

# ‘Give it him and then I’ll give you money for it’. The dative alternation in Contemporary British English

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**Abstract** – ‘Dative alternation’ refers to a linguistic phenomenon related to ditransitive verbs, that is, verbs which take a subject and two objects referring to a theme and a recipient. In English, the phenomenon offers the possibility of alternation between a prepositional object construction (PREP), where the recipient is encoded as a prepositional phrase (*give it to him*), a double object construction (DOC), where the recipient precedes the theme (*give him it*) and an alternative double object construction (altDOC), where the theme takes precedence over the recipient (*give it him*), the latter constrained to dialectal usage. Even though this alternation has been extensively addressed in the literature, few studies have considered language-external factors in determining the choice of encoding. This paper analyses the distribution of ditransitive forms in competition in contemporary British English from a twofold perspective, shedding some light on the distribution of these variants across time, along with the study of PREP, DOC and altDOC in relation to their sociolinguistic dimension. The corpus used as source of evidence is the *British National Corpus*, a 100-million-word collection of both written and spoken language from a wide range of sources.

**Keywords** – dative alternation, ditransitives, corpus, frequency, British English, sociolinguistics

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept ‘dative alternation’ denotes a linguistic phenomenon related to ditransitive verbs, consisting of “a verb denoting transfer of an entity or theme (T[H]) from an agent (A) to a recipient (R[EC])” (Haspelmath 2015: 26). In English, the phenomenon offers the possibility of the alternation between a prepositional object construction (PREP), where the recipient is encoded as a prepositional phrase, as in (1), and a double object construction (DOC), where the recipient precedes the theme, as in (2).

- (1) She [gave [TH the ball] [REC to her]]
- (2) She [gave [REC her] [TH the ball]]

In addition, the double object construction comes in two different types if non-standard varieties of English are considered: the canonical double object construction (DOC) and an alternative double object construction (altDOC), where the theme takes precedence over the recipient, as in (3) (see Gast 2007: 31).

- (3) [Give [TH it] [REC John!]]



The phenomenon dates back to the late Old English period and, since then, it has experienced transformations in its use and distribution in the history of English. On the one hand, altDOC stands out as the historical remnant through which the other types of constructions developed, being the only available form in the Old English period. In Middle English, this type of construction slightly decreased in frequency and is sporadically found at the end of the period.<sup>1</sup> In the early Modern period, the construction gains some ground, but it eventually dies out at the beginning of the twentieth century becoming “virtually non-existent in the decades beginning with the 1940s” (Gerwin 2014: 168). DOC, on the other hand, “may have developed as a new variant at some point [...], though there is some evidence that it is a continuation of a (rare) option in Old English” (Koopman and van der Wurff 2000: 265). Notwithstanding this, some authors state that in Old English the DO used to appear after the IO, at least with a pronoun-noun order (Fischer 2000: 381; see also Fries 1940: 202, quoted in Fischer 2000: 381). According to Gast (2007: 51),

there is good evidence that REC-TH order may have been established (at least in some varieties) before the Middle English period [...]. In Old Norse, both REC-TH and TH-REC order are attested (for example see Faarlund 2005: 134, 141–142), but in modern Scandinavian languages REC-TH is the order generally used with all combinations of objects (nominal and pronominal) [...]. Given that Modern Scandinavian languages uniformly have REC-TH order, it seems feasible that this was also the preferred order of Old Norse [...]. In this case, the REC-TH construction may have been established before the Norman Conquest, i.e. before the emergence of Middle English, since the Danish settlements in the north-west date back to the late 8<sup>th</sup> century.

In addition to this, DOC is also said to be remarkably frequent in Old English with verbs whose meanings inherently denote change of possession, as in (4).<sup>2</sup>

- (4) *Pa geaf se cyng his sunu þone earldom on Norðfolc & Suðfolc*  
 ‘Then gave the king his son the earldom in Norfolk and Suffolk’  
 (ChronE 1075/4; Sówka-Pietraszewska 2012)

This construction decreases in Middle English as a consequence of the loss of inflections in early Middle English, “with the result that the dative [case] lost most of its functions” (Fischer 2000: 379). Therefore, except for the cases in which the dative could maintain its function as indirect object, the old dative was replaced by a prepositional phrase or it remained and changed syntactically into a direct object. Despite this, DOC increases in frequency in early and late Modern English, hence becoming the predominant variant in this period.

Finally, PREP appears gradually in late Old English/early Middle English (Fischer 2000: 379). Although DOC predominates over PREP, there is a number of cases in which the prepositional variant is used, as in (5).

- (5) *He sende ða sona syððan to þam cyninge beotlic ærende.*  
 ‘He then soon afterwards sent a threatening message to the king’  
 (Ælfric: Ælfric’s Lives of Saints; Sówka-Pietraszewska 2012)

According to Fischer (2000: 380), this type of structure is used more often in the following contexts: (i) when the object of the verb is animate; (ii) when the indirect object is a noun rather than a pronoun; (iii) after the verb *secgan* (‘to say’), presumably on analogy of *cweþan* (‘to speak to’), which was followed by *to* + NP in Old English; (iv) when it is removed from the verb; and (v) after Latinate verbs (typically borrowed from French).<sup>3</sup> In the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries, the frequency of PREP increased, not only with verbs of movement, but also with verbs expressing a change of possession (see McFadden 2002), thus favouring the emergence of the dative alternation in English. In the following centuries, PREP becomes the preferred ditransitive variant with the verb type *give* in combination with recipient *me* and theme *it* (Gerwin 2014: 168).

