Ditransitive constructions in Russian and Ukrainian: Effect of givenness on word order

Roksolana Mykhaylyk, Yulia Rodina *, Merete Anderssen

Center for Advanced Study in Theoretical Linguistics (CASTL), Department of Language and Linguistics, Faculty of Humanities Social Sciences and Education, University of Tromsø – The Arctic University of Norway, NO-9037 Tromsø, Norway

Abstract

This paper presents new experimental data on the acquisition of structures involving ditransitive verbs in two East Slavic languages: Russian and Ukrainian. The results of an elicited production task with adults and 3–6-year-old children show that the ordering of the two object arguments (DP_{DAT} and DP_{ACC}) is conditioned by the givenness of one of them. Similarly to adults, children place given recipients before themes, preferring the DP_{DAT}–DP_{ACC} word order in recipient-given contexts. However, unlike adults, they prefer this order in theme-given contexts as well. We propose that these findings might be indicative of a preference for the underlying syntactic structure in child grammars and/or for the use of prosodic means to express the same meaning, rather than a lack of knowledge of the pragmatic principle *Given-before-New* at this developmental stage.
© 2013 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Dative; Accusative; Ditransitive; Givenness; Russian; Ukrainian

1. Introduction

In Russian and Ukrainian, object arguments of ditransitive verbs, such as *give* or *show*, are case-marked as Accusative and Dative, and the relative order of the two can alternate: DP_{DAT}–DP_{ACC} or DP_{ACC}–DP_{DAT}.[1] The word order in these constructions has been claimed to be constrained by, among other things, the discourse-pragmatic factor givenness, which governs many other syntactic phenomena in Slavic languages (see e.g., Kallestinova, 2007 or Kučerová, 2007 for an overview).[2] Contexts with given themes are likely to trigger the use of the DP_{ACC}–DP_{DAT} word order (as shown in (1)), while contexts with given recipients prompt the use of the DP_{DAT}–DP_{ACC} order (as shown in (2)).

(1)   a.   Petja   dal   **devočke knigu.**   RUS
        b.   Petryk   dav   **divčynci knyhu.**   UKR
           Peter   gave   girl$_{DAT}$ *book*$_{ACC}$
           'Peter gave **the girl a book**.'   ENG

---

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +47 92658596. Rodina, Y.   (yulia.rodina@uit.no)

[1] Abbreviations used in this paper: ACC – Accusative, DAT – Dative, DA – Dative Alternation, DO – direct object, DOC – Double Object Construction, ENG – English, GEN – Genitive, IMPERF – imperfective, IO – indirect object, IS – Information Structure, DP – Determiner phrase, PD – Prepositional Dative, PERF – perfective, RG – recipient-given, RT – recipient before theme, RUS – Russian, TG – theme-given, TR – theme before recipient, UKR – Ukrainian.

[2] Naturally, givenness is not only expressed through word order, but also by other means, such as sentence prosody or certain lexical elements.

(2)	a.	Petja	dal	**knigu**	**devočke.**		RUS
	b.	Petryk	dav	**knyhu**	**divčynci.**		UKR
		Peter	*gave*	*book*$_{ACC}$	*girl*$_{DAT}$		
		'Peter gave **the book to a girl**.'					ENG

In English, the structures exemplified above correspond to the double object construction (DOC) (as in (1)) and the prepositional dative (PD) (as in (2)). The availability of these two possible word orders is referred to as the Dative Alternation (DA) and has been investigated in a number of theoretical and empirical studies. It has been shown that one of the factors that influences the choice of word order in English DA is also object givenness: contexts with a given theme trigger the use of the PD, while contexts in which the recipient is given prompt the use of DOC (Bresnan et al., 2007; Bresnan and Nikitina, 2009, inter alia). Most recently, the effect of givenness has been investigated in another Germanic language – Norwegian (Anderssen et al., in press). Interestingly, in the previous empirical studies that compare child and adult sensitivity to givenness, English and Norwegian adult speakers were found to behave as expected in the two contexts. However, the children acquiring these languages were found to exhibit a bias towards the PD construction even in recipient-given contexts (Gropen et al., 1989; Conwell and Demuth, 2007; Stephens, 2010; Anderssen et al., in press). In English, this dispreference for the DOC has been explained in terms of processing difficulties, complexity of the syntactic structure or pronominality effect. In a recent study on Norwegian, it was suggested that young children might prefer PD as the basic/underlying word order in various discourse contexts (Anderssen et al., in press).

