Double object construction

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The double object construction involves so-called ditransitive verbs, i.e. verbs with both a direct object (DO) and an indirect object (IO), to use traditional terminology here. Ditransitive verbs (also called double object verbs) can be further divided into three classes: verbs of giving or donatory verbs with the IO as recipient (sòng 送 ‘give as a present’, mái 卖 ‘to sell’, huán 还 ‘to give back’, dì 递 ‘to pass on’ etc.), verbs of taking with the IO as source (tōu 偷 ‘steal’, piàn 骗 ‘cheat’ etc.), and verbs of communication (wèn 问 ‘to ask’, gàosu 告诉 ‘to tell’ etc.) with the IO as goal.

(1)

他賣了美麗一台電腦
Tā mài-le Měi lì yī-tái diànnǎo
3SG sell -PERF Mary 1-CL computer
‘He sold Mary a computer.’

(2)

他偷了美麗一台電腦
Tā tōu-le Měi lì yī-tái diànnǎo
3SG steal-PERF Mary 1-CL
‘He stole Mary a computer.’

(3) 他告訴李四你的秘密了
Tā gàosu Lǐ sì nǐ de mì mǐ le
3SG tell Lisi 2SG SUB secret PART
‘He told Lisi your secret.’

(For comprehensive lists of these three classes in Mandarin with 15-30 verbs per class, cf. Lǐ Líndìng 李临定 1986: 53-63; Zhu Dēixi 朱德熙 1979: 81-82).

The DOC has always puzzled and fascinated syntacticians, because in many languages it displays an exceptional behaviour when compared with monotransitive verbs taking one object only (cf. the detailed overview in Emonds and Whitney 2006). This is also the case in Chinese where the DOC had to be “ruled in” by “marked features of the verbs, which require both constituents following them to be subcategorized elements” (C.-T. James Huang 1982: 96-97, note 16). This additional assumption was necessary because otherwise the DOC systematically violated C.-T. James Huang’s (1982: 41) Phrase Structure Condition, which allowed one constituent in postverbal position only.

The subdivision into three semantic classes (roughly ‘give’ vs. ‘take’ vs. ‘tell’ verbs) correlates with different syntactic properties, visible in the bā construction and the passive. (For donatory verbs, the presence of verb-adjacent gěi is preferrable here; its status is examined below).

(4a) 他把一台電腦賣給了美麗
Tā bā yī-tái diànnǎo mài-gěi-le Měi lì
3SG BA 1 CL computer sell -GEI-PERF Mary
‘He sold Mary a computer.’
(4b) *他把美麗賣給了一台電腦
*Tā bā Měilǐ mài-gěi-le yī tái diànhǎo
3SG BA Mary sell-GEI-PERF 1 CL computer

(4c) 這台電腦被他賣給了美麗
Zhè tái diànhǎo bèi tā mài-gěi-le Měilǐ
this CL computer PASS 3SG sell-GEI-PERF Mary
‘This computer was sold by him to Mary.’

(4d) *美麗被他賣給了一台電腦
*Měilǐ bèi tā mài-gěi-le yī tái diànhǎo
Mary PASS 3SG sell-GEI-PERF 1 CL computer
(‘Mary was sold a computer by him.’)

(5a) 他偷了美麗一臺電腦
Tā tōu -le Měilǐ yī-tái diànhǎo
3SG teal-PERF Mary 1-CL computer
‘He stole Mary a computer.’

(5b) *他把一台電腦偷了美麗
*Tā bā yī tái diànhǎo tōu -le Měilǐ
3SG BA 1 CL computer steal-PERF Mary

(5c) *他把美麗偷了一台電腦
*Tā bā Měilǐ tōu -le yī tái diànhǎo
3SG BA Mary steal-PERF 1 CL computer

(5d) *這台電腦被他偷了美麗
*Zhè tái diàn-nǎo bèi tā tōu -le Měilǐ
this CL computer PASS 3SG steal-PERF Mary

(5e) 美麗被他偷了一台電腦
Měilǐ bèi tā tōu -le yī tái diàn-nǎo
Mary PASS 3SG steal-PERF 1 CL computer
‘Mary was stolen a computer by him.’

(6a) 他把你的秘密告訴李四了
Tā bā nǐ de mimi gàosu Lǐsì le
3SG BA 2SG SUB secret tell Lisi PART
‘He told Lisi your secret.’

