# *DOUBLE OBJECT CONSTRUCTION IN ENGLISH, FRENCH AND ROMANIAN PROVERBS*

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*Abstract: Languages that have a dative case and use the dative NP as the realization of possessors, can express recipients with dative verbs or verbs of caused possession. The paper will present the morphosyntactic encoding of recipients in English, French and Romanian proverbs, analyzing the distribution of object properties across recipient relation in paremic constructions. I believe that proverbs offer the specific pattern for asymmetries or perfect paralleled alternations when targeting the double object constructions. There are some questions that need an answer and the paper will display the possible directions of investigation:*

- *coding properties of objects (word order, case marking);*
- *the ability to passivize;*
- *the sensitivity to animacy;*

*Interpreting the paremic patterns may lead to a hierarchy of verb classes in English, French and Romanian proverbs. A comparison between the double object construction and the dative construction has been drawn within the selected paremic ethnofields of understanding & knowledge and child & ignorance.*

*Keywords: object, argument, thematic role, subject, verb.*

## I. Proverbs as texts.

**1.** Making language empirically accessible from a grammatical angle has been developed since 1950s and the status of language patterns became very important. Formal properties of explanatory theories turned to causal and ontological properties of those theories. Still there are voices who claim that there is no formally explicit and factually adequate syntactic description of a natural language.

Languages can differ in constraints and verb complexity. I have selected *proverbs* as they offer a variety of patterns that can include terms like *phrase, sentence, saying, statement, situation, expression, people, principles, generalization, message, comparison, paradigm, culture*. According to Matti Kuusi *proverbs* are ‘monumenta humana’, expressing ‚basic truths’ in short sentences, being the *mirror of the communmities* people lived in, filtering moral principles and norms. Throughout centuries proverbs changed their form and encapsulated figures of speech, a peculiar rhythm and sometimes undoubtful rime. The paremiologic dowry represents a thesaurus that has been recorded and launched in collections.The relationship between national and foreign or international proverbs became stronger. Such a relationship has a doubled aspect (conceptual and lexical).



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Is the proverb the image of the wise? This is probably the most repeated question whenever such a mysterious and everlasting communication unit is analysed, compared or simply uttered. Proverbs in people's messages reflect every age and time. According to Halliday [2004: 3] „when people speak or write, they produce text". I consider *proverbs,* texts by themselves, because they bring many-faceted phenomena that can be used and explored from different points of view. The *proverb* as a text can be viewed both as an *object* having a meaning, a *value* and an *instrument* that reveals data about the system of the language in which it is spoken or written.

II. Verbal patterns.

2. In what I am going to explore – the paremic ethnofields of *understanding & knowledge* and *child & ignorance* I am endowed to different theories starting from semantic syntax (limited to sentence syntax) and passing through Fillmore's case grammar.

Based on McCawley's hypothesis that all languages of the world have an underlying structure of either Verb-Subject-Object (VSObj) or Subject-Object-Verb (SObjV), every S(entence)-structure consists of a predicate accompanied by its argument terms, each with its specific functions. In, 'open syntax', there are between zero and three argument terms/argument functions, according to Seuren. In English, a so called, 'dummy subject'(*it*) can appear:

E: *It* takes all sorts to make a world.
R: Mare-i grădina lui Dumnezeu.

Romanian is much more inclined towards ' zero' argument structure than English, in proverbs, even if the following examples might offer the image of an equilibrium between the two languages:

R:**0[S]** Seamănă dar nu răsare.
E: It may rhyme, but it accordeth not.

R: **[0 [S][**Mai bine bolnav la pat decât bărbat încornorat.
E: It is better to be a-cold than a cuckold.

In French proverbs the Subject may appear towards the end or can be replaced by an impersonal expression or a neutral pronoun *on*:

F: On n'a rien sans peine.
R: **0[V]** Cu nimic tot nimic

On the other hand, Romanian and English seem to favour the same elliptic pattern – when the verb is absent in proverbs like:

R: Faptele, faptele, nu oala cu laptele!
E: Deeds not words!



