I gave it him – on the motivation of the ‘alternative double object construction’ in varieties of British English
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1 Introduction

As is well known, standard British English has two alternating constructions for the expression of three-place predicates: the ‘double object construction’ and the ‘prepositional object construction’ (cf. Larsson 1988, Levin 1991, Goldberg 1995, Mukherjee 2005, Siewierska & Hollmann forthcoming). The two constructions are basically equivalent and a contrast in meaning emerges only under very specific circumstances. For instance, in some cases the double object construction necessarily expresses “successful transfer between a volitional agent and a willing recipient” (Goldberg 1995: 151) whereas an event described by the prepositional object construction may be unsuccessful (cf. (1)). (2) illustrates that the double object construction requires a “volitional agent”.

(1) a. I sent a parcel to her but she never received it. (prepositional object construction)
   b. ?I sent her a parcel but she never received it. (double object construction)

(2) Joe threw the right fielder the ball he had intended the first baseman to catch.
   (Goldberg 1995: 143)

Moreover, there are instances of ‘idiomatization’ for both the double object construction and the prepositional object construction. The following examples do not allow an alternation:

(3) But on 21 June 1982 the problem temporarily dissolved when at three minutes past nine in the evening, Diana gave birth to Prince William. [BNC]

(4) We might give the hospital a call, I think, and get the latest report. [BNC]

Since such contrasts as illustrated in (1) and (2) above emerge only rarely (or are rarely relevant in actual discourse), and for idiomatic constructions like those in (3) and (4) an alternation is not even available, semantic properties of sentences only have a minor impact on the distribution of the two alternating constructions. Much more important are structural properties of the constituents involved, in particular their syntactic complexity and their phonological weight: constituents that are either syntactically complex or bear heavy stress (or both) tend to come last, so the double object construction is often preferred when the

1 I will use the semantic terms ‘recipient’ (REC) and ‘theme’ (TH) to distinguish the two lower arguments of ditransitive predicates.
theme is heavy while the prepositional object construction is preferred with heavy recipients (cf. Hawkins 1994, 2004 for an explanation of such heaviness effects).

In standard English, the prepositional object construction exhibits greater syntactic flexibility than the double object construction insofar as the order of prepositional and non-prepositional objects is not entirely fixed: if the non-prepositional object is heavier than the prepositional one it may be postponed (‘heavy NP-shift’; cf. (5a)). Such reordering is not generally possible with the double object construction, as is witnessed by the ungrammaticality of (6b):

(5) a. His son was Decimus Burton whose designs [gave [to the scheme] [a wholeness much more successful than any of the other attempts in the county]]. [BNC]
   b. *His son was Decimus Burton whose designs [gave [a wholeness much more successful than any of the other attempts in the county] [to the scheme]].

(6) a. The colonial period ushered in an era of foreign investment which [gave [the large scale trading houses of Europe] [a hold on the development]] ... [BNC]
   b. *The colonial period ushered in an era of foreign investment which [gave [a hold on the development] [the large scale trading houses of Europe]] ...

TH–REC order as illustrated in (6b) is found only in some regional varieties of British English. Hughes & Trudgill (1979: 21) provide the example in (8), noting that it “is not especially common, but does occur in northern varieties, particularly […] if man is contrastively stressed” (cf. also Siewierska & Hollmann forthcoming). I will refer to the construction illustrated in (8) as the ‘alternative double object construction’, in contradistinction to the ‘canonical double object construction’ illustrated in (7).

(7) CANONICAL DOUBLE OBJECT CONSTRUCTION
   She [gave [the man] [a book]].

(8) ALTERNATIVE DOUBLE OBJECT CONSTRUCTION
   \[D\]She [gave [a book] [the MAN]]. (Hughes & Trudgill 1979: 21)

By and large, the generalizations made above apply when one of the objects is a pronoun as well, and pronouns simply behave like very short constituents of category NP. The alternative double object construction with a pronominal theme is illustrated in (9):

(9) \[D\]We give it the cook and she cooked it. [BNC HVB 44]

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2 In the following, a superscript \[D\] is used to indicate a restriction to specific dialects.
Just like cases such as (8) above ([V NP_{TH} NP_{REC}]), constructions of the type of (9) ([V PRO_{TH} NP_{REC}]) are very rare, and only a handful of instances can be found in the BNC. However, the alternative double object construction is relatively common when both objects are pronominal, i.e. combinations of the form [V \textit{it}_{TH} me_{REC}], [V \textit{it}_{TH} you_{REC}], etc. are relatively frequent in regional varieties of British English, though overall much less common than the prepositional object construction ([V \textit{it}_{TH} \textit{to me}_{REC}]), and slightly less common than the canonical double object construction ([V me_{REC} \textit{it}_{TH}]). Examples of each construction are given in (10)–(12). The statistical distribution of the three constructions in registers of English is shown in Table 1 (in occurrences per million words in the LSWEC; cf. Biber et al. 1999: 928, quoted from Siewierska & Hollmann forthcoming).

