

Alternating predicates in Romanian: preliminary insights from a pilot experimental study

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This presentation deals with the Romanian construction in (1a–b) and (2a–b), in which certain predicates select for two alternating argument structures:

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| (1a) Fetei îi place istoria girl.DAT her.DAT pleases history.the.(NOM) 'The girl likes history' | (1b) Istoria îi place fetei history.the.(NOM) her.DAT pleases girl.DAT 'History pleases the girl' |
| (2a) Pe Maria o enervează indiferența PE Maria.ACC her.ACC irritates indifference.the.(NOM) 'Maria gets irritated by indifference' | (2b) Indiferența o enervează pe Maria indifference.the.(NOM) her.ACC irritates PE Maria.ACC 'Indifference irritates Maria' |

In the literature, this type of construction is called an *alternating predicate construction*. Recent studies show that alternating predicates are found in several old and modern Indo-European (IE) languages (Barðdal et al. 2019; Barðdal 2023: Ch. 3; Somers & Barðdal 2022). The alternating predicate constructions are a type of oblique subject construction that selects for two distinct and opposed argument structures: DAT-NOM or ACC-NOM vs. NOM-DAT or NOM-ACC (Barðdal et al. 2019), of which DAT-NOM and ACC-NOM are often analyzed as cases of topicalization (Dobrovie-Sorin 1987). Remarkably, when the order of the arguments is DAT-NOM or ACC-NOM, the dative or the accusative takes on the subject role, while when the order is NOM-DAT or NOM-ACC, the nominative behaves as a subject, hence refuting the topicalization analysis. Among IE languages, Romanian shows a high number of accusative subject constructions (Van Peteghem 2016) and a fair number of dative subject constructions, although not all of them may be of the alternating type. This research is part of a larger project that investigates the productivity and the evolution of the alternating predicate construction in Romanian from a diachronic and synchronic perspective through several corpus studies in combination with a series of psycholinguistic experiments aiming to unveil what triggers the choice for one argument structure or the other in the speaker's mind.

The pilot study discussed in this presentation consists of two psycholinguistic experiments meant to provide an answer to the following research questions: does structural priming influence the speaker's use of one argument structure over the other? is there any verb bias observed? does priming work across different constructions? The concept of *verb bias* refers to the fact that some verbs may have a strong preference for one of the alternating argument structures they select for (Bernolet et al. 2014). As for *structural priming*, this refers to the tendency of speakers to reuse structures from the immediately preceding (unrelated) discourse (Bock 1986; Scheepers et al. 2017). When an alternating predicate shows a strong preference for one of the argument structures, its production is less influenced by the priming of the other argument structure. As for the locus of priming, it is an ongoing discussion: is it driven by thematic roles (Pappert & Pechmann 2014) or by event structure (Ziegler et al. 2018)?

By using a sentence generation task programmed in PCIBex Farm presented to a sample of 24 participants recruited via Prolific, the first experiment aims at verifying whether priming influences the choice of a certain argument structure over the other one, within the same construction, and whether any verb bias can be observed. As for the second experiment, also created in PCIBex Farm and presented to a comparable sample of participants, it aims at verifying whether priming works also across different constructions (e.g. can a DAT-NOM argument structure be obtained when an ACC-NOM argument structure has been provided as priming?), what would bring more clarity to the discussion on the locus of priming: thematic roles or event structure (Pappert & Pechmann 2014, Ziegler et al. 2018). The preliminary results of the psycholinguistic experiments show that some of the selected predicates have indeed a strong preference for one argument structure over the other. With respect to the influence of structural priming on the choice of the argument structure, the preliminary results confirm that speakers tend to reuse the primed argument structure from the preceding context but they do that to a lesser extent in contexts where verb bias is present.

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