

REVISITING CONSTRAINTS ON POSTVERBAL ARGUMENT CODING AND LINEARIZATION IN ENGLISH GOAL DITRANSITIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

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Abstract: *The current study seeks to revisit the analysis that attributes the infelicity, in all varieties of English, of strings like (1) *He gave the man it' and (2) *He gave to him it' to "the clash between the topical character of the pronoun 'it' and the focality associated with end position in English", in addition to the "breach of the short-before-long principle" (Siewierska & Hollmann, 2007: 86f.) The string in (1) is a double object construction (DOC), while that in (2) is a prepositional construction (PPC). In contradistinction to the above constraints, the present study shows that the pronoun 'it' can felicitously appear in the end position in DOCs, as in e.g. "He gave him it" (cf. Huddleston, 2002: 248), besides the fact that the so-called 'short-before-long principle' is clearly violated in that sentence without rendering it ungrammatical. Hence, end position and the "breach of the short-before-long principle" are not tenable constraints. Thus, the current study maintains that for a DOC to accommodate a personal pronoun theme, its goal argument must be realized as a lexically unstressed constituent (cf. Antilla, 2008), specifically as a pronoun (e.g. He gave him it). On the other hand, postponing a personal pronoun theme in the PPC is not possible (e.g. *He gave to him it) because a postponed theme involving non-heavy NP shift is only possible if it is a nominal constituent, since nominal constituents are both contrastively and lexically stressable (cf. Antilla et al., 2010), as in e.g. He gave to him the book – a construction that has been reported to occur in the northern dialect of British English (cf. Siewierska & Hollmann, 2007). Any attempt to postpone a personal pronoun theme will render the sentence ungrammatical (e.g. *He gave to him it), even where there is an unequivocally contrastively stressable pronoun like 'them' (e.g. *He gave to him them), since, while 'them' is no doubt contrastively stressable, it is not lexically stressable. Both lexical stressability and contrastive stressability are a requirement for this kind of postponement.*

Keywords: *ditransitive, goal, ordering, pronominalization, postponement*

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Introduction

While ditransitive constructions have attracted a lot of research and debates, as regards their semantics, syntax, pragmatics, among others (e.g. Pinker, 1989; Krifka, 2004; Gast, 2007; Beavers, 2011; Gerwin, 2013; Beavers & Koontz-Garboden, 2017; Isingoma, 2018, 2021a, 2021b), more research into these phenomena continues to unveil more idiosyncrasies that provide a better understanding of this area of linguistic inquiry. Ditransitive constructions come in two linear orders, namely the Double Object Construction (DOC) and the Prepositional Phrase Construction (PPC), as shown in (1):

- (1) (a) Peter sent Tom a book. (DOC)
 (b) Peter sent a book to Tom. (PPC)

However, there are situations where the ordering of the non-subject arguments is presented non-canonically ((2) & (3)), and there are also situations where the non-subject arguments may be coded pronominally either in a canonical ordering (4) or a non-canonical ordering (3b). Canonically, the DOC in (2) requires a configuration where the goal precedes the theme, while the canonical ordering of the PPC in (3) requires the theme to precede the goal. Crucially, despite the non-canonical linearization of the non-subject arguments, the sentences are deemed licit by native speakers for all the cases in (2) and (3), including the canonical ordering in (4b), where the theme is pronominalized in the DOC. However, most of these configurations are said to be mainly dialectal (Hughes & Trudgill, 1979; Haddican, 2010). On the other hand, configurations such as those in (5) are illicit in all varieties of English (cf. Siewierska & Hollmann, 2007):

- (2) (a) She gave *a book the man*.
 (b) She gave *the book him*.
 (c) She gave *it him*.
 (d) She gave *it the man*. (Hughes & Trudgill, 1979, p. 21)
- (3) (a) A staff sergeant is explaining *to the men the rules of the Geneva Convention*. (Anttila, 2008, p. 53)
 (b) He gave *to him a book*. (Siewierska & Hollmann, 2007, p. 87)
- (4) (a) He gave *it to him*.
 (b) He gave *him it*. (Hughes & Trudgill, 1979, p. 21)
- (5) (a) *She gave *the man it*.
 (b) *She gave *to the man it*.
 (c) *She gave *to him it*. (Siewierska & Hollmann, 2007, pp. 86ff)

This study therefore seeks to delineate conditions under which the pronominalization of the theme arguments is allowable in e.g. (4b), while it is precluded in (5a). Similarly, the study is set out to examine conditions that allow the postponement of the theme argument in (3b) in the northern variety of British English as opposed to (5b) and (5c), which are illicit in all varieties of English. The analysis in the current study is meant to revisit Siewierska and Hollmann's (2007, p. 86) account, in which it is claimed that the infelicity in (5) is attributable to "the clash between the topical character of the pronoun *it* and the focality associated with end position in English", in addition to the "breach of the short-before-long principle". This study shows that Siewierska and Hollmann's (2007, p. 86) account is not tenable and consequently the current study provides an alternative unified account that adequately accounts for the phenomenon in (5) and (4b) as well as in other related examples in (2) and (3) above. The data for this study was mainly gleaned from repositories (specifically the BNC) and works that have dealt with ditransitive constructions in English (e.g. Hughes & Trudgill, 1979; Siewierska & Hollmann, 2007; Anttila, 2008; Huddleston, 2002).

