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The object of verbs like help and an apparent violation of UTAH

Platzack, Christer

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Christer Platzack

In all the Germanic languages with morphological case, some verbs take their object in dative case, although accusative case is prototypical for objects. In this squib I will discuss one type of such verbs, represented here by English *help*, a class that also includes verbs like *rescue*, *nurse*, *serve* etc. In the Principles-and-Parameters tradition, these verbs are usually said to take lexical (or semantic) case, whereas verbs with an accusative object, like *buy*, do not specify any case, the assumption being that accusative is structurally assigned. The difference between structural and lexical case is shown by the well-known fact that lexical case is preserved in passive, whereas structural accusative changes into nominative. See the Icelandic examples in (1):

- Some of the Germanic languages, like Dutch, English and mainland Scandinavian, lost morphological case during the Middle Ages. It is usually assumed that the distinction between lexical and structural case is not lost in this process. In this squib I will discuss whether the loss of morphological case has any influence on the structure of the VP headed by verbs of the *help*-type, mainly using Scandinavian data. My discussion will be framed within the Minimalist program, more specifically in a particular implementation of the feature driven account of Chomsky (2001) and Pesetsky and Torrego (2001). The basic theoretical machinery is outlined in the rest of this introduction. Section 2 will present the analysis of VPs headed by verbs like *help*, comparing the VP structure of languages with and without morphological case. In section 3 I will give some syntactic arguments indicating that VPs headed by verbs like *help* are structured

¹ Thanks to Cecilia Falk and Halldór Sigurðsson for valuable comments.

differently in these two groups of languages, in particular that the object is in different positions. Unless there is a thematic difference as well, this finding goes against the Uniformity of Theta Assignment Hypothesis (UTAH), as described in Baker (1997). In section 4, I will highlight verbs like *throw* that also take dative objects in Icelandic, which like the *help*-verbs seem to have different structured VPs in languages with and without morphological case. For these verbs, however, a difference with regard to thematic roles is much easier to envisage.

1.1. Theoretical prerequisites

1.1.1. Features and the operation Agree

Syntax is a computational system (an algebra), mediating between form and meaning. Syntactic features have a central role to play in the computation. A syntactic structure is the result of merging elements taken from the lexicon, consisting of features which have either a semantic or a phonetic value. These features may come in two guises, interpretable and uninterpretable. Only interpretable features are allowed at the interfaces, which means that the syntactic computation must delete the uninterpretable instances for the derivation to converge. I will use only two features in my presentation *tense* (τ), interpretable in T° and v° , and *person, gender and number* (ϕ -features), interpretable in DP.

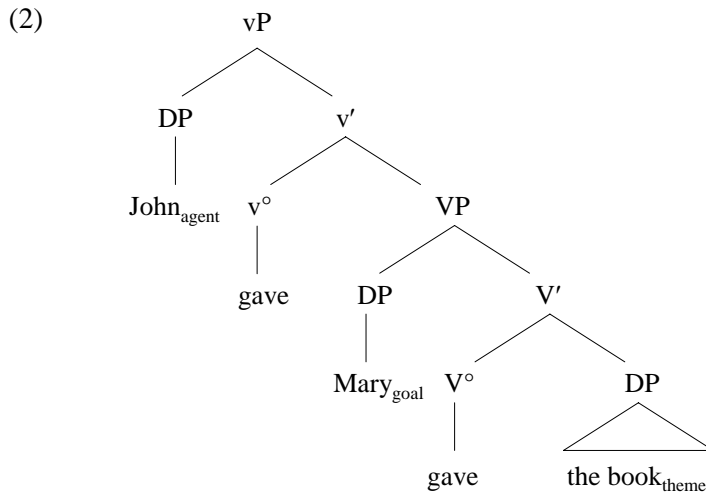
Uninterpretable features are deleted with the help of an operation called **Agree**. This operation first selects a **probe**, i.e. a head with at least one uninterpretable feature $-F$. The relevant probes are v° and T° . I will assume that v° has the same inherent feature set up for all types of verbs, contra Chomsky but in line with Legate (2003). This probe will search its c-command domain for the closest **goal** with the same feature but with reversed value for interpretability, $+F$. Finally, the uninterpretable feature is given the value of the interpretable feature.

Sometimes, the valuing of an uninterpretable feature is accompanied by movement of the goal to the position of the probe. Such movement is forced by the presence of EPP on some uninterpretable feature, see Pesetsky and Torrego (2001).

