

# The Effect of Language Transfer in the Production of the English Dative Alternation

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**Abstract**—The given-before-new principle refers to the tendency of speakers and writers to place old information before new information, and it is generally considered a universal rule. While there has not been extensive research on this principle in the context of second language learners from the perspective of discourse structure, some studies have examined whether this principle is followed or not. These studies involve English learners whose native languages are Japanese or Chinese. Due to differences in how this rule is satisfied depending on the native language, the question of whether this is influenced by the first language remains unresolved. This study, using a Japanese corpus, investigated the characteristics of the native language and concluded that double object constructions and constructions with missing the recipient are generated as a result of language transfer.

**Keywords**—given-before-new principle, language transfer, EFL learners, the dative alternation

## I. INTRODUCTION

The dative alternation allows dative verbs such as *give* and *buy* to adopt two constructions: double object and prepositional dative constructions [1, 2]. Representative examples are shown in (1).

### (1) a. Double Object Construction

I gave the children books.

Recipient Theme

### b. Prepositional Dative Construction

I gave the books to children.

Theme Recipient

Moreover, the discourse principle, known as the given-before-new principle, states that information in a sentence flows from old to new information [3–6]. In (1a), the double object construction places the recipient with the definite article *the children* before the noun with a zero article, *books* and in (1b), the prepositional dative construction places the theme with the definite article, *the books* before the recipient with a zero article, *children*. Both examples follow the given-before-new principle by placing the old information before the new information.

Although there are some studies which investigate acquisition of the English dative alternation by L1 English-speaking children focusing on discourse factors such as the given-before-new principle, there are few that pursue EFL learners [7–10]. Fukaya (2024) tackled the question of whether Japanese EFL learners obey the given-before-new principle or not [11]. She analyzed the English dative alternation produced by Japanese students and found that in double object constructions, the principle was usually satisfied, whereas in prepositional dative construction, the

principle tended to be violated. Fukaya (2024) suggested a Japanese influence on the English dative alternation; however, she did not investigate the actual use of the Japanese counterpart to the English dative alternation. Therefore, this study aims to answer the following research questions.

(2) **Research Question 1:** How frequently are Japanese constructions with missing recipients observed?

**Research Question 2:** Based on Japanese data, how can the English dative alternation produced by Japanese EFL learners be analyzed?

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section II reviews previous research on the English dative alternation produced by EFL learners, focusing on the given-before-new principle. Section III introduces the Balanced Corpus of Contemporary Written Japanese and presents the results of Japanese cases with *atae*-, the counterpart to *give*. Section IV, based on the Japanese data and Fukaya (2024), argues that language transfer occurs in the production of double object constructions and constructions missing the recipient, but not in prepositional dative constructions. Finally, Section V concludes this study.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Zhang and Kang (2023)

Zhang and Kang (2023) focused on Chinese EFL learners [12]. Their study aimed to determine whether Chinese EFL learners followed the given-before-new principle in the English dative alternation. For this purpose, 140 EFL learners participated in the study and were classified into four groups based on their English proficiency levels. The participants read a short story in which either a theme or a recipient was presented. The final sentence, which contained a dative verb, was incomplete, and the participants were required to complete it. For example, in the story presented in (3), the theme of broccoli was presented to the listener. The final sentence was incomplete; therefore, the participants needed to complete it based on the context.

### (3) Theme-given story

John doesn't like broccoli. One day his mom put a lot of broccoli in his lunch. It looked terrible to John, so he thought of a way to get rid of it. **John gave ...**

When the theme was provided in the story, Chinese EFL learners correctly produced prepositional dative constructions with a given-new order and rarely produced

double object constructions. This tendency was observed irrespective of whether the students' English levels were advanced or not.

When the recipient was given in the story as in (4), double object constructions were expected to appear to satisfy the given-before-new principle.

#### (4) Recipient-given story

Yesterday, Mary went out to play in the park. It started to rain suddenly but she didn't have an umbrella with her. A nice boy shared his umbrella with her. Mary wanted to thank the boy. **So she gave . . .**

However, low-level students produced more prepositional dative constructions, which yielded the new-given order. Consequently, the given-before-new principle was ignored.

Zhang and Kang (2023) argued that this high number of prepositional dative constructions resulted from Chinese EFL learners' preferences for the types of dative constructions over informational status. In other words, learners prefer prepositional dative constructions, even if the theme is new. As their English abilities increase, learners prefer to satisfy the given-before-new principle, leading to the production of double object constructions in recipient-given contexts.

