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Item-based foreign language learning of *give* ditransitive constructions: Evidence from corpus research



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ABSTRACT

This paper incorporates corpus contrastive interlanguage analysis and usage-based approaches to language acquisition to study English ditransitive constructions of the verb *give* as used by Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners at different proficiency levels. A contrastive analysis was carried out between a learner corpus – *The Chinese Learner English Corpus* and a native English corpus – *The Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays*. The findings show that beginning EFL learners tend to frequently use pronouns (as indirect object), short constituents, and certain concrete semantic classes. In addition, they also make erroneous use of *give* ditransitive constructions. At higher English proficiency levels, however, learners tend to use more complex structures containing noun phrases, longer constituents, and a wider range of semantic classes. The findings offer useful insights into the Chinese EFL learners' developmental trajectory of ditransitive constructions, and provide further evidence for the usage-based model, by showing an item-based foreign language learning process of *give* ditransitive constructions. The paper then concludes with a discussion of the pedagogical implications for classroom teaching practice and compiling teaching materials.

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1. Introduction

Recent years have seen increasingly widespread applications of a usage-based approach to second/foreign language learning (e.g., Ellis & Ferreira–Junior, 2009a, 2009b; Ellis, O'Donnell, & Römer, 2013; Eskildsen, 2009; Roehr-Brackin, 2014; Yuldashev, Fernandez, & Thorne, 2013). The fundamental assumptions generally held by usage-based linguists are that the language system is experience-driven, language structure emerges from language use, and frequency contributes to the “rules” of language, i.e., “structural regularities that emerge from learners' lifetime analysis of the distributional characteristics of the language input” (Ellis, 2002, p. 144). The implications arising from usage-based research into first language (L1) acquisition (Lieven & Tomasello, 2008; MacWhinney, 2004; Tomasello, 2003) are far reaching for research in second language (L2) learning: some central issues are re-conceptualized, such as the role played by formulaic language in development, the relationship between interaction and learning and, importantly here, the idea of an item-based learning process (Eskildsen, 2015).

Within the framework of usage-based linguistics, language learning is initially an exemplar-, or item-based, process (Roehr-Brackin, 2014). In other words, language learning is argued to be a bottom-up process from item-based chunks via partially fixed schemas to increasingly abstract linguistic constructions (Dabrowska & Lieven, 2005; Lieven, 2010; Tomasello,

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1992, 2003). This developmental trajectory has been postulated for both L1 (MacWhinney, 2004; Tomasello, 2003, 2005) and L2 acquisition (Ellis, 2002, 2011; Eskildsen, 2009). To this developmental path, the analytic focus should be on linguistic constructions that allow for abstract representation. English verb-argument constructions such as verb locative, verb object locative, and ditransitive are suitable for this line of research.

Many researchers (Butler, 2004; Gries, 2012; McEnery & Hardie, 2011) hold that the cognitively inspired usage-based model aligns with corpus linguistics, and therefore, the present study combines usage-based approaches to language acquisition and corpus-based contrastive interlanguage analysis, targeting English ditransitive constructions of the verb *give*. The major reasons for choosing *give* ditransitive constructions as the research target are that 1) the ditransitive construction poses considerable learning difficulties for both first and second/foreign language learners, and creates a classic learnability problem (Pawley & Syder, 1983), and that 2) the investigation of *give* is of great value because it is prototypical of the ditransitive construction and drives the L2 ditransitive construction learning (Ellis & Ferreira–Junior, 2009a, 2009b).

Give can occur in a variety of grammatical structures, with examples illustrated below (IO represents indirect object, DO represents direct object, and PC represents prepositional complement). Most interestingly, *give* can alternate between the ditransitive construction and the prepositional *to*-dative construction.

Construction	Structure	Example
ditransitive	<i>give</i> + IO + DO	Mary gave me a book.
<i>to</i> -dative	<i>give</i> + DO + <i>to</i> + PC	Mary gave a book to me.
monotransitive	<i>give</i> + DO	Mary gave a report yesterday.
phrasal verb	<i>give</i> + particle	Mary finally gave up.

The investigation of the verb *give* has been a topic of interest for a long time. A number of corpus-based studies have focused on native speakers' use of *give*, such as Newman (1996), Mukherjee (2005), Bresnan and Hay (2008), Schilk, Mukherjee, Nam, and Mukherjee (2013), etc. Many studies have been conducted to investigate L2 learners' use of English ditransitive constructions by looking at the learner corpus data (e.g., Gries & Wulff, 2005; Gu, 2009; Manzanares & Lopez, 2008), but few were focused on learners' use of the ditransitive verb *give*. To date, little research has been conducted to probe into the developmental trajectory of *give* ditransitive constructions in EFL learners. To be more specific, little is known about whether EFL learners' developmental trajectory follows an item-based learning process in the case of ditransitive constructions with *give*.

To overcome this gap, the present study combines the corpus-based contrastive interlanguage analysis and the usage-based approaches to language acquisition via a case study of *give* ditransitive constructions in Chinese learner English. Through investigation of language use in learner corpora, it is easier for researchers “to understand how best to help students develop competence in the kinds of language they will encounter on a regular basis” (Biber & Reppen, 1998, p. 157). The study compares the patterns of ditransitive *give* used by Chinese EFL learners at different proficiency levels and by native English speakers. In doing so, the present study aims to unveil evidence confirming or disconfirming the item-based foreign language learning process. This study also attempts to provide pedagogical implications for foreign language teaching of grammatical structures.

2. Literature review

2.1. The item-based learning process

As stated earlier, in the usage-based linguistics framework, language learning is initially item-based. With greater exposure to an increasing number of item-based constructions in the learning process, learners' mental representations are gradually altered, allowing for schematic constructions over instances to be derived (Kemmer & Barlow, 2000; Taylor, 2002).

Item-based constructions refer to comparatively complete and coherent verbal expressions normally used to perform communicative functions (Fillmore, 1988; Goldberg, 1995; Lakoff, 1978; Tomasello, 2003; Van Valin, 1993). Tomasello (1992, 2003) posits that in the process of first language development, the use of item-based constructions is an inescapable stage that children must experience on the way to achieving mature linguistic competence. In addition, Tomasello's Verb Island Hypothesis claims that “each verb is its own island of organization in an otherwise unorganized language system” (Tomasello, 2003, p. 117), and emphasis is put on the important roles played by specific verbs that contribute to early construction development. A few studies (e.g., Lieven, Pine, & Baldwin, 1997; Pine & Lieven, 1993) have proved that children's early syntactic ability is built on specific lexical items.

Nevertheless, Tomasello and some other scholars have moved on from earlier views and offered different accounts, arguing that specific grammatical items other than verbs can also play the role of “island”, such as “pronoun island”, which has been brought up by Jones, Gobet, and Pine (2000), and reinforced by Childers and Tomasello (2001), Ibbotson, Theakston, Lieven, and Tomasello (2010), and many others. In two novel verb experiments, Childers and Tomasello (2001) found that children with the input containing both NPs and pronouns did significantly better than those with the input excluding pronouns. The results show that the particular lexical and morphological elements around the verb, especially pronouns, do contribute to the acquisition of early syntactic constructions.

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