In present-day English, DOC predominates over the other patterns, particularly in the north, when the recipient is a pronoun in the first person, and after the verb *tell*. PREP becomes the predominant variant in the south, especially with third person pronouns in combination with the verb *sell* (Gerwin 2014: 198–199). AltDOC, in turn, is the least frequent ditransitive construction in standard British English, “typically found in (north) western varieties of British English when both objects are pronominal” (Gast 2007: 31).

<sup>1</sup> Koopman and van der Wurff (2000: 265) state that “the DO-IO pattern [altDOC] remains stable in cases where both objects are pronouns”.

<sup>2</sup> Koopman (1993: 112) notes that the DO-IO pattern is equally common as the IO-DO pattern.

<sup>3</sup> Further on time, most Latinate verbs, with the exception of verbs with one metrical foot, such as *offer* or *promise* (see Krifka 2004), can be found in present-day English with prepositional object constructions.

The present paper therefore analyses the phenomenon in contemporary British English, paying attention to the rise and fall of the prepositional object construction (PREP), the double object construction (DOC) and the alternative double object construction (altDOC) in relation to a number of language-internal and language-external factors.

## 2. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON THE ALTERNATION

A study on the dative alternation must be preceded by a classification of dative verbs appearing in ditransitive constructions. As stated by Levin (1993: 45–47), three types of classifications are distinguished: (i) verbs that can only occur in double constructions, as in (6); (ii) verbs appearing uniquely in prepositional object constructions, as in (7); and (iii) verbs admitting both double object constructions and prepositional object constructions, as in (8).<sup>4</sup>

- (6) a. The bank *denied* me the credit.
- b. \*The bank *denied* the credit to me.
- (7) a. Troubadours *recited* poems and songs to the audience.
- b. \*Troubadours *recited* the audience poems and songs.
- (8) a. Harry has *lent* some money to me.
- b. Harry has *lent* me some money.

Considering the core meanings of these dative verbs that allow for the occurrence of DOC and PREP (see Levin 1993: 45), a semantic distinction between core dative and non-core dative verbs is required. According to Levin (2008: 3), a number of these dative verbs intrinsically lexicalize causing a change of possession, i.e. they lexically select a recipient, and some others do not lexicalize possession, many of which are said to lexically select a spatial goal.

- (9) a. The boy *gave* an apple to the girl.
- b. The boy *gave* the girl an apple.
- (10) a. The banker *loans* some money to the family.
- b. The banker *loans* the family some money.
- (11) a. Lawrence *threw* the keys to David.
- b. Lawrence *threw* David the keys.
- (12) a. My boss has *sent* a message to me.
- b. My boss has *sent* me a message.

Examples (9) and (10) express a change of possession in which an agent (*the boy/the banker*) performs an action (to *give/to loan*) making the recipient (*the girl/the family*) possess a theme (*an apple/some money*), whereas the (a) sentences in (11) and (12) express caused motion where the agent (*Lawrence/my boss*) performs the action (to *throw/to send*) making the theme (*the keys/a message*) move to a goal (to *David/to me*). The (b) sentences, in turn, can likewise specify caused possession, even though the verbs in (11) and (12) belong to the category of non-core dative verbs, which leads us to assume that the use of a certain kind of construction may modify the meaning of these verbs. As a consequence, two dominant classes of analyses emerge: (i) a uniform multiple meaning approach, where the meaning of PREP and DOC is non-derivational, that is, their meanings are connected but different; and (ii) a single meaning or verb-sensitive approach, according to which PREP and DOC have the same meaning (Rappaport-Hovav and Levin 2008: 130; see also Krifka 2004: 3–5).

According to the uniform multiple meaning approach, whilst PREP expresses caused motion in which the doer of an action makes a theme to move to a spatial goal, DOC expresses caused possession, causing a recipient to possess an entity with the notion of possession construed broadly (Rappaport-Hovav and Levin 2008: 130). Table 1 summarizes the uniform multiple meaning approach.

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<sup>4</sup> Despite this, Gerwin (2014: 34) states that “actual language data show that verbs cannot be categorised into alternating, PREP or DOC-only verbs in a principled fashion. Instead, it makes more sense to speak of the *probability* rather than the *possibility* of verbs occurring in one or both of the constructions” (see Bresnan and Nikitina 2003, 2008; Bresnan 2007; Bresnan et al. 2007).

DATIVE VERBS	PREP	DOC
	Caused motion	Caused possession

Table 1: Summary of the uniform multiple meaning approach (from Rappaport-Hovav and Levin 2008: 132)

The single meaning approach (also known as verb-sensitive approach), on the other hand, states that PREP and DOC denote the same meaning, but they are different on the surface because of the distribution and realization of arguments (see Jackendoff 1990; Rappaport-Hovav and Levin 2008). Verbs like *give*, *sell* or *loan* (i.e. *give*-type verbs) express caused possession either in PREP, as in (13), or in DOC, as in (14). *Throw*-type verbs, in turn, express caused possession or caused motion in PREP, as in (15), and only caused possession in DOC, as in (16).

