

Oral versus Written English Grammar: Evidence from Korean Adult Learners' Data*

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Lee, In. (2018). Oral versus written English grammar: Evidence from Korean adult learners' data. *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal*, 26(2), 133-146. The purpose of this study is to find out how Korean adult learners of English elicit their answers to the questions which require the use of an English ditransitive verb. Twenty-five students at Jeonju National University of Education in Korea provided the data for this study in 2016. They were juniors majoring in Primary English Education. Over the course of this study, the language informants were asked a number of questions about three different scenes adopted from a wordless picture book, *A Circle of Friends*, by Giora Carmi (2003). Their oral responses to these questions were collected twice: once in the first week of Semester 1 and again in the first week of Semester 2. Their written responses were collected one month after the second oral test was administered. Their responses were evaluated in terms of two criteria: (i) How sensitive to 'Focus' is each response? (ii) How sensitive to 'Tense' is the response? The following are the findings. First, the language informants' oral responses were more sensitive to 'Focus' in Test 2 than in Test 1 except for the responses to Q3c, 'What is the old man doing with a seed?' Second, the language informants were more sensitive to 'Tense' than to 'Focus' in each test. Third, Korean adult learners responded more appropriately when the theme was 'the current topic of attention.'

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Key Words: English ditransitive verb, sensitivity to Focus, sensitivity to Tense

1. Introduction

Unlike the preceding generations, Korean adult L2 learners currently enrolled in university are rarely afraid of communicating with native speakers of English. It might be due to their early exposure to the target language. This generation began to learn English as one of their regular school subjects when they were in Grade 3, and their English proficiency has improved year after year. Recent statistics of TOEIC results show that the average scores of examinees, undergraduates or postgraduates, have increased: 633 in 2012, 636 in 2013, 652 in 2014, and 677 in 2015 (<http://exam.ybmnet.co.kr/>). The comparison between Korean adult learners' oral proficiency in English and their written proficiency has not been dealt with; hence the need for this study.

The purpose of this study is to find out how Korean adult learners of English elicit their answers to the questions which require the use of an English ditransitive verb. The following are research questions:

- (i) Are there any differences between the language informants' oral responses and their written responses?
- (ii) How sensitive to 'Focus' is each response?
- (iii) How sensitive to 'Tense' is the response?

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Approaches to English Dative Alternation

The grammatical relationship between the double object construction and the prepositional dative construction has been one of the main research topics in the generative syntax. Larson (1988) argued that the dative construction is the basic form from which the double object construction is derived. On the contrary, Aoun & Li (1989) argued that the double object construction is the basic form. After reviewing various transformational approaches to the dative alternation,

Shan & Hong (2009) proposed a 'Neo-Transformational Approach'. On the other hand, Jun (2006) argued against the syntactic approach and proposed a construction-based analysis for lexically deriving triadic verbs from their dyadic counterparts. Some researchers argue that the English dative alternations can be better explained from a semantic perspective (Baker, 1979; Pinker, 1993; Hong, 2003; J.-M. Lee, 2009; to cite a few). Since Goldberg (1995) proposed a construction grammar approach, advocates of construction grammar argue that words and phrases exist as constructions in our general cognitive system (Jun, 2006; Year & Gordon, 2009; Shin, 2010; Lee & Kim, 2011). Other researchers in a pragmatic approach proposed that the information structure of a ditransitive construction is different from that of a prepositional dative construction (Erteschik-Shir, 1979; Gropen, Pinker, Hollander, Goldberg, & Wilson, 1989; Goldberg, 1995; Tak, 1999). Following the theory of information structure, Tak (1999: 184) states that the transferred object is focused in double object constructions, if there is no prosodic contrast, while the recipient is focused in the prepositional dative construction. This is true in the case of assertion. How about question-and-answer (Q&A) exchanges? If the transferred object is the current topic of attention in a question, then the prepositional dative is preferred in the answer. If the recipient is the current topic of attention in question, then the double object construction is preferred.

The English ditransitive constructions can be dealt with lexically, syntactically, semantically, or pragmatically, and even in language acquisition theory. However, theoretical backgrounds differ from research to research, and the division is not clear-cut at all. For example, Lee & Kim (2011) investigated Korean EFL learners' developmental sequence of English constructions in the framework of Bencini and Goldberg's (2000) construction grammar.