(10) His Dad pulled the arrow off the door and \textbf{GAVE IT TO HIM}. [BNC]
(11) He wanted more time and the rebels \textbf{GAVE HIM IT}. [BNC]
(12) I got the map from his secretary, and when I \textbf{GAVE IT HIM} he spread it out on his desk. [BNC]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONV</th>
<th>FICT</th>
<th>NEWS</th>
<th>ACAD</th>
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<td>[V PRON_{TH} to PRON_{REC}]</td>
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<td>70</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[V PRON_{REC} PRO_{TH}]</td>
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<tr>
<td>[V PRON_{TH} PRON_{REC}]</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>&lt;5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 1: Ditransitive constructions with pronominal objects (Biber et al. 1999: 928)

For one specific combination of pronominal recipients and themes the variation between British varieties of English has been mapped in the 	extit{Linguistic Atlas of England} (Orton et al. 1978), based on the 	extit{Survey of English Dialects} (Orton et al. 1962-71), namely for third person/inanimate themes and first person recipients (\textit{give it to me}, \textit{give it me}, or \textit{give me it}; cf. Figure 1). The emerging patterns roughly correspond to traditional classifications of English dialects, in particular of Middle English. Five major areas can be distinguished: the northern varieties, where REC–TH order (no 3) prevails, just like in the East Midlands, whereas in the West Midlands it is TH–REC order (no 1) that is more widespread. In the south-west and in London, neither of the two double object constructions is widely used (no 2). As will be seen later, reference to Middle English dialects is significant because it was between Old and Middle English that the different constructions were established.
In the following we will first consider the distribution of the three ditransitive constructions within varieties of English (Section 2). Specific (‘inconsistent’) varieties exhibit what I call a ‘paradigmatic mismatch’, i.e. variation in the order of theme and recipient relative to the (lexical or pronominal) status of the objects. An explanation for this ‘inconsistency’ is offered in Section 3 using comparative data from German. Section 4 outlines the historical development of the three constructions in English, illustrating that the ‘inconsistent’ varieties have preserved patterns of Old English whereas the ‘consistent’ ones are probably innovative and may have been influenced by contact with Old Norse. The paper concludes with a summary and outlook in Section 5.

2 The distribution of ditransitive constructions within varieties of English

As has been seen, the two ditransitive constructions of Standard English – the prepositional object construction and the canonical double object construction – have a strongly overlapping, though not identical, distribution. The question arises how ditransitive constructions are distributed in non-standard varieties which have all of the three constructions distinguished above. Corpus data show that the two double object constructions are often in complementary distribution insofar as for each combination of a theme and a recipient (pronominal theme/pronominal recipient, pronominal theme/lexical recipient, etc.) only one of the constructions is available. For instance, in Charles Dickens’ novel *David Copperfield* the canonical double object construction is found only with the combinations ‘lexical recipient/lexical theme’ and ‘pronominal recipient/lexical theme’. When both objects are pronominal, only the alternative double object construction is used. Neither of the two constructions is found with lexical recipients/pronominal themes, so the prepositional object construction is the only option in such cases. The prepositional object construction is also found as an alternative construction in all other cases. Examples of the four possible combinations of pronominal and non-pronominal recipients and themes are given in (13)–(16).

(13) lexical REC, lexical TH

“Clara, there’s nothing like work – *give your boy an exercise*” [DC 74]

(14) lexical REC, pronominal TH

She withdrew her hand timidly from his arms as we stopped to speak to them, and blushed as she *gave it to Steerforth and to me*. [DC 417]
(15) pronominal REC, lexical TH

“If I was ever to be a lady, I’d give him a sky-blue coat with diamond buttons…”

[DC 49]

(16) pronominal REC, pronominal TH

Mr. Dolloby rolled it up again, and gave it me back. [DC 234]

Note that the categories ‘pronominal’ vs. ‘lexical’ are rather coarse-grained, since some elements may not be clearly categorized as either pronouns or lexical NPs. For instance, deictic pronouns and pronominal one are generally classified as ‘pronouns’, but they behave like full NPs insofar as they license the canonical double object construction in David Copperfield:

(17) “…how could I deny her when she give me this to carry for her – knowing what she brought it for? …” [DC 434]