Constraints on the pronominalization of the theme in the DOC and its postponement in the PPC

One important constraint that has been suggested in literature in the postponement of the theme argument in goal ditransitive constructions is prosody. For instance, Hughes and Trudgill (1979, p. 21) state that (2a) and (2b) occur if 'man' (2a) and 'him' (2b) are contrastively stressed. In addition, Hughes and Trudgill (1979, p. 21) also observe that if both non-subject arguments are pronouns, the constructions where the permutation of the non-subject arguments is allowable are very common in British English. Hence, as is well known, pronominality and prosody are very important predictors in this respect. Crucially, a very important structural property regarding the syntactic phenomena under consideration in this study concerns the constraints on the pronominalization of the theme argument in the DOC in (5a) and the postponement of a pronominalized theme argument in the PPC of goal ditransitive constructions in (5b) and (5c). All the strings in (5) above are infelicitous in all varieties of English, as reported by Siewierska and Hollmann (2007, p. 86ff).

In relation to (5a) and (5b), in which the goal arguments are nominal constituents, Siewierska and Hollmann (2007, p. 86) note that the infelicity is due to "the clash between the topical character of the pronoun *it* and the focality associated with end position in English." They also point out that there is a "breach of the short-before-long principle."¹ However, if this explanation were to hold, what would

1. Note that in relation to (5a) if the theme is a demonstrative pronoun or indefinite pronoun, as in (i) and (ii), respectively, there is no ungrammaticality (cf. Siewierska and Hollmann, 2007, p. 86):

- (i) She gave *the man this*.
- (ii) She gave *the man some*.

explain the felicity of (6), in which ‘it’ occupies the end position in ditransitive constructions?

- (6) (a) She gave *him it*. (Hughes & Trudgill, 1979, p. 21)
 (b) He gave *her it*. (Huddleston, 2002, p. 248)
 (c) Give *me it*, you little cow! (Biber et al., 1999, p. 929)
 (d) And she said, my mother *brought me it* (BNC-KCR)
 (e) I know. And I didn’t. They *offered me it*. (BNC-KC6)
 (f) So they *sent me it*. (BNC-JA4)
 (g) There was no reason why Guido shouldn’t know the truth. So she *told him it*. (BNC-JXT)
 (h) Newcastle Oh it’s not is it? Wants to *sell us it*! What Er company (BNC-KB9)
 (i) Maybe he just didn’t think when they *showed him it*, that it wasn’t... (BNC-KB9)
 (j) The bastards want to *lend you it*, if you haven’t and want to borrow (BNC-HHS)

Evidently, the difference between (5a) and (6) is that, in (5a), the goal argument is a nominal constituent, while in (6) the goal arguments are pronominal constituents. This is a very important property and Siewierska & Hollmann (2007, p. 86) correctly associate it with the frequency of cases where permutation is allowed, as in (2c): *She gave it him*. However, attributing the infelicity in (5) to the clash between the topicality of ‘it’ and the focality of end position would mean that the examples in (6) should be infelicitous as well. Yet, they are not only felicitous, but also, as Huddleston (2002, p. 248) puts it, (6b) is “widespread.” Moreover, according to Hughes and Trudgill (1979, p. 21), (6a) is standard (British) English, although Biber et al. (1999, p. 929) point out that (6c) is “virtually restricted to conversation.”² In addition, there are obvious cases involving non-ditransitive constructions in English in which ‘it’ must occupy the end position as in (7), something that Zwicky (1986, p. 104) had already observed:

- (7) (a) I saw *it*.
 (b) I want you to buy *it*.