#### B. Fukaya (2024)

Fukaya (2024) focused on the English dative alternation produced by Japanese junior high and high school students and aimed to answer the question of whether the given-before-new principle was followed in the dative alternation. She collected data from the Japanese EFL Learner (JEFL) Corpus (the JEFL Corpus) [13] and sorted them into four categories: double object and prepositional dative constructions, and constructions missing the theme or recipient. As Table 1 shows, the most frequently observed category was double object constructions, followed by constructions missing recipients, which are ungrammatical in English grammar. For convenience, Fukaya (2024) referred to double object constructions, prepositional dative constructions, constructions missing the theme, and constructions missing the recipient as Types A, B, C, and D, respectively.

Table 1. Results of four categories

Constructions	Numbers (%)
Double object constructions (Type A)	276 (55%)
Prepositional dative constructions (Type B)	84 (16.7%)
Constructions missing themes (Type C)	13 (2.5%)
Constructions missing recipients (Type D)	128 (25.5%)
Total	501

Fukaya (2024) addressed the question of whether the dative alternation produced by Japanese EFL learners follows the given-before-new principle. If Japanese EFL learners obey this principle, double object constructions should be preferred when recipients are provided, and prepositional dative constructions should be preferred when themes are provided. Tables 2 and 3 show the results of double object constructions:

Table 2. Recipients in double object constructions

	Numbers	Information
Pronouns	256	Given
Determiners ( <i>the, this, etc.</i> )	8	264 (96%)
Determiners ( <i>a, an</i> )	3	New
Zero articles	8	11 (4%)
Total	275	

Table 3. Themes in double object constructions

	Numbers	Information
Pronouns	16	Given
Determiners ( <i>the, this, etc.</i> )	28	45 (16%)
Determiners ( <i>a, an</i> )	138	New
Zero articles	92	230 (83.9%)
Total	275	

Table 2 shows the informational status of the recipients in double object constructions. Of 275 the cases, 264 (more than 90 %) were given information, as expected. Of the 264 cases with the given information, 256 were pronominal objects, as shown in Example (5). Themes in double object constructions are expected to provide new information. As Table 3 shows, almost 85% of the information was new information. For example, themes with indefinite or zero articles were observed, as in Example (5).

(5) I will give you **a box** if you open it.  
Recipient Theme

Let us now move on to prepositional dative constructions. The results are presented in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4. Themes in prepositional dative constructions

	Numbers	Information
Pronouns	15	Given
Determiners ( <i>the, this, etc.</i> )	5	20 (23.8%)
Determiners ( <i>a, an</i> )	25	New
Zero articles	39	64 (76.1%)
Total	84	

Table 5. Recipients in prepositional dative constructions

	Numbers	Information
Pronouns	19	Given
Determiners ( <i>the, this, etc.</i> )	26	45 (53.5%)
Determiners ( <i>a, an</i> )	8	New
Zero articles	31	39 (46.4%)
Total	84	

If Japanese EFL learners follow the given-before-new rule, the theme in the prepositional dative construction should be old information, whereas the recipient should be new information. However, as Table 4 shows, out of 84 cases, 64 were new information and only 20 were given information. Moreover, Table 5 shows that, contrary to expectations, approximately half of the recipients carried old information.

Fukaya (2024) pointed out two major findings: First, Japanese EFL learners produced a large number of constructions missing recipients (Table 1). Second, unlike Chinese EFL learners, Japanese EFL learners tended to disobey the given-before-new principle in prepositional dative constructions. She suggested the influence of language transfer from Japanese. In Japanese, the verb *ataeru* corresponds to the English dative verb *give*. The unique property of the verb *ataeru* is that it allows constructions without recipients (Type D), as well as two-object constructions. A detailed investigation into the theme of Type D revealed that nearly 90% of the information was new, as

shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Themes in constructions with missing recipients

	Numbers	Information
Pronouns	12	Given 15 (11.7%)
Determiners ( <i>the, this, etc.</i> )	3	
Determiners ( <i>a, an</i> )	10	New 113 (88.2%)
Zero articles	103	
Total	128	

In conclusion, Japanese EFL learners usually follow the given-before-new principle in double object constructions, but struggle with it in prepositional dative constructions, possibly because of the influence of their native language's grammar.

