Object functions and the syntax of double object constructions in Lexical Functional Grammar

Olivia Lam
University of Hong Kong

The default definition for a double object construction (DOC) is almost invariably 'a construction like the give-construction'. While the give-construction may be the most representative example of such constructions in many languages, this is definitely not the case in Cantonese (cf. also Borg and Comrie 1984, Comrie 2003, Kittila 2006, Margetts and Austin 2007, and Newman 1997 on the anomaly of the verb GIVE in other languages). In fact, in Cantonese, the give-construction is the *only* construction that displays a number of peculiar properties.

This paper presents a study of the syntax of Cantonese DOCs and shows that Cantonese as a language does not have an exceptional order of non-subject arguments in double object constructions - only the verb *bei2* 'give' in this language does. More specifically, in the *bei* 'give'-construction in Cantonese, the theme-object precedes the recipient-object:

(1) GIVE
    a.   Theme-NP < Recipient-NP

ngo	bei-zo	bun	syu	ngo	gaaze
1.sg	give-perf	CL	book	1.sg	elder.sister

        'I gave the book to my elder sister.'
    b.   *Recipient-NP < Theme-NP

*ngo	bei-zo	ngo	gaaze	bun	syu
1.sg	give-perf	1.sg	elder.sister	CL	book

In all other ditransitive constructions, it is the recipient-object that precedes the theme-object:

(2) TEACH
    a.   Recipient-NP < Theme-NP

ngo	gaau	siupangjau	zungman
1.sg	teach	children	Chinese

        'I teach children Chinese.'
    b.   *Theme-NP < Recipient-NP

*ngo	gaau	zungman	siupangjau
1.sg	teach	Chinese	children

The GIVE-construction differs from other DOCs in the order of objects, which is a c-structure difference. In terms of all the f-structure phenomena investigated, it patterns with other DOCs in the language. Since the verb *bei* 'give' is the only exception to the class of ditransitive verbs in the language, the anomaly of the order of objects in the *bei*-construction can be viewed as a kind of lexical idiosyncracy, and in LFG, lexical idiosyncracies are typically represented in lexical entries. The (partial) lexical entry for *bei* 'give' is given below:

(3)   Partial lexical entry for the verb GIVE in Cantonese

      bei   V $(\uparrow PRED) = $ 'bei < -, -, - >'

                    $(\uparrow PRED\ ARGS\ \varepsilon\ ) = \%arg_a$
                    $(\%arg_a\ role) = Rpt$
                    $(\%arg_a\ GF) = OBJ_\theta$
                    $CAT\ (\%arg_a) = \{\ NP, N', N\ \}$

                    $(\uparrow PRED\ ARGS\ \varepsilon\ ) = \%arg_b$
                    $(\%arg_b\ role) = Th$
                    $(\%arg_b\ GF) = OBJ$
                    $CAT\ (\%arg_b) = \{\ NP, N', N\ \}$

                    $\{\ \%arg_b <_f \%arg_a\ |$
                    $\%arg_a <_f \%arg_b$
                    $(\%arg_b\ weight) = heavy\}$

                    $ARGS = \{ARG1\ |\ ARG2\ |\ \ldots\ |\ ARG_n\}$

The linear order of the arguments that express the semantic roles required is highly relevant to a study of the syntax of DOCs and objects in Cantonese. Assuming various parallel but inter-related levels of representation, LFG has the appropriate tools to take into account the fact that the verb *bei* 'give' only exhibits a difference in the order of objects, while patterning with other ditransitive verbs in other syntactic respects.

References

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