Hence, end position in itself is not the issue in (5), contra Siewierska and Hollmann (2007, p. 86). Similarly, the violation of ‘short-before-long principle’ suggested by Siewierska and Hollmann (2007, p. 86) cannot account for the infelicity of (5),

2. See also Quirk et al. (1985, p. 1396, fn. a).

since in (6) the violation does not affect the felicity of the sentences (for example in (6a)); it is clear that ‘it’ is short compared to ‘him’ but it felicitously comes after long ‘him’). What we could advance as a possibly tenable explanation for the infelicity of (5a) resides in the syntactic categories to which the goal and theme constituents belong and the associated lexical stress they carry or do not carry. Anttila (2008, p. 52), following Erteschik-Shir (1979; 2007), points out that “in dialects where lexically unstressed pronoun themes are allowed in double object constructions [,] they preferably occur after lexically unstressed pronoun goals [my square brackets].” This accounts well for the infelicity of (5a), because the goal argument is not a lexically unstressed constituent, i.e. it is a nominal constituent, which is lexically stressable. Given that Siewierska and Hollmann’s (2007, p. 87) explanation for (5b) is the same as that for (5a), which I have shown to be inadequate, we need a different explanation for (5b), since the one I have provided above (following Anttila, 2008) only caters for (5a). We also need an explanation for (5c), as Siewierska and Hollmann (2007) do not seem to provide one or seem to take their (now inadequate) explanation for (5a) and (5b) to be valid for (5c). Crucially, (5b) and (5c) need a different explanation, because they are different from (5a); that is, (5a) is a double object construction (DOC) while (5b) and (5c) are prepositional phrase constructions (PPCs). In addition, (5a) is a case of canonical ordering, while (5b) and (5c) are cases of non-canonical ordering.

Accounts of the possibility of having a non-canonical ordering of PPCs indicate that such configurations are common where there is heavy NP shift (Siewierska & Hollmann, 2007, p. 87), as illustrated in (8a) and in (3a) above (repeated here as (8b)):

(8) (a) And they brought [to him] [a paralyzed man lying on a stretcher].

(Bible: New American Standard Version)

(b) A staff sergeant is explaining [to the men] [the rules of the Geneva Convention]. (Anttila, 2008, p. 53)

Note that according to Arnold et al. (2000, p. 29), heaviness should be viewed in terms of “relative number of words” (but see, for example, Shiobara, 2002, p. 275 for considerations of heaviness based on “prosodic words”). Based on Arnold et al. (2000, p. 29), the sentences in (8) show that the postponement of the theme arguments is motivated by the fact that they are heavy compared to the goal arguments, since in terms of number of words, the theme arguments have more words than the goal arguments.

Remarkably, where heavy NP shift is not involved, such non-canonical orderings require that there is contrastive stress on the postponed theme argument (cf.

Siewierska & Hollmann, 2007, p. 87). Yet in (5b) and (5c) above, we have the pronoun ‘it’ as the theme argument. The pronoun ‘it’ has limited stressability, as it cannot be placed, for example, in certain focal positions, namely, in the focus position of a cleft sentence, as in (9b):

- (9) (a) It is *the degree* that I’m interested in.
 (b) *It is *it* that I’m interested in.

However, a situation where ‘it’ could be contrastively accented (stressed) is illustrated in (10). In (10a), if ‘it’ is left unaccented, the hearer will automatically resolve its reference in favor of ‘the cake on the left’ (the grammatical subject or topic), even if that yields an interpretation that does not seem to be the intended one. A contrastive accent on ‘it’ may presumably direct the hearer’s attention towards ‘the other one’ instead. But, seemingly, this must be accompanied by a pointing gestural stimulus. At the same time, Cleghorn and Rugg (2011, p. 41) show that a high tone on the word ‘it’ in (10b) “implies that the speaker made the accusation that one or more other objects were stolen.” Relevantly, we realize that even though ‘it’ may be contrastively stressed in some environments, this is typically limited (cf. (10) vs. (9)).

- (10) (a) *The cake on the left* costs much less than *the other one*, but **IT** is much more tasty, I’m sure.
 (b) I didn’t say you stole **IT**.

Moreover, while Antilla et al. (2010, p. 959, fn.2) recognize that personal pronouns can be accented, they insist that these pronouns do not have lexical stress. Hence, a distinction has been made between emphatic stress (contrastive stress or accent) and lexical stress, with the latter, according to the above authors, relating to lexical “metrical prominence.” What seems to be clear now is that the (contrastive) stressability of ‘it’ is restricted to arguably (some) cases where there is no theme postponement, as shown in (10). In other words, prima facie, a postponed theme cannot be pronominalized using ‘it’ because contrastive stressability on ‘it’ seems not to be permitted in such a syntactic environment (i.e. in the non-canonical ordering of the PPC). One could, thus, preliminarily, state that it is this paucity in contrastive stressability that makes the pronoun ‘it’ fail to occupy the non-canonical end position in the PPC, a prosodic requirement for the postponement of the theme argument where no

heavy NP shift is involved in the PPC (cf. *She gave to him the book* vs. **She gave to him it*).³