### III. DATA

#### A. BCCWJ

To answer the research questions presented in (2), data were collected from the Balanced Corpus of Contemporary Written Japanese (BCCWJ), which was created by the National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics. It contains approximately 104.3 million words and covers a wide range of genres from newspaper articles to magazines. Thus, the BCCWJ consists of data randomly extracted from a variety of genres. This enables a comprehensive understanding of contemporary written Japanese. Various studies have been conducted using the BCCWJ on topics such as Japanese writing styles and Japanese language education [14, 15].

#### B. Method

In this analysis, I collected constructions involving *atae*-, which corresponds to the English verb *give*. In Japanese, different tenses and other grammatical aspects can be expressed by adding suffixes to the verb stem, as in (6) [16].

(6) a. Sensei-wa seito-ni hon-wo atae-**ta**.

The teacher the studenta book gave.

The teacher gave a book to the student.

b. Sensei-wa seito-ni adobaisu-wo atae-**ru deshou**.

The teacher the student advice give will.

The teacher will give advice to the student.

Therefore, I entered the verb stem *atae* in the search box as shown in Fig. 1.

Fig.1. Search window for *atae*.

Based on Fukaya (2023), the data were then divided into four categories, as presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Four types investigated

Type	Pattern
A	(S) O <sub>1</sub> O <sub>2</sub> V inu-ni esa-wo atae-ta. the dog food gave I gave the dog food.
B	(S) O <sub>2</sub> O <sub>1</sub> V esa-wo inu-ni atae-ta. food the dog gave I gave food to the dog.
C	(S) O <sub>1</sub> V inu-ni atae-ta. the dog gave I gave the dog.
D	(S) O <sub>2</sub> V esa-wo atae-ta. food gave I gave food.

Both Types A and B involved two objects: the recipient and the theme. In Type A, the recipient appears before the theme, whereas in Type B the theme appears before the recipient. It is important to note that in English Type B, as shown in Example (1b), the preposition *to* or *for* is required before the recipient, depending on the dative verb. However, Japanese does not have prepositions; therefore, cases in the order “theme-recipient” were classified as Type B.

In this analysis, data were extracted from two genres in BCCWJ: newspapers, and Yahoo! Blogs and Yahoo! *Chiebukuro*. In newspapers, relatively formal Japanese is expected to be used, whereas in Yahoo! Blogs and Yahoo! *Chiebukuro*, informal Japanese is expected to be used. Moreover, passive sentences such as (7) were excluded from the data set. Additionally, cases in which verbs modified nouns were excluded from the analysis, as in (8).

(7) Kare-wa sensei-kara shou-o atae-rare-ta.

He by the teacher an award was given.

He was given an award by the teacher.

(8) Kare-ga atae-ru adobaisu-wa itsumo tekikaku-da.

He gives The advice is always accurate.

The advice he gives is always accurate.

#### C. Data Analysis

First, let us examine the results from the newspapers. Table 8 shows that a total of 171 cases were identified involving *ate*-. Type A was observed in 126 cases, accounting for over 70% of the total. Representative examples of Type A are shown in (9).

Table 8. Results of the four types newspapers

Type A	Type B	Type C	Type D	Total
126	4	0	41	171

(9) Type A

a. Chiimu-ni Shigeki-wo atete hoshii.

the team motivation give want

I want them to give the team motivation.

b. Zenkoku-no bunkazai hogo katsudou-ni yuuki-wo atae-ru.

Nationwide cultural heritage preservation efforts encouragement gives

It gives encouragement to cultural heritage preservation efforts nationwide.

Table 9 presents the results for Yahoo! Blogs and Yahoo! *Chiebukuro*. A total of 332 cases were identified. The most frequently observed type was Type D (168 cases), followed by Type A (149 cases). Representative examples of these two types are shown in (10) and (11).

Table 9. Results of the four types Yahoo! Blogs / *Chiebukuro*

Type A	Type B	Type C	Type D	Total
149	15	0	168	332

(10) Type A

- a. Kogar-na josei-no hou-ga okyakusama-ni appaku-kan-wo atae-nai.  
A petite woman customers less of a sense of pressure gives.  
A petite woman gives customers less of a sense of pressure.
- b. Hone-ni tekido-na Shigeki-wo atae-ru  
the bone moderate stimulation give.  
Give the bone moderate stimulation.

