

# On the Thematic Roles of Beneficiary and Recipient in the Benefactive Alternation in English

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The benefactive alternation is one of the widely known alternations in English. This article addresses the question of what kinds of thematic roles are involved in the *for*-phrase in a prepositional benefactive form and the first object in the corresponding double object form, and argues that the two forms have basically the same semantic structure: the difference arises from a difference in profiling of thematic roles. It is shown that the benefactive, the dative, and the locative alternations can be similarly accounted for.

Key Words : Alternation, Benefactive Beneficiary, Profile, Recipient

## 1. Introduction

This article addresses the problem of what kinds of thematic roles are involved in the *for*-phrase and the first object in the benefactive alternation in English, as exemplified by (1a) and (1b). We will call the persons like John in (1) beneficiaries (Jackendoff 1990: 183), because the action the subject referent performs is intended for the benefit of them.

- (1) a. Mary baked a cake for John.  
b. Mary baked John a cake.

It has generally been held in the literature that the sentences related by the benefactive alternation share the basic meaning. This is why the sentences in question were considered transformationally related in the early days of generative grammar (e.g. Akmajian and Heny 1975). However, there have also been arguments based on the observation that the two constructions involved in the benefactive alternation do not share exactly the same meaning; specifically the first object beneficiary in the ditransitive form comes to have the other object referent (see the discussion in section 2). These arguments, together with the assumption that syntactic operations do not change the lexical semantics of predicates, have led to the analyses including the present paper which do not claim that they are transformationally related. I argue in section 3 that the predicates such as *bake* in (1) have basically the same semantic structure whether they appear in the prepositional benefactive construction or the ditransitive construction: the difference is due to a difference in profiling of thematic roles involved in beneficiary nominals.

## 2. Previous Analyses

### 2. 1. Some Recently Found New Data

Goldberg (2002: 345) argues that “when the ditransitive construction is combined with verbs of creation [like *bake*, TO], the recipient role is associated only with the construction; we do not need to assume that verbs of creation lexically specify a potential recipient.” While her argument explains why the first object referent John in (1b) has the recipient role, it is far from clear how she could deal with Takami’s (2003) data. He argues that “the acceptability of the benefactive double object construction is dependent on whether the action the subject referent performs is intended for the benefit of the indirect object referent, and not on whether a prospective possessive relationship is established between the two object referents” (p. 218). One of the crucial sets of sentences for Takami’s position is (2):

- (2) a. \*John killed Mary the centipede.  
b. John killed Mary a/the centipede for her collection.  
c. John, could you kill me that centipede, too ?  
I’m still scared.

The verb *kill* is normally a two-place predicate. Therefore (2a), which contains three arguments, is unacceptable. However, (2b) and (2c), which also contain three arguments, are acceptable: the context suggests that “John’s act of killing the centipede was intended for the benefit of [Mary or] the speaker” (p. 214), and no possessive/recipient relationship can be established between me and that centipede in (2c). At this point it is clear that Goldberg needs to account for the reason why the recipient role does not turn up in every ditransitive construction: it does so typically only in specific classes of verbs like *bake*. I argue in the following sections that this role is not directly connected with the ditransitive construction itself but is felt by speakers of English to exist because of its profiled

status.

## 2. 2. The Dative Alternation

It is well known that there is a grammatical phenomenon called the dative alternation, in which the preposition *to*, not *for*, is employed in the prepositional dative construction. Observe (3a) and (3b):

(3) a. John gave a doll to Mary.

b. John gave Mary a doll.

Gropen, et al. (1989: 240–241) argue that the thematic core<sup>1</sup> of the argument structure for the prepositional dative and that for the double object dative are (4) and (5), respectively.

(4) prepositional dative:

X causes Y to go to Z

(5) double object dative:

X causes Z to have Y

I argued in Otsuka (2005) that the distinct thematic cores represented in (4) and (5) are not appropriate for explaining the examples in which pragmatic factors are involved, and proposed that verbs participating in the dative alternation have basically the same lexical semantic structure. The difference between the prepositional dative and the double object dative forms is simply which thematic role, Goal or Recipient, is profiled. More concretely, their structures are represented as in the following, in which the profiled role is indicated by boldface:

(6) prepositional dative:

X causes Y to go to Z

**Goal/Recipient**

(7) double object dative

X causes Y to go to Z

**Goal/Recipient**

In order to make my proposal clear, consider the semantics of the sentences in (8). According to Baker (1997: 89), (8b) suggests that the ball actually reached Bill (thus, the Recipient as well as the Goal in my proposal), whereas (8a) does not.

(8) a. I threw the ball to Bill.

b. I threw Bill the ball.

