO</sub> ‘They gave the goods to their knights’ (a1470; Malory)

This paper now argues against the assumption of a causal link between the disappearance of inflectional markers and the rise of prepositional competitors based on a number of points:

First, it has been shown that prepositional patterns were, although limited to a certain extent, already present in Old English (De Cuypere 2015). Second, presuming a functional gap that needed to be closed is unwarranted if not misleading, as especially in the case of ditransitives, disambiguating between the objects would usually have been relatively easy based on animacy asymmetries and context (Fischer 1992; Gast 2007). Furthermore, and more importantly, it is claimed that prepositional periphrases, once they had appeared ‘by accident’, i.e. imperfect replication, could have propagated themselves highly successfully even while the inflectional system was still intact. This is due to certain advantages they would have had over inflections, the most striking of these benefits being their greater internal and external flexibility (as they could “be found in virtually any position in the clause” in Old English (Lundskær-Nielsen 1993)). At the same time, the prepositional variants were presumably not only equally, but even more explicit than their competitors. Thus, the object participant role(s) of verbs in general, and ditransitive verbs in particular, increasingly associated themselves with adjunct syntax.

The further development of ditransitive patterns presents, as is argued, a case of ‘constructionalisation’ (Hilpert 2013; Traugott & Trousdale 2013) – while in the beginning, variation concerning the order of the objects as well as their position within the clause was rather high, subsequently a restriction to four basic patterns (3) can be observed.

(3) [V IO DO] vs. [V DO IO] vs. [V prepIO DO] vs. [V DO prepIO]

Having acquired construction or ‘replicator’ status, the patterns then “compete for territory” (Hilpert 2013; Ritt 2004). Due to various selective factors, e.g. discourse-pragmatic differences, some constructions are able to compete more successfully than others, ultimately leading to a reduction in the number of acceptable patterns to the two default variants of the dative alternation (at least in Standard PDE; 4).

(4) Mary gave **John**<sub>IO</sub> an apple<sub>DO</sub> / Mary gave an apple<sub>DO</sub> **to John**<sub>IO</sub>

Support for this proposal is gained from a quantitative study of all instances of ditransitive verbs in either the DOC or a PP-pattern found in the Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English (PPCME2).

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