Variation and change in constructional semantics: The Dutch ditransitive

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One of the basic tenets of construction grammatical approaches to language is that schematic grammatical constructions such as the ditransitive [Sbj [V Obj Obj]] argument structure construction are not fundamentally different from lexical items, since both must be considered as stored pairings of a certain form with a certain meaning. Since the semantic properties of lexical items are known to be subject to intralingual variation and change, it follows from the above that the same will apply to the semantic properties of schematic grammatical constructions. However, while a lot of work in Construction Grammar has been concerned with the elucidation of the semantics of grammatical constructions at the level of the synchronic standard language, much less energy has been devoted to the investigation of patterns of language-internal variation and change in constructional semantics.

The present paper addresses this issue through an exploration of the semantic range of the ditransitive construction, illustrated in (1), at several stages in the history of the Dutch language and in several regional varieties of the present-day language. Along the lines of Goldberg’s (1995) analysis of the equivalent English construction, the Dutch ditransitive can be analysed as a polysemous category built around a semantic core ‘Agent successfully causes Recipient to receive Patient’, with the first three verbs in (1) instantiating this core sense and verbs such as aanbieden ‘offer’, beloven ‘promise’ and weigeren ‘refuse’ representing various sense extensions (see Geeraerts 1998 for an overview of the semantic possibilities in present-day standard Dutch).

(1) Jan heeft zijn broer een boek gegeven/overhandigd/aangeboden/beloofd/geweigerd/ ….

‘John has given/handed/offered/promised/refused… his brother a book.’

On the basis of data from a diachronic corpus of 17th- to early 20th-Century Dutch, we shall illustrate a number of now obsolete subsenses of the Dutch ditransitive and document their demise. Examples of uses which have either completely disappeared from the grammar since the Early Modern Dutch period or which have been marginalized include the use of the ditransitive construction with verbs of dispossession such as roven ‘rob’ and stelen ‘steal’, the use of the ditransitive to encode events of benefaction which do or do not involve a subevent of reception (e.g. iemand een taart bakken ‘to bake s.o. a cake’, iemand de deur openen ‘to open s.o. the door’), and the use of the construction with attitudinal verbs such as benijden ‘envy’, prijzen ‘praise’ and vergeven ‘forgive’. Such shifts suggest that the semantic range of the Dutch ditransitive has decreased considerably over the last three to four centuries (consistent with Barðdal’s 2007 findings for the ditransive in Scandinavian languages). In addition, it will be shown that there is also regional variation. The benefactive ditransitive, for instance, which has all but disappeared from the grammar of standard Netherlandic Dutch, is still fairly productive in Belgian Dutch and in local dialects from the eastern provinces of The Netherlands. Ongoing shifts in constructional semantics can therefore be seen to have progressed further in some (regional) varieties than in others.