- (13) The French Prime Minister *gave* a medal to the runner.  
 (14) The French Prime Minister *gave* the runner a medal.  
 (15) Cupid *throws* arrows to the couple.  
 (16) Cupid *throws* the couple arrows.

Table 2 summarizes the associations between various types of alternating verbs and the meaning that the constructions provide according to the verb-sensitive approach.

	PREP	DOC
<i>Give</i> -type verbs	Caused possession	Caused possession
<i>Throw</i> -type verbs	Caused motion or possession	Caused possession
<i>Send</i> -type verbs	Caused motion or possession	Caused possession

Table 2: Summary of the verb-sensitive approach (from Levin 2008: 3)<sup>5</sup>

Together with the previous approaches, information structure is also treated as a broad strategy to explain the motivation of the alternation in English. This concept, which helps understand why speakers produce sentences in many different ways, refers to the organization of information presented in words and structures that compose sentences and utterances. It has a strong influence on how people mention new entities in a discourse, on how they refer back to already mentioned entities and also on the guidelines that the speaker follows when selecting between nouns, pronouns and other referring expressions (Arnold et al. 2013: 40). Information structure emerges, according to Arnold et al. (2013: 404), from two broad schemes of word order variation: (i) a first scheme reflecting a distinction between information that is previously known and information that is new and (ii) a second scheme dealing with the differentiation between the information that is assumed and the information that is highlighted or focused. This word order variation extends to many linguistic phenomena that are sensitive to informational considerations, among which the dative alternation can be found. First, the alternation between PREP and DOC “allows for a shift of focused or heavy constituents to the right, thus satisfying a universal, functionally motivated tendency for such constituents” (Krifka 2004: 5). Consider, for instance, examples (17) and (18) taken from Krifka (2004: 5–6):

- (17) a. He gave the book to Beth. [preferred]  
 b. He gave Beth the book.  
 (18) a. Chris gave Terry a bowl of Mom’s traditional cranberry sauce. [preferred]  
 b. Chris gave a bowl of Mom’s traditional cranberry sauce to Terry.

Since “English, like most other languages (see in particular Hawkins 1994 [2004]), exhibits a preference for linearizing light constituents before heavy ones” (Siewierska and Hollmann 2007: 84),<sup>6</sup> PREP is preferred with heavy recipients, as in (17), whilst DOC is preferred when the theme is syntactically heavier than the recipient, as in (18) (see Gast 2007: 33).

Second, the dative alternation responds to a given-before-new inclination, by which constituents that are either more topical or relevant tend to come before less topical ones. That is, “prepositional datives are

<sup>5</sup> *Send*-type verbs have been added to this table as their roots are associated with the expression of movement and, consequently, lexicalize caused motion, as well as with the caused possession event type because verbs may be integrated into event types via force dynamic relation (see Levin 2008: 13).

<sup>6</sup> This principle is also known as the principle of end-weight (see Wasow 1997, quoted in Gerwin 2014: 48; Biber et al. 1999; Gast 2007).

preferred when themes are more topical than recipients, while double objects are preferred when recipients are more topical than themes” (Lacerda 2017: 388).

Both the uniform multiple meaning and the single meaning approach are compatible with the view of information structure. In the case of the uniform multiple meaning approach, the presentation of information may affect the selection between two constructions that are different in terms of their meaning because, according to Krifka (2004: 27),

the two constructions, even though they differ in their semantic form, can have identical or near-identical truth conditions. This is quite obvious with verbs that truth functionally are indeed identical in the [double object] and [the prepositional object] frame, most prominently *give*.

Consider the examples in (19) and (20):

- (19) a. Manfred has given a very special gift to his father in law.  
       b. Manfred has given his father in law a very special gift.  
 (20) a. Our ancestors give all their positive energies to us.  
       b. Our ancestors give us all their positive energies.

As the sentences in (a) and (b) in (19) and (20) seem to be equivalent on semantic grounds, the alternation responds to the given-before-new inclination by which topical or relevant constituents are placed after the verb. For that reason, the recipients appear in post-verbal position in (a), whereas the themes occur in that position in (b).

According to the single meaning approach, the selection of PREP or DOC is easily carried out because if the meaning of the two constructions is the same, then information structure preferences may be the only factor in choosing one over the other construction (Krifka 2004: 6).

- (21) a. Mister Robinson paid the bill to the waiter.  
       b. Mister Robinson paid the waiter the bill.

As in (19) and (20) above, where the topical constituents appear after the verb, the shift also responds to a given-before-new preference in (21). Therefore, according to this preference, the theme (*the bill*) and the recipient (*the waiter*) appear in post-verbal positions in (21a) and (21b), respectively.

