

Empirical studies on syntactic alternation across languages and theoretical frameworks (ESoSA)

Convenors: Yanis Da Cunha (University of Graz), Pegah Faghiri (University of Amsterdam) and Juliette Thuilier (Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès).

Keywords: syntactic alternation, empirical methods, under-studied languages, corpora, experimental methods

Abstract submission: Please send a title and a short abstract (300 words) no later than November 10th 2024, to yanis.da-cunha@uni-graz.at, p.faghiri@uva.nl and juliette.thuilier@univ-tlse2.fr

Twenty years ago, Bresnan and her colleagues introduced a new dynamic in the study of syntactic alternation: using quantitative data drawn from systematic corpus and experimental studies, they showed that the English dative alternation obeys multifactorial and probabilistic constraints and called into question hitherto accepted introspective descriptions as well as categorical models of grammatical competence (Bresnan 2007, Bresnan et al. 2007). Many studies have followed in this new path: genitive and particle placement alternations (Szmrecsanyi et al. 2016), active/passive alternation (e.g., Hundt et al., 2018), word order alternations more broadly (e.g., Thuilier 2012, Faghiri 2016) as well as various other phenomena in a wide array of languages (e.g., McDonnell 2016, Riesberg et al. 2022, Gregersen 2023, Walker et al. 2023). At twenty years of research, we may well ask to what extent have we succeeded in gaining a better understanding of syntactic alternation and if we have reached a common ground for defining syntactic alternation across languages. In a recent special issue of *Linguistics Vanguard* “What are alternations and how should we study them?”, Pijpops and colleagues aimed at tackling the question of how to define “alternation” and put together a collection of usage-based studies from “alternation researchers” with various backgrounds. In their introduction, the authors observe that in the paradigm of alternation studies, researchers’ theoretical background affects the results; it determines not only how alternation is understood, but also how the study is executed (Pijpops et al. 2024: 3). Following in their footsteps, our aim is to contribute to this research paradigm by targeting research on related phenomena not initially framed in terms of syntactic alternation and/or in a usage-based framework.

The study of syntactic alternation is traditionally in line with the variationist approach, which aims to study how speakers use “alternate ways of saying ‘the same thing’” (Labov 1972: 188). While rephrasing or paraphrasing intuitively amounts to saying the same thing in a different way, many studies argued that there is never perfect synonymy between two forms (cf. near-synonymy in the lexicon, Edmonds & Hirst, 2002), and therefore the question whether syntactic structures compete to express the same meaning, or rather represent sets of partially overlapping uses remains open. While dative alternation is the prototypical case of alternation between two structures, and has been studied many times, many other cases are less easy to characterize.

On the one hand, languages often have families of constructions to express the same meaning, while each construction can also further specialize in other uses. For example, while the thematization of the P argument can involve several constructions in many languages, studies of the active/passive alternation generally consider only one as *the* passive construction (e.g. Da Cunha & Abeillé 2022). On the other hand, some phenomena that are not classically described in terms of alternation can also be treated as such. The bi-absolutive constructions in Nakh-Daghestanian (Forker 2012) languages is an illustrative example. In Chechen, for instance, while the basic transitive case frame is ergative-absolutive, in some contexts the A argument may remain unmarked, yielding an absolutive-absolutive – or bi-absolutive – construction. Molochieva

et al. (2022) investigate the conditioning factors for this construction in terms of an argument-marking alternation using a quantitative approach.

The continuously growing availability of large syntactically annotated corpora, and the development of statistical approaches have allowed us to process bigger and more naturalistic linguistic data. However, we may wonder whether this methodological progress has not led to a disconnect between qualitative and quantitative approaches. We also need to consider the challenges the quantitative standard presents for the research on under-resourced languages, constrained by the lack of access to the field and/or availability of corpora. It is therefore interesting to see how quantitative and qualitative data can be reconciled in order to provide finer-grain accounts of alternation both within and across languages and language varieties.

As far as experimental methods are concerned, the use of comprehension paradigms (acceptability judgments, reading times) and production paradigms (completion, sentence recall) may provide diverging results (e.g., MacDonald 2013). In the same way, corpus and experimental data may lead to different results (Flach 2020). These findings highlight methodological limitations of our understanding of alternation and call for a careful consideration of data collection paradigms.

Going back to Bresnan, it is notable that the empirical study of syntactic alternation challenged many theoretical hypotheses, such as the *NP Pro constraint on dative alternation (Erteschik-Shir 1979: 452) or the Affectedness Constraint on genitive alternation (Taylor 1989). But it also spurred new theoretical frameworks and new hypotheses: gradient approaches to grammar (Bresnan & Hay 2008, Bresnan & Nikitina 2008) or stochastic grammars (Bresnan et al. 2001). The identification of factors underlying alternations has also become a proper line of research benefiting other fields of linguistic research (Bresnan & Aissen 2002), for example, by informing debates on the existence of universal referential prominence hierarchies (Haspelmath 2020). In turn, linguistic theories can approach competition between constructions from different perspectives. For example, in Construction Grammar the notion of competition is challenged by studies arguing that there always exist some (fine) semantic distinctions between constructions (e.g., Stefanowitsch 2003, Pijpops et al. 2024). The empirical study of syntactic alternation thus contributes to theoretical linguistics also by improving the empirical foundations of theoretical claims when facing alternative hypotheses.

