

Effects of Focus Type and Argument Length on the Dative Alternation

The arguments of English double object verbs appear in the *dative form* (ex: “Give the sailor the cup.”) or the *PP-frame* (ex: “Give the cup to the sailor.”). Constructions with flexible word order have attracted attention in existing psycholinguistic research on language production (see eg. [1], [2], [3]), as researchers have investigated what influences the likelihood of a speaker producing one form rather than the other. One of the factors that has repeatedly been shown to influence argument ordering in English double object constructions is the relative weight/length of the two arguments (heavier arguments occur last: [3],[4],[6]). In addition, [4] found, in a picture-description experiment, that focused arguments also tend to occur last, but did not distinguish information focus (new/old) and contrastive focus (corrective or picked from a set) (see e.g. [5]). We conducted a production study to test (i) whether information focus or contrastive focus drives word order variation, and (ii) whether focus interacts with weight. These research questions were based on [2], [3], and [6] showing that weight influences word order, [2], [4], [5], and [7] showing that focus influences word order, and [8], [9], [10], and [11] showing the extent of the relatedness between the dative form and the PP-frame of a double object verb.

Design, procedure: Participants (n=16) produced sentences using the verb “give” in a dialog task, on the basis of words shown on the computer screen. We manipulated *focus type* (contrastive focus/information focus), *focused argument* (theme/recipient), and *weight of the theme* (heavy/light). Manipulating the weight of the recipient might yield somewhat stronger results, but as the results of that manipulation should be relatively the same as manipulating the theme, manipulating the weight of the recipient has been left for now for a future study. Participants responded to a prompt question that set up an information-focus context (ex.1, Fig. 1) or a contrastive focus context (ex.2, Fig. 2). We looked at what proportion of answers that used dative forms (“Give the sailor the cup”) vs. PP-frames (“Give the cup to the sailor”).

(1) Information-focus PROMPT:

- (a) There’s the sailor. What should the sailor get? [theme-focus]
- (b) There’s the cup. Who should get the cup? [recipient-focus]

(2) Contrastive-focus PROMPT:

- (a) There’s the cup, the hat, the rag, and the sailor. What should the sailor get? [theme-focus]
- (b) There’s the sailor, the artist, and the diver. Who should get the cup? [recipient-focus]

- (3a) SHORT THEME: the cup (3b) LONG THEME: the cup that is filled with juice

Results: Participants produced significantly more *dative forms* when the theme was information focused (67.18%) than when the recipient was information focused (45%). They did not produce significantly more dative forms when the theme was contrastively focused (52.38%) than when the recipient was contrastively focused (39.71%). Weight did not have a significant effect on information focus trials. (67.18% of utterances when a light theme was information focused were in a dative form versus 70.97% of utterances when a heavy theme was information focused.) However, on contrastive focus trials, heavy arguments tended to occur last (52.38% of utterances when a light theme was contrastively focused were in a dative form versus 62.69% of utterances when a heavy theme was contrastively focused.) Any trials where the participant did not produce a dative form or a PP-frame, did produce a pronoun, or did not produce a sentence with “give” were excluded from the experiment. These instances were rare.

Conclusions: Our results suggest that information focus, but not contrastive focus, influences the choice between dative forms and PP-frames. On the whole, our findings support the idea that focus is not a single phenomenon, but that there are at least two different types of focus (see eg. [5]), and suggest that theories of flexible word orders need to account for different types of focus in addition to weight.

Fig. 1: Screen on *information focus trials*.

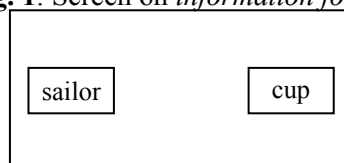
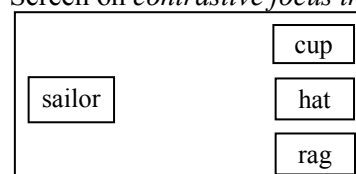


Fig. 2: Screen on *contrastive focus trials*.



References:

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