All this considered, the reasons why English has a dative alternation lie on the specific realization of arguments and the relatively fixed status of the language. As the English word order encodes argument realization and information structure, with heavy constituents appearing at the end of sentences, and with given information preceding new information, English needs two constructions: DOC, where the recipient goes before the theme, and PREP, where the theme precedes the recipient (Levin 2007: 8).<sup>7</sup>

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The corpus used as source of evidence is the *British National Corpus* (BNCweb CQP-edition),<sup>8</sup> containing collections of written and spoken language from a wide range of sources, such as regional or national newspapers, specialist periodicals or journals, academic books, school or university essays, popular fiction, published or unpublished letters and memoranda, and orthographic transcriptions of unscripted informal conversations, among other types of written and spoken texts. This corpus is designed to represent a wide –cross– section of British English from the latter part of the twentieth century, and it is encoded according to the *Guidelines of the Text Encoding Initiative* (TEI),<sup>9</sup> in which full contextual and bibliographical information is included, in order to represent both the output from CLAWS<sup>10</sup> (an automatic part-of-speech tagger developed at Lancaster University) and a variety of other structural properties of text. The corpus contains 100 million words distributed over 4,049 texts. Most of them (90 percent) are taken from written texts of many different types, whereas 10 percent are taken from transcribed speech, recorded in both formal

<sup>7</sup> AltDOC has not been examined in this section since little attention has been paid to this form in terms of meaning and information structure. The scarce number of studies on this variant are restricted to its dialectal usage (see Gast 2007; Siewierska and Hollmann 2007; Haddican 2010; Gerwin 2014).

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.helsinki.fi/varieng/CoRD/corpora/BNC>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.tei-c.org>

<sup>10</sup> CLAWS (Constituent-Likelihood Automatic Word-tagging System) “is a system for tagging English-language texts, that it, for assigning to each word in a text an unambiguous indication of the grammatical class to which this word belongs in this context” (Garside 1987: 30).

and informal contexts by volunteers selected from different age ranges, regions and social classes in a demographically balanced way. In addition, the corpus is divided into three major sub-periods (1960–1974, 1975–1984 and 1985–1993), thus becoming the appropriate input for a diachronic and a sociolinguistic study of the phenomenon in Contemporary British English.<sup>11</sup>

The retrieval of information has been carried out with different tags considering the forms of lexical verbs and the position of their constituents (PRO + PRO; PRO + NP; NP + PRO; NP + NP). Thus, the following commands have been employed: [\_VV\* \_PNP to \_PNP], [\_VV\* \_PNP to \_NN\*], [\_VV\* \_NN\* to \_PNP] and [\_VV\* \_NN\* to \_NN\*] for PREP; and [\_VV\* \_PNP \_PNP], [\_VV\* \_PNP \_PNP], [\_VV\* \_NN\* \_PNP] and [\_VV\* \_NN\* \_NN\*] for DOC and altDOC.<sup>12</sup> Different tags were required to account for the distinct forms and tenses of lexical verbs in PREP and (alt)DOC (\_VVB for their base form, \_VVD for their past tense, \_VVN for their past participle and \_VVG for their *-ing* participle) and the different types of determiners and nouns (\_AT0 for articles, \_DT0 for general determiners, \_DPS for possessive determiners, \_NP for proper nouns and \_NN for common nouns). The results required disambiguation to disregard the instances beyond the scope of the present research, such as the following: (i) those in which the lexical verbs (in their different forms and tenses) do not belong to any of those classified as ‘dative verbs’,<sup>13</sup> as in (22); (ii) those that do not follow the patterns [DO + *to* IO] for PREP, [IO + DO] for DOC and [DO + IO] for altDOC, as in (23); and (iii) those erroneously tagged, as in (24).

(22) ‘We *seek a solution to the dispute* which has divided Cyprus since 1974.’ [BNC AM8\_162].

(23) ‘When you *send a reporter to a festival*, why don’t you send one who knows a little about it?’ [BNC CD5\_20].

(24) ‘They *give me me money* back, cos they’d already give him back his, you see’ [BNC H56\_930].<sup>14</sup>

All in all, the final database of examples was reduced to 17,620 instances,<sup>15</sup> of which 89 appear with altDOC, 3,610 are encoded as PREP and the remaining 13,921 as DOC, the latter standing out as the predominant variant in Contemporary British English, thus coinciding with the previous accounts of the phenomenon in British English which state that “the double object construction constitutes the majority pattern across the centuries” (Gerwin 2014: 164).

#### 4. ANALYSIS

##### 4.1. Diachronic evolution of the variants

Table 3 presents the chronological distribution of ditransitive constructions in the three different periods of the BNC.

	altDOC	DOC	PREP
1960–1974	11.63	2,589.54	686.66
1975–1984	12.68	1,206.96	304.38
1985–1993	8.99	1,421.02	363.22

Table 3: Distribution of ditransitive constructions in the BNC, 1960–1993 (n.f.)

On the one hand, both PREP and DOC occur more frequently in the period 1960–1974 with a rate of 50.70 percent and 49.63 percent, whereas altDOC is the least frequent ditransitive construction with an occurrence of 34.93 percent. The period 1975–1984, in turn, shows a substantial decrease in the use of the predominant forms. PREP and DOC are found to have an occurrence of 22.47 percent and 3.13 percent, respectively.

<sup>11</sup> The number of tokens of the different periods of the corpus can be viewed in <http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/docs/URG/BNCdes.html#BNCcompo>. The figures have been normalized up to 10 million words.

<sup>12</sup> The same queries have been employed for DOC and altDOC given that both variants present a lexical verb (in its different forms) followed by two objects without a *to*-preposition.

<sup>13</sup> See Levin (2008) for further information on dative verbs.

<sup>14</sup> Example (24) will not be removed from the analysis as it presents a lexical verb that can occur in both PREP and DOC, followed by the combination of an indirect object (*me*) and a direct object (*me money*). Nevertheless, it appears as an ambiguous instance, given that the expected result was a double object construction with two pronominal objects, and the corpus provided an example in which the pronominal IO was followed by a nominal DO introduced by the possessive determiner *my* (*me*).

