PO-biased and DO-biased verbs in the Dutch dative alternation: Evidence from corpora and production experiments

Linguistic studies of argument structure alternations often rely on observations about lexical *verb bias* as evidence for claims about schematic semantic contrasts between the "competing" constructions under investigation. For instance, with regard to the English dative alternation, it has been observed that verbs such as *refuse* and *deny* prefer the double object (DO) construction over the prepositional object (PO) construction, and this observation is often mentioned in support of the hypothesis that the PO construction basically encodes 'caused motion' rather than 'caused reception' (e.g. Goldberg 1995). Recently, the concept of verb bias has drawn a fair amount of attention in psycholinguistic research on syntactic priming, too. Priming effects have been shown to be sensitive to the verb-specific preferences of both *target verbs* (verbs which are biased towards one of the alternating constructions are less responsive to priming of the other construction, Gries 2005) and *prime verbs* (the effect is stronger if the prime consists of a verb used in a construction it is biased *against*, Jaeger & Snider 2007).

All of this raises the important question of how to measure verb-specific constructional preferences in a reliable way. An intriguing fact about the dative alternation is that different results have been obtained with respect to structural preferences, depending on the data used: while many alternating verbs occur more often with DO than with PO syntax in natural language corpora, resulting in an overall preference for the DO construction, experimental studies typically report a strong overall PO-bias (compare for instance the data in Bresnan *et al*. 2007 with those in Schoonbaert *et al.* 2007). Our paper offers a detailed comparison of the results from a corpus investigation of the Dutch dative alternation carried out by the first author with the data from a series of picture description experiments conducted by the second author. While the results follow the above pattern (i.e., predominance of DO-datives in the corpus data, predominance of PO-datives in the experimental data), we will show that there is actually a strong correlation between the alternation biases displayed by the investigated verbs in both datasets, especially if these are measured in terms of "distinctive collostruction strength" (Gries & Stefanowitsch 2004) rather than on the basis of raw frequencies. In addition, we will look into a couple of verbs which, contrary to the general trend, *do* display markedly different alternation biases in both datasets, and explore the reasons why this might be so (which will trigger a discussion on the relation between lexical bias and verbal polysemy).

References

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