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What to blame it on:

Diathesis alternations, usage advice, “confusion”, and pattern extension

[revision and expansion of the handout for the talk]

1. My larger goal is to talk (especially on Language Log and ADS-L, the American Dialect Society mailing list) to people who are not linguists about linguistic matters, especially syntax, semantics, pragmatics, discourse organization, and usage/style – and their relationships. This paper is about one small piece of this project.

2. The linking between syntactic arguments and participant roles is complex: in particular, some verbs allow alternative expressions for the same participant roles (“diathesis alternations”)

Dative Alternation:

- (1a) give RECIPIENT OBJECT (*give me the book*)
- (1b) give OBJECT to RECIPIENT (*give the book to me*)

Spray Alternation:

- (2a) spray SUBSTANCE on LOCATION (*spray paint on the wall*)
- (2b) spray LOCATION with SUBSTANCE (*spray the wall with paint*)

while other verbs will allow only one of the alternatives, and still others might allow only the other (Levin 1993).

(What follows is entirely about verbs and their syntactic arguments.)

3. When an alternative to some existing pattern arises, usage critics are quick to criticize it: they are usually antagonistic towards innovations (or what they perceive to be innovations) in general, but especially to innovations that introduce what they see as just new ways of saying old things. If we already have the (a) variants, why should we also have the (b) variants?

(3a) blame SOURCE (for CONSEQUENCE) (*blame Kim (for the disaster)*)

(3b) blame CONSEQUENCE on SOURCE (*blame the disaster on Kim*)

Mark Liberman at <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/language-log/archives/005260.html> and AMZ at <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/language-log/archives/005272.html> -- citing *OED*, *MWDEU*, Ayres (1881), Funk & Wagnalls (1915), and Garner (2000); Levin (1993:sec. 2.10)

(4a) rid LOCATION of SOMETHING (*rid the garden of rats*)

(4b) rid SOMETHING from LOCATION (*rid rats from the garden*)

MWDEU (821), Levin (1993:secs. 2.3.2, 10.6)

(5a) confuse ORIGINAL with REPLICA (*confuse love with sex*)

(5b) confuse REPLICA for ORIGINAL (*confuse sex for love*)

(5c) also: confuse REPLICA with ORIGINAL (*confuse sex with love*)

"We must not confuse dissent with disloyalty" (Edward R. Murrow, *See It Now* broadcast, report on Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, 3/17/54), variously quoted as "We must not confuse dissent for disloyalty" (b), "We must not confuse disloyalty with dissent" (c), as well as "We must not confuse dissent and disloyalty" and "We must not confuse disloyalty and dissent"
ADS-L discussion by Larry Horn and AMZ, Aug.-Sept. 2007; various sections of Levin (1993)

(6a) substitute NEW (for OLD) (*substitute fries (for the salad)*)

(6b) substitute OLD (with/by NEW) (*substitute the salad (with/by fries)*)
"encroached/innovative *substitute*"

(6c) also: substitute OLD (for NEW) (*substitute the salad (for fries)*)
"reversed *substitute*"

Denison (to appear); AMZ at
<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/005255.html>
following up ADS-L discussions during 2004-06

This is just a sampling of cases, and they aren't all the same in their details. In this paper, I'm concentrating on the alternations between (a) and (b) in (3)-(6), but I've listed some other variants as well.

4. The cases in (1)-(6) above involve two objects, with DO alternating with PO [oblique object marked by P] or 2O. There are other cases with only one object, PO (intransitive V) alternating with DO (transitive V) – "transitivizing P drop" – for example:

(7a) exit from LOCATION (*exit from the building*)

(7b) exit LOCATION (*exit the building*)

locative preposition drop: "the transitive frame appears to be derived from the intransitive frame by 'dropping' the preposition" (Levin 1993:43); and see Ben Zimmer at
<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/004210.html>

(8a) protest against SOMETHING (*protest against the war*)

(8b) protest SOMETHING (*protest the war*) [AmE, judged to be barbarous by many BrE speakers]

ADS-L discussion 2/11/08, citing Garner (2003:649), Burchfield (1998:635), *MWDEU* (784), *OED*; and see Jan Freeman at
http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2007/09/09/yankees_win/

(9a) agree to SOMETHING (*agree to a two-year roadmap*)

(9b) agree SOMETHING (*agree a two-year roadmap*) [BrE, judged to be unacceptable by most AmE speakers, though it occurs with some frequency in newspapers and news broadcasts]

Many countries hope that Bali will agree a two-year roadmap to negotiate a successor to the Kyoto Protocol ... (<http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/L16335225.htm>); ADS-L report by Alison Murie 1/29/08, with follow-up by AMZ

Transitivizing P-drop is interesting in its own right, but I believe it has a different motivation

from the alternations in (3)-(6), and I won't discuss it further in this paper.]

5. The meaning issue

5.1. Implicit assumptions above: each of these verbs has a single meaning, denoting a type of situation, describable by listing the participants (playing specific roles) in this situation and specifying the relationships among the participants. The participants are then linked to syntactic arguments in various syntactic constructions. Like lexemes, each construction may contribute its own truth-functional semantics, various types of indirect meaning (presuppositions, implicatures, “nuances”), “social content”, or discourse-functional content.

For *blame*, we have a situation with three participants, call them P1, P2, and P3. Very crudely, in this situation,

P1 judges that P2 and P3 are related as source and consequence, and that P3 is in some way undesirable.

Participant roles and syntactic arguments are then linked via two constructions:

Construction 1: P1 links to SU, P2 to DO, P3 to PO (of *for*) [as in (3a)]

Construction 2: P1 links to SU, P2 to PO (of *on*), P3 to DO [as in (3b)].

Each construction may, but does not have to, contribute further content.

5.2. Non-linguists tend not to think about things in such a fashion (with situations in the world separated from the words that describe these situations), but are inclined to think of meanings in terms of linguistic expressions, and they are inclined to downplay the possible contributions of syntactic constructions, preferring instead to locate meaning differences (in a very broad sense of “meaning”) in individual words, often in a circular fashion.

So *MWDEU* (821) considers an example with “ridding sandflies from houses” in it, saying:

In the context, *rid* essentially means “to remove completely.” The more likely construction in current English would be “ridding houses of sandflies,” where *rid* means “to make free; relieve.”

I interpret this as a claim that there are two verbs *rid*, with somewhat different meanings. But note that the proposed meanings are just other English expressions – expressions that entail the very syntactic differences that are at issue: *remove* has the syntax

remove SOMETHING from LOCATION [as in (4b)]

while *make* ___*free* and *relieve* have the syntax

make LOCATION free of SOMETHING

relieve LOCATION of SOMETHING [as in (4a)].

And from a correspondent who read the abstract for this paper on Language Log:

I'm an editor, not a linguist; to me the difference between the verbs that do and do not allow alternative roles has to do with the accepted meanings of words, not the sentence structure. "Give" and "spray" mean the same thing in both examples, whereas "substitute" really doesn't. [meaning, presumably, that *substitute* means ‘replace’ in (6b)]

Non-linguists often have firm intuitions about when you have “the same” verb and when you have two verbs with different meanings, but these intuitions tend to follow from the paraphrases

they can find.

6. The correctness issue. Non-linguists are sometimes puzzled that I consider non-standard usages at all. Lying behind their puzzlement is the assumption that standard English (or, perhaps, even formal written standard English) IS English, so that things like (6b), *substitute* OLD *with/by* NEW, simply aren't English. End of story.

Somewhat more subtly, people in general tend to find usages that are not their own “confusing” or “unclear” (understandably, since they have to work to figure out the intended meaning). Note the reference to “the accepted meanings of verbs” in the mail from the editor above, and consider his continuation:

... "confuse REPLICA for ORIGINAL" is poor diction – the writer/speaker means "mistake" not "confuse." "Confuse ... for" and "substitute ... by" are not standard English, and aren't clear writing in the sense of readability.

The usages in (3b) (*blame on*), (4b) (*rid from*), (5b) (*confuse for*), and (6b) (*substitute with/by*) all have a history of disparagement. *Blame on* has a particularly entertaining history, with Alfred Ayres in 1881 labeling it “a gross vulgarism” and Funk & Wagnalls (1915) calling it “indefensible slang”; it’s now entirely standard, though Bryan Garner (2000) seems not to have gotten the news.

According to *MWDEU* (821),

Rid is now almost always used with *of* ...

At one time *rid* was commonly used with *from*, but the combination now seldom occurs. I can recall teachers complaining about *rid from*, but I haven't found it (yet) in the manuals. Meanwhile, despite what *MWDEU* says, the number of {"rid * from"} examples on the web is gigantic; some are from older literature, and some involve reflexives (a special case), but many are straightforward *rid Y from X*.

The history of *confuse for* is at the moment unclear to me. It didn't catch the attention of the *MWDEU* editors or of Bryan Garner, but many informants reject it. On the other hand, it seems to be frequent; as Larry Horn said on ADS-L on 8/26/07:

I see that "confused it with" only defeats "confused it for" by 51.7K to 20.8K, so the latter is evidently much more robust than I'd ever have guessed.

Finally, encroached/innovative *substitute* has a long and rich history, with occurrences of *substitute with/by* going back at least to the 17th century, and complaints about it accumulating for a century (Fowler called it a “corruption”). *MWDEU*:

Given its use in general, and even sometimes scholarly, writing and its presence in the language for more than 300 years, we see no reason to dismiss this use of *substitute* as an error, and it has been recognized as standard in Merriam-Webster dictionaries since Webster's Second (1934).

7. Back to the main question. “Why do these things happen?”, the usage critics ask, about diathesis alternations. And the critics answer: because people “confuse” the correct usage with other related usages – they combine, or blend, different constructions.

For *blame*, for example, the claim is (Funk & Wagnalls (1915:18)) that people combine the correct (3a) with the related

(3c) lay/put/place (the) blame on SOURCE (for CONSEQUENCE).

(This is the F&W candidate, but

(3d) attribute CONSEQUENCE to SOURCE
is another possibility.)

For *rid*, the claim is that people combine the correct (4a) with the related

(4c) remove SOMETHING from LOCATION

or

(4d) clear SOMETHING from LOCATION ~ (4e) clear LOCATION of SOMETHING.

For *confuse*, the claim is that people combine the correct (5a) with the related

(5d) mistake REPLICA for ORIGINAL

or with the related (reversible) coordinate-object construction

(5e) confuse ORIGINAL and REPLICA, confuse REPLICA and ORIGINAL.

For *substitute*, the claim is that people combine the correct (6a) with the related

(6d) replace OLD (with/by NEW)

(and then take a further step to get to reversed *substitute*).

Now, there is certainly a sense in which the innovative variants have bits of stuff taken from two (or more) different places in English syntax. And it’s possible that occasionally such an innovation results from true syntactic blending, in which alternative formulations of the same content compete with one another in production, with the result that the actually produced expression inadvertently has parts of both. But in general, if the innovation is to be seen as a combination of two things, the combination is at a higher level, the level of patterns – constructions – not specific utterances-in-planning. (While combos of constructions are certainly well attested – there’s a fair literature on “syntactic amalgams” – these involve EMBEDDING one construction within another.)

But I’m inclined to see even this pattern-combination account as gratuitously complex, given that EXTENSION OF PATTERNS to new items that have appropriate semantics is so common. There’s no reason to say that someone who uses *donate*, say, with two NP objects –

(10a) Kim donated the university a large amount of money.

is literally combining the patterns of the prepositional dative (PDAT), as in (1b) –

(10b) Kim donated a large amount of money to the university.

with the pattern of the double-NP dative (NDAT), as in (1a) –

(10c) Kim gave the university a large amount of money.

Instead, we should want to say that English provides (at least) two patterns for referring to transfers (the default PDAT and the more restricted NDAT), and that some speakers occasionally extend Vs that are mostly PDAT-only to the NDAT pattern.

Why should people do this? Aren't these just different ways of saying the same thing? Maybe yes, maybe no, but linguists are here to tell the usage critics that when you have two non-SU arguments for a V, it's really useful to have alternative syntactic argument structures for them: whichever one serves as DO is focussed on (by being closely attached to the verb); whichever one comes first is more likely to be discourse-topical (old before new); and the different argument structures provide ways to put short before long (avoiding long things first, and, especially, short things last). (The advice literature mostly sees the alternatives merely as choices of P, and so misses the difference in participant roles that goes along with the difference in Ps.)

The details are different in each case, but in all of them we see speakers actively (though tacitly) re-shaping the materials of their language so as to increase the expressive capacity available to them – not just balling things up. I might find things like

(11a) He washed his face of dirt.

Gregory Maguire, *Leaping Beauty*, p. 39, in “Goldiefox and the Three Chickens”:

But at the end of the day, when the carpenter tools were all stored away, Goldiefox would wash his face of dirt and play with Baby Chick.

as an alternative to

(11b) He washed dirt from his face.

(the reverse development from that in (4b), with innovative *from*, in addition to (4a), with standard *of*) somewhat jarring, but the intended meaning is clear – AND it's easy to see why, given only one of the two alternatives, speakers would want to innovate some version of the other.

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