1.1.2. UTAH

In Baker (1997), UTAH is seen as a universal one-to-one correspondence between thematic role (in a particular broad sense) and first merge: a DP with the role of Agent (Cause, Instrument) is first merged in Spec-vP, a Benefactive, Goal, Recipient or Experiencer is first merged in Spec-VP,

and a Patient or Theme is first merged in the complement of V. This is illustrated in (2) with a ditransitive verb:

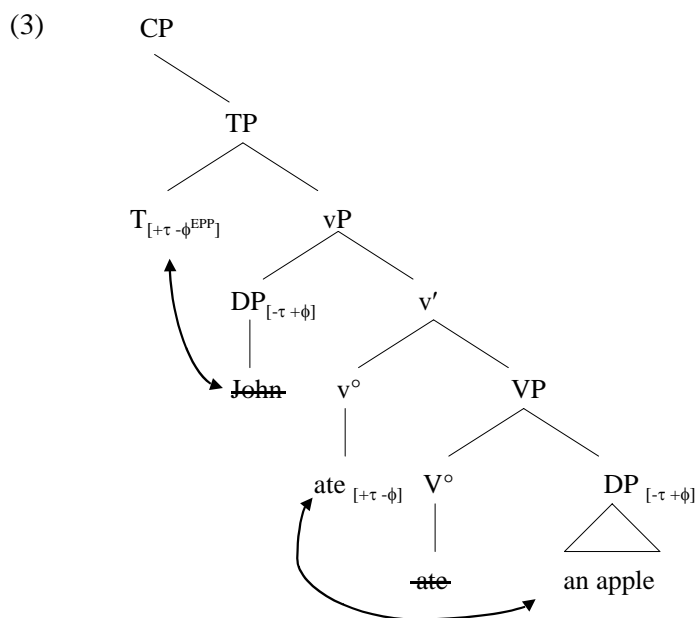


For languages with morphological case, (2) implies a possible correlation between case and position in addition to UTAH: Spec-vP is Nominative, Spec-VP is dative, and the complement of V is accusative.²

1.1.3. The derivation of a transitive clause: *John ate an apple*

The derivation of a simple transitive clause is outlined in (3). The agree-relations at hand are indicated by arrows. Note that there are two probes and two goals. *John* ends up in Spec-TP due to the EPP feature associated with the uninterpretable ϕ -feature in T ($-\phi^{\text{EPP}}$).

² This is a simplification, as can be seen e.g. by the fact that the two objects in Icelandic double object constructions have the following case possibilities: DAT-ACC (the give-class), DAT-DAT, DAT-GEN, ACC-GEN, ACC-DAT (the return-class). See Jónsson (1996: 136).



2 Verbs with dative objects: the case of *help*

In Platzack (2005) I have argued that dative case has the property of making DP-features invisible for probes, an effect that may be seen long after the loss of case morphology. In this way, I am able to account for the fact that both in English and in Mainland Scandinavian morphological dative was lost during the Middle Ages (Allen 1995, Falk 1997, Skrzypek in press), but promotion of the recipient (the former dative argument) was not an immediate consequence; as a matter of fact, both in English and in Swedish normative grammarians as late as in the 20th century (Sweet 1900, Wellander 1959) advice against the promotion of the indirect object to subject in passives, as in (4):

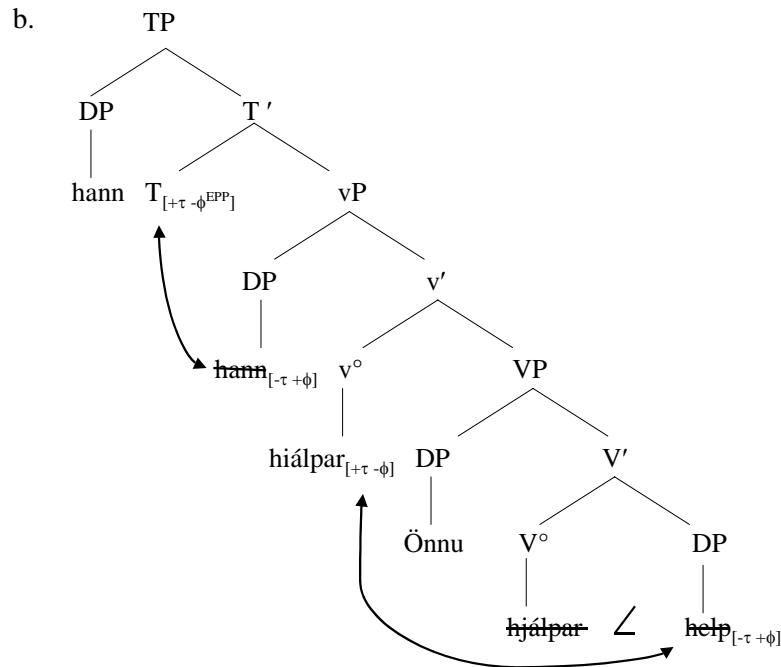
- (4) Mary was given the book.