2.2. Dative Alternation and Language Acquisition

Dative alternation in English has been a controversial issue among L1 acquisition researchers because it poses a learnability paradox: When children hear *give money to him* and *give him money*, they could formulate a rule deriving the double object from the prepositional form, but the rule would allow overgeneralization from *donate money to him* to **donate him money*. With regard to

dative alternation phenomenon, Gropen, et al. (1989) proposed:

When the identity of theme (the transferred object) is the current topic of attention and the identity of the goal (i.e. the recipient) is the new and informative piece of information, the prepositional dative is more felicitous (6a); when it is the goal that is currently the topic and the theme that is to be learned about, the double-object dative is more appropriate (6b; see Erteschik-Shir 1979).

- (6) a. What did John do with the letter?
 He mailed the letter to Mary.
 ? He mailed Mary the letter.
- b. What did John do to Mary?
 He mailed Mary the letter.
 ? He mailed the letter to Mary. (p. 225)

Granted Gropen, et al.'s generalization works in L2 acquisition, what would happen to Korean adult learners of English? How do they elicit their answers when Gropen, et al. (1989)'s questions, (6a) & (6b), are asked? To find out the answer to these questions, two oral tests and one written test were administered to the language informants. Oral tests were administered twice in order to increase the reliability of the language informants' responses.

3. Research Design

3.1. Language Informants

Twenty-five students at Jeonju National University of Education in Korea provided their responses for this study in 2016. The language informants were juniors majoring in Primary English Education. The author of this study co-taught them Advanced English Conversation with three native English-speaking instructors (NESIs) in the first semester. Those students were randomly divided into three groups, and the three NESIs helped the researcher

interview each group when the language informants' oral responses were collected. In the first week of the second semester, those three NESIs helped him again to collect the language informants' second oral responses. One month later, a written test was administered to the same class of students, and twenty-four students' responses were collected.

3.2. Data Collection

Three scenes from a wordless picture book, *A Circle of Friends* [henceforth referred to as *ACOF*], by Giora Carmi (2003) were selected. The theme of the book, 'A chain of giving brings about happiness' was the reason the author of this study chose this book. Two copies of interviewing materials were prepared for each group: one copy for the interviewer and the other for the interviewee. The former consisted of three scenes, each of which was followed by four questions the interviewer would ask, while the latter was composed of three scenes only. Each NESI was asked to interview the students in a group one after another. When a student came into the interview room, the instructor asked the student to describe the details of each scene as much as possible. Then four questions about each scene, twelve questions in total, were asked. The interviewee was supposed to answer each question while looking at the relevant picture. The language informants' oral responses were recorded using a digital voice recorder (Model: SVR-S820), saved onto computer, and then transcribed.

The language informants' oral responses were collected twice at intervals of five months: once in the first week of Semester 1 and again in the first week of Semester 2. Their written responses were collected one month after their second oral responses were collected. The written test kit consisted of three selected scenes and each scene was followed by four questions. It was a 20-minute test and twenty-four students took the test. Their responses, oral or written, were evaluated in terms of the following criteria: (i) How sensitive to 'Focus' is each response? and (ii) How sensitive to 'Tense' is the response? Following Gropen, et al (1989), 'Focus' in this paper refers to 'the current topic of attention'.

3.3. Template for Collecting Language Samples

Three scenes were selected from *ACOF* and the first scene is shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Scene 1

Four questions were asked about Scene 1. Two questions, (1a) and (1b), were adopted from Gropen, et al. (1989), and two more questions, (1c) and (1d), were added to find out whether there would be any differences between Korean adult learners' sensitivity to 'Focus' and their sensitivity to 'Tense'.

- (1) a. What did Mom do with some money?
- b. What did Mom do to the boy?
- c. What is Mom doing with some money?
- d. What is Mom doing to the boy?

The second scene is shown in Figure 2 below and followed by four questions.

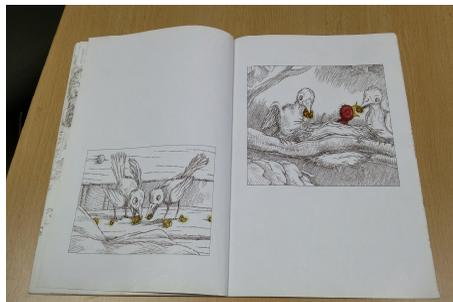


Figure 2. Scene 2

- (2) a. What did parent birds do with crumbs/pieces of bread?
- b. What did parent birds do to a baby bird?

- c. What are parent birds doing with crumbs/pieces of bread?
- d. What are parent birds doing to a baby bird?

