Dative alternations in less-researched syntactic patterns of standard Croatian

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Abstract

Dative alternation in double object constructions is a frequently researched syntactic phenomenon, having been investigated across world languages. Consequently, even relatively smaller and under-resourced languages like Croatian have seen influential studies on the topic. Recent syntactic and semantic analyses of verbs in standard Croatian have identified less-explored instances of dative alternation. This contribution aims to describe the alternation between dative case and prepositional phrase for the non-agentive and intransitive uses of the verb *služiti* ('to serve'), as well as the dative alternation for the agentive and transitive uses of the verb *izbjeći* ('to avoid').

1 Introduction

The phenomenon of dative alternation (dative shift) closely related to *double object construction* (DOC) has a prominent role in linguistic theory, particularly within generative grammar (Chomsky 1955/1975, Larson 1988, Pesetsky 1995), though it is also explored in other linguistic frameworks (Goldberg 1995). Since Chomsky (1955/1975) and earlier it has been noted that there exists a class of English verbs that show up in two different syntactic patterns and pose a problem for syntactic theory on multiple levels (case-marking of two 'bare' objects, two syntactic patterns for the same meaning). Verbs like *give*, for instance, may appear in the canonical ditransitive pattern (*John gave a letter to Mary* > Agent[NP] V Theme[NP] Recipient[PP]) or in the DOC pattern, where two prepositionless objects are required (*John gave Mary a letter* > Agent[NP] V

Recipient[NP] Theme[NP]). The phenomenon has been extensively studied in English and has given rise to the stipulation of layered structure for the Verb Phrase (*v*P-shell, Larson 1988). Terminological preferences vary – some authors prefer dative shift (Larson 1988), while others opt for dative alternation (Levin and Rappaport Hovav, 2005). A similar construction has been noted in Croatian, though scholars advise against applying the term *double object construction* in this context. Instead, they refer to it as dative alternation (Zovko Dinković 2007). As a case-marking language, Croatian expresses grammatical relations and semantic roles through morphological case, and two objects of a single verb are usually marked differently. In the prototypical situation which describes a transfer of a Theme from an Agent to a Recipient, and is expressed through "give"-verbs, an Agent is realized as nominative NP, Theme as accusative NP and Recipient as dative NP. Interestingly, a small group of Croatian verbs (approximately eight) also allow an alternative syntactic pattern in which the Recipient is marked with the accusative case (as a direct object), while the Theme appears in the instrumental case. This construction resembles English dative alternation in that the Recipient can appear in two different morphological forms. In Croatian Recepient alternates between indirect and direct object as in 1a-1b.[1]

1a)

Lena	je poslužila	gostima	čaj.
Lena	serve$_{3SG.PAST}$	guests$_{DAT.PL}$	tea$_{ACC.SG}$

'Lena served tea to the guests.'

1b)

Lena	je poslužila	goste	čajem
Lena	serve$_{3SG.PAST}$	guests$_{ACC.PL}$	tea$_{INST.SG}$

'Lena served guests the tea.'

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[1] The same is sometimes claimed for English too (Larson 1998).

Zovko Dinković (2007) points out that the dative alternation in Croatian serves to increase the affectedness of the Recipient which is achieved by shifting it to the direct object position i.e. by using the accusative case. Belaj and Tanacković Faletar (2017) further argue that this syntactic shift serves to topicalize and focalize the Recipient, and also suggest that the instrumental-marked NP can carry two semantic roles: Theme and Instrument. In the pattern with the dative case in its prototypical semantic role of Recipient, the construction is unmarked. In contrast, the alternation where the direct object in the accusative case takes a semantic role of a Recipient, accompanied by the instrumental-marked Theme, is syntactically and stylistically marked. Various theoretical accounts have been proposed to explain these alternations. Some researchers argue that the constructions differ semantically and thus correspond to two distinct verb entries with different subcategorization frames (Oehrle 1976, according to van Gelderen 2013), while others claim that one construction is derived from the other (Larson 1988, Baker 1997), assuming a single lexical entry with approximately the same semantic roles.

2 Analysis of the non-agentive intransitive use of the verb *služiti* ('to serve')

Introductory analysis of the ditransitive dative alternation of the verb *služiti* ('to serve') in Croatian, where a direct object (Theme) in the accusative case and an indirect object (Recipient) in the dative case (pattern Agent[NP_Nom] V Theme[NP_Acc] Recipient[NP_Dat]) can alternate with relatively similar constructions featuring a direct object (Recipient) in the accusative case and an indirect object (Theme) in the instrumental case (pattern Agent[NP_Nom] V Recipient [NP_Acc] Theme[NP_Inst]), pertains to the agentive use of this verb in its primary meaning. This meaning can be broadly defined as 'to offer something to guests or clients' and could semantically be classified within the "give" verbs (according to Levin 1993).