(6b) *他把李四告訴你的秘密了
*Tā bā Lǐsì gàosu nǐ de mimi le
3SG BA Lisi tell 2SG SUB secret PART

(6c) 你的秘密被他告訴李四了
Nǐ de mimi bèi tā gàosu Lǐsì le
2SG SUB secret PASS 3SG tell Lisi PART
‘Your secret was told to Lisi by him.’
(6d)  *李四被他告訴你的秘密了  
*Lìsì bèi tā gāosu nǐ de mìmì le  
Lìsì PASS 3SG tell 2SG SUB secret PART

In the case of donatory verbs, the theme argument (direct object) can follow bā, but not the recipient (indirect object) (cf. (4a) vs (4b)). For verbs of taking, neither the source (IO) nor the theme argument (DO) are acceptable in the bā construction (cf. (5b), (5c)). The theme argument of donatory verbs can be the subject in passive sentences, to the exclusion of the recipient (cf. (4c) vs (4d)). By contrast, for verbs of taking, the source, but not the theme argument, can be passivized (cf. (5d) vs (5e)). Verbs of communication finally pattern with donatory verbs, both in the bā construction and in the passive (cf. (6a) - (6d)).

These syntactic differences illustrate the necessity of a syntactic analysis per subclass, i.e. there is no uniform analysis for ditransitive verbs in general.

The present entry concentrates on donatory verbs (in Mandarin), for their analysis is the most controversial, due to the existence of two structures in addition to ‘V IO DO’ (repeated in (7)):

(7)  他賣了美麗一台電腦  ‘S V IO DO’  
Tā mài-le Měi lì yī-tái diànnǎo (DOC)  
3SG sell-PERF Mary 1-CL computer  
‘He sold Mary a computer.’

(8) below shows the same linear order between IO and DO as in (7), but the verb is followed by 給 gěi, whose status is still controversial (hence the gloss GEI).

(8)  他賣給了美麗一台電腦  ‘S V-gěi IO DO’  
Tā mài-gěi-le Měi lì yī-tái diànnǎo (DOC)  
3SG sell -GEI-PERF Mary 1-CL computer  
‘He sold Mary a computer.’

Both structures, ‘S V IO DO’ and ‘S V-gěi IO DO’ are in general subsumed under the label Double object construction (DOC), in contrast to the dative construction, where the Prepositional Phrase consisting of gěi ‘to, for’ and the recipient follows the theme:

(9)  他賣了一台電腦給美麗  ‘S V DO [PP gěi IO]’  
Tā mài-le yī tái diànnǎo gěi Měi lì (Dative construction)  
3SG sell -PERF 1 CL computer GEI Mary  
‘He sold a computer to Mary.’

The controversy mainly concerns the status of gěi in the DOC ‘S V-gěi IO DO’, but also in the dative construction, i.e. the prepositional analysis adopted here is not generally accepted. The issue is further complicated by the existence of the ditransitive verb gěi 給 ‘give’:

(10)  他給了美麗一台電腦  
Tā gěi -le Měi lì yī tái diànnǎo  
3SG give-PERF Mary 1 CL computer  
‘He gave Mary a computer’
Importantly, as demonstrated by Zhū Déxī 朱德熙 (1979, 1983) - the indispensable literature on this issue - not all verbs acceptable in the dative construction are likewise acceptable in the DOC. (For an extensive discussion of Zhu (1979, 1983), cf. Paul (1988a,b).) Donatory verbs in the strict sense are acceptable in the ‘V IO DO’ pattern, and verb-adjacent gei 给 is optional for them (compare (7) with (8)). Verb-adjacent gei is, however, obligatory in the DOC for what I call donatory verbs by extension, corresponding to Zhu’s (1979: 85) verb class V_{a/c}, which besides e.g. jǐ 寄 ‘send’ and xiě xìn 写信 ‘write (a letter)’ also include transitive verbs involving the meaning of transfer only optionally.

(11) 我寄*給*他三個包裹
Wǒ jì *-gei tā sān-ge bāoguǒ
1SG send -GEI 3SG 3 -CL parcel
‘I sent him three parcels.’

(12) 我沏給他一杯茶
#Wǒ qī -gei tā yī-bēi chá
1SG brew-GEI 3SG 1-cup tea
‘I made him a cup of tea.’

(13) 我打給了他一件毛衣
#Wǒ dǎ -gei-le tā yī-jiàn máoyī
1SG knit-GEI-PERF 3SG 1-CL sweater
‘I knitted him a sweater.’

