

Sabine De Knop/Fabio Mollica

## The German ditransitive construction: A challenge for Italian learners

**Keywords:** foreign language acquisition; ditransitive construction; corpus data; German; Italian learners

Many studies have dealt in full length with the ditransitive construction in different languages from a theoretical point of view (among others Goldberg 1995, 2006; Haspelmath 2004; Malkuchov et al. 2007; Proost 2014; Willems 2020) but hardly with the difficulties associated with its learning in a foreign perspective. Our contribution focuses on the German ditransitive construction and the learning issues for Italian-speaking learners of German. In the German ditransitive construction prototypical verbs such as *geben* ('to give') are used, they express a transfer semantics and require a dative complement for the recipient and an accusative complement for the theme. However, some German verbs with a similar semantics, such as *lehren* ('to teach') or *abfragen* ('to interrogate') occur with two accusative complements. This is often problematic for learners who tend to overgeneralize (see Goldberg 2019; Mollica 2010), especially when these German verbs with two accusative complements correspond to ditransitive verbs in their mother tongue.

The first part of our presentation will describe a test with two tasks developed with a collection of ditransitive verbs and verbs with ditransitive semantics but without ditransitive argument structure, taken from the *Elektronisches Valenzwörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* (E-VALBU). It was conducted with Italian bachelor and master students at the University of Milano with the aim to define the challenging issues related to the learning of German ditransitive constructions. Both tasks revealed that a mere functional description of the ditransitive construction and its constituents is not satisfactory to explain the idiosyncratic use of German verbs, as it is not always predictable in which construction verbs expressing a transfer occur. Moreover, the correct order between both objects cannot be explained with functional principles either, especially for objects in pronominal form whose order is fundamentally different in Italian.

The second part of our presentation will focus on the issues related to the use of verbs expressing a transfer but with two accusatives, e.g. *lehren* ('to teach') or *abfragen* ('to interrogate') and the pedagogical applications. As we will show, grammar books and teaching manuals (like Dreyer & Schmitt 2009; Helbig/Buscha 2013; Hentschel/Weydt 2021) do not address the specificities of these verbs in an efficient way for learners of German. Starting from the observation that these verbs with two accusatives are sometimes used with a dative complement for the recipient/beneficiary instead of an accusative (see also Lang 2007 and Wegener 1985), we want to propose a more differentiated picture about the use of these verbs by looking at corpus data from the Sketch Engine that can provide more authentic evidence about the usage possibilities (e.g. sentence in active vs. passive; nominal vs. pronominal complements, etc.).

For the learning of the German ditransitive construction, we advocate a usage-based approach which involves corpus data and frequency figures (see also De Knop *fc.* 2023) to make better decisions about the use of this construction and its specificities.

## References

- De Knop, Sabine (*fc.* 2023): The integration of frequency dimensions and lexicalization preferences in contrastive analysis. In: Baicchi, Annalisa/Broccias, Cristiano (eds.), *Constructional and Cognitive Explorations of Contrastive Linguistics*. Berlin: Springer.
- Dreyer, Hilke/Schmitt, Richard (2009): *Lehr- und Übungsbuch der deutschen Grammatik*. Ismaning: Hueber.
- Goldberg, Adele E. (1995): *Constructions. A Construction Grammar Approach to Argument Structure*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Goldberg, Adele E. (2006): *Constructions at Work: The Nature of Generalization in Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goldberg, Adele E. (2019): *Explain Me This: Creativity, Competition and the Partial Productivity of Constructions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Haspelmath, Martin (2004): Explaining the Ditransitive Person-Role Constraint: A usage-based approach. In: *Constructions 2*.
- Helbig, Gerhard/Buscha, Joachim (2013): *Deutsche Grammatik: Ein Handbuch für den Ausländerunterricht*. München: Langenscheidt.
- Hentschel, Elke/Weydt, Harald (2021): *Handbuch der Deutschen Grammatik*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Lang, Peter (2007): *Grammatik und Norm: Direktes Objekt, indirektes Objekt und der doppelte Akkusativ*. Seminararbeit Universität Zürich, Deutsches Seminar zum Thema Grammatik und Norm, Wintersemester 2006/07.
- Malchukov, Andrej/Haspelmath, Martin/Comrie, Bernard (2007): Ditransitive constructions: a typological overview. In: Malchukov, Andrej/Haspelmath, Martin/Comrie, Bernard (eds.): *Studies in Ditransitive Constructions*. Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter, pp. 1–64.
- Mollica, Fabio (2010): Syntaktischer Wechsel, Restriktionen und Lesartänderung im Deutschen und im Italienischen. In: Fischer, Klaus/Fobbe, Eilika/Schierholz, Stefan J. (eds.): *Valenz und Deutsch als Fremdsprache*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, pp. 157-182.
- Proost, Kristel (2014): Ditransitive transfer constructions and their prepositional variants in German and Romanian: An empirical survey. In: Cosma, Ruxandra/Engelberg, Stefan/ Schlotthauer, Susan/Stanescu, Speranta/Zifonun, Gisela (eds.): *Komplexe Argumentstrukturen - Kontrastive Untersuchungen zum Deutschen, Rumänischen und Englischen*. Berlin: De Gruyter, pp. 19–83.
- Wegener, Heide (1985): *Der Dativ im heutigen Deutsch*. Tübingen: Narr.
- Willems, Klaas (2020): Remarks on the ditransitive construction in German. In: *Sprachwissenschaft* 45(2), pp. 141-180.

## Contact information

### Sabine De Knop

Université Saint-Louis Bruxelles

[sabine.deknop@usaintlouis.be](mailto:sabine.deknop@usaintlouis.be)

### Fabio Mollica

Università degli Studi di Milano

[fabio.mollica@unimi.it](mailto:fabio.mollica@unimi.it)