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R: Lesne din gură, anevoie din mână.
E: Great cry and little wool.

**2.1.** The French proverbs can display verbal forms that can offer the image of a perfect symmetry like in:

F: Il faut ce qu'il faut.

even if the Romanian version underlines the contrast within the *noun sphere* through the word order which is in this case: Adj, Adj, N, V.

R: Albă, neagră, asta este.

French seems to be closer to English in the following elliptic patterns:

E: Like cow, like calf!
F: De mauvais corbeau, mauvais oeuf!

Still, there is at a deeper analysis, a difference between the English and the French elliptic pattern. French allows, nevertheless, an argument of a presupposed verb AVOIR in:

F: De mauvais corbeau, [on a] mauvais œuf!.

while the English version presupposes the verb to BE in 'The calf [is] like the cow'.

The Romanian version of the above French-English proverb displays, however, the S-V structure, making use of a metaphor and of a movement verb:

R: Aşchia nu *sare* departe de pomul tăiat.
(the subject of the Romanian version is a part of the adverbial modifier – *pomul tăiat*)

According to Seuren [1996], French presents fully lexical indirect objects (datives) generally external, ordered after the direct object and preceded by the dative preposition, which in French is *à:*

F: Chante à un baudet, il te fera des pets
R: Ce ştie măgarul ce e cântarea privighetorii.

What is to be observed here is the clear difference between the French and the Romanian pattern when rendering the same idea: Romanian uses V-S (ubject) structure adding an object clause as an argument, while the French version uses the alternative image of the V+ IObj and V+DObj.

In Romanian proverbs the word order can be changed, especially if we face a rhetoric question. The indirect object appears after the direct object:



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R: Frumuseţea [DObj] cui nu-i [IObj] place? dar nu ştii în ea ce zace.

The French version chooses the elliptic pattern where the oppositon between what is *appearance* or form and what is *subtance* is rendered through the adjective ‚belle' and the adverb 'rien':

F: *Belle* pochette et *rien* dedans.

**2.2** English allows both internal and external datives (even if there are linguists who observed that in English there are semantic differences between the two kinds of dative):

E: Who is bad to his own, is bad to himself.
R: Cine face, lui îşi face.

The only verb used in English and Romanian proverbs, that allows an internal dative, together with a direct object, remains the verb *to give*:

R: Dacă îi dai mult **nas,** ţi se urcă la cap.
E: Give him **an inch** and he'll take an elf.

The presence of two arguments means that the first is *the subject* and the second is *the direct object*:

R: *Soiul rău* nu are îndreptare.
E: *It is a bad* cloth that will take no colour.

If there are three arguments, the normal order is the *subject*, then comes *the indirect object* and then the *direct object.* It is the case where the verb to give is the main verb, otherwise, the general format may be different in English, as compared to Romanian proverbs:

E: Give a *clawn your finger* and he will take your hand.
R: *Îi* dai *degetul*, el îţi apucă mâna.

Lexical semantic properties of some other predicates may result in different argument functions, where the subject and direct object terms can be either NP or S. The middle term (normally an indirect object) can only be NP:

E: Now I have *a sheep* and *a cow*, everybody bids *me* '*Good morrow'*
R: *Omului harnic şi înstărit*, toţi vor să-*i* dea *bineţe.*

Even if the importance of thematic functions is recognized as 'part in the machinery of language, in the organizational principles that govern or constrain the shape of lexical argument frames' [Seuren, 1996], their role is not clearly assumed. They are considered as not sufficient 'to catch the regularities found in syntactic processes'.



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Certain verbs in English, called intransitives or 'unaccusatives', may have:

- different syntactic behaviour:

E: Ye shall never labour younger.
R: Tinereţea nu se mai întoarce.

( the English version uses an intransitive verb, while the Romanian one uses a movement verb)

- different syntactic constructions:

E: *Who* has not understanding, *let him* have legs.

R: *Unde* nu e minte, *trebuie* să fie picioare.

