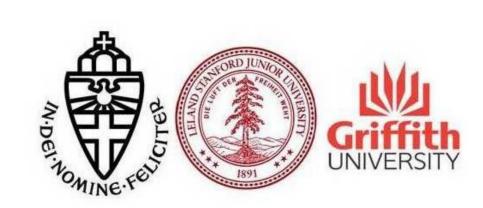# In a land far, far away...
The dative alternation in British, American and Australian English

Daphne Theijssen[1], Joan Bresnan[2] and Marilyn Ford[3]

[1]Radboud University Nijmegen, [2]Stanford University, [3]Griffith University
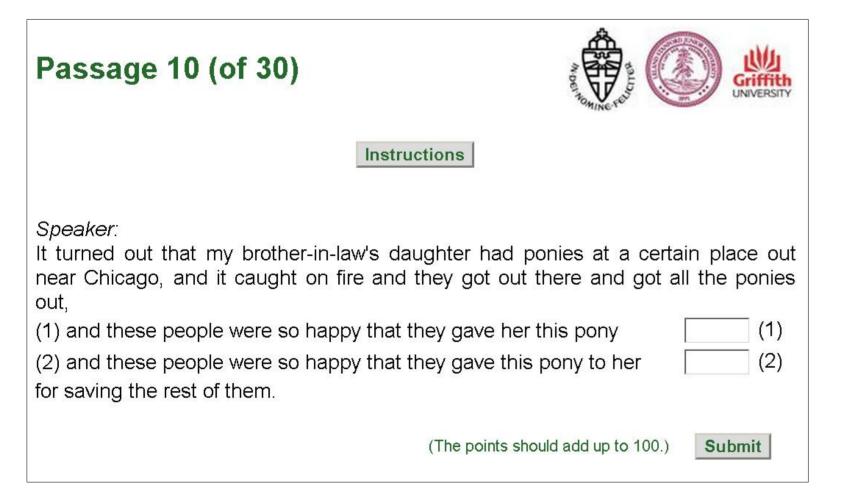
Introduction

► In the dative alternation in English, one can choose between:
  ▷ *the evil queen gave the poisonous apple to Snow White*
  ▷ *the evil queen gave Snow White the poisonous apple*
► Previous research has shown that there is a general tendency to place
  ▷ animate before inanimate nouns
  ▷ shorter before longer nouns
  ▷ pronouns before non-pronouns
  ▷ definite before indefinite nouns
► We compare distributional properties of the dative alternation in American, British and Australian English
► Since Australian English is the younger variety, we expect the difference between Australian and British English is smaller than that between American and British English

Research question

► What are the differences and similarities in the judgement of dative sentences in British, American and Australian English?

Experimental setup

► We replicate the rating study of Bresnan&Ford (2010), extending it by:
  ▷ including British English
  ▷ using a wider age range (20 to 65 years)
  ▷ conducting it through a website instead of on paper
  ▷ presenting the items in random order
► Participants read a short passage followed by two possible continuations and were asked to rate the naturalness of both options by dividing 100 points between them (the more points, the more natural)
► 30 items taken from the (American English) Switchboard corpus, e.g.

Passage 10 (of 30)

Instructions

Speaker:
It turned out that my brother-in-law's daughter had ponies at a certain place out near Chicago, and it caught on fire and they got out there and got all the ponies out,
(1) and these people were so happy that they gave her this pony   (1)
(2) and these people were so happy that they gave this pony to her for saving the rest of them.   (2)

(The points should add up to 100.)   Submit

Participants

Table: Characteristics of participants in rating study

	Female				Male			
	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

Linear regression modeling

► We model the ratings for the variant with preposition *to*
► Two grouping factors (random effects): speaker and item
► The predictors included as fixed effects:
  ▷ definiteness of the recipient (*Snow White* in the example)
  ▷ definiteness of the theme (*the poisonous apple*)
  ▷ animacy of the recipient
  ▷ pronominality of the theme
  ▷ the log ratio of the length of the theme to the length of the recipient
  ▷ age, sex, and variety, and their interaction with the above predictors
  ▷ item order, the options order and the rating previously assigned
► Pairwise models with significant effects from individual models, plus interactions with variety

Results

Table: Significant coefficients in pairwise regression models (positive favour variant with *to*)

	Br-Aus	Br-Am	Am-Aus
Variety = US : Previous rating/10			-0.52
Variety = US : Length ratio : Age/10			-1.37
Previous rating/10		-0.41	
Theme = pronominal : Age/10		-2.26	
Theme = indefinite		-12.45	-13.31
Length ratio (th/rec)	-19.59	-18.77	-23.15
(Intercept)	47.78	47.99	47.78
Recipient = inanimate	42.30	34.48	43.46
Variety = US		4.28	6.10
Variety = US : Length ratio			9.33

► Three predictors are significant in two or three models
  ▷ animate nouns precede inanimate nouns
  ▷ shorter nouns precede longer nouns
  ▷ definite nouns precede indefinite nouns
► As expected, British English seems to be in between the other two varieties
  ▷ only the Am-Aus model shows significant interactions with variety
  ▷ the Br-Aus model has **no** significant interactions/effects of variety
► Older British and American people are less reluctant to use a double object construction with a pronominal theme (e.g. *give the man it*) than younger
► Compared to Australians, Americans are less sensitive to length ratio. This is especially true for younger Americans ('Americanization'?)

Conclusion

► There are distributional differences between the dative alternation in American, Australian and American English.
► The effects found are consistent with the history of the varieties
► In near future, we will compare the dative alternation across the varieties in corpus data

Acknowledgements