Note that this class is open to some variation (signaled by #). While like Zhu Dexi (1979: 82), more conservative speakers only allow for a handful of verbs here (e.g. yǎo tāng 煮湯 ‘ladle out soup’, dào chá 倒茶 ‘pour tea’ etc.) and accordingly reject (12) and (13), younger speakers have extended that class to include more verbs and accept (12) and (13). Crucially however, even if the class membership for donatory verbs by extension may vary across speakers, this does not challenge the existence of that class itself.

For the dative construction ‘S V DO [ gei IO]’, native speakers’ judgements are more homogeneous. Besides for (both types of) donatory verbs (cf. (9), (14)), the dative construction is systematically available for transitive verbs optionally involving the meaning of transfer. With the latter type of verbs, the PP ‘gei NP’ is interpreted simultaneously as goal and beneficiary, i.e. the individual referred to by the NP benefits from the action, because its result (the tea or sweater in (15) and (16)) is transferred to her/him.

(14) 我寄了三個包裹給美麗
Wǒ jì -le sān ge bāoguǒ [gei Měilì]
1SG send-PERF 3 CL parcel to Mary
‘I sent three parcels to Mary.’

(15) 我沏一杯茶給美麗
Wǒ qī yī bēi chá [gei Měilì]
1SG brew 1 cup tea to Mary
‘I make Mary a cup of tea.’
(16) 我打了一件毛衣給美麗
Wǒ dà -le yí jiàn máoyī [gěi Měilì]
1SG knit-PERF 1 CL sweater to Mary
‘I knitted Mary a sweater.’

Against the backdrop of these facts, we can now evaluate a selection of the proposals in the literature.

Y.-H. Audrey Li 李艳惠 (1990: 110) analyses both instances of postverbal gěi as verbs. In the DOC ‘V-gěi IO DO’, V-gěi is considered a compound verb to which the IO adjoins, thus forming a complex verb capable of assigning case to the DO. The dative construction ‘V DO [gěi IO]’, by contrast, is claimed to instantiate a serial verb construction. This overall verbal analysis of gěi is also adopted by Huang, Li and Li (2009: 29-31).

C.-C. Jane Tang 湯志貞 (1990: 268) only examines the dative construction ‘V DO [gěi IO]’. She proposes a structure where the gěi PP is the complement of a lower PredP (cf. Bowers 1993), which itself is complement of the ditransitive verb. The DO in Spec, VP controls PRO in Spec, PredP:

(17) \([\text{PredP} V [\text{VP} \text{DO} [V [\text{PredP} \text{PRO} [\text{Pred} \text{gěi IO}]]] \text{tV}]]\)

In a similar vein, Cheng et al. (1999) claim that ‘gěi IO’ in the dative construction underlyingly involves a secondary predication on the DO, akin to English purposive clauses (I brought 30 dollars to give (to) him).

(18) DP V \([\text{VP2} \text{DO} [V_2 [[\text{PredP} \text{gěi}] \text{OP} [\text{VP3} \text{IO} [V_3 \text{HAVE} \text{t}]]]]\])

Gěi ‘give’ heading VP2 results from incorporating the abstract verb of possession ‘have’ to ‘cause’; whether this happens in the lexicon or in syntax is left open. The same incorporation is postulated for gěi in the DOC ‘V-gěi IO DO’, where gěi in turn incorporates to the lexical verb, resulting in a compound \([V \text{V-gěi}]\). Note that this step requires right adjunction of gěi to the verb, gěi in (18) originating in a position below the lexical verb.

The new analysis presented here differs from these earlier proposals. As already mentioned above, ‘gěi IO’ in the dative construction ‘S V DO [gěi IO]’ is analysed as a PP, basically following C.-C. Jane Tang (1990). The alleged role of this gěi PP as complement of a lower Pred, however, is in contradiction with the general inability of PPs to function as (primary or secondary) predicates (cf. Djamouri and Paul 1997, 2009) and therefore not adopted. If, as claimed by Y.-H. Audrey Li (1990), gěi were a verb here, it would be wrongly expected to allow for aspect suffixes such as perfective -le (also cf. Zhang Shi 1990):

(19) 我賣(了)一台電腦給(*了)美麗
Wǒ mài(-le) yī tái diànnǎo [pp gěi (*-le) Měilì].
1SG sell-PERF 1 CL computer to/for -PERF Mary
‘I sold a computer to Mary.’

Turning to the DOC ‘V-gěi-le IO DO’, gěi is neither a preposition nor a verb, but an applicative (functional) head (cf. Marantz 1993, Pylkkänen 2008) above the lexical VP, hosting the recipient argument in its specifier (cf. Georgala, Paul and Whitman 2008; Paul and Whitman 2010). Accordingly, the sequence ‘V-gěi’ is obtained in the syntax.
This analysis can account for the order ‘V-gěi’: the lexical verb (mài) raises to the Appl head gěi and adjoins to its left, as is standard for head adjunction (cf. Kayne 1994, Baker 1996; contra Cheng et al.’s (1999) approach which requires right adjunction). When an aspect suffix is present, ‘V-gěi’ further raises and left-joins to Asp°, resulting in the sequence ‘V-gěi-lege’, (for V-to-Asp° movement in Chinese, cf. Lin Tzong-hong 林宗宏 2001). The position of the perfective aspect suffix -le in ‘V-gěi-lege IO DO’ invalidates the traditional Chinese analysis of gěi as a preposition here: V [PP gei IO] DO.

The derivation of the ‘V-gěi’ sequence in the syntax also allows to explain the contrast with verbal compounds in ‘A-not-A’ questions (cf. Huang 1982, ch. 4.3 for this term and further discussion):

(21a) 他喜歡不喜歡數學?
Tā [v̲o xī -huān] bù [v̲o xī -huān] shùxué ?
3SG like NEG like mathematics
‘Does she like mathematics?’

(21b) 他喜歡不喜歡數學?
Tā xī- bù xī-huān shùxué ?
3SG like NEG like mathematics
‘Does she like mathematics?’

Though it is difficult to come up with separate glosses for xī and huān, xī-huān is clearly analyzable, as witnessed by the appearance of xī and huān in other compounds: huān-hū 歡呼 ‘cheer’, xī-ái 喜愛 ‘be fond of’.
While for verbal compounds, either the entire compound (cf. (21a)) or only its first member may precede negation (cf. 21b), this choice does not exist in the DOC, i.e. the sequence ‘V-řei’ cannot be treated as a unit (cf. (22a)). This straightforwardly obtains when assuming that ‘V-řei’ is built in the syntax, and not in the lexicon like verbal compounds.

Importantly, in this new analysis using Applicative Phrase, the recipient argument (IO) does not remain in the lexical VP (as assumed in all preceding accounts), but raises to the specifier of ApplP. This is confirmed by the position of distributive adverbial quantifiers such as ět-řen 每人 ‘everyone’ or yī-řen 一人 ‘each’ to the right of the IO in the DOC:

(23) 我送給孩們[每人一百塊錢
Wǒ sòng-g ěi háizimen [vp měi-řen [vp tůsōu ěi kuài qián]]
1SG give-GEI children every(one) 100 CL money
‘I gave the children each a hundred dollars.’

(24) 校長分給我們[每人/一人]十個大學
Xiàozhăng fēn-g ěi wǒmen [měi-řen /yī-řen] [shí ge dàxué]
principal allot-GEI 1PL every(one)/each 10 CL student
‘The principal allotted us each 10 students.’

In order for the adverbial quantifier to scope over the IO, the latter must have originated in a position below the adverb and moved over it, exactly as assumed in the present account where the IO raises from Spec,VP to Spec,ApplP.

The observation that a distributive quantifier may intervene between the IO and the DO in the DOC goes back to Kung (1993: 182) and is taken up by Soh (2005). Note, however, that the adverb ěi ‘each’ 各 used by both is judged unacceptable by many native speakers when in the position between the indirect and the direct object. Instead, měiren 每人 ‘every(one)’ or yī-řen 一人 ‘each’ must be used. Furthermore, in Kung’s (1993) small clause analysis of the DOC, [vp V [PredP IO [Pred gě-Pred° DO]]], where gě ‘each’ adjoins to a null verb heading Predicate Phrase below the IO, it is not possible for ěi ‘each’ to scope over the IO. The applicative analysis, however, provides a satisfying account of the DOC with three postverbal constituents, a case which has puzzled Chinese linguists for a long time. (Cf. among others Li Linding (1986: 227) who explicitly notes the distributive meaning observed here.)

To conclude, although the account proposed here implements basic insights of Pylkkänen’s (2008) Applicative Phrase, there exists an important difference between the two approaches. More precisely, ěi as applicative head occupies a position above the lexical VP, in contrast to Pylkkänen who posits an applicative head inside the VP (her low applicative) for ‘theme-
recipient’ DOC. Barring head adjunction to the right, Pylkkänen’s approach predicts that the low applicative head is realized as a verbal prefix or as a particle in VP. However, as also noted by Emonds and Whitney (2006: 106), cross-linguistically applicative affixes are generally suffixes, exactly as proposed for Chinese gèi.

References


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