5th International Conference on Corpus Linguistics (CILC2013)

Exploring Transitivity Alternations across Dialects:
A Preliminary Approach

Tania de Dios*

Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, Avda. Castelao s.n., Santiago de Compostela, 15782, Spain

Abstract

Even though the weight of classical conceptions of transitivity is still sensed, current trends in the study of such notion have revealed that clear-cut classifications of verbs as either transitive or intransitive should be abandoned. Indeed, it has been argued that far from belonging to closed sets, verbs can show transitive or intransitive uses depending on the context and the intention they are used with. The aim of this paper is to throw some light on the workings of transitivity alternations of this sort in two major varieties of the English language, namely, British English and American English.

Keywords: (in)transitivity, ergative verbs, middle verbs, British English, American English

1. Introduction

Traditional accounts of transitivity have largely relied on the idea that verbs can be defined as belonging to one of two well-defined sets, i.e., those verbs which bear an object are to be considered transitive, while those lacking it must be classified as intransitive. Nevertheless, over the last decades, it has been claimed that transitivity should not be described as the either-or issue which long-established formal accounts have made it appear to be, as a particular verb might not necessarily always be either transitive or intransitive. Indeed, it might be the case that one and the same verb may be employed with an object on some occasions, while it may appear on its own on others (e.g. The children ate an ice cream vs. The children ate). This means that a shift of focus from the conceptualization of

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +34 981563100 ext. 11976
E-mail address: tania.dedios@rai.usc.es
transitivity as an inherent property of individual verbs to its consideration as a range of usage possibilities of verbs seems to have occurred (cf. Quirk et al. 1985: 1168; Biber et al. 1999: 141; Huddleston and Pullum et al. 2002: 216), with the implications that this brings about for the study of the English verbal system.

Verbs that can be employed in both transitive and intransitive patterns have been designated as amphibious verbs (Visser 1963-1973: 97), ambitransitive verbs (Dixon and Aikhenvald 2000: 4), and dual-transitivity verbs (Huddleston and Pullum et al. 2002: 217) in the specialized literature, and have become a subject of interest over the years. In fact, several studies have been devoted to the treatment of transitivity alternations in general (Guerssel et al. 1985; Levin 1993) and, more specifically, to the examination of the so-called ergative verbs (Dixon 1994; Johns et al. 2006) and middle intransitive verbs (Fagan 1988; Klingvall 2003), which constitute two of the most widely known classes of verbs offering transitivity contrasts of the aforementioned kind.

The aim of the present paper is to go a step further and try to elucidate how alternations of this sort work across dialects by testing the behaviour of the most outstanding types of verbs showing transitivity shifts (i.e. ergative verbs and middle verbs) in two major varieties of the English language, namely, British English (BrE) and American English (AmE). With this purpose in mind, I will carry out a corpus-based study to obtain empirically-derived evidence of potential differences in the use of both verb types in the two selected varieties of the language.

2. A brief note on terminology

The terms ergative and middle have been extensively used in the literature to refer to a number of more or less related syntactic phenomena. In this paper, following Trask (1993), among others, I will use the tag ergative to refer to “the transitive pattern exemplified by the sentence She opened the door, as compared with the intransitive The door opened, reflecting the observation that the patient NP the door functions indifferently as intransitive subject or as transitive object, with no change in the morphology of the verb or the NP” (Trask 1993: 93). As regards the term middle, it will be employed here to designate “a construction in which an intrinsically transitive verb is construed intransitively with a patient as subject and receives a passive interpretation” (Trask 1993: 170), as happens in instances such as My new book is selling well.

3. Methodology

For the elaboration of this study, I performed a search of a prototypical member of the two categories in question, break in the case of ergative verbs and sell for middle verbs, in the Freiburg-Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen Corpus of British English (FLOB) and the Freiburg-Brown Corpus of American English (FROWN). Such corpora are identical in size – consisting of circa one million words each – and show a matching distribution of the samples, which makes them the most appropriate option for a variationist study such as the one to be presented here.

The searches yielded in the FLOB a total of 278 tokens of break and 235 instances of sell. In turn, the figures for FROWN were 267 examples of break and 190 occurrences of sell. However, I have only taken into account those occurrences in which break and sell are used in a sense in which the ergative and middle readings should be available. Thus, I have only considered tokens in which break is used with the sense “to be damaged and separated into two or more parts, as a result of force” (Wehmeier 2005: 179), while I have restricted instances of sell to those cases in which this verb is employed with the meaning “to give something to somebody in exchange for money” (Wehmeier 2005: 1379). Moreover, I have disregarded a number of categories which include: (i) nominal uses, as in (1); (ii) adjectival uses, as shown in (2); (iii) passive constructions (cf. (3) below); (iv) idioms, as in (4); (v) verbs appearing in combination with other words to form a new word, as shown in example (5); (vi) phrasal verbs, as in (6); (vii) causative uses (cf. example (7)); and (viii) verbs not offering an ergative/ middle reading such as that illustrated in (8).

(1) We were staying at Guernsey’s four-star St Pierre Hotel on a special gourmet weekend break. (FLOB F43 138-140)
(2) The prospects for the book looked even less promising two weeks later, when Stafford found himself in the hospital, with a crushed nose, a broken cheekbone, and a skull fractured in several places (FROWN G35 159-162)
All our purebred lamb was sold privately as it was very small. (FLOB E36 172-173)

The ‘manifesto’ of Mr Heath and pro-marketees effectively sold the nation a pup. (FLOB B10 109-111)

Things notoriously difficult to re-sell include the more bizarre, customized items, or expensive, hand made jobs with names on. (FLOB E12 184-187)

Earlier, she said friends “dragged” her to the party because it was “time to get out” after breaking up a relationship. (FROWN A32 229-232)

“We got them cows sold yet? (FROWN N01 206-208)

“Lucky to have business these hard days. What is there left to buy and sell? (FLOB N29 48-50)

After having manually pruned the instances, the remaining examples of break and sell in the corpora add up to a total of 273 instances, distributed as shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CORPORA</th>
<th>Break</th>
<th>Sell</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FLOB</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FROWN</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The detailed examination of the instances yielded by the corpora will allow me to draw some interesting conclusions as regards the similarities and differential traits of ergative and middle intransitive verbs in the two varieties object of inquiry. These are explored in the following sections.