With features in the indirect object invisible for the probe v° , the direct object must be responsible for the elimination of the uninterpretable ϕ -feature in v° .

Verbs taking a dative object as its sole argument are potential problems to such an analysis: with the features of the dative DP invisible for the

probe v° , it is not obvious how v° gets rid of its uninterpretable ϕ -feature. Extending an idea from Hale and Keyser (1993), Platzack (2005) claims that such verbs take an invisible cognate object which is incorporated in the verb—an analysis which has a long history in linguistics, see e.g. March (1871) and Wessén (1967). According to this idea, dative-taking verbs like German *helfen* and Icelandic *hjálpa* ‘to help’ are ditransitives underlyingly with the meaning ‘provide X with help’, where *help* is the cognate object. Consider the analysis of (5a) in (5b):

- (5) a. Hann hjálpar Önnu.
he help Anna_{dat}



As seen in (5b), this analysis removes the problem with the dative blocking the features of *Önnu*.

3. The Structure of *Help*-verbs in Modern Swedish

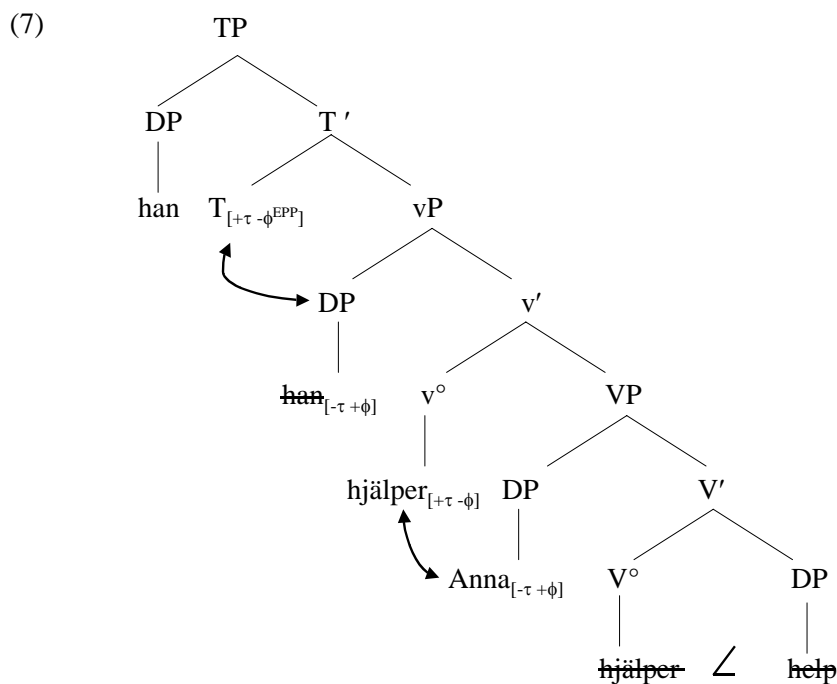
3.1. Possible analyses

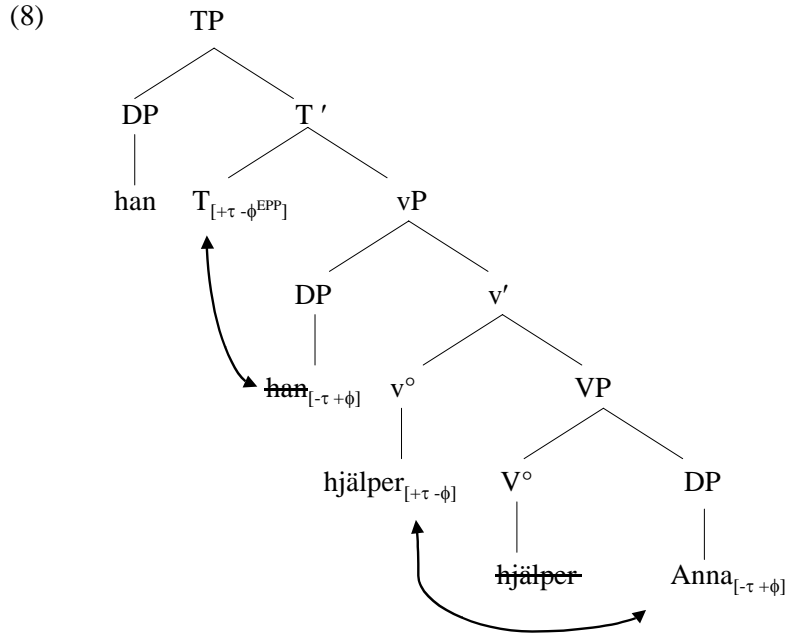
We will now consider the analysis of the corresponding modern Swedish example, where the object is not inflected for case:

- (6) Han hjälper Anna.
he helps her

Since there is no dative object in (6), we may ask whether the structure underlying (6) is identical to the structure outlined in (5b)—without dative case, the features of the object should be visible to v° , and there does not seem to be any reason to assume an invisible cognate object in the complement of V.

There are at least two analyses of (6) available within the framework used here: either the structure in (7), equal to (5b) with the exception that the visible object and not the invisible cognate has the features $[-\tau +\phi]$, or (8), where the object is in the complement of the verb.





In both (7) and (8), v° is agreeing with the visible DP, which also gets its tense-feature valued by v° . In this respect, there is a clear difference between (7)-(8) on the one hand and (5b) on the other, since v° agrees with the cognate object in (5b).

The important difference between (7) and (8) is the position of the visible object: in (7), as in (5b), this DP is in the specifier of VP, whereas it is in the complement of V in (8). Thus, given UTAH, we would expect a change in thematic roles if (8) is correct, whereas no such change is implied by (7). Furthermore, if (7) is the right structure, we expect to be able to find some trace of the invisible cognate object, whereas such a trace should not be visible, given (8). In the remainder of this section, I will provide evidence that indicate that (8) is the structure of present day Swedish (6).

