

Argument structure constructions in the teaching of
German as a foreign language:
from free instantiations to phraseological ones
along the grammatical-lexical continuum

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1. Introduction

Topic of our presentation: the **ditransitive construction** (DC)

- Many studies on this topic, mostly for English: Goldberg (1992, 1995 und 2006); Gropen et al. (1989); Levin (1993); Rappaport Hovav & Levin (2008)
- Some studies for German: Wegener (1985); Røreng (2011); Welke (2011); Zifonun, Hoffmann & Strecker (1997); Rauth (2020)
- Few applied studies: Baten & De Cuypere (2014): DOC in Dutch + Germ.; De Cuypere et al. (2014): Object order with Russian learners of English

Our study:

- Learning issues with the DC for Italian-speaking learners of German
- 3 empirical studies for the learning of DC: instantiations in free use, in collocational use and in idiomatic use
- Teaching methodology based on priming and structural persistence

2. Definition of the ditransitive construction

E.g. (1)	<i>Der Nikolaus</i>	<i>schenkt</i>	<i>den Kindern</i>	<i>Schokolade</i>
	(Lit.) 'Santa Claus	offers	to the children	chocolate'
	SUBJECT	VERB	INDIRECT OBJ (IO)	DIRECT OBJ (DO)
	(AGENT)	(CAUSE-RECEIVE)	(RECIPIENT)	(THEME/PATIENT)

In Construction Grammar:

- **Syntax:** [Subject Verb IndirectObj DirectObj]
- **Semantics:** CAUSE-RECEIVE <agt rec pat>

Expression of transfer between **agent** and **recipient** (Goldberg 1995: 49)

3. Contrastive analysis German-Italian

3.1. German

- Morpho-syntactic **case-marking**: **IO** in dative, **DO** in accusative
- V with ditransitive argument structure, e.g. *geben* 'to give', *schenken* 'to offer as a present', *zeigen* 'to show', *verkaufen* 'to sell', etc.
- Unmarked order of objects: [**IO-DO**] (Lenerz 1977, Malchukov et al. 2007)
 - (2) *Der Nikolaus gab dem Kind [IO] Schokolade [DO]*
(lit) 'Santa Claus gave to the child chocolate'
- Alternative order [**DO-IO**] possible: dependent on information status (topic/comment)
 - (3) *Der Nikolaus gab die Schokolade [DO] einem Kind [IO]*
(lit) 'Santa Claus gave the chocolate to a child'

➤ Nominal vs. pronominal objects

(4)	<i>Der Nikolaus</i>	<i>schenkt</i>	<i>dem kleinen Jungen</i> [IO - NP]	<i>ein Spielzeugauto</i> [DO - NP]
	Santa Claus	offers	to the little boy	a toy car
(5)	<i>Der Nikolaus</i>	<i>schenkt</i>	<i>es</i> [DO - PRO]	<i>dem kleinen Jungen</i> [IO - NP]
			<i>it</i>	<i>to the little boy</i>
(6)	<i>Der Nikolaus</i>	<i>schenkt</i>	<i>ihm</i> [IO - PRO]	<i>ein Spielzeugauto</i> [DO - NP]
			<i>to him</i>	<i>a toy car</i>
(7)	<i>Der Nikolaus</i>	<i>schenkt</i>	<i>es</i> [DO - PRO]	<i>ihm</i> [IO - PRO]
			<i>it</i>	<i>to him</i>
(8)	<i>Der Nikolaus</i>	<i>schenkt</i>	<i>ihm</i> [IO - PRO]	<i>das</i> [DO - DEMONSTRATIVE PRO]
			<i>to him</i>	<i>that</i>

On information structure see e. g. Røreng 2011; Sauermann/Höhle (2018)

3.2. Italian

➤ Unmarked order of objects → opposite of German

(9)	Maria	dà	la rosa [DO - NP]	a sua madre [IO - PP]
	Maria	gives	the rose	to her mother
(10)	Maria	la [DO - PRO]	dà	a sua madre [DO - NP]
	Maria	it	gives	to her mother
(11)	Maria	gli/le [IO - PRO]	dà	la rosa [DO - NP]
	Maria	to him/to her	gives	the rose
(12)	Maria	gliela [IO+DO - PRO]	dà	
	Maria	to him it	gives	
(13)	Maria	la [DO - PRO]	dà	a lei [IO - PRO]
	Maria	it	gives	to her