(18) But if you want a dog to race with, Little Blossom, he has lived too well for that, and I’ll give you one. [DC 897]

So far, we can distinguish between three major types of varieties with respect to the availability of ditransitive constructions (assuming that the prepositional object construction is usually available as one alternative): (i) varieties that have only the canonical (but not the alternative) double object construction, but that do not use it when both objects are pronominal (*gave me it, *gave it me, gave it to me); (ii) varieties that have only the canonical double object construction and that do allow it in sentences with two pronominal objects (gave me it, *gave it me, gave it to me); (iii) varieties that have both the canonical and the alternative double object construction and that use the former when the recipient is lexical and the latter when both objects are pronominal (*gave me it, gave it me, gave it to me). This list of varieties is, of course, not exhaustive, but it seems to capture the patterns most commonly found on the British Isles. For the sake of future reference, I will use the following labels for the three types of varieties: varieties of type (i) will be called ‘neutral’, varieties of type (ii) ‘consistent’, and varieties of type (iii) ‘inconsistent’. The term ‘inconsistent’ is motivated by the varying order of the theme and recipient.

In order to determine the distribution of the double object constructions in varieties of English more exactly we would of course have to take more fine-grained distinctions into account, for instance the distribution of specific constructions with two pronominal objects relative to their distribution with one pronominal object, or without a pronominal object. Moreover, the question should be addressed to what extent the availability of constructions
depends on lexical or grammatical classifications (NP, pronoun), or maybe on other properties such as animacy or the ability to carry stress. Sentences such as (19) seem to be unattested in any variety of English, but Hughes & Trudgill (1979: 21) provide the example in (20), which requires that him carry heavy stress.

(19) *She gave some thought it.
(20) DShe gave the book HIM. (Hughes & Trudgill 1979: 21)

We may speculate that certain implicational relations can be established with regard to the availability of the alternative double object construction. For instance, the hypothesis suggests itself that varieties allowing the alternative double object construction in sentences such as (8) above (She gave a book the man) will also allow it in cases like (9) (We give it the cook), though not vice versa; and varieties that allow (9) will in all likelihood also allow sentences of the form I gave it him, but not vice versa. This hypothesis amounts to postulating a hierarchy of the form shown in (21), which is, however, nothing more than a conjecture at this point:

(21) [V PRO_{TH} PRO_{REC}] > [V PRO_{TH} NP_{REC}] > [V NP_{TH} NP_{REC}] > [V NP_{TH} PRO_{REC}]

3 A parallel structural mismatch in German: towards an explanation

From the perspective of language internal ‘paradigmatic architecture’ – the organisation of syntactic relations into constructional schemas, as it were – the existence of the alternative double object construction in some varieties of English is unexpected, since it leads to what we may call a ‘paradigmatic mismatch’: in some sentences the recipient precedes the theme while in others the theme precedes the recipient, even though there is no distinctive morphological case marking. Although real misunderstandings will only rarely arise because contextual information and animacy asymmetries will usually indicate which constituent functions as a theme and which one as a recipient (cf. Haspelmath’s 2004 ‘ditransitive person-role constraint’), such ‘constructional inconsistency’ seems to call for an explanation. This issue is addressed from a historical perspective in Section 4. Before turning to the diachronic facts of English, however, a comparative survey of some relevant facts from German will be given in this section, since German has a syntax quite parallel to that of Old English and since, unlike for Old English, negative evidence and grammaticality judgements are readily available (Section 3.1). In Sections 3.2 and 3.3, the distributional facts of German will be explained with reference to general motivations underlying the structure and development of languages, namely ‘frequency’ and Behagel’s (1932) ‘law of increasing constituents’. I take it that parallel explanations could be given to account for the word order of Old English.
3.1 A ‘paradigmatic mismatch’ in German

A paradigmatic mismatch parallel to the one found in ‘inconsistent’ varieties of English can be observed in ditransitive constructions of German as well. While the recipient generally precedes the theme when both objects are lexical, the inverse order is found when the two objects are pronominal. This is illustrated in (22)–(25). Note that the order of NPs is also sensitive to other factors such as length/complexity, definiteness and the interpretation of indefinite NPs. For instance, *eine Münze* in (23) can be preposed when it receives a specific/wide scope or a generic reading. As long as both objects are non-specific/existential, however, the dative precedes the accusative. This configuration is, for several reasons, regarded as the ‘basic’ or ‘canonical’ one (cf. Büring 2001, Lenerz 2001, Haider & Rosengren 2003, Frey 2004).

