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Ditransitive structures: the *to*-Dative

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Starting with Chomsky (1965) the English Dative alternation has received a considerable amount of attention given the two accounts which have emerged: a non-derivational account (Kayne 1984, Pesetsky 1995, Harley 2002, Bruening 2010, 2018, Hallman 2015 i.a.) and a derivational account (Larson 1988, Larson and Harada 2006, Ormazabal and Romero 2010, MacDonald 2015 i.a.). Starting from this discussion, I show that the dative alternation has a morpho-syntactic dimension which can be illustrated at the level of idiomatic expressions. Because idioms are considered fixed structures, the paper aims at investigating whether to-dative idioms can occur in both ditransitive syntactic frames. The investigation will show that idioms are fully compositional structures in line with Larson (2017) and they can occur in alternating ditransitive frames, contrary to what has been previously discussed.

Keywords: Dative alternation, ditransitives, idioms, to-dative

1. Introduction

English exhibits a Dative alternation between two syntactic patterns the *Double Object Construction* (DOC) and the *Prepositional Dative Construction* (PDC) where the latter is marked by the preposition *to* (see 1a and 1b below).

(1) a. *Double object construction (DOC)*
She bought the children a puppy.
b. *Prepositional Dative construction (PDC)*
She bought a puppy to the children.

As the examples above show, for the DOC the Goal and the Theme are NPs which appear in the order V-Goal-Theme. For the PDC the Goal is an NP which follows the Theme where the order is V-Theme-Goal. In other words, the Dative alternation amounts to (i) the loss of the P *to* and (ii) the change of word order.

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The dative alternation has a morpho-syntactic dimension which can be illustrated at the level of preferences shown by idiomatic expressions. Since they are considered fixed structures, the paper aims at investigating whether *to*-dative idioms can occur in both ditransitive syntactic frames. The following research questions have been formulated:

1. Do idioms exhibit sensitivity to the *v*P configuration? Are they sensitive to the event structure?
2. Do idioms alternate? And if so, do they exhibit fixed meanings across alternants?
3. What is the role of functional heads within idiomatic expressions? Can they vary? Do they disrupt the selection?

Furthermore, in the analysis of idioms I will lean on the theoretical framework proposed by Bruening (2010, 2018) and Larson (2017) by looking at the (a) *semantic* characteristics which include sensitivity to the animacy hierarchy and sensitivity to the *v*P configuration and at the (b) *syntactic* features which account for the possibility of idioms to occur in alternating ditransitive frames.

2. Idioms in English ditransitives

Following Larson (2017), I define idioms as fully compositional structures where their meanings can be predicted from the meanings of their parts and the structure in which they occur. An idiom can also be defined in terms of a constituent which satisfies the sisterhood condition.

Furthermore, a simple and elegant account of idiomatic expressions has been proposed by Bruening (2010), drawing on the influential work of O'Grady (1998). In defining the general architecture of idioms, he proposes a *principle* and a *constraint* which are formalized below:

(2) a. The Principle of Idiomatic Interpretation
X and Y may be interpreted idiomatically only if X selects Y

b. Constraint on Idiomatic Interpretation
If X selects a lexical category Y, and X and Y are interpreted idiomatically, all of the selected arguments of Y must be interpreted as part of the idiom that includes X and Y.

(Bruening 2010, 532)

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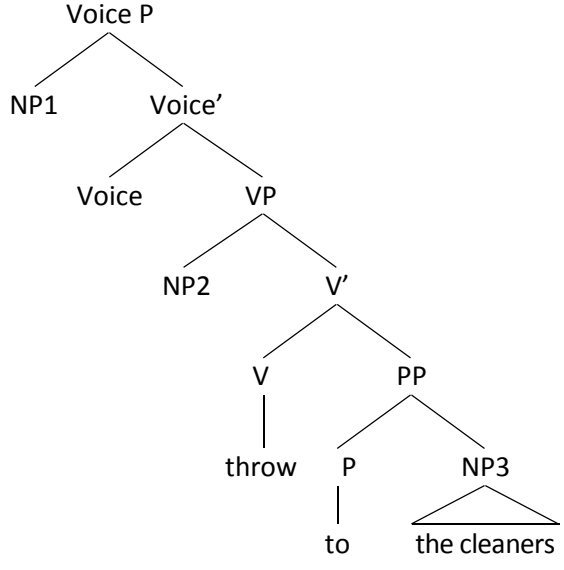
The principle in (2a) illustrates how idiomatic readings arise and how selection is the mechanism that combines X and Y and determines their contextual interpretation. Following constraint (2b) *functional* categories are excluded as English exhibits a large class of idiomatic expressions which consists of a verb and a preposition selected by the verb but lacking the object of the preposition as in *throw the book at* (2010: 535). As a result, as P does not belong to the lexical categories, it cannot force its arguments to be part of the idiomatic expression; however, P must be part of the idioms for the meaning to be kept.

