Prototypical ditransitivity

Åshild Næss, University of Oslo
What is the prototypical ditransitive verb?

- Givón (2001): prototypical ‘bi-transitive’ verbs ‘code events in which a deliberate agent (the subject) causes the movement of the patient (direct object) to or from some location (indirect object).

- Examples: put, send, take
What is the prototypical ditransitive verb?

- Most accounts center on verbs like SEND, TEACH, and particularly GIVE
- Newman (1998): ”the act of giving can be considered as a basic type of act of considerable functional importance.”
Borg & Comrie (1984)

- Examine different three-participant verbs in Maltese
- \textit{ta} ‘give’ is exceptional:
  - only ‘give’, ‘show’, and ‘teach’ can cross-reference the recipient on the verb with an ACC suffix
  - only ‘give’ and ‘show’ can passivise on both objects
  - ‘give’ differs from ‘show’ in disallowing the use of a dative suffix for the recipient for disambiguation in certain contexts
Borg & Comrie (1984)

- “In a certain set of cases… two noun phrases as arguments of a single predicate compete for direct object status… the patient has all the properties of a direct object, while the recipient has some of those properties”
- “in many languages, including Maltese, ‘give’ is syntactically a very atypical ditransitive verb.”
What exactly is a ‘ditransitive’ verb anyway?

- Kittilä (2006): only verbs which have two arguments coded formally like the patient of a monotransitive = genuinely ‘two objects’.
- If a language has only one such verb, it is always GIVE
- If it only has a few, the class nearly always includes GIVE
- A prototype pattern with GIVE as most central member
Keeping the terminology straight

- 'Prototypical' ≠ 'frequent' or 'unmarked'
- 'Ditransitive clause' vs 'three-participant construction' (Kittilä: ditransitive vs trivalent verb)
- B&C examine Maltese three-participant constructions and show that the IO of 'give' has the highest amount of direct-object properties.
- In other words, 'give' in Maltese is 'most ditransitive' by Kittilä’s definition.
The status of ditransitivity

- What Borg & Comrie show is not that GIVE is an unusual ditransitive verb, but that ditransitivity in itself is unusual.
- Many languages have no ditransitives in the strict sense.
(Di)transitivity and markedness

- Næss (2007): a formally transitive clause is a relatively marked way of encoding a two-participant event
  - explains why ‘prototypical transitive clauses’ are often those with ‘marked objects’
  - ‘Natural transitive constructions’ by the definition of Comrie (1989) are often formally intransitive; incorporated or oblique objects.
Examples

(1) West Greenlandic:

a. *inuit tuqup-pai*
   
   people.ABS kill-TR.IND.3SG.ERG.3PL
   
   ‘He killed the people.’

b. *inun-nik tuqut-si-vuq*
   
   people-INS kill-ANTIP-INTR.IND/3SG.ABS
   
   ‘He killed people.’ (Fortescue 1984)
Examples

(2) Äiwoo:

a. *Nuwopa-ee i-lââ-no nä-tä gino-u*
   
   house-DEM PFV-build-1minA IRR-POSS son-1MIN.POSS

   'I built this house for my son’

b. *I-lâwââ nuwopa nä-tä gino-u*
   
   1minS.PFV-build house IRR-POSS son-1min.POSS

   'I built a house for my son.’
(Di)transitivity and markedness

- Transitive prototype: two distinct and independent participants
  - both high in individuation (definite/animate)
  - clearly semantically distinct: strictly agentive vs. strictly patientive

- Transitive clause: two distinct and independent syntactic arguments
(Di)transitivity and markedness

- Givón (1985): “The more important an item is in the communication, the more distinct and independent coding expression it receives.”
- I.e. distinct and independent linguistic coding is a signal that particular attention should be paid to the participant in question.
- As such, constructions with two distinct and independent arguments are relatively demanding to process.
(Di)transitivity and markedness

- A formally intransitive construction with an incorporated or oblique object casts the situation in terms of one prominent participant, one less prominent.
- Fully transitive constructions may then be reserved for those cases where both participants are construed as prominent.
- Dalrymple & Nikolaeva in prep: object marking correlates with topicality.
(Di)transitivity and markedness

- If having two syntactic arguments is ‘marked’, having three should be even more so.
- A syntactic cline:
  - every language has formally intransitive and formally transitive clauses…
  - …though transitive clauses may be restricted in use
  - ditransitive clauses are even more restricted: occur only with one or a few verbs in some languages, completely absent in others
Conclusion

- The unusual behaviour of GIVE verbs in many languages simply stems from its high degree of ditransitivity.
- Constructions with three full syntactic arguments are relatively rare in language – GIVE is not an unusual ditransitive verb, it’s ditransitive verbs as such that are unusual.
- May reflect a processing constraint – paying (near-)equal attention to three arguments at once is relatively demanding.
Towards a ditransitive prototype

- Clearly, GIVE is crosslinguistically the most prototypical ditransitive verb – if any verb in a language is ditransitive, GIVE is.
- This suggests a transfer event with an actively instigating agent, a transferred patient and an animate recipient.
- Kittilä (2006) suggests GIVE ’has no semantics of its own but merely lexicalizes the basic three-participant event, understood as a relation that involves an agent, a theme and a recipient’.
Towards a ditransitive prototype

- Transitive prototype (Næss 2007): two distinct, independent participants:
  - ’distinct’ in the sense of both participants being highly individuated
  - ’distinct’ in the sense of the participants being in maximal opposition with respect to their role in the event

- Set of binary oppositions: Agent = volitional, instigating, nonaffected; Patient = nonvolitional, noninstigating, affected
Towards a ditransitive prototype

- The criterion of individuation is extendable to three participants
  - Kittilä suggest distinctness of participants relevant for ditransitives – ’take’, where AG and REC coincide, is typically not ditransitive.
- That of binary semantic opposition clearly is not.
Towards a ditransitive prototype

- Instead, the Agent-Patient opposition might be conceived of as a scale with all other possible participants (different combinations of feature values) as points on this scale.

- Volitional Undergoer [VOL, -INST, AFF], a category which includes recipients, might be a third prominent point on this scale.
Towards a ditransitive prototype

Agent:
- + Volitional
- + Instigating
- - Affected

Recipient:
- + Volitional
- - Instigating
- + Affected

Patient:
- - Volitional
- - Instigating
- + Affected