However, prior analyses have focused exclusively on the agentive ditransitive construction within the semantic group of "give"-verbs. The verb *služiti* ('to serve') is polysemous, and its meaning as a "give"-verb – along with this agentive ditransitive usage – is not its only one. A relatively common non-agentive use exists, meaning 'to be serviceable or suitable for something', as in the following grammatical sentence 2a):

2a)

Sport	služi	za	jačanje svijesti.
Sport	serve$_{3SG}$	for	strengthening$_{ACC.SG}$ awareness$_{GEN.SG}$

'Sport serves to strengthen awareness.'

On the level of syntactic realization, we can formally represent this realized pattern as Theme[NP_Nom] V Purpose[PP_za+Acc], seemingly without an expressed semantic role of Recipient. This prepositional phrase (*za* 'for' + *jačanje*$_{ACC.SG}$ 'strengthening') is interchangeable with a noun phrase in the dative case (*jačanju*$_{DAT.SG}$), while the sentence remains grammatical and retains the same meaning, as in 2b):

2b)

Sport	služi	jačanju svijesti.
Sport	serve$_{3SG}$	strengthening$_{DAT.SG}$ awareness$_{GEN.SG}$

'Sport serves to strengthen awareness.'

The semantic role of Purpose, which is prototypically realized in (2a) by the prepositional phrase *za* 'for' + accusative NP, is realized in (2b) with the dative case (Theme[NP_Nom] V Purpose[NP_Dat]). The dative case is more commonly associated with the semantic roles of the Recipient, but in this instance, the appearance of the dative NP does not alter the semantic role of Purpose.

We hypothesize that the reason for this lies in the fact that, in such sentences, the Recipient of the action of serving a purpose for someone is not overtly expressed in the sentence. Semantically, at a logical argument-structure level of the event, an action in which no one benefits from the notion of "serving" is impossible. Thus, it can be presumed that, in its full form (Theme[NP_Nom] V Recipient[NP_Dat] Purpose[PP_za+Acc]), the sentence is as in (2c):

2c)

Sport	služi	državi	za jačanje svijesti.
Sport	serve$_{3SG}$	state$_{DAT.SG}$	for strengthening$_{ACC.SG}$ awareness$_{GEN.SG}$

'Sport serves the state to strengthen awareness.'

The alternation between (2a) and (2b) could therefore be explained as an instance of grammatical metonymy (Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez

& Pérez Hernández, 2001: 334). Specifically, since an essential participant in the action (in this case, the Recipient in the dative case) is unexpressed as an argument, the next argument in the structure (though it fulfils a completely different semantic role) appears in unexpected grammatical form due to recategorization, replacing the prototypical prepositional phrase. Thus, this alternation between the dative case and the prepositional phrase in the meaning of the imperfective verb *služiti* (and its perfective counterpart *poslužiti*) is both possible and grammatical.

3 Dative alternations in specific group of motion verbs

In Section 2, it was shown how the dative case alternates with a prepositional phrase, covering the semantic role of Purpose in the intransitive syntactic pattern when an important member (Recepient) of the argument structure in non-agentive usage was not expressed. In this chapter, we will analyze in more detail the uses of the verb *izbjeći* ('avoid, escape', perfective), a polysemous verb that is relatively frequent in the Croatian language. At the surface level, we can say that this is a motion verb, but upon deeper classification, the first two distinct meanings identified in the analysis of examples (3a-3b) and (4a-4b) fall under "avoid"-verbs (according to Levin 1993).

In the first distinct meaning, which we can define as 'to do everything to prevent anything unpleasant or unwanted from happening', a possible alternation between accusative and dative case in the same structural position was observed without a change in the semantic role. Thus, in example (3a):

3a)
Taj krvolok   izbjegao je   progon.
That bloodsucker escape$_{3SG.PAST}$ persecution$_{ACC.SG}$
'That bloodsucker escaped persecution.'

The prototypical pattern is transitive and has the Theme marked with the accusative case (Agent[Nom] V Theme[Acc]), but the Theme can also appear in the dative case (Agent[Nom] V Theme[Dat]), which is not prototypical role for dative case.

3b)
Taj krvolok   izbjegao je   progonu.
That bloodsucker escape$_{3SG.PAST}$ persecution$_{DAT.SG}$
'That bloodsucker escaped persecution.'

The same valency patterns were observed in the analysis of examples for the second meaning, defined 'to move suddenly from current location' ("avoid"), as in (4a) and (4b):

4a)
On   će izbjeći   kamen.
He   avoid$_{3SG.FUT}$ stone$_{ACC.SG}$
'He will avoid the stone.'

4b)
On   će izbjeći   kamenu.
He   avoid$_{3SG.FUT}$ stone$_{DAT.SG}$
'He will avoid the stone.'

We emphasize that the analysis of this dative alternation for single-object "avoid"-verbs cannot be entirely identical to the analysis of dative shift in double-object constructions for "give"-verbs. Although the prototypical uses in both meanings involve the Theme in the accusative case, we believe that alternation with the dative is possible due to a combination of two reasons:

1. The argument with a dative case in south Slavic languages is usually used with certain types of motion verbs[2], making it somewhat ingrained in speakers' usage memory.
2. The alternation is enabled by the process of conceptualizing the object in the sentence: while the prototypical accusative usage focuses on the event or entity being avoided as a whole, the dative shifts the focus more toward the direction or goal of avoidance.

