Ditransitive predicates and dative arguments in Maltese[☆]

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the syntactic expression of three argument (ditransitive) predicates in Maltese. We provide the first detailed description of the ditransitive constructions found in Maltese, which have been largely ignored in the substantial literature on ditransitive predicates, and show that the primary means of expression for these predicates uses a canonical dative construction. We argue that the canonical dative construction (with ditransitive predicates) is distinct from both a double object construction and a prepositional oblique construction in terms of the mapping of arguments to surface grammatical functions. We provide an analysis of Maltese ditransitives in the Lexical Mapping Theory of Lexical Functional Grammar.
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1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with the syntactic expression of three argument (ditransitive) predicates in Maltese. Such predicates have received very little attention in the literature to date (though see Borg and Comrie, 1984; Borg and Azzopardi-Alexander, 1997). We outline in some detail the nature of the ditransitive constructions found in Maltese and provide an analysis using a version of LFG's Lexical Mapping Theory. We argue that Kibort's reformulation of LMT (Kibort, 2007, 2008) provides an appropriate analysis of the Maltese data, and is to be preferred over competing LMT approaches.

Maltese encodes ditransitive predicates (including those in the class of caused motion and those in the caused possession class) primarily by means of a construction in which the theme argument is realized as an object and the recipient/ goal argument bears the (dative) marker *lil*. Anticipating our eventual analysis, we will refer to this construction throughout as the canonical dative (CDAT) construction (following Kibort, 2008). A primary focus of this paper is to provide a syntactic analysis of this CDAT construction, and in particular, to determine the syntactic status of the (dative marked) recipient/goal argument. In the descriptive part of our paper, we will refer to this argument as a dative object, sometimes using the abbreviation DAT OBJ. An important goal of the current paper is to determine the grammatical function of this DAT OBJ in the canonical dative (CDAT) construction.[1]

[1] Of course, dative objects do not only occur in the CDAT construction; a range of non-selected arguments, such as affected experiencers, are also realised as DAT OBJs, see Camilleri and Sadler (2012) for discussion of these elements.

A considerable part of the (voluminous) literature on ditransitives is concerned with languages which exhibit an alternation between a double object (or dative shift) construction and an object-prepositional oblique construction, and on the analysis of the two objects themselves in the shifted construction. One of the issues which we will address, and which relates to this debate, is whether the Maltese CDAT construction should itself be identified with either the double object or the prepositional oblique construction. We will show that neither analysis would be correct, and will additionally show that Maltese makes limited use of an second construction which itself bears the hallmarks of being a double object (DOBJ), or dative shift, construction.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of the basic ditransitive construction and dative arguments. Section 3 discusses the syntactic properties of the dative-marked argument in the ditransitive (CDAT) construction. In Section 4 we turn to the question of whether Maltese has a dative shift or double object construction, and show that it does indeed have such a construction, although its distribution is a good deal more restricted than in (other) varieties of Arabic. Section 5 provides an overview and evaluation of different versions of Lexical Mapping Theory and in Section 6 we provide an analysis of the Maltese CDAT and DOBJ ditransitive constructions, and of the distinct prepositional oblique constructions,[2] couched within the version of LMT developed in Kibort (2007, 2008). Finally, we provide a data appendix listing ditransitive verbs and the constructions which they allow.

2. Dative arguments and ditransitive predicates

Maltese verbs taking agent, theme and recipient (or possessional goal) arguments typically encode the theme argument as an OBJ while the recipient (possessional goal) argument is obligatorily preceded by the marker *lil*.[3] We refer to this recipient/goal nominal marked by *lil* as the dative NP or DAT OBJ and a primary concern of this paper is to determine the correct syntactic analysis of this element. Anticipating our eventual analysis, we will refer to examples such as (1) as canonical dative (CDAT) constructions.

(1) a. *Bgħat-t   il-ktieb   lil Marija*.
         send.PV-1SG DEF-book.SGM DAT Mary
         I sent the book to Mary.
     b. *Bgħat-t-u   lil Marija.*
         send.PV-1SG-3SGM.ACC DAT Mary
         I sent it to Mary.

If the recipient is pronominal rather than a lexical NP, it is realized as an inflectional element on the verb, as shown in (2), and can be optionally doubled by a dislocated pronominal. Affixation of the pronominal recipient is obligatory in unmarked contexts, and hence (3) is ungrammatical in neutral (discourse) contexts.

(2) *Bgħat-t-i-l-ha   l-ktieb.*
     send.PV-1SG-EPENT.VWL-DAT-3SGF DEF-book.SGM
     I sent her the book.

(3) **Jien bgħat-t   ittra lil-u.*
     I   send.PV-1SG letter DAT-3SGM
     I sent a letter to him.

Pronominal theme arguments are also normally expressed inflectionally, although free pronouns are possible under certain discourse conditions, especially when they are found at the left or right sentential periphery. As the table below shows, the dative (DAT OBJ) and accusative (OBJ) affixal pronominal forms are clearly morphologically related: the former relating quite transparently to the latter with the addition of a reduced form of *lil*; '*l*. Both theme and recipient arguments may be simultaneously expressed affixally, as shown in (4), subject to Case and Person Ordering Constraints of a familiar type (the ACC must precede the DAT and the cluster is subject to a 3 < 1/2/3 person ordering constraint). There is a single full pronoun paradigm corresponding to both OBJ and DAT OBJ affixal forms (Table 1).

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[2] The prepositional oblique is not characteristic of ditransitive verbs in Maltese, although it is available as an alternative for a few verbs, but prepositional obliques, of course, occur with a range of different verbs.

[3] This simplifies slightly, because when an NP argument is left or right dislocated to a position outside the nucleus of the clause, DAT (and indeed ACC) marking is in fact optional — an example which illustrates this is (31). We take it that such dislocated elements occupying peripheral positions are (additionally) associated with discourse functions, but since this matter is really orthogonal to our concerns here, we do not discuss it further.