<sup>15</sup> Of these 3,152 examples have been used for the sociolinguistic study of the variants, given that the social class of informants is exclusively provided in the spoken component of the corpus.

Contrariwise, altDOC rises with a rate of 38.07 percent. Finally, the period 1985–1993 confirms a slight increase of the standard variants, in which PREP and DOC amount to 26.82 percent and 27.23 percent, respectively. The increase of these forms coincides with an important decrease in the use of altDOC, with an occurrence of 26.99 percent.

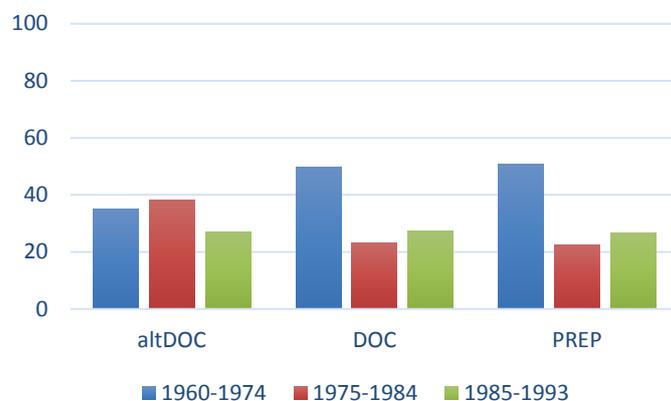


Figure 1: Distribution of ditransitive variants in the BNC, 1960–1993 (%)

As observed, the two canonical ditransitive constructions sharply decrease from the first to the last sub-period, whilst the alternative form increases slightly. Interestingly enough, this distribution may be the result of an erratic development of these three structures in competition in the previous stages of the history of English. For instance, data from the ARCHER corpus<sup>16</sup> not only reveal a significant increase of the variants in late Modern English, but they also display a reversal of the trend in the twentieth century (see Wolk et al. 2013: 393; Gerwin 2014: 144).

#### 4.2. The phenomenon across speech and writing

The phenomenon has been investigated across speech and writing in the light of the textual classification of the material in the BNC. As already pointed out, the corpus contains material from written books and periodicals (books, newspapers, magazines, biographies), written miscellaneous (brochures, leaflets, manuals, advertisements, letters, memos, reports, minutes, essays) and written-to-be-spoken texts (scripted television material, play scripts). Spoken texts, in turn, display spoken demographic, containing transcriptions of spontaneous conversations produced by members of the public, and spoken context-governed texts, consisting of transcriptions of recordings collected in different contexts, spanning from formal business or government meetings to radio shows and phone-ins.<sup>17</sup>

As shown in Table 4, the three variants are more prone to occur in the spoken domain, thereby presenting the alternation as typical of informal contexts, since spoken language is considered as representative of less formal registers (see Gerwin 2014: 200). AltDOC occurs almost exclusively in the spoken domain (90.81 percent), being negligible in the written component of the corpus (9.18 percent). DOC is also observed to be the choice in spoken texts (65.73 percent), especially if compared with its occurrence in written texts (34.26 percent). PREP, on the other hand, seems to be the form with the highest relative frequency in written texts (40.85 percent), that is, speakers tend to produce PREP in writing more frequently, as compared with speech, than both double object constructions, thus suggesting that the prepositional form is more susceptible to appear in more formal contexts (as is typical of written language).

	altDOC	DOC	PREP
Written	4.66	1,289.87	350.41
Spoken	46.11	2,474.57	507.21

Table 4: Typology of texts in the BNC (n.f.)

As far as the written texts are concerned, PREP turns out to occur with the highest relative rate in written books and periodicals (48.69 percent), that is, in texts which are produced in a formal language style, which

<sup>16</sup> ARCHER (*A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers*) is a multi-genre corpus of British and American English covering the period 1600–1999. See <http://www.projects.alc.manchester.ac.uk/archer>.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/docs/URG>

indicates that this form is more likely to occur in a formal background, followed by written-to-be-spoken texts (27.87 percent) and written miscellaneous (23.42 percent). DOC, in turn, presents a more balanced distribution, as it is found to be frequent in written books and periodicals with 1,330.04 instances per 10 million words (38.69 percent) and in written-to-be-spoken texts with 1,235.70 examples per 10 million words (35.95 percent), while the remaining 871.29 instances per 10 million words (25.35 percent) appear in written miscellaneous. Finally, as shown in Table 5, altDOC is exclusively witnessed in written books and periodicals with 5.17 examples.

	altDOC	DOC	PREP
Written books and periodicals	5.17	1,330.04	368.88
Written-to-be-spoken	0	1,235.71	211.16
Written miscellaneous	0	871.29	177.48

Table 5: Ditransitive variants in written texts in the BNC (n.f.)

