

## Analysis of the Double Object Construction from Corpus Study

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### Abstract

The study of the double object construction (DOC for short) (S+V+N1+N2) has been one of the most heated topics in modern linguistics, and a lot of studies have been made on this language phenomenon. The previous studies are mainly centered on its structural or semantic classifications from the perspective of syntax. However, there are not enough studies on the semantic diversity of nouns cases. With the help of sentences from BNC, the paper studies features of nouns in DOC, from which we make a contrastive study of DOC in Chinese and English.

**Key words:** DOC; A contrastive study; Corpus

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Both in Chinese and English, DOC has been a long-lasting hot topic. Up to now, many famous scholars and linguists have done a lot of studies on this construction. The previous studies are mainly centered on its structural or semantic classifications from the perspective of syntax (Zhu, 1979; Li, 1984; Givón, 1984; Bass & Lasnik, 1986; Larson, 1988; Zhang, 1999; Langacker, 2002; Goldberg, 2003; Shi, 2004; He, 1999, 2003, 2008, 2009a, 2009b; Mei, 2010). Possessive relationship is one of the most important semantic relationships between nouns in DOC; in this chapter I will select a lot of sentences from the British National Corpus, to illustrate that there are more semantic relationships other than possessive relationship. In the study, we divide DOC into two kinds: typical ones

and atypical ones.

### 1. POSSESSIVE RELATIONSHIP OF NOUNS IN TYPICAL ENGLISH DOC

According to some studies possessive relationship between nouns in English DOC is basic semantic roles. However, in this thesis, I hold that, there are a lot of other semantic relationships besides possessive relationship. I have selected a lot of sentences from the British National Corpus to illustrate my point of view.

#### 1.1 Possessive Relationship of Objects in English

According to Langacker (2002), it is very difficult for nouns without specific possessive relationship to enter double object constructions or “indirect object + direct object” construction. That is to say, the significant feature of the “indirect object + direct object” construction is the possessive relationship between them. In Li Tianxin’s (2006) opinion, only “result verbs” and “transfer verbs” have such relationships. Such verbs exist in Chinese and English, so we can analyze from the following aspects:

1<sup>st</sup>. Result verbs can make results, which are, at the same time, direct objects for the verbs.

For example, in the sentence “*I made my son a toy*”, “make” belongs to the “result verb” with the result “toy”; “my son” has a possessive relationship with the “toy”, or now “my son” has “possessed” the toy. And, the sentence can be rewritten in for-beneficiary form: *I made a toy for my son*.

But, there is another case, which should be paid much attention to. Let’s first see the sentence: *He has made me a strong-minded person*. In the sentence, “make” is still a “result verb”, but the noun phrases can not enter the double object construction, because there is no possessive relationship between “me” and “a strong-minded person”. This kind of sentences is always regarded as containing an

object and an object complement.

2<sup>nd</sup>. Transfer verbs transfer the possessive relationship.

For example, in the sentence “*I sent him a book*”, the possessive relationship between “I” and the “book” is transferred to the relationship between “he” and the “book” by the transfer verb “send”, or “I” no longer “possess” “the book”, instead, “he” began to “possess” “the book”.

Li (2006) believes that except result verbs and transfer verbs, others don't make new possessive relationship. We can also see that in V+IO+DO sentences, which are derived from these words always contain an oblique word “for”—the Beneficiary case marker, which makes up the *for*-beneficiary through the transfer of possession in the double object construction. The key point of such a construction is the transfer of the possessive relationship. Jackendoff (1991) has the similar idea that perhaps the most prominent appearance in English of the Beneficiary role is in verbs of transfer of possession. The Goal of possession, especially in indirect object position, is always construed as Beneficiary. On the thematic tier of “*Harry gave Sam a book*”, Harry causes a book to change possession from him to Sam. On the action tier, Harry benefits Sam, that is, positively on him (Jackendoff, 1991).

Moreover, there are some other cases,

- (1) John washed the dishes for Mary.
- (2) \*John washed Mary the dishes.
- (3) Mary drove John to the school.
- (4) \*Mary drove the school John.