We conducted the same experimental study as Anderssen et al. (in press) in order to investigate empirically the impact of givenness on the relative order of the direct and the indirect objects in two Slavic languages – Russian and Ukrainian. In our study, we collected elicited production data from 18 adult and 24 child speakers of Russian as well as ten adult and 24 child speakers of Ukrainian. The results show that the adults behave as predicted and use appropriate structures in the two contexts that were tested: theme- and recipient-given. The children appear to be sensitive to givenness as well, especially in their patterns of argument omission and in the use of target-like word order in recipient-given contexts. However, they showed a strong preference for the DAT–ACC order in both the contexts tested, and thus differed significantly from the adults in this regard. We explain this difference in the same terms as Anderssen et al. (in press), by suggesting that the children might show a preference for the underlying syntactic structure. Nevertheless, we argue that their pragmatic knowledge is target-like, but it is to a large extent expressed through the omission of given object arguments or possibly through a change in prosody rather than through object alternations.

The paper is structured as follows. In section 2, we discuss theoretical issues related to the word order in Slavic ditransitive constructions. In section 3, we provide an overview of the relevant previous acquisition studies, and in section 4 we specify the goals of the present study and formulate our predictions. Section 5 is a description of the experimental task, and section 6 provides the results of the experiment. In section 7 we discuss our main findings and identify possible future directions.

2. Theoretical background: ditransitives in Russian and Ukrainian

Unlike English, where the DA is represented by two different syntactic constructions – the DOC and the PD, Russian and Ukrainian do not use an overt preposition to form ditransitive structures. Crucially, however, the examples in (1) and (2) demonstrate that object reordering in these languages is similar to the reordering between the DP and the PP/DP arguments found in English, but that both objects are overtly case marked.[3] Furthermore, as we show below, object alternation in Russian and Ukrainian is also subject to the Information Structure (IS) constraints that affect general word order patterns in Slavic and have been found to play a role in English DA (cf. Gropen et al., 1989; Bresnan et al., 2007). Given that the main goal of this paper is to investigate givenness effects on object placement, our theoretical background is mainly based on the accounts that consider IS effects, such as Junghanns and Zybatow (1997), Dyakonova (2007), and Kallestinova (2007). The accounts based exclusively on syntactic evidence will be mentioned only briefly (e.g., Bailyn, 1995, 2010).

Junghanns and Zybatow (1997) as well as Dyakonova (2007) discuss in detail the internal structure of the VP in Russian, and, most importantly, relate their assumptions to IS facts. These authors present evidence supporting a

---

[3] In various analyses of the ditransitive structures in Slavic languages like Russian and Ukrainian, it is argued that they lack genuine DA and that object alternations in these languages occur due to scrambling (Bailyn, 1995, 2010; Junghanns and Zybatow, 1997; Pereltsvaig, 2001; Emonds and Whitney, 2005; Dyakonova, 2007; Slioussar, 2007). We acknowledge this view; however, the exact syntactic definition of these constructions is not directly relevant for our study. We consider only those properties of the ditransitive structures that are similar in both language types, i.e., effects of object givenness. Note also that Ukrainian is not explicitly discussed in the literature, but according to the native speaker's intuitions presented in this paper, Ukrainian behaves in the same way as Russian with regard to the phenomenon under investigation.