Prototypical ditransitivity

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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

- *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