English ditransitive idioms can occur in two different frames, either in the double object construction or in the prepositional dative construction, involving a ditransitive verb and one of its internal arguments. Let us look at the *PP dative* idiom *take X to the cleaners* ("to swindle somebody"), which exhibits the following syntactic structure:

(3) a. *take x to the cleaners* (PP dative): Mary *took* Josh *to the cleaners*.



For the *DOC* pattern, idioms such as *give X the creeps* can be represented as follows (3b) where either V' or VP is the relevant idiomatic unit that is projected:

(3) b*. give X the creeps* ("to unnerve somebody") DOC- The count gave me
the creeps

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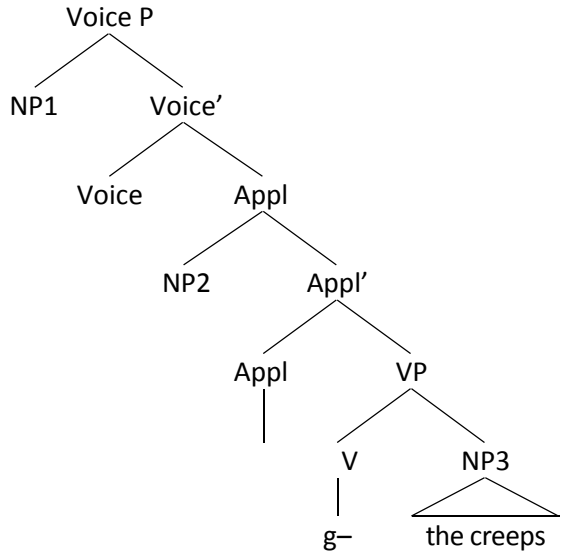
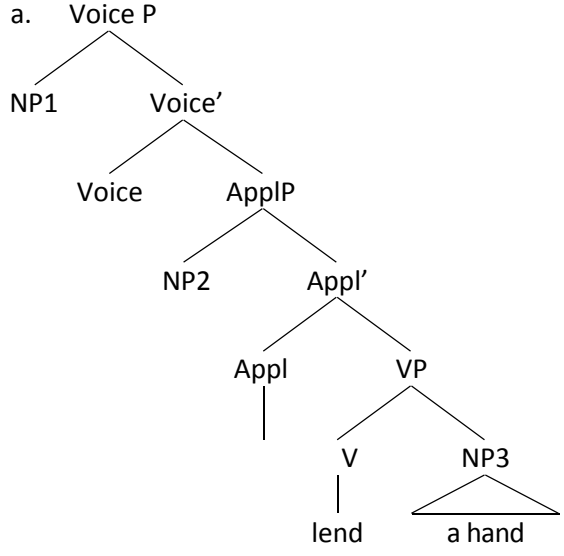


Some idiomatic expressions may be found in both frames, each being equally available as the examples below illustrate:

(4) *lend X a hand ~ lend a hand to X*

a.



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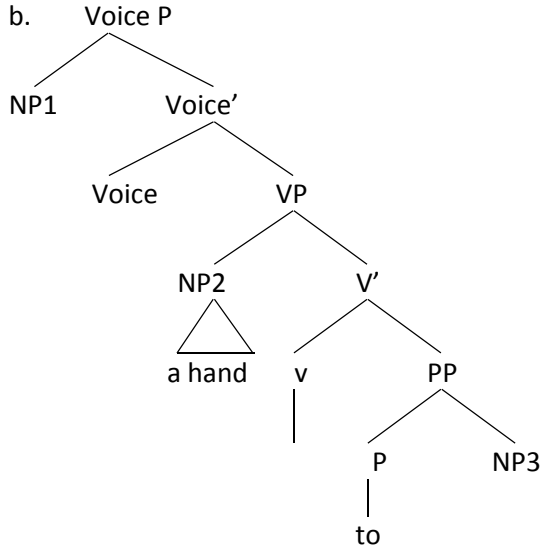