Scene 3 is shown in Figure 3 and followed by four questions.



Figure 3, Scene 3

- (3) a. What did the old man do with a seed?
- b. What did the old man do to a little bird?
- c. What is the old man doing with a seed?
- d. What is the old man doing to a little bird?

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Overall Sensitivity to Focus

Twenty-five language informants participated in an oral interview, but twenty-four students responded to a written test. Since four questions were asked about each scene, 300 responses in each oral test and 288 responses in the written test were collected. It was expected that the students would use the verb *give* or *feed* to answer the questions in each scene. However, some students used the verb *show* in their responses to the questions about Scene 3. All the responses were classified as those where the verb, *give*, *feed*, or *show* was used, or those in which other verbs were used. Table 1 shows how sensitive to 'Focus' the language informants' answers were. One student's oral response to Question

4 about Scene 3 in Test 2 was not recorded due to an unexpected technical error. Finally, if the expected verb was used ungrammatically in a response, the response was classified as ‘Dubious Sensitivity.’

Table 1. Sensitivity to Focus in Oral versus Written Test

	Frequency (%)		
	Oral Test 1	Oral Test 2	Written Test
Sensitive to Focus	67 (22.3)	86 (28.66)	74 (25.7)
Insensitive to Focus	114 (38)	113 (37.66)	113 (39.2)
Dubious Sensitivity	41 (13.7)	44 (14.66)	21 (7.3)
Using Other Verbs	78 (26)	56 (18.66)	80 (27.8)
No Recording	0 (0)	1 (0.33)	n.a.
Total	300 (100)	300 (99.97)	288 (100)

According to Table 1, the language informants’ sensitivity to ‘Focus’ in oral tests improved from 22.3% to 28.66%, but the rate of sensitivity is still low. Their sensitivity to ‘Focus’ in the written test (25.7%) was almost the same as the average rate of the two oral tests (25.48%). Thus, we can say the language informants’ sensitivity to ‘Focus’ is quite low. It would appear it is necessary we teach our students the importance of paying attention to the current topic. Most of our daily interactions consist of Q&A exchanges and the questions usually include some clues to the answers. If a person carefully listens to her/his interlocutor’s question, the hearer can easily answer the question. Consider the following conversation, where NESI2 refers to one of three NESIs and S101 refers to ‘the first student in Group 1’ (S101 was interviewed by NESI2 in the first Oral Test, but he was interviewed by NESI1 in the second Oral Test).

(4) Q&A between an NESI2 (A) and S101 (B) in Oral Test 1

[After B described Picture 1, A started to ask questions.]

A: What did mom, do with some money?

B: Mom?

A: Uh uh

B: Uh, maybe, she give, gives pocket money, to chil, child, and teach how to use it.

- A: Uhm, good!
Okay, 1b. what did mom, do to the boy?
B: Give money, and do to money? Ah, I forgot,
A: Just according to the picture.
B: Ah, give money and, teach same, same with number 1?
A: Okay, 1c. What is mom doing, with some money?
B: Uhm, is it different question? (laughs)
A: Uhm, the first question was, What did mom do with some money?
B: Ah, uhm, maybe she, gives money, (laughs)
Uh, I think, gives money to child, and, yes.
A: Okay! What is mom doing, to the boy?
B: Ah, gave, give pocket money, and tell, tell something, about this money.

Here we can see S101 did not pay attention to the question. He recognized neither the differences in Focus (Direct Object vs. Indirect Object as a given information) nor the differences in Tense (Past vs. Present Progressive). Let's compare S101's oral responses in Test 1 with his responses in Test 2 whose transcript is shown in (5). S101 did not pay attention to the current topic in Test 2, either. However, it seemed that he became aware of sensitivity to Focus as the interview went on. S101 appropriately responded to Question 1c, 'What is mom doing with some money?' (Refer to the underlined utterance).

(5) Q&A between NESI1 (A) and S101 (B) in Oral Test 2

[After B described Picture 1, A started to ask questions.]

- A: What did mom do with some money?
B: Did mom?
A: What did mom do, with some money?
B: Giving her, her son, that pocket money.
A: Good! What did mom do to the boy?
B: (laughs) What did mom do to the boy? (laughs)
Ah, she gave pocket money.
A: And, what is mom doing with some money?

B: Ah, he's giving, that money, to her son.

A: Okay, what is mom doing to the boy?

B: Not same? (laughs)

A: Yeah,

B: Giving pocket money, to her son.