Crucially, the constraint posed by the postponement of the theme in PPCs (i.e. outside cases of heavy NP shift) becomes explanatorily more robust when one considers the infelicity of a string like **She gave to him them*, which, according to Willem Hollmann (p.c.), is disallowed even in the northern dialect of British English, where cases such as *He gave to him a book* are possible, yet the pronoun ‘them’ can contrastively be stressed. Thus, a unified account that includes cases such as **She gave to him them* could be postulated based on the criterion that a postponed theme in the PPC must simply be a nominal constituent and not a pronominal constituent (especially if it is a personal pronoun)⁴, as not only contrastive stressability is required, but also lexical stressability is obligatory. Both ‘it’ and ‘them’ lack lexical stressability, since they are personal pronouns (Antilla et al., 2010). This morphophonemic constraint would also account for the infelicity of a string like **He gave to the man them*, which Siewierska and Hollmann (2007, p. 86) have shown to be ungrammatical in all varieties of English. If we consider the above reasoning as tenable, then we can advance the following constraint (11), which will quintessentially account for the felicity of (12) and the infelicity of (13):

- (11) CONSTRAINT ON THE POSTPONEMENT OF THEME ARGUMENTS IN THE PPC
A postponed theme argument in the PPC must not only be contrastively stressed, but also it must be a lexically stressable constituent.
- (12) (a) He gave to *him* a book. (Siewierska & Hollmann, 2007, p. 87)
(b) I give to you *Helen*. (BNC-K74)
- (13) (a) **She* gave to the man *it*.

3. We should note that Huddleston (2002, p. 247) and Cowan (2008, p. 339) stress that a sentence like *She gave to him the book* (which according to Siewierska & Hollmann (2007) occurs in the northern dialect of British English) is not good since there is no heavy NP to necessitate the postponement of the theme. Thus, according to them, the strings in (i) below are not felicitous.

- (i) (a) **I* returned to *Jo* the books.
(b) **John* demonstrated to *Alan* the procedure.

However, it seems clear that Huddleston (2002, p. 247) and Cowan (2008, p. 339ff) make the above observation in relation to standard English, as Siewierska and Hollmann (2007) have proved that dialectically such sentences are possible.

4. I have no evidence as to whether other pronouns such as demonstratives or indefinites would be allowed as in (i) and (ii). According to Willem Hollmann (p.c.), no evidence about that is available in the corpora he and colleagues have used to describe varieties of English that allow the postponement of the theme in the PPC:

- (i) ??*She* gave to *him* *that*.
(ii) ??*She* gave to *him* *some*.

- (b) *She gave to him it. (Siewierska & Hollmann, 2007, p. 86ff)
- (c) *She gave to him them. (Willem Hollmann, p.c.)

Observably, in both (12a) and (12b), the postponed theme arguments are lexically (as well as contrastively) stressable, since they are nominal constituents and this renders their postponement unproblematic especially in the northern variety of British English. On the other hand, all the examples in (13) have illicit postponed themes, as neither ‘it’ nor ‘them’ is lexically stressable. Even though ‘them’ is prototypically contrastively stressable, ‘it’ is not in this syntactic environment. Above all, neither ‘it’ nor ‘them’ is simultaneously lexically and contrastively stressable – a requirement for the postponement of the theme argument (cf. 11), as illustrated in (12).

Conclusion

This study, contra Siewierska and Hollmann (2007, p. 86), has shown that “the clash between the topical character of the pronoun ‘it’ and the focality associated with end position in English” as well as the “breach of the short-before-long principle” cannot account for the infelicity of the sentences where the pronominalized theme is placed after the goal whether in canonical ordering (i.e. (5a)) or non-canonical ordering (i.e. (13)). Rather, the PPCs where no heavy NP shift is involved (i.e. (12)) allow the postponement of the theme argument if and only if the morphophonemic criterion in (11) is met. We also note that the pronominalization of theme arguments (as lexically unstressed constituents) in the canonical ordering of DOCs (i.e. (5a)) requires the goal argument to also be realized as a lexically unstressed constituent (6) (cf. Antilla, 2008). All in all, and, as has been demonstrated in the available relevant literature (e.g. Bresnan & Nikitina, 2008; Levin, 2015) we again see an interplay of constraints at work in the syntax of goal ditransitive verbs, namely, phonological (contrastive stress), morphophonemic (word class and lexical stressability), syntactic (heavy NP shift), as well as those not covered here (or just mentioned incidentally), such as animacy, or language-external factors, such as dialectal variations (see e.g. Pinker, 1989; Beavers & Koontz-Garboden, 2017; Bresnan & Nikitina, 2008; Rappaport Hovav & Levin, 2008; Gerwin, 2013; Levin, 2015; Isingoma, 2018, among others).

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