Drawing on the influential work of Bresnan (2007) and Rappaport, Hovav and Levin (2008), Bruening (2010) proposes six classes of idiomatic expressions; each class involves a ditransitive verb (which can occur under two different frames - that is, DOC and PDC) and one of its internal arguments, as follows:

Logically possible **fixed** ditransitive idioms patterns

1) Class 1: Verb NP NP (*give X the sack*)
2) Class 2: Verb NP to NP (*give rise to X*)
3) Class 3: Verb NP to NP (*send X to the lions*)
4) Class 4: V NP NP (**throw the wolves X*)

(Bruening 2010, 536)

Throughout his analysis Bruening (2010) argues that the interpretation of idioms depends on lexical selection and on the restrictions imposed on the constituents.

Larson (2017) proposes a semantic framework, which accounts for a rethinking of the notion of dative idioms, positing for the fact that English lacks dative idioms, both in the oblique and the double object patterns, but rather these should be interpreted as (a) *idiomatic caused-motion constructions* in the PP dative form and (b) *collocations* in their double object form. The present view indicates they are all *compositional*; in this respect, the meanings of the phrases can be computed from the meanings of their parts and the syntactic structure in which they occur.

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Let us now turn to the interface of idiomatic expressions in English ditransitives with the purpose of accounting for their syntactic and semantic characteristics.

2.1. A syntactic account of idiomatic patterns: the *to*-frame vs. the double object frame

In my attempt to provide a semantic and syntactic account of English ditransitive idiomatic patterns, I have collected 200 idioms extracted from, *The Dictionary of English idioms* (Seidl and McMordie 1988), *The Penguin Dictionary of English idioms* (M Gulland and Hinds- Howell 2001) and *Dicționar englez-român de expresii și locuțiuni* (Hulban 2007), and The Free Online Dictionary by Farlex which are centred around the two major classes of dative verbs: *give*-type verbs/ *throw*-type verbs (Rappaport Hovav and Levin 2008).

Class 1 involves a *double object frame* where the verb and the theme are part of the idiom, while the goal remains an open slot; the verb and the theme are separated by the Goal. I have identified 80 instances of this pattern with prototypical *give*, 2 instances with *verbs of sending* and one instance with *verbs of throwing*. Consider the examples in (5), followed by the syntactic structure in (6).

(5) **Verb**-Goal-**Theme**

a. give (somebody) the sack
   I tried hard to do a good job in John's garage, but he *gave me the sack* anyway.
b. send (somebody) a wire (cf. Hulban 2007, 673)
   His grandfather used to *send his wife a wire* once a month.
c. toss (somebody) a bone
   My younger brother is always pleading for me to help his career, so I tossed him a bone and got him a gig in some bar at the edge of town.
   (https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/toss+him+a+bone)

(6) give (somebody) the sack

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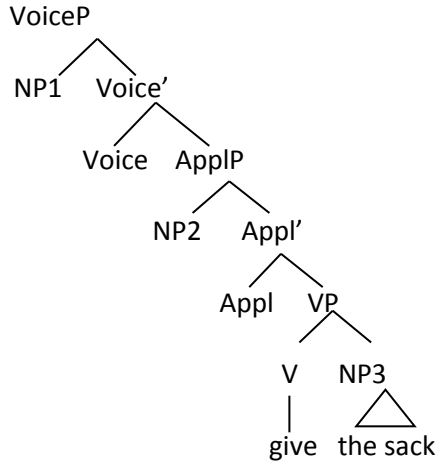

Furthermore, ***Class 2*** involves the *prepositional dative*; the verb and the theme are continuous and the Goal is excluded (**Verb**-**Theme**-Goal) as shown in the examples in (7), followed by the syntactic structure in (8).

I have identified 21 instances with *give*. A limited number of instances with *verbs of future having*, verbs *of communication* and *verbs that inherently signify acts of giving* have been found. A limited number of instances have been found with subcategories of *throw*-type verbs, that is with *verbs of instantaneous causation of ballistic motion*.

