1. Field of research: Argument Structure

What is argument structure? The principles that govern in which syntactic constructions verbs can be used.

What is an alternation? A pair of minimally different constructions that can both be used with a number of different verbs, usually forming near-paraphrases. e.g., the dative alternation, cf. diagram on the right.

In constructional approaches to Argument Structure (Goldberg 1995, 2006), only constructions are stored and instantiated; it is assumed that alternations are not stored as part of the grammar.

Nevertheless, alternations are a plausible hypothesis about linguistic structure:

– Alternations could be stored as second-order symbols: pairing of a contrast in meaning with a contrast in syntactic form.
– Such second-order symbols could be used to create new forms on the basis of analogy involving attested forms.

The status of alternations has widely been debated; however, it has never been investigated empirically.

Goal: to empirically evaluate the cognitive reality of alternations

2. Research questions and methods

Research questions

➔ Do speakers actually store representations of alternations?
➔ Do they follow alternations to generalize constructions to new verbs?

Methods

– quantitative corpus linguistics, to check to what extent variants of alternations are similarly used;
– experimental psycholinguistics, to gain on-line evidence of the cognitive reality of alternations in language comprehension and production.

Frequency effects

– Frequency under study: type frequency of alternations, i.e., how many different verbs occur in two related constructions
– Frequency effects:
  ➔ Storage: does a high type frequency lead to a cognitive representation of the alternation as a second-order symbol?
  ➔ Productivity: can it be extended to other verbs? i.e.: IF a verb V has been heard in an argument structure A1 AND IF there are other verbs heard both in A1 and in another argument structure A2 THEN V can be used in A2

3. A first (ongoing) experiment

Sorting task, follow-up of Bencini and Goldberg (2000).

Questions: are alternations a sorting dimension available to speakers when they classify sentences, in addition to constructions? Can generalizations by alternations be stronger as generalizations by constructions?

Stimuli: 16 sentences, so designed as to exemplify three constructions related by two alternations:

Task: sorting into three groups: will speakers group the instances of 'caused-motion' together, or will they prefer grouping following one of the two alternations? Are both alternations equally likely to be selected?