With this workshop we aim to broaden the empirical basis of studies on syntactic alternation by bringing together researchers from different theoretical frameworks working on syntactic alternations in different languages and/or using a variety of methods. We are particularly interested in:

- **studies investigating alternation phenomena never addressed as such,**
- **studies of syntactic alternations in understudied or low-resource languages,**
- **studies exploring complex cases, e.g. involving more than two competing constructions and/or constructions with partially overlapping uses,**
- **studies exploring new methods, either quantitative or qualitative, or a combination of methods with consistent or divergent results,**
- **theoretical studies using empirical arguments to support or disprove a given theoretical hypothesis,**
- **studies with (theoretical) contributions to other fields of research (e.g. psycholinguistics, language evolution, language acquisition, sociolinguistics).**

- Bresnan, J. (2007). Is syntactic knowledge probabilistic? Experiments with the English dative alternation. *Roots: Linguistics in search of its evidential base*, 96, 77-96.
- Bresnan, J., & Aissen, J. (2002). Optimality and Functionality: Objections and Refutations. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory*, 20(1), 81-95.
- Bresnan, J., Dingare, S., & Manning, C. D. (2001). Soft constraints mirror hard constraints: Voice and person in English and Lummi. In M. Butt & T. Holloway King (Eds.), *Proceedings of the LFG01 Conference* (p. 13-32). Stanford: CSLI Publications.
- Bresnan, J., Cueni, A., Nikitina, T., & Baayen, R. H. (2007). Predicting the dative alternation. In G. Boume, I. Kraemer, & J. Zwarts (Eds.), *Cognitive foundations of interpretation* (p. 69-94). Royal Netherlands Academy of Science.
- Bresnan, J., & Hay, J. (2008). Gradient grammar: An effect of animacy on the syntax of give in New Zealand and American English. *Lingua*, 118(2), 245-259.
- Bresnan, J., & Nikitina, T. (2008). The gradience of the dative alternation. *Reality exploration and discovery: Pattern interaction in language and life*, pp. 161-184.
- Da Cunha, Y., & Abeillé, A. (2022). L'alternance actif/passif en français parlé : Un modèle statistique. *Langue française*, 216(4), 63-80. <https://doi.org/10.3917/lf.216.0063>
- Edmonds, P., & Hirst, G. (2002). Near-synonymy and lexical choice. *Computational linguistics*, 28(2), 105-144.
- Ertescik-Shir, N. (1979). Discourse constraints on dative movement. In *Discourse and syntax* (pp. 441-467). Brill.
- Faghiri, P. (2016). La variation de l'ordre des constituants dans le domaine préverbal en persan : approche empirique. [PhD Thesis, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle]. <https://theses.hal.science/tel-01429416/>
- Flach, S. (2020). Schemas and the frequency/acceptability mismatch: Corpus distribution predicts sentence judgments. *Cognitive Linguistics*, 31(4), 609-645. <https://doi.org/10.1515/cog-2020-2040>
- Forker, D. (2012). The bi-absolute construction in Nakh-Daghestanian. *Folia Linguistica* 46(1). 75–108. <https://doi.org/10.1515/flin.2012.3>
- Gregersen, S. (2023). Restrictions on past-tense passives in Late Modern Danish. *Open Linguistics*, 9(1), 20220196. <https://doi.org/10.1515/opli-2022-0196>
- Haspelmath, M. (2020). Role-reference associations and the explanation of argument coding splits. *Linguistics*, 59(1), 45. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ling-2020-0252>
- Hundt, M., Röthlisberger, M., & Seoane, E. (2018). Predicting voice alternation across academic Englishes. *Corpus Linguistics and Linguistic Theory*, 17(1), 189-222.
- MacDonald, M. C. (2013). How language production shapes language form and comprehension. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00226>
- McDonnell, B. (2016). Symmetrical voice constructions in Besemah: A usage-based approach. [PhD Thesis, University of California Santa Barbara].
- Molochieva, Z., Faghiri, P., & Van Lier, E. (2022). Bi-absolute constructions in Chechen. *Folia Linguistica*, 56(2), 325-349. <https://doi.org/10.1515/flin-2022-2036>
- Pijpops, D., Karlien, F., Speelman, D., & Van de Velde, F. (2024). Introduction: what are alternations and how should we study them? *Linguistics Vanguard*, 10(1), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1515/lingvan-2023-0165>
- Riesberg, S., Bardají i Farré, M., Malcher, K. & Himmelmann, N.P. (2022). Predicting voice choice in symmetrical voice languages: All the things that do not work in Totoli. *Studies in Language* 46(2), 453–516. <https://doi.org/10.1075/sl.20061.rie>
- Stefanowitsch, A. (2003). Constructional semantics as a limit to grammatical alternation: The two genitives of English. *Topics in English Linguistics*, 43, 413-444.
- Szmrecsanyi, B., Grafmiller, J., Heller, B., & Röthlisberger, M. (2016). Around the world in three alternations : Modeling syntactic variation in global varieties of English. *English World-Wide*, 37(2), 109-137. <https://doi.org/10.1075/eww.37.2.01szm>
- Taylor, J. (1989). Possessive genitives in English. *Linguistics* 27: 663–686.
- Thuilier, J. (2012). Contraintes préférentielles et ordre des mots en français [PhD Thesis, Université Paris-Diderot]. <https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-00781228>
- Walker, K., Faghiri, P. & Van Lier, E. (2023). Differential argument indexing in Kamang. *Studies in Language*. <https://doi.org/10.1075/sl.21077.wal>