(7) **Verb**-**Theme**-Goal

a. give ear to (somebody)
   I want to assure you that city council is *giving ear to all residents* who want to lodge complaints.
   https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/give+ear+to
b. pass the torch to (somebody) (cf. Holban 2007: 548)
   As Mary is retiring she is *passing the torch to me*.
c. show the door to (somebody) (cf. Holban 2007: 689)
   The President *showed the door to the reporters*.

(8) show the door to (somebody)

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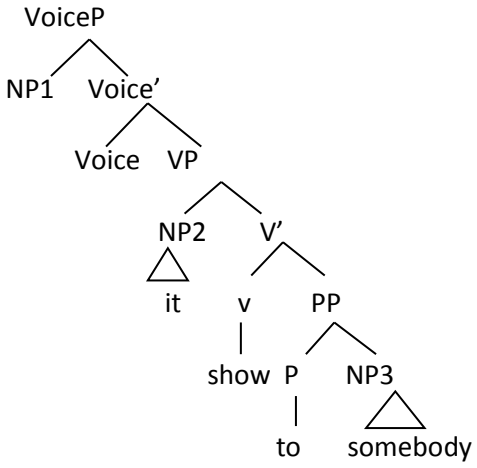

As previously suggested in the literature, *Class 1* and *Class 2* have been found to alternate. My investigation has indeed confirmed, at least with the prototypical *give*, the alternation (see Table1). It has further revealed that, due to its high frequency, *give* participates in the dative alternation, with an overall preference for the double object construction in ditransitive idiomatic expressions.

Table 1. Alternating idioms

Class 1 (**Verb**-Goal-**Theme)**	Class 2 **(Verb**-**Theme**-Goal)
give (somebody) a wide berth	give a wide berth to (somebody)
give (somebody) the cold shoulder	give the cold shoulder to (somebody)
give (somebody) birth	give birth to (somebody)
give (somebody) a black eye	give a black eye to (somebody)
give (somebody) way	give way to (somebody)
give (somebody) the lie	give the lie to (somebody)
give (somebody) a blank check	give a blank check to (somebody)
give (somebody) pause	give pause to (somebody)
give (somebody) credit	give credit to (somebody)
give (somebody) hell	give hell to (somebody)
give (somebody) full reign	Give full reign to (somebody)

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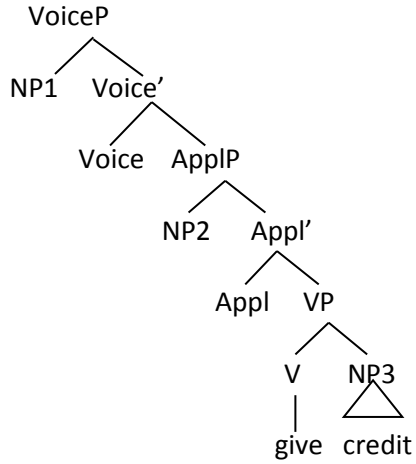
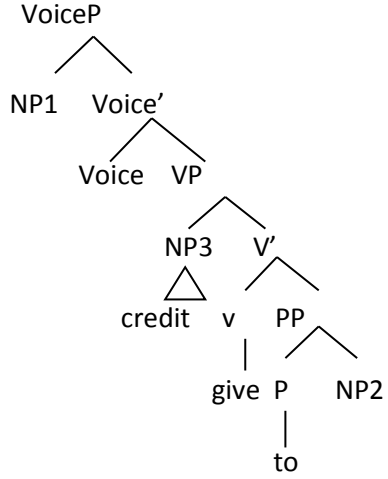
The syntactic structures for these idioms (e.g., *give x credit* vs. *give credit to x*) consist of the root V and NP3, which can appear in either the double object construction (9a) or the prepositional dative (9b).

(9) a.



b.



However, the equal availability of the two alternations shows, in some cases, a preference for some idioms to be used in one alternant more than in the other one. Such is the case of *give birth to (someone)* vs*. give (someone) birth* which is available in both alternants; however, the preferred pattern is the prepositional dative *give birth to (someone).* Similar examples are listed below:

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(10) a. give birth to (someone) ~ ??give (someone) birth
Mum who was a triplet *gives birth to quadruplets* after fertility battle**.**
Mum told she was infertile and had months to live *gives birth to miracle baby*.

b. give full reign to (somebody) ~ ??give (somebody) full reign
The manager believed he should *give free rein to the employees* to present a campaign.
Despite giving full rein to *Laura's inner struggles* and torments, Fuentes is far more interested in the grand scale.