While we do not know whether Bill actually received the ball in (8a), he is a *potential* recipient of the ball in our knowledge of the world. The reason why the role of Goal is profiled in the combination of Goal and Recipient in (8a) is that the preposition *to* strengthens the path interpretation, profiling the terminal point of the movement of the ball, i.e. the Goal. In the case of the double object dative the preposition *to* does not exist, which means that the path interpretation is weakened and the role of Recipient is relatively stronger: in other words it is now possible to obtain the interpretation of a *prospective*, not a *potential* Re-

cipient.

## 3. A Lexical Semantic Analysis

Now we are in a position to extend the analysis of the dative alternation exemplified in (6) and (7) to the benefactive alternation. I propose that the prototypical benefactive alternation is represented in the following semantic structures:

(9) prepositional benefactive:

X causes Y to become created/obtained/... for Z<sup>2</sup>

**Agent Theme**

**Beneficiary/Recipient**

(10) double object benefactive:

X causes Y to become created/obtained/... for Z

**Agent Theme**

**Beneficiary/Recipient**

Benefactive alternation verbs take two arguments (Agent and Theme)<sup>3</sup>, with a Beneficiary/Recipient nominal being simply an adjunct or adjunct-like. Levin (1993: 49) states that the first object in a double object construction with a benefactive alternation verb is less “object”-like in some respects than the first object in a double object construction with a dative alternation verb. This is typically shown by the optionality of the *for*-phrase or the first object in this alternation:

(11) Mary baked a cake.

The non-passivisability of the first object in the double object form, as shown in (12) (cited from Goldberg 1992: 53), is another phenomenon showing its adjunct-like status. (See also Takami 2003: 220.)

(12) a. \*Lou was bought a gift.

b. \*Lou was boiled an egg.

c. \*She was baked a cake.

The quasi-argument Z has the roles of Beneficiary and Recipient. In the prepositional benefactive form the role of Beneficiary is profiled because of the existence of the preposition *for*, while in the double object benefactive form Recipient is relatively strengthened and profiled because of the non-existence of the preposition in question, weakening the beneficiary interpretation.

Let us go back to the concrete examples in (1), repeated here as (13a) and (13b).

(13) a. Mary baked a cake for John.

b. Mary baked John a cake.

c. Mary baked a cake. (= (11))

The event represented by (13c), lacking the beneficiary nominal, indicates in our real-world knowledge that there is a potential person who has the benefit of Mary’s action and possesses the cake. In (13a) the Beneficiary role is profiled while in (13b) the Recipient role is profiled. One might naturally wonder whether these two roles are distinct ones or not. Baker’s (1997: 89) observation indicates that they are in fact distinct.

He states that (14b) is “weird because the dead lover cannot perceive the song,” and that the recipient in this sentence comes “to possess something (an experience of a song).”

- (14) a. She sang a song for her dead lover.  
b. #She sang her dead lover a song.

However, Baker goes on to state:

While I agree that there is something to this judgment, I think it must be stated at the level of “suggests,” rather than “asserts” or “implies”. Thus, the sentences in [15] may be stylistically awkward, but they do not feel to me like contradictions and I can imagine finding them in texts.

- (15) Mary sang her lover a song, but he didn’t hear because he had just died.

Whatever the status of acceptability of (14b) and (15) might be, the proposal in (9–10) gives us a clue to the difference of acceptability between the prepositional benefactive form and the double object form. In (14a) the role of Beneficiary is profiled. Therefore it does not matter whether the Beneficiary referent is dead or alive. In (14b) and (15) the role of Recipient is profiled. Therefore it does matter whether the Recipient referent is dead or alive: when he is dead, he cannot be a possible recipient. This is why these sentences are “weird” or “stylistically awkward”. This in turn shows that Beneficiary and Recipient are distinct roles.

Actually, a double object form with the verb *sing* could be potentially ambiguous. Levin (1993: 178) shows that this verb allows either the benefactive or the dative alternation:

- (16) Benefactive Alternation  
a. Sandy sang a song for me.  
b. Sandy sang me a song.  
(17) Dative Alternation  
a. Sandy sang a song to me  
b. Sandy sang me a song.

Even if the dative alternation is also involved in (14b) and (15), the logic of explanation of why they are not completely acceptable is almost the same as in the case of the benefactive alternation, because the role of Recipient also participates in the dative alternation as shown in (6–7). This role is profiled in the double object form, thus reducing the acceptability of the two sentences in question.

Now let us go on to the case of non-prototypical benefactive alternations exemplified by the sentences in (2), repeated as (18).

- (18) a. \*John killed Mary the centipede.  
b. John killed Mary a/the centipede for her collection.  
c. John, could you kill me that centipede, too?  
I’m still scared.

I assume that (18b) and (18c) are forms extended

from the prototypical benefactive alternation, and that they have the semantic structure of the following type:

- (19) prepositional benefactive:  
X causes Y to become dead for Z  
|  
Beneficiary

- (20) double object benefactive:  
X causes Y to become dead for Z  
|  
Beneficiary

The action of “X kill Y” does not imply that there exists a recipient of Y in our normal interpretation of the world. Thus the role of Recipient does not exist in (19) and (20). The prepositional benefactive form corresponding to the double object benefactive form (18a) is (21).