**2.3.** There are both in English and Romanian, verbs having *an internal object:*

E: He laughs best who laughs last.
R: Cine râde la urmă, râde mai bine.

The paremic pattern can offer a perfect superpositon of terms and meaning in French and Romanian:

F: Qui **cherche** *trouve*.
R: Cine **caută**, *găseşte*.

The absence of the arguments, or the presence of zero arguments as direct objects can be perhaps, explained within the Romance languages.

NPs may appear at the right periphery of the S (entence) in French and in Romanian:

R: Prieten cu interes nu se înţelege[nu este] prieten.
F: L'ami par intéret est une hirondelle sur les toits.

In terms of subject, direct object and indirect object, considering the number and the position of the terms in question, we can retain an interesting situation of the verb to pay:

E: If you pay not *a servant his wages*, he will pay *himself*.
R: Dacă *slugii* nu-*i* plăteşti *simbria*, o să şi-*o* ia şi *singură*.

In English, the NP *his wages* is a direct object in the first part of the paremic unit, while 'himself' as a reflexive pronoun is becoming an *indirect object*, in the second part ('the servant will pay the *wages to himself*'). The Romanian version has a double indirect object in the first part and a direct object in the second part of the paremic unit. In both languages, the



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verb to pay may be considered a *recipient verb*, but it can highlight the 'beneficiary shadow', as well. Verbs like to *pay*, to *teach*, or to *serve*, can drop the direct object, while the indirect one loses the status of indirect object. Its thematic role can remain unaffected:

E: He that serves *God* for money, will serve the *devil* for better.
R: Cine-l serveşte *pe Dumnezeu* pentru bani, îl va sluji şi *pe diavol* pentru aur.

E: I taught you *to swim* and now you'd drown *me.*
R: *Pe cine* nu laşi *să moară* nu *te* lasă *să trăieşti.*

III. Arguments and themes.

**3.1** In the Predicate-Argument structure all lexical elements are considered predicates. English and Romanian proverbs show structural differences for the expression of the identical or near-identical meanings.

The position of the predicate at S(ubject)A(rgument)-level can be S(entence)-initial or S(entence)-final:

R: Cine spune *mult*, face puţin.
E: They bray *most* that can do least.

vs

R: *Binele* se uită.
E. *Eaten bread* is soon forgotten.

**3.2** Romanian and English proverbs can display:

- no syntactic parallelism, semantic parallelism:

R: *Bine* faci, *bine* găseşti.
Dacă faci *bine(bine)* găseşti*(bine).*
E: Good finds *good.*

The French pattern in proverbs can bring an indirect object while the Romanian version
brings another type of a V and a direct object:

R: Cine a păţit multe, ştie multe.(in Romanian V+DObj+V+DObj)
F: On apprend à vivre à ses depens.(in French V+prep.+Inf. Clause)

- partial syntactic parallelism, no semantic parallelism:



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R: Leagă *sacu*' până-i rotund, nu când *îi* dai de fund.
E: Better spare at *brim* than at *bottom*.

- reduction vs extension of the paremic pattern:

E: Patient men win *the day.*[NPh+V+DObj]
R:Victoria e de partea celui care rabdă. [Pred+Relative Clause]

(the meaning transfer from E to R is from the verbal sphere to the noun one:*to win* becomes *victorie)*

R: Cine **vorbeşte** multe, ştie multe.
F: **Diseur** de bon mots, mauvais caractère.

(in the above example the Romanian verb *a vorbi* is transformed in a French noun. The double direct object from the Romanian version – *multe*- is found in one single NP – *de bon mots).*

**3.3.** Ilocutionary verbs of communication may be used to describe events of communicating messages:

- having a caused possession meaning:

E: Don't sell the *bearskin* before you killed the *bear.*
R: Nu vinde pielea ursului din pădure.

R : Ce ai învăţat la tinereţe, ai să ştii la bătrâneţe.
F : Ce qu'on apprend au berceau dure jusqu'au tombeau.