Source: *ldoceonline.com*

c. ?? give the cold shoulder to (somebody)~ give (somebody) the cold shoulder
The Prime Minister thinks Trump has started that rumour about him- that's why he's *giving him the cold shoulder*.
After I got the promotion, a few of my co-workers started giving me the cold shoulder.

Source: *ldoceonline.com*

Another interesting aspect noticed with the alternation between the double object frame and prepositional frame is that ditransitive idiomatic expressions such as *give the cold shoulder*, *give birth*, *give way*, *give a black eye* etc. have fixed constant meanings across both alternants (DOC and PDC). Moreover, certain verb-argument combinations that seem to alternate (*give the cold shoulder, give birth, give a black eye, give a wide berth*, *give way*, *give hell*, *give full reign*, *give the lie*, *give pause*) do not involve intended possession; for these idioms *give* seems to have lost its possessional meaning. The same stands for subclasses of give; idioms headed by verbs of future having such as *promise the moon*, *offer the world* fail to entail successful transfer of possession, in either variant.

Class 3 resembles Class 2 in that it involves the *prepositional dative*. The pattern is discontinuous, the verb and the Goal are part of the idiomatic expression while the theme constitutes an open slot (**Verb**-Theme-**Goal**). I have found 26 instances of this type with *verbs of instantaneous causation of ballistic motion, verbs of causation of accompanied motion in a deictically specified direction* and *verbs of sending* as shown in (11a,b) below followed by the syntactic structure in (12).

(11) **Verb**-Theme-**Goal**

a. throw (somebody) to the wolves
Tommy was caught with the marijuana in his backpack, but *he threw me to the wolves* and said it was mine.

b. take (someone) to the cleaners
It was my first time playing poker at the casino, and the more experienced players *took me to the cleaners*.

Source: *thefreedictionary.com*

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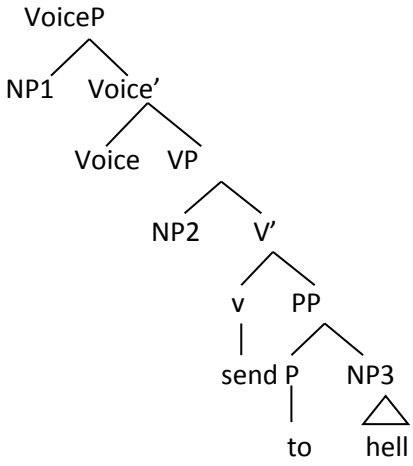
(12) send (somebody) to hell



Class 4 as already pointed out by Bruening (2010) is ruled out as it would require the verb and the theme to form an idiom while the goal would constitute an open slot (the examples are extracted from Bruening 2010, 545)

(13) a. *give the wolves NP
b. *send the devil NP

Except for Bruening's classification, I have also identified another class of idioms where both the verb, the theme and the goal are fixed.

(14) **Verb**-**Theme**-**Goal**
a. give the devil its due

So far, I have shown that with idioms headed by the verb *give* the *double object frame* is the preferred syntactic expression; out of the 100 idioms headed by *give*, 80 fall under the double object frame, thus we can hypothesize that the prototypical pattern for expressing caused possession is biased towards the double object frame; a similar situation is met with idiomatic expressions headed by subclasses of *give*-type verbs. Furthermore, with idioms headed by *throw/send*-verbs the *prepositional frame* is the preferred syntactic expression. Thus, verbs of sending (*send* x to the lions, *send* x to the showers, *send* x straight to hell, send x to his Maker etc.), verbs of instantaneous causation of ballistic motion (*throw* x to the wolves, *throw* x to the dogs etc.) and verbs of causation of accompanied motion in a deictically specified direction (*take* x to the cleaners) are biased towards the

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prepositional frame. Last but not least, idioms alternate between class 1 (**Verb**-Goal**-Theme)** and 2 (**Verb**-**Theme**-Goal); however, in spite of the equal availability of the two alternations, some idioms exhibit a preference for a specific frame ([??] give the cold shoulder to (somebody)~ give (somebody) the cold shoulder).

2.2. Selection and functional heads

In what follows, I examine the functional heads that appear in between V-N, relying on the selection theory which holds that a chain of selection would hold from V to D, Num, Cl to N so as V and N can be interpreted idiomatically, but the functional elements do not have to be a fixed part of the idiom and their presence/ absence does not affect the selection. This examination offers a contrastive view on two frames involved in the dative alternation, where the *to*-frame does not exhibit a rich variation in functional elements, as compared to the double object frame.