(22)  Er gab [REC einem Bettler] [TH eine Münze].
     he gave a beggar.DAT a coin.ACC
(23)  ?Er gab [TH eine Münze] [REC einem Bettler].
     he gave a coin.ACC a beggar.DAT
(24)  Er gab es_TH ihm_REC.
     he gave it.ACC him.DAT
(25)  ?Er gab ihm_REC es_TH.
     I gave him.DAT it.ACC

The data from German seem to indicate that we may be dealing with a rather general phenomenon, at least within the Germanic languages. If we consider the make-up of the German sentence in a so-called *topological* model (e.g. Lenerz 1977, Höhle 1986), it turns out that the paradigmatic mismatch under discussion gives German main clauses a remarkably symmetrical structure. Such a *topological* model is illustrated in (26). German sentences are regarded as being made up of three major ‘fields’: the ‘Forefield’ (or ‘Prefield’), the ‘Middle Field’ and the ‘Postfield’. The Postfield, which hosts extraposed/right-dislocated constituents, is not relevant at this point. The Middle Field is ‘embraced’ by the ‘sentence bracket’, which consists of the finite verb on the left margin and the non-finite verb (if there is one) on the right margin.
The Forefield is a slot for one sentence-initial constituent, which is generally either topical or focal. It often contains the subject but it may be taken by any other constituent as well. The Middle Field constitutes the ‘core’ of the sentence. It contains all arguments and adjuncts (except, of course, the topical and extraposed ones, which are located in the Forefield and the Postfield, respectively). In (26), the Forefield is taken by the adverbial gestern ‘yesterday’, the sentence bracket is formed by the auxiliary hat ‘has’ and the (non-finite) main verb gegeben ‘given’, and the non-topical arguments and adjuncts are located in between. Table 2 shows that any other constituent may also occupy the Forefield:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forefield</th>
<th>V₉</th>
<th>Middle Field</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| Karl      | hat | wahrscheinlich gestern einem Bettler eine Münze | gegeben  
| Wahrscheinlich | hat | Karl _________ gestern einem Bettler eine Münze | gegeben  
| Gestern   | hat | Wahrscheinlich _____ einem Bettler eine Münze | gegeben  
| Seinem Sohn | hat | Wahrscheinlich gestern _________ eine Münze | gegeben  
| Ein Fahrrad | hat | Wahrscheinlich gestern einem Bettler _________ | gegeben  
|           | has | Karl probably yesterday a beggar.DAT a coin.ACC | given  

Table 2: The structure of German main clauses

Pronouns usually occur on the left margin of the Middle Field in a position that is widely known as the ‘Wackernagel position’ in Indo-European linguistics. If the objects einem Bettler ‘a beggar.DAT’ or eine Münze ‘a coin.ACC’ are pronominalized, they immediately follow the finite verb. When they are both pronominalized, the accusative tends to precede the dative. Table 3 illustrates the structures that result when the subject is located in the Forefield and the objects are pronominalized:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forefield</th>
<th>( V_{\text{FIN}} )</th>
<th>Middle Field</th>
<th>( V_{\text{NON-FIN}} )</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Karl</td>
<td>hat</td>
<td>gestern</td>
<td>gegeben</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>einem Bettler</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>eine Münze</td>
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<tr>
<td>Karl</td>
<td>hat</td>
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<td>gegeben</td>
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<td>has</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>yesterday a</td>
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<td></td>
<td>a coin.ACC</td>
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Table 3: Pronominal objects in the German Middle Field

When we consider the structures displayed in Table 2 and Table 3 it becomes apparent that in the most typical sentence configuration – in sentences with a (topical) subject in the Forefield – German clause structure displays a remarkable symmetry as far as the arrangement of arguments and adverbials in the Middle Field is concerned.\(^3\) The verbs occupy the outermost positions, and towards the centre of the Middle Field the elements become increasingly oblique, in what looks like a shell structure. If we move from the verbs inwards the first elements are the accusative objects \( \text{sie} \) (to the left) and \( \text{eine Münze} \) (to the right), then follow the dative objects \( \text{ihm} \) (left) and \( \text{einem Bettler} \) (right), and in the centre there is the adverbial \( \text{gestern} \) ‘yesterday’. Accordingly, the Middle Field (plus the sentence bracket) can be described as a concentric structure in such ‘subject-topic sentences’. This is illustrated in (27). Note that the ellipses do not indicate constituency but spatial distance in typical sentence configurations, and that pronouns and noun phrases with identical case specifications are of course complementary:

(27) Karl hat \( \text{sie} \) ihm \( \text{gestern} \) einem Bettler eine Münze gegeben

