Intractable constructions: 
Relexification and Lexical Relativity 
in the second language acquisition of the dative alternation 
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There is a rich literature on the acquisition of argument structure alternations (see e.g. Bley-Vroman & Yoshinaga 1992; Hawkins 1987; Inagaki 1997; Mazurkewich & White 1984; Whong-Barr & Schwartz 2002; Yang & Montrul 2017). The dative alternation is characterized by a pattern in which ditransitive verbs allow their arguments to be expressed in two configurations. In one configuration, usually called the double object construction, the goal or recipient NP appears adjacent to the verb along with the direct object NP. In the other configuration, the prepositional or oblique dative, the goal or recipient NP appears after the direct object as the object of a preposition; prototypically to with a range of verbs whose roots express notions of caused possession, communication, or motion, and for with verbs of creation and a range of other actions with beneficiaries (Emonds and Whitney, 2005; Rappaport-Hovav & Levin 2008; Jackendoff 1990, 1990a; Levin 1993, 2008; Pinker 2013).

If the final state of L1 acquisition is the initial state of L2 acquisition (Schwartz and Sprouse 1996), then the featural complexion of the L1 lexicon can be expected to form the basis of L2 lexical entries (Sprouse 2006). The initial state of L2 acquisition is the relabeling of the L1 lexicon with interlanguage L2 phonology, or Relexification (Sprouse 2006). If changes in conceptual structure predicated on open class lexical items drive the surface permutations of the expression of arguments, then the second language acquisition of dative structures is driven foremost, as in first language acquisition, by meaning (Stringer 2005). However, as Lardiere (2009), Sprouse (2006), and Stringer (2005, 2010, 2019) have argued, mismatches between the featural makeup of L1 and L2 lexical items are a constant of second language acquisition. Stringer has argued for Lexical Relativity as a fundamental principle both of L2 acquisition and of the nature of language in general. The best starting point for examining L2 syntax is to tease out the consequences of the combination of Relexification and Lexical Relativity (Sprouse 2006, Stringer 2010, 2019).

Many studies have considered the influence of the L1 on conflation patterns in interlanguage (Agirre 2015; Bley-Vroman & Yoshinaga 2002; Cuervo 2007; Hawkins 1987; Inagaki 1997; Oh 2010; Oh & Zubizaretta 2006; Whong-Barr and Schwartz 2002). However, there are still unsettled questions about how learners acquire knowledge of the semantic and morphological restrictions on double object datives. One fundamental learning question is: how do learners revise the conceptual structure of dative verbs? A related question is how the arguments of double objects are derived and represented in interlanguage; typological study (Baker 1988, Marantz 1993, Pylkkänen 2000) has revealed that ditransitive structures vary greatly across the world’s languages, and there has yet to be a study that adequately addresses the question of what kinds of ditransitive structures are generated by interlanguage grammars as learners converge on more target-like representations. A third question is whether learners develop sensitivity to the syntactic restrictions that characterize double object constructions, which include extraction asymmetries (Emonds & Whitney 2005) and a sensitivity of some verb classes to path and source predicates (Rappaport-Hovav & Levin 2008).

In this study I will argue for a reexamination of the logical problem of SLA and consider the learning problems posed by ditransitive structures. Building on a study design developed in McKenzie (2019), this dissertation proposal will present a battery of tasks designed to gain
insight into how speakers of Chinese, Korean, and French represent ditransitive verbs, DP arguments, and the dative rule in their mental lexicons. Grammaticality judgment tasks targeting A and A’ movement extractions of theme and goal arguments of double object constructions will shed light on learner’s knowledge of subtler restrictions on the higher-level syntax of dative constructions. A sentence correction task will build on the former task to test whether learners are more likely to allow null prep (Dekydtspotter, Sprouse, and Anderson's 1998) with verbs that participate in the dative alternation in their own lexicons. A lexical decision task on the native/Latinate distinction will help to tease apart learners’ morphological and semantic knowledge. A truth value judgment task using video media will examine whether advanced learners develop sensitivity to the asymmetry between give- and throw-type verbs in the kinds of prepositional expressions they can combine with. This study will bring together several decades of theoretical and experimental work on datives in English and other languages towards the aim of providing a coherent account of how adult language learners come to have a deep knowledge of Baker’s “notoriously intractable construction” (1988, 286).

References