3.2. Syntactic arguments for the structure in (8)

There are some syntactic arguments that support the analysis in (8). Consider first examples like (9), and compare with (10):

- (9) a. den dödade mannen
the killed man
b. det öppnade fönstret
the opened window
c. det erbjudna jobbet
the offered job
- (10) *den erbjudne mannen
the offered man
intended meaning: 'the man to whom something was offered'

As these examples show, the direct object, but not the indirect one (10), may correspond to the head of a noun phrase, taking the past participle of the verb as its modifier. In the active VP, this head corresponds to the object in the complement of V (the Theme argument). Looking now at Swedish *hjälpa* 'help', we notice that its past participle behaves as the past participle of ordinary transitive verbs, as shown in (11a); this is not possible in languages where the cognate of *help* takes a dative object, as (11b,c) show:

- (11) a. den hjälpta mannen
the helped man
b. *hjálpaði maðurinn
c. *der geholfene Mann

These facts indicate that the structure underlying the examples in (6) presumably is (8), not (7).

Another indication that the object of *help* is in the complement of V in modern Swedish is the following datum. In Swedish, existential passives are usually well formed, both with verbs taking ordinary objects in the active, and with verbs like *help*.

- (12) a. Det köptes många böcker.
there bought_{passive} many books
b. Det hjälptes en man över gatan.
there helped_{passive} a man across the street

The associate, i.e. *många böcker* 'many books' in (12a) and *en man* 'a man' in (12b), must be indefinite (the well-known definiteness restriction on existentials). Existential passives are possible with ditransitive verbs as

well, but only with the direct object of the active clause as the associate, as shown by the definiteness restriction on this argument, but not on the indirect object:

- (13) Det gavs henne presenter/*presenterna.
there gave_{passive} her gifts/the gifts

The example in (13) implies that the associate of a Swedish existential must be placed in the complement of V. Applied to (12), this seems to be an argument in favour of the analysis in (8) for verbs of the *help*-type. This analysis is further strengthened by the fact that Icelandic, which accepts existential passives like (12a), does not accept the correspondence to (12b):

