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In a land far, far away...

The dative alternation in British, American and Australian English

Introduction

In many situations, one can choose between several syntactic options that are equally grammatical, but that may differ in their acceptability in the given context. An example is the dative alternation in English, for which speakers and writers can choose between structures with a prepositional dative (1) or double object structure (2).

- (1) The evil queen gave the poisoned apple to Snow White.
- (2) The evil queen gave Snow White the poisoned apple.

Previous research has shown that there is a general tendency to place animate before inanimate nouns, shorter before longer, pronouns before non-pronouns and definite before indefinite. Notably, these observations have been made both in psycholinguistic research (e.g. Prat-Sala and Branigan 2000), in corpus studies (e.g. Snyder 2003, Szmrecsanyi 2006, Bresnan et al. 2007), and in studies that combine the two (e.g. Arnold et al. 2000, Rosenbach 2005, Bresnan and Ford 2010).

In this paper, we compare the distributional properties of the dative alternation in different variants of the same language: English. More specifically, we compare American, British and Australian English. Previous studies have shown that there are distributional differences in the dative alternation across these variations and across time (Rohdenburg 2007, Grimm and Bresnan 2009, Bresnan and Ford 2010). Given the history of English in the three countries, we would expect to see the most differences between American and Australian English. These varieties have originated from British English separately from each other, at different points in time. Since Australian English is the younger variety, we expect that the difference between Australian and British English is smaller than that between American and British English. Moreover, various studies have shown that when it comes to fine-grained syntactic changes over time, American English seems to lead the way: 'Americanization' (e.g. Leech and Smith 2006, Szmrecsanyi 2010).

Method

We replicated the judgment study of Bresnan and Ford (2010), but included British English, used a wider age range (20 to 65 years), and conducted it through a website instead of on paper. Participants read a short passage followed by two possible continuations: one with a double object construction, one with a prepositional dative. They were asked to rate the naturalness of both options by dividing 100 points between them: the more points, the more natural. We used the same 30 items taken from the (American English) Switchboard corpus as in Bresnan and Ford (2010), localizing them to British and Australian English by replacing American-specific vocabulary and place names. All items were presented in random order,

and the order in which the two options were presented was alternated. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the participants.

Table 1: Characteristics of participants in judgment study

	<i>Female</i>				<i>Male</i>			
	N	av age	min age	max age	N	av age	min age	max age
British	22	32.0	21	61	18	31.5	21	63
American	22	37.3	21	65	13	32.1	21	61
Australian	20	34.0	23	63	17	32.1	20	64

Using linear regression, we modeled the participants' ratings for the prepositional dative variant. We included the two grouping factors, speaker and item, as random effects in the model. The predictors we included as fixed effects were definiteness of the recipient (*Snow White* in the example), definiteness of the theme (*the poisoned apple*), animacy of the recipient, pronominality of the theme and the log ratio of the length of the theme to the length of the recipient¹. Moreover, we looked at age, sex, and variety, and their interaction with the other predictors. We also controlled for the order of the items, the order of the two options and the rating assigned for the previous item by including these as fixed effects.

We first built three separate models for the three varieties. Only the main effects and interactions that were significant² in (at least one of) these models were then included in the pairwise models, with interactions between variety.

Results

The significant effects in the three models are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Significant effects and their estimates in the pairwise linear regression models. Positive estimates favor the prepositional dative, negative ones the double object construction.

	<i>Am vs. Aus</i>	<i>Br vs. Am</i>	<i>Br vs. Aus</i>
Length ratio (th/rec)	-23.15	-18.77	-19.59
Recipient = inanimate	43.46	34.48	42.30
Theme = indefinite	-13.31		-12.45
Theme = pronominal : Age		-0.23	
Variety = US : Length ratio	9.33		
Variety = US : Length ratio : Age	-0.14		
Variety = US	6.10	4.28	
Previous rating		-0.04	
Variety = US : Previous rating	-0.05		
(Intercept)	47.78	47.99	47.78

¹ In fact, seeing the correlation between the length ratio and the definiteness of the recipient and the theme, and the pronominality of the theme, we residualized the length ratio on these three predictors, and included the residuals in the regression model.

² We applied several variable selection methods, and the models presented are representative of what we found. They are established by first removing all interactions for which the regression estimate was below twice the standard error, and then a stepwise backward elimination with the remaining predictors until all p-values (based on the t-value) were below 0.05.

We see that length ratio and animacy of recipient are significant across the different varieties, and they are in line with the findings in previous research: animate precedes inanimate and shorter precedes longer. The same is true for the definiteness of the theme, although it just misses significance in the model with British and American judgment: definite precedes indefinite.

For British and American speakers, there is also an effect of the pronominality of the theme in interaction with age. It thus seems that older British and American people are less reluctant to use the double object construction when the theme is a pronoun (e.g. *give the man it*) than younger people. It has been shown in previous research that some British dialects show different patterns when the theme is pronominal: reversed double constructions such as *give it him* are also possible (Haddican 2010). There are also significant interactions between the length ratio, variety and age. Compared to Australians, Americans award higher naturalness scores to instances that violate the principle of end weight (measured by length ratio), as also demonstrated in the judgment study by Bresnan and Ford (2010). In addition, our study shows that this is especially true for younger Americans, which could mean ‘Americanization’ is taking place: American English is leading in this change.

The only significant interactions with variety and linguistic predictors are in the model that compares American and Australian English. This is exactly what we expected: the largest differences exist between these two varieties, while British English, from which they originated, seems to be in the middle. There is a main effect of variety for the comparison between British and American English, but not between British and Australian English. This is again as expected: the younger variety Australian English shows no (significant) differences with British English. Finally, the rating that the participant assigned to the previous instance has an effect in the combined British and American English data, but not in Australian English

Conclusion

This paper shows that there are distributional differences between the dative alternation in American, Australian and American English. The effects we found in this judgment study are consistent with the history of the varieties and with ‘Americanization’. In the near future, we plan to compare the dative alternation across the varieties in corpus data, and relate the results to this study.

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