Given that verbs, rather than adverbials, should be regarded as the centre of the clause, the structure should better be described as a ‘bi-polar’ formation with a verb on each side. This is shown (28) and (29):

(28) Karl hat \( \text{sie} \) ihm \( \text{gestern} \) einem Bettler eine Münze gegeben

(29) \( \text{NP}_{\text{NON}} \) \( V_{\text{FIN}} \) \( \text{PRO}_{\text{TH}} \) \( \text{PRO}_{\text{REC}} \) \( \text{gestern} \) \( \text{NP}_{\text{REC}} \) \( \text{NP}_{\text{TH}} \) \( V_{\text{NON-FIN}} \)

\(^3\) There are several positions for adverbials, but most of them are located between the pronouns on the left margin and indefinite/existential objects on the right margin; cf. Frey & Pittner (1998).
The structures in (28) and (29) suggest that the two verb positions, in a way, ‘attract’ the accusative. If this is right, it follows that accusative pronouns will precede dative pronouns – since pronouns are located on the left margin of the Middle Field, close to the finite verb – whereas the reverse order will be found with lexical NPs on the right margin of the Middle Field. However, saying that the verb positions ‘attract’ the accusative is of course only a metaphor which is itself in need of an explanation. The assumption that two elements or categories $x$ and $y$ ‘attract each other’ can be translated into a more falsifiable statement by saying that, all other things being equal, they tend to co-occur more strongly than any other possible combination of elements. In other words, they tend to be placed together whenever they occur in the same sentence if no other reason requires an alternative ordering. Such a generalization can be accommodated within the framework of frequency-driven functionalism as advocated, among others, by Martin Haspelmath (cf. Haspelmath 2004, 2006a, 2006b; cf. also Bybee & Hopper 2001 and Bybee 2001, 2005 for phonological applications). This argument requires that we briefly digress into matters of text frequency, which is done in the next section.

3.2 Types of text frequencies and the motivation of linguistic structure

The most basic type of frequency is that of item frequency, i.e. the frequency of elements such as *give, it, me*, etc. in a text. A second type of frequency has been called string frequency (see e.g. Krug 1998, 2000). String frequency measures the frequency of specific linear combinations of items, for instance $<\text{give it}>, <\text{give me}>, \text{or } <\text{give him}>$. Thirdly, if we generalize over one of the two positions in a ‘string’, this gives us one type of pattern frequency – say, ‘unary pattern frequency’ – which indicates the frequency of patterns such as $<V\ it>$ or $<V\ me>$ (Bybee’s 2001 ‘schemas’). Finally, we can also abstract away from the second element of a string, thus determining what we may call ‘binary pattern frequency’. In this case we deal with patterns such as $<V\ NP_{\text{acc}}>$ or $<V\ PRO_{\text{dat}}>$. Note that string frequency and pattern frequency have nothing to do with constituency, i.e. pairs forming a string like $<\text{give it}>$ need not form a constituent. This is why such pairs are enclosed by pointed brackets rather than square brackets.

The crucial point of my argument concerning the preferred order of objects in German is that the pattern frequency of a finite verb followed by a pronominal accusative, or a non-finite verb preceded by a lexical accusative, will always be much higher than the frequency of the corresponding structures with dative pronouns or NPs. This prediction is independent of the

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4 I deliberately avoid the term ‘token frequency’ since it evokes the dichotomy of token vs. type frequency, which is too coarse-grained for the present purposes.
order of accusative and dative constituents in the Middle Field. The reason is that most transitive verbs are monotransitive, thus licensing only one (accusative) object, whereas the dative is, with a few exceptions, licensed only in addition to an accusative object (very few verbs license a single dative object, e.g. helfen ‘help’ or folgen ‘follow’). In other words, the set of environments licensing a dative object is (almost) a subset of the set of environments licensing an accusative object. Therefore, patterns such as \(<V_{\text{FIN}} + \text{ihn}>\) or \(<V_{\text{FIN}} + \text{PRO}_{\text{ACC}}>\) on the left margin of the Middle Field are more frequent than the corresponding structures with a dative pronoun (\(<V_{\text{FIN}} + \text{ihm}>\), \(<V_{\text{FIN}} + \text{PRO}_{\text{DAT}}>\)). Likewise, on the other side of the Middle Field, the pattern \(<\text{NP}_{\text{ACC}} + V_{\text{NON-FIN}}>>\) will be more frequent than the corresponding pattern with a dative object (\(<\text{NP}_{\text{DAT}} + V_{\text{NON-FIN}}>>\).