- (14) a. Það voru keyptar margar bækur.
there were bought many books
b. ⁷⁸Það var hjálpað gömlum manni yfir götuna.³
there was helped old man across the street
(Maling 1988, p. 180)

Hence, there are indications that the object of verbs like *help* occupies different positions in languages with morphological case, like Icelandic, and in languages without morphological case, like Swedish. Given UTAH, this difference implies that the object has different thematic roles in the two types of languages. However, at the moment I am not able to see how this difference is manifested, hence the proposed analysis does not seem to be compatible with UTAH in the form suggested by Baker (1997). In the next section we will consider another type of verbs taking dative objects in Icelandic and Old Scandinavian, where the change of position of the object

³ If the associate is placed in front of the participle, the example is well-formed:

- (i) Það var gömlum manni hjálpað yfir götuna. (Maling 1988, p. 180)

Notice that Swedish, which also has a passive with a past participle, accepts both the word order with the associate in front of the participle, and the word order with the associate following the participle:

- (ii) a. Det blev hjälpt en man över gatan
there was helped a man across the street
b. Det blev en man hjälpt över gatan.
there was a man helpt across the street

from Spec-VP to complement of V seems to result in a change of perspective, indicating different thematic roles.

4. The case of *kasta* ‘throw’

The verb *kasta* ‘throw’ takes its object in dative both in Old Swedish (15a) and in modern Icelandic (15b), whereas in modern Swedish there is no indication of case (15c):

- (15) a. *kasta stene* (Old Swedish 1300; Skrzypek in press)
 throw stone_{dat}
 b. *Kristján kastaði sleggjunni.*
 Kristján threw the-hammer_{dat}
 c. *Johan kastade släggan.*
 Johan threw the-hammer

Kasta ‘throw’ belongs to a group of verbs accompanied by a dative object denoting the tool/ object being set in motion, see Jónsson (1996) and Maling (2002). Since the object is in the dative, the first hypothesis is that it occupies Spec-VP; if so, it must express a Recipient of some kind, e.g. the object is assigned momentum by the Agent/the subject. For modern Swedish, there is no indication that the object is anywhere else than in the complement of V, carrying the Theme role, i.e. plainly indicating the moved entity. Syntactic arguments are provided in (16) and (17) below. Hence, contrary to the situation with verbs like *hjälpa* ‘help’, it seems to be possible to detect a slight change in perspective connected with the loss of dative.

In the final part of this section, I will give two syntactic arguments for assigning Swedish verbs of the *kasta*-type the structure in (8), whereas the corresponding Icelandic verbs display the structure in (5a). Firstly, parallel to (9)-(11) above, only Swedish can use the participle of these verbs as an attribute to a noun corresponding to the dative object:

- (16) a. *den kastade bollen*
 the thrown ball
 b. **kastaði boltinn*
 thrown ball

Secondly, assuming that the VP-structure of the *throw*-verbs differs between Swedish and Icelandic in the way mentioned, we correctly predict

that a free 'dative' should be possible with these verbs in Swedish but not in Icelandic, assuming that free 'datives' occupy Spec-VP. Hence in Icelandic, but not in Swedish, the free 'dative' compete for the same position as the object:

- (17) a. Jag kastade henne bollen. (Swedish)
 I threw her the ball
 b. *Ég kastaði henni boltanum. (Icelandic)
 I threw her the-ball_{dat}

5. Conclusion

In this squib I have argued that VPs of verbs of the *help*-type and the *throw*-type have undergone a structural change in connection with the loss of morphological dative, to the effect that the DP expressed as a dative object in Old Swedish, which had its place in Spec-VP, in present day Swedish is placed in the complement of V. Given UTAH, this implies a shift in perspective: whereas the speakers of Old Swedish are supposed to view this object as a kind of Benefactor or Recipient, in present day Swedish it is merely taken as a plain Theme. Such a change may be envisaged with the *throw*-verbs but is harder to detect with the *help*-verbs. Given the fact that English has developed in the same way as Swedish with respect to these two classes of verbs, we might expect the same change in underlying structure, thus also for English UTAH predicts a change in perspective with respect to the object of verbs like *help* and *throw*. Whereas such a change is visible with *throw*-verbs, it is not with *help*-verbs, hence for these verbs UTAH seems to provide the wrong prediction.

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