Starting from the three major classes of idioms I will look at the functional elements that appear in between parts of ditransitive idioms, as follows: I will begin with idioms that have (a) *a definite determiner* and I will check to see whether it is fixed or it varies. I will further move to (b) *indefinite determiners* and finally I will look at idioms with (c) bare singulars which occur with other determiners. This investigation draws on previous work of verb-object idioms (Riehmann 2001) which holds that the majority of idioms permit the determiner to vary. I now take a look at ditrasitive idiomatic patterns, by including my findings in the form of examples.

I will now turn to idiomatic expressions with a definite determiner in their canonical form. I have identified 26 ditransitive idioms with a *definite determiner*, the double object frame as in (15 a, b) and for the most part, the determiner seems to be fixed (see the full list in Appendix 2).

(15) a. give (someone) the cold shoulder: "Father will give Patrick a big cold shoulder"

Source: *thefreedictionary.com*

b. give (someone) the raspberry: "I gave my boyfriend a raspberry the other day and then we just started tickling each other

Source: *urbandictionary.com*

In contrast, I have identified 62 instances of idioms, occurring with *indefinite determiners*; they show a different malleability in that they can be replaced with other determines without affecting the idiomatic reading as shown in (16a-c). For the most part, these idioms with indefinite determiners occur in the double object frame; rare cases of idiomatic expressions with indefinite determiners occurring in the *to*-frame are shown in (16d, e) below.

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(16) a. give (someone) a hint: “Tim gave Gabe some hints on the issue”
Source: *macmillandictionary.com*
b. give (someone) a try: “The teacher gave Tom one more try”
c. give (someone) a chance: “the director gave her another chance”
d. give (someone) a buzz: “The Most Disappointing Democrat Of The Week is President Barack Obama, for shamefully allowing his minions to give the buzz-saw treatment to Dean”
e. give (someone) a fair hearing: “gives fair hearing to the activists who spent much of the eighties blockading his father's medical office”
Source: *thenewyorker.com*

What the analysis indicates is that determiners are not fixed and they can either be replaced (give *a* final blow to x~ give the final blow to x) or left out (give x *a* fair hearing~ give fair hearing to x) without disrupting the selection.

Moreover, I have identified a small number of idiomatic expressions that take optional modifiers (adjectives) which can be left out, added or changed with another; however, not all behave in the same way. For some idiomatic expressions, if adjectives are added, they will bring about changes in the meaning of the idiom (see (17a-c) below). In contrast, other idioms which permit adjectives to be dropped do not affect the meaning of the idiom. (see (18a-a’ below) and they only have a slight influence on the verbal event.

(17) a. give (somebody) a big hand - “Let’s give our final competitors a big hand”
a’. give (someone) a hand - “Let me give you a hand with that backpack”
b. give (someone) funny money - “Advances in medicine are being used by journalists to make funny money”
c. give (someone) hush money - “He said the old man offered him hush money to keep the encounter a secret.”

(18) a. give (somebody) a fair hearing- “Weber gave a fair hearing to anyone who held a different opinion”
a’. give (somebody) a hearing- “Weber gave a hearing to anyone who held a different opinion”

As shown in the examples above, functional elements that occur in certain idioms can be omitted; they are not fixed parts of the idiom. Many idioms also allow non-functional elements to occur in between parts; *give x funny money* vs. *give x hush money* where the adjective brings about a different interpretation. Last but not least, the *to*-frame does not exhibit a rich variation in functional elements, as compared to the double object frame which is the preferred one.

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3. Conclusions

The above examination of the English ditransitive idiomatic patterns has confirmed the view already expressed in the literature that the interpretation of idioms depends on lexical selection. Idioms are fully compositional where their meanings can be predicted from the structures in which they occur and the meanings of their parts. Historically, idioms represent "moments" of linguistic creation; they are fully compositional and they have been found to alternate between the two syntactic frames involved in the Dat alternation.