Let us refer to patterns that are highly frequent as ‘recurrent patterns’. A recurrent pattern is established whenever the pattern frequency of a given linear sequence of words or categories is beyond a certain threshold value (where a threshold level would have to be determined by psycholinguists and statisticians). It is in this sense that the elements of a recurrent pattern can be said to ‘attract each other’: they simply tend to occur en bloc. The establishment of a ‘recurrent pattern’ can be called ‘entrenchment’, and according to frequency-based functionalism, there is a causal relationship between frequency and entrenchment. Haspelmath (2004: 1-2) refers to this relationship as “the Frequency Condition on Entrenchment in Grammaticalization. It says that when a loose combination of expressions becomes entrenched and is conventionalized as a separate construction, which particular elements may figure in the construction often depends on their frequency of occurrence”. This is of course closely related to DuBois’ (1985: 363) claim that “grammars code best what speakers do most”, and to Hawkins’ (2004: 3) ‘Performance-Grammar Correspondence Hypothesis’:

Grammars have conventionalized syntactic structures in proportion to their degree of preference in performance, as evidenced by patterns of selection in corpora and by ease of processing in psycholinguistic experiments.

To illustrate the effects of frequency on German clause structure, consider (30)–(32). In (30), the Middle Field is delimited by the auxiliary habe ‘have’ and the monotransitive verb treffen ‘meet’. Given that sentences of the type of (30) are relatively frequent, the string \(<\text{habe} + \text{ihn}>>\) or, more generally, the patterns \(<\text{hab} - \text{FIN} + \text{ihn}>>\) or \(<V_{\text{FIN}} + \text{ihn}>>\) are ‘entrenched’, i.e. a ‘recurrent pattern’ is established. Whenever the two words co-occur in a sentence, it is expected that they will be adjacent, unless there is some other, stronger, recurrent pattern. The hypothesis underlying this line of reasoning is, of course, that more frequent structures require
less processing or production effort than less frequent ones (cf. Bybee 2001: 6-14 for an overview of the relationship between frequency and memory). The clause structure of (31) is therefore more economical from a psycholinguistic point of view than the competing structure in (32), which does not contain any recurrent pattern:

(30) Ich **habe ihn** gestern getroffen. recurrent pattern <V + ihn>
    I have him.ACC yesterday met
    ‘I met him yesterday.’

(31) Ich **habe ihn** ihr gestern vorgestellt. recurrent pattern <V + ihn>
    I have him.ACC her.DAT yesterday introduced
    ‘I introduced him to her yesterday.’

(32) ?Ich habe ihr ihn gestern vorgestellt. no recurrent pattern
    I have her.DAT him.ACC yesterday introduced

3.3 **An alternative explanation: the ‘law of increasing constituents’**

The hypothesis that the two verb positions in the German Middle Field ‘attract the accusative’ faces one problem: it cannot account for the order of objects in subordinate clauses, where pronominal themes likewise precede pronominal recipients, although there is no (finite) verb to the left of the Middle Field. This is illustrated in (33):

(33) dass ich es**TH** ihm**REC** gestern gesagt habe.
    that I it.ACC him.DAT yesterday told have
    ‘…that I told him it yesterday.’

We could of course assume that the order of elements in the German Middle Field is primarily determined in main clauses and then generalized to subordinate clauses. From the perspective of frequency-based explanations this seems feasible, since main clauses are certainly more frequent than subordinate clauses, especially in the spoken language. Still, one may object that we should be bound to expect that the word order in subordinate clauses should differ from the one in main clauses if frequency were the only factor. In this section, a second factor will be discussed which favours TH–REC order for pronominal objects and REC–TH for non-pronominal ones, thus ‘conspiring’ with the frequency effects pointed out in Section 3.2, namely the ‘law of increasing constituents’.

If we consider the serialization of pronouns in the German Middle Field from a phonological point of view we notice that accusative pronouns typically have less phonological substance than dative pronouns. It is consequently to be expected that accusative pronouns will precede dative pronouns, in accordance with the ‘law of increasing
constituents’ stated by Behagel (1932) and explained by Hawkins (1994, 2004), among others. (34) provides a scale of phonological weight, and all German accusative and dative pronouns are located on this scale according to the weight of their rhymes:

(34) 

\[
\begin{align*}
[\text{er}] & \text{3.NT.ACC} & [\text{uns}] & \text{2PL.ACC/DAT} & [\text{ihn}] & \text{3.MASC.ACC} & [\text{ihal}] & \text{3.PL.DAT} \\
[\text{ich}] & \text{1.ACC} & [\text{zich}] & \text{3.PL.ACC/3FEM.ACC} & [\text{ihm}] & \text{3.MASC.DAT} \\
[\text{ich}] & \text{2.ACC} & [\text{ich}] & \text{2.PL.ACC/DAT} & [\text{ihle}] & \text{2.PL.ACC/DAT} \\
[\text{zich}] & \text{3.REFL.ACC/DAT} & & & [\text{ihle}] & \text{3.FEM.DAT}
\end{align*}
\]

