A Corpus-Based Study on the Treatment of Objects in Arabic Ditransitive Verb:

the Case of [ʔaʕˈtːa:] “to give”

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When a verb is ditransitive, it takes two objects. In Arabic, the two objects can be found in three types of ditransitive constructions. The first type (1) has the verb immediately followed by the indirect object (IO) then the direct object (DO), which we shall call it double-object-construction (DOC) here. The other two constructions utilize the dative [li] “to” to mark the IO. Depending on the position of the dative, we will call it as either DO-IO or IO-DO constructions, as shown in (2) and (3).

(1) DOC:

a3Teitu 3ali al-kitaab

gave-I Ali def-book

IO DO

(2) DO-IO construction:

a3Teitu al-kitaab li-3ali
gave-I def-book to-Ali

DO IO

(3) IO-DO construction:

a3Teitu li-3ali al-kitaab
gave-I to-Ali def-book

IO DO

Wilmsen (2010, 2012) is a recent investigation into these ditransitive constructions in Arabic. The study specifically focuses on the sequence of the two objects when a free object pronoun [ʔiʔa:] “it” is identified to be the DO. Using corpus data from Levantine and Egyptian newspapers, the author reported that the IO-DO construction is preferred over DO-IO in the Levantine newspaper than in the Egyptian newspaper. He concludes that such preference is due to the editors or writers’ home vernacular, which belongs to either West or East Arabic.

Although this study provides an overview of ditransitive constructions in various Arabic verbs, the study focuses on a very specific context, which is restricted to the use of [ʔiʔa:] “it” as the DO. This does not adequately describe the general patterns of Arabic ditransitive verbs that do not have [ʔiʔa:] as the DO. To fill in this gap in the literature, the present study will use new corpus data to look at the objects of the ditransitive verb in a larger context. That is, all instances where the verb [ʔaʕˈtːa:] “to give” takes two objects will be considered. Particularly, the study examines (1) whether the West/East Arabic divide in terms of the preference for DO-IO or IO-DO still holds in a larger context; and (2) whether other predictors, such as whether the object is pronoun, and the length difference between the objects, could inform the use of ditransitive construction as well.

To examine these research questions, I use three corpora from the ArabiCorpus (http://arabicorpus.byu.edu). I include two parts of the Jordanian newspaper corpus, Al-Ghad 2010-2011, to represent East Arabic. Additionally, I include Al-Masri Al-Yawm 2010 and the Shuruq Columns corpus to represent West Arabic. I identify 1759 occurrence of [ʔaʕˈtːa:] “to give” that takes two objects from the corpora. Care is taken to analyze and categorize the data to be either DOC, DO-IO or IO-DO constructions. However, the effect of the type of dialect (East/West) on the use of ditransitive construction is insignificant ($\chi^2, p = 0.67$). On the other hand, I include the length difference between DO and IO (ΔDOIO), and whether either of the two objects is a pronoun (ISPRO) as two additional predictors in the Al-Ghad corpus. As a result, both predictors are found to have a significant effect ($\chi^2, p < 0.001$) on the use of ditransitive construction. This result suggests that there is a preference for pronouns and shorter words to be in the immediate following position of the verb, e.g., the IO position in DOC.

To sum up, although the results do not seem to reflect the effect of the vernacular divide that was reported in Wilmsen’s work when we consider all instances of DO, other factors, i.e., ΔDOIO and ISPRO, show a significant effect on the use of ditransitive constructions. At the time of submission, I am in the process of incorporating more variables into the analysis. These variables include the definiteness, number and animacy of the objects, as well as the person, number and case of the verb. By including more variables, I hope to ultimately establish a model that better describes the underpinning for the use of ditransitive verb in Arabic.