I have shown that the *to*-frame exhibits a limited number of idioms, as compared to its double object counterpart. Drawing on the typology already suggested in the literature, the *to*-frame can be found with two classes of idiomatic expressions- that is in the (a) **Verb**-**Theme**-Goal class where the Goal remains an open slot as in *give heart to (somebody)*, *give ear to (somebody)* and in the (b) **Verb**-Theme-**Goal** class where the verb and the Goal are part of the idiomatic expression and the Theme is open as in *throw (somebody) to the wolves*, *throw (somebody) to the lions*. Within the **Verb**-**Theme**-Goal class (*give heart to (somebody))* I have identified 21 instances with the verb *give* and a small number of idioms with verbs of future having (*offer an olive branch to (somebody)*), verbs of communication (*show the door to (somebody)*), verbs that inherently signify acts of giving (*pass the torch to (somebody)*) and verbs of instantaneous causation of ballistic motion (*throw a bone to (somebody)*). The contexts where these idiomatic expressions have been found show a specific animacy pattern in what concerns the *to*-dative goal. The Goal, even if it represents an empty slot, selects common nouns with [+animate, +/-human] features in the singular or plural (*She gave birth to a beautiful baby girl*), proper names with a [+human] feature (*I can't give any credence to Donald*), collective nouns (*John gave offence to the committee after the football match*) and pronouns (*Can you believe the manager gave free reign to me?*). What is important to mention is that leaning on the idea that *give* along its subclasses have one event schema-caused possession, in both ditransitive frames, I have identified that with some **Verb**-**Theme**-Goal idioms (*give birth to x*, *give way to x*), the possessional meanings seems to have been "bleached" out. Turning to the **Verb**-Theme-**Goal** class, where the Goal is part of the idiomatic expression (*throw (somebody) to the wolves*), I have found 26 instances with verbs of instantaneous causation of ballistic motion (*throw (somebody) to the dogs*), verbs of causation of accompanied motion in a deictically specified direction (*take (somebody) to the woodshed*) and with verbs of sending (*send (somebody) to kingdom come*). The *to*-Goal can occur with animate arguments carrying a third person specification as in *throw (somebody) to the wolves* or

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send (somebody) to his Maker, but it can also occur with inanimate arguments as in *send (somebody) to hell*. In other words, for the most part, *throw*-type verbs are biased towards the prepositional frame.

By way of contrast, I have argued that the double object construction exhibits a large number of idioms centred around one class of idiomatic expressions (**Verb**-Goal-**Theme**) where the Goal remains an open slot (*give (somebody) the red face*). I have identified 80 instances with the prototypical *give*; let us remember that *give* carries lexical sensitivity in both ditransitive frames, thus in the double object frame it lexicalizes caused possession, similar to the *to*-frame. Except for the prototypical *give*, this frame occurs with verbs which show acts of giving (*owe (somebody) a grudge, promise (somebody) the Earth),* verbs of future having (*show (somebody) the ropes*) verbs of communication, verbs of sending (*send (somebody) a wire*) and verbs of throwing (*toss (somebody) a bone*).

Furthermore, I have also investigated the behaviour of *give* around Class 1 (**Verb**-Goal-**Theme)** involving the double object frame and Class 2 (**Verb**-**Theme**-Goal) involving the prepositional dative. I have shown that in spite of the equal availability of the two alternants within idiomatic expressions, there is an overall preference for the double object variant; out of 100 idioms headed by *give*, 80 fall under the double object frame. In contrast, some idioms of the type *give birth to (someone)*, *give full reign to (someone)* show a preference for the *to*-frame.

I have also shown that ditransitive idiomatic patterns that alternate have fixed meanings across alternants (DOC and PDC). Moreover, certain idiomatic expressions headed by *give* that are found in both alternants, fail to entail successful transfer of possession, thus the possessional meaning seems to have been "bleached" out. By way of contrast, when it comes to certain idioms headed by *throw* and its subclasses (*throw x to the wolves*, *throw x to the dogs*), I have argued that they carry an abstract form of caused motion, thus they cannot alternate and they can only function in the *to*-frame. Remember that *throw*-type verbs exhibit two event schemas, where the caused motion is signalled by the PDC and their caused possession by the DOC. Furthermore, idioms headed by *send* have been found to alternate and both patterns are grammatical (*send x a check~ send a check to x*); from a semantic point of view, they involve a relation of intended possession.

Last but not least, I have examined the functional heads that appear in between parts of ditransitive idiomatic expressions, relying on the selection theory, and I have shown that their presence/absence does not disrupt the selection. These heads are not fixed and they can either be replaced or left out without affecting the selection.

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