The generalization that pronouns are serialized according to their phonological weight makes the right predictions in most but not all cases. For instance, dative \textit{uns} should precede accusative \textit{ihn}, but the reverse order is actually found. Still, both of the two dative pronouns that may precede accusative pronouns – \textit{sich} and \textit{uns} – are also used in the accusative, i.e. there is case syncretism. The following generalization can therefore be made: whenever a dative pronoun precedes an accusative pronoun (in the canonical order), the dative pronoun is also used in the accusative. This seems to indicate that the scale in (34) is not only one of phonological weight, but also one of frequency: accusative pronouns are more frequent than dative pronouns and are therefore expected to have less phonological weight (Zipf’s law).

As far as combinations of pronouns are concerned, the law of increasing constituents thus works in the same direction as pattern frequency insofar as it favours TH–REC order for combinations of pronouns. The same applies to the linearization of lexical NPs on the other side of the Middle Field: lexical recipients are typically ‘lighter’ than lexical themes, since the former tend to be human and given whereas themes are often non-human and new. Therefore, lexical recipients are expected to typically precede lexical themes.

4 English ditransitive constructions in a diachronic perspective

The clause structure of Old English or, to be more precise, of the West Saxon dialect of Old English, is quite similar to that of German. Old English is usually analyzed as a verb-second language though the verb occurs regularly in the third position as well when it is preceded by a pronoun (cf. van Kemenade 1987, Denison 1993, Fischer et al. 2000 for surveys of Old English syntax). Old English is typically analyzed as OV, but VO structures are also frequently found. This is attributed either to extraposition (i.e., right-dislocation beyond the final verb), or to variation in the underlying order (the ‘double base hypothesis’; cf. Pintzuk 1990). V3-structure in main clauses is illustrated in (35) and an example of VO/extraposition is given in (36):
(35) God him worhte þa reaf of fellum
   God him made then garments of skins
   ‘God then made him garments of skin.’
   (AHTh I, 18)

(36) Se mæssepreost sceal mannum bodian þone oþan eleafan
   the masspriest must people preach the true faith
   ‘The masspriest must preach the true faith to the people.’
   (ÆLet 2/Wulfstan 1 175)

In general, the topological structure of the OE sentence is nevertheless quite similar to that of German, in particular insofar as there is a ‘basic’ part of the sentence, corresponding to the German Middle Field, and there are marginal positions for information-structurally prominent constituents. As far as the order of theme and recipient is concerned, the situation is also reminiscent of the one found in German. Both REC–TH (DAT–ACC) and TH–REC (ACC–DAT) are attested, but the order of objects seems to be sensitive to properties of the constituents involved. Using the same diagnostics that are commonly applied to modern V2-languages, Koopman (1991: 120) has argued that “there is reasonable evidence to suggest that the underlying order is DAT-ACC”. Two examples with this (supposedly) basic order are given in (37) (main clause) and (38) (subordinate clause):

(37) He [sealde [REC þam geswenctum mannum] [TH reste]]
   he gave the oppressed people rest
   ‘He gave the oppressed people rest.’
   (HomU 9/VercHom4 166)

(38) þæt he [[REC þon biddendan] [TH ece lif] forgeafe]
   that he the asking eternal life gave
   ‘that he gave eternal life to those who asked.’
   (HomS 8/B1 Hom 2 100)

The order of pronominal objects is likewise parallel to that of German. According to Visser (1963: 623), “[w]hen both the objects are pronouns it seems always to have been the rule to put the direct object before the indirect object. Exceptions are not numerous.” Examples are given in (39)–(42) (for more examples see Visser 1963: 623):

(39) & Ø hæfde hitTH himREC wel neh twelf monæð
   and PRO had it.ACC him.DAT well near twelve months
   ‘…and PRO kept it for himself for about twelve months.’ (Ch 1467)
Turning from Old English to Middle English, we are faced with the well-known problem that Middle English cannot simply be regarded as a later stage of Old English if the latter is taken to be synonymous with West Saxon, since most Middle English documents are written in dialects from regions other than West Saxon. It is therefore often difficult to say whether a structural difference between varieties of Old and Middle English is due to a process of historical change, or whether the relevant differences already existed in Old English times. The developments sketched below are therefore to be taken as models for possible developments, rather than representing specific developments in the history of English.

