In a land far, far away...
The dative alternation in British, American and Australian English
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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 I caught on the and they got out there and got all the ponies out.
(1) and these people were so happy that they gave her the pony
(2) and these people were so happy that they gave this pony to her
for saving the rest of them.

(The points should add up to 100.)

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)

| Variety = US : Previous rating/10 | 0.52 | 0.13 |
| Variety = US : Length ratio : Age/10 | -0.41 | 0.37 |
| Previous rating : 0.01 | -2.26 |
| Theme = pronominal : Age/10 | -12.45 |
| Theme = indefinite | 13.31 |
| Length ratio (th/rec) | -19.59 |
| (Intercept) | 47.78 |
| Recipient = inanimate | -43.46 |
| Variety = US | 4.28 |
| Variety = US : Length ratio | 9.33 |

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.

Conclusion

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

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 people.

Compared to Australians, Americans are less sensitive to length ratio. This is especially true for younger Americans (‘Americanization’).

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