The third distinct meaning, 'to go in the opposite direction from where a certain danger is coming' ("flee, fly, escape"), is slightly different from the first two because the English translation equivalents would not apply to the previous two meanings, and we would not primarily classify that meaning semantically as an "avoid"-verb, but rather as an "escape"-verb (according to the VerbNet (Class Hierarchy), Kipper Schuler and Palmer 2005). Regardless of this semantic shift,

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[2] A detailed study of dative arguments with verbs of motion in South Slavic languages can be found in Palić 2010, pp. 239-267.

the alternation between the accusative and dative in examples (5a) and (5b) could be analyzed in the same way as the alternations in examples (3a-3b) and (4a-4b).

5a)

Stanovnici sela	izbjegli su	rat.
Villagers	escape3PL.PAST	war_ACC.SG

'Villagers escaped the war.'

5b)

Stanovnici sela	izbjegli su	ratu.
Villagers	escape3PL.PAST	war_DAT.SG

'Villagers avoided the war.'

However, due to the semantic difference from the first two meanings, another syntactic alternation appears, as in example (5c), where a prepositional phrase is used (something not expected for the first two described meanings).[3]

5c)

Stanovnici sela	izbjegli su	od	rata.
Villagers	escape3PL.PAST	from	war_GEN.SG

'Villagers fled from the war.'

In this case, we would not draw a parallel between the dative alternation in (5b) and the prepositional phrase in (5c) by explaining it through the process of grammatical metonymy, as in examples (2a-2b) for the verb *služiti* ('serve'), but rather through semantic proximity to prepositional semantics because *od* ('from') in (5c) introduces a spatial or abstract separation, which can overlap with the directional or goal-oriented meaning of the dative case when used with motion verbs in general. The small semantic difference can be related to perspective: the dative NP may focus more on the direction, while the PP focuses more on the source or the process of separation.

4   Conclusion and outlook

This paper presents initial analyses of less frequent and rarely described dative alternations in the Croatian language. While the phenomenon of dative alternation with ditransitive verbs semantically belonging to the "give"-verb group has been precisely described (Zovko 2007, Belaj and Tanacković Faletar 2017), this contribution focuses on other patterns and examples. In the first part of the analysis, we described the possible dative alternation with a prepositional phrase in the non-agentive use of the verb *služiti* ('serve'), even though it cannot be considered part of the "give"-verb group. In the second part, we examined different levels of dative alternations across all three distinct meanings of the frequent motion verb *izbjeći* ('avoid').

By comparing the conclusions from both analyses, we observed that:

1. The cause of the syntactic alternation between dative and accusative in the examples with the (mono)transitive verb *izbjeći* ('avoid') significantly differs from the cause of this phenomenon in the agentive use of the ditransitive verb *služiti* ('serve'). However, a key similarity is that, in both cases, the alternation arises due to focalization and the topicalization of objects in the sentence.

2. The phenomenon of grammatical metonymy emerged as a logical cause for the syntactic alternation between the dative and prepositional phrase ('*za*' + Acc) in the non-agentive use of *služiti* ('serve'). This process differs significantly in speakers' cognition from the cause of the alternation between the dative and prepositional phrase ('*od*' + Gen) in the examples for the third meaning of *izbjeći* ('avoid'). Here, the dative case and prepositional phrase alternate due to the semantic similarity between the source preposition *od* ('from') and the prefix '*iz-*' in the prefixed perfective verb *izbjeći* (both the preposition and the prefix carry the same meaning 'from').

These are fundamental and preliminary analyses obtained using traditional methods on small corpus samples. It would be preferred to develop an automated method for extracting this type of argument structure alternation and similar patterns from corpora for the purposes of further, diverse linguistic analyses. However, existing syntactically and, especially, semantically annotated treebanks for Croatian are limited in size and genre-specific, which poses significant challenges for conducting large-scale quantitative studies. Moreover, current

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[3] A search of the hrWaC corpus (Ljubešić and Klubička 2014) confirmed that this alternation also applies to less frequent synonyms of that particular sense of *izbjeći*, such as *odbjeći*, *umaći/umaknuti*, or *izmaći/izmaknuti*. These are relatively low-frequency synonyms, all also perfective in aspect with the core semantics of avoidance, but there is no evidence of the described alternations in the aspectual counterpart *izbjegavati* (imperfective). Thus, it can be assumed that in future research, verbal aspect will continue to play an important role.

frameworks, such as Universal Dependencies, continue to face difficulties in distinguishing between adverbial arguments and adjuncts, as well as in providing sufficient semantic role annotation. For analyses of this kind, it is probably necessary to introduce additional layers of grammatical representations – for instance, Enhanced Dependencies (Schuster and Manning 2016) – into larger treebanks. A possible direction for future work is therefore to explore ways in which the less-researched syntactic patterns of argument structure in Croatian could be systematically identified and described – for example, by applying the method of neutralizing argument alternations (Candito et al. 2017) to Croatian treebanks.

Acknowledgments

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