In very general terms, the change from Old English to Middle English is characterized by two important developments: first, the basic word order shifted from V2/OV to SVO, and second, case morphology was lost (cf. Trips 2002 for an overview). Supposedly as a result of the loss of case distinctions, the word order in the VP became increasingly fixed, but this change proceeded less quickly than one may be led to expect. As Visser (1963: 622) remarks, “the indirect object can no longer be distinguished from the direct object by means of the difference in inflectional form. Henceforth the interpretation depends on context and situation, and on the fact that in the majority of cases the indirect object refers to a person and the direct object to a thing, so that word order is mostly immaterial”. Later, “a fixed word order [sic] came to take over the discriminative task of the difference in case forms”, in other words, REC–TH order was established.

A certain freedom may also have existed in the order of pronominal objects. However, it is likely that combinations of the type gave it him/gave him it were fixed earlier than the corresponding patterns with lexical NPs, owing to their relatively high string frequency. Some varieties of Middle English had TH–REC order, just like the West Saxon dialect of Old English. Examples are given in (43)–(46) (in chronological order):
(43) he wule hit me forȝeuen
MED, s.v. mild-herted, Lamb.Hom., a1225, W-Midlands
(44) ‘Gossip’, quod þe wolf, ‘forȝef hit me’.
MED, s.v. god-sib, Fox&W, a1300, prob. Kentish
(45) but I desire for to herkne\textsuperscript{5} that thou scheue it me.
Chaucer, Boethius, P433.C2, 1380, London
(46) Also I prey yow to foryeve it me.
Chaucer, Caterbury Tales, General Prologue, 743, a1400, London
(47) Thou that knowest the vse of an argument, I pray the scheue yt me.
MED, s.v. ûse, Chartier Dial.F.&.F., a1500, dialect not classified

A second set of varieties differs from Old English in regularly showing REC–TH order, as illustrated in (48)–(51). Note that the sentences in (48) and (49) show verb-final order and are, in this respect, conservative:

(48) Gode faith me it tauȝte
MED, s.v. têchen, PPl.B, c1378, W-Midland
(49) he wil me it allowe
MED, s.v. allouen, PPl.B, c1378, W-Midland
(50) A pure man ... prayed þaim to giff hym it.
MED, s.v. thirst, Alph. Tales, c1450, dialect not classified
(51) I pray ȝow send me it as hastely as ȝe may.
Corp CPaston, P200, a1500, E-Midland

As mentioned above, it is not entirely clear whether REC–TH order was in all cases the result of a process of innovation, or whether the relevant structures already existed in Old English times. However, there is good evidence that REC–TH order may have been established (at least in some dialects) before the Middle English period: the area covered by ‘me-it-dialects’ in Figure 1 corresponds more or less to the Danelaw (which extended more into the West Midland dialect area, though). Given that in Old Norse there was a clear tendency towards REC–TH order (for examples see Faarlund 2005: 134, 141-2), varieties of English showing this construction may have been influenced by Old Norse. REC–TH order has also become the norm in modern Scandinavian languages with all combinations of objects. (52) and (53) are examples from Swedish and Icelandic:

\textsuperscript{5} Hear, listen to.
A similar instance of language contact has been claimed by Trips (2002: 152-163) for ‘object shift’, viz. an operation commonly found in Scandinavian languages which is also attested in varieties of Middle English that are located in the Danelaw, in particular the language of the *Ormulum*. Given all the other (e.g. lexical) evidence that we have for contact influence of Old Norse on Old English, the hypothesis that REC–TH order in the pronominal double object construction is due to language contact is certainly not too far-fetched. It is equally clear, however, that REC–TH order was also favoured by the principle of analogy, and that it may well have developed without any external influence as well.

5 Conclusions and outlook

Starting with the observation that some varieties of English exhibit what we may call a ‘paradigmatic inconsistency’ insofar as the order of objects varies with their category, I have attempted to show that such an inconsistency may actually be well motivated in V2-languages such as German and Old English if one takes frequency patterns and universal distributional preferences (‘the law of increasing constituents’) into account. Such principles have been claimed to counterbalance the ‘principle of analogy’, which is likewise an important motivation underlying language structure. Varieties with REC–TH order in ditransitive constructions with two pronominal objects are basically found in the area corresponding to the Danelaw, which suggests that language contact with Old Norse may have played a role. In order to corroborate this suspicion, a fine-grained analysis of Middle English texts with regard to the distribution of double object constructions and their geographical origin needs to be carried out. I leave this as a suggestion for future research.

References


Figure 1: Ditransitive constructions with two pronominal objects in varieties of British English