4. Learning issues for Italian learners of German

- Correct case-marking of objects
- Correct order of objects – especially pronominal
- To check difficulties: 3 studies with Italian students
- Instantiations of DC in free use, in collocational use and in idiomatic use
- Aim:
 - CxG offers a good description potential for all 3 uses + priming
 - Learn and teach DC from free to idiomatic along the lexicon-grammar-continuum
 - Teaching methodology based on structural priming + structural persistence

4.1. Empirical study about learning issues with DC in free use

(De Knop / Mollica 2023 in print)

➤ 3 Test stages

- Pretest (Part 1 + Part 2): to check the former proficiency of students with DC
- Posttest 1 (Part 1 + Part 2): directly after teaching lecture based on priming
- (long-term) Posttest 2 (Part 1 + Part 2): 4 weeks after Posttest 1

➤ Participants

- 51 Students of Dept *Mediazione Linguistica e culturale* at Università degli Studi di Milano
- 3rd semester, proficiency level B1/B2
- Students have learned German DC with traditional manuals
- All tests on Moodle-platform of University of Milano, work by themselves for pretest (and long-term posttest)

Pretest (Part 1)

➤ **Test design:** build a sentence with word mix in italics (10 sentences)

(14) Peter und seine Schwester sind beim Kaffeetrinken: *erzählen – er – seine Schwester – eine spannende Geschichte.*

(lit. 'Peter and his sister are having coffee: *tell - he - his sister - an exciting story*')
→ ditransitive V

(15) Wir sind im einem Spanischkurs in Rom: *lehren – der Dozent – die spanische Sprache – die Italiener.*

(lit. 'We are in a Spanish course in Rome: *teaching - the lecturer - the Spanish language - the Italians*')
→ not ditransitive V, but ditransitive argument structure/semantics

Pretest (Part 2)

➤ Test design

- 10 ditransitive sentences
- Prompt: please express the objects in italics with pronouns

(16) Die Mutter hat *ihrem Sohn die neue Playstation* geschenkt. [DAT OBJ + ACC OBJ]

(lit. 'The mother has to her son a new playstation offered')

(17) Der Dozent lehrt *die Studenten die deutsche Sprache*. [2 ACC]

(lit. 'The lecturer teaches the students the German language')

Teaching methodology based on structural priming

(Branigan & Pickering 2017; Hartsuiker et al. 2004; Loebell und Bock 2003; Scheepers & Corley 2000)

“Speakers tend to repeat the structure just encountered” (Gries 2005: 365)

- Learners hear or read a sentence, then they see a picture depicting another scene and they have to produce a new sentence for the picture

➤ Design of a **lecture** (60 minutes) inspired by **structural priming**

1. Repetition of personal pronouns in German + Italian
2. Presentation of prototypical DC, with objects in color (but also different structure in spite of ditransitive semantics)

1.	Zu Weihnachten schenkt sie ihren Großeltern ein schönes Buch .	
2.	Die Touristen fragen die Männer nach dem Weg .	
3.	Sie schreibt ihren Eltern eine Mail jeden Tag.	
4.	Meine Großmutter lehrte mich das Kochen .	
5.	Sie sagte dem Professor die Wahrheit .	
6.	Sie diagnostizierten bei ihm Krebs .	

Posttest (Part 1) (directly after presentation)

Scrivete una frase con le parole elencate in corsivo, facendo attenzione al caso!

1	Hanna war in Krankenhaus mit ihrer Großmutter: <i>diagnostizieren – die Ärzte – ihre Großmutter – eine schlimme Krankheit</i>
2	Peter ist sehr romantisch: <i>schreiben – er – Gedichte – seine Freundin</i>
3	Maria hat morgen Geburtstag: <i>schenken – sie – einen Rock (= una gonna) – ihre Großeltern</i>
4	Ich konnte nicht reiten: <i>lehren – Markus – das Reiten – ich</i>
5	Ich habe lange von Marias Eltern nicht gehört, gestern habe ich aber Maria in Supermarkt getroffen: <i>fragen – ich – sie – ihre Eltern</i>

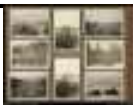
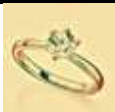
Results pretest – Results direct posttest (Part 1)