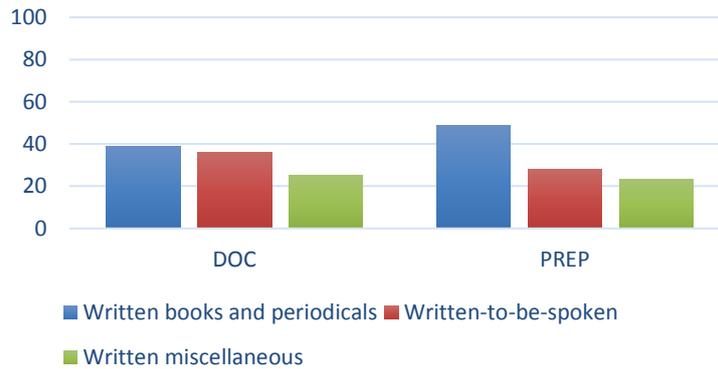


Figure 2: Ditransitive variants in written texts in the BNC (%)<sup>18</sup>

Figure 3 shows the distribution of ditransitive constructions according to the typology of the spoken text. Both altDOC and PREP are preferred in spoken conversations (spoken demographic texts) with an occurrence of 89.52 percent and 71.68 percent, suggesting that these forms are typical of spontaneous dialogues, rather than in other types of spoken materials (spoken context-governed texts), where these variants amount to 10.47 percent and 28.31 percent, respectively. DOC, in turn, presents the highest number of occurrences in the other types of spoken materials (39.62 percent), that is, in texts limited to a specific situation, such as business meetings or phone-in shows, despite still being more frequent in spoken demographic texts (60.37 percent).

	altDOC	DOC	PREP
Spoken demographic	96.83	3,108.20	791.22
Spoken context-governed	11.33	2,040.19	312.50

Table 6: Ditransitive variants in spoken texts in the BNC (n.f.)

<sup>18</sup> AltDOC has not been included in this figure as a consequence of the low number of occurrences of this structure in the written component of the BNC.

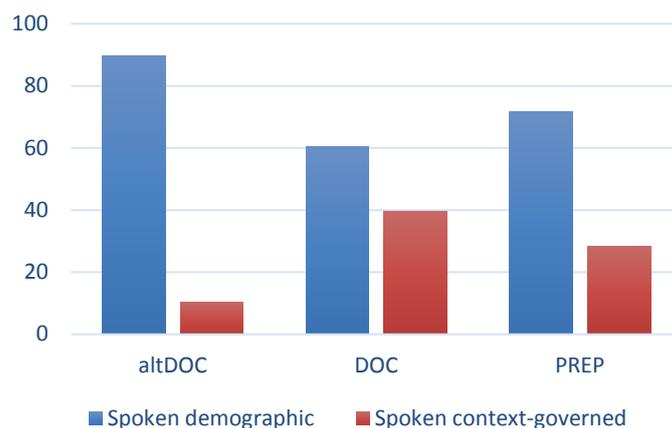


Figure 3: Ditransitive variants in spoken texts in the BNC (%)

#### 4.3. The typology of objects

According to Gast (2007: 36–37) and Gerwin (2014: 193–194), the type of object is observed to participate in the choice of a particular ditransitive construction. In the light of this, four different combinations of theme and recipient have been distinguished in the study:<sup>19</sup> (i) pronominal theme/pronominal recipient, as in (25); (ii) pronominal theme/nominal recipient, as in (26); (iii) nominal theme/pronominal recipient, as in (27); and (iv) nominal theme/nominal recipient, as in (28).

- (25) a. When *I gave it him* he spread it out on his desk [BNC H0D\_808]  
 b. He asked if Mum had *told me it...* [BNC FNW\_2027]  
 c. They *gave it to me* at the London gig as a present... [BNC C9M\_2342]
- (26) a. He had such a go at me for *showing it my mum* [BNC KCE\_3401]  
 b. I *give it to my husband* so that I can't sell it if money gets low [BNC C89\_292]<sup>20</sup>
- (27) a. Managed to let him know about our Social and *sold him a book* of Christmas Draw tickets [BNC GUR\_552]  
 b. Their chairman *sold the club to me* in our negotiations [BNC K4T\_9412]<sup>21</sup>
- (28) a. Karen *reported the thefts the police and the ranger* [BNC ADF\_1116]  
 b. He *gave Richard the land of Robert lord Hungerford* [BNC EEE\_46]  
 c. Jones *showed these data to Fleischmann and Pons* on 23 February [BNC CER\_1059]

As far as objects are concerned, DOC occurs most frequently with the combination of a nominal theme and a pronominal recipient (89.97 percent), whilst its use with the sequences ‘pronominal theme/pronominal recipient’ and ‘pronominal theme/nominal recipient’ is negligible (0.93 percent and 0.32 percent, respectively). Previous researches on ditransitives suggest that topicality or ‘topicworthiness’ may contain the ultimate explanation of this pattern in the canonical double object constructions. As stated by Haspelmath (2015: 27), “[t]he double-object construction tends to be used when the R[EC] is topical and referentially prominent”, that is, when the REC is short, animate and pronominal.<sup>22</sup> Bresnan et al. (2007: 89), in their analysis of the Switchboard corpus,<sup>23</sup> find that “[t]here are more double object constructions [...] because there are simply more recipient pronouns”. In addition, these results are corroborated by Gast (2007: 36), who also finds that DOC is frequently attested with the combination of a nominal theme and a pronominal recipient in Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield*.<sup>24</sup> PREP, in turn, does not seem to be favoured by any specific pattern. This construction is recurrently found with a nominal theme and a nominal recipient

<sup>19</sup> Note that the position of both theme and recipient varies depending on the type of construction used.

