

A dative landscape

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There is a lot of diversity in the potential interpretation of dative arguments (understanding ‘arguments’ in a loose sense). This paper addresses the question of ambiguity in the interpretation of dative arguments across languages and constructions. One of the most common observations in recent literature (cf. Bosse et al. 2012; Boneh & Nash 2012, 2017; Cuervo 2020) is that ‘added’ dative arguments, i.e., arguments that are not necessarily selected by a verb, can have a range of available context-dependent interpretations. For instance, (1) in Spanish:

- (1) Este niño no me come nada.
This child not dat.1sg eat nothing
‘This child eats nothing (and this affects me).’ ‘My child eats nothing.’

The dative ‘me’ in this example can have a possessive reading (‘my child’) or an ‘affected experiencer’ reading (this affects me). Similar cases exist in other languages, e.g., French or Russian:

- (2) Le teinturier lui a massacré une chemise.
the dry-cleaner 3sg.dat has destroyed a shirt
‘The dry-cleaner ruined her/his shirt/ruined a shirt for him/her.’ (Boneh & Nash 2012)
- (3) Mne pocinili masinu.
me.dat repaired car.
‘My car was repaired.’/‘A certain car was repaired and it affects me/I care.’

However, not all dative arguments can be ambiguous. For instance, *selected* datives (in the terminology of Boneh & Nash 2017) are not generally ambiguous: their interpretation is largely determined by a thematic/semantic role assigned by the selecting predicate. This is illustrated in (4) for Spanish, where the dative argument has just one interpretation.

- (4) Los niños le dieron un libro a Juana.
the kids her.dat gave a book to Juana.
‘The kids gave a book to Juana.’

This paper examines the question of whether there are common patterns in the ambiguity of dative arguments across languages and what determines the availability of interpretations for each dative.

References:

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