(11) Type D

- a. Miruku-wo atae-ta  
Milk gave  
I gave milk.
- b. Okashi-wo atae-tara dame-da  
snacks give shouldn't.  
You shouldn't give snacks.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

##### A. Research Question 1: How Frequently are Japanese Constructions with Missing Recipients Observed?

Based on the results presented in the previous section, it is clear that Type D expressions are accepted in Japanese, as stated in dictionaries. In particular, on Yahoo! Blogs and Yahoo! *Chiebukuro*, approximately half of the cases belonged to Type D, confirming that Type D is preferred in informal Japanese over the formal language. According to Fukaya (2024), Japanese EFL learners frequently produce English Type D sentences, second only to Type A sentences, with approximately 25% of sentences being Type D (Table 1). This high frequency of Type D in English can be attributed to a tendency in Japanese, where speakers omit the recipient when it is clear from the context, which in turn leads them to favor Type D structures in English.

##### B. Research Question 2: Based on Japanese Constructions Missing Recipients, How Can the English Dative Alternation Produced by Japanese EFL Learners be Analyzed?

To answer Research Question 2, I focused on Japanese Type D cases and investigated whether readers could understand the recipients without mentioning them. A detailed investigation revealed that the missing recipients were divided into two types. The first type is the one mentioned in the previous context. Consider Example (12).

(12) Bioferumin-wo atae-te-imasu.

Biofermin give

I give Biofermin

Example (12) does not specify to whom the biofermin was given. In the previous context, the author mentioned his dog and stated that the dog's stomach was not feeling well; therefore, we can infer that the biofermin is given to his dog. The second type refers to the general *you* or *we*, as in (13).

(13) Mantenboshi Tsutsuji to mo kakare, kochira wa romanchikku na imēji o ataemasu.

It is as *Mantenboshi Tsutsuji* also written, which a romantic image gives.

It is also written as *Mantenboshi Tsutsuji*, which gives a romantic image.

The number of instances, such as in (13), is small, but from the context, it is clear that they do not refer to a specific individual. Both types, as shown in (12) and (13), show that readers can guess the recipient appropriately, although it is not referred to. Based on the Japanese data from the corpus, I argue that Japanese Type D is derived through the following stages.

(14) Type D\_ Japanese

- a. [VP [NP recipient: -ni theme: -wo] atae-]  
b. [VP [NP ~~recipient: -ni~~ theme: -wo] atae-]  
c. [VP [NP theme: -wo] atae-]

First, the double object construction is created as shown in (14a), and then the recipient is struck out as shown in (14b). Finally, Type D is created. The recipient was base-generated, as shown in (14a); therefore, the listener or reader is supposed to understand who it is from the context.

Based on the Japanese data from the BCCWJ, let us examine how the English dative alternation produced by Japanese learners can be analyzed. Type A, a double object construction, is easily produced based on language transfer from Japanese. This is supported by the fact that half of the occurrences resulted from Type A (Table 1) and that the given-before-new principle is largely satisfied (Tables 2 and 3). If we limit the data to Types A and B (the dative alternation), approximately 77% belonged to Type A. Moreover, Japanese EFL learners produce Type D sentences that omit the recipient without resistance when they have already mentioned it in the context. Type D produced by Japanese EFL learners is assumed to be derived from Type A, in line with Japanese Type D. This is shown in (15).

(15) [VP give [NP ~~recipient~~ theme]]

The question then is how Type B is produced. I argue that Type B resulted not from language transfer, but from English Type D. Let us look at how Type B is produced.

- (16) a. [VP give [NP theme]]  
b. [VP give [NP theme] [PP to recipient]]

(16) shows that Type B is created by adding the prepositional phrase to Type D. Although the theme of Type B is expected to provide old information, more than 70% of the themes are new information. Considering that 90% of the

themes in Type D carried new information, it is reasonable that more than 70% of the themes in Type B is also new information, deviating from the given-before-new principle.

## V. CONCLUSION

This study addressed how Japanese EFL learners produce English dative alternation. The Japanese data collected from the BCCWJ revealed that double object constructions and dative structures with omitted prepositions were predominant. In particular, the omission of recipients was more prevalent in informal texts. Based on these findings, it was clarified that Japanese EFL learners are influenced by their native language when producing Types A and D, whereas their production of prepositional dative constructions is not influenced by Japanese. In the future, I will explore how Japanese students can use prepositional dative constructions, which they tend to use less frequently, in a way that adheres to the rules of information structure and investigate the extent to which Japanese influences the use of other dative verbs.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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