From the above four sentences, we can see that indirect objects are not always the possessors of direct objects. There is no notion of the indirect object being the possessor, or prospective possessor of the direct object. Looking back over all the examples where the double object construction is allowed, we can see that there is always a possessive relationship between the two objects. However, it is also true that the indirect object always has the theta role of Goal or Beneficiary (or both). In this case, it is very easy for us to explain why sentences (2) and (4) are not grammatical. In sentence (1) “Mary” is clearly the beneficiary of John's action, because she doesn't have to do the washing-ups herself. What stops the formation of the double object construction is that there is no possessive relationship between the direct and indirect objects, the dishes may belong to “Mary”, but we can't get a definite answer from the sentence. Any possessive relationship between “Mary” and the dishes is not a part of the action of washing in the same way that the possessive relationship is necessitated in the action of giving. So even if one were to say “*John washed Mary's dishes for her*”, because the verb does not contain any Semantic reference to possession, the double object form *John washed Mary the dishes* is not allowed. Sentences (3) and (4) have a similar explanation. The indirect object, “the school”, may be the Goal of the action of driving, but the action of driving, or the driver, and the school doesn't

have possessive relationship, either.

## 1.2 Analysis of Possessive Relationships from the Corpus Study

In order to have a clearer study of the definition of English DOC, we have selected 1,000 sentences of the construction form the BNC (British National Corpus), the sentence pattern is [v\*] [d\*] [n\*] [at0] [n\*], that is verbs+ determiners + nouns + articles + nouns. After a careful analysis, I am surprised to find that there are only about 218 sentences that can be regarded as DOC sentences. Having made a brief study to the sentences, I find that verbs involved in the construction are *give, teach, send, tell, offer, show, make, name, read, write, sell, do, owe*, etc. with different frequencies.

**Table 1**  
**Verbs in DOC Pattern One**

Verbs	Instances number	Verbs	Instances number
offer	35	owe	5
teach	23	pass	5
tell	22	save	4
give	21	win	3
show	18	set	3
pay	16	shoot	3
send	9	prepare	3
make	7	read	2
write	7	represent	2
name	5	others	25

From the above chart, we can obviously see that “giving” verbs are major DOC verbs, most sentences are typical DOC sentences. In some cases, as discussed in 5.1.1, semantic relationship between the nouns is transfer of possessive relationships, that is the direct objects are transferred from sources to goals, and the indirect objects become the possessors and have beneficiary cases, with to or for as their case markers. For example,

- (5) Offer our customers the facility
- (6) Make her daughter a coffee.

The above two sentences can be rewritten as:

- (7) Offer the facility to our customers.
- (8) Make a coffee for her daughter.

But there are other cases that don't involve possession transfer. Even among the 21 typical DOC sentences made with the verb “give”, only one has specific nouns as its direct object in *GIVE THEIR CALVES THE MILK* and about 10 sentences have the sense of possession transfer. The rest 11 ones have other semantic relations, with various direct nouns. In addition, there are a lot of vague semantic relationships between the nouns in DOC, which can be regarded as events.

Let's see the following sentences from the data collected,

- (9) Give your cleaner a score.
- (10) Give each party a mark.
- (11) Give their cars a rest.
- (12) Give your mother a look.

- (13) Give the community the balance.
- (14) Give the child an investment.

The above sentences are obviously they DOC sentences, but in the sentences, semantic relations of direct objects and indirect objects are of various types. Noun of them has possessive relationship. In sentence (9) and (10), the semantic relationship can be regarded as “evaluation”, that is to evaluate “your cleaner” and “each party” with “a score” or “a mark”. However, in other sentences, the nouns as direct objects pick out events. “Rest, look, balance, and investment” are regarded as “verbal event nouns” (Parsons, 1990).

In the sentences selected, more abstract nouns function as direct objects in DOC, like *information, strength, permission, hope, pleasure, authority, confidence, airing, miss*, etc. And as for these words, some of them can not be transferred to indirect objects, and I claim that they entail “events”.

We also select 1,000 sentences from BNC in another DOC pattern: [v\*] [pn\*] [n\*] that is verbs + pronouns + nouns. In this category, because the restriction of indirect objects (when selecting data I restrict IO to pronouns, there must be other cases, which will be further studied in the future), about 525 sentences are DOC sentences, and verbs involved are obviously less diverse than sentences from [v\*] [d\*] [n\*] [at0] [n\*] pattern. To my surprise, among the 525 sentences, the verb “give” appear in 348 sentences, taking up about almost 66%, and other verbs only take up about 34%, as shown in the following table.