How sensitive to 'Focus' are S101's responses in the written test? His written responses retyped from his original answer sheet are shown in (6). He properly responded to Q1a&b, but his answers to Q1c&d were not appropriate. His responses to the questions about Scene 1 were only 50% sensitive to Focus. His answers to Q1a&b conformed to Gropen, et al.'s generalization: When the identity of theme (the transferred object) is the current topic of attention, the prepositional dative is more felicitous; when it is the goal that is currently the topic, the double-object dative is more appropriate. On the other hand, S101's answers to Q1c&d were classified as the case of 'Dubious Sensitivity' because he used the English ditransitive verb, give, ungrammatically.

(6) S101's written responses to Scene 1

Q1a. What did Mom do with some money?

S101: Mom gave some money to her son.

Q1b. What did Mom do to the boy?

S101: She gave him some pocket money.

Q1c. What is Mom doing with some money?

S101: She is giving some money.

Q1d. What is Mom doing to the boy?

S101: She is giving and talking to him.

4.2. Overall Sensitivity to Tense

Compared with Table 1, the language informants' sensitivity to Tense was higher than their sensitivity to 'Focus'. In the oral tests, their sensitivity to Tense improved from 37.66% to 58%. The frequency of the expected verb properly marked in Tense increased by 20.34%p while the frequency of the expected verb unmarked in Tense decreased by 7%p. Nineteen responses in Oral Test 1 included

give, feed, or show, in mixed Tense; however, any response with the expected verb in mixed Tense was not found in Oral Test 2. Seventy-eight responses in the first oral test included other verbs instead of an expected verb. When other verbs were used, the rates of Tense-marking were similar; forty out of seventy-eight responses were marked in Tense, but thirty-five responses were unmarked in Tense (13.33% vs. 11.66%). However, the rate of using other verbs in Oral Test 2 decreased by about 6%p. Their sensitivity to Tense in the written test was much higher than their sensitivity to Tense in each oral test. In the written test, the language informants' Tense-marking was remarkable; 70.48% of their responses included the expected verbs which were properly marked in Tense. Even when other verbs were used in the written test, the frequency of proper Tense-marking was about 27 times greater than the unmarked cases (26.74% vs. 1.04%). Table 2 shows how sensitive to Tense the language informants' responses were.

Table 2. Sensitivity to Tense

	Frequency (%)		
	Oral Test 1	Oral Test 2	Written Test
Expected Verb (marked Tense)	113 (37.66)	174 (58)	203 (70.48)
Expected Verb (unmarked Tense)	90 (30)	69 (23)	5 (1.74)
Expected Verb (mixed Tense)	19 (6.33)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Using Other Verbs (marked Tense)	40 (13.33)	31 (10.33)	77 (26.74)
Using Other Verbs (unmarked Tense)	35 (11.66)	25 (8.33)	3 (1.04)
Using Other Verbs (mixed Tense)	3 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)
No Recording	0 (0)	1 (0.33)	n.a.
Total	300 (99.98)	300 (99.99)	288 (100)

5. Conclusion

The English ditransitive constructions have been a controversial issue until recently. They have been analyzed syntactically, lexically, semantically, or pragmatically. English dative alternation has been a controversial issue among L1 acquisition researchers because it poses a learnability paradox. This issue has been dealt with from different perspectives and in various research frameworks, but none of them has been satisfactory yet.

Granted that Gropen, et al.'s generalization works in L2 acquisition, how do Korean L2 learners respond to questions which require the use of English ditransitive verbs. To find out the answer to this question, two oral tests were administered to twenty-five juniors at Jeonju National University of Education at intervals of five months in 2016. One month after the second oral responses were collected, a written test was administered to the same group of language informants. Their responses, oral or written, were evaluated in terms of two criteria: (i) How sensitive to 'Focus' is each response? (ii) How sensitive to 'Tense' is the response? The following are the findings. First, the language informants' oral responses were more sensitive to 'Focus' in Test 2 than in Test 1 except for the responses to Q3c, 'What is the old man doing with a seed?' Second, the language informants were more sensitive to 'Tense' than to 'Focus' in each test. Third, Korean adult learners responded more appropriately when the theme was 'the current topic of attention.'

The findings of this study, however, cannot be generalized because the size of the language informants is limited to twenty-five students from a restricted area. Nevertheless, we found why the concept of 'the current topic of attention' is important and why the information structure should be taught. Only 25% of language informants' responses were sensitive to 'Focus'. Further research in large scale or additional qualitative research is needed.

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