- having a caused motion and possession meanings:

E: Shear *sheep* that have them.
R: Cine poate, *oase* roade.



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R: Cine n-a gustat amarul, nu ştie ce e zahărul.
F: Qui n'a connu le malheur, ne sait apprécier la joie.

Even if the syntactic pattern is not changed in the two languages (Romanian and French), there is transfer at the level of meaning (the verb *a gusta* is translated by the verb *connaître*, while the direct objects *amarul* and *zaharul* are translated by two antonyms, le *malheur* and *la joie*).

**3.4** The prepositions *to* and *à* usually introduce the second object in English and French and on very many occasions they indicate a wide range of argument types:

- possession goals:

E: He gives straw to his dog, bones to his ass.
R: Nu da fân câinelui şi oase măgarului..

R: Cine a păţit multe, ştie multe.
F: On apprend à vivre à ses depens.

- spatial goals:

E: He that dwells *next door* to *a cripple*, will learn *to halt.*
R: Cu *şchiopul* împreună de vei locui, *te* înveţi şi tu a şchiopăta.

R: Spinii carnea ţi-o sfâşie
F: Qui a affaire à mechantes gens, aura la guerre malgré ses dents.

**3.5.** English lacks impersonal passives and its passive formation is relatively straightforward. Paremic patterns may appear blocked in many examples:

E: It is an ill bargain where no man wins.
R: Nu e tocmeală bună acolo unde nu câştigă nimeni.
* An ill bargain is won (by no man).

It seems that verbs like *to have, to happen, to want* block passivization in English:

E: Have at *it* and have *it.*
R: Cine îndrăzneşte, cucereşte.
* It is had.

E: He who wants *a mule* without fault, must walk on foot.
R: Cine caută *cal* fără cusur, perge pe jos.



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* A mule without fault is wanted(by him)

In French only transitive subjects passivize and only original direct objects become the new subjects:

R: Mulţi văd, puţini înţeleg.
F:Il y a plus d'acheteurs que de connaisseurs.
* Acheteurs et connaisseurs sont plus.

vs

R: Nu după suman trebuie judecat omul.
F: On ne connaît pas les gens aux robes.
Les gens *ne sont pas connus* aux robes.

IV. Farther steps.

**4.** CONCLUSIONS

The above analysis allows me to conclude on the following aspects:

- there are several components that paremic units can display: ideational, interpersonal, textual;
- proverbs can generalize, evaluate or modalize;
- even if many of the paremic units can be considered synonyms, they may have different expressions, conveying the same meaning;
- English, French and Romanian proverbs may have distinct structures and use sometimes different terms:

E: Make *hay* while the sun shines.
R: Bate *fierul* cât e cald.

(*make* vs *a bate*, *hay* vs *fierul*)

or a very detailed saying may be rendered in a metaphoric synthesis expressed in the target language:

R: De puţine cuvinte înţeleptul înţelege, iar cel nebun nici când urechile i le sparge.
F: A bon entendeur, peu de paroles.



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(De puţine cuvinte înţeleptul înţelege, iar cel nebun nici când urechile i le sparge)

- there are few double object constructions in English proverbs, Romanian proverbs being richer in this respect; dative verbs in English are not so present in paremic structures; still the verb to give is probably the most used one (the Romanian counterparts are the verbs: *a da, a face, a îmbia* or a whole sentence).
- elliptic constructions are very frequent in Romanian, French and English proverbs;
- preposition stranding is possible in English and not compulsory in Romance languages (the preposition *of* is more present in English proverbs than the preposition *to*);
- if we tend to compare paremic structures with idioms, we can recognize that the double object variant is proper to a fixed theme, while the *to/of* variants (even if they are not numerous) diplay the fixed goal/instrument in English;

R: Viaţa omului, ca oul în mâna copilului.
E: Man's life is like an egg in the hands of a child.

Proverbs, considered, 'strategies in situations', may warn, advise or draw people's attentiom to the moral or ethical consequences. They preserve the semantic connectedness of constituents, the word order being the most important element for the message to be understood.

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