**Table 2**  
**Verbs in DOC Pattern Two**

verbs	instances number	verbs	instances number
give	348	buy	6
bring	27	wish	6
ask	19	lend	5
offer	17	bid	5
tell	14	allow	4
cause	15	owe	3
keep	14	cook	2
make	13	fine	2
get	7	others	18

Form the above table, we can obviously see that in this pattern, “giving” verbs are also typical DOC verbs, especially the verb “give”. However, there are more abstract nouns in the pattern, and not all sentences have the semantic relationship of possession transfer. There are various semantic relationships, in which events are always entailed. For example,

- (15) Give him birth.
- (16) Give him love.
- (17) Give them hell.
- (18) Give him lessons.
- (19) Give him directions.

In the above sentence, all direct nouns are abstract nouns, and it is obvious that they don’t have a possessive

relationship with the indirect nouns. In sentence (15), (16), and (17), I hold that the direct nouns entail “events”. They are not transferred to the direct nouns. In sentence (18), instead of being a beneficiary the indirect noun “him” becomes an experiencer that is “he experiences the lessons”. And in sentence (19), the semantic relationship can be called “instruction”, for “he knows the directions”.

In addition to sentences from the corpus, there are other sentences where there is no possessive relationship between objects, and therefore, no transfer is made. Let’s see the following sentences,

- (20) Give him a beating.
- (21) Give the room a cleaning.

In the above two sentences, “him” and “the room” have become “patients” instead of “beneficiary”, in the two sentences direct objects “a beating, a cleaning” can be regarded as “event gerunds” (Parsons, 1990). Therefore, the semantic relationships of the above two sentences can be interpreted as “experiencing” and “a state of changing”, with the interpretation of “He was beaten” and “The room has become clean from being not clean” respectively.

From what we explain above, we can come to a conclusion that, in English DOC, possession transfer is not the only semantic relationships of objects in the construction, even though in typical DOC with “giving” sense. There are more various semantic relationships like, evaluation, instruction, state of changing, etc. In addition, we use the concept of “event” to analyze the DOC sentences with abstract objects.

## 2. POSSESSIVE RELATIONSHIP OF OBJECTS IN CHINESE DOC

In Chinese, possessive relationship between nouns is also a common semantic relationship in DOC. Typical double object construction sentences like 我送给他一本书 (I sent him a book.), involve the transfer of the possession. As in the above sentence, “一本书” is transferred from “我” to “他”, and at the same time the possession of the book is transferred from “我” to “他” as well. There is another Chinese sentence,

- (22) 张三买了邻居一套旧家具 (Zhang San bought a set of used furniture from his neighbor.)

Form the meaning, the sentence belongs to “taking” type. In the sentence, the semantic relationship between the two objects “邻居” and “一套旧家具” can also be interpreted as possessive relationship. The semantic meaning of the sentence is “Zhang San got a set of furniture by paying from his neighbor”, the furniture is transferred from his neighbor to Zhang San. Although in the sentence 单位分给我一套房子 (The agency allotted me a house.), “分” doesn’t have a sense of “transfer”, but the sentence as a whole conveys the sense of “transfer”. That is the possession of the house has transferred to me. In this case, there is almost no difference between

Chinese and English.

However, it is not always the case, let's again see the following two Chinese sentences,

(23) 大家都称他呆霸王 (We all call him a fool.).

(24) 我们喊他老大哥 (We all call him brother.).

In Chinese, the two sentences are typical DOC sentences belonging to the "Naming type" (Ma Qingzhu, 1983). As we can see, in the two Chinese sentences, the objects "他" and "呆霸王" and "他" "老大哥" don't necessarily have a possessive relationship, and of course, there is no transfer in the sentence. So in this case, possession can not always be regarded as the only standard to identify DOC.

In Chinese, "属于" (belong to) is a special kind of syntactic alternation (which can be a parallel to locative inversion). In other words, in the English structure "sb. has sth." the light verb "have" has the inversion of "belong to", and the ditransitive verb in dative sentence should be decomposed as [x Cause z to belong to y]. The double object construction is then regarded as a special type of causative construction.

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### 3. SUMMARY

Possessive relationship is a very important semantic relationship between nouns both in Chinese and English DOC sentences. However, there are a lot of other semantic relationships, and from the study of sentences selected from BNC, we can see even in typical DOC sentences, possessive relationship is not the only standard. The thesis explains other semantic relationships as evaluation, instruction, and state of changing. And sometimes, the concept of "event" is used to have a further understanding of the construction. In Chinese it is also the case. Besides,

possessive relationships, there are some other ones in DOC.

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