<sup>20</sup> Examples of the double object construction with the sequence ‘pronominal theme/nominal recipient’ have not been added here since the number of instances following this combination of constituents is almost non-existent in the BNC (0.32 percent) (see Bresnan and Nikitina (2008) for further discussion on the ‘NP-PRO constraint’).

<sup>21</sup> Examples of the alternative double object construction with the sequence ‘nominal theme/pronominal recipient’ have been omitted since no example of altDOC with this pattern has been found.

<sup>22</sup> According to Thompson (1990: 243), “[p]ronouns are more topicworthy than full noun phrases since they always refer to entities whose referents can be recovered or inferred from previous context or from the discourse setting”.

<sup>23</sup> The *Switchboard* corpus is a collection of about 2,400 two-sided telephone conversations among 543 speakers from all areas of the United States.

<sup>24</sup> Gast (2007: 36) makes use of evidence taken from this novel, “[g]iven that even the most comprehensive dialect corpora are not large enough to provide any statistically significant figures about the (pronominal) double object construction”.

(34.34 percent), whereas only a few examples of PREP are found in the sequence ‘nominal theme/pronominal recipient’ (8.14 percent). This distribution of the patterns may respond to syntactic complexity. In a recent publication Röthlisberger et al. (2017: 693), examine the phenomenon in nine postcolonial varieties of English by means of some multifactorial statistical approaches and datasets, and find that the complexity or length “increases the likelihood of [PREP] since the recipient increases in length in comparison to the theme” (see Thompson 1990: 246; Biber et al. 1999: 928), thereby corroborating the aforementioned results. Finally, altDOC favours the sequence of a pronominal theme and a pronominal recipient (76.4 percent), being also found with the pattern ‘pronominal theme/nominal recipient’, in spite of the lower incidence of this variant (20.22 percent). 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”. Therefore, the sequence ‘pronominal theme/pronominal recipient’ in altDOC is held to be historically conditioned. Furthermore, Gast (2007: 36), in his analysis of *David Copperfield*, likewise finds that only the alternative double object construction is used when both objects are pronominal, thus supporting the data retrieved in this section.

Figure 4 reproduces the distribution of PREP, DOC and altDOC according to the typology of objects.

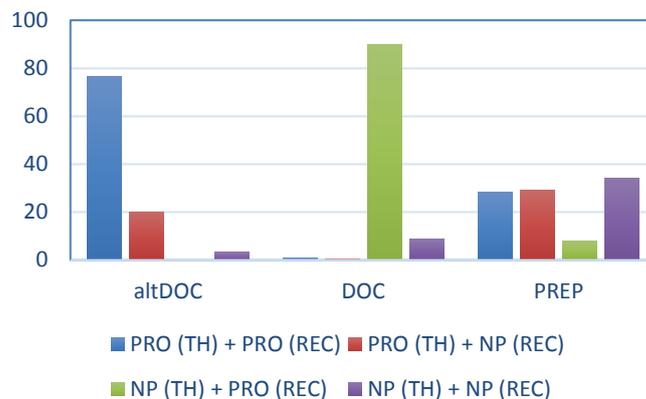


Figure 4: Combination of objects in the BNC (%)

#### 4.4. Sociolinguistic distribution of the variants

##### 4.4.1. Gender

Table 7 shows the distribution of ditransitive constructions according to the gender of informants. First, altDOC is favoured among male informants with 149.23 examples (63.75 percent), whereas the remaining 84.83 instances (36.24 percent) occur among female informants. In the same fashion, DOC is recurrent in male informants with 7,536.35 examples (65.86 percent), while 3,906.3 instances (34.13 percent) are produced by women. On the other hand, PREP is used with a more balanced distribution among male and female informants with 1,176.65 (54.41 percent) and 985.66 instances (45.58 percent), respectively.

	altDOC	DOC	PREP
Female	84.83	3,906.3	985.66
Male	149.23	7,536.35	1,176.65

Table 7: Gender in the BNC (n.f.)

As shown, the gender of speakers has no significant effect in the choice of a particular variant, given that men use the three structures more repeatedly than women. Therefore, gender has been confirmed as a non-relevant factor in this selection.

##### 4.4.2. Age

Table 8 presents the distribution of the phenomenon according to the age of speakers. DOC, on the one hand, is more widely distributed among informants below 14 years of age with 5,243.34 instances (19.82 percent) and among informants in-between 45–59 with 5,791.48 instances (21.9 percent), whereas altDOC is particularly attested in informants in-between 35–44, and 45-59, with 141.98 (26.62 percent) and 145.3 instances (27.24 percent), respectively. PREP, on the other hand, predominates in the younger group of informants, with 1,235.93 instances (22.37 percent).

	altDOC	DOC	PREP
0–14	37.45	5,243.34	1,235.93
15–24	60.11	3,050.98	796.56
25–34	70.27	4,333.4	901.81
35–44	141.98	4,176.75	769.09
45–59	145.3	5,791.48	913.35
60+	78.23	3,849.01	907.49

Table 8: Age of informants in the BNC (n.f.)

Both double object constructions, as observed in Figure 5, are more frequent among the older generation of informants, whilst PREP presents the highest relative frequency among informants belonging to the younger generation.<sup>25</sup> This widespread classification may be the consequence of the effects of the different social changes that occur when someone moves through its different life stages (see Eckert 1997).