- (21) John killed the centipede for Mary.

Because of the existence of the preposition *for* the role of Beneficiary is profiled as in (19). Then the question is why the double object form (18a) is unacceptable. Note that the role of Beneficiary is not profiled in (20) because of the non-existence of the preposition *for*. Let us assume that the thematic role carried by the phonologically overt nominal must be profiled. Thus, (20), left as it is, is ungrammatical. In other words, if the role of Beneficiary becomes profiled as in (22), the double object form is grammatical. This is exactly the point where the context plays a crucial part.

- (22) double object benefactive:  
X causes Y to become dead for Z  
|  
Beneficiary

The reason why (18b) and (18c) are acceptable is that the context in place of the preposition *for* serves to profile the role of Beneficiary.

We have noted above that when a nominal escapes from the government by a preposition due to being placed in direct object position, its interpretation can be slightly changed from a semantic point of view. This phenomenon actually has been observed in various alternations in English under the name of the “completive”, “perfective”, or “holistic” interpretation. Jackendoff (1990: 172) states that the forms in (24) are for the most part “completive” or “perfective” in a way that the forms in (23) are not. This is the case of the locative alternation.

- (23) a. Bill loaded hay onto the truck.  
b. Bill sprayed paint onto the wall.  
c. Bill packed books into the boxes.  
d. Bill stuffed groceries into the bag.  
(24) a. Bill loaded the truck (with hay).  
b. Bill sprayed the wall (with paint).  
c. Bill packed the boxes (with books).  
d. Bill stuffed the bag (with groceries)

The difference between (23a) and (24a), for example,

is, as often observed, that the latter means “the truck is full of hay”, while this is not necessarily the case in the former. The subject position is also involved in the following well-known sentences:

(25) a. Bees are swarming in the garden. (Fillmore 1968: 48)

b. The garden is swarming with bees.

The (b) sentence means that the garden is full of bees, while this is not necessarily the case in the (a) sentence. According to Levin (1993: 52–53), the (b) sentences in the following alternations have the “holistic” interpretation:

(26) *Clear* Alternation

a. Henry cleared dishes from the table.

b. Henry cleared the table of dishes.

(27) *Wipe* Alternation

a. Helen wiped the fingerprints off the wall.

b. Helen wiped the wall (\*of fingerprints).

The analyses proposed for the dative and the benefactive alternations suggest that the other cases of alternation can be accounted for in a similar way. Suppose, for example, that the truck in (23a) and that in (24a) have a set of thematic roles as shown in (28) and (29), respectively:

(28) truck

|

Location/Patient<sup>4</sup>

(29) truck

|

Location/Patient

The action of loading hay onto the truck necessarily affects at least part of the truck in our knowledge of the world, and may wholly affect it when it is finally full of hay. Whether the truck is partially or wholly affected depends on the actual situation in which hay is loaded: it must be pragmatically determined. (28) does not tell us whether the truck is completely affected by Bill’s action, with Location being profiled because of the existence of the preposition *onto* and Patient being in the background. However, (29), in which the profiling relationship is reversed because of the disappearance of the preposition, clearly shows that the truck is Patient, thus can be considered to be completely affected by Bill’s action.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

The preposition *for* employed in the benefactive alternation imposes a specific interpretation, i.e. Beneficiary, on the nominal governed by it. Since this interpretation is weakened in the ditransitive form due to the lack of *for*, the beneficiary nominal must be supported by the thematic role of Recipient, which is now relatively strengthened and thus profiled by being placed in direct object position. In some cases like *kill* in

which the Recipient role is not borne by the beneficiary nominal, Beneficiary itself must be profiled in the ditransitive form by the context. Thus, the interaction of the thematic roles of Beneficiary/Recipient, the direct object position, and the context is involved in the benefactive alternation in English.

#### Notes

1. According to Pinker (1989: 73), a thematic core is “a schematization of a type of event or relationship that lies at the core of the meanings of a class of possible verbs.”

2. The preposition *for* in (1a) can mean “in place of”, in addition to “for the benefit of”.

Goldberg (2002: 332) states that the following sentence (i) can mean that Mina bought a book for a third party because Mel was too busy to buy it himself. This meaning is “in place of”, which is irrelevant to the discussion, because the double object form does not contain this interpretation.

(i) Mina bought a book for Mel.

3. The representations of Agent and Theme assigned to the arguments X and Y, respectively, are omitted in the following discussion, in order to focus on the theta roles assigned to Z.

4. I assume that the nominal *hay* in (23a) and (24a) is Theme.

5. Otsuka (2004) discusses the lexical conceptual structure of the verb *load* and argues that it must be pragmatically determined which component of the structure is selected.

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