51 participants, 10 sentences	Frequency pretest	Frequency posttest
Correct answers	56.5%	68.6%
Mistakes		
- wrong argument structure	19.2%	6.3%
- wrong order of objects	3.8%	3.0%
- wrong case with dative	9.5%	6.5%
- wrong case with accusative	6.9%	5.5%
- wrong preposition	16.7%	4.9%
- <i>lehren</i> with Dat + Acc	6.2 %	0.2 %

t-test results:

- mean pretest 5,58; mean direct posttest 6,82; df 50
- $p=0,001 \rightarrow$ significant

Lecture (Part 2): pronominal expressions of objects

1. Ich gebe <u>meinem Vater</u> das Buch. Ich gebe <u>es</u> <u>ihm</u>.	
2. Ich gebe <u>meiner Schwester</u> die Blume. Ich gebe <u>sie</u> <u>ihr</u>.	
3. Ich gebe <u>meinen Freunden</u> den Brief. Ich gebe <u>ihn</u> <u>ihnen</u>.	
4. Maria zeigt <u>ihren Kindern</u> das alte Fotoalbum. Maria zeigt <u>es</u> <u>ihnen</u>.	
5. Die Eltern kauften <u>ihrer Tochter</u> das kleine Auto. Die Eltern kauften <u>es</u> <u>ihr</u>.	
6. Peter hat <u>mir den teuersten Ring</u> versprochen. Peter hat <u>ihn</u> <u>mir</u> versprochen.	

Posttest (Part 2) (directly after Part 2 of the lecture)

Sostituire le parole in corsivo con dei pronomi

1	Die Mutter nähte (= cucire) <i>ihrer Tochter das Hochzeitskleid.</i>
	Die Mutter nähte
2	Der Hausbesitzer vermietete <i>dem jungen Paar die neue Wohnung.</i>
	Der Hausbesitzer vermietete
3	Die Großmutter backte (= cuocere al forno) <i>ihrer Enkelin den Geburtstagskuchen.</i>
	Die Großmutter backte
4	Der Englischlehrer gibt <i>den Schülern</i> immer <i>sehr viele Hausaufgaben.</i>
	Der Englischlehrer gibt
5	Sie hatte <i>ihrer Eltern</i> <i>all ihre Sorgen</i> anvertraut (=confidare).
	Sie hatte anvertraut.
6	Die Bank hat <i>der Stadt das Geld</i> geliehen (= prestare).
	Die Bank hat geliehen.
7	Er reichte (= dare) <i>den Gästen die Hand.</i>
	Er reichte
8	Ich schicke <i>dir</i> bald <i>das Formular.</i>
	Ich schicke
9	Der junge Mann kochte <i>seiner Freundin</i> <i>den leckeren Kaffee.</i>
	Der junge Mann kochte
10	Kannst Du <i>unseren Kindern</i> <i>eine leckere Pizza</i> besorgen (=procurare)?
	Kannst Du besorgen?

Results pretest – Results direct posttest (Part 2)

51 participants, 10 sentences	Frequency Pretest	Frequency direct posttest
Correct C with pronouns	52.4%	85.1%
Mistakes		
- wrong order of objects	25.9%	1.4%
- discontinuous order of objects	4.0%	1.4%
- wrong case with dative	5.0%	2.0%
- wrong case with accusative	1.3%	0.6%
- <i>lehren</i> with Dat + Acc	7.7%	0.0%

t-test results:

- Mean pretest 4,92; mean direct posttest 8,29; df 50
- $p=2,02E-09 \rightarrow$ highly significant

Long-term posttest (1 month after direct posttest)

- out of the blue and without any explanations
- with same students
- on the Moodle-platform, work by themselves
- with same sentences as in pretest
- Part 1 + Part 2

Results pretest – Results long-term posttest (Part 1)

51 participants, 10 sentences	Frequency pretest	Frequency long-term posttest
Correct answers	56.5%	59.3%
Mistakes		
- wrong argument structure	19.2 %	12.0%
- wrong order of objects	3.8%	9.0%
- wrong case with dative	9.5%	6.8%
- wrong case with accusative	6.9%	2.8%
- wrong preposition	16.7%	9.2%
- <i>lehren</i> with Dat + Acc	6.2 %	4.0%

t-test results:

- mean pretest 5,59; mean long-term posttest 5,82; df 50
- $p = 0,611 \rightarrow$ not significant

Results pretest – Results long-term posttest (Part 2)

51 participants, 10 sentences	Frequency Pretest	Frequency long-term posttest
Correct pronouns	52.4%	77.7%
Mistakes		
- wrong order of objects	25.9%	9.3%
- discontinuous order of objects	4.0%	3.4%
- wrong case with dative	5.0%	5.3%
- wrong case with accusative	1.3%	0.2%
- <i>lehren</i> with Dat + Acc	7.7%	0.4%

t-test results

- mean pretest 4,92; mean long-term posttest 7,70; df 50
- $p=1,44E-06 \rightarrow$ highly significant

4.2. Empirical study about learning issues with DC in collocational use

(De Knop / Mollica 2024 in print)

➤ Similar study as with instantiations in free use

➤ **Participants**

- 49 Students of Dept *Mediazione Linguistica e culturale* at Università degli Studi di Milano (B1/B2)
- Pretest on Moodle-platform, work by themselves

➤ **Examples**

(18) *Hanna hat Pedro die Freundschaft gekündigt*

(lit.) 'Hanna has broken off her friendship with Pedro'

(19) *Er hat mir einen großen Gefallen getan*

(lit.) 'He has done to me a big favor'

Pretest (Part 1)

- Combine 10 instantiations of ditransitive collocations with Italian paraphrases (15 incl. 5 distractors)

Indicate per ogni esempio la sua parafrasi di significato.

Attenzione: Ci sono più parafrasi ma ad ogni esempio corrisponde una sola parafrasi! Alcune parole difficili hanno la traduzione in italiano

1. Die Mutter hat dem Kind die Erlaubnis gegeben
2. Ich werde dir immer die Wahrheit sagen.
3. Darf ich Ihnen eine Frage stellen?
4. Er wollte mir Hallo sagen.
5. Er hat ihr Bescheid gesagt, dass er morgen abreisen wird.
6. Beim Kennenlernen haben wir uns die Hand gegeben.
7. Er hat mir ein sehr gutes Angebot gemacht.
8. Hanna hat Pedro die Freundschaft gekündigt.
9. Er hat mir einen großen Gefallen getan.
10. Sie hat es mir im Vertrauten gesagt.

Paraphrases in Italian

1. Permettere qualcosa a qualcuno
2. non raccontare bugie a qualcuno
3. domandare qualcosa a qualcuno
4. salutare qualcuno
5. dire/comunicare qualcosa a qualcuno
6. darsi la mano, ad es. quando ci si saluta
7. proporre qualcosa a qualcuno
8. non essere più amico di qualcuno, per esempio dopo una litigio
9. aiutare qualcuno a fare qualcosa
10. confidare qualcosa a qualcuno

Distractors

1. salutare qualcuno
2. non ascoltare qualcuno
3. essere molto timido
4. aiutare qualcuno a portare la spesa
5. conoscere qualcuno da tanto tempo

➔ 98 % correct answers: understanding of collocations is not problematic

Pretest (Part 2)

- **Gap filling exercise with multiple choice:** add the complements in the correct case
- **Instruction:** in each example 3 entities with the verb
- **Aim:** check if students use the correct case + order of complements
- Semi-productive exercise
- Italian translation

(8) (informare qualcuno di qualcosa)

Bitte, sage, wann du morgen am Bahnhof ankommst!

- mich
- mir
- Bescheid

(9) (fare un'offerta a qualcuno)

Der Verkäufer hat gemacht

- meine Mutter
- meiner Mutter
- ein Superangebot
- einem Superangebot

Teaching methodology based on priming

➤ Similar to study with instantiations in free use

6. Das Kind hat der Mutter die Wahrheit gesagt.

die Wahrheit sagen:

Subjekt – Dativkomplement – Akkusativkomplement



Results of Pretest (Part 2) – Results of posttest

49 Participants, 10 sentences Total 490 valid answers	Frequency of Pretest	Frequency of Posttest
Correct answers	66.7%	84.3%
Mistakes		
- wrong order of objects	13.3%	6.9%
- wrong case with dative object	11.8%	2.4%
- wrong case with accusative object	3.9%	1.6%
- wrong case with both complements	0.8%	0.6%

t-test results

- mean pretest 6,67; mean posttest 8,42; df 48
- $p=0.001 \rightarrow$ highly significant

4.3. Empirical study about learning issues with DC in idiomatic use

(De Knop / Mollica 2016)

- **Sorting** according to the construction and not according to the verb
- **ditransitive idioms** sorted in the same way as instantiations in free use

Examples:

(20) *Die Mutter verpasste ihrer Tochter einen Denkartel.*

(lit.) 'The mother gave her daughter a think-card' = The mother gave her daughter something to think about.