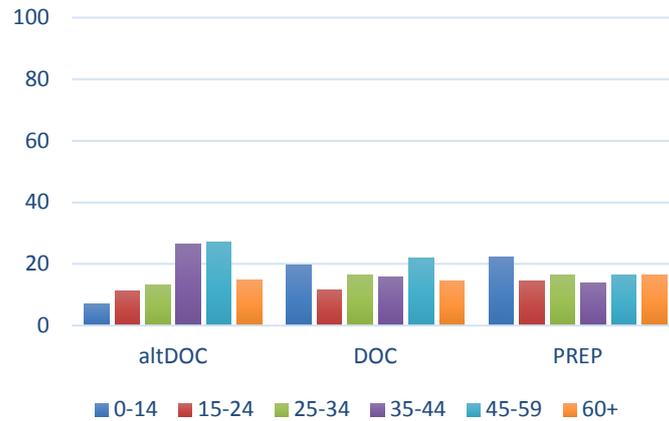


Figure 5: Age of informants in the BNC (%)

#### 4.4.3. Social class

Figure 6 shows the distribution of ditransitive constructions according to the social class of the informants. AltDOC is more widely attested in informants belonging to the lowest social class (DE) with 253.44 instances (54.25 percent), thus evincing a connection between this non-standard option and speakers with a low level of education. DOC, in turn, is favoured among informants from the DE group with 3,579.84 examples (28.82 percent), although this variant can also be witnessed among informants belonging to the AB group (top or middle management, administrative or professional informants) with 3,110.12 results (25.03 percent). This balanced distribution may be due to the predominance of DOC in present-day British English. Since this variant appears as the preferred option in all the contexts considered, it is more probable to find it among informants from different social groups. Finally, PREP is more likely to appear among DE informants, followed by those belonging to the C2 social group (skilled informants), with 818.15 instances (25.26 percent).

	altDOC	DOC	PREP
AB	58.26	3,110.12	815.77
C1	54.33	2,780.09	670.12
C2	101.12	2,950.88	818.15
DE	253.44	3,579.84	934.56

Table 9: Social class of informants in the BNC (n.f.)

<sup>25</sup> Note that DOC is also recurrent in informants below 14 years of age. However, the quantitative difference between the aforesaid groups of informants is not as evident as in PREP.

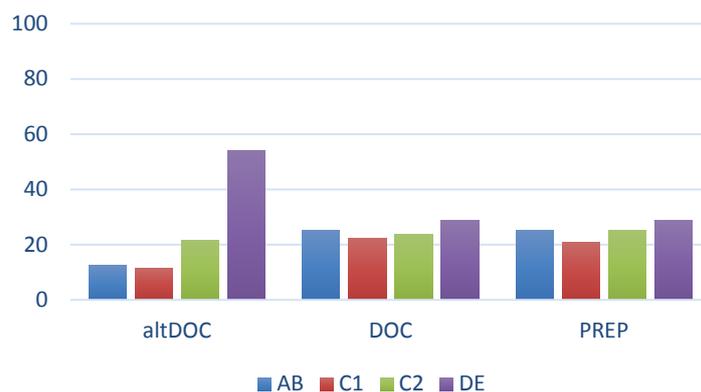


Figure 6: Social class of informants in the BNC (%)

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

This study has examined the use and development of the dative alternation in Contemporary British English both from a diachronic and a sociolinguistic point of view, on the basis of data from the *British National Corpus*. The study has analysed the contribution of linguistic and sociolinguistic factors in the choice of the construction, paying attention to the typology of texts and objects, along with the gender, age and social class of the informants.

First, DOC is found to be the predominant form in Contemporary British English. This form predominates in the period 1960–1974, decreasing in 1975–1984 and rising again in the period 1985–1993. PREP is more widely distributed in the period 1960–1974, with a drastic decline in the period 1975–1984, becoming more popular in the last sub-period. AltDOC, in turn, occurs more frequently in the period 1975–1984, decreasing sharply in the last sub-period.

Second, the three types of ditransitive constructions are more prone to occur in the spoken domain. DOC is the variant with the highest number of occurrences in context-governed texts, even though it is more frequent in spoken demographic texts. It is also equally distributed in written texts, occurring most frequently in written books and periodicals, with the combination of a nominal theme and a pronominal recipient. Likewise, PREP appears more repeatedly in spoken conversations and in written books and periodicals, with the sequence of a nominal theme and a nominal recipient. Finally, altDOC is only found in the spoken component of the corpus with the pattern of a pronominal theme and a pronominal recipient.

Third, while the age and the social class of the informants are found to be relevant factors in the choice of these variants, gender does not participate in the selection of a particular form, as men tend to use the three constructions more repeatedly than women. DOC predominates among informants below 14 years of age and in between 45–59, and those belonging to the AB and DE social groups. AltDOC presents the highest relative frequency among informants in the 35–44 and 45–59 age ranges and among those belonging to the DE group. PREP, in turn, diffuses more frequently among the younger generation of speakers and among skilled informants (C2), despite being more frequent among those belonging to the lowest social group.

All in all, this corpus-based analysis can be considered important for the study of the English language and its on-going development in recent Contemporary English for two different reasons. On the one hand, it enhances the potential of corpus linguistic methodologies as a reference resource in the study of the language from a diachronic standpoint. On the other, it contributes to the comprehension of the mechanisms of language change, especially those pioneered by social and external factors.

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