4. Discussion of the findings

4.1. Ergative break

Figure 1 provides information on the frequency of the object bearing pattern as compared to the objectless construction in the two corpora.

As can be observed, the object bearing pattern is far more commonly used than the objectless construction in both dialects. Such uneven distribution of the two patterns might well be related to the specific meaning to which the employment of the intransitive variant seems to be related. Indeed, the use of the object lacking pattern appears to be somehow connected with a desire to endow inanimate subjects with a certain degree of agentivity, which, in turn, might be linked with a wish on the part of the speaker to minimize human responsibility for the action in question. These special usages are represented in examples (9) and (10).
These particular cakes were given a patterned edge and had a hole in the middle. [...] If any broke during the baking this was considered an ill omen for the child for whom it was intended. (FLOB F34 114-118)

The trickster borrowed an axe from his grandmother and used it to kill his brother Stone but the axe broke in two places (FROWN K07 22-24)

Moreover, the objectless pattern seems to be slightly more frequently employed in BrE than in AmE. However, these results are by no means conclusive, as ergative break shows a very low rate of occurrence in the data analyzed – 18 instances in FLOB and 24 examples in FROWN –, which indicates that we are dealing with a low frequency phenomenon for the study of which larger amounts of data are required.

4.2. Middle sell

Middle verbs are here represented by sell. As regards the overall frequencies of occurrence of the two constructions at issue, similarly to what happened with ergative break, the object bearing pattern is far more commonly used than the objectless one in both dialects, although the latter appears to be slightly more frequent in BrE than in AmE, as Figure 2 shows:

![Fig.2. Frequencies of the object bearing and objectless patterns in FLOB (a) and FROWN (b)](chart.png)

In this case, the lower representation rates of the intransitive pattern might also be due to the restriction in the use of such construction to those situations in which the speaker’s intention is that of creating a distance with a semantically entailed human subject by putting the syntactically expressed inanimate subject in focus. Examples (11) and (12) illustrate this strategy:

(11) The selection procedure tends to favour records that sell relatively quickly throughout the country [...]. (FLOB G46 157-159)

(12) [...] these retailers use sophisticated information technology to keep close tabs on what’s selling and what’s not [...]. (FROWN B10 124-127)

Another interesting aspect to bear in mind when analyzing the usage of middle verbs is the presence or absence of an adverbial modifier or the negator not in objectless patterns, as this has been singled out as one of the characteristic traits of this kind of constructions (Liu 2003). As the pie charts in Figure 3 clearly show, this feature seems to be much more entrenched in the case of BrE, as only 8% of the objectless instances are employed without being accompanied by an element of this sort. On the contrary, AmE seems to be much more flexible as far as the appearance of adverbial forms is concerned, with 60% of the instances lacking an object appearing in combination with adverbial modifiers or the negative particle not.
The idea that middles are generic statements and therefore do not describe particular events in time has also been claimed to be a distinctive feature of middle formation (Keyser and Roeper 1984; Fagan 1988). Taking this into account, we would presume that the present tense should be almost invariably used in constructions of this kind, whereas forms of the verb phrase like past, imperative, and progressive are not expected to occur. However, as Figures 4 and 5 show, such requirement is not met in most of the instances of the verb sell offering a middle reading (12 tokens in FLOB and 5 instances in FROWN), in which a wide range of forms including the allegedly least preferable options are used in the verb phrase.

5. Conclusions

The present paper has tackled the study of both ergative and middle constructions with the aim of empirically testing the potential similarities and differences in the use of both patterns in two major dialects of the English language, BrE and AmE. Such analysis has served to point out that both BrE and AmE share a number of behavioural traits as regards the usage of ergative and middle verbs. Both varieties show (i) a clear pre-eminence of object bearing constructions; (ii) a tendency to use objectless patterns to convey special nuances of meaning; (iii) a tendency to include adverbial modifiers in middle formations; and (iv) an apparent disregard of the non-eventive nature of the middle as demonstrated by the recurrent use of forms other than the present in the verb phrase. However, this study has also made possible to spot some points in which BrE and AmE seem to depart from each other: (i) the objectless pattern is somewhat more frequent in BrE; and (ii) AmE accepts the absence of adverbial modification more readily.
The current paper represents but a little contribution to the vast and challenging field of transitivity alternations. Many are the questions that remain unsolved and further research is indeed required in order to achieve a complete understanding of such complex phenomena as ergative and middle formation. Among the possible courses of action to achieve this goal, it would be interesting to (i) increase the number of verbs under analysis; (ii) expand the number of corpora analyzed; and (iii) enlarge the number of factors under consideration for this preliminary contrastive study. Such improvements must, however, be left for future research.

Acknowledgements

For generous financial support, I am grateful to the following institutions: the Spanish Ministry of Education (grant AP2010-4222), the European Regional Development Fund, Spanish Ministry for Economy and Competitiveness (grant FFI2011-26693-C02-01), and the Autonomous Government of Galicia (Directorate General for Scientific and Technological Promotion, grants CN2011/011 and CN2012/012).

References


