

**Of robbing, concealing, and violating:  
semantic specialisation and the case of Middle English ditransitives**

Eva Zehentner  
(University of Vienna)

This paper investigates the range of verb classes associated with the double object construction (DOC) in Middle English (Mitchell 1985; Visser 1984). More specifically, it explains the reduction of this range that is observable during this period (and beyond, cf. Coleman & De Clerck 2011; Rohdenburg 1995), with certain verb classes (such as verbs of dispossession as in [1]) becoming markedly less frequent in the DOC.

- (1) (c1405 (c1390) Chaucer Pars.) *For dronkenesse bireveth hym the discrecioun of his wit* ‘for drunkenness takes away from him the discretion of his wit’.

This development is taken to “present a case of [constructional semantic] specialization”, in this case to basic ‘give’-senses (Coleman & De Clerck 2011: 183; cf. also Barðdal 2007; Geeraerts 1997; Goldberg 1995).

The development of the DOC is closely connected to more general processes occurring at the transition between Old and Middle English, such as the erosion of the case marking system and the convergence of different case frames available for ditransitive verbs in Old English resulting from this (e.g. [DAT<sub>Deprivee</sub> GEN<sub>Theme</sub>] as in [2]; Allen 1995: 28-29; Visser 1984).

- (2) (OE Ælfric Cath. Hom. I) *and him<sub>DAT</sub> mancynnes<sub>GEN</sub> benæmde* ‘and took mankind away from him’.

Thus, the Middle English DOC could first encode a wide range of meaning relations, i.e. not only the frame [DAT<sub>Rec</sub> ACC<sub>Theme</sub>], which expressed the successful transfer of a theme to a recipient (Allen 1995: 28-29), and which had been most common in Old English, but also others, including e.g. dispossession.

However, such non-prototypical uses, i.e. uses at the periphery of the construction’s core meaning, were soon marginalised and eventually ousted from the pattern again (cf. Coleman & De Clerck 2011: 204; Rohdenburg 1995).

In this paper, it is argued that this re-narrowing was promoted by the rise of what is known as the ‘dative alternation’, i.e. the ability of ditransitive verbs to be paraphrased by a prepositional pattern with *to* (or *for*), as in (3):

- (3) (a1470 Malory) *They gaff the godis [...] to their knyghtes* ‘They gave the goods to their knights’.

As will be shown, the spread of the *to*-NP paraphrase as the prototypical analytic alternative to previously synthetic datives can be taken to constitute a key factor in the increasingly close (or rather, reinforced) association of datives with the semantic relations expressed by *to*, and particularly with basic ‘give’-situations.

Evidence for this proposal is taken from a corpus analysis of the occurrences of the DOC as well as its prepositional paraphrase(s) in the *Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition* (PPCME2). The results not only confirm a strong correlation and suggest a causal relationship between the semantic specialisation of the DOC and the rise of the *to*-paraphrase, but also allow us to draw more general conclusions on argument structure and the syntax-semantics interface.

## References

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