(21) *Isabella gab ihrem Verlobten einen Korb.*

(lit.) 'Isabella gave her fiancé a basket' = Isabella turned her fiancé down.

Participants

- 15 Belgian French-speaking master students in translation and interpretation studies at the high school Marie Haps in Brussels (B2-C1)
- 15 Italian master students in language studies at the University of Milano (B2-C1)

4.3. Empirical study about learning issues with DC in idiomatic use

Part 1

- 25 mixed sentences: 14 with DC (incl. 11 phraseologisms) + 11 with mixed constructions.
- Either sentences contained same V with different argument structure, e.g. with the verb *geben* 'to give':
 - (21) *Die Kuh gibt Milch.* [LITERAL]
(lit.) 'The cow gives milk' = The cow produces milk.
 - (22) *Isabella gab ihrem Verlobten einen Korb.* [IDIOMATIC]
(lit.) 'Isabella gave her fiancé a basket' = Isabella turned her fiancé down.
 - (23) *Die Müllers geben eine Party in ihrer neuen Villa.* [COLLOCATIONAL]
(lit.) 'The Müllers give a party in their villa'
- Or sentences with different V, but instantiations of same constructions, e.g. DC
 - (24) *Peter zeigt seiner Schwester die Krallen.*
(lit.) Lit. 'Peter shows his sister the claws' = 'Peter threatens his sister.'

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Evt diese Folie, genau wie Folien 28 und 29 nicht zeigen, ist zuviel. Es reicht wahrscheinlich zu sagen, dass die Studis die Sätze doch nach der K und nicht V sortiert haben

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4.3. Empirical study about learning issues with DC in idiomatic use

Part 1

Table 1: Construction-based vs. verb-oriented classification of examples

	Italian learners	French-speaking learners
Ditr. Cx/Phraseol.	73%	69%
Verb-oriented	19%	38%

4.3. Empirical study about learning issues with DC in idiomatic use

Part 2

Aim: see how far students understand meaning of ditransitive idioms starting from the DC

- 10 instantiations of ditransitive idioms with 4 possible paraphrases
- multiple choice task: select 1 paraphrase

	Italian learners		French-speaking learners	
	Correct answer	Know the phraseologism	Correct answer	Know the phraseologism
10 sentences with 4 possible answers	37.4%	8.1%	70%	31.2%

5. Conclusions

- Presentation of different studies on DC in free, collocational and idiomatic use
- Teaching methodology: [structural priming/persistence](#)
 - visualization + repetition of structures with different words (= fillers)
 - Structural priming allows to entrench constructions

5. Conclusions

Assets of CxG for teaching of DC in all uses

- Postulate of schematic construction with specific form + transfer semantics
- Should be enriched with valency infos (Herbst 2011, 2014; Stefanowitsch 2011)
- Grammar-Lexicon-continuum can be exploited to learn + teach all instantiations of DC → Learners recognize structure + transfer semantics of all instantiations of DC

„schematic parts of C can be filled with different material which allows speakers to produce new structures. [...] learning of FL can do without complex rules.“
(Rostila 2012: 219)

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Ist doppelt, würde ich vereinfachen

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5. Conclusions

Phraseology

IDIOMS

*jdm. die kalte
Schulter zeigen;*
*jdm. zeigen,
wo der Hammer
hängt*

*jdm. sein wahres
Gesicht zeigen;*
*jdm. zeigen, wo es
langgeht*

COLLOCATIONS

*jdm. die Stadt/den Weg
zeigen*

Syntax

FREE WORD COMBINATIONS

*jdm. das neue Auto/
die neue Wohnung zeigen*

Ditransitive Construction: the